

Challenges Experienced by Job Seekers During the Qualification Verification Process Conducted by the Zambia Qualifications Authority (ZAQA): Evidence from Ndola District, Zambia

Richard Chalwe^{1*}, Mukwalikuli Mundia¹

¹ School of Business Studies, Kwame Nkrumah University, Zambia

* Corresponding Author

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Abstract

Qualification verification is an important component of education and employment systems because it establishes the authenticity, validity and recognition of academic and professional qualifications. In Zambia, the Zambia Qualifications Authority (ZAQA) is responsible for coordinating qualification recognition and verification. However, job seekers may encounter challenges during the verification process that can affect their participation in recruitment processes. This study examined the challenges experienced by job seekers during the qualification verification process conducted by ZAQA in Ndola District, Zambia, assessed how these challenges affect employment opportunities, and identified strategies for improving verification services. The study adopted a mixed-methods research approach using a descriptive research design and a convergent parallel mixed-methods design. Data were collected from 150 participants comprising 145 job seekers who completed structured questionnaires and five ZAQA officials who participated in semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data were analysed using frequencies and percentages, while qualitative data were analysed thematically. The study was guided by Systems Theory. The findings revealed that long processing time was the most frequently reported challenge, accounting for 33.1% of job seekers, followed by high verification fees (21.4%), poor communication and feedback (16.6%), technical challenges with the online system (13.1%), repeated submission of documents (10.3%), and limited accessibility to ZAQA services (5.5%). The challenges affected employment opportunities mainly through delayed recruitment processes (38.6%), missed employment opportunities (23.4%), increased financial burdens (17.9%), reduced motivation to apply for jobs (11.7%), and loss of employer confidence (8.4%). Respondents identified faster processing, improved communication, stronger online verification systems, reduced verification fees, increased staffing and improved institutional collaboration as key strategies for improving the system. The study concludes that qualification verification should be treated as an interconnected service-delivery system involving ZAQA, applicants, educational institutions, technology and employers. Improving coordination among these components is essential for reducing delays and enhancing employment outcomes.

1. Introduction

Qualification verification has become an important component of modern education, training and employment systems because it enables institutions and employers to establish whether academic and professional qualifications presented by individuals are genuine, valid and recognised. The increasing number of higher education and training institutions, growing labour mobility and concerns regarding fraudulent or unrecognised qualifications have increased the need for reliable qualification recognition and verification systems (Republic of Zambia, 2011; ZAQA, 2022).

In Zambia, the Government established the Zambia Qualifications Authority (ZAQA) under the Zambia Qualifications Authority Act No. 13 of 2011. The Authority was established to implement the Zambia Qualifications Framework, register qualifications and support the recognition and verification of qualifications. Its establishment was intended to promote consistency, transparency, quality assurance and comparability within the national qualifications system (Republic of Zambia, 2011; ZAQA, 2022). The role of qualification verification is particularly important in recruitment because employers may require applicants to provide evidence that their qualifications are authentic and recognised before employment decisions are finalised.

The importance of qualification verification has increased alongside the expansion of higher education and the growing number of graduates entering the labour market. Employers, professional bodies and educational institutions increasingly require verified qualifications for recruitment, professional registration, promotion and further study (ZAQA, 2022). Efficient qualification recognition systems can facilitate the transition from education to employment, promote labour mobility and enable individuals to make effective use of their educational qualifications (ILO, 2022; UNESCO, 2021).

However, the effectiveness of qualification verification depends on several interconnected factors, including administrative procedures, staffing, technological infrastructure, communication, institutional cooperation and the availability of accurate academic records. Weaknesses in any of these components may affect the overall performance of the verification system. International literature has identified processing delays, technological limitations, administrative bureaucracy and difficulties in confirming academic records as common challenges affecting qualification recognition systems (Brown & Souto Otero, 2020; Mahlobo, 2022).

Similar challenges have been identified within African qualification systems. The African Union Commission (2021) emphasises the importance of effective qualification recognition systems for improving quality assurance and facilitating labour mobility. Nevertheless, many African countries continue to experience technological, administrative and institutional coordination challenges. In South Africa, for example, applicants may experience delays when foreign qualifications require additional evaluation or when qualification-awarding institutions are slow to respond to verification requests (Mncwango & Mkhize, 2022).

In Zambia, ZAQA has introduced digital systems intended to improve the accessibility and efficiency of qualification verification. However, the effectiveness of online systems depends on reliable technological infrastructure, adequate staffing, effective communication and timely cooperation between ZAQA and qualification-awarding institutions (ZAQA, 2022; UNESCO, 2021). Financial costs associated with verification may also create additional barriers for unemployed graduates who must simultaneously meet expenses related to transport, internet access, document preparation and job applications.

Ndola District provides an important context for examining these challenges because it is one of Zambia's major commercial, industrial and educational centres. The district has a considerable population of graduates and job seekers competing for employment opportunities. Many recruitment processes require applicants to provide verified qualifications within specified periods. Consequently, delays or other difficulties in qualification verification may affect applicants' ability to participate effectively in recruitment.

Although previous studies have examined qualification recognition, quality assurance, labour mobility and public service delivery, limited empirical attention has been given to the direct experiences of job seekers undergoing ZAQA qualification verification in Ndola District. The present study therefore examined the challenges experienced by job seekers, assessed their effects on employment opportunities and identified strategies for improving qualification verification services.

Research Objectives

The study was guided by three objectives:

- To examine the challenges experienced by job seekers during the qualification verification process conducted by ZAQA in Ndola District.
- To assess how the challenges experienced during the qualification verification process affect employment opportunities among job seekers in Ndola District.
- To identify the strategies for improving the qualification verification process administered by ZAQA in order to enhance service delivery and employment outcomes.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Systems Theory

This study is anchored on Systems Theory developed by Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1968). Systems Theory views an organisation or process as a collection of interconnected components that work together to achieve common objectives. The performance of the whole system therefore depends on the effective interaction of its individual components.

Systems Theory is particularly relevant to qualification verification because the process involves several interconnected actors and resources. These include ZAQA, applicants, universities and colleges, employers, administrative personnel, technological systems and academic records. The effectiveness of the verification process depends on coordination among these components. A weakness in one component may affect the performance of the entire system (von Bertalanffy, 1968).

In the context of this study, delays may result not only from ZAQA's internal operations but also from high application volumes, inadequate staffing, technological problems, poor communication and delays by qualification-awarding institutions in confirming academic records. The theory therefore provides a useful framework for understanding why qualification verification challenges should not be considered in isolation.

The application of Systems Theory is consistent with the study's conceptualisation of qualification verification as an interconnected process. Improving service delivery therefore requires interventions targeting multiple components simultaneously, including digital systems, staffing, communication, administrative procedures and institutional collaboration (UNESCO, 2021; ZAQA, 2022).

2.2 Empirical Review

Qualification verification plays an important role in ensuring the credibility of academic credentials and supporting employment and labour mobility. Globally, qualification recognition systems face challenges arising from increasing application volumes, inaccurate records, technological limitations and difficulties in verifying qualifications issued by different institutions (UNESCO, 2021; Brown & Souto Otero, 2020).

Mahlobo (2022) found that administrative delays in qualification verification can negatively affect graduate employment outcomes by postponing recruitment decisions. Such delays can become particularly problematic where employers require applicants to provide verified qualifications within specific recruitment deadlines. The OECD (2022) similarly emphasises that efficient qualification recognition systems facilitate labour mobility by reducing

unnecessary administrative barriers.

African evidence indicates similar challenges. Nyerere and Wanjala (2021) observed that inefficient qualification recognition systems can restrict graduate mobility and delay transitions into employment. Mncwango and Mkhize (2022) further found that although South Africa has developed electronic qualification verification systems, applicants may still experience delays where foreign qualifications require evaluation or qualification-awarding institutions delay confirmation.

Financial barriers also affect qualification verification. Applicants may incur verification fees as well as additional costs related to transport, internet access, document certification and repeated follow-ups. These costs may be particularly burdensome for unemployed graduates who have limited financial resources (Mlambo, 2020; African Union Commission, 2021).

In Zambia, qualification verification is administered by ZAQA under the Zambia Qualifications Authority Act No. 13 of 2011. Although the establishment of ZAQA has strengthened coordination within the national qualifications system, applicants may still experience administrative, technological, communication and financial challenges during verification (Republic of Zambia, 2011; ZAQA, 2022).

The literature also demonstrates that qualification verification challenges can affect employment outcomes. Inefficient verification may delay recruitment, prevent applicants from meeting application deadlines and increase the cost of job searching (ILO, 2022; UNESCO, 2021). Applicants whose qualifications remain unverified may also become less competitive than candidates who can provide complete documentation.

Digital transformation has increasingly been proposed as a strategy for improving qualification verification. Electronic platforms can reduce paperwork, improve accessibility and allow applicants to monitor the progress of their applications. However, digital transformation requires reliable infrastructure, adequate technical capacity and effective institutional coordination (UNESCO, 2021; OECD, 2022).

The literature therefore demonstrates that qualification verification is not simply an administrative activity. It is an interconnected service that can influence labour-market participation. However, limited empirical research has examined these issues from the perspective of job seekers in Ndola District. This study addresses this gap by combining quantitative evidence from job seekers with qualitative evidence from ZAQA officials.

3 Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted a mixed-methods research approach using a descriptive research design and a convergent parallel mixed-methods design. The mixed-methods approach enabled the researcher to combine quantitative information from job seekers with qualitative explanations from ZAQA officials (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Quantitative data were used to establish the frequency and prevalence of qualification verification challenges among job seekers, while qualitative data provided institutional explanations regarding the causes of delays, technological challenges, staffing issues, communication and possible strategies for improving service delivery.

The convergent parallel design involved collecting quantitative and qualitative data during the same period, analysing the two forms of data separately and integrating the findings during interpretation. This approach provided a more comprehensive understanding of the verification process (Kumar, 2020).

3.2 Study Area

The study was conducted in Ndola District in Copperbelt Province, Zambia. Ndola is an important commercial, industrial and educational centre with various organisations, government institutions and industries that recruit graduates and other qualified individuals. The district therefore provided an appropriate setting for examining qualification verification challenges and their implications for employment opportunities.

3.3 Target Population and Sample

The target population consisted of job seekers in Ndola District who had applied for or undergone ZAQA qualification verification and ZAQA officials directly involved in the verification process. A total of 150 participants were included in the study. This comprised 145 job seekers and five (5) ZAQA officials. The 145 job seekers provided quantitative data, while the five (5) ZAQA officials provided qualitative institutional perspectives.

Simple random sampling was used to select job seekers, while purposive sampling was used to select ZAQA officials because of their specialised knowledge and direct involvement in qualification verification procedures (Taherdoost, 2021).

3.4 Data Collection Instruments

Two instruments were used: structured questionnaires and semi-structured interview guides. Questionnaires were administered to 145 job seekers and included questions on demographic characteristics, verification experiences, challenges, employment effects and suggested improvements. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five ZAQA officials. The interviews focused on institutional procedures, causes of delays, technological challenges, staffing, communication and strategies for improving verification services.

3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using frequencies and percentages and presented through tables and charts. Qualitative data were analysed thematically by identifying recurring themes related to verification challenges, causes of delays, employment effects and improvement strategies.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings allowed the researcher to compare job seekers' experiences with institutional explanations and develop a comprehensive interpretation of the research problem (Creswell, 2018).

3.6 Validity and Reliability

The research instruments were reviewed by supervisors and research experts to ensure clarity, relevance and alignment with the study objectives. Ethical principles were observed throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, confidentiality was maintained and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study. Respondents' identities were not disclosed and information was used solely for academic purposes.

4 Findings and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the findings of the study in relation to the research objectives. Quantitative findings from 145 job seekers are integrated with qualitative findings from five ZAQA officials.

4.1 Profile of Study Participants

The study involved 150 participants, of whom 85 (56.7%) were male and 65 (43.3%) were female. Among the job seekers, 82 were male and 63 were female. The educational profile showed that 64 respondents (42.7%) held Bachelor's degrees, 47 (31.3%) held Diplomas, 18 (12.0%) held Certificates, 16 (10.7%) held Master's degrees and five (3.3%) held Doctoral qualifications.

The predominance of Bachelor's and Diploma holders demonstrates that qualification verification is particularly relevant to individuals entering or seeking to progress within the labour market after completing tertiary education.

4.2 Challenges Experienced During the Qualification Verification Process

The findings showed that job seekers experienced several challenges during qualification verification. Long processing time was the most frequently reported challenge, with 48 respondents (33.1%) identifying it as their major challenge. This was followed by high verification fees at 21.4%, poor communication and feedback at 16.6%, technical challenges with the online system at 13.1%, repeated submission of documents at 10.3%, and limited accessibility to ZAQA services at 5.5%.

Table 1: Challenges Experienced by Job Seekers During ZAQA Qualification Verification

Challenge	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Long processing time	48	33.1
High verification fees	31	21.4
Poor communication and feedback	24	16.6
Technical challenges with online system	19	13.1
Repeated submission of documents	15	10.3
Limited accessibility to ZAQA services	8	5.5
Total	145	100

Source: Field Data (2026)

The dominance of processing delays is consistent with Mahlobo (2022), who found that administrative delays in qualification verification can negatively influence graduate employment outcomes. The finding is also consistent with UNESCO (2021), which identifies administrative and technological efficiency as important components of effective qualification recognition systems.

High verification fees represented another important challenge. For unemployed graduates, the cost of verification occurs alongside other job-search expenses such as transport, internet access, printing and document preparation. This suggests that the affordability of verification services may influence an applicant's ability to complete employment-related requirements.

Poor communication and feedback were also significant. Respondents reported that they did not always receive timely information regarding the progress of their applications, sometimes requiring repeated inquiries. Effective communication is important in public service delivery because it reduces uncertainty and improves transparency. From a Systems Theory perspective, weaknesses in communication represent a weakness within one component of an interconnected system, potentially affecting the performance of the entire verification process (von Bertalanffy, 1968).

Technical challenges with the online system further demonstrate the importance of technological infrastructure. Although digital systems can improve accessibility and efficiency, unreliable platforms may create additional barriers for applicants. This finding supports the broader literature suggesting that digital transformation must be accompanied by adequate infrastructure and technical capacity (UNESCO, 2021).

The qualitative interviews with ZAQA officials reinforced these findings. Officials identified high application volumes, limited human and technological resources, delayed submission of academic records by qualification-awarding institutions and inadequate applicant awareness as important factors contributing to delays.

These institutional findings demonstrate that qualification verification challenges cannot be attributed solely to one organisation. The process depends on the interaction between ZAQA, applicants, educational institutions, technology and other stakeholders. This supports Systems Theory, which emphasises that the performance of a system depends on the effective interaction of its interconnected components.

4.3 Effects of Qualification Verification Challenges on Employment Opportunities

The findings demonstrate that qualification verification challenges have consequences beyond administrative inconvenience. The most frequently reported employment effect was delayed recruitment, reported by 56 respondents (38.6%). This was followed by missed employment opportunities (23.4%), increased financial burden (17.9%), reduced motivation to apply for jobs (11.7%) and loss of employer confidence (8.4%).

Table 2: Effects of Qualification Verification Challenges on Employment Opportunities

Effect	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Delayed recruitment process	56	38.6
Missed employment opportunities	34	23.4
Increased financial burden	26	17.9
Reduced motivation to apply for jobs	17	11.7
Loss of employer confidence	12	8.4
Total	145	100

Source: Field Data (2026)

Delayed recruitment was the most significant employment effect which was reported by 38.6%. Where employers require verified qualifications before finalising appointments, applicants whose verification remains incomplete may be unable to satisfy recruitment requirements within the stipulated period. This can postpone appointments or result in exclusion from recruitment exercises.

The finding is consistent with ILO (2022), which identifies administrative barriers as factors that can prolong graduates' transition into employment. UNESCO (2021) similarly emphasises that efficient qualification recognition facilitates transitions from education to employment, while inefficient systems can restrict labour mobility.

Missed employment opportunities were reported by 23.4% of respondents. This indicates that qualification verification delays can place otherwise qualified applicants at a competitive disadvantage. In highly competitive labour markets, recruitment opportunities may be time-sensitive, meaning that an applicant can possess the required academic qualification but still lose an opportunity because evidence of that qualification is not available when required.

The financial effects were also important. Respondents reported expenses related to verification fees, transportation, internet access, printing, photocopying and repeated follow-ups. These additional costs may be particularly significant for unemployed graduates with limited financial resources.

The qualitative evidence reinforced the quantitative findings. ZAQA officials acknowledged that delayed verification can affect recruitment timelines, especially where employers require verified qualifications before appointment. Officials also noted that applicants whose qualifications remain pending may be less competitive when employers are considering many candidates.

These findings support Systems Theory because they demonstrate how weaknesses in one part of the qualification verification system can produce consequences in another part of the broader employment system. A delay in academic-record confirmation or technological processing can eventually influence recruitment outcomes.

4.4 Strategies for Improving Qualification Verification Services

Table 3: Suggested Strategies for Improving ZAQA Qualification Verification

Suggested Strategy	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Faster processing and reduced turnaround time	45	31.0
Improved communication and feedback	32	22.1
Strengthening online verification systems	25	17.2
Reduction of verification fees	21	14.5
Increased staffing levels	14	9.7
Improved collaboration with institutions	8	5.5
Total	145	100

Source: Field Data (2026)

Respondents identified several strategies for improving qualification verification. Faster processing and reduced turnaround time was the most frequently recommended strategy, reported by 45 respondents (31.0%). This was followed by improved communication and feedback systems (22.1%), strengthening online verification systems (17.2%), reducing verification fees (14.5%), increasing staffing levels (9.7%) and improving collaboration with educational institutions (5.5%).

The highest priority was faster processing. This finding directly corresponds with the fact that long processing time was the most frequently reported challenge. Clearly defined turnaround times and improved administrative procedures could therefore reduce uncertainty and allow job seekers to satisfy employment requirements more efficiently.

Improved communication was the second most frequently recommended strategy. Respondents proposed regular updates through email, SMS and online platforms. Such systems could reduce uncertainty and unnecessary follow-ups while improving transparency.

Strengthening online verification systems was also important. Digital systems can allow applicants to submit documents, receive updates and monitor application progress without unnecessary physical visits. However, digital transformation requires reliable technological infrastructure and adequate technical support (UNESCO, 2021).

Reducing verification fees was recommended because unemployed graduates may face considerable financial pressure while searching for employment. Affordable verification services could therefore reduce financial barriers and make the process more accessible.

Increasing staffing levels was supported by both job seekers and ZAQA officials. Officials indicated that growing application volumes place pressure on available staff. Additional personnel could reduce workload pressure and improve turnaround times.

Finally, collaboration with qualification-awarding institutions was identified as important because ZAQA cannot complete verification until academic records have been confirmed. Strengthened cooperation among ZAQA, universities, colleges and other institutions could therefore reduce delays originating outside ZAQA.

Overall, the findings indicate that improving qualification verification requires a combination of administrative, technological, financial, human-resource and institutional interventions. This supports Systems Theory because the recommended improvements target several interconnected components of the qualification verification system.

5 Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This study examined the challenges experienced by job seekers during the qualification verification process conducted by ZAQA in Ndola District, their effects on employment opportunities and strategies for improving verification services.

The study concludes that job seekers experience significant challenges during qualification verification. The most prominent challenge was long processing time, followed by high verification fees, poor communication and feedback, technical difficulties, repeated submission of documents and limited accessibility. The qualitative evidence further indicated that high application volumes, limited staffing, technological limitations and delayed confirmation of academic records contribute to verification delays.

The study further concludes that qualification verification challenges negatively affect employment opportunities. Delayed recruitment was the most significant effect, followed by missed employment opportunities, increased financial burdens, reduced motivation to apply for jobs and loss of employer confidence. These findings demonstrate that qualification verification is not merely an administrative requirement but can influence the ability of qualified individuals to participate effectively in the labour market.

The findings also demonstrate that the qualification verification process operates as an interconnected system. ZAQA, job seekers, qualification-awarding institutions, technology and employers are mutually dependent components. Weaknesses in communication, staffing, technology or institutional coordination can therefore produce consequences for the overall efficiency of the system.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends that:

- ZAQA should reduce verification turnaround times by improving internal administrative procedures, increasing processing capacity and establishing clear service timelines.
- ZAQA should strengthen communication and feedback mechanisms by providing regular application-status updates through email, SMS and online platforms.
- Online verification systems should be strengthened to improve reliability, accessibility, user-friendliness and application tracking.
- Verification fees should be reviewed to reduce financial barriers for unemployed graduates and other economically constrained applicants.
- ZAQA should increase staffing capacity in response to growing application volumes and workload pressures.
- Collaboration with qualification-awarding institutions should be strengthened so that universities, colleges and other institutions respond promptly to requests for academic-record confirmation.
- Public awareness should be increased so that applicants understand verification requirements and submit complete and accurate documentation at the beginning of the process.
- Job seekers should be encouraged to verify qualifications early, preferably before applying for employment opportunities, to reduce the risk of missing recruitment deadlines.

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