

Reforming Liberia's Higher Education Regulation through Depoliticization: Assessing NCHE's Quality Assurance Performance

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Received: 21.02.2026 | Accepted: 10.03.2026 | Published: 14.03.2026

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DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.19021319](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19021319)

Abstract

Original Research Article

This study assesses the function of Liberia's National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) in overseeing and maintaining the quality of the country's tertiary education system. Central to this analysis is the impact of political interference on the commission's ability to regulate independently and make objective quality assurance (QA) decisions. By employing a strong qualitative and exploratory emphasis, the research relies mainly on document analysis and draws from theoretical frameworks such as principal-agent theory, policy implementation, public governance, and bureaucratic autonomy. The investigation seeks to understand how political dynamics influence the NCHE's regulatory autonomy, evaluate how effectively its QA mechanisms uphold academic standards across both public and private institutions, and identify measures to reduce political interference that could improve regulatory performance. Findings indicate that while the NCHE has the technical capacity to detect and sanction breaches of quality standards—as reflected in actions taken against non-compliant institutions—its enforcement is irregular. Political pressures, especially in matters concerning public and private universities and core regulatory standards, significantly constrain the commission's independence and result in uneven application of QA policies. One prominent example is the suspension of the requirement that university leaders hold terminal degrees, demonstrating how political considerations can override professional and academic criteria. This undermines the commission's credibility and erodes public confidence in the regulatory system. The study concludes that meaningful reform of Liberia's higher education regulation demands deliberate efforts to depoliticize the NCHE. Strengthening its legal and operational independence through fixed-term appointments, merit-based leadership selection, transparent enforcement protocols, and enhanced monitoring will be crucial. It was therefore recommended that the Liberian National legislature should revise the NCHE Act to ensure NCHE's independence from political influence; and that the National government should invest in continuous professional development for NCHE staff in areas such as accreditation, evaluation, data analysis, and international quality assurance standards

Keywords: Depoliticization, Higher education regulation, Institutional accountability, Liberia, NCHE, Political interference, Principal-agent theory, Public governance, policy implementation, Quality assurance, Regulatory autonomy.

Introduction and Background

Higher education is widely viewed as a key engine of national progress, enabling societies to develop skilled workforces, foster innovation, and strengthen public institutions. Studies have shown that higher education plays a central role in economic development by preparing individuals with the knowledge, abilities, and competencies needed for long-term social and economic advancement (e.g., Pee & Vululleh, 2020; Kikasu et al., 2025). In countries recovering from conflict and those still developing, such as Liberia, this function becomes even more vital, as universities and colleges are expected to contribute to reconstruction, workforce capacity-building, and governance reform. As a result, the impact of higher education is closely linked not only to the performance of individual institutions but also to the effectiveness of regulatory systems that uphold academic standards, ensure quality assurance, and maintain accountability to the public.

Building on this premise, Liberia's system of higher education has been positioned as a cornerstone of national development, with the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) established in 1989 as the principal regulatory authority responsible for safeguarding quality assurance and ensuring that post-secondary education is aligned with national development priorities. Since its establishment, the NCHE has made some significant gains, evidenced by the official recognition and accreditation of 80 higher education institutions (HEIs), which the NCHE grouped into three (3) categories by credentials, including a) two (2) Doctoral Degree-granting institutions, b) Eleven (11) Master's Degree-granting institutions, c) Thirty-Five (35) Bachelor's Degree-granting institutions, and d) Thirty-One (30) Associate's Degree-granting institutions (NCHE, 2026), and closure or crackdown of 35 unauthorized higher learning institutions operating illegally across Liberia as well as the suspension of 22 others for

failing to meet regulatory requirements (Torgbean, 2025).

Despite these accomplishments, which are theoretically vital to Liberia's post-conflict national development agenda, the NCHE has faced ongoing challenges that have compromised the credibility, quality, and relevance of tertiary education. More importantly, these issues, in some ways, have contributed to Liberia's absence from the rankings of prestigious universities in Africa. Scholarly articles have highlighted systemic constraints, including inadequate funding, outdated infrastructure, limited research capacity, and the prevalence of under-resourced institutions, all of which have weakened institutional quality and capacity (Zinnah & Jackollie, 2020; Okechukwu, Obiasogu, & Wonkeryor, 2025). Additionally, Zinnah & Jackollie (2020) pinpointed politicization as a significant challenge undermining the NCHE's ability to ensure quality assurance. The authors contend that politicization, as it has often manifested through leadership turnover, which is believed to be influenced by partisan politics, has hindered and continues to hinder the NCHE's effectiveness in fulfilling its mandates, which are essential for delivering quality higher education in Liberia. This issue underscores the need for the NCHE to be depoliticized, as even adequate funding will not suffice to oversee quality assurance that aligns with Liberia's national development priorities.

In this context, this study contends that the regulatory framework governing higher education in Liberia urgently needs reform, focusing not only on regulatory structures and practices but, also, on the governance principles that guide oversight decision-making. Moreover, it asserts that enhancing the quality assurance capabilities of the NCHE through depoliticization is essential for cultivating a more credible, accountable, and internationally competitive higher education system, which is vital for the national development agenda.

Problem Statement

Higher education is widely recognized as a driver of socio-economic development, institutional capacity building, and democratic consolidation. Effective regulation and quality assurance systems are essential to ensure that universities meet acceptable academic standards and remain accountable to the public (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009; Materu, 2007). In Liberia, the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) is statutorily mandated to license, accredit, and monitor tertiary institutions. However, concerns persist regarding the extent to which political influence affects regulatory decisions, potentially undermining institutional autonomy, transparency, and the credibility of quality assurance processes. Recent developments in Liberia's higher education sector indicate that weaknesses in the regulatory oversight exercised by the NCHE have become increasingly evident. These shortcomings have allowed a growing number of institutions to operate without accreditation or in violation of established standards. National compliance reviews have exposed serious lapses, including the employment of inadequately qualified instructors, poor academic and physical infrastructure, and the delivery of academic programs without proper authorization. In response, the NCHE has taken corrective action by suspending or shutting down several noncompliant institutions (Togba, 2025). Although such interventions are justified, they point to more fundamental problems within the country's quality assurance system. Persistent challenges, such as weak enforcement mechanisms, limited financial and technical capacity, and uneven implementation of regulatory standards, have historically created space for low-quality providers to operate unchecked. These conditions have gradually eroded public confidence in the credibility of higher education in Liberia (Togba, 2025). These challenges are embedded within a wider policy context characterized by outdated regulatory instruments, insufficient monitoring capacity, and chronic resource limitations—factors that collectively underscore the urgency of pursuing depoliticized reforms in higher education regulation (Ministry of Education, 2022). This study, therefore, intends to assess the quality assurance performance of the NCHE and examine

how politicization influences its regulatory effectiveness. Specifically, the research seeks to analyze the relationship between political interference and accreditation outcomes, evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of current oversight mechanisms, and propose depoliticization strategies that can strengthen transparency, accountability, and institutional credibility within Liberia's higher education system.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are three-fold:

- i. It examines the extent to which political influence affects the regulatory autonomy and quality assurance decisions of NCHE;
- ii. It systematically evaluates the effectiveness of the NCHE's existing quality assurance frameworks and enforcement mechanisms in maintaining academic standards across public and private higher education institutions;
- iii. It proposes depoliticization strategies that can strengthen NCHE's regulatory effectiveness and enhance sustainable quality assurance outcomes in Liberia's higher education sector.

Research questions

- i. To what extent does political interference influence NCHE's regulatory autonomy and quality assurance decision-making processes in Liberia's higher education sector?
- ii. How effective are NCHE's existing quality assurance frameworks and enforcement mechanisms in maintaining academic standards across public and private higher education institutions?
- iii. What depoliticization measures can be adopted to improve NCHE's institutional independence, regulatory performance, and overall quality assurance effectiveness?

Significance of the Study

This study is important because it adds to both academic and policy discussions about higher

education governance, especially in countries recovering from conflict or facing instability. It focuses on how removing political influence can improve the effectiveness of regulatory bodies. By evaluating the quality assurance work of Liberia's NCHE, the study offers concrete evidence on how political interference affects decision-making, standards, and the credibility of the higher education system.

The results are intended to guide policymakers, regulators, and higher education administrators in developing practical approaches to protect quality assurance processes from political pressures. This would help improve transparency, accountability, and consistency in regulatory practices. The study also provides recommendations based on evidence to support reforms that can strengthen institutional performance and increase public confidence in Liberia's higher education sector. Academically, the research fills a gap in the limited literature on higher education regulation in Liberia and the wider West African region. It also serves as a useful reference for other countries facing similar governance challenges. Overall, the study highlights the critical role of depoliticized quality assurance in building human capital, enhancing national competitiveness, and supporting sustainable development.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs principal-agent theory as the core framework to explain how political leaders delegate regulation to the NCHE and how political interference, information gaps, and conflicting incentives can weaken its independence and performance. Agreeably, it also draws on public governance and bureaucratic autonomy theory to stress the need for institutional independence and accountability, and on policy implementation theory to show how political context and administrative capacity affect quality assurance. Together, these theories help explain how politicization impacts NCHE and how depoliticization could improve its regulatory effectiveness.

Principal-Agent Theory

Articulated by several prominent scholars, including Michael C. Jensen and William H. Meckling (1976), Terry Moe (1989), Hawkins et al. (2006), and Anna

Leander and Rita Abrahamsen (2016), the concept views the state or government as the "principal" that delegates authority to an "agent," tasked with carrying out functions on its behalf. In the context of the study, the government of the Republic of Liberia is the state, precisely the Executive Branch, and the National Legislature -- House and Senate Committees on Education and Public Administration -- responsible for oversight of the NCHE, the agency tasked with the legal mandate of regulating, accrediting, licensing, monitoring, and overseeing post-secondary/tertiary institutions and programs. In other words, the NCHE operates within the broader Liberian government and is accountable to the executive branch (often in cooperation with the Ministry of Education) but, also, subject to legislative confirmation and oversight. Interestingly, the Ministry of Education serves as the chairman of the NCHE Board of Commissioners that oversee the NCHE Secretariat which runs the day-to-day activities of the National Commission on Higher Education.

Concerning the main problem, proponents argue that problem arises when the agent's goals are not perfectly aligned with the principal's expectations. From this assertion, two fundamental concepts emerge. First, the agent, meaning the senior leadership position, is guaranteed when its policy and strategy protect the interests of the principal or the state. Second, the position is not guaranteed when its policy or strategy threatens the interests of the principal, especially where the agent works at the will and pleasure of the principal. In a fragile democracy manifested by weak legislative or parliamentary oversight, the principal exercises its constitutional power to protect vested interests. A case that illustrates the practical relevance of this theory occurred when Liberia's former Minister of Education and Chair of the NCHE Board, Professor Dr. D. Ansu Sonii, Sr., single-handedly suspended an NCHE policy requiring university presidents and vice presidents to hold terminal (PhD, etc.) degrees as a prerequisite for appointment. The NCHE justified the policy as consistent with widely accepted international best standards in higher education governance. The decision was reportedly motivated by growing concerns over the prevalence of questionable or falsified academic credentials

among prominent individuals in Liberia, including former and serving legislators, as well as presidents and vice presidents of several universities (Johnson, 2023).

The Minister contended that the policy was adopted unilaterally by the NCHE and deviated from the framework in place at the time he assumed office. Consequently, he ordered the suspension of the policy pending consultations and formal justification by the NCHE Executive Director, Professor Dr. Edward Lama Wonkeryor, and the Board of Commissioners regarding the timing and necessity of the policy's implementation (Johnson, 2023). From the perspective of this study, the Minister's intervention does not necessarily reflect opposition to efforts aimed at strengthening academic standards within Liberia's tertiary education system. Rather, the controversy appears to stem from a conflict of interest inherent in the policy's implications. As the Board Chair, the Minister holds an honorary doctorate rather than a terminal academic degree. Endorsing a policy that effectively disqualifies individuals without terminal degrees from senior academic leadership could, therefore, place the Minister and others in this category in a position of perceived inconsistency and reputational vulnerability. Such circumstances may raise public concerns regarding the ethical coherence and institutional legitimacy of the decision-making process, thereby reinforcing the relevance of principal-agent dynamics and political interference in regulatory governance.

On a different note, the case of former Education Minister, Professor Dr. Sonni, presents a significant argument. Professor Sonni taught accounting and business courses at the University of Liberia for close to forty years and reached the rank of Full Professor before his appointment as Minister of Education. He has also played a significant role in mentoring students at both undergraduate and graduate levels. Moreover, as a notable leader in education and a qualified academic, he is more than capable of serving as a University President.

An additional clear demonstration of ethical coherence and institutional legitimacy in the decision-making process is evident in the reappointment of Professor Wonkeryor as the NCHE Executive Director by President Joseph Nyuma

Boakai, Sr. Upon his reappointment, Dr. Wonkeryor received a definitive mandate to address and reform the rapid proliferation of higher education institutions, including healthcare training programs in Liberia, with the goal of enhancing their viability and competitiveness within the West African sub-region and globally. Embracing this directive with full commitment, the National Commission on Higher Education commenced a nationwide inspection on November 25, 2024, targeting both public and private higher education institutions throughout Liberia. This rigorous inspection was vital to safeguarding the quality and integrity of academic programs across Liberia's diverse geopolitical regions. The review focused on several critical areas: ensuring that academic programs were accredited and aligned with national and international standards; evaluating institutional governance and leadership structures; and verifying compliance with regulatory requirements. Through these measures, the NCHE aimed to enforce high standards and strengthen Liberia's higher education landscape.

In June 2025, the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) in Liberia concluded a comprehensive inspection of tertiary institutions across the country. The findings were formally submitted to key national stakeholders, including the NCHE Board of Commissioners, the President's office, and legislative committees overseeing education. This report marked a significant moment in the ongoing effort to uphold academic standards and institutional accountability in Liberia's higher education sector.

On June 24, 2025, Professor Wonkeryor, Executive Director of the NCHE, publicly presented the inspection results during a press briefing hosted by the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism. The briefing revealed that 22 institutions were suspended for failing to meet the minimum required standards, while 21 others were found operating without official NCHE recognition or approval and were consequently shut down. Professor Wonkeryor emphasized the urgent need to bolster the NCHE's regulatory capacity by recruiting more qualified personnel, including PhD holders in key academic fields, to ensure rigorous oversight. He also underscored that all higher education institutions,

regardless of their geographic location or affiliation, must comply with established regulations (McGee, 2025).

The assessment process is ongoing, with particular attention being paid to graduate programs at the University of Liberia. To enhance the quality assurance process, external experts in specialized fields such as law and medicine are being engaged to conduct thorough program reviews. These measures aim to safeguard the integrity and quality of professional education in Liberia (McGee, 2025).

Following the press conference, Honorable Dr. Jarso Maley Jallah, Minister of Education and Chairperson of the NCHE Board of Commissioners, expressed dissatisfaction with the timing and manner of the public disclosure, noting that it occurred without her prior approval. In response, Professor Wonkeryor clarified that while he respects the Minister and the Board's oversight role, the Executive Director is responsible for the daily operations of the NCHE and deemed it necessary to inform the public promptly. In the same context, Dr. Wonkeryor informed Minister Dr. Jallah that the Honorable Deputy Minister of Education had already revealed the findings of the NCHE assessment report publicly when he proxied for the Minister at a program marking the groundbreaking ceremony of the proposed NCHE Secretariat building at the University of Liberia Fendell Campus, Montserrado County. This division of authority reflects the 1989 Act establishing the NCHE, which grants the Board oversight responsibilities while delegating operational management to the Executive Director and the Secretariat.

This episode highlights the delicate balance between governance and transparency in Liberia's higher education regulatory framework. It also underscores the government's commitment to enforcing standards that protect students and uphold the credibility of the nation's academic institutions.

Policy Implementation Theory

The foundational work of Pressman & Wildavsky (1973), Lipsky (1980), and Sabatier & Mazmanian (1980), has shaped a policy framework that examines the reasons behind the failure of well-designed policies, attributing it to various contextual barriers such as leadership instability, political interference,

inadequate capacity, and limited institutional autonomy. In other words, this theory is particularly valuable in the context of public sector reform and regulatory agencies, as it illustrates that the success of policy implementation relies not only on the formulation of the policy itself but also on the actors involved, the institutions at play, the discretion exercised, and the overarching political context.

This study argues that the theoretical dynamics under discussion are closely aligned with Principal-Agent Theory, which explains how political principals may constrain, influence, or override the actions of implementing agents. The case of the Minister of Education's suspension of the NCHE policy illustrates this relationship and reinforces key assumptions of policy implementation theory. Specifically, the policy's failure can be attributed to the NCHE's limited institutional autonomy, which enables ministerial intervention in its regulatory decisions. Moreover, the situation is inherently political, as the NCHE operates under the authority of the Executive through the Ministry of Education which, as previously stated, has the oversight authority. This structural arrangement restricts the agency's independent decision-making capacity and weakens its regulatory authority. The policy setback was further exacerbated by the perceived influence of certain university presidents who, benefiting from this institutional structure, were able to leverage ministerial authority to undermine the implementation of the NCHE policy.

Another manifestation of policy implementation failure attributable to political influence is regime change, which often produces leadership instability and discontinuity in institutional practices. In the Liberian context, the Executive Director and Principal Deputies -- particularly the presidential appointees of the NCHE -- serve at the will and pleasure of the President. In many instances, the leadership of the NCHE is frequently influenced by party affiliation or political recommendation, which directly and indirectly impacts neutrality in policy implementation. Traditionally, the NCHE has been mandated to ensure quality assurance through mechanisms such as accreditation, credential auditing, and verification; however, these functions have not been guided by clearly defined policy timelines or implementation cycles. The absence of

such temporal frameworks has created a pattern in which institutional actions are frequently reversed following leadership transitions. For example, in March 2024, President Joseph Boakai, Sr. reappointed Professor Wonkeryor as Executive Director of the NCHE, following his earlier tenure under former President George Weah from 2021 to 2024 (Executive Mansion's press release 2025). Similarly, when President Joseph Nyuma Boakai, Sr. replaced Professor Edward Lama Wonkeryor, PhD, with Dr. Cecelia Cassell as Executive Director of the NCHE, Dr. Cassell declared that her administration would embark on the review and revision of accreditation decisions undertaken by her predecessor, Professor Wonkeryor. These examples are not intended to single out individual officeholders but rather to highlight the structural weaknesses arising from the lack of formalized policy time-frames, which, when combined with politically driven leadership turnover, undermine policy continuity and effective implementation.

Public Governance and Bureaucratic Autonomy Theory

Pioneered by multiple scholars such as Carpenter (2001), Kooiman (2003), Stoker (1998), and Weber (1992), this theoretical lens posits that effective public institutions require a degree of autonomy from political influence to ensure professionalism, consistency, and public accountability. Public governance and bureaucratic autonomy theory offer a useful lens for understanding the role of tertiary education regulatory bodies, particularly because these institutions are tasked with protecting academic quality, maintaining standards, and upholding public confidence. When regulatory decisions are heavily shaped by political interests, these core responsibilities are often weakened. Within higher education systems, the theory underscores the importance of granting regulators sufficient operational and decision-making independence from political authorities. As Carpenter (2001) argues, institutional autonomy allows regulatory agencies to develop technical competence, professional authority, and stable regulatory practices over time. For bodies overseeing tertiary education, such independence is critical for

carrying out accreditation processes, verifying academic credentials, and enforcing compliance based on objective standards rather than political pressure.

From a broader governance standpoint, public governance scholars such as Kooiman (2003) and Stoker (1998) highlight that effective regulation depends on clearly defined institutional mandates, strong accountability arrangements, and professional discretion within complex governance environments. In higher education, regulatory agencies serve the public by ensuring that institutions meet acceptable quality benchmarks. Interference by political actors, such as directing accreditation outcomes or suspending established standards, can undermine both the credibility of the regulator and the overall quality of the education system. Weber's (1992) classical bureaucratic theory further supports this argument by emphasizing rule-based administration, hierarchical order, and specialized expertise as foundations of effective public institutions. A tertiary education regulator that adheres to transparent rules and professional norms is better equipped to apply standards consistently across institutions, regardless of political affiliation, leadership changes, or institutional ownership.

In sum, public governance and bureaucratic autonomy theory help explain why regulatory independence, professional capacity, and accountability are essential to the effective functioning of tertiary education oversight bodies. Where autonomy is limited, regulators become vulnerable to external influence, uneven enforcement, and declining public trust in higher education governance.

In the context of this study, the case of the Minister of Education's suspension of the NCHE policy illustrates this relationship and reinforces key assumptions of the public governance and bureaucratic autonomy theory. The lack of full autonomy undermined the NCHE's well-designed policy intended to raise the bar of Liberia's tertiary educational system. In short, the policy suffered a major setback because of the structural arrangements that limit the NCHE's full autonomy.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Mandate of the National Commission on Higher Education

The 1989 Act mandates the NCHE to:

1. Formulate broad policy guidelines for the establishment of institutions of higher education in Liberia.
2. Serve as the regulatory body for all institutions offering post-secondary education (technical, professional, and academic) leading to the award of certificates, diplomas, and degrees.
3. Coordinate and serve as the principal liaison between all institutions of higher learning and the Government of Liberia.
4. Monitor, evaluate, and accredit all institutions of higher learning to ensure quality programming.
5. Approve new and existing programs of higher education for funding, after having satisfied itself of their relevance to national development.
6. Review existing programs at institutions of higher education with the aim of establishing programs of study based on national needs. (NCHE's 1989 ACT)

Composition of the Board of Commissioners of the National Commission on Higher Education

Minister of Education – serves as *Chairperson* of the Board (ex-officio)

Deputy Minister of Education – member

Chairperson of the Senate Committee on Education – member

Chairperson of the House Committee on Education – member

Minister of Finance & Development Planning – member

Director General of the Liberia Chamber of Commerce – member

Executive Director of the National Commission on Higher Education - serves as Secretary of the Board

President of the University of Liberia – member

President of William V.S. Tubman University – member

President of Cuttington University – member

President of the Liberia Dental & Medical Council – member

President of the National Teachers' Association of Liberia – member

President of the Liberia National Bar Association – member

President of the Liberia Business Association – member (NCHE's 1989 ACT)

Depoliticization

For this study, the concept of depoliticization of higher education is clarified. In relation to a national higher education and quality assurance body, depoliticization connotes reducing undue political influence, i.e., decisions driven by political agendas, patronage, or partisan considerations, so that the body performs its functions objectively, transparently, and meritocratically (Philips & Kinser, 2018). In paraphrase, Trumbić & Okebukola (2023) argue that rather than being shaped by short-term political interests (e.g., rewarding supporters or aligning with a ruling party's ideology), national commissions or bodies responsible for tertiary education operate on technical criteria, evidence, and professional norms to regulate and assure quality in higher education. Accordingly, this involves: (a) Merit-based appointments and leadership selection; (b) Institutional autonomy from political interference in accreditation, curriculum evaluation, and sanctions; (c) Transparent, consistent procedures that stakeholders trust; and (d) Decisions grounded in academic standards and quality benchmarks, not partisan objectives (Trumbić & Okebukola 2023).

In his erudite publication, Mohammed (2024) contends that, unless replaced by merit-based governance models, political interference, manifested by ethnic or factional appointments, erodes institutional integrity and academic quality. The study clarifies that the concept of depoliticization does not seek to remove politics from national commissions tasked with regulating tertiary education. Rather, it emphasizes that decisions should adhere to professional benchmarks rather than fluctuating political priorities. It advocates for the protection of autonomy from political maneuvering while ensuring oversight from the governing board or body. This approach is being observed in several African countries recognized among the top prestigious universities on the

continent. The third segment of this study features a comparative analysis.

Quality Assurance (QA)

In the realm of tertiary education regulation, the concept of quality assurance has garnered extensive scholarly attention in academic discourse. For example, Harvey & Green (1998), whose insights remain pertinent today, framed quality assurance as a systematic review of educational programs to ensure the maintenance and enhancement of acceptable standards in education, scholarship, and infrastructure. Ewell (2002) emphasizes the regulatory aspect of quality assurance, defining it as external quality assurance, which includes activities such as accreditation, audits, and evaluations carried out by an external entity to confirm that institutions or programs adhere to predetermined criteria and comply with regulatory standards.

A comprehensive and modern definition that reflects the evolution of the concept since its inception, as provided by Quality and Qualifications Ireland. According to the institution, this concept encompasses a continuous process of monitoring, evaluating, maintaining, and improving the quality of an education system, institution, or program (QQI, 2021). According to Stott (2023), it includes teaching, opportunities for learning, assessment, qualifications standards, the design and delivery of programmes, accreditation and certification of learners, and learning achievements. Together, these definitions imply that QA provides the benchmarks in higher education. The benchmarks include curriculum design and learning outcomes, faculty qualifications, and staff–student ratios, assessment and examination practices, and academic resources such as libraries, laboratories, and ICT facilities. These standards function as reference points against which institutional performance is judged (United States Commission of Higher Education, 2025; Asamoah et al (2025).

Rini, Sudadio, & Muhyidin (2025) opined that QA does not merely measure quality. It defines, operationalizes, and enforces benchmarks that shape how higher education institutions design programs, assess learning, and demonstrate performance. Without QA, benchmarks would be fragmented, informal, or politically driven rather than evidence-

based and professionally grounded. Asamoah et al. (2025) similarly emphasized that regulatory measures, including program validation, institutional visits, staff recruitment, and foreign credential evaluations, are essential for maintaining educational standards.

At the national level, QA is primarily the responsibility of regulatory bodies overseeing tertiary education, which typically operate as semi-autonomous agencies under the Ministry of Education. This arrangement, by its nature, exposes these agencies or national commissions to political influences that have implications for their effectiveness. In other words, even though QA agencies are created under national law, their procedures, decisions, and judgment outcomes should not be dictated by political agendas, which would otherwise compromise the integrity of academic quality assessments and improvement of the educational system or sector. This is why Milas (2022) warns that QA bodies must function without undue influence from governments or political stakeholders to ensure unbiased evaluations of higher education provision. As mentioned in the case of Ghana and Nigeria, this study submits that although QA is not among the objective criteria for the ranking of African Universities, which are identical to those used globally (Times Higher Education -- THE), QS World University Rankings, Shanghai/ARWU, Webometrics), it would be difficult to ignore the impact of QA. This is because the criteria, such as teaching capacity, research volume, and impact, internationalization, graduate employability, and societal impact, etc., are influenced by the effective QA void of political interference. In other words, it can be argued that these criteria are the outcome or end product of QA. So, by this claim, it makes sense to infer that QA is indirectly connected to these objective criteria.

Reforming Liberia's Higher Education

Reforming Liberia's higher education regulatory system requires addressing the structural relationship between political authorities and regulatory institutions, as explained by Principal–Agent Theory. In this context, political actors delegate oversight responsibilities to the NCHE, creating a risk that political interests may override professional and

technical judgment when accountability arrangements are weak. Depoliticization-oriented reforms respond to this challenge by clearly redefining NCHE's mandate, strengthening oversight mechanisms, and aligning institutional incentives with national quality assurance objectives. Such measures help limit discretionary political interference, reduce inconsistencies in regulatory enforcement, and ensure that NCHE's actions reflect long-term public interest goals rather than short-term political considerations. By minimizing agency distortions and improving incentive alignment, depoliticization enhances regulatory credibility and institutional trust.

At the same time, policy implementation theory and public governance and bureaucratic autonomy theory emphasize that effective reform depends on institutional capacity, operational clarity, and professional independence. From an implementation perspective, regulatory reforms are more likely to succeed when policies are translated into clear procedures, supported by adequate resources, and executed by personnel who are shielded from political patronage. Public governance perspectives further stress that regulatory legitimacy is strengthened when agencies operate transparently and engage relevant stakeholders, while bureaucratic autonomy theory underscores the importance of insulating regulatory decision-making from partisan pressures. In combination, these theories suggest that depoliticization is not the removal of accountability, but the establishment of a governance framework in which NCHE can exercise technical expertise independently while remaining answerable to the governing board through transparent and participatory oversight mechanisms. Such an arrangement promotes consistency, legitimacy, and effectiveness in quality assurance outcomes across Liberia's higher education sector.

Comparative Analysis of Ghana Tertiary Education Commission (GTEC) and the National Universities Commission (NUC)

Ghana Tertiary Education Commission (GTEC)

Similar to the NCHE, the GTEC operates under the Presidency as an agency within the Ministry of Education. Its annual reports and other statutory reporting obligations are submitted through the

Minister. The President of Ghana is responsible for appointing the Board members and the Director-General, in accordance with constitutional processes. This structure indicates that the executive branch holds significant influence over GTEC's leadership and strategic direction (GTEC, 2020). Consequently, while GTEC demonstrates autonomy, it is nonetheless constrained by governance frameworks and political realities. In contrast to the NCHE, the GTEC employs a tenure-based approach for the Director-General, who serves a fixed term of four years rather than an indefinite or lifetime appointment. This legal arrangement provides the officeholder with a defined period of service, which can be renewed based on performance or approval, contributing to a degree of independence. Such independence is crucial for upholding quality assurance through the implementation of relevant policies.

While the presence of national commissions for tertiary education may not directly influence the higher tiers of continental university rankings, it can be posited that institutions like the University of Ghana, ranked 5th, and Ashesi University, ranked 9th according to the Sub-Saharan Africa University Rankings 2024, a respected continental ranking based on teaching, research, and impact, should not disregard the GTEC mandate aimed at ensuring and enforcing quality assurance. This suggests that these institutions maintain a considerable degree of autonomy. Furthermore, it indicates that their decisions are based on academic standards and quality benchmarks rather than partisan interests.

The National Universities Commission (NUC)

Much like the NCHE and GTEC, the NUC, established in 1962, operates as a statutory agency under the Federal Ministry of Education and is governed by a Council appointed with the President's approval. Its primary responsibilities include ensuring quality assurance, accreditation, and the coordination of Nigeria's university system, as well as advising on the establishment of new institutions and monitoring academic standards (National Universities Commission, 2026).

Although similar to GTEC, the NUC does not possess complete autonomy; its regulatory functions provide it with the necessary leverage to conduct

accreditation and standard-setting activities independently within its mandate. While the NUC functions autonomously in its regulatory role, it remains accountable to the federal government and aligns its policies with national educational objectives (National Universities Commission, 2026). Unlike the NCHE, the NUC Act stipulates that the Executive Secretary, appointed by the President of Nigeria, serves an initial term of five years, which may be renewed under the same conditions (Quadri, 2024). Similar to the GTEC, this legal framework provides a degree of independence, which is essential for maintaining QA through the implementation of relevant policies. It can be argued that while the presence of the NUC is not a critical factor for achieving higher positions in continental rankings of universities, the 2026 QS World University Rankings (released in June 2025 and frequently referred to as the "2025 ranking") includes three Nigerian universities: the University of Ibadan, the University of Lagos, and Ahmadu Bello University. Their inclusion in this global ranking underscores their standing within Africa and reflects the performance of the NUC's mandate to ensure and enforce QA. This suggests that the organization operates with a certain level of autonomy, indicating that its decisions are based on academic standards and quality benchmarks rather than partisan interests. In the context of Liberia, this comparative experience highlights the critical need to depoliticize the regulation of higher education in order to bolster the institutional autonomy and governance capacity of the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE). By enhancing the NCHE's operational independence, specifically through the implementation of clear protections for leadership tenure and safeguarding against arbitrary political interference, the organization would be better positioned to apply QA standards more consistently, transparently, and professionally. Such improvements in regulatory performance are likely to lead to greater institutional compliance, elevated academic standards, and enhanced outcomes in tertiary education. Consequently, this approach would strengthen Liberia's higher education sector as a credible contributor to the development of human capital and long-term socio-economic growth.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology. Qualitative research is appropriate when the objective is to understand meanings, experiences, and social realities from the perspective of participants rather than to measure variables numerically. The study seeks to generate in-depth insights into participants' lived experiences and the social processes surrounding the phenomenon under investigation.

Qualitative inquiry is grounded in interpretivist and constructivist traditions, which emphasize understanding human behavior within natural settings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This perspective allows the researcher to interpret how individuals construct meaning from their experience. The qualitative approach centers on document analysis of policy papers, regulatory decisions, and official reports to identify patterns of politicization in regulatory practice. Document analysis is a systematic method that helps trace policy development and understand how governance and political forces are expressed in formal texts (Dalglish, Khalid, & McMahon, 2021). This approach is especially suitable for policy research because documents both influence and reflect institutional behavior over time. Additionally, an exploratory qualitative approach is used to investigate aspects of depoliticization that remain underexplored. This design helps generate new insights, refine conceptual frameworks, and ground theory in empirical evidence (Reiter, 2017).

ANSWERING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This section serves as the centerpiece of the article, in which the research questions are examined in relation to the theoretical framework discussed earlier.

To what extent does political interference influence NCHE's regulatory autonomy and quality assurance decision-making processes in Liberia's higher education sector?

As mentioned, the suspension of the NCHE's PhD requirement for university leadership provides a clear illustration of how political interference can substantially constrain regulatory autonomy and distort QA decision-making in Liberia's higher

education sector. To begin with, the situation illustrates a clear infringement on the regulatory independence of the NCHE. Establishing minimum academic qualifications, such as requiring a doctoral degree for university presidents and vice presidents, falls within the commission's legally assigned responsibility to determine and enforce governance and academic standards consistent with global best practices. The decision by the Minister of Education to suspend this requirement, acting simultaneously as a political officeholder and Chair of the NCHE Board, effectively displaced a decision that was grounded in professional QA considerations. Such action implies that the NCHE's regulatory authority is subject to political discretion rather than protected autonomy. Consequently, the commission's ability to function as a credible, independent, and technically driven regulatory agency is significantly undermined.

Second, the incident illustrates how political calculations can override technical and evidence-driven QA judgments. While the NCHE framed the doctoral qualification requirement as aligned with internationally accepted norms in higher education regulation, its subsequent suspension appears to have been influenced by fears that the policy would reveal irregular or fraudulent academic credentials held by powerful political and institutional figures (Johnson, 2023). This indicates that the reversal was not primarily driven by concerns about instructional practicality or sectoral readiness, but rather by efforts to contain political fallout and shield entrenched interests. Under such circumstances, QA actions are shaped by political expediency instead of academic standards, institutional development objectives, or the long-term integrity of the higher education system.

Third, the situation disrupts the reliability, coherence, and perceived legitimacy of quality assurance mechanisms. Robust QA systems depend on clear, stable rules that are consistently enforced across all institutions. When compliance requirements can be set aside through political intervention, enforcement begins to look arbitrary rather than rule-based. This weakens confidence among universities, academic professionals, and external partners, who may come to view quality assurance obligations as subject to political influence

instead of grounded in professional judgment. Over time, such views can reduce adherence to standards, encourage push-back against regulation, and ultimately undermine the NCHE's authority as an impartial and credible regulator of academic quality. In sum, the example shows that political meddling in Liberia's higher education system goes further than mere policy supervision and affects the actual process of setting academic standards. Although the NCHE is officially a national regulator, its real independence is limited because political figures can modify or halt quality assurance policies for reasons unrelated to technical criteria. This situation weakens the QA process and underscores the necessity for more robust institutional protections to shield regulatory decisions from transient political influence (Johnson, 2023).

In connection with the theoretical framework, the suspension of NCHE's PhD requirement illustrates how political interference can weaken regulatory autonomy and distort QA decision-making. In theoretical terms, the case reveals a classic principal-agent failure where political actors override the agent's technical decisions. It also demonstrates a breakdown of bureaucratic autonomy and public governance, showing that the regulator cannot operate independently. Finally, the incident exemplifies policy implementation failure driven by political incentives rather than technical capacity, undermining the legitimacy of the higher education regulatory framework in Liberia.

How effective are NCHE's existing quality assurance frameworks and enforcement mechanisms in maintaining academic standards across public and private higher education institutions?

The response to this question can be understood through two distinct scenarios, illustrating both effectiveness and ineffectiveness. A mandate has been issued for the suspension or closure of 53 tertiary institutions due to their illegal operations or failure to comply with regulatory standards. According to the latest report from the NCHE, ongoing violations include neglecting to pay annual service fees and the unauthorized introduction of academic programs, both of which violate national policy. Among the institutions evaluated were

several notable universities in Liberia, such as the University of Liberia (UL), Cuttington University, the African Methodist Episcopal University (AMEU), the African Bible College University (ABCU), and Tubman University (TU), among others. Although these institutions are not facing suspension, the NCHE has given them a one-year ultimatum to address persistent administrative, infrastructural, and academic deficiencies (Staff Reporter, 2025).

In the first scenario, the NCHE's quality assurance frameworks and enforcement mechanisms appear effective in identifying and sanctioning noncompliant institutions, as evidenced by the suspension of 53 institutions and ongoing enforcement actions. However, the continued violations among major public universities indicate that the NCHE's mechanisms struggle to enforce compliance among influential institutions. The issuance of ultimatums points to a weakness in proactive oversight and corrective enforcement. Moreover, the persistence of violations even after monitoring suggests that the NCHE's framework may be more reactive than preventive. On the other hand, the scenario demonstrates that NCHE is effective in enforcing standards when institutions are clearly noncompliant, but it also highlights the limited impact of its frameworks on improving institutional quality, especially among well-established public universities.

Factually, the NCHE's enforcement mechanisms are strong in sanctioning noncompliance but weak in ensuring sustained compliance and institutional improvement. The second scenario has to do with the policy requiring university presidents and vice presidents to hold terminal degrees, which reflects a robust commitment to international quality standards. It aligns with global norms that prioritize academic leadership credentials as a key quality marker. However, the suspension of this policy by the Minister of Education indicates a major weakness in enforcement capacity and institutional autonomy. If NCHE cannot sustain its own standards in the face of political pressure, the framework becomes symbolic rather than functional. Technically, it suggests that NCHE's QA frameworks appear conceptually strong but operationally weak. By implication, it points out that the QA framework may

be well-designed on paper, but its effectiveness is undermined if it cannot be consistently applied across institutions. Moreover, the suspension signals a vulnerability in the enforcement mechanism. This is because, as mentioned earlier in this study, QA is not only about setting standards; it is about ensuring compliance through credible enforcement mechanisms, accreditation, sanctions, and monitoring.

Viewed through a principal-agent lens, the situation suggests that universities can take advantage of the NCHE's limited monitoring capacity, leading to a gap in oversight and opportunities for noncompliance. In terms of policy implementation theory, this points to a discrepancy between policy design and execution, driven by constraints such as inadequate resources, ineffective sanctions, and opposition from powerful stakeholders, which makes the NCHE's approach appear more responsive than preventive. Public governance theory also indicates that uneven application of accountability and transparency across institutions weakens the NCHE's credibility and public confidence. Likewise, the concept of bureaucratic autonomy suggests that the NCHE's ability to act independently is compromised when political actors, as in the case of the Minister of Education's suspension of a requirement for university leaders to hold terminal degrees, can influence or obstruct enforcement.

What depoliticization measures can be adopted to improve NCHE's institutional independence, regulatory performance, and overall quality assurance effectiveness?

Recent political interference in Liberia's higher education oversight, especially the decision to suspend the PhD requirement for university leadership, highlights major gaps in the NCHE's legal authority and operational independence. These gaps weaken the effectiveness of QA, disrupt consistent policy enforcement, and erode public trust in higher education institutions. By contrast, countries like Ghana and Nigeria demonstrate more resilient governance models through bodies such as GTEC and NUC, which operate under clearer tenure protections and institutional safeguards that limit political interference and improve regulatory effectiveness. Both Ghana and Nigeria provide

valuable lessons crucial to the reformation of the NCHE. Clear statutory tenure and institutional mandate can help NCHE shield QA decisions from shifting political dynamics, and fixed terms for leadership, tied to performance and statutory protections, can reduce arbitrary political influence on QA decision-making. This discussion suggests specific amendments to the NCHE Act aimed at strengthening autonomy, improving accountability, and raising the quality of Liberia's tertiary education system. The amendment must take cognizance of the following:

(a) Stipulate a fixed tenured term (e.g., 4–5 years) for the Executive Director with renewal conditional on performance and QA outcomes. This is because defined tenure promotes stability and reduces vulnerability to political pressure.

(b) Establish a multi-stakeholder selection committee comprising representatives from universities, civil society, QA experts, and the Ministry of Education to recommend candidates. This is because diverse inputs reduce single-source political leverage.

© Protect NCHE's regulatory decisions from unilateral suspension by political officeholders. Specify that core QA standards and guidelines may only be amended through legislative processes. This is because it will safeguard NCHE against ad hoc political reversals and enhance predictability.

CONCLUSION

This study assessed the effectiveness of the NCHE in maintaining academic standards within Liberia's tertiary education system, with a particular focus on the impact of political influence on its regulatory role. Grounded in frameworks such as principal-agent theory, public governance, policy implementation, and bureaucratic autonomy, the research reveals that the NCHE's ability to ensure quality largely hinges on its independence from political interference. Although the commission demonstrates technical competence—evidenced by actions like suspending fifty-three institutions for noncompliance and ongoing university oversight—persistent violations among major public universities and the rollback of key policy reforms indicate that enforcement remains vulnerable to political pressures. This

uneven regulatory application undermines the NCHE's credibility and weakens consistent quality assurance across both public and private institutions. The findings show that while the NCHE's quality assurance processes can identify and penalize clear breaches, their overall effectiveness is limited by institutional and governance challenges that impede sustained improvements. The decision to waive the terminal degree requirement for university leaders exemplifies the commission's compromised independence, illustrating how political influence can override professional standards and damage regulatory credibility. Consequently, the NCHE's quality assurance role risks becoming symbolic rather than substantive, diminishing public trust and hindering the development of a robust, accountable higher education system.

For Liberia's higher education system to be successfully reformed, depoliticization must be central to the agenda. This requires strengthening the NCHE's legal and operational autonomy through institutional reforms such as fixed-term appointments for commissioners, merit-based leadership selection, and clear separation between political interests and regulatory decisions. Additionally, the NCHE should enhance its enforcement capacity by increasing transparency, applying more effective sanctions for noncompliance, and improving monitoring and evaluation to ensure consistent implementation. Fostering a professional culture of accountability, supported by active engagement from universities, civil society, and industry stakeholders, will further reinforce adherence to quality standards. Ultimately, removing political interference from higher education regulation will enable the NCHE to better protect academic integrity, enforce institutional accountability, and align Liberia's higher education system with international standards—thereby boosting the credibility and value of Liberian qualifications both domestically and globally.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From the findings above, the following recommendations are made as possible interventions to the problem:

1. That the Liberian National legislature should revise the NCHE Act to ensure NCHE's

independence from political influence. No Higher Education Institution should be allowed to be a member of the Board of Commissioners as it is presently. The NCHE should be autonomous and empowered to make regulatory decisions, and protected from executive, legislative, or any other political interference.

2. The National government should invest in continuous professional development for NCHE staff in areas such as accreditation, evaluation, data analysis, and international quality assurance standards. This should be captured in the annual budget of the NCHE. This will help to professionalize Quality Assurance and regulatory capacity.

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