
ENHANCING STUDENT ASSESSMENT INTEGRITY THROUGH BLIND MARKING IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA: EVIDENCE FROM PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES IN UGANDA FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE

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ABSTRACT

Assessment integrity is a critical concern in higher education, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa where issues such as bias, favoritism, unfair grading, and limited transparency continue to challenge the credibility of academic outcomes. This study examines the role of blind marking in enhancing student assessment integrity in private universities in Uganda and its implications for quality assurance in higher education. The study adopts a singular methodology that enabled collection of qualitative data. Sequential explanatory mixed-methods design integrating survey data and semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data were analysed using structural equation modelling, while qualitative data were thematically analysed to provide contextual explanation of the statistical findings. The results indicate that blind marking has a significant positive effect on assessment integrity by reducing bias, favoritism, and unfair assessment practices while improving fairness, consistency, and transparency in grading. Further, assessment integrity significantly enhances quality assurance outcomes and fully mediates the relationship between blind marking and institutional quality assurance. Qualitative findings corroborate these results, showing that blind marking strengthens stakeholder trust, reduces disputes over examination results, and improves perceptions of institutional credibility. However, challenges such as inadequate digital infrastructure, limited staff training, and administrative constraints hinder effective implementation. The study concludes that blind marking is not merely a technical grading procedure but a strategic quality assurance mechanism that strengthens fairness, accountability, and institutional legitimacy. It recommends institutionalizing blind marking

policies, investing in digital assessment systems, and enhancing staff capacity development in Sub-Saharan African higher education institutions.

KEYWORDS: Blind marking, assessment integrity, quality assurance, higher education, Sub-Saharan Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Assessment integrity has become a defining concern in contemporary higher education governance, particularly as universities are increasingly required to demonstrate transparency, accountability, and credibility in their academic processes (Verma, 2026). Beyond its technical function of measuring student learning, assessment serves as a critical mechanism through which institutional legitimacy is constructed and maintained. When assessment systems are perceived as biased, inconsistent, or opaque, the credibility of qualifications is weakened, thereby undermining stakeholder trust in higher education outcomes (S, 2023). These concerns are particularly pronounced in rapidly expanding higher education systems in Sub-Saharan Africa, where massification, resource constraints, and diverse institutional capacities have intensified scrutiny of assessment practices.

Within this context, private universities in Uganda operate in a competitive and highly accountable environment where questions of fairness, consistency, and transparency in student assessment remain central to quality assurance debates (Long & Pisani, 2025). Reported concerns such as favoritism, subjective grading, perceived unfairness, and inconsistencies in marking practices continue to challenge confidence in examination outcomes. These issues highlight the need for robust assessment mechanisms that safeguard integrity while strengthening institutional credibility.

Blind marking has emerged as a potential procedural intervention designed to enhance fairness in assessment by concealing student identities during grading (Clayton, 2026). The underlying premise is that anonymization reduces both conscious and unconscious bias, thereby promoting more objective and consistent evaluation of student performance. While evidence from higher education systems in the Global North suggests that blind marking can improve assessment fairness and stakeholder confidence, its applicability and effectiveness in Sub-Saharan African contexts remain underexplored and empirically fragmented.

This study is anchored in the theoretical synergy between Procedural Justice Theory and Quality Assurance Theory. Hohl & Stanko, (2024) Procedural Justice Theory explains how fairness in decision-making processes shapes perceptions of legitimacy and trust, while

Quality Assurance Theory emphasizes systematic mechanisms for ensuring accountability, consistency, and continuous improvement in educational institutions (Ali et al., 2024). The integration of these frameworks provides a comprehensive lens for understanding blind marking not merely as a technical grading tool but as a governance mechanism that reinforces institutional credibility.

Despite growing interest in assessment reform, three key gaps persist in the literature. First, most empirical studies on blind marking are situated in developed higher education contexts, limiting their transferability to African institutional environments (Swargiary, 2024). Second, existing research tends to focus on the technical effectiveness of blind marking in reducing bias, with limited attention to its broader role in institutional quality assurance systems. Third, there is insufficient evidence on how blind marking influences stakeholder trust and perceived legitimacy within private universities, which play an increasingly significant role in expanding access to higher education in Uganda.

Addressing these gaps, this study contributes a novel conceptual synergy by positioning blind marking as a dual-function mechanism that simultaneously enhances procedural fairness and strengthens quality assurance governance (Gregorio & Jaime, 2020). Unlike previous studies that treat blind marking as a narrow assessment technique, this study reconceptualizes it as a strategic institutional intervention embedded within broader systems of accountability and legitimacy production. Empirically, it provides evidence from private universities in Uganda, a context that remains underrepresented in global assessment literature (Mohammad et al., 2026). Theoretically, it integrates procedural justice and quality assurance perspectives into a unified explanatory framework linking assessment processes to institutional trust and academic credibility. Accordingly, the study investigates how blind marking influences student assessment integrity and quality assurance outcomes in private universities in Uganda, with broader implications for higher education systems across Sub-Saharan Africa.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a singular methodology enabled collection of qualitative data (Resources, 2022). The study used a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design to examine the effect of blind marking on student assessment integrity and quality assurance in private universities in Uganda. The design was selected because it enables the integration of quantitative analysis of relationships among key variables with qualitative insights that explain and deepen interpretation of statistical results (Adu & Miles, 2023). The quantitative phase was conducted

first, followed by the qualitative phase, allowing qualitative findings to elaborate on emerging patterns.

Study Context and Population

The study was conducted in selected accredited private universities in Uganda operating within a dynamic higher education environment characterized by increasing demands for accountability, transparency, and quality assurance(Akotia et al., 2023). The target population comprised academic staff involved in assessment, examination officers, quality assurance personnel, heads of academic departments, and undergraduate students. These participants were selected due to their direct involvement in, or experience of, assessment processes(Deutz et al., 2024).

Sampling Procedure and Sample Size

A multi-stage sampling strategy was employed. In the first stage, private universities were purposively selected based on accreditation status. The existence of formal assessment and quality assurance frameworks(OECD, 2024). In the second stage, purposive sampling was used to select academic staff, quality assurance officers, and examination administrators, while stratified random sampling was used to select undergraduate students to ensure representation across faculties and academic levels.

The quantitative sample of 450 representatives was scientifically selected, using purposive, stratified and simple random sampling technique(Geetha, 2024). The selected participants were engaged with survey and interviews conducted until thematic saturation was achieved.

Data Collection Methods

The survey was used in the study and the collected Quantitative data were collected using a structured questionnaire measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The instrument captured perceptions of blind marking practices, assessment fairness, assessment integrity, and quality assurance outcomes(Nodia, 2026).

The interviews were used for Qualitative data, the collected data through semi-structured interviews with academic leaders and quality assurance officers to explore experiences of blind marking, perceived benefits, and implementation challenges. In addition, institutional documents such as assessment policies and examination guidelines were reviewed to triangulate findings.

Measurement of Variables

Blind marking was operationalized as the extent to which student identity is concealed during grading and moderation processes. Indicators included anonymization of scripts, standardized marking procedures, and independent moderation practices(Swargiary, 2024).

Assessment integrity was measured through fairness, objectivity, consistency, transparency, and credibility of assessment outcomes. Quality assurance outcomes were assessed in terms of accountability, stakeholder trust, compliance with academic standards, and continuous improvement.

Validity and Reliability

Content validity was ensured through expert review by specialists in higher education and assessment. A Content Validity Index (CVI) above 0.80 confirmed adequacy of the instrument. Reliability was established using Cronbach's alpha and Composite Reliability, with all constructs exceeding the threshold of 0.70. Zhao et al., (2026) Construct validity was confirmed through Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), while convergent and discriminant validity were assessed using Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and the Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) ratio.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS and SmartPLS/AMOS. Descriptive statistics summarized respondent characteristics and perceptions, while Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) tested relationships among variables and mediation effects (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Model fit was assessed using standard indices including CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and SRMR. Qualitative data were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically using iterative coding procedures (open, axial, and selective coding). The qualitative findings were integrated with quantitative results during interpretation to enhance explanatory depth.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from relevant institutional review authorities (AlDhaen et al., 2025). Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents. Confidentiality, anonymity, and data protection were strictly observed throughout the study.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings in line with the study objectives: (i) to examine the effect of blind marking on student assessment integrity; and (ii) to determine the extent to which assessment integrity influences quality assurance outcomes, including the mediating role of assessment integrity in the relationship between blind marking and quality assurance.

Importantly, the results reveal that historical concerns associated with assessment processes such as favoritism, unfair grading, inappropriate assessment practices, and unexplained variation in scores (Gebhardt et al., 2023). The missing or disputed results and perceived risks of compromised integrity are substantially reduced in contexts where blind marking is

systematically implemented. This suggests that blind marking functions as a structural safeguard against both procedural weaknesses and perceived ethical risks in assessment systems.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings align with Procedural Justice Theory, which emphasizes that fairness in processes directly shapes perceptions of legitimacy (Renn et al., 2026). The results indicate that when identity-based cues are removed, stakeholders perceive assessment decisions as more legitimate, even when final grades remain unchanged.

Effect of Blind Marking on Student Assessment Integrity

The findings reveal that blind marking has a statistically significant and positive effect on student assessment integrity ($\beta = 0.67$, $p < 0.001$). This indicates that anonymizing student identities during grading substantially enhances fairness, objectivity, consistency, and transparency in assessment processes.

Descriptive results further show strong agreement among respondents that blind marking reduces bias, favoritism, and unfair grading practices (Education, 2021). Participants reported that when student identities are concealed, assessors are more likely to focus strictly on academic performance, thereby reducing the influence of non-academic factors such as prior familiarity, institutional reputation, or subjective perceptions of student ability.

Qualitative findings reinforce this result, indicating that blind marking improves confidence in grading systems by minimizing perceptions of unfair assessment, inconsistent scoring, and potential bias. Respondents emphasized that anonymization strengthens professional accountability among examiners and enhances trust in examination outcomes.

Overall, the evidence suggests that blind marking is an effective mechanism for strengthening assessment integrity in private universities in Uganda.

Effect of Assessment Integrity on Quality Assurance Outcomes

The findings indicate a strong and significant positive relationship between assessment integrity and quality assurance outcomes ($\beta = 0.71$, $p < 0.001$). This suggests that institutions with higher levels of assessment integrity tend to demonstrate stronger accountability, improved stakeholder confidence, and greater compliance with quality assurance standards (Verma, 2026).

Descriptive data show that respondents associate high assessment integrity with credible academic results, reduced examination disputes, and improved institutional reputation. Where assessment integrity is weak, concerns such as unfair grading, inconsistent results, and reduced trust in academic outcomes are more likely to arise.

Qualitative evidence confirms that robust assessment integrity enhances institutional legitimacy by fostering trust among students, academic staff, and external stakeholders. Participants emphasized that fair and transparent assessment practices are central to maintaining institutional credibility.

Assessment Integrity in the Relationship between Blind Marking and Quality Assurance

The structural model results confirm that assessment integrity fully mediates the relationship between blind marking and quality assurance outcomes ($\beta = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$). This indicates that blind marking does not directly influence quality assurance outcomes; rather, its effect operates through the enhancement of assessment integrity (Al-Emran et al., 2023).

This finding implies that the effectiveness of blind marking as a quality assurance strategy depends on its ability to strengthen fairness, objectivity, and transparency in assessment processes. Once assessment integrity is improved, institutions experience enhanced quality assurance outcomes such as increased trust, accountability, and compliance with academic standards.

Qualitative findings support this mediation effect, as respondents consistently described blind marking as a mechanism that builds trust in grading systems, which in turn strengthens overall perceptions of institutional quality (Bais, 2025).

The findings demonstrate that blind marking significantly enhances student assessment integrity, which subsequently improves quality assurance outcomes in private universities in Uganda. The results confirm that assessment integrity serves as a critical mediating mechanism through which blind marking contributes to institutional quality. These findings underscore the importance of integrating blind marking into assessment systems as a strategic quality assurance intervention in higher education.

DISCUSSION

This study examined the extent to which blind marking enhances student assessment integrity and strengthens quality assurance in private universities in Uganda. The findings demonstrate a consistent pattern: blind marking significantly improves assessment integrity, which in turn strengthens institutional quality assurance outcomes. This section interprets these findings in relation to theory, existing literature, and the broader governance of higher education.

Blind Marking and the Construction of Assessment Integrity

The finding that blind marking significantly enhances assessment integrity suggests that fairness in assessment is structurally conditioned rather than merely dependent on examiner

professionalism. By concealing student identity, blind marking reduces the likelihood of both conscious and unconscious bias, including favoritism, subjective judgement, and reputational influence(Cybellium, 2024). In this respect, the results reinforce the argument that assessment integrity is not an inherent attribute of assessors but an outcome of carefully designed procedural safeguards.

This aligns strongly with Procedural Justice Theory, which posits that individuals evaluate institutional legitimacy based on the fairness of processes rather than outcomes alone. In contexts where concerns such as unfair grading, inconsistent scoring, and perceived favoritism persist (Rainfall, 2025). blind marking functions as a corrective mechanism that restores confidence in assessment systems. The qualitative findings further support this interpretation, as participants consistently associated anonymized grading with increased fairness, reduced disputes, and enhanced trust in examination outcomes.

Assessment Integrity as a Driver of Quality Assurance

The strong effect of assessment integrity on quality assurance outcomes underscores the integrity centrality of assessment processes in shaping institutional quality. Rather than being a peripheral academic activity, assessment emerges as a core governance mechanism through which institutional credibility is produced and sustained(Verma, 2026). Universities with stronger assessment integrity reported higher levels of stakeholder trust, improved accountability, and greater compliance with quality assurance standards.

This finding extends Quality Assurance Theory by demonstrating that institutional quality is not only a function of compliance frameworks or external audits but is deeply embedded in everyday assessment practices(Education, 2021). Where assessment is perceived as fair and transparent, quality assurance gains legitimacy; where it is perceived as biased or inconsistent, institutional credibility is weakened.

Mediation and the Governance Logic of Blind Marking

The mediation effect indicates that assessment integrity fully transmits the influence of blind marking on quality assurance outcomes. This is theoretically significant because it clarifies the mechanism through which blind marking operates. It does not directly generate institutional quality; rather, it strengthens fairness and objectivity in assessment, which subsequently enhances broader perceptions of quality assurance(Archer et al., 2023).

This mediation logic reframes blind marking as a governance tool rather than a technical procedure. Its value lies not in mechanical anonymization alone, but in its capacity to transform how assessment decisions are made and legitimized within institutional systems.

Contextual Realities in Sub-Saharan Africa

The findings must also be interpreted within the specific context of private universities in Uganda, where concerns about bias, favoritism, unfair grading, and perceived integrity gaps remain salient. In such environments, trust in assessment systems is fragile and highly sensitive to procedural transparency. Blind marking therefore assumes heightened importance as an institutional mechanism for rebuilding confidence in academic evaluation processes(Bankston et al., 2025).

The qualitative evidence suggests that where blind marking is implemented, students and staff perceive fewer disputes over marks, reduced suspicion of manipulation, and greater confidence in institutional fairness. This reinforces the argument that assessment reform in Sub-Saharan Africa must address not only technical efficiency but also trust deficits embedded in institutional cultures.

Theoretical Contributions

The study contributes to Procedural Justice Theory by demonstrating its applicability in higher education assessment within a developing-country context. It confirms that fairness in procedures significantly shapes perceptions of legitimacy and acceptance of outcomes.

It also extends Quality Assurance Theory by positioning assessment integrity as a mediating construct that links assessment design to institutional quality(AlDhaen et al., 2025). This shifts the focus of quality assurance from compliance-based evaluation to process-based legitimacy, where fairness in everyday academic practices becomes central to institutional credibility.

Implications for Higher Education Governance

The findings suggest a broader shift in higher education governance from outcome-oriented accountability to process-oriented legitimacy. In increasingly competitive and market-driven higher education systems, institutional reputation depends not only on the quality of graduates but also on the perceived fairness of the processes that produce academic outcomes.

Blind marking, therefore, operates as a governance mechanism that strengthens institutional legitimacy by reducing perceptions of bias and enhancing transparency in assessment(Aurel, 2020). Its implementation represents a move toward more ethically grounded and trust-sensitive quality assurance systems.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the extent to which blind marking enhances student assessment integrity and strengthens quality assurance in private universities in Uganda. Based on the findings and discussion, it is evident that blind marking plays a significant and positive role in shaping fair, transparent, and credible assessment systems within higher education.

The study concludes that blind marking is a structurally effective mechanism for reducing bias, favoritism, and subjective influence in grading processes. By concealing student identity, it strengthens assessment integrity through improved fairness, objectivity, consistency, and transparency. This confirms that assessment integrity is not solely dependent on individual examiner ethics but is largely determined by the procedural design of assessment systems.

Furthermore, the study establishes that assessment integrity is a critical determinant of quality assurance outcomes in higher education institutions. Institutions that demonstrate higher levels of assessment integrity experience stronger stakeholder trust, improved accountability, and greater confidence in academic standards. In this regard, assessment integrity serves as the key pathway through which blind marking contributes to institutional quality assurance.

The findings also support the theoretical proposition that procedural fairness is central to institutional legitimacy. Grounded in Procedural Justice Theory and Quality Assurance Theory, the study demonstrates that fairness in assessment processes enhances the perceived credibility of academic outcomes and strengthens overall institutional reputation.

Overall, the study concludes that blind marking is not merely a technical grading procedure but a strategic quality assurance mechanism that enhances fairness, strengthens assessment integrity, and reinforces institutional legitimacy in higher education.

In the context of private universities in Uganda, and by extension Sub-Saharan Africa, the adoption of blind marking represents an important reform for improving the credibility, transparency, and trustworthiness of higher education assessment systems.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, several recommendations are advanced to strengthen the implementation of blind marking and enhance student assessment integrity and quality assurance in higher education.

The study recommends that, higher education regulatory bodies and national quality assurance agencies should institutionalize blind marking as a formal requirement within assessment frameworks. This will ensure standardization across institutions and strengthen

accountability in grading practices. Inclusion of blind marking as an accreditation and audit criterion would further reinforce its adoption and sustainability in private universities.

The study also recommends that Private universities in Uganda should integrate blind marking into their official academic assessment policies and examination regulations. Clear operational guidelines should be developed to ensure consistent application across faculties and academic programmes. Institutions should also establish monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to ensure compliance and continuous improvement in assessment practices.

The study recommends that Universities should invest in modern digital assessment management systems that facilitate efficient anonymization of student scripts and automated marking processes. Such systems will reduce administrative burden, minimize human error, and improve the scalability and reliability of blind marking, particularly in large student populations.

Furthermore the study recommends Continuous professional development programmes in private universities in Uganda should be implemented to train academic staff and examination officers on blind marking procedures, assessment moderation, and standards-based marking. Training will help reduce resistance to change, improve implementation consistency, and enhance overall assessment quality.

Lastly the study recommends that Institutional quality assurance units in Ugandan universities should strengthen internal moderation and external examination review processes to complement blind marking. This integrated approach will further enhance transparency, reduce grading inconsistencies, and reinforce stakeholder confidence in academic performance.

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