

International Journal Research Publication Analysis

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EVALUATING THE CONTRIBUTION OF CENTRAL AND BLIND MARKING TO STUDENTS' ASSESSMENT INTEGRITY IN UGANDA'S PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES: IMPLICATIONS FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

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Article Received: 13 May 2026

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Article Revised: 03 June 2026

Faculty of Social Science, Kampala University, Kampala –Uganda.

Published on: 23 June 2026

DOI: <https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijrpa.7232>

ABSTRACT

Assessment integrity is a cornerstone of quality assurance in higher education, ensuring that assessment outcomes are fair, reliable, transparent, and credible. In many universities across Sub-Saharan Africa, concerns regarding inconsistencies in grading, examiner bias, and variations in marking standards have increased the need for robust assessment practices. This study assesses the contribution of central marking and blind marking to assessment integrity in Public universities in Uganda and examines the implications of these practices for quality assurance in the region. Guided by principles of educational assessment and quality assurance, the study employs a mixed-methods approach involving academic staff, examination officers, quality assurance personnel, and students from selected Public universities. Data are collected through questionnaires, interviews, and document analysis and analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics alongside thematic analysis. The study investigates how central marking promotes consistency and standardization in grading, while blind marking minimizes potential bias arising from knowledge of students' identities. Findings indicate that both central marking and blind marking make significant contributions to assessment integrity by enhancing fairness, objectivity, reliability, and transparency in the assessment process. The results further suggest that institutions that systematically implement these practices are more likely to strengthen stakeholder confidence in academic qualifications and support continuous quality improvement. The study concludes that central

marking and blind marking are important mechanisms for safeguarding academic standards and recommends their wider adoption within higher education institutions across Sub-Saharan Africa as part of comprehensive quality assurance frameworks. The findings contribute to ongoing policy discussions on assessment reform and institutional accountability in the Great Lakes region.

KEYWORDS: Central marking, blind marking, assessment integrity, quality assurance, higher education, Public universities.

INTRODUCTION

Assessment integrity is widely recognized as a cornerstone of quality assurance in higher education because it determines the credibility, fairness, and reliability of academic judgments. Universities rely on assessment outcomes to certify learning achievement, make progression decisions, and confer qualifications that are trusted by employers, professional bodies, governments, and society (Bradby et al., 2023). Consequently, the quality of assessment processes directly influences institutional reputation, stakeholder confidence, and the overall effectiveness of higher education systems. As universities continue to expand and diversify their academic offerings, ensuring the integrity of assessment practices has become a critical concern for educational leaders and quality assurance agencies worldwide (Nisbet & Shaw, 2024).

In recent decades, higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa has experienced unprecedented growth, driven by increasing demand for tertiary education, demographic expansion, globalization, and knowledge-based economic development (Nisbet & Shaw, 2024). This expansion has been accompanied by the rapid emergence of Public universities, which have become important providers of higher education and contributors to human capital development (Antona & Stephanidis, 2025). However, the mystification of higher education has also generated concerns regarding academic standards, consistency in grading, examiner bias, and the credibility of assessment outcomes. These concerns have intensified calls for more robust assessment systems capable of safeguarding academic integrity while maintaining public trust in university qualifications.

Uganda, located within the African Great Lakes Region, presents a particularly important context for examining assessment quality assurance practices. The country has witnessed significant growth in Public higher education institutions over the past two decades, reflecting broader regional trends in educational expansion (M et al., 2023). As qualifications

increasingly facilitate cross-border employment, professional certification, and academic mobility within the Great Lakes Region and across Sub-Saharan Africa, universities are under growing pressure to ensure that assessment outcomes accurately reflect student achievement. Consequently, assessment integrity has emerged as a strategic priority for institutions seeking to maintain academic credibility and comply with national and international quality assurance expectations.

Among the various mechanisms employed to strengthen assessment quality, central marking and blind marking have gained increasing attention(Bankston et al., 2025). Central marking refers to the systematic coordination and standardization of assessment evaluation through common marking guides, moderation procedures, examiner calibration, and collaborative grading processes. The primary objective of central marking is to reduce variability among assessors and ensure consistency in the application of marking criteria(Weidmann, 2022). Blind marking, in contrast, involves concealing students' identities during the assessment process to minimize conscious and unconscious biases that may arise from factors such as gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, prior academic performance, or personal familiarity. Through anonymity, blind marking seeks to promote fairness, objectivity, and impartiality in academic evaluation(Johnstone & Momani, 2024).

Although both central marking and blind marking are increasingly recognized as valuable quality assurance mechanisms, existing research has predominantly examined them as separate assessment interventions. Studies on central marking have focused largely on grading consistency, reliability, and standardization, while investigations into blind marking have concentrated on reducing assessor bias and promoting fairness(Abbott et al., 2023). As a result, limited scholarly attention has been devoted to understanding how these practices interact and complement one another in strengthening assessment integrity. This gap is particularly evident within the context of Public universities in Sub-Saharan Africa, where empirical evidence on integrated assessment quality assurance strategies remains scarce despite growing concerns regarding academic standards and institutional accountability.

This study addresses this gap by examining the combined contribution of central marking and blind marking to assessment integrity in Public universities in Uganda. The study is grounded in the proposition that the two mechanisms operate synergistically rather than independently(Aldhaen et al., 2025). Central marking enhances procedural consistency and standardization, while blind marking promotes impartiality and fairness. Together, they create a comprehensive assessment framework capable of addressing both technical and ethical dimensions of assessment quality. This synergistic perspective offers a more holistic

understanding of assessment integrity and extends existing scholarship beyond traditional approaches that examine assessment practices in isolation.

The study lies in three important dimensions. First, it advances the literature by investigating the interaction between central marking and blind marking as complementary determinants of assessment integrity rather than as separate quality assurance tools. Second, it proposes an integrated conceptual framework that links assessment standardization, objectivity, fairness, transparency, and reliability within a single quality assurance model (Anderson et al., 2020). Third, it provides empirical evidence from Public universities in Uganda, a context that remains underrepresented in international assessment and quality assurance research despite its growing significance within the higher education landscape of the Great Lakes Region and Sub-Saharan Africa.

By exploring how central marking and blind marking collectively influence assessment integrity, this study contributes to ongoing debates on academic quality, institutional accountability, and educational excellence (Aurel, 2020). The findings are expected to inform policy development, institutional practice, and quality assurance frameworks aimed at strengthening assessment systems in higher education. Ultimately, the study positions assessment integrity as a strategic foundation for enhancing the credibility, comparability, and international recognition of university qualifications in Uganda, the Great Lakes Region, and Sub-Saharan Africa more broadly.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a parallel descriptive mixed-method that enabled collection of the required method for the study. This research approach was suitable as it posted into epistemology and ontological stance (Ahmed, 2023). The study also used an explanatory sequential design to examine the contribution of central marking and blind marking to assessment integrity in Public universities in Uganda. The combination of the method and design enabled collection of both qualitative and quantitative component was used to establish the extent to which these assessment practices influence dimensions of assessment integrity (Nisbet & Shaw, 2024; Salazar, 2021). While the qualitative component provided deeper insights into institutional experiences, implementation processes, and contextual factors shaping assessment quality assurance. The integration of both approaches enabled a comprehensive understanding of how procedural standardization and assessor impartiality interact to strengthen assessment credibility.

Study Context and Participants

The study was conducted among selected Public universities in Uganda, a country located within the African Great Lakes Region where Public higher education institutions. Assessment have become significant contributors to expanding access and strengthening human capital development(Aturupane & Bank, 2021). The study population comprised academic staff, examination administrators, quality assurance personnel, heads of departments, and undergraduate students because of their direct engagement with assessment design, administration, marking, moderation, and quality assurance processes(Nisbet & Shaw, 2024).

Universities were purposively selected based on institutional accreditation status, operational experience, and the existence of formal assessment quality assurance mechanisms(Aurel, 2020). Participants were selected using a combination of purposive and stratified sampling approaches to ensure representation of key stakeholder groups involved in assessment governance.

Data Collection and Measurement

Quantitative data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed around the study constructs: central marking, blind marking, and assessment integrity. Central marking was measured through indicators including standardization of marking criteria, moderation practices, consistency among assessors, and institutional oversight(Badr & Lhoussaine, 2024). Blind marking was assessed through indicators related to anonymity of scripts, reduction of examiner bias, and objectivity of grading decisions. Assessment integrity was measured through fairness, transparency, reliability, consistency, and credibility of assessment outcomes(Annen & Castro, 2025).

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with quality assurance officers, examination coordinators, and academic leaders(Hacker, 2023). Interview questions explored institutional experiences regarding the implementation of central marking and blind marking, perceived benefits, operational challenges, and their implications for quality assurance. Relevant institutional assessment documents were also reviewed to strengthen contextual understanding and triangulate findings.

Validity and Reliability

The research instruments were reviewed by experts in higher education assessment and quality assurance to establish content validity(Mandal et al., 2022). A pilot study was

conducted to refine the questionnaire items and improve clarity. Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, with values of 0.70 and above considered acceptable for the study constructs.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize patterns in central marking, blind marking, and assessment integrity practices (Badr & Lhoussaine, 2024). Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine associations among study variables, while multiple regression analysis was employed to determine the predictive contribution of central marking and blind marking to assessment integrity.

The regression model was expressed as:

$$AI = \beta_0 + \beta_1 CM + \beta_2 BM + \varepsilon$$

Where:

AI = Assessment Integrity

CM = Central Marking

BM = Blind Marking

β_0 = Constant

β_1 and β_2 = Regression coefficients

ε = Error term

Qualitative interview data were analyzed thematically through coding, categorization, and identification of emerging patterns (Aurel, 2020). Findings from qualitative and quantitative analyses were integrated during interpretation to generate a comprehensive explanation of the relationship between assessment practices and quality assurance outcomes.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval and institutional permissions were obtained before data collection. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was secured from all respondents. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process, with data used solely for academic purposes (AlDhaen et al., 2025).

Methodological Contribution

Methodologically, the study extends existing assessment research by examining central marking and blind marking as interconnected quality assurance mechanisms rather than isolated interventions(L et al., 2023). This integrated approach provides empirical evidence on how universities can combine procedural consistency with impartial evaluation to enhance assessment integrity and strengthen quality assurance systems within Sub-Saharan Africa.

Results of the study

The study examined assessment quality assurance practices across public universities representing the major geographical regions of Uganda, including the Central, Eastern, Northern, and Western regions. Respondents comprised academic staff, examination officers, and heads of departments, and quality assurance personnel who directly participate in assessment development, marking, moderation, and academic governance(Caperchione & Bianchi, 2022). The findings revealed that assessment integrity remains a central institutional concern, with universities increasingly adopting structured mechanisms to improve fairness, transparency, and consistency in grading.

The results indicated that most participating universities had established formal assessment policies, marking guidelines, and moderation procedures(M et al., 2023). However, variations existed in the level of implementation, particularly regarding the consistency of central marking practices and the extent to which blind marking was institutionalized across faculties and academic disciplines.

Contribution of Central Marking to Assessment Integrity

The first objective examined the contribution of central marking to assessment integrity. Findings demonstrated that central marking significantly enhanced consistency, reliability, and standardization of assessment outcomes across public universities in Uganda.

Respondents reported that centralized marking processes promoted the use of common marking schemes, improved alignment among assessors, and reduced variations in grading standards among different markers(Nisbet & Shaw, 2024). Academic staff particularly noted that collaborative marking sessions and moderation meetings enhanced professional dialogue and strengthened shared understanding of assessment expectations.

The findings further showed that central marking contributed to institutional accountability by creating opportunities for cross-checking, verification, and quality control before final results were released. Examination officers indicated that centralized procedures reduced

cases of inconsistent awarding of marks and strengthened confidence in examination outcomes(Boyle et al., 2023).

However, some challenges were identified, including increased workload for academic staff, limited financial resources to support centralized marking activities, and difficulties coordinating large numbers of assessors across geographically dispersed campuses. Despite these challenges, central marking was perceived as an important mechanism for improving assessment credibility.

Contribution of Blind Marking to Assessment Integrity

The second objective assessed the contribution of blind marking to assessment integrity. Findings indicated that blind marking positively influenced perceptions of fairness, objectivity, and impartiality in assessment processes.

Participants reported that removing student identifiers from scripts reduced the possibility of conscious and unconscious bias associated with students' personal characteristics, previous academic performance, or relationships with lecturers(Alario-Hoyos et al., 2020). Quality assurance officers emphasized that anonymous marking strengthened trust among students and academic stakeholders by demonstrating institutional commitment to equitable assessment practices.

The findings also revealed that blind marking was particularly valued in courses with large student numbers, where personal familiarity between lecturers and students could potentially influence assessment judgments. Nevertheless, implementation challenges included technological limitations, inadequate examination management systems, and resistance from some academic staff accustomed to traditional marking approaches.

Effect of Central Marking and Blind Marking on Assessment Integrity

The third objective explored the combined contribution of central marking and blind marking. Findings revealed that the two practices produced a stronger quality assurance effect when implemented together rather than independently.

Central marking primarily strengthened procedural consistency by ensuring common assessment standards, while blind marking strengthened ethical neutrality by reducing assessor bias(Finger & Wagner, 2022). The combination created a comprehensive assessment integrity framework that addressed both reliability and fairness dimensions of assessment.

Respondents indicated that institutions applying both mechanisms experienced improved confidence in examination results, fewer disputes related to grading decisions, and enhanced acceptance of academic outcomes among students and external stakeholders.

The findings suggest that central marking and blind marking operate as complementary mechanisms: central marking answers the question of “whether assessment standards are applied consistently,” while blind marking addresses “whether assessment decisions are made impartially.” Their integration therefore provides a stronger foundation for institutional quality assurance.

Quality Assurance in the Great Lakes Region and Sub-Saharan Africa

The study further examined implications for quality assurance beyond Uganda. Findings suggest that assessment integrity remains a strategic concern for higher education systems within the Great Lakes Region. Where academic mobility, cross-border recognition of qualifications, and regional integration require confidence in university assessment systems (Bankston et al., 2025).

Participants emphasized that adopting transparent and standardized assessment mechanisms can strengthen comparability of qualifications, enhance institutional reputation, and support regional higher education harmonization efforts (Sharma, 2024).

The findings indicate that universities across Sub-Saharan Africa can benefit from embedding central marking and blind marking within broader quality assurance frameworks. Such approaches provide practical mechanisms for improving academic accountability while responding to increasing demands for credible and internationally recognized qualifications.

DISCUSSION

The study findings demonstrate that central marking significantly contributes to assessment integrity by enhancing consistency, standardization, and reliability in grading practices across public universities in Uganda. This finding suggests that centralized assessment procedures provide an institutional mechanism for reducing variations in examiner judgments and ensuring that assessment decisions are guided by common standards rather than individual interpretations (Nisbet & Shaw, 2024). In a higher education environment characterized by increasing student enrollment, diverse academic disciplines, and expanding institutional responsibilities, maintaining consistency in assessment outcomes remains a critical quality assurance challenge.

The positive contribution of central marking can be explained through its capacity to promote shared understanding among assessors. By bringing examiners together around common marking schemes, moderation processes, and agreed performance criteria, central marking creates opportunities for professional calibration and collective responsibility for assessment decisions. This finding supports the view that assessment quality is not solely determined by the design of examination instruments but also by the governance structures surrounding marking and moderation.

The findings are particularly significant within the Ugandan public university context, where geographical dispersion, multiple campuses, and large student populations can create inconsistencies in assessment practices. Central marking provides a structured approach for ensuring comparability of academic standards across faculties and institutions(M et al., 2023). In the context of the Great Lakes Region, where academic mobility and recognition of qualifications are increasingly important, such mechanisms contribute to strengthening confidence in university credentials.

However, the study also identified implementation challenges, including increased workload for academic staff, resource constraints, and logistical difficulties associated with coordinating centralized marking activities. These challenges indicate that the effectiveness of central marking depends not only on policy adoption but also on institutional investment in assessment infrastructure, staff capacity development, and sustainable examination management systems.

Contribution of Blind Marking to Assessment Integrity

The findings further reveal that blind marking contributes substantially to assessment integrity by strengthening fairness, objectivity, and transparency in academic evaluation. By concealing student identities during marking, blind marking reduces opportunities for conscious and unconscious bias, allowing academic judgments to focus primarily on the quality of students' responses rather than personal characteristics or prior relationships with assessors(Finger & Wagner, 2022).

This finding reinforces the argument that assessment integrity has both technical and ethical dimensions. While technical reliability concerns whether assessment outcomes are consistent and accurate, ethical integrity concerns whether students are treated fairly throughout the assessment process. Blind marking addresses the ethical dimension by promoting impartial evaluation and enhancing students' confidence that academic performance is judged objectively.

The relevance of blind marking is particularly important in contexts where lecturer–student familiarity may influence perceptions of fairness. In many African higher education institutions, relatively close academic communities can create situations where assessors are familiar with individual students' identities, backgrounds, or previous performance (Fackler et al., 2022). Although such familiarity may sometimes support effective teaching, it can introduce potential risks of favouritism or unintended bias during assessment. Blind marking therefore provides an institutional safeguard that protects both students and academic staff.

Nevertheless, the findings indicate that blind marking requires appropriate technological and administrative support. Challenges related to examination management systems, staff acceptance. It is notable that. procedural adaptations demonstrate that assessment reforms must consider institutional readiness and stakeholder engagement (Nicolescu & Nicolescu, 2021). Thus, blind marking should not be viewed merely as an administrative procedure but as part of a broader culture of academic integrity.

Relationship between Central Marking and Blind Marking

A major contribution of this study is the finding that central marking and blind marking generate a stronger assessment integrity framework when implemented together (Bui et al., 2023). Existing assessment literature has often examined these mechanisms independently; however, this study demonstrates that their combined effect addresses different but complementary dimensions of assessment quality.

Central marking primarily strengthens the reliability dimension of assessment by improving consistency among markers and ensuring adherence to common standards. Blind marking strengthens the fairness dimension by minimizing bias and promoting impartial evaluation. When combined, these mechanisms create a balanced assessment system that enhances both consistency and justice in academic decision-making.

This synergistic relationship represents an important conceptual contribution to quality assurance scholarship (Bais, 2025). It suggests that assessment integrity requires more than standardized procedures alone. A system may achieve consistency while still being vulnerable to bias, just as anonymity may reduce bias without guaranteeing consistent application of assessment standards. The integration of both approaches therefore provides a more comprehensive framework for safeguarding academic credibility.

From a quality assurance perspective, the findings imply that universities should move beyond compliance-oriented assessment practices toward integrated assessment governance

systems. Such systems recognize assessment as a strategic institutional process linked to academic reputation, stakeholder trust, and continuous improvement.

Quality Assurance in Uganda, the Great Lakes Region, and Sub-Saharan Africa

The findings have significant implications for higher education quality assurance beyond Uganda. As universities in the Great Lakes Region increasingly participate in regional academic networks, student mobility, and professional recognition frameworks, the credibility of assessment systems becomes essential for maintaining trust in qualifications.

The study suggests that central marking and blind marking can serve as practical quality assurance instruments for universities seeking to strengthen academic standards(Crew, 2024).

Rather than relying solely on external accreditation reviews, institutions can embed internal assessment integrity mechanisms that continuously monitor and improve academic practices.

For Sub-Saharan Africa, where higher education systems continue to expand rapidly, strengthening assessment governance is essential for balancing increased access with maintained quality. The adoption of transparent and standardized assessment approaches can contribute to reducing concerns about grade inconsistencies, improving institutional accountability, and enhancing international confidence in African university qualifications.

The findings also highlight the need for regional collaboration among universities, quality assurance agencies, and policymakers to develop shared assessment standards. Such collaboration would support greater comparability of qualifications and promote harmonization of higher education quality frameworks within the African Great Lakes Region and beyond.

Theoretical and Practical Contribution of the Study

The study extends existing assessment and quality assurance scholarship by demonstrating that assessment integrity is best understood as a multidimensional construct requiring both procedural control and ethical safeguards. The integration of central marking and blind marking provides a novel perspective that connects assessment standardization with fairness-oriented practices(Caperchione & Bianchi, 2022).

Practically, the findings provide university leaders and quality assurance practitioners with evidence that strengthening assessment integrity requires deliberate institutional strategies rather than isolated interventions. Universities should therefore develop comprehensive assessment frameworks that incorporate standardized marking procedures, anonymous

evaluation mechanisms, continuous assessor training, and technology-supported examination management systems.

The study confirms that central marking and blind marking are not competing approaches but complementary strategies that collectively strengthen assessment integrity (M et al., 2023). Their effective implementation provides a pathway toward improving academic credibility, institutional accountability, and sustainable quality assurance in Ugandan universities and higher education systems across Sub-Saharan Africa.

Recommendations

Based on the findings that central marking and blind marking significantly contribute to assessment integrity, fairness, consistency, and quality assurance in public universities in Uganda, the study proposes the following practical and feasible recommendations. The study recommends the following practical measures:

Public Universities should use centralized marking teams to ensure consistent interpretation and application of competence-based assessment rubrics, learning outcomes, and performance criteria across programmes.

The academic staff should receive continuous training on assessing practical skills, problem-solving abilities, professional competencies, and authentic learning outcomes rather than relying mainly on knowledge recall.

All public universities should adopt blind marking approaches, particularly for written, project-based, and portfolio assessments, to reduce bias and ensure that competence judgments are based on demonstrated performance rather than student identity.

The Institutions of higher learning should establish common guidelines for designing, moderating, and evaluating competence-based assessments to enhance reliability and comparability of graduate outcomes.

The Quality assurance units should regularly evaluate assessment tools, marking practices, and student performance evidence to ensure alignment between assessment methods and intended competencies.

The Universities should invest in digital assessment management systems that facilitate anonymous evaluation, portfolio assessment, feedback tracking, and evidence-based monitoring of competence development.

Public Universities and quality assurance agencies within Uganda and the entire Great Lakes Region and Sub-Saharan Africa should collaborate in developing shared competence-based assessment standards to improve comparability, mobility, and recognition of qualifications

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