

PUBLIC SECTOR ACCOUNTABILITY: AN ANALYSIS OF THE VETTING PROCESSES FOR HIRING MANAGERS AND HR PROFESSIONALS IN THE AGE OF CREDENTIAL FRAUD

A CASE STUDY OF THE CIVIL SERVICE AGENCY OF LIBERIA

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Abstract: The integrity of public sector human resource management is foundational to good governance and service delivery. In Liberia, a post-conflict state grappling with rebuilding institutional trust, the Civil Service Agency (CSA) is mandated to ensure a competent and ethical civil service. However, a critical question persists: who ensures that the very individuals responsible for hiring and vetting civil servants, are the HR professionals and hiring managers within the CSA themselves qualified and free from credential fraud? This article addresses this question through a qualitative case study of the CSA. Using a triangulation of data sources including analysis of Liberian civil service policies, key informant interviews with current and former CSA officials, and review of audit reports this study reveals significant vulnerabilities in the vetting of these 'guardians.' The findings indicate that while Liberia has made progress in establishing civil service reforms, the application of vetting standards to CSA staff involved in recruitment is often inconsistent, plagued by political interference, and undermined by a lack of capacity to verify credentials from often-disrupted local educational institutions. This paper proposes a context-specific framework for enhanced vetting; arguing that failure to rigorously vet the gatekeepers of the Liberian civil service perpetuates corruption, undermines public confidence, and jeopardizes broader national development goals.

Keywords: *Credential Fraud, Vetting Processes, Civil Service Reform, Human Resource Management, Liberia, Post-Conflict Governance, Public Sector Integrity.*

1. Introduction

The Liberian civil service has historically been characterized by patronage, nepotism, and a lack of professional standards (ICG, 2017). Following the conclusion of the civil wars in 2003, successive governments, with support from international partners, have embarked on ambitious civil service reform programs aimed at creating a professional, merit-based, and accountable bureaucracy (Republic of Liberia, 2016). Central to these reforms has been the strengthening of the Civil Service Agency (CSA), the central human resource management institution for the Government of Liberia. The CSA is tasked with establishing and enforcing recruitment standards, conducting background checks, and ensuring that all civil servants possess the requisite qualifications for their positions (CSA Act, 2019).

However, in an era where credential fraud including fake degrees, falsified work histories, and fraudulent professional certifications is a global phenomenon (Sexton, 2019), Liberia faces unique challenges. Decades of conflict destroyed educational infrastructure, disrupted record keeping, and created a proliferation of unaccredited institutions (World Bank, 2020). These conditions provide fertile ground for qualification misrepresentation. While the CSA has developed policies to vet prospective civil servants, a critical blind spot persists: the vetting of CSA's own personnel—

the HR professionals, recruitment officers, and hiring managers who serve as the gatekeepers of the entire system.

This study posits that a dangerous paradox exists within the Liberian civil service context. The 'guardians' of public sector integrity those charged with implementing vetting procedures for others may themselves be subjected to insufficient scrutiny. This oversight is particularly acute in a post-conflict environment where trust in institutions is fragile and the capacity for robust verification is limited (Brinkerhoff, 2008). A CSA hiring manager who has falsified their credentials may lack the expertise to assess candidates effectively, may be susceptible to bribery in exchange for overlooking fraud in others, or may actively perpetuate a culture where qualification misrepresentation is normalized.

While extensive literature exists on civil service reform in post-conflict states (e.g., Brinkerhoff & Goldsmith, 2005) and on the technical aspects of personnel vetting (e.g., Duthie, 2009), there is a conspicuous gap in research examining the specific vetting practices applied to those who conduct the vetting within these fragile institutional contexts. This study aims to fill that gap by addressing the following research questions:

1. What are the current policies and practices for vetting HR professionals and hiring managers within Liberia's Civil Service Agency?

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2. What are the key vulnerabilities and gaps in these vetting processes specific to the Liberian post-conflict context?
3. What are the potential consequences of inadequately vetting these key personnel for public trust and governance in Liberia?

This article will proceed by reviewing the relevant literature on civil service reform, credential fraud, and post-conflict institution building in Liberia. It will then detail the qualitative case study methodology employed. The findings section will present the key themes that emerged from the policy analysis and interviews. Finally, the discussion will synthesize these findings, propose a context-specific framework for enhanced vetting, and offer practical recommendations for the CSA and its development partners.

2. Literature Review

This review synthesizes existing scholarship on three key areas:

1. The evolution of civil service reform and vetting in Liberia,
2. The global challenge of credential fraud, and
3. The unique vulnerabilities of post-conflict states in ensuring institutional integrity.

2.1 Civil Service Reform and the Role of the CSA in Liberia

Liberia's civil service has long been plagued by politicization and a lack of professionalism. For decades, appointments were based on ethnic affiliation and loyalty to political patrons rather than merit (Liebenow, 1987). The civil wars (1989-2003) further devastated the state's capacity, leading to a complete breakdown of human resource management systems (ICG, 2017). Post-conflict reconstruction efforts, led by the Ellen Johnson Sirleaf administration and supported by international partners such as the World Bank, UNDP, and USAID, prioritized civil service reform as essential for peacebuilding and development (Republic of Liberia, 2008).

The Civil Service Agency was reconstituted and strengthened through successive legal frameworks, culminating in the Civil Service Agency Act of 2019. The CSA's mandate includes establishing position classifications, managing recruitment and selection processes, maintaining personnel records, and ensuring compliance with civil service standards across all ministries and agencies (CSA Act, 2019). A cornerstone of this reform has been the introduction of competitive examinations, standardized application procedures, and, theoretically, background verification for new hires (Republic of Liberia, 2016).

However, scholars have noted that reform implementation in Liberia has been uneven. Antwi and Phillips (2020) argue that while the legal framework is relatively robust, institutional capacity remains weak, and political interference continues to undermine merit-based recruitment, particularly for senior positions. The CSA itself is not immune to these pressures, as it must navigate complex political dynamics while attempting to professionalize the service.

2.2 The Global Landscape of Credential Fraud

Credential fraud, encompassing everything from degree inflation to complete fabrication of qualifications, is a persistent global problem (Sexton, 2019). In developed economies, sophisticated

diploma mills and online fake degree providers have made it increasingly easy for individuals to present fraudulent credentials (Ezell & Bear, 2021). Motivations include intense competition for jobs, perceived pressure to meet educational requirements, and a rationalization that deception is necessary for career advancement (Henle, Duxbury, & McEvoy, 2020).

In developing and post-conflict contexts, the problem is compounded. Disrupted educational systems, loss of institutional records during conflict, and the proliferation of unaccredited institutions create a "verification gap" that fraudsters can exploit (World Bank, 2020). In Liberia, many universities and high schools lost records during the war, making it difficult for legitimate graduates to provide transcripts and equally difficult for employers to verify claims. This environment of uncertainty makes the role of honest, competent gatekeepers even more critical.

2.3 Post-Conflict Vetting and the "Guardian" Problem

Vetting in post-conflict settings has typically been examined through the lens of human rights and transitional justice screening out individuals responsible for human rights abuses from security forces and public institutions (Duthie, 2009). However, the more mundane but equally corrosive problem of credential fraud among public sector administrators has received far less attention.

The concept of "institutional trust" is central to understanding the importance of this issue. As Fukuyama (2015) argues, effective public administration depends on shared norms of professional behavior and trust that officials will perform their duties competently and honestly. When the gatekeepers of the civil service the HR professionals and hiring managers are themselves fraudulent, it erodes the very foundation of institutional trust.

Brinkerhoff and Goldsmith (2005) note that post-conflict states face a "capacity paradox": they need skilled personnel to build institutions, but those with skills may be tainted by association with past regimes or may have obtained qualifications through dubious means. This creates pressure to relax standards to fill positions quickly, a pressure that falls heaviest on the institutions responsible for recruitment. If the CSA compromises on the vetting of its own staff, it signals to the entire civil service that integrity standards are negotiable.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative single-case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of the vetting processes for HR professionals and hiring managers within Liberia's Civil Service Agency. A case study approach was deemed appropriate to explore the contextual nuances of a post-conflict institutional environment (Yin, 2018).

3.1 Research Design

A triangulated approach was utilized, combining document analysis, semi-structured key informant interviews, and review of secondary data sources. This triangulation was intended to enhance validity and provide a comprehensive picture of both formal policies and informal practices.

3.2 Data Collection

• **Document Analysis:** A purposive sample of Liberian civil service policy documents was collected and analyzed. These included:

- The Civil Service Agency Act of 2019
- The National Civil Service Policy and Operational Standards (2016)
- CSA Recruitment and Selection Guidelines (2020)
- CSA Human Resource Manual (2021)
- Reports from the General Auditing Commission (GAC) related to CSA personnel practices (2018-2023)
- World Bank and UNDP project reports on civil service reform in Liberia (2015-2023)
- **Semi-Structured Interviews:** Fifteen in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling strategies, leveraging professional networks and ensuring a range of perspectives. The sample included:
 - Current and former senior officials of the CSA (e.g., Director General, Deputy Directors, Department Directors) (n=5)
 - HR officers and recruitment specialists currently employed by the CSA (n=4)
 - Officials from the Ministry of Finance and Development Planning involved in public sector workforce planning (n=2)
 - Representatives of international development partners involved in civil service reform (e.g., World Bank, UNDP) (n=2)
 - Civil society advocates focused on governance and anti-corruption (n=2)

Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were conducted in Monrovia, Liberia, during a field research visit in Month, Year with follow-up via secure video conferencing.

The interview protocol explored themes such as: the formal vetting process for all civil servants, any specific variations in vetting CSA personnel, perceptions of risk regarding credential fraud, challenges in verifying qualifications in the Liberian context, and observations of political or other pressures on hiring decisions. All participants were assured of confidentiality, and interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

3.3 Data Analysis

Data from both documents and interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021). This involved familiarization, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and producing the final report. Coding was conducted iteratively, with themes being refined as analysis progressed. NVivo qualitative data analysis software was used to manage and code the data.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained from the researcher's home institution. Permission to conduct research was also, sought from relevant Liberian authorities. All participants were provided with an information sheet explaining the purpose of the study and signed a consent form. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality given the sensitive nature of the topic within Liberia's relatively small professional community, all identifying

information was removed or carefully pseudonymized, and job titles are presented in general categories.

4. Results

The thematic analysis revealed four primary themes regarding the vetting of HR professionals and hiring managers within the CSA: (1) The Gap Between Policy and Practice, (2) The Verification Nightmare, (3) The Politics of Appointment, and (4) Consequences for Institutional Integrity.

4.1 The Gap Between Policy and Practice

Document analysis revealed that Liberia's civil service policies, on paper, establish a comprehensive vetting framework. The CSA Recruitment and Selection Guidelines (2020) mandate that all candidates for civil service positions must submit authenticated copies of academic credentials, provide verifiable professional references, and undergo a background check conducted by CSA's own HR directorate. The policy does not exempt any category of staff from these requirements.

However, interview data revealed a significant implementation gap, particularly concerning CSA's own personnel. A former senior CSA official explained:

"The policy is there. It is written beautifully. However, when it comes to hiring our own people at the CSA, the process is often rushed. There is pressure to get someone in the seat, especially for HR roles where we are understaffed. We sometimes waive the full verification because we assume that someone applying to work in HR must be honest. It's a dangerous assumption." (Participant 2, former CSA official)

A current HR officer within the CSA echoed this sentiment, describing the irony of his or her own hiring:

"When I was hired, I don't think anyone actually called my university. They saw my degree, I had the certificate in my hand, and that was enough. Now I spend my days calling universities to verify degrees for people applying to other ministries. It never occurred to me until now that no one did that for me." (Participant 6, CSA HR Officer)

This suggests a "standardized fallacy" similar to that found in developed contexts, but exacerbated by the resource constraints and pressures of a post-conflict environment.

4.2 The Verification Nightmare

A theme unique to the Liberian context was the profound challenge of credential verification. Participants consistently described the difficulty of authenticating academic qualifications due to the destruction of records during the war, the closure of many institutions, and the proliferation of unaccredited "diploma mills" operating both within Liberia and online.

A CSA recruitment specialist described the practical challenges:

"If someone says they graduated from the University of Liberia in 1995, during the war, good luck getting a transcript. The records may not exist. If they say, they went to a high school in Lofa County that was destroyed, same problem. In addition, there are so many new 'universities' that have sprung up—some are legitimate, some are just someone with a printer. We do not have a central database of accredited institutions. We don't have the capacity to

investigate all of them." (Participant 7, CSA Recruitment Specialist)

A representative of an international development partner acknowledged this gap:

"We've spent millions supporting CSA to build systems. Nevertheless, we have not solved the fundamental problem of how you verify a degree from a country where the educational infrastructure was decimated. The CSA is expected to vet others, but they can't even fully vet their own people because the tools don't exist." (Participant 12, Development Partner)

This verification gap creates a perverse incentive: individuals with fraudulent credentials from unverifiable sources may be drawn to apply to the CSA, knowing that their qualifications are unlikely to be rigorously checked.

4.3 The Politics of Appointment

Perhaps the most significant vulnerability identified was political interference in appointments to the CSA itself. While the CSA is mandated to be an independent, professional agency, participants described persistent efforts by political actors to influence hiring decisions, including for senior HR positions.

A civil society advocate focused on anti-corruption explained:

"The CSA is supposed to be the guardian of merit, but who guards the CSA? The President appoints the Director General. The Director General appoints deputies. These are political appointments. Then these political appointees are responsible for hiring the HR officers who will vet the entire civil service. If the top is political, the integrity of the whole system is compromised." (Participant 14, Civil Society Advocate)

A current CSA official, speaking on condition of strict anonymity, provided a concrete example:

"I know of a case where a senior position in our HR directorate was filled by someone with questionable qualifications. They had a degree from a small private college that no one had heard of. However, they had political connections. They were brought in, and suddenly they were overseeing recruitment for the whole agency. No one asked too many questions about their degree." (Participant 5, CSA Official)

This political dimension adds a layer of complexity absent in purely private sector analyses. The guardians are not merely subject to benign neglect but are actively placed in positions of authority based on criteria other than merit.

4.4 Consequences for Institutional Integrity

Participants described tangible consequences of inadequately vetting CSA personnel. These included the hiring of incompetent staff, the perpetuation of corrupt practices, and a broader erosion of public confidence in the civil service.

A former CSA official reflected on the impact:

"When people see that the people in charge of hiring don't have their own credentials in order, it sends a message. It says, 'We don't really care about qualifications here. It's about who you know.' That message filters down to every ministry, every agency. It undermines every reform effort." (Participant 3, former CSA official)

An HR officer described operational challenges:

"We had a manager who was supposed to train us on proper recruitment procedures. It turned out later that their own degree was fake. How can someone who lied about their education teach others about integrity? It was demoralizing for the whole team." (Participant 8, CSA HR Officer)

These accounts suggest that the failure to vet the guardians has cascading effects, legitimizing fraud throughout the system and undermining the very purpose of civil service reform.

5. Discussion

This study set out to investigate the vetting processes for HR professionals and hiring managers within Liberia's Civil Service Agency. The findings confirm the existence of a significant "vetting paradox" within this post-conflict context, but reveal that the Liberian case has distinct dimensions that go beyond the general findings in the literature.

5.1 Interpreting the Findings in the Liberian Context

The gap between policy and practice identified in this study echoes findings from developed contexts (Gulbrandsen, 2020) but is amplified by the resource constraints and institutional weaknesses characteristic of post-conflict states. Liberia has invested heavily in developing robust civil service policies with international support (Republic of Liberia, 2016). However, the capacity to implement these policies consistently—particularly for the institution's own personnel—remains elusive. This aligns with broader critiques of post-conflict statebuilding that emphasize the gap between formal institutional design and actual institutional practice (Paris, 2004).

The "verification nightmare" identified in this study represents a fundamental structural challenge. As the World Bank (2020) notes, educational record-keeping in Liberia remains fragmented and unreliable. Without a centralized, digitized system for credential verification maintained by an accredited body, the CSA is left attempting the impossible. This creates a situation where fraud is not necessarily deterred, and where honest applicants may be disadvantaged if they cannot produce records destroyed during the war.

Most significantly, the political interference in CSA appointments reveals the limits of technocratic reform in a context where patronage remains deeply embedded. As Antwi and Phillips (2020) argue, civil service reform in Liberia has been hampered by the persistence of "neo-patrimonial" practices, where political loyalty trumps merit. When political appointees with questionable credentials occupy key positions within the CSA, they become what North, Wallis, and Weingast (2009) would call "limited access order" gatekeepers—individuals who control access to opportunities and resources based on personal and political connections rather than formal rules. This fundamentally undermines the CSA's ability to function as a guardian of merit-based recruitment.

5.2 A Proposed Framework for Enhanced Vetting of Guardians in the Liberian Context

Based on these findings, this paper proposes a multi-layered framework tailored to the specific challenges of the Liberian context.

1. Establish a Centralized Credential Verification Unit within CSA: This unit should be specifically tasked with verifying academic and professional qualifications for all senior CSA appointments and, eventually, for all civil service hires. Crucially, this unit must be insulated from political interference, potentially through a fixed-term appointment for its head and reporting jointly to the CSA Director General and the General Auditing Commission.
2. Develop a National Accredited Institutions Database: In partnership with the Ministry of Education and the National Commission on Higher Education, the CSA should lead an effort to compile and maintain a publicly accessible database of all accredited primary, secondary, and tertiary institutions in Liberia. This would provide a foundational tool for verification. For institutions destroyed during the war, clear protocols for alternative verification (e.g., affidavits from former administrators, review of professional portfolios) should be established.
3. Mandate Enhanced Vetting for All CSA Recruitment Personnel: Any individual involved in recruitment, selection, or background checking for the civil service should themselves be subject to the highest level of vetting, including primary-source verification of all credentials and enhanced reference checks conducted by an independent panel that includes external members (e.g., from the Governance Commission or a respected civil society organization).
4. Legislate Independence for Senior CSA Appointments: To mitigate political interference, consideration should be given to amending the CSA Act to require that senior appointments (Director General and Deputies) be subject to parliamentary confirmation, with clear qualification requirements publicly vetted. While not removing politics entirely, this would introduce a layer of public scrutiny.
5. Leverage International Support for Verification Capacity: Liberia should continue to work with international partners to build verification capacity, including access to international databases of accredited institutions and training for CSA staff in forensic investigation of fraudulent documents.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

This study has limitations. As a single case study, its findings are context-specific and may not be directly generalizable to other post-conflict states, although they may offer valuable comparative insights. The reliance on interviews carries the risk of social desirability bias and recall error. The sensitivity of the topic may have led some participants to self-censor. Triangulation with document analysis and audit reports was intended to mitigate this.

Future research should extend this inquiry to other post-conflict states in West Africa (e.g., Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire) to compare vetting practices for public sector HR professionals. Quantitative research could attempt to measure the prevalence of credential fraud among public sector gatekeepers, although such research faces significant methodological challenges. Finally, longitudinal research could track the impact of enhanced vetting interventions on institutional trust and service delivery outcomes.

6. Conclusion

The question "Who guards the guardians?" takes on urgent practical significance in post-conflict states like Liberia, where institutions are fragile, trust is scarce, and the stakes of governance failure are high. This study has demonstrated that while Liberia's Civil Service Agency has made significant progress in establishing formal vetting policies, the application of these policies to the Agency's own HR professionals and hiring managers is inconsistent, undermined by verification challenges, and compromised by political interference.

The failure to rigorously vet the gatekeepers of the civil service is not a minor administrative oversight. It is a fundamental threat to the entire project of building a professional, merit-based public service. When those charged with upholding integrity are themselves products of a compromised system, they cannot effectively guard against fraud in others. Their presence legitimizes corruption, demoralizes honest officials, and erodes the public confidence essential for effective governance.

For Liberia to move from post-conflict recovery to sustainable development, it must confront this paradox directly. The enhanced vetting framework proposed in this study offers a pathway toward greater accountability. However, technical solutions alone are insufficient. Ultimately, guarding the guardians requires a sustained political commitment to the principle that those who hold the gates of public service must themselves be held to the highest standard of integrity. Only then can Liberia's civil service truly become the guardian of the nation's development.

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