

The Performance of The Internal Audit Functions in Higher Education Institutions: The Auditees Perspective

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Abstract – State-owned universities worldwide are facing challenges that cast doubt on the effectiveness of their internal audit departments. The objective of the study was to assess the current state of internal audit functions in terms of performance in Zimbabwe's higher education institutions. The research utilised a multi-case study approach, focusing specifically on state universities in Zimbabwe. Data was collected through a survey distributed to auditees in these state-owned universities and analysed the responses using multiple regression analysis. For rigor and robustness, the quantitative data was triangulated with the qualitative analysis of the auditor general reports covering the years 2013 to 2021. The qualitative findings showed that auditees generally lacked knowledge about the performance of internal audit functions in public universities. Further, the auditor general reports revealed the malpractices in state universities in the presence of internal auditors. The study recommends raising awareness about the importance of internal audit functions within university communities through training, education and displaying the internal audit charter on the university website. The auditor general must be proactive by conducting audits of the internal audit function in the state-owned universities. The lack of awareness about the internal audit function despite over a decade of existence in the ZSUs is an indication of the low value attached to the departments.

Keywords – Auditee Perceptions, Internal Audit Function, State-Owned Universities.

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1 Introduction

Auditor General reports over the past years on Zimbabwe state universities (ZSUs) have found various irregularities (OAG, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021). This is despite the presence of the internal audit function (IAF) within the state universities (SUs) in Zimbabwe. The reporting of the financial losses, misappropriation of funds, liquidity crises, loss of assets, going concern problems, poor teaching and learning services, and poor corporate governance structures by the Office of the Auditor General (OAG) is clear evidence of a problem in ZSUs. Internal auditing is expected to provide objective and independent consultancy and assurance services on the management of risk, internal control, and other governance processes that are needed to add value and improve the operations of organisations (Mutchler & Chang, 2001; Mutchler, 2003; Stewart & Subramaniam, 2010; Pelser, Mensah & Ngwenya, 2020; Bello, Ahmad and & Yusof, 2018; Singh et al., 2021). The IAF in ZSUs seems not to be playing their key institutional roles, as irregularities continue to occur under their noses.

The public sector's ability to provide services is directly influenced by the effectiveness of the IAF, making it a key player in governance processes (Janse van Rensburg & Coetzee, 2015). Despite the presence of in-house internal audit functions (IAF) in nearly all public sector enterprises (PSEs), poor service delivery is the order of the day in Zimbabwe (Jachi & Yona, 2019). Various statutory pronouncements have been made to support good corporate governance practices and resident IAFs in PSEs (Jachi & Yona, 2019). Studies have been conducted on internal auditing (IA) in local government but there is a dearth of studies that have looked into Zimbabwe State Universities (ZSUs) despite the institutions being directly responsible for the development of human capital which is essential for the sustainable economic growth of the country (Jachi & Yona, 2019).

It is against this background that this study aimed to assess the current status of the internal audit functions in ZSUs from the perspective of the auditees. The research builds upon previous research that has been published by Chenjerai, Dubihlela & Makoza (2024) that investigated the determinants of IA independence in ZSUs from the perspective of the Chief Internal Auditors.

Given the above background, the main objective of this research was to gather the perspectives of the auditees on the performance of the IAF in terms of:

1. The independence of the IAF
2. The objectivity of the internal auditors
3. The role played by the management in the internal audit function.
4. The role played by the audit committee in the internal audit function.
5. The value added by the IAF in state universities.
6. The legal authority and mandate of the IAF.
7. The quality of the services provided by the IAF.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Challenges faced by internal audit functions in state universities

Several studies have critically examined the IAF within universities globally, focusing on the efficacy and challenges faced by these functions (Christopher, 2012 & 2015; Kehinde et al., 2016; Purpera, 2017; Mokono & Nasieku, 2018; DeSimone & Rich, 2019). State universities have consistently encountered issues that raise concerns about the effectiveness of their internal audit units (Christopher, 2012; Kehinde et al., 2016; Purpera, 2017; Mokono & Nasieku, 2018; DeSimone & Rich, 2019).

This study offers a comparative review of internal auditing practices across diverse countries, including Australia, the United States, Kenya, Malaysia, Italy, the Philippines, Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Indonesia.

Specific studies within this body of literature reveal various insights: In Nigeria, despite reforms, persistent deficiencies in internal control systems have been linked to ongoing fraud and misappropriations, attributed to non-functional IAFs (Ahmad & Kehinde, 2016; Bello et al., 2018; Ogunwole & Oluwakemi, 2019). Mokono and Nasieku (2018) found that factors such as internal audit independence, work environment, authority, and technical competence significantly influence audit performance in Kenyan universities. DeSimone and Rich (2020) noted the increasing importance of IAFs in enhancing financial reporting systems in U.S. higher education institutions. Christopher (2012) identified that irregularities in IAF applications in Australian universities were linked to inadequate monitoring frameworks. Purpera (2017) highlighted a lack of understanding of IAFs among university leaders in Louisiana, often compromising auditor independence. Arena (2013) and Arena and Azzone (2007) reported low adoption rates of internal auditing in Italian universities, while Mallari and Santiago (2013) emphasized the need for policy revisions in the Philippines to align with international auditing standards.

It is important to note that previous research primarily relied on data from internal auditors, highlighting the necessity for additional perspectives from other stakeholders to validate findings. Furthermore, the literature indicates a scarcity of research on internal auditing in Zimbabwean universities, underscoring the need for further investigation in this area.

2.2 Internal auditing in Zimbabwean state universities

State-owned universities in Zimbabwe are established by way of university acts. The university acts do not provide for the creation or operations of the IAF. Public sector enterprises in Zimbabwe are required by the Public Entities Corporate Governance Act (PECGA) to establish in-house IAFs. The 11 state universities that participated in this study all have internal audit functions. Although the OAG reports on public universities in Zimbabwe show material irregularities in the presence of resident IAUs within the universities, research regarding internal audits in higher education is scanty. Wadesango and Mhaka (2017) examined the impact of enterprise risk management (ERM) and IAF on the financial reporting quality of ZSUs. Denhere (2023) assessed the

involvement of internal auditors in ERM in ZSUs. No research, according to the best knowledge of the author, has been carried out on IA in state universities in Zimbabwe specifically focusing on the performance of the IAFs. This research therefore intends to close this gap in the literature.

2.3 Performance of the IAF

Performance indicates organisational health (Bello *et al.*, 2018). Academics utilise performance in assorted studies, although it is challenging to define as it may differ from one study to another study. Early research described the performance as a tangible outcome of an organisational process, evaluated in comparison to the intended outcome (Kaplan *et al.*, 1993). It is associated with the quality of services, efficiency, and effectiveness in the utilisation of resources (Kaplan *et al.*, 1993). While private company performance is usually measured in terms of financial results and position, public organisations like university performance can be measured in terms of academic output (Bello *et al.*, 2018). Previous research shows that there is a need to measure the performance of IAFs (Rupšys & Boguslauskas, 2007). "Performance measurement can be defined as the process of quantifying the efficiency and effectiveness of action" as defined by Neely *et al.* (2005) cited in (Rupšys and Boguslauskas, 2007). The assessment of the performance of the IAFs within the context of ZSUs is crucial for determining the extent in which the IAFs have adhered to international standards of internal auditing. Since internal auditing adds value to the organisation through improved risk management, internal controls, and governance processes, measuring the performance of the IAFs using the value approach helps indicate its effectiveness and efficiency (Bou-Raad, 2000). Rupšys and Boguslauskas (2007), however, assert that the assessment of internal audit functions (IAFs) using the value approach is a complex task due to the inherent variability in internal auditing practices across various organisations. A combination of the input-process-output approach and value-added approach has been adopted for use in measuring IAF performance as suggested by (Bou-Raad, 2000; Rupšys & Boguslauskas, 2007). The input is "independence," the process is "internal audit quality" and the output is value added and indicated through improved risk management, internal control, and governance processes. Table .1 below shows the internal audit dimensions and performance measures adapted from previous research and used in this study.

Table 1: Internal audit dimensions, adapted from (Rupšys and Boguslauskas, 2007) and modified by author

Dimension	Performance measure
Input (Independence)	CIA reporting lines; hiring, firing, and remuneration of CIA; availability of human and financial resources; budget autonomy; legal mandate.
Process (Upholding Internal Audit Quality)	Upholds IAQ by; considering university objectives and goals; providing timely and accurate reports; generating clear reports; providing accurate findings, using qualified, experienced, and professional staff.
Output (Value Added)	University goals and objectives, Risk management, internal control system, corporate governance, and financial reporting.

According to IIA (2017), the objective of internal auditing as extracted from its definition is to add value to and improve the organisation's operations. Internal auditing is not considered to be effective if it does not add value to the processes of an institution (Siyaya et al., 2021). Dellai and Omri (2016) have argued that internal auditing creates value by identifying the weaknesses in institutional processes and providing the necessary recommendations to be implemented by management to improve the audited processes and enhance the performance of the organisation.

Performance indicators for higher education institutions have been taken to be finance, customer, learning, risk management, internal control, and governance (Siyaya et al., 2021). In the context of this research, the indicators of IA performance are derived from the definition of internal auditing provided by the Institute of Internal Auditors (IIA, 2017).

These indicators encompass financial reporting, risk management, internal control, corporate governance, and educational services. Internal audit is the initial layer of defense used to counter poor organisational management and financial reporting, according to Njeru (2013). Risk management, control governance, and compliance are key elements of internal audits that fit with corporate governance (Demeke & Kaur, 2021). The internal audit process is incomplete until an organisation addresses and fixes its issues.

2.4 Internal audit and internal controls

Internal control deficiencies detected by audit reports have been used as a measure of internal audit effectiveness (Nyaga & Kamau, 2018). IAFs work to improve oversight of university programmes in a way that lessens the possibility of problems with internal controls (DeSimone & Rich, 2020). As per the findings by DeSimone and Rich (2020), educational institutions with IAFs have a lower probability of disclosing material deficiencies in internal controls. The comprehensive preview of the internal audit includes the scrutiny and assessment of the sufficiency and efficacy of internal control systems. Corruption cases and weaknesses in internal control systems are a signal of IAF ineffectiveness (Saputra et al., 2020).

2.5 Internal audit and corporate governance

According to (Demeke and Kaur, 2021a) "Internal auditing and corporate governance are two sides of the same coin". Internal auditing and corporate governance have been studied by different authors (Christopher, 2015; Groff, Pietra, and Sitar, 2016; Lantsoght, 2018). The need for sound corporate governance has directed attention to internal auditing as a corporate governance tool and mechanism in both public and private sector organisations. Corporate governance is strongly correlated with IA.

Most of the internal auditing literature identifies and discusses the boards of directors, management, internal auditing, and external auditing as the four main corporate governance processes (Gramling et al., 2004). Of these four mechanisms, internal auditing is the cornerstone. Gramling et al. (2004) argue that internal auditing serves as a resource for the other parties to corporate governance. In 2009, the IIA redefined internal auditing, specifically indicating internal auditing as an enabler of corporate governance.

In recent times, the numerous cases of corporate fraud, often related to accounting malpractice, have triggered a debate on inefficient corporate control mechanisms and called for strict changes in legislation related to corporate governance. Poor corporate governance has been linked to a lack of internal audit function independence by different authors (Groff et al., 2016). Following the inclusion of improved effective corporate governance as one of the expected outcomes of internal auditing by the IIA (2016) definition of internal auditing and other previous literature, this study seeks to assess the impact of the ZSUs' internal audit functions on corporate governance.

2.6 Internal audit and risk management

The impact of internal audit on risk management (RM) has been attracting increased attention in research (Mashal, 2014; Ackermann and Marx, 2016; Mhaka, Charity; Wadesango, 2017; Zainal Abidin, Nor Hafizah; Wan Mustapha, 2017; Kabuye et al., 2019; Elhaddad, Elhaddad and Alfadhli, 2020; Vuko and Slapnicar, 2020; Ninson, 2022; Tetteh, 2022). According to Erasmus and Coetzee (2017), internal audit is a key driver of internal audit effectiveness. The IIA (2017) has defined risk management as: "A process to identify, assess, manage, and control potential events or situations to provide reasonable assurance regarding the achievement of organisation objectives." Internal audit does not manage risk, but it does provide information in the form of assurances and advice to the management of an organisation (IIA, 2022).

One of the primary responsibilities of the Internal Audit Function (IAF) is to offer assurance to the board of directors regarding the effectiveness of risk management processes in effectively mitigating risks, in alignment with the organisation's risk appetite (Zainal Abidin, Nor Hafizah; Wan Mustapha, 2017). Risk management is a crucial necessity for universities (Sityata et al., 2021). Sityata et al. (2021) argue that the risk profile of universities is complex and could result in disruptions from both internal and external environments if not professionally managed. Research has shown that the occurrence of fraud, poor governance, weak internal controls, high litigation costs, loss of

public funds, and bad reputation has resulted in calls for the development of risk management frameworks (Ackermann & Marx, 2016). (Elhad-dad, Elhad-dad, and Alfadhli, 2020) stated that risks in the public sector vary in severity and importance from one period to another but are often risks arising from the regulatory environment, risks related to non-compliance with accounting or financial rules, risks related to management delegation, risks related to public control and internal fraud, and risks related to lack of services in asset management.

2.7 Internal audit and financial reporting

Considerable research has been carried out to examine the relationship between internal auditing and financial reporting quality. In this study, financial reporting is used as a measure of university performance. (Mhaka, Charity; Wadesango, 2017) examined the impact of IAF on the financial reporting quality of universities. Wadesango and Mhaka (2017) found that there was a significant positive relationship between the IAF and the financial reporting quality.

The IAF acts as an independent party to guarantee that internal control over financial reporting and corporate governance is effective (process objective) and produces accurate financial outcomes. Wadesango and Mhaka (2017) research findings were in line with those of (David and Festus, 2023), who also found that audit quality had a significant effect on financial reporting quality of public universities in southwest Nigeria. IAQ had a significant effect on faithful representation, understanding ability, and comparability of financial reporting quality. An earlier study by (Abbott et al., 2016) examined the impact of internal audit quality on financial reporting quality.

2.8 Impact of internal audit stakeholders on IA independence

The chief executive officers, chief internal auditors, administrative managers, financial managers, external auditors, and audit committee members have been identified by previous research as internal audit stakeholders (Abu-azza *et al.*, 2015; Erasmus & Coetzee, 2018; Mashayekhi, Jalali & Rezaee, 2022). The IA stakeholders can either prevent or improve the independent functioning of the IAU (Scarborough *et al.*, 1998; Goodwin & Yeo, 2001; Goodwin, 2003; Gramling, 2004; Christopher *et al.*, 2009; Al-Matari, 2014; Bi, 2019; Chang *et al.*, 2023). IA stakeholders can be broadly classified into two groups: the auditees and the internal auditors.

In the study conducted by Mashayekhi *et al.* (2022), it was found that internal audit (IA) stakeholders significantly influence the status of IA through their perceptions and actions. Internal audit independence and objectivity are not only important to an internal organisation's credibility; they are hallmarks of executive management's commitment to promoting a strong, introspective approach to corporate governance. Audit committee and top management involvement in IA affairs have been identified as some of the factors that influence IAF performance, according to previous academic literature (Scarborough *et al.*, 1998; Goodwin & Yeo, 2001; Goodwin, 2003; Gramling, 2004;

Christopher *et al.*, 2009; Al-Matari *et al.*, 2014; Bi, 2019; Chang *et al.*, 2023). In addition to the fact that stakeholders are crucial in determining the IA status, internal auditors who consider the demands and expectations of stakeholders are more successful in enhancing their organisations' value (Grzesiak, 2021).

3 Methods and Data

This research considered multiple cases primarily for a better understanding of the phenomena under investigation and capturing participants' perspectives and helping to compare cases to find common patterns and relationships. (Coombs, 2022 & Yin, 2014). The state universities are the identified cases as each operates independently and located in a variety of provinces within Zimbabwe. According to Yin (2014), a case study focuses on either a single instance or multiple cases. This study focused on a selection of cases, specifically 13 state universities in Zimbabwe. A total of 365 individuals within the sample of interest were purposefully selected for the quantitative strand of the investigation.

The study's participants consisted of individuals who were specifically selected from each of the studied SUs. These participants were chosen based on their authority to implement the recommendations of the IAF, as well as their roles in management and internal auditing. The individuals who participated in this study comprised the population and were deemed to possess a high level of expertise in the subject matter under investigation. An online self-administered questionnaire was used as a data collection technique. The development of the questions for the questionnaire was informed by prior research conducted within the same field (Macrae & Van Gils, 2014). The researcher sent emails to the university registrars asking for permission to collect data from the relevant sample staff members.

The emails also requested the email addresses of the chief internal auditors. The request for permission emails were accompanied by the permission letter which was obtained by the researcher from the MHTEISTD. For rigour and robustness, a sample of the auditor general reports on ZSUs was analysed qualitatively for content.

4 Results

4.1 Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Table 2 shows the frequency and percentage distribution of the respondents in terms of gender. Of the 279 respondents, 108, or 38.71% were females, while 171, or 61.29% were males.

Table 2: Distribution of the Respondents in terms of Gender

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	171	61.29
Female	108	38.71
Total	279	100%

4.2 Educational Qualification of Respondents

Table 3 shows the frequency and percentage distribution of respondents in terms of highest academic qualification. As shown in the table, the largest group of respondents (131, or 46.95%) held a bachelor's degree. There were 71 (25.45%) who had completed their master's degree, 55 (19.71%) held diploma certificates, 22 (7.89%) had a doctoral degree, and no one had IIA certification.

Table 3: Frequency and Percentage of Academic Qualifications of Respondents.

Highest academic qualification	Frequency	Percentage
Diploma/Certificate	55	19.71
Bachelor's Degree	131	46.95
Master's Degree	71	25.45
Doctoral Degree	22	7.89
IIA Certification	0	0.00
Total	279	100%

4.3 Number of Years in Department

Table 4 shows the frequency and percentage distribution of respondents by experience in terms of the number of years in their respective departments. The largest group of respondents, 109 (39.07%), had less than 2 years, followed by 5 to 6 years (23.66%), 53 (19.00%) had more than 6 years, and 51 (18.28%) had 2 to 4 years.

Table 4: Frequency and Percentage Distribution of the Respondents in terms of Experience.

Number of years in the department	Frequency	Percentage
Less than 2 years	109	39.07
2 to 4 years	51	18.28
5 to 6 years	66	23.66
More than 6 years	53	19.00
Total	279	100%

4.4 Job Position of Respondents

Table 5 shows the frequency and percentage distribution of respondents in terms of position. 24 (8.60%) were university top management; 128 (39.07%) were directors/managers/deans/heads of department and 127 (39,07%) were Finance/bursar/ procurement office staff members.

Table 5: Frequency and Percentage Distribution of the Respondents In Terms of Position.

University Top Management	24
Finance/Procurement Staff	127
Head of Department/Faculty	128
Total	279

Table 6 shows the frequency and percentage distribution of respondents in terms of position. 24 (8.60%) were university top management; 128 (39.07%) were directors/managers/deans/heads of department and 127 (39,07%) were Finance/bursar/ procurement office staff members.

Table 6: Frequency and Percentage Distribution of the Respondents in Terms of Position.

University Top Management	24
Finance/Procurement Office Staff Member	127
Head of Department/Manager/Dean/Director	128
Total	279

The following sections (4.5 to 4.11) present the findings that address the main research objective of this study, which was to evaluate the performance of the internal audit function in state universities. Participants provided their opinions by responding to Likert scale statements in the closed-ended questionnaire. The Likert scale key used was as follows: 5 (strongly agree), 4 (agree), 3 (not sure), 2 (disagree), 1 (strongly disagree).

4.5 Assessment of the respondents of the internal audit functions in Zimbabwean state universities in terms of independence

Table 7 shows the assessment of respondents in the internal audit function in terms of independence. Most respondents **agreed** that "the independence of the IAF is a key enabler of its effectiveness," with a weighted mean (WM) of 4.61 and a standard deviation (SD) of 0.59.

This was closely followed by "The IAF has unrestricted access to every department and all of the University's information," with a WM of 3.96 and SD of 1.15, interpreted as uncertain (**not sure**). The results also show that the respondents were **not sure** if "The Chief Internal Auditor (CIA) reports directly to the Vice-Chancellor functionally"; "The IAF is free from university

management interference when performing their duties"; and "Internal auditors are the university management police dogs" all had the same WM of 3.36 with SDs of 1.42, 1.23, and 1.25 respectively.

With a WM of 3.10 and SD of 1.45, respondents were not sure whether "the CIA's position on the university organogram enables him or her to act objectively". On the other hand, respondents disagreed that "the IAF is an autonomous budget centre in the university" (with a WM of 2.81 and SD of 1.01); "the IAF has sufficient financial resources to enable it to work independently" (with WM of 2.30 and SD of 1.06); and "the IAF has sufficient human resources to enable it to work effectively" (with a WM of 2.20,) and SD of 1.10.

In general, the assessment of respondents was **not sure** about IAF effectiveness in terms of independence, with a general weighted mean (GWM) of 3.14 and SD of 1.13.

Table 7: Assessment of the Respondents on the Internal Audit Function Effectiveness in Terms of Independence

No.	Statement	Number of Respondents					WM	SD	Interpretation
		5	4	3	2	1			
1	The Independence of the IAF is a Key Enabler of its Effectiveness.	179	95	3	0	2	4.61	0.6	Agree
2	The IAF has Sufficient Financial Resources to Enable it to Work Independently.	37	28	19	113	82	2.37	1.4	Disagree
3	The IAF has Unrestricted Access to Every Department and all the Information in the University.	124	66	49	33	7	3.96	1.2	Not Sure
4	The Chief Internal Auditor (CIA) Reports Directly to the Vice-Chancellor Functionally.	83	75	5	91	25	3.36	1.4	Not Sure
5	The IAF is an Autonomous Budget Centre in the University.	11	77	44	141	6	2.81	1	Disagree
6	Internal Auditors are the University Management Police Dogs.	41	124	49	25	40	3.36	1.3	Not Sure
General Weighted Mean (GWM):							3.41	1.1	Not Sure

4.6 Assessment of the respondents on the internal audit functions in Zimbabwean state universities in terms of objectivity

Table 8 presents the assessment of respondents on the objectivity of the internal audit function (IAF). It shows that most respondents **agree** that "Objectivity is a key enabler for the IAF's effectiveness", with a WM of 4.33 and SD of 0.71, and that "IA audits the work of the individual or department that makes decisions that directly affect his or her future employment opportunities and salary", with a WM of 0.14 and SD of 0.77.

However, some respondents were **not sure** if "The university management is responsible for the appointment and remuneration of the Chief Internal Auditor", with a WM of 3.68 and SD of 1.17; "IA are sometimes exposed to social pressure threats from university pressure groups", with a WM of 3.52 and SD of 0.73; "Internal auditors feel free to include any audit findings in their audit reports", with a WM of 3.37 and SD of 0.95.

The remaining items ("Internal auditors (IA) act as facilitators of control self-assessment exercises which they may be asked to review afterwards" and "The IAF is highly valued by management as demonstrated by the priority given budget") with the same WM of 3.18 and a SD of 0.93 and 1.12 respectively were both interpreted as **not sure**. The statement "IA sometimes approaches audit work with preconceived notions" had a WM of 3.5 and SD of 1.09 was interpreted as **not sure** either. The respondents, on the other hand, disagreed that "the university is a multicultural or gender entity and the IA has a bias towards auditee employees of their culture or gender", with a WM of 2.94 and SD of 0.92. The respondents disagreed that "The Chief Internal Auditor is financially motivated and happy with their salary grade", with a WM of 2.39 and SD of 0.95.

Table 8: Assessment of the Respondents of Internal Audit Function Effectiveness in Terms of Objectivity

No.	Statement	Number of Respondents					AWM	SD	Interpretation
		5	4	3	2	1			
1	Objectivity is a Key Enabler for IAF Effectiveness.	127	119	30	3	0	4.33	0.7	Agree
2	Internal auditors (IA) Act as Facilitators of Control Self-Assessment Exercises which they may be asked to review Afterwards.	13	105	89	64	7	3.18	0.9	Not Sure
3	The University Management is Responsible for the Appointment and	86	67	101	1	24	3.68	1.2	Not Sure

	Remuneration of the Chief Internal Auditor.								
4	Internal Auditors Feel Free to Include any Audit Findings in their Audit Reports.	20	120	84	52	3	3.37	0.9	Not Sure
5	The IAF is Highly Valued by Management as Demonstrated by the Priority Given Budget.	41	72	73	83	10	3.18	1.1	Not Sure
General Weighted Mean (GWM):							3.55	1	Not Sure

4.7 Assessment of the Respondents on the Internal Audit Functions in Zimbabwean State Universities in Terms of Value Added

Table 9 shows the assessment of the respondents in terms of the value added by the internal audit function to the university. The majority of the respondents were **not sure** that "The IAF has added value to the university by ensuring that the internal controls are robust and functioning in terms of detecting and preventing fraudulent acts against the university", with a WM of 3.69 and SD of 0.96; "The IAF has added value to the university by ensuring that sound corporate governance principles are adhered to by university management", with a WM of 3.56 and SD of 0.84; "The IAF has added value to the university by ensuring that all the pillars of Education 5.0 are being implemented into curriculum development and the teaching and learning processes of the university", with an weighted mean (WM) of 3.51 and SD of 0.87. Furthermore, "The IAF has added value to the university by ensuring that university strategic goals and objectives are met", with a WM of 3.47 and SD of 0.88, interpreted as **not sure**. The same assessment was applied to "The IAF has added value to the university by ensuring that the university complies with all the state laws and regulations", with a WM of 3.46 and SD of 0.90.

Also, "The IAF has added value to the university by ensuring that financial reporting is always accurate and up to date", with a WM of 3.41, and SD of 0.88; and "The IAF has added value to the university by ensuring that the positive risks are enhanced and capitalised on by the university", with the same WM of 3.20, and SDs of 0.71 and 1.29 interpreted as **not sure**.

In addition, respondents were not sure whether "The IAF has added value to the university by ensuring that the university's internal quality assurance unit is fully functional to minimize the risk of poor service delivery", with a WM of 3.18 and SD of 1.01; and "The IAF has added value to the university by ensuring that the residual risks affecting the functional and organisational units of the university are kept at manageable levels", with a WM of 3.18 and SD of 1.01.

Table 9: Assessment of the respondents on internal audit function effectiveness in terms of value added.

No.	Statement	Number of Respondents					AWM	SD	Interpretation
		5	4	3	2	1			
1	The IAF has Added Value to the University by Ensuring that the Internal Controls are Robust and Functioning in terms of Detecting and Preventing Fraudulent Acts Against the University.	48	146	36	48	1	3.69	0.96	Not Sure
2	The IAF has Added Value to the University by Ensuring that the Residual Risks Affecting the Functional and Organisational Units of the University are Kept at Manageable Levels.	8	94	103	74	0	3.13	0.84	Not Sure
3	The IAF has Added Value to the University by Ensuring that the University Complies with all the State Laws and Regulations.	40	84	120	34	1	3.46	0.90	Not Sure
4	The IAF has Added Value to the University by Ensuring that all the Pillars of Education 5.0 are being Implemented in Curriculum Development and the Teaching and Learning Processes of the University.	46	74	137	21	1	3.51	0.87	Not Sure
5	The IAF has Added Value to the University by Ensuring that the Departmental Goals for my Department are Achieved.	44	93	57	44	41	3.20	1.29	Not Sure
General Weighted Mean:							3.40	0.97	Not Sure

In conclusion, the participants who expressed uncertainty regarding the contribution of the internal audit function to the institution had an average score of 3.40, as measured by a GWM, with SD of 0.97.

4.8 Assessment of the Respondents on the Internal Audit Functions in Zimbabwean State Universities in Terms of Management

Table 10 summarises the assessment of the respondents on the relationship between management and the IAF. Most of the respondents were **not sure** that "Management supports the IAF by considering internal auditors as advisors to management on matters relating to internal controls and governance issues", with a WM of 3.97 and SD of 0.90; "Management supports the IAF in that the Vice-Chancellor and top university management are responsible for the appointment of the Chief Internal Auditor (CIA)", with a WM of 3.87 and SD of 1.15; "Management supports the IAF by promoting IA independence by not intervening in the IA processes", with a WM of 3.47 and SD of 0.94; "Management supports the IAF by valuing and taking timely corrective action on audit findings and recommendations", with a WM of 3.10 and SD of 0.96; "Management supports the IAF by facilitating and funding regular continuous professional development for internal auditors", with a WM of 3.39 and SD of 1.10; and "Management supports the IAF by including the IA plan in the university calendar", with a WM of 3.20 and SD of 1.13.

Furthermore, respondents disagree that "Management supports the IAF by placing value on and communicating the role of IAF to the university stakeholders", with a WM of 2.95 and SD of 1.18; "Management supports the IAF by compensating the CIA on a level matching the value added by the IAF to the organisation", with a WM of 2.92 and SD of 1.35; "Management supports the IAF by ensuring that the IA unit has adequate manpower to enable it to carry out its duties", with a WM of 2.77 and SD of 1.44; "Management supports the IAF by ensuring that the internal audit department has adequate financial resources required for it to carry out its duties", with a WM of 2.66 and SD of 1.35.

In general, the respondents were not sure about the relationship between management and the IAF, with a GWM of 3.23 and SD of **1.11**.

Table 10: Assessment of the respondents on the internal audit functions in terms of management.

No.	Statement	Number of Respondents					WM	SD	Inter- preta- tion
		5	4	3	2	1			
1	Management Supports the IAF by Placing Value on and communicating the role of IAF to the University Stakeholders.	17	99	54	72	37	2.95	1.18	Disa- gree
2	Management Supports the IAF by Compensating the CIA on a Level Matching the Value Added by the IAF to the Organisation.	27	102	32	57	61	2.92	1.35	Disa- gree
3	Management Supports the IAF by Valuing and Taking Timely Corrective Action on Audit Findings and Recommendations.	49	104	46	77	3	3.43	1.10	Not Sure
4	Management Supports the IAF by Facilitating and Funding Regular Continuous Professional Development for Internal Auditors.	31	122	53	72	1	3.39	1.00	Not Sure
5	Management Supports the IAF by Promoting IA Independence by not Intervening in the IA Processes.	45	77	129	20	8	3.47	0.94	Not Sure
General Weighted Mean (GWM):							3.23	1.11	Not Sure

4.9 Assessment of the Respondents on the Internal Audit Functions in Zimbabwean State Universities in Terms of the Audit Committee

Table 11 shows the responses on the audit committee's (AC) relationship with IAF. Most respondents agree that a non-executive director chairs the AC," with a WM of 4.13 and SD of 0.81. The respondents were **not sure** if "The university has a functional audit committee", with a WM of 3.94 and SD of 0.88; if "The CIA reports functionally to the audit committee", with a WM of 3.93 and SD of 0.89; if "The AC approves a timely, risk-based and agile internal audit plan", with a WM of 3.82 and SD of 0.82; if "The CIA always provides reports directly to the audit committee", with a WM of 3.66 and SD of 0.94; if

"the CIA confirms the independence of the IAF to the AC at least annually", with WM of 3.23 and SD of 0.99.

Moreover, respondents disagree that "The AC supports the IAF by making sure that the department is well resourced for it to carry out its duties effectively". The AC received a WM of 2.84 and SD of 1.14; "The AC is responsible for and approves the internal audit budget and resource plan", with a WM of 2.72 and SD of 1.02; and "The audit committee oversees employment and remuneration decisions of the CIA", with a WM of 2.54 and SD of 1.20.

In general, the assessment of respondents on the audit committee's relationship with IAF was not sure, with a GWM of 3.05 and SD of 1.05.

Table 11: Assessment of the Respondents on the Internal Audit Function in Terms of Audit Committee.

No.	Statement	Number of Respondents					WM	SD	Interpretation
		5	4	3	2	1			
1	The University has a Functional Audit Committee	90	91	91	6	1	3.94	0.88	Not Sure
2	The Audit Committee Oversees the Employment and Remuneration Decisions of the CIA.	30	14	93	81	61	2.54	1.20	Disagree
3	The CIA Confirms the Independence of the IAF to the AC at Least Annually.	40	54	118	65	2	3.23	0.99	Not Sure
4	The AC is Responsible for and Approves the Internal Audit Budget and Resource Plan.	16	40	101	94	28	2.72	1.02	Disagree
5	The AC Supports the IAF by Making Sure that the Department is Well Resourced for it to Carry Out its Duties Effectively.	24	59	77	87	32	2.84	1.14	Disagree
General Weighted Mean (GWM):							3.05	1.05	Not Sure

4.10 Assessment of the Respondents on the Internal Audit Functions in Zimbabwean State Universities in Terms of Internal Audit Quality

Table 12. presents the assessment of respondents in terms of whether the IA unit upholds the IAQ. Most of all respondents agree that "the IA unit upholds the IAQ through providing feedback during audits", with a WM of 4.15 and SD of 0.71; this was closely followed by "The IA unit upholds the IAQ through formally following up and ensuring that appropriate actions are taken on audit findings and recommendations", with a WM of 4.14 and SD of 0.71; and "The IA unit upholds the IAQ through taking into consideration the university objectives and goals when planning audit programmes", with a WM of 4.05 and SD of 0.77.

The statements, "The IA unit upholds the IAQ through providing clear reports", had a WM of 3.99 and SD of 0.89; "The IA unit upholds the IAQ through providing valuable recommendations", with a WM of 3.98 and SD of 0.89; "The IA unit upholds the IAQ through providing timely reports", with a WM of 3.97 and SD of 0.80; "The IA unit upholds the IAQ through providing accurate findings", with a WM of 3.76 and SD of 0.81; "The IA unit upholds the IAQ through providing independent and objective service", with a WM of 3.47 and SD of 1.08; "The IA unit upholds the IAQ through the use of qualified, experienced, and professional staff members", with a WM of 3.32 and SD of 1.01; and lastly, "The IA unit up-holds the IAQ through maintaining and using a sufficient number of IA staff members", with a WM of 3.03 and a SD of 1.06. They were all interpreted as not sure. In conclusion, respondents were not sure that the IA unit upholds the IAQ, with a GWM of 3.81 and SD of 0.87.

Table 22: Assessment of the Respondents on the Internal Audit Function in Terms of Internal Audit Quality.

No.	Statement	Number of Respondents					WM	SD	Interpre- tation
		5	4	3	2	1			
1	The IA Unit Upholds the IAQ Through Following Up and Ensuring that Appropriate Actions are Taken on Audit Findings and Recommendations.	87	151	35	6	0	4.14	0.71	Agree
2	The IA Unit Upholds the IAQ Through Providing Feedback During Audits.	82	161	32	4	0	4.15	0.67	Agree
3	The IA Unit Upholds the IAQ Through Providing Valuable Recommendations.	78	146	27	27	1	3.98	0.89	Not Sure
4	The IA Unit Upholds the IAQ Through Providing Independent and Objective Service.	57	83	78	56	5	3.47	1.08	Not Sure
5	The IA Unit Upholds the IAQ Through Use of Qualified, Experienced, and Professional Staff Members.	30	105	74	65	5	3.32	1.01	Not Sure
General Weighted Mean (GWM):							3.81	0.87	Not Sure

4.11 Assessment of the Respondents on the Internal Audit Functions in Zimbabwean State Universities in Terms of Legal Mandate

Table 13 displays the assessment of the respondents on the legal mandate of the internal audit (IAUs) and the internal audit charter (IAC). It can be seen that most respondents were not sure if the "The IAC clearly states that the CIA reports functionally to the AC and administratively to the Vice-Chancellor", with a WM of 3.85 and SD of 0.89; "The IAC gives the IAF the legal mandate to audit every key result area of the university", with a WM of 3.65 and SD of 0.67; and "The university has an internal audit charter (IAC) that complies in

all aspects with the requirements of the International Internal Auditing Standards", with a WM of 3.52 and SD of 1.03.

Both statements, "The IAC clearly spells the duty of the CIA to ensure independence and objectivity of the IAF" and "The IAC emphasises the value the governing body places on the independence of the IAF" have the same WM of 3.45 and SD of 0.96 and 1.02.

"The university has a formal internal audit manual that outlines the scope and authority of the IAF and documents the standards, guidelines, and procedures for the IAF" has a WM of 3.42 and SD of 1.05; "The IAC clearly shows the position of the Internal Audit Unit (IAU) within the university organogram", has a WM of 3.37 and SD of 0.69;

"The structure of the Internal Audit Department is clearly shown in the IAC", has a WM of 3.34 and SD of 0.73; "The University Act provides for the establishment, structure, and operation of the IAF" has a WM of 3.26 and SD of 1.13, which is interpreted as not sure. The statement "The IAC is available to stakeholders either freely or by request and is subject to scrutiny by all staff members as to its appropriateness in terms of coverage and the mandate provided to internal audit" was interpreted as disagree with a WM of 2.93 and SD of 1.16.

Table 33: Assessment of the Respondents on the Legal Mandate of the Internal Audit Unit (IAU).

No.	Statement	Number of Respondents					WM	SD	Interpretation
		5	4	3	2	1			
1	The University Act Provides for the Establishment, Structure, and Operation of the IAF.	50	63	86	69	11	3.26	1.13	Not Sure
2	The University has a Formal Internal Audit Manual that Outlines the Scope and Authority of the IAF and Documents the Standards, Guidelines, and Procedures for the IAF.	58	59	105	55	2	3.42	1.05	Not Sure
3	The university has an internal audit charter (IAC) that complies in all aspects with the	72	41	126	39	1	3.52	1.03	Not Sure

	requirements of the International Internal Auditing Standards.								
4	The IAC is Available to Stakeholders Either Freely or by Request and is Subject to Scrutiny by all Staff Members as to its Appropriateness in Terms of Coverage and the Mandate Provided to Internal Audit.	9	100	85	33	52	2.93	1.16	Disagree
5	The IAC Clearly States that the CIA Reports Functionally to the AC and Administratively to the Vice-Chancellor.	79	92	98	8	2	3.85	0.89	Not Sure
General Weighted Mean (GWM):							3.40	1.05	Not Sure

5 Secondary Data: Analysis of the Auditor General Reports

5.1 Content Analysis of Interview Steps Using Atlas.ti, Version 9

A sample of all the auditor general reports on state owned enterprises that were publicly available on the auditor general website at the time of this study were downloaded and analysed. The reports covered the years 2013 to 2021. The researcher examined several analytical methodologies (Frieze, 2014) and followed the guidelines provided by Braun and Clarke (2014), as outlined in the subsequent phases, and facilitated using ATLAS.ti, Version 9 software. ATLAS.ti is designed to help analyze unstructured, non-numerical text with features that improve the organization, coding, and interpretation of qualitative data (Sharma, 2024:112). Using ATLAS. ti, Version 9, also enhanced the rigor of the study, made it easier to manage data, and ensured transparency in the analysis process (Sharma, 2024:112; Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007).

Following the collection of interview data, the utilisation of ATLAS.ti software facilitated the organisation and analysis of the data. In the subsequent stage of coding, an impartial specialist aided by safeguarding the integrity of the data. This was achieved by intertwining the empirical findings with theoretical perspectives that formed the foundation of the research.

The process necessitated the utilisation of open coding, which involves the amalgamation of data into distinct categories, as well as the precise classification and documentation of themes that arose, as highlighted by (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2009). The researcher and an independent expert engaged in a collaborative process of reviewing quotations and codes, adhering to the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2014).

Following the completion of the analysis, the data was presented using two methods. Firstly, it was presented in textual form, with varying degrees of quality and disposition. Secondly, it was displayed using well-prepared and constructed networks in ATLAS.ti or tables that reflected the themes that arose, as proposed by Miles et al. (2014). The data was presented in tabular format, and networks were generated and exported from ATLAS.ti. Additionally, themes that emerged from the transcripts were summarised and are displayed in Table 14.

Table 44: Performance of Internal Audit Functions.

Themes/ Categories/ Codes	Subthemes/Subcategories/ Subcodes	Meanings/Operational Definitions/Coding Rules (These Themes Above Depict the Information described below:)
Performance of IAFs	Corporate Governance System Status	Improved or strong corporate governance systems as displayed by compliance with regulations.
	Risk Management	Robust risk management that minimises negative risks and maximises positive risks.
	Internal Control System	Efficient internal control policies that detect loopholes for fraud, and unnecessary losses.
	Financial Reporting	Profitable ventures, reduced losses, and financial reporting that complies with international accounting standards.
	Academic Performance	Teaching and learning output, research output.

5.2 Performance of IAF in Terms of Corporate Governance

Figure 1 shows the network diagram generated from Atlas.ti using the Auditor General reports to display the quotations related to the performance of the IAF in terms of corporate governance. Quotation 6:20, "poor corporate governance in Auditor General report 2021. The institute had not been filling the internal audit vacant reports were not prepared consistently throughout the year due to shortages of staff in the department" shows that the internal audit functions may not be effective due to shortage of human resources. Quotation 1:21, "Vice Chancellor also a member of Audit Committee in Auditor General Report, 2016" shows that the audit committee may lack independence hence affecting its oversight role over the internal audit function. Quotation 3:11 Goin concern risk in Auditor General Report 2018 "These factors indicate that a material uncertainty exists that may cast doubt on the university's ability to continue operating as a going concern."

5.3 Performance of IAF in terms of internal controls

Figure 2 shows quotations that are related to the theme: Internal controls. Quotation 2:41 Weak internal controls over the payroll in Auditor General Report 2017, "An employee who resigned from university on 30 April 2017 was removed from the payroll seven months later. In that regard, \$ 15,806 was paid to that employee in salaries. Quotation 6:63 Weak internal controls in that former employees remained as signatories of university bank accounts in Auditor General Report 2021-internal controls over cash at bank were weak in that former employees (bursar, registrar, and deputy bursar finance and administration), a possible complete panel remained as signatories for an average of nine (9) months to a year. Quotation 3:24 Absence of key university policies in Auditor General Report 2018. The university did not have key policies to regulate its operations. In addition, its financial regulations were outdated. Quotation 2:24 Examination risk Auditor General Report 2017, The university did not have a documented examination policy to guide the preparation, handling, and marking of exams.

The quotations indicate a weak internal control environment which is not expected in the presence of an effective IAF. This is evidence of a dysfunctional internal audit system in state universities, as one of the roles of the IAF is to ensure an effective internal control system. Nyaga and Kamau (2018) used the number of internal control deficiencies detected as a measure of internal audit effectiveness. Weak internal control systems are a common problem in state universities, as evidenced by research carried out by Zakaria et al. (2006) in Malaysian public universities, and by Adetoso and Akinselure (2016) in Nigerian state universities.

5.4 Performance of IAF in Terms of Risk Management

Quotation 2.33: "Examination results tampering risk... lecturers had unlimited results to students results." Quotation 2.22: "Financial loss risk due to unapproved expenditure...." Quotation 1.16: "Going concern risk..."

The quotations on the network diagram in Fig 3 show that the ZSUs are facing a number of risks including going concern, fraud, examination, and legal risk. It is the responsibility of the internal audit to ensure that the risk management process is effective. Figure 3 reveals numerous risks faced by the ZSUs despite the presence of their internal audit functions. The risks displayed in Figure 3 are similar to the risks revealed by Mustapha and Abidin (2017) in a study of Malaysian state universities.

ElHaddad et al. (2020) carried out a similar study on the role of internal audit in risk management in Libyan universities. The study concluded that the internal audit offices and departments of the Libyan universities carried out their activities related to risk management evaluation and added value to the work of the departments. These results are in line with the findings by Ackermann and Marx (2016) whose research concluded that internal audit provides a broad scope of risk management work which assists senior management in the discharge of their responsibilities. However, research by Ninson and Tetteh (2022) was different from earlier studies (ElHaddad et al., 2020;

Ackermann & Marx, 2016) in that they concluded that weak implementation of internal audit recommendations and lack of internal audit resources resulted in ineffective risk management practices.

5.5 Performance of IAF in Terms of Financial Reporting

This is an indication of the impact of the IAF on financial reporting issues. Quotation 3.6. "Disclaimer opinion..." Quotation 3.2: "Financial statements do not fairly present..." Quotation 2.16: "Long outstanding creditors..."

The quotations in the network diagram Figure 4 show that material audit issues were reported in every Auditor General report for state universities in Zimbabwe.

5.6 Performance of IAF in Terms of Academic Performance

Figure 5 shows the network diagram with quotations that pertain to the academic performance of the institutions. This theme is particularly important because it covers the main business of the university which is centered around the Education 5.0 agenda. Quotations 2.34 and 2.35 show that the university degree programmes were not being reviewed and that the university concerned had no examination policy to guide the preparation, handling, and marking of exams. According to the International Professional Practices Framework (IPPF), internal auditing is characterized as an independent and objective activity that provides assurance and consulting services with the aim of enhancing an organisation's operations and adding value (IIA, 2017).

The implementation of a systematic and disciplined method to assess and enhance the efficacy of risk management control and the governance process aids an organisation in achieving its objectives. This concept places greater focus on the objective of internal auditing, which is to enhance value within firms. The primary business of universities is the provision of academic services in the form of teaching and learning services, research, and community engagement.

The visual representation depicted in Figures 1, 2,3,4, and 5 highlights a screenshot of the codes and phrases derived from transcribed auditor general reports within ATLAS.ti.

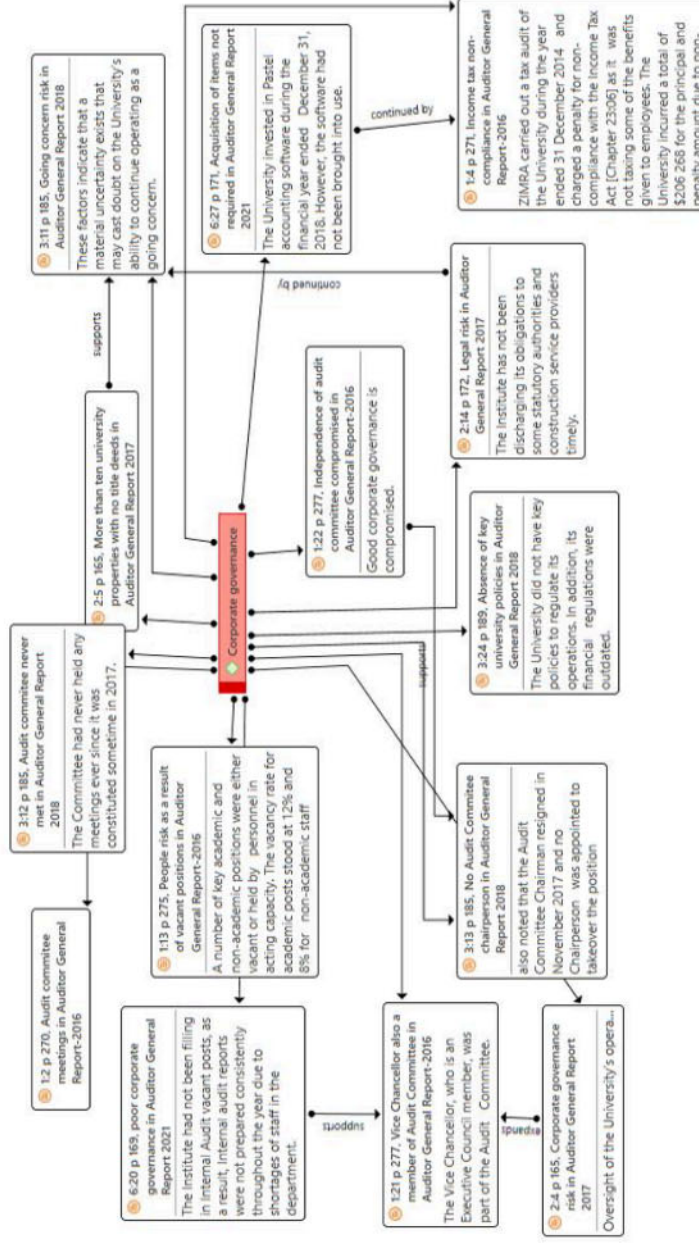


Figure 1: Performance of IAF in Terms of Corporate Governance

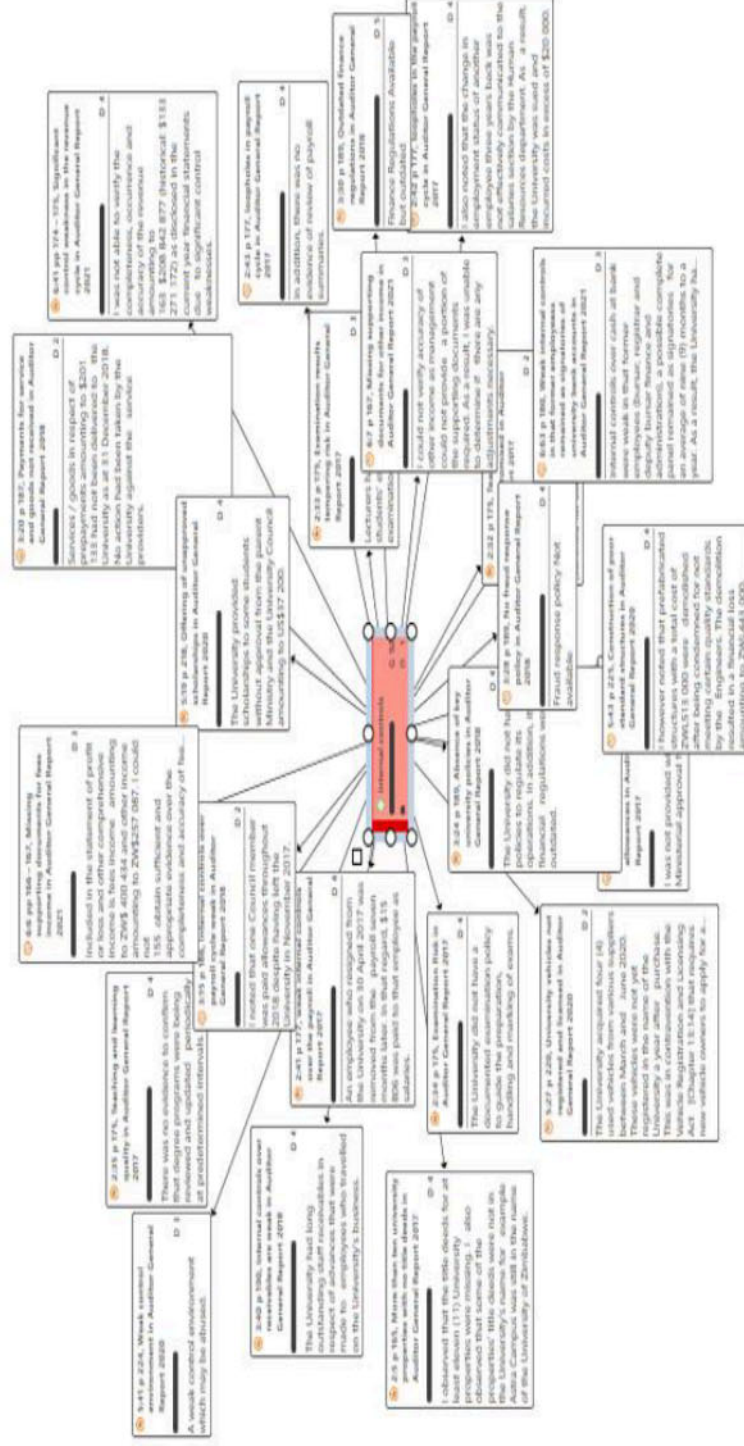


Figure 2: Performance of IAF in Terms of Internal Controls

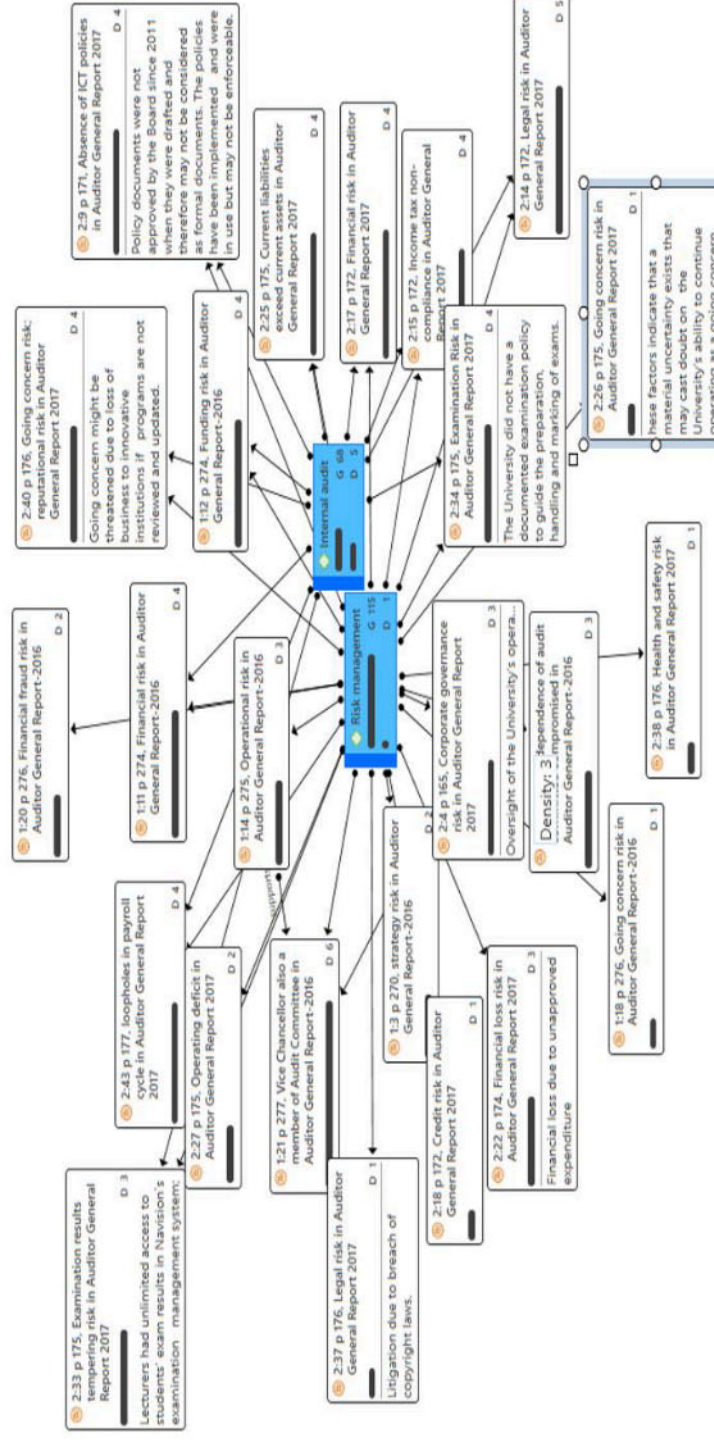


Figure 3: Performance of IAF in Terms of Risk Management

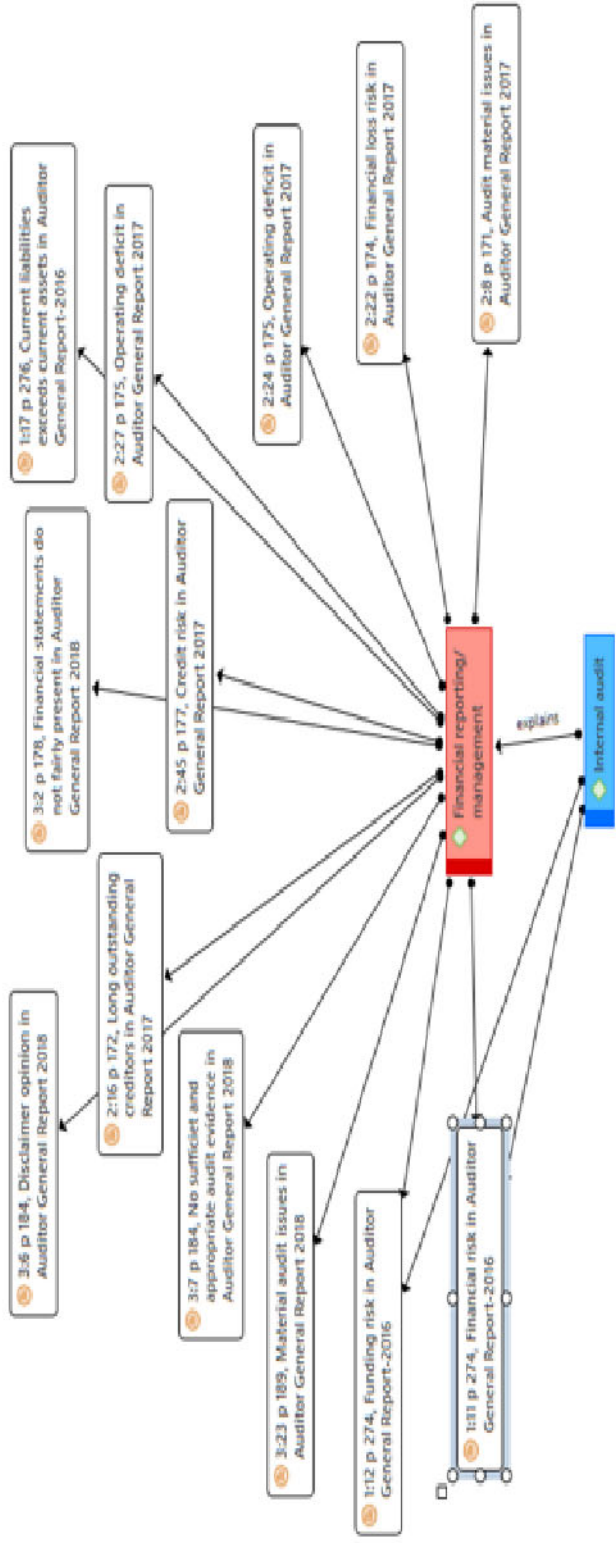


Figure 4. Performance of IAF in Terms of Financial Reporting or Management

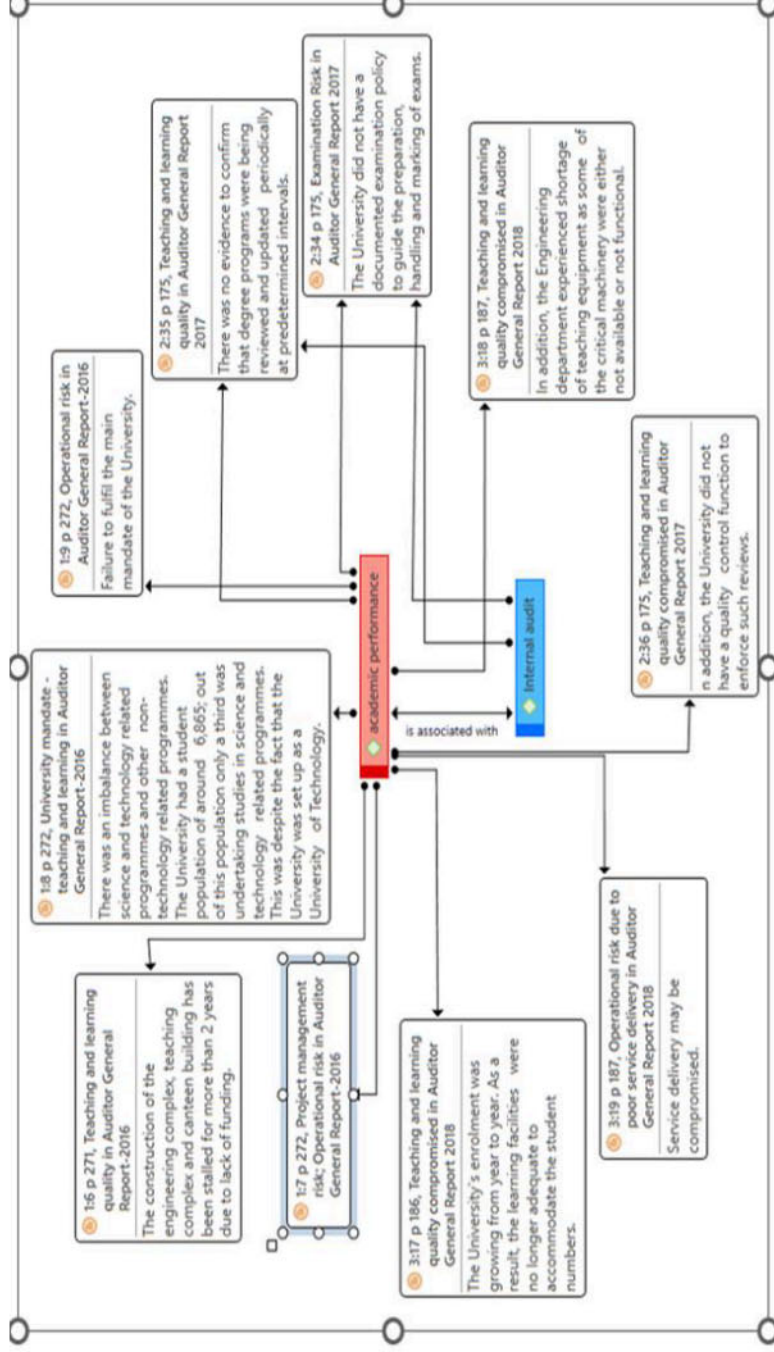


Figure 5: Performance of the IAF in Terms of Academic Performance

6 Discussion

6.1 The Value Added by IAFs in ZSUs

This study assessed the performance of the IAFs in terms of the value added to ZSUs. The quantitative analysis showed that the auditees were generally not sure about how the IAF added value to the ZSUs. This finding unearthed a lack of awareness and a knowledge gap generally amongst the IA stakeholders on how the IAF works and adds value to the university. This lack of knowledge about the IAF may indirectly affect the performance of the IA as minimum cooperation would be received by the stakeholders. Lack of information (information asymmetry) has been given as one of the agency problems. Adams (1994) posits that the presence of information asymmetry has a detrimental impact on the principals' capacity to adequately oversee the agents and ensure their alignment with the objectives of their principals. IA can be viewed through both the agency and stakeholder theory lenses as agents of the principals, or as stakeholders playing a monitoring role to ensure that management is serving the interests of the university stakeholders. Eisenhardt (1989) held that the information asymmetry problem can be alleviated if the principal invests in information.

The OAG reports found material irregularities for each university, with the OAG expressing concern about the failure of ZSUs to adequately manage the risks they faced. The reporting of constant material irregularities is an indication of the impact the IAF has on the state universities.

These findings are consistent with the perceptions of IA stakeholders in previous research who did not find IA to be beneficial to their organisations (Grzesiak, 2021; Mashayekhi et al., 2022).

Previous research has endeavoured to identify the primary factors that may contribute to the improvement of IA value creation processes (Bou-Raad, 2000; Mihret & Woldeyohannis, 2008; Barac, Plant & Motubatse, 2009; (Eulerich and Eulerich, 2020). It is important to acknowledge that research has brought attention to the fact that the lack of organisational independence within the IAF hinders the ability of internal auditors to effectively fulfil their role in providing assurance to the board and audit committee in discharging their corporate governance responsibilities (Christopher *et al.*, 2009; Chambers & Odar, 2015).

6.2 The independence of the IAFs in ZSUs

On one hand, the quantitative analysis of this study showed that independence and objectivity are key enablers of IAF effectiveness; on the other hand, the quantitative analysis showed that the members of the university community were not sure whether the IAF was independent or not. This has been corroborated by a multitude of previous studies that have found that adequate internal auditor independence is key for improved performance of the internal auditor (Njoroge, 2012); (Macrae and Van Gils, 2014); (Mokono and Nasieku, 2018a). The IIA (see (Mutchler and Chang, 2001) also confirmed that the IAF

cannot remain a viable aspect of the corporate governance system if it does not sustain internal auditor independence in the face of the changing internal audit environment. This analysis is in line with prior literature that showed that internal audit independence is significantly associated with internal audit performance (Cohen & Sayag, 2010; Arena & Azzone, 2009).

The results are in line with the previous research has identified organisational independence (Mihret & Yismaw, 2007) as a key enabler of IA effectiveness (Mutchler & Chang, 2001) and as a crucial factor needed for the IAFs to add value to organisations. There is a consensus among scholars that independence and objectivity are essential attributes for both internal and external auditors to uphold the credibility of audit services (Goodwin & Yeo, 2001; Gramling *et al.*, 2004). For internal auditors to efficiently carry out their assurance and consulting services, it is crucial to prioritise the preservation of organisational independence and individual objectivity (De Zwaan, Stewart & Subramaniam, 2011).

The results that the auditees disagree that the IAF has sufficient resources to enable it to work independently and that they also disagree that the IAF is an autonomous budget centre in the university are an indication of a lack of IA independence in ZSUs. This is in line with the findings by (Alzeban & Gwilliam, 2014; Bi, 2019; Christopher *et al.*, 2009; Goodwin & Yeo, 2001a; Razali *et al.*, 2016). Lack of resources has been a threat to independence threat (Razali, Said and Johari, 2016). Lack of budget autonomy is a threat to IA independence as revealed by previous research. According to Christopher *et al.* (2009), the approval of the IAF budget by top management posed a significant risk to its independence since it allowed management to potentially limit the scope and effectiveness of the IAF through the imposition of budgetary restrictions.

6.3 The Objectivity of Internal Auditors in ZSUs

Whilst respondents agreed that objectivity is a key enabler of IA effectiveness, overall, respondents' assessment of the objectivity of the internal audit function was interpreted as not sure, with a GWM of 3.55 and SD of 0.97. Independence, as defined by Stewart and Subramanian (2010), refers to the state of being free from circumstances that pose a risk to objectivity, or the perception of objectivity. Lack of knowledge on independence and objectivity by the auditees is an indication of lack of it as independence should be both in appearance and in fact (ISSAI, 2010).

6.4 The Management Support towards the IAFs in ZSUs

The auditees disagreed with the statement that management supports the IAFs by placing value on and communicating the role of the IAF to the university stakeholders. The absence of top management support threatens the performance of the IAFs in ZSUs. Chang *et al.* (2023) emphasizes that the performance of the IAF is achieved when top management displays active interest in it. (Alzeban and Gwilliam, 2014) in their research also concluded that management support affects the effectiveness of the IA.

6.5 The auditee committee role in IA in ZSUs

In general, the assessment of respondents on the audit committee's relationship with IAF was *not sure*, with a GWM of 3.05 and SD of 1.05.

Previous research has shown that the audit committee has a responsibility to safeguard and ensure the independence of the IAF (Goodwin and Yeo, 2001; Goodwin, 2003; Gramling, 2004; Christopher, Sarens and Leung, 2009). The responses show that the audit committees in the ZSUs are not playing their oversight role on the performance of the IAFs. The oversight role includes overseeing the employment and remuneration decisions of the CIA as well as making sure that the department is well resourced to enable it to function independently.

6.6 The Internal Audit Quality in ZSUs

In conclusion, respondents were not sure that the IA unit upholds the IAQ. Internal audit quality (IAQ) has been used as a measure of internal audit effectiveness by previous studies (Alzeban & Gwilliam, 2014; Sihombing, 2023). This study employs IAQ as one of the indicators of IAF performance as perceived by auditees. Whilst the respondents agreed that the internal auditors provide feedback after audit and follow up after recommendations, they were not sure whether the internal auditors were objective qualified personnel and whether the recommendations provided were useful.

6.7 The legal mandate of the IAFs in ZSUS

In conclusion, the respondents were not sure about the legal mandate of the internal audit unit and internal audit charter, with a GWM of 3.40 and SD of 1.05. The findings are in line with the findings by Zakaria (2006) who established that the IAFs in Malaysia state universities lacked effective legal mandate and hence independence. This also finding aligns with the research conducted by Al-Akra, Abdel-Qader, and Billah (2016), which showed that the independence of the IAFs was compromised in nations where the corporate governance legislation did not incorporate a clause to guarantee IA independence.

7 Conclusion

The research findings presented in this study are both unique and comprehensive in terms of internal audit research. This research serves as a foundation for further exploration, offering insight into the current state of the internal audit function within ZSUs. These findings are crucial for informing policymakers on the most effective strategies for state universities to contribute meaningfully to economic development in Zimbabwe. The respondents anonymously underscored the importance of independence and objectivity as the key drivers of internal audit performance in state universities. The findings show that the IAFs in ZSUs lack independence because they do not have the

necessary resources to function on their own. It has also been revealed that the IAF in Zimbabwe is not adequately supported by legislation. In addition, quantitative analysis indicated that the auditees generally lack a clear understanding of how the IAF adds value to ZSUs. This highlights a significant knowledge gap among internal audit stakeholders regarding the purpose and benefits of the IAF. Moreover, support of the IAF by the audit committee and the university management is not visible, possibly indicating the low value attached to the IAF by the university management in general. In terms of internal audit quality, the secondary data revealed that malpractices are occurring within ZSUs, a scenario that is not expected in the presence of effective IAFs that are providing high-quality services.

7.1 Practical and Theoretical Implications

To address the significant knowledge gap, practitioners should conduct awareness campaigns primarily through the Institute of Internal Auditors (IIA) Zimbabwe. These campaigns will inform and educate the university community about the internal audit function and its value, fostering collaboration among stakeholders to enhance organizational effectiveness. Additionally, universities should prominently display the internal audit charter on their websites and create a dedicated section for the Internal Audit Function (IAF). This transparency will enable stakeholders to hold the IAF accountable for maintaining independence and objectivity.

The study revealed that state university acts do not establish or support the internal audit function. Therefore, the government must revise these acts to provide legal authority and guidance for the IAF, ensuring its effectiveness and independence.

Despite existing for over a decade, the lack of awareness about the internal audit function indicates a low value attached to these departments. To strengthen the IAF, management and audit committees should emphasize its importance as a key mechanism of corporate governance within the university.

Furthermore, the Auditor General should proactively audit the internal audit function in state-owned universities, assessing their operational independence and efficiency as part of the annual public sector audits.

The study also faced limitations with theoretical implications. It focused exclusively on the Zimbabwean context and state universities, which limits the generalisability of its findings, presenting an opportunity for replication in other countries and organisations. Additionally, data collection primarily from auditees may introduce bias; future research should include all internal audit stakeholders to provide a comprehensive view of the IAF in Zimbabwe.

7.2 Recommendations for Future Research

This current study had state universities as its exclusive focus, and future research should expand participation to include IAFs working in both public and private sector organizations. Such an extension would serve to provide a broader, nationwide perspective on the status of IAFs. Moreover, a nationwide

exploration of the internal audit function in both public and private sector entities is crucial for improving corporate governance practices within these institutions. In deeper explorations, researchers will be allowed to provide useful insights that may inform policymakers in improving the overall effectiveness of internal audit functions.

Since this study is based on the primary collection of data from the auditee's perspective, future research needs to be derived based on data from other stakeholders involved in the audit process for a more balanced view.

A comparative study among IAFs of private and state universities, or across regions, would allow for an improved understanding of common challenges and best practices in internal auditing.

Finally, the study established that there existed a lacuna of knowledge regarding IAFs in state universities. This is attributed to the lack of research in academic institutions in Zimbabwe. The limited research in Zimbabwe provides an ideal opportunity to plug the gap. The quantitative design has been employed by this study, whereas qualitative methods of interviews and focus groups, for example, are envisaged to be helpful in further investigating internal audit practices.

8 Authors

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