


## Exploring Service Quality in Gambian Public Universities in the Dawn of Massification: Perceptions of Internal Authorities


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### Abstract

**Objective:** The purpose of our study was to explore the perceptions of internal authorities of public universities in The Gambia—with a focus on the University of The Gambia (UTG)—on service quality amid massification and thereby elicit their recommendations.

**Method:** This qualitative case study of service quality in public universities in the Gambia employed content analysis of data collected through semi-structured interviews to ascertain categories.

**Results:** The results showed an unfavorable view of the quality of all the factors observed—physical environment quality, core educational quality, and transformative quality. Despite efforts of the university administration to enhance the quality of education, the financial constraints posed by massification remain a hurdle.

**Conclusions:** The results show that the hope of relocating UTG to the new university campus in Faraba-Bantang serves as the beacon of hope for the respondents. However, this relocation is only a relief regarding physical infrastructure. It does not offer solutions for the other quality aspects. Thus, a holistic solution is needed.

**Implications:** The decreasing trend of government expenditure on education suggests that the government of The Gambia's ambition to expand higher education (HE) is at the altar of quality. Hence the universities should expedite efforts to raise alternative financial sources to remain competitive.

**Keywords:** *service quality, public universities, massification, perceptions, The Gambia*

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## Introduction

In recent decades, higher education institutions (HEIs) worldwide have undergone a significant transformation characterized by “massification” (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Gill et al., 2022), denoting the proliferation of the number of HEIs and rapid expansion of student enrollments. This phenomenon is rooted in a historical context that spans global, regional, and local dimensions.

The sociologist Martin Trow (2007) highlights three fundamental phases of the global evolution of HE: elite, mass, and universal access. The elite phase, prevalent in earlier centuries, was characterized by limited access to education, typically reserved for the privileged few. As societies progressed, the massification of higher education became inevitable, driven by economic development, social demand, and government policies aimed at democratizing education. This phase saw a surge in student enrollments, challenging traditional notions of academic exclusivity. This phenomenon, although pervasive, is relatively new globally. The United States was the first country to achieve mass HE, with 40% of the traditional age cohort enrolled in post-secondary education in 1960. Western Europe and Japan experienced rapid growth in the 1980s, and industrialized nations in Latin America and East Asia soon followed (Altbach et al., 2009). Nevertheless, mass HE has become a global phenomenon as third-world nations also catch up (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Teferra & Altbach, 2004).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, including The Gambia, the quest for higher education opportunities has intensified, fueled by population growth, urbanization, and aspirations for socioeconomic advancement (Amin & Ntembe, 2021; Gao et al., 2017; Majgaard & Mingat, 2012). This growth is not without challenges to educational systems (Mohamedbhai, 2014; Teferra, 2015; Trow, 1974). As The Gambia’s HE sector continues to grow at an unprecedented rate since the 1990s (World Bank, 2011), national reports (Ministry of Higher Education, Research, Science and Technology (MoHERST), 2022; National Accreditation and Quality Assurance Authority (NAQAA), 2019) revealed that the sector faces the challenge of making education relevant and of high quality.

Historically, HE has been the responsibility of the state hence it is traditionally considered a public good (Altbach et al., 2009; Xu, 2021). However, the financial strain brought on by massification and associated forces has left the future of HE in uncertainty. For example, The Gambia, which was unable to sustain a single public university for over two decades, is poised to open three more public universities, among other tertiary institutions. Could this current circumstance be a call to privatize HE? Despite growing concern regarding the quality HE offers (Touray & Adesopo, 2022), the quality of education remains unexplored. Although mention has been made of the paucity of lecturers as well as teaching and learning materials, which are apparent, no study to date has involved the university stakeholders, particularly asking the authorities to explore their perception regarding the quality of education. Our study identified the university authorities as the respondents considering their broader understanding of the academic landscape and the requirements for graduate-level education. Their perceptions are expected to reflect the challenges facing the education quality at UTG.

This study aimed to fill this gap in the existing literature by exploring the perception of the internal authorities regarding the service quality in public universities in The Gambia amid massification. In this context, it is crucial to understand these views. This is because universities require service quality for their survival—it can serve as a tool to attract students and staff, achieve excellence, and generate revenue. Students’ choice of HEI has been shown to depend on their perception of service quality. An increase in the number of universities

from one in 1999 to four and the plan to expand the sector with more universities and other tertiary institutions, has brought an end to monopoly in HE in The Gambia. Thus, there is a need for various institutions to compete for excellence for a better reputation and survival.

## Literature Review

### Theoretical Background

#### The Concept of Quality in Higher Education

In higher education institutions, service quality is becoming more widely acknowledged as a critical component that directly affects the total quality of education. Excellent services foster a learning environment that improves student happiness, retention, and academic performance. Research using the SERVQUAL (service quality) model and others has repeatedly demonstrated that the provision of excellent services by institutions improves both the overall quality of education and outcomes (Subrahmanyam & Raja Shekhar, 2016; Ghanad, 2022; Phonthanakitithaworn et al., 2022; Cinkir et al., 2022; Kamakoty et al., 2015).

Numerous researchers who examined quality-related issues in higher education looked at it from students' perceptions and the perspective of service quality (Ibrahim et al., 2012). However, quality is "stakeholder-relative" (Harvey et al., 1993) and the many "stakeholders" are students, employers, the government and its financial agencies, teaching and non-teaching personnel, accreditors, validators, auditors, and assessors (including professional bodies). Each of these stakeholders views quality in HEIs in a different way (Abd Elghany & Elharakany, 2017; Fleseriu et al., 2020). These varying views are a result of the differing interests and perspectives of different stakeholders. For instance, employers may be more interested in the output of higher education than students and lecturers are in the educational process itself. This large range of stakeholders makes the concept of quality and what makes up its indicators more elusive (Nicholson, 2011). Nevertheless, quality—however it is defined and measured—is a crucial concern in HE. Higher education participants, employers, businesses, the government, and its agencies are all concerned about it due to the demand for high-quality skills by the global knowledge economy, the competition among higher education institutions to provide these demands, and the struggle among universities for global rankings and benchmarks (de Wit & Altbach, 2021).

Despite the widely differing conceptualizations of quality in education, Harvey and Knight (1996) described five broad definitions of quality: quality as exceptionally high standards, quality as consistency, quality as fitness of purpose, quality as value for money, and quality as a transformative process. Another approach to defining quality in higher education is the process of quality enhancement (Hau, 1996; Argyris et al., 1974, as cited in Bekebayeva, 2023). This approach focuses on continuous improvement and the implementation of strategies to enhance the quality of education. Harvey and Green (1993) perceived quality in education as a transformative quality that aims to empower and enhance students. This notion is similar to that of Horsburgh (1998), who argues that among the various definitions of quality in education, the most meaningful one is quality as a transformative process, referring to it as the "end" and the other approaches as "means" to achieve it. Other scholars (Barnett, 1992; Biggs, 1989; Mezirow, 1997; Ramsden, 1993) uphold a similar view that the very essence of higher education lies in transforming students' life experiences, changing their interpretation of the world, and cultivating conceptual ability, self-awareness, and skills for active participation in a rapidly changing world. This suggests that to achieve the desired quality of education, the focus should be more on developing transformative graduates.

#### Measuring Service Quality in Higher Education

Even though the development of quality management in the service sector only gained prominence in the 1990s (Vinzant & Vinzant, 1996), it is a critical feature of higher education that institutions seek to measure

and improve (Abdullah, 2006; Mastoi et al., 2019a, 2019b). This is because customer perceptions of service levels might pressure HEIs to oversee and execute service quality. Various definitions of service quality can be found in the literature. It is commonly acknowledged as an antecedent of total customer satisfaction and can be characterized as an overall judgment akin to attitude toward service (Parasuraman et al., 1985).

The continuous struggle for measuring service quality has resulted in the creation of many service quality measurement models. However, due to the lack of agreement on the most appropriate definition and measurement of service quality, no single service quality model is universally accepted by everyone or considered superior to all others in the marketing literature. Nonetheless, SERVQUAL and SERVPERF (service performance) instruments have garnered the most attention (Abdullah, 2005, 2006). SERVQUAL, developed by Parasuraman et al. (1985), is a widely recognized scale utilized across various industries. It employs a gap model, contrasting customers' perceptions of service quality with their expectations. However, SERVPERF, proposed by Cronin and Taylor (1992, 1994), diverges from SERVQUAL by focusing on perceptions only, excluding customer expectations from measurement.

Many researchers (Abbas, 2020; Abdullah, 2006; Mahapatra & Khan, 2007) have criticized the applicability of generic service quality scales like SERVQUAL and SERVPERF to higher education, citing the need for modifications to relate them specifically to the academic context. Thus, these generic measurement scales have been slightly modified to be used as specialized tools in the educational field (Ibrahim et al., 2012).

For example, Abdullah (2006) tailored the Higher Education Performance (HEdPERF) scale (a 41-item instrument) specifically to the education sector, emphasizing academic and environmental qualities. Also, Teeroovengadum et al. (2016) proposed Higher Education Service Quality (HESQUAL), a recent hierarchical and holistic model specifically designed for evaluating service quality in higher education. Hence HEdPERF and HESQUAL are better instruments for assessing service quality in higher education as they focus on the education sector, including the academic and environmental aspects (Abbas, 2020).

### **HESQUAL Model**

This study is underpinned by the HESQUAL model. Following the shortfalls of the generic models, Teeroovengadum et al. (2016) developed HESQUAL based on the perception of Harvey & Green (1993), who perceived quality in education as transformative. According to the model, service quality in higher education includes functional and technical (transformative) aspects of quality encompassing both academics and the environment. The functional service quality aspects comprise administrative quality, physical environment quality, core education quality, and support facilities quality.

In this article, three types of quality determinants—physical environment quality, core educational quality, and transformative quality—drawn from the body of existing literature are used to assess university authorities' perceptions of both the technical (transformative) and aspects of functional quality (physical environment quality and core education quality). The administrative quality and the support facilities qualities are not included as the study focuses more on academic quality.

Physical environment quality depends on three main factors: general infrastructure, learning environments, and support infrastructure. This dimension considers several factors, including the presence of an adequate library and laboratories, adequate lecture halls, adequate teaching materials and tools, the appearance of the buildings, the ambient conditions (noise, ventilation, etc.) on campus, and others.

Core educational quality includes four constructs: the attitude and behavior of lecturers and the university's curriculum, pedagogy, and lecturer competency. This category includes things like course content and objectives that are current, clear, and challenging, academic standards that are challenging and relevant to future careers, and the availability and qualifications of lecturers.

Transformative quality evaluates, among other things, an institution's effectiveness in helping students overcome their prejudices, gain the necessary knowledge and skills to perform future jobs, boost self-confidence, foster critical thinking, increase self-awareness, and develop problem-solving skills relevant to their field of study.

### **Service Quality and Survival of HEIs**

As HEIs embrace "market orientation" (Williams, 1993), attributed to the development of global education markets on the one hand and the reduction of governmental funds that force public organizations to seek other financial sources on the other, commercial competition for student satisfaction becomes the focus (Abdullah, 2006). Although service quality in HE is crucial in determining the long-term quality of life for students, it is also fundamental for the survival of institutions. This is because service quality is considered a basic ingredient in achieving excellence in higher education. It is associated with attracting and retaining students/customers and other stakeholders in general, which is required for the survival of HEIs (Ibrahim et al., 2012). Consequently, the last ten years have seen a noticeable increase in competition among the HEIs. Thus, the satisfaction and well-being of students, academic staff, and other stakeholders have become the focus of universities while delivering service (Malik et al., 2010).

One of the first to offer a model of the variables influencing HEI selection was Chapman (1981), who stated that the two main groupings are the student's characteristics and the external factors (Table 1). In extension to Chapman's (1981) Model, Cortes et al. (2023) added three predictor variables (i.e., university image, perceived program quality, and perceived career opportunities). Based on the same model, Proboyo and Soedarsono (2015) presented the factors that influence HEI selection. They include the student's interest, their capacity to perform the course, family advice, and institutional factors like HEI's reputation, institution values, and previous students' success. However, according to Rudhumbu et al. (2017), institutional factors have more influence on students' decision to choose a higher education institution (Table 1). Haza et al. (2022) investigated five factors influencing graduate alumni's perceptions of the university in a survey including 597 alumni. Results showed that one of the key factors influencing their perception of the university's reputation and image was its capacity to provide graduates with a given set of specific skills. This result indicates the students' interest in transformative skills, such as soft skills required for future jobs. According to a study by Mastoi et al. (2019a), the physical environment quality, core educational quality, support facility quality, and transformative quality of a university are positively and significantly correlated with the overall satisfaction of students in Chinese universities. Mastoi et al. (2019b) reached similar conclusions; the multiple regression analysis results indicate that administrative quality, physical environment quality, core educational quality, support facilities quality, and transformative quality are positively and significantly correlated with students' overall satisfaction in universities in Pakistan. Based on these findings, universities should think about enhancing areas that influence how customers perceive the institution to remain competitive.

**Table 1.** *Influence Factors in Students' HEI Selection*

Dimension	Variables	Author
Students Characteristics	Education level aspirations, school performance	
External factors	Significant people: relatives and someone from school. Institution-established characteristics: financial support, location, program availability. School effort to communicate with students, written information, campus visits, admission/recruitment.	Chapman (1981)
Institutional factors	Institution location, academic programs, institution image and reputation, staff quality, education facilities quality (classrooms), fees, possibility to obtain scholarships, and job perspectives for graduated students.	Rudhumbu et al. (2017)
Marketing factors	Advertising, school tours from university employees, career fairs, and future students' campus visits.	

Note: Culled from (Adília & José, 2021)

## Purpose of the Study, and Research Questions

Exploring the service quality of education in public universities in The Gambia amid massification, this study seeks to shed light on the potential impact the expansion of HE has on the quality of education. We aim to explore the perceptions of the internal authorities of public universities in The Gambia on service quality and thereby elicit their recommendations.

1. What is the authorities' perception of the core education quality?
2. What is the authorities' perception of the physical environment quality?
3. What is the authorities' perception of the transformative quality?

## Methods

### Participants and Settings

We gathered data for this study from a group of nine ( $N = 9$ ) university authorities out of 15 in a single public university in The Gambia. The study employed a purposive-convenience sampling strategy (Mackey & Bryfonski, 2018). The authorities include one registrar, one deputy vice-chancellor, two directors, and five deans. Apart from the Islamic universities, there are four (two public and two private) secular universities in The Gambia. The study selected one university out of the two public universities. The selection of this university for the study was deliberate, as it is the oldest university and offers both undergraduate and postgraduate programs. Consequently, the participants chosen for this study possessed substantial exposure and experience as most of them served through ranks or in the same positions for over a decade. Also, they all actively teach in both graduate and undergraduate programs. Hence, they double as faculty who widen their awareness about service quality. Thus, this institution and participants provide the best opportunity for exploring perceptions about the quality of education in The Gambia.



## Data Collection Procedure and Analysis

In this qualitative study, we employed a semi-structured interview to collect data from the participants. The answers from these one-on-one interviews served as the basis for our investigation. The interviews were conducted during the first semester of the academic year 2023. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes. The researchers transcribed the interview data, which were evaluated and interpreted using qualitative content analysis. This method involves assigning content to categories in a subjective manner, using a systematic approach while considering how frequently the content categories occur (Kuckartz, 2019; Selvi, 2020). We carefully examined the transcription to inductively search for meaningful patterns within the codes. Coding facilitated the interpretation of the data by producing an initial data set regarding the phenomena and developing categories and subcategories. Colleagues evaluated the transcript and classified data to improve the reliability of the information. The researcher's coding was then compared with theirs. The coding framework was then developed. Following the goals of the study, the data was then combined into three main themes, which are covered in the following section. The study's findings were supported by quotations from the respondents.

## Results and Discussion

We identified three overarching themes based on the HESQUAL model (Teeroovengadum et al., 2016) within a performance-only approach: authorities' perception of the Core Educational Quality and transformative skills, physical environment quality, and recommendations for solutions. These informed the development of our categories and subcategories as the basis for our analysis and interpretation (Table 2). Data contents that are relevant to the research objectives and themes are illustrated by excerpts. The excerpts are numbered and presented (e.g., Excerpt 3) with identification by the participant number (e.g., P-2).

**Table 2:** *Main Categories and Sub-Categories*

Categories	Sub-categories
Core educational quality	Curriculum quality
	Transformative skills
	Lecturer quality
Physical environment quality	Infrastructure challenges
	Availability of elearning tools and resources
Recommendations of the authorities	Funding dependence and limitations
	Retention strategies

### Authorities Perception of the Core Educational Quality and Transformative Skills

In our exploration of how the authorities view core educational quality and transformative skills, respondents did not generally perceive these fundamental components of education favorably. As we dig more into this area, two significant issues come to light: the widespread problem of out-of-date curricula that do not consider transformative skills and the shortage of qualified lecturers.

#### Curriculum Quality

The participants emphasized the need for a curriculum that not only aligns with international best practices but also resonates with the local context to ensure relevance to existing realities. The authorities [P-3, P-4, P-8] highlighted NAQAA's recommendation for comprehensive reviews "every three to five years" to match the

evolving needs of industries and societal demands. Notwithstanding, participants [P-3, P-4, P-5, P-7, P-8, P-9] stated there has been no comprehensive review for the last two decades.

**Excerpt 1:** The curriculum should have a 5-year lifespan. After every 5 years, you review it but here we haven't done a review for about 18 to 20 years. This will automatically affect quality because what you are teaching is not current. I know some of the course contents we teach are outdated and they should not be taught to students again [P-4].

**Excerpt 2:** The curriculum should be reviewed every 3 or 5 years to adapt it to the existing realities because times change, and the curriculum should be always adjusted to match the needs of the industry. So, if there is a mismatch then there are bound to be problems. From my vantage point and from the little I know when designing the curriculum let's say in geography for The Gambia, it has to be adapted to the local environment [P-8].

Participants expressed a consensus that the presence of outdated curricula negatively affects the alignment of educational programs with industry trends and the evolving needs of students. This sentiment emphasizes the curriculum's pivotal role in providing education that is not only globally competitive but also locally applicable (Amin & Ntembe, 2021; Mohamedbhai, 2014; Zhang et al., 2016). Authorities echoed the urgent necessity for constant and regular updates to the curriculum to prevent mismatches.

### **Transformative Skills**

In this study, transformative quality is linked to practical knowledge and skills crucial for students' future careers. Although technical or transformative quality is a separate dimension in SERVQUAL, we capture it under core educational quality as this dimension is determined by the design of the curriculum. However, a noteworthy concern surfaces from participants [P-1, P-2, P-3, P-5, P-6, P-7]—the apparent “lack of transformative skills,” as noted by the respondents:

**Excerpt 3:** However, critical thinking skills are lacking and can be evident in the cognitive demonstration of the students [P-1].

**Excerpt 4:** Every year we have 50% of our graduates will remain without employment. Most of the students leave the university with the hope of being employees. So, we have not been able to do enough to educate them to be their employer should they find it difficult to find employment. So, the teaching and learning methodology should be redesigned to incorporate soft skills [P-7].

Similar views were highlighted by other participants (P-8, P-7, P-5). While they acknowledge UTG's substantial contributions to national development, they also highlight gaps in supplying a quality labor force, especially in fields like engineering and computer science and the inability of the university to solve the country's development needs in the areas of agriculture, health, economy, education, infrastructure, and technology problems. These views show the relevance of integrating transformative skills into the curriculum since they have a major impact on the quality of education. This is in line with the literature considering education as transformative (Gill et al., 2022; Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey & Knight, 1996; Horsburgh, 1998). Seeking an updated and relevant curriculum that incorporates transformative skills is essential to equipping students to thrive in a rapidly changing world. The authorities, therefore, emphasize the need to align educational programs with the dynamic demands of the contemporary world.

### **Lecturer Quality**

The data from the participants revealed that despite the financial constraints, UTG has demonstrated concerns about lecturer quality through training and retraining initiatives, with current efforts focusing on staff pursuing doctoral degrees abroad, sponsored by UTG. Notwithstanding, UTG faces a twofold challenge—a scarcity of numbers and, at times, a compromise in quality, as succinctly expressed by participants [P-3, P-5,



P-6, P-7, P-9]; “For lecturers, we don’t even have the numbers, talk less of quality.” The discussion gravitates towards the ideal, where quality is not sacrificed at the altar of quantity.

**Excerpt 5:** The personnel is something important. We need to emphasize the training of trainers. In the global best practice only PhD holders are supposed to be lecturing in the university. We have very few of them here. I can tell you even professors who are indigenes in The Gambia are very few. The majority of our professors are from outside The Gambia. Since graduate programs require experienced lecturers and we don’t have enough lecturers here we depend on visiting lecturers and adjuncts. We have lecturers from Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal as visiting lecturers. The number one quality of a quality lecturer is to be a PhD holder [P-9].

**Excerpt 6:** As I told you in our general discussion, we are still short of the number and quality of lecturers. A very small number of our staff have PhDs and talk less of professors. Here it’s common to see someone who got his master’s today become engaged in full-time teaching. Also, you see somebody with PhD today started supervising PhD students. What kind of experience does that kind of person have? This is affecting the quality of education [P-5].

These responses indicate that the efforts made by the university authorities to train and retain lecturers do not match the demand for qualified lecturers. This results in dependence on part-time lecturers to cover the vacancies. However, the coopting of the part-time lecturers highlights the need for pedagogical orientation and ongoing development. Nonetheless, the authorities (P-3, P-5, P-7) emphasized the management problems associated with the part-time lecturers. As HEIs are poised to introduce graduate programs, the greatest concern remains whether the lecturers are qualified to teach and supervise students. These concerns are in line with the literature. There is no denying that the foundation of a high-quality education is the caliber of the lecturers (Tan, 1986). The shortage of PhD holders and experienced lecturers is a concern that raises questions about the sustainability and continuity of quality instruction. Regardless, graduate programs are being introduced, and some only have visiting lecturers.

### **Authorities’ Perception of the Physical Environment Quality**

The participants generally deem the current state of facilities as poor. These deficiencies cast shadows on vital educational spaces like classrooms, libraries, and laboratories, affecting the comprehensive learning environment. Furthermore, the inadequacy of essential spaces, combined with the absence of facilities for the physically challenged, exacerbates challenges for both the faculty and students in their educational pursuits.

#### **Infrastructure Challenges**

As we explored the infrastructure issue, an alarming fact emerged—the UTG Faraba-Bantang Campus, crucial to the university’s expansion, remains incomplete as of this study. It is noteworthy that since inception in 1999, the UTG has been hosted by other institutions as the designated campus, Faraba-Bantang, is still under construction. The participants collectively echo a resounding sentiment: “Infrastructure, in general, is a big problem,” with [P-1, P-3, P-4, P-6, P-7, P-8, P-9] adding that it is not considerate of the physically challenged. Faculties find refuge in various public institutions, a patchwork arrangement involving Gambia College, Management Development Institute (MDI), Gambia Technical and Training Institute, Edward Francis Small Teaching Hospital, and rented apartments. This paints a vivid picture of the challenges faced by UTG. The Graduate School, School of Medicine and Allied Health Sciences (SMAHS), School of Education (SEDU), and the physical and natural sciences of the School of Arts and Sciences (SAS), in particular, face challenges in laboratories and classrooms, signifying a pressing need for improvement. Respondents expressed concerns about large class sizes, insufficient ventilation, and limited office spaces for lecturers, pointing to a pervasive shortage of facilities encompassing teaching materials, desks, and overall space.

**Excerpt 7:** The infrastructure as you can see is not one of the best, we are managing. We are literally squatting in Brikama. The classrooms are not adequate, the class sizes are huge, and ventilation and many other challenges when it comes to inadequate infrastructure. This is because we do not own the infrastructure we are mainly accommodated [P-8].

**Excerpt 8:** Although other schools are hopeful to relocate to our new campus in Faraba, the School of Medicine is not moving because it has to collocate with the teaching hospital. The hospital serves as a lab for the school of medicine so the school of medicine can never move to Faraba. The only place you can think of moving it to is Farato when the new hospital is completed [P-4].

Our discussions brought to light the far-reaching effects that inadequate infrastructure—due to massification—has on the quality of education (Akalu, 2017; Mitchell et al., 2017; Mohamedbhai, 2014; Pillay, 2020; Tlali et al., 2019). The narrative about all the schools and faculties reflects the ongoing struggle for space. Host institutions, once accommodating, are now strained, further complicating the quest for a conducive learning environment. The participants [P-1, P-6] continue to articulate the prevailing sentiment. The infrastructure deficit is not merely a logistical hurdle; it is a significant impediment to the university's expansion plans and compromises the overall quality of education.

### Availability of eLearning Tools and Resources

The educational environment at UTG exhibits a noticeable imbalance when examined through the lens of eLearning tools, resulting in a digital divide among the faculties and schools. The French department within the Arts and Sciences umbrella as well as the School of Information Communication Technology (SICT), for instance, boasts a digital haven, equipped with eLearning materials and state-of-the-art labs featuring smartboards. However, the narrative is different when it comes to the School of Education, SMAHS, and the rest of the departments in SAS, where the scarcity of eLearning tools has become more pronounced. Emphasizing the disparity in digital resources among schools, participants [P-2, P-6] made the following highlights:

**Excerpt 9:** SICT and other departments have computer labs although labs are not enough generally. Lecturers do use open educational resources and there are teaching and learning resources such as projectors and smartboards. These scenarios differ from school to school and from campus to campus [P-6].

**Excerpt 10:** As far as SEDU is concerned there are no eLearning materials and tools such as smartboards and access to software. Although multimedia facilities such as projectors are not enough, but they are available [P-2].

The digital divide, where access to essential tools differs greatly amongst academic units, casts shadows over the universality of eLearning resources. One potential explanation for this imbalance is the disparity in research projects and funding that various schools and faculties can attract. While there are internal initiatives underway to produce revenue through research and consulting projects [P-7, P-8], the projects are reportedly still in the developmental stage, so the returns are not yet lucrative enough.

While acknowledging the existing challenges, respondents also highlight improvements over the years. The UTG's administrative and faculty staff are given laptops and free internet connectivity. Some of the respondents [P-1, P-2, P-3], however, do not consider textbooks and other reading materials an issue in this digital age and the availability of free internet on campus.

**Excerpt 11:** The good thing about the university is the internet facility and since there are thousands of books online that students and lecturers can use. The UTG has provided every academic or admin staff with a laptop and free internet at the workplace and home. Am sure that the lecturers are also sharing with students their eBooks [P-5].

**Excerpt 12:** For the textbooks, it's difficult to tell in this era of the internet most people get their resources online which has made life very easy [P-2].

The assumption that the issue of textbooks is not much of an issue in this digital age is supported by studies (Alenezi, 2020; Guo et al., 2021) that demonstrate innovative approaches to instruction that support universal learning by providing more affordable access to education and resources while lessening the burden on scarce facilities and resources.

### Recommendations of the Authorities

The authorities call for the government's active role in higher education. They opine that the government should allocate sufficient funds to the university to address its challenges, including the need for technological upgrades, resources, and hiring and retention of competent staff. According to most participants [P-1, P-4, P-6, P-7, P-8], government subvention is barely sufficient to sustain the university.

### Funding Dependence and Limitations

Although a public organization, UTG struggles to maintain its financial stability and struggles with a tight financial situation. Its reliance on tuition fees and insufficient government support present significant challenges, as echoed in the participants' concerns:

**Excerpt 13:** Imagine the government subvention is less than 2 million Dalasi per month when the university spends about 20 million monthly on salary alone. 2 million cannot even pay the university's monthly electricity bill. ... In addition to limited funding on the side of the government, most of the students are under government scholarships which are often not paid [P-4].

**Excerpt 14:** Funding remains a problem. We mainly depend on tuition fees. What the government is giving as subvention is barely sufficient to run our operations. By 2024 we expect that the government will take care of the basic salaries of the staff so that the money from tuition will be used for consultancy, research, and other things [P-8].

The plea for increased government commitment echoes a well-established concern in the literature. Insufficient government funding can jeopardize the quality of education in public institutions leading to a dependence on tuition fees (Altbach et al., 2019; Mitchell et al., 2017), as attested by P-6 and P-7. A respondent [P-1] emphatically states, "The government has to take education more seriously as this is the only university called the University of The Gambia." This plea is a call for tangible financial commitment that mirrors the value placed on higher education. This concern is in line with national budget allocations for education. The budget expenditure on education (% of GDP) was 2.94% in 2021, and (% of public expenditure) was 15.62%. Also, the budget expenditure (% of GDP) was 2.72% in 2022 while (% of public expenditure) was 14.48% (World Bank, 2022). Although expenditure costs and the number of HEIs are increasing, the budget is decreasing. Besides, these figures are below the recommended benchmarks. Allocating at least 4% to 6% of GDP to education and/or allocating at least 15% to 20% of public expenditure to education is the indicator endorsed by The Education 2030 Framework for Action as a key benchmark for government financing of education (UNESCO, 2016).

### Retention Strategies

Overall, our interviews with university authorities underscore a commitment to faculty development. Incentives for PhD holders and tuition waivers for university staff entering graduate programs stand as beacons of motivation. The employment of fresh graduates as graduate assistants who later become lecturers was also employed as a way of filling human resource gaps. However, among the things that are not attracting quality lecturers are the low salary and other incentives, as lamented by participants P-2, P-4, and P-7.

**Excerpt 15:** There are incentives provided to PhD holders as a form of motivation. We also waive tuition for the staff of the university admitted to our graduate programs as a form of motivation. The

university also financially supports those who go to study abroad [P-9].

**Excerpt 16:** Among the things that are not attracting quality lecturers is the low salary. So, we try to increase the salaries against the limited resources and also, we try to provide training opportunities. All of these are strategies to attract lecturers and retain the already available ones. Notwithstanding, our retention strategies are dismal and staff work because they love the job but not because of pay [P-7].

**Excerpt 17:** To solve this issue, we have to look at the long-term sustainability of employing and capacitating Gambians. For this reason, we employ graduate assistants who after some time enroll for further studies to fill the gaps [P-3].

Despite UTG's commitment, all the efforts to recruit and retain the faculty are frustrated by poor remuneration. Additionally, the retention attempts are consistently thwarted by brain drain [P-7]. The UTG's meager remuneration means that young talent sent for study frequently disappears at the first chance. This is a situation that the authorities are grappling with. While HEIs have made considerable commitments to nurturing a pool of highly qualified educators, they should also make the remuneration more attractive, as highlighted by P-6 and P-7.

## Conclusion and Implications

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of internal authorities of public universities in The Gambia on service quality amidst the dawn of massification. The data analyzed from the interviews revealed that, among the nine participating authorities, the majority shared a common perspective. They recognized the impact of massification on the quality of education, emphasizing the need to maintain the core educational quality, physical facilities quality, and transformative quality as the university continues to expand. The data from the interviews demonstrated their awareness of the pressure the expansion exerts on the limited resources. Participants across the spectrum, while expressing dissatisfaction with the existing facilities and the adversarial relations with host institutions, share a common thread of optimism tied to the Faraba-Bantang campus. The collective anticipation is that this relocation will not only mark the end of existing difficulties but also usher in a new era for both students and faculty, characterized by improved learning conditions. Although this relocation can potentially alleviate some of the constraints, the participants called for a holistic solution considering the multifaceted nature of the problem. Relocating to Faraba-Bantang may solve the problem of infrastructure and learning resources for selected schools and departments. However, not all schools are moving. Schools such as the SMAHS, School of Law, and School of Journalism and Digital Media are not moving to the designated UTG Faraba-Bantang campus any time soon. Consequently, the issues of curriculum, lecturers, and quality assurance in general require funding and particular attention.

While participants acknowledged the efforts to make education relevant to the needs of the knowledge society, most of them expressed concerns about the inability to meet the demands of the labor market in terms of transformative skills as seen in excerpts 3 and 4 and as corroborated by Touray and Adesopo (2022). Given these findings, the authorities should collaborate with the employers to fill the skill gaps. There should be constant review and updates to the curriculum.

While the limited number of participants in this study may pose a constraint in terms of obtaining in-depth insights into the quality of education, the findings are assumed to reflect a common perception of the quality of education in public universities. Consequently, future research could explore the perception of other stakeholders, such as the students and the alumni, as evaluating the quality of education is everyone's business (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). Additionally, future research might use a variety of data-gathering methods and broaden the study to include the other quality dimensions of the HESQUAL model and extend to

private universities. Additionally, since inadequate service quality is attributed to financial limitations, greater investigation into the university's financial operations could be conducted to determine the funding sources and allocation.

Moreover, this study highlights the need for a collective reconsideration to ensure massification of HE does not defeat the purpose of quality. In as much as the government of The Gambia wants to expand HE, it should prioritize the quality of education in public universities. The government should make the jobs at public HEIs attractive to entice experts and retain the existing staff. This strengthens both the internal and external quality assurance units by giving them the option to appoint and maintain the most qualified staff. As recommended by P-8 in excerpt 14, the government should fund the salaries of the staff to reduce the financial burden on the management. Finally, considering the decreasing trend of government expenditure on education, universities should expedite efforts to raise alternative financial sources such as research projects, partnerships, and collaboration to remain competitive.

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