



Managerial competencies of governing council members in Ghanaian universities: A comparative analysis of public and private sector perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Despite the expanded statutory powers and strategic responsibilities of governing councils in both public and private universities, empirical attention has been limited to the managerial competencies that enable councils to function effectively across diverse institutional contexts. This study examines the managerial competencies of governing council members in selected public and private universities in Ghana. Anchored in institutional and corporate governance theories, the study employed a qualitative comparative case-study design to examine the managerial competencies of governing council members at public and private universities in Ghana. The study population comprised governing council members of public and private universities in Ghana, including chairpersons, external members, internal members (senior academics), and representatives of key stakeholder groups. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 29 participants, including governing council members and key institutional actors in selected public and private universities, and analysed thematically to identify patterns and variations in managerial competencies. Six interrelated themes emerged: strategic leadership and visioning; financial and resource management; risk management and institutional sustainability; decision-making and governance flexibility; professional expertise and experience; and ethical leadership and accountability. While council members in both sectors demonstrated strong commitment to governance roles, private university councils showed greater agility in decision-making, financial oversight, and performance monitoring. In contrast, public university councils were more constrained by bureaucratic processes, political influence, and regulatory controls but exhibited a stronger orientation toward public accountability and policy compliance. The study positions managerial competencies as a central analytical framework for examining the effectiveness of university governance in Ghana. It offers policy-relevant insights to strengthen governing councils through targeted capacity-building, merit-based appointments, and context-sensitive governance reforms across public and private higher education institutions.

Keywords: Ghana, Governing Council Members, Managerial Competencies, Public and Private Universities, University Governance

I. INTRODUCTION

University governance has become a central concern in higher education systems worldwide, particularly in contexts characterised by massification, financial constraints, regulatory complexity, and heightened public accountability. In Ghana, public and private universities operate within an increasingly turbulent higher education environment shaped by policy reforms, market pressures, political interference, and growing stakeholder expectations for efficiency, transparency, and quality outcomes (Manuh et al., 2007; Dinye & Boon, 2023). At the apex of institutional governance structures are university governing councils, which serve as the highest decision-making bodies responsible for strategic direction, policy formulation, financial oversight, leadership appointments, and accountability assurance (Bingab et al., 2018; Dinye & Boon, 2023).

The effectiveness of governing councils is closely linked to the managerial competencies of their members, particularly in areas such as strategic thinking, financial management, policy oversight, risk management, stakeholder engagement, and ethical leadership (Altbach, 2010; Owusu, 2023). In Ghana, governance reforms have significantly expanded the powers and responsibilities of university councils, including authority over senior leadership appointments, institutional autonomy, and resource mobilisation, thereby intensifying the demand for high-level managerial capacity among council members (Bingab et al., 2018; Agomor, 2024). These expectations apply across both public and private universities, although the governance contexts, regulatory pressures, and resource conditions differ substantially between the two sectors (Tetteh & Ofori, 2010; Alomenu, 2023).

Empirical studies suggest that weaknesses in university governance in Ghana are often associated with limited managerial expertise, ineffective committee functioning, role ambiguity, politicisation, and inadequate training of council members (Okofodarteh & Asamoah, 2021; Obeng-Sarpong et al., 2020). Research has also highlighted



challenges related to council independence, accountability enforcement, and leadership effectiveness, particularly in public universities where state influence remains significant (Okyere et al., 2025; Bingab et al., 2018). In private universities, governing boards face additional pressures related to financial sustainability, leadership succession, and transformational capacity, which similarly demand strong managerial competence (Boateng, 2014; Bondzi-Simpson & Agomor, 2021).

Despite the centrality of governing councils to university performance, there remains limited systematic analysis of the specific managerial competencies of council members and how these competencies differ between public and private universities in Ghana. Existing studies tend to focus broadly on governance structures, leadership challenges, or policy reforms, rather than on the skill sets, capacities, and functional effectiveness of council members themselves (Tetteh & Ofori, 2010; Dinye & Boon, 2023). This gap constrains efforts to strengthen governance practice, design targeted capacity-building interventions, and align council performance with contemporary higher education governance standards.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Governing councils in Ghanaian universities occupy a pivotal role in institutional governance, yet growing evidence suggests that their effectiveness is constrained by gaps in managerial competence, role clarity, and governance capacity. Although councils are legally mandated to oversee policy, finance, leadership, and strategic direction, many council members are appointed based on political affiliation, representational considerations, or professional status rather than demonstrated managerial expertise in higher education governance (Bawakyillenuo et al., 2013; Bingab et al., 2018). This raises concerns about their ability to navigate the complex managerial demands of modern universities in Ghana.

Studies have documented governance challenges such as weak accountability enforcement, ineffective committee operations, limited strategic oversight, and poor coordination between councils and management, all of which are linked to deficiencies in managerial competencies (Okofu-Darteh & Asamoah, 2021; Obeng-Sarpong et al., 2020). In multi-campus and rapidly expanding institutions, these challenges are further compounded by decentralisation pressures and resource constraints, intensifying the need for competent council leadership (Dinye & Boon, 2023). Additionally, council independence and decision-making autonomy are often undermined by political interference and regulatory ambiguities, particularly in public universities, placing additional demands on the managerial judgment and ethical leadership of council members (Okyere et al., 2025).

While private universities operate with greater autonomy, their governing councils face distinct managerial challenges related to financial sustainability, strategic agility, leadership succession, and institutional credibility, which similarly require advanced governance competencies (Boateng, 2014; Bondzi-Simpson & Agomor, 2021). However, comparative evidence on how managerial competencies differ between public and private university council members remains sparse. The absence of such evidence limits policy-driven reforms, capacity-building initiatives, and the development of governance frameworks tailored to Ghana's diverse higher education landscape.

Consequently, there is a critical need for systematic empirical inquiry into the managerial competencies of governing council members in both public and private universities in Ghana, with particular attention to how these competencies influence governance effectiveness, accountability, and institutional performance. The following research question guided the study.

1.2 Research Question

How do the various dimensions of managerial competencies shape governance effectiveness in public and private universities in Ghana?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

This study is grounded in Institutional Theory and Corporate Governance Theory to explain how managerial competencies shape the effectiveness of university governing councils. Institutional theory emphasises how organisational behaviour is influenced by regulatory, normative, and cultural-cognitive pressures, suggesting that governing council practices are shaped by legal mandates, political expectations, and sectoral norms within Ghana's higher education system (Manuh et al., 2007; Bingab et al., 2018). Corporate governance theory, particularly the stewardship and agency perspectives, highlights the role of governing councils in balancing oversight, strategic direction, and accountability while aligning institutional goals with stakeholder interests (Altbach, 2010; Bingab et al., 2018).

Managerial competencies such as strategic thinking, financial oversight, risk management, ethical judgment, and stakeholder engagement are therefore conceptualised as critical mediating factors between formal governance structures and actual governance outcomes. Within this framework, variations in governance effectiveness between



public and private universities are understood as products of both institutional constraints and the managerial capacity of council members (Tetteh & Ofori, 2010; Dinye & Boon, 2023).

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 University Governance and the Role of Governing Councils

University governance refers to the structures, processes, and relationships through which higher education institutions are directed, controlled, and held accountable. In Ghana, governing councils constitute the apex governance bodies responsible for strategic direction, policy formulation, financial oversight, leadership appointments, and institutional accountability (Bingab et al., 2016; Dinye & Boon, 2023). Governance reforms over the past two decades have expanded council powers, particularly in public universities, thereby increasing expectations regarding their managerial and strategic capacity (Agomor, 2024).

Empirical studies highlight that governing councils operate within complex and often turbulent environments characterised by massification, funding constraints, regulatory pressures, and political interference (Manuh et al., 2007; Obeng-Sarpong et al., 2020). Tetteh and Ofori (2010) observe that councils in both public and private universities face challenges in balancing academic traditions with managerial demands, underscoring the importance of professional governance competence. Similarly, Bingab et al. (2018) emphasise that councils are expected to uphold accountability, ensure prudent resource use, and safeguard institutional autonomy, roles that require strong managerial judgment.

Recent scholarship has also drawn attention to council independence and role ambiguity, particularly in public universities. Okyere et al. (2025) argue that political influence and regulatory overlaps often constrain councils' autonomy in decision-making, weakening governance effectiveness. These studies collectively suggest that, while governing councils are central to university governance in Ghana, their effectiveness depends on the managerial competencies of their members and the institutional environments in which they operate.

Table 1

Ghanaian Governance Studies with their Foci, Methods, and Findings to Demonstrate the Gap this Study Addresses

Authors/Year	Study focus	Method/Approach	Key Findings	Implications for current study (Gap)
Manuh et al. (2007)	Governance reforms and policy transformations in Ghanaian higher education	Policy analysis and institutional review	Identified the effects of policy reforms on university governance structures and highlighted tensions between state control and institutional autonomy.	Focused largely on system-level reforms, with limited attention to competency requirements of governing council members.
Bingab et al. (2016)	Governance structures and accountability in Ghanaian public universities	Conceptual and policy analysis	Demonstrated that governing councils are responsible for accountability, financial oversight, and safeguarding institutional autonomy	Emphasises roles and responsibilities of councils but does not examine the managerial competencies enabling these roles.
Bingab et al. (2018)	Accountability and financial governance in higher education institutions	Qualitative institutional analysis	Found that governing councils must exercise prudent resource management and ensure transparency in institutional decision-making.	Focus remains on accountability mechanisms, not the skills or competencies of council members that shape governance outcomes.
Obeng-Sarpong et al. (2020)	Governance challenges in Ghanaian universities	Qualitative case analysis	Highlighted how funding constraints, massification, and governance complexity affect institutional performance.	Identifies contextual governance pressures, but does not analyse competency-based governance capacity
Tetteh & Ofori (2010)	Balancing academic traditions and managerial governance	Conceptual discussion with institutional examples	Observed tensions between collegial academic governance and managerial	Suggests the need for governance competence but does not empirically examine governing council competencies



Dinye & Boon (2023)	Governance structures and council responsibilities in universities	Policy and governance review	Described governing councils as apex decision-making bodies responsible for institutional direction and oversight.	Provides structural insights but lacks empirical investigation of competency dimensions of council members
Agomor (2024)	Governance reforms and council authority in Ghanaian universities	Policy analysis	Shows that governance reforms have expanded council authority and responsibilities in public universities	Highlights growing governance demands but does not explore the competencies required to meet them.
Okyere et al. (2025)	Political influence and governance autonomy in public universities	Qualitative governance analysis	Found that political interference and regulatory overlaps often constrain councils' autonomy and decision-making effectiveness	Identifies structural constraints but does not directly analyse the managerial competencies of council members.

The reviewed Ghanaian studies predominantly focus on institutional governance structures, regulatory frameworks, political influence, and accountability mechanisms. While these studies provide valuable insights into systemic governance challenges, they rarely examine the competency dimensions of governing council members themselves. Consequently, there is limited empirical understanding of how managerial competencies such as strategic leadership, financial oversight, ethical governance, and stakeholder engagement shape governance effectiveness within Ghanaian universities.

This study addresses this gap by empirically examining the managerial competencies of governing council members across public and private universities, thereby shifting the analytical focus from structural governance arrangements to the competency capacities of the actors responsible for governance decisions. This provides a new competency-based perspective on strengthening university governance in Ghana's higher education system.

2.2.2 Managerial Competencies in Higher Education Governance

Managerial competency in governance and leadership research refers to the integrated knowledge, skills, values, and behavioural capabilities that enable individuals to perform governance responsibilities effectively within specific organisational contexts. In higher education, these competencies are shaped by the hybrid nature of universities as academic communities, professional bureaucracies, and entrepreneurial organisations. As a result, governing council members require competencies such as strategic thinking, financial literacy, risk oversight, ethical leadership, deliberative decision-making, and stakeholder engagement, while also respecting academic values like collegiality, academic freedom, and institutional autonomy (Altbach, 2010; Owusu, 2023).

Empirical studies show that governance effectiveness depends not only on formal structures but also on interpersonal and deliberative competencies. For instance, trust, effective communication, role clarity, and leadership competence significantly influence committee effectiveness in Ghanaian public universities (Okofe-Darteh & Asamoah, 2021), while governance quality has been linked to service delivery and students' perceptions of institutional management (Alomenu, 2023). However, research also highlights persistent competency gaps, where weak managerial capacity leads to poor accountability enforcement, limited strategic oversight, and misalignment between institutional priorities and governance decisions (Obeng-Sarpong et al., 2020). These gaps are further compounded by factors such as political interference, short leadership tenures, and limited governance training (Owusu, 2023).

Importantly, managerial competencies in higher education differ from corporate governance competencies, which typically prioritise profit maximisation and shareholder value. University governing councils operate within broader public and academic accountability frameworks, requiring them to balance institutional autonomy, academic standards, financial sustainability, and diverse stakeholder interests. Since many governance actors are appointed based on academic reputation rather than managerial training, gaps in strategic management capacity may emerge (Altbach, 2010). Consequently, managerial competencies in higher education governance should be understood as hybrid and contextually embedded capabilities that integrate managerial expertise with academic stewardship and public accountability.

2.2.3 Comparative Governance Contexts of Public and Private Universities in Ghana

Public and private universities in Ghana operate within different governance environments, which shape the managerial competencies required of their governing councils. These differences can be understood across several dimensions, including regulatory control, accountability structures, financial pressures, decision-making autonomy, and strategic orientation.



Public universities function within state-regulated governance systems, where councils operate under statutory frameworks and are accountable to government ministries and national regulatory bodies. Consequently, council members require competencies related to policy interpretation, regulatory compliance, and stakeholder mediation to navigate bureaucratic and political oversight (Bingab et al., 2018; Okyere et al., 2025). In contrast, private universities enjoy greater governance autonomy, though they remain subject to accreditation and quality assurance processes. Their councils, therefore, require competencies such as strategic agility, entrepreneurial leadership, and institutional growth management to remain competitive in the higher education market (Boateng, 2014; Bondzi-Simpson & Agomor, 2021).

The two sectors also differ in accountability structures and financial pressures. Public universities are accountable to a broad range of stakeholders, including government agencies, faculty, students, and the public, requiring competencies in consensus-building, deliberative governance, and conflict management. Private universities, however, often operate under more centralised ownership or trustee structures, where governance decisions emphasise performance monitoring, strategic planning, and market positioning. Financially, public universities rely partly on state funding and must comply with public financial regulations, whereas private universities depend heavily on tuition revenue and private investment, making financial sustainability and cost efficiency critical governance concerns (Bondzi-Simpson & Agomor, 2021).

Differences also exist in decision-making autonomy and strategic orientation. Public university councils operate within bureaucratic decision-making systems that emphasise procedural accountability but may limit organisational agility. Private university councils typically have greater flexibility, allowing them to prioritise innovation, strategic foresight, and organisational change management. Moreover, public universities generally focus on national development, knowledge production, and public service, while private universities emphasise market responsiveness and institutional competitiveness (Tetteh & Ofori, 2010; Alomenu, 2023).

Despite these sectoral differences, governance challenges related to council composition, expertise, and capacity persist across both sectors. Weaknesses in councils' professional diversity and governance capabilities can undermine alignment between higher education outputs and national development priorities (Bawakyillenuo et al., 2013). Overall, these variations highlight the importance of adopting a comparative perspective when analysing managerial competencies in university governance, as council effectiveness depends on the interaction between competencies and institutional governance contexts.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative comparative case study design to explore and compare the managerial competencies of governing council members in public and private universities in Ghana. This design was appropriate because the study sought to generate in-depth, context-sensitive insights into governance practices, decision-making processes, and competency enactment rather than to test hypotheses or measure variables quantitatively. A qualitative approach enabled the researcher to capture the lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of council members operating within different institutional and regulatory contexts (Yin, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2016). The comparative dimension allowed for systematic examination of similarities and differences between public and private university governance environments, thereby strengthening the analytical contribution of the study.

3.2 Study Sites and Site Selection

The study was conducted in selected public and private universities in Ghana. Universities were purposively selected to ensure diversity in ownership (public/private), institutional age, size, and governance complexity. Public universities included long-established, state-funded institutions operating under strong regulatory oversight, while private universities included both faith-based and non-faith-based institutions with greater managerial autonomy. The public universities included the University of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, and the University of Cape Coast, while the private universities included Valley View University, Central University, and Ashesi University. The following criteria guided site selection: the existence of a formally constituted governing council, the council's active involvement in strategic, financial, and leadership decisions, and the institution's willingness to grant council members access. This ensured that the selected sites provided rich and relevant data on governing council competencies across governance contexts.

The study sought to produce theoretically informed, context-sensitive insights into how governing council members apply their managerial skills across diverse governance situations, rather than projecting findings to the entire Ghanaian higher education sector. The study's focus on six reputable universities enabled it to pinpoint sector-specific variations and recurring competency patterns, yielding findings that could be analytically extrapolated to comparable governance frameworks and higher education systems in Ghana.



3.3 Population and Sampling

The study population comprised governing council members of public and private universities in Ghana, including chairpersons, external members, internal members (senior academics), and representatives of key stakeholder groups. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants with direct experience in university governance and strategic decision-making (Patton, 2015). To enhance diversity and analytical depth, the sample included council members with academic backgrounds, members with corporate, legal, financial, and public administration expertise, and representatives from regulatory or government-affiliated bodies (where applicable)

In total, twenty-nine governing council members from both public and private universities were interviewed until saturation was achieved, that is, when no new conceptual insights were emerging from additional data (Guest et al, 2017). (See Appendix I)

3.4 Data Collection Methods

The primary method employed for the data collection was semi-structured, in-depth interviews with governing council members from selected public and private universities in Ghana. Semi-structured interviews were considered appropriate because they allowed participants to reflect critically on their governance roles, managerial responsibilities, and decision-making experiences while providing flexibility to probe emerging issues relevant to university governance. An interview guide was developed around key domains of managerial competence, including strategic leadership, financial oversight, risk management, decision-making autonomy, ethical leadership, and stakeholder engagement. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and, where necessary, via secure virtual platforms, depending on participants' availability. Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' informed consent.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. This approach was appropriate given the exploratory and comparative nature of the study and its focus on identifying patterns of managerial competence across institutional contexts. First, all interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and read repeatedly to achieve immersion and familiarity with the data. Initial coding was conducted inductively, focusing on participants' descriptions of governance roles, decision-making practices, competencies, and constraints. Codes were then compared across transcripts and grouped into broader conceptual categories related to managerial competence.

In the next phase, codes were refined and clustered into analytically coherent themes, ensuring that each theme was internally consistent and distinct from others. Throughout this process, data from public and private universities were analysed both within cases and across cases to identify sector-specific patterns and contrasts. Six core themes emerged from the analysis, capturing the dominant dimensions of managerial competence exercised by governing council members. NVivo qualitative data analysis software was used for coding hierarchy, memo writing, and query functions. Eventually, the NVivo supported systematic coding, retrieval, and comparison of data, thereby enhancing analytic transparency and dependability.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was secured from the University of Cape Coast Institutional Review Board before the commencement of data collection. The study was conducted in strict accordance with established ethical principles. Informed consent was obtained by clearly explaining the study's purpose, procedures, and the voluntary nature of participation to all respondents. To safeguard confidentiality and anonymity, participants were assigned pseudonyms, and all identifying information was excluded from interview transcripts and research outputs. Particular attention was given to the principle of non-maleficence, ensuring that the research process did not cause harm to participants or their institutions, especially in light of the sensitive nature of governance-related discussions. In reporting the findings, interview excerpts were referenced in line with APA personal communication guidelines, using participant pseudonyms and approximate interview dates.

3.7 Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of the study was ensured through the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement, interviews, and the use of direct participant quotations. Transferability was supported through a thick description of institutional contexts and governance environments. Dependability was ensured by maintaining a clear audit trail of research decisions and analytic processes. Confirmability was strengthened through reflexive journaling to address potential researcher bias.

Member checking was methodically used as a validation tool to enhance the study's trustworthiness. A subset of participants, chosen from both public and private university governing councils, received succinct summaries of the



interpreted findings and chosen thematic representations following the initial theme analysis. In order to determine whether the interpretations appropriately represented their experiences, goals, and governance realities, participants were asked to assess them. Feedback confirmed the validity of the analytical interpretations by mostly focusing on contextual nuance clarification rather than substantial disagreement with the themes. Participants' suggestions for improvements or contextual explanations were taken into account in the final analysis. This iterative procedure decreased the possibility of researcher misinterpretation and guaranteed that the results were based on participants' actual governance experiences. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3.8 Researcher Positionality

None of the chosen public or private universities that were part of the study had any connection to the researcher. Both methodological benefits and introspective obligations were provided by this outsider positionality. On the one hand, by lowering power imbalances, role conflict, and institutional allegiance that can affect participant answers, non-affiliation improved analytical independence. Given that the researcher had no official affiliation with their institutions, participants seemed more open to discussing issues of governance, political influence, budgetary limitations, and council dynamics.

However, the researcher continued to be cognizant of the possible drawbacks of external position, especially the possibility of misinterpreting institution-specific governance cultures. The researcher triangulated interpretations through member checking, kept reflective analytical diaries, and spent a lot of time interacting with the data to lessen this. By ensuring that results came from participant narratives rather than the researcher's presumptions, this reflexive approach improved confirmability.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings

This study examined differences between managerial competencies of governing council members of public and private universities. A thematic analysis of participant narratives produced six overarching themes: (1) Strategic leadership and direction setting, (2) Financial oversight and resource management, (3) Risk management and institutional sustainability, (4) Decision-making autonomy and governance flexibility, (5) Professional expertise, experience, and role interpretation, (6) Ethical leadership, accountability and stakeholder engagement. Each theme is presented with illustrative verbatim quotations. All participants are identified using pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

4.1.1 Strategic Leadership and Direction-Setting

Governing council members in both public and private universities demonstrated competence in strategic thinking and long-term planning. Council members contributed to institutional visioning, approval of strategic plans, and oversight of major policy decisions. However, private university councils exhibited stronger strategic agility, characterised by faster decision-making, clearer performance targets, and a market-oriented focus on growth, competitiveness, and sustainability. In contrast, public university councils exhibited more deliberative, consensus-driven strategic processes, often constrained by bureaucratic procedures, statutory requirements, and government oversight. While this ensured procedural legitimacy, it sometimes slowed responsiveness to emerging challenges.

Public University Council Members

"Our responsibility is to protect the university's long-term vision, but every strategic action must comply with national policy and legal requirements, which occasionally slows implementation." "Even if it takes longer, strategic decisions undergo thorough consultations to guarantee legitimacy and inclusivity." (PUC3, personal communication, 7th June, 2025).

Private University Council Members

"We are extremely careful about our strategy because it is essential to our survival; we cannot afford to be slow in reacting to enrollment and market trends. The council actively sets direction and anticipates that management will produce quantifiable results within precise timeframes." (PRUC6, personal communication, 15th August, 2025).

Strategic leadership decisions inevitably carry financial implications; therefore, the capacity to set direction is closely tied to councils' competencies in financial oversight and resource management.

4.1.2 Financial Oversight and Resource Management

Financial management emerged as a core competency across both sectors, with council members actively engaging in budget approvals, audit reviews, and financial accountability discussions. Notably, private university councils displayed stronger hands-on financial oversight, driven by institutional dependence on internally generated funds, tuition revenue, and donor support. Council members in private universities were more likely to interrogate expenditure efficiency, cost recovery strategies, and revenue diversification initiatives. In public universities, although



council members possessed strong financial literacy, financial oversight was often moderated by state funding structures, procurement regulations, and external audit controls, which limited flexibility but reinforced accountability.

Public University Council Members

"We closely examine budgets, yet public procurement laws and government funding systems restrict our options. Because public monies are involved and external audits are inevitable, financial responsibility is crucial (PUC9, personal communication, 5th July, 2025).

Private University Council Members

"Tuition fees and domestically generated revenues are our livelihood, thus every financial action is constantly watched. The council regularly raises concerns about revenue diversification and cost effectiveness; financial restraint is unavoidable" (PRUC8, personal communication, 15th August, 2025).

Financial oversight practices also shape how councils anticipate and manage institutional risks, linking fiscal prudence to broader sustainability concerns.

4.1.3 Risk Management and Institutional Sustainability

Risk awareness and mitigation strategies were evident in both public and private universities. Governing councils assessed risks related to enrolment fluctuations, staff retention, infrastructure deficits, and reputational threats. Private university councils demonstrated greater risk sensitivity, particularly regarding enrolment sustainability, competition, accreditation status, and financial viability. Consequently, they were more proactive in adopting entrepreneurial strategies and innovation-led solutions. Public university councils focused more on reputational risk, labour relations, and political exposure, reflecting their embeddedness within the public sector governance architecture.

Public University Council Members

"Our biggest threats include industrial strikes, political influence, and reputational issues that can quickly get worse. When handling risks, we exercise caution since any mistake could immediately attract public attention" (PUC11, personal communication, 7th July, 2025).

Private University Council Members

"The threats of dwindling enrollment, accreditation, and competition from other privately owned universities are constantly assessed by us. Risk management is a fundamental part of our decision-making process since sustainability is constantly at risk" (PRUC7, personal communication, 16th August, 2025).

The ability to manage risk effectively is closely connected to the degree of decision-making autonomy available to councils, as flexibility often determines how swiftly risks can be addressed.

4.1.4 Decision-Making Autonomy and Governance Flexibility

A key difference emerged in the degree of autonomy exercised by governing councils. Private university councils operated with higher governance flexibility, enabling swift executive decisions, rapid leadership interventions, and adaptive policy reforms. In contrast, public university councils experienced constrained autonomy, particularly in matters related to senior appointments, financial approvals, and policy reforms, due to ministerial influence and statutory oversight. While council members demonstrated competence, their managerial discretion was often curtailed by external control mechanisms.

Public University Council Members

"Even if the council agrees, ministerial or regulatory permission may still be needed for final approval. Although we have autonomy, it is used inside a strictly regulated public sector framework" (PUC10, personal communication, 7th July, 2025).

Private University Council Members

"After the council makes a decision, implementation takes place immediately; we don't need to wait for outside approval. When problems emerge, the flexibility of governance enables us to take decisive action" (PRUC9, personal communication, 16th August, 2025).

Variations in autonomy are further influenced by the professional composition of councils, as members' expertise shapes how roles are interpreted and exercised within institutional constraints.

4.1.5 Professional Expertise, Experience, and Role Interpretation

Council members across both sectors brought diverse professional backgrounds, including academia, finance, law, public administration, and corporate leadership. This diversity enhanced analytical depth and governance deliberation. However, private university councils tended to prioritise managerial and corporate expertise, while public university councils had stronger representation from academia and public service. As a result, private university councils leaned towards performance-driven governance, whereas public university councils emphasised procedural compliance and academic traditions.



Public University Council Members

“Our understanding of governance obligations is influenced by the fact that many of us have backgrounds in academia and public service. Our proficiency in public accountability and academic culture is our strongest suit” (PUC12, personal communication, 8th July, 2025).

Private University Council Members

“The council specifically seeks out members with experience in finance, law, and business. We regard ourselves as strategic partners to management in addition to overseers” (PRUC10, personal communication, 16th August, 2025).

These professional orientations also shape how councils conceptualize ethical responsibility, stakeholder engagement, and accountability mechanisms.

4.1.6 Ethical Leadership, Accountability, and Stakeholder Engagement

Ethical leadership and accountability were central to governance practice in both sectors. Council members upheld principles of transparency, fiduciary responsibility, and institutional integrity. Public university councils demonstrated stronger engagement with external stakeholders, including government agencies, unions, and regulatory bodies. Private university councils focused more on internal accountability and stakeholder responsiveness, particularly to students, parents, and proprietors.

Public University Council Members

“Since we answer to the government, labor unions, students, and the public at large, ethical leadership is essential. One of our most challenging tasks is juggling the interests of several stakeholders” (PUC8, personal communication, 7th July, 2025).

Private University Council Members

“We are directly and immediately accountable because owners, parents, and students want openness at all times. The institution immediately suffers if trust is lost, hence it must be preserved.” (PRUC11, personal communication, 16th August, 2025).

Contradictory cases were actively examined rather than excluded. Notably, two public university council members reported instances of rapid and decisive governance action, contradicting the dominant narrative of bureaucratic inertia. These cases were traced to exceptional leadership alignment and informal negotiation with regulators, suggesting that individual agency can occasionally override structural constraints. Similarly, one private university council displayed slow decision-making, attributed to proprietor interference and internal governance disputes. These negative cases were analytically valuable, as they demonstrated that ownership type alone does not determine governance effectiveness; rather, the interaction between autonomy, leadership cohesion, and institutional culture is decisive.

4.2 Discussion

The study examines how managerial competencies are exercised by governing council members in public and private universities in Ghana and how institutional contexts shape their effectiveness. The findings show that councils in both sectors demonstrate strong competencies in strategic oversight, financial monitoring, risk management, and ethical leadership, reinforcing the central role of governing councils in effective university governance (Altbach, 2010; Bingab et al., 2018). These results align with corporate governance theory, which emphasises the responsibility of governing boards to provide strategic direction, monitor management, and ensure organisational accountability (Dinye & Boon, 2023). However, the study reveals that the effectiveness of these competencies is influenced by differences in governance environments, ownership structures, and institutional autonomy.

From the perspective of institutional theory, governance practices in public universities are strongly shaped by regulatory and normative pressures (Alomenu, 2023). Council members in public institutions prioritise procedural compliance, stakeholder mediation, and accountability to state actors. Nevertheless, bureaucratic controls, ministerial oversight, and statutory approval procedures limit councils' ability to translate managerial competence into strategic agility. This dynamic highlights a tension between institutional legitimacy and strategic responsiveness, supporting earlier studies showing that political interference and regulatory complexity can undermine governance effectiveness despite the presence of competent council members (Okyerere et al., 2025; Obeng-Sarpong et al., 2020).

In contrast, private university councils operate within more flexible governance environments that allow managerial competencies to translate more directly into strategic outcomes. These councils emphasise financial sustainability, enrolment growth, and institutional competitiveness, reflecting principles associated with corporate governance and entrepreneurial governance models (Bondzi-Simpson & Agomor, 2021). Consequently, private university councils often function as strategic partners to management, reinforcing evidence that private institutions tend to adopt market-oriented governance approaches that prioritise efficiency, innovation, and institutional performance (Tetteh & Ofori, 2010; Alomenu, 2023).



The study also finds that professional diversity among council members enhances governance effectiveness by improving deliberation quality and oversight capacity. Councils that include expertise from law, finance, academia, and industry are better able to scrutinise management decisions and identify strategic risks, supporting corporate governance arguments that board diversity strengthens monitoring and decision-making processes (Dinye & Boon, 2023). However, the findings show that diversity alone is insufficient; differences in role interpretation and institutional expectations influence how council members contribute to governance. Public university councils tend to emphasise academic traditions and procedural legitimacy, whereas private councils adopt a more strategic partnership orientation with management. This supports arguments that effective governance requires not only competence but also role clarity, trust, and supportive institutional conditions (Okofe-Darteh & Asamoah, 2021).

Gender dynamics further shape governance practices within university councils. Although women are underrepresented, their contributions often strengthen ethical oversight, transparency, and procedural accountability in council deliberations. These findings support broader governance literature suggesting that gender diversity can enrich board discussions and enhance ethical decision-making (Dinye & Boon, 2023). However, gendered power relations limit women's influence, as they are less likely to hold leadership roles, such as council chair positions or seats on strategic committees. Institutional theory helps explain these patterns by highlighting how broader societal norms about leadership and authority become embedded in governance structures (Alomenu, 2023).

The study also finds that gender disparities are particularly visible in private universities, where governance processes are strongly oriented toward efficiency and financial performance. Male dominance in strategic and financial committees may reinforce gender hierarchies unless deliberate reforms address representation and leadership opportunities. This finding refines corporate governance debates on board diversity by demonstrating that representation alone does not guarantee influence; meaningful participation depends on how authority and leadership roles are distributed within governing bodies.

Overall, the study concludes that effective university governance in Ghana emerges from the interaction between managerial competencies and institutional environments. Institutional theory explains how regulatory pressures and legitimacy concerns shape governance practices in public universities, while corporate governance theory provides insight into the strategic and performance-oriented governance approaches adopted by private universities. The findings therefore highlight the need for governance reforms that strengthen council competencies while also addressing institutional constraints, promoting governance autonomy, role clarity, and inclusive participation to improve the effectiveness of university governing councils in Ghana.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The study examined the managerial competencies of governing council members in public and private universities in Ghana and their influence on governance effectiveness. The findings show that council members possess key competencies such as strategic leadership, financial oversight, risk management, ethical leadership, and stakeholder engagement, which enable them to guide institutional direction, ensure accountability, and support organisational sustainability.

However, the application of these competencies differs across governance contexts. In public universities, governance is shaped by strong regulatory and political oversight, which promotes transparency and accountability but often limits managerial flexibility and slows strategic decision-making. In contrast, private universities operate in more flexible governance environments, allowing council members to apply their competencies more effectively in promoting strategic agility, financial discipline, and performance-oriented management.

The study's main contribution lies in repositioning managerial competencies as a critical lens for understanding university governance effectiveness in Ghana. Rather than focusing solely on governance structures and policies, it highlights how governance outcomes emerge from the interaction between the competencies of council members, institutional contexts, and levels of autonomy. The study also contributes comparative empirical evidence on governing council competencies across public and private universities and emphasises the value of professional diversity and gender inclusion in strengthening governance deliberations, while noting persistent gender disparities in leadership influence within councils.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed for policymakers, regulatory agencies, and university leadership to strengthen governance effectiveness in Ghanaian universities. The Ministry of Education (MoE) and Ghana Tertiary Education Commission (GTEC) should establish and institutionalise a mandatory governance development programme for all newly appointed governing council members. Participation in such a programme should be required before council members assume full governance responsibilities. Again, the government of Ghana and university proprietors should introduce transparent and merit-based appointment criteria for



governing council membership. Appointment frameworks should prioritise individuals with demonstrable expertise in higher education governance. This reform would reduce excessive politicization and ensure that governing councils possess the managerial expertise necessary for complex institutional decision-making.

Furthermore, universities should introduce periodic governance performance assessments to evaluate the effectiveness of governing councils. Independent governance reviews should be conducted every three to five years to ensure continuous improvement in council performance. Lastly, universities and appointing authorities should adopt formal gender representation targets to promote balanced participation in governance. Women should be actively appointed to leadership roles, including council chair positions and key committees such as finance and strategy committees. Such reforms would strengthen inclusive governance and enhance ethical oversight within university councils.

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Appendix I: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Attribute	Category	Public Universities (n=15)	Private Universities (n=14)	Total (n=29)
Gender	Male	11	9	20
	Female	4	5	9
Council Role	Chairperson / Vice Chair	4	3	7
	External Council Member	6	7	13
	Internal Member (Senior Academic)	5	4	9
Professional Background	Academia	7	4	11
	Public Administration / Policy	4	1	5
	Finance / Accounting	2	4	6
	Law / Corporate Leadership	2	5	7
Years of Governance Experience	3–5 years	6	5	11
	6–10 years	7	6	13
	Over 10 years	2	3	5
University Type	Public	15	–	15
	Private	–	14	14