

# Equity at a Crossroads: Rethinking Private Provision in Ghana's Higher Education

WAHEN, CGHE and SKOPE

*Access and Geopolitics: Next Steps in Tackling the Equity Crisis in  
Global Higher Education*

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# Ghana's Higher Education Landscape



## Structural Imbalance

Ghana's tertiary education sector comprises **16 accredited Public Universities** and **91 private higher education** institutions out of **which 24 are chartered private ones**, yet 89% of all tertiary students are enrolled in public institutions.



## Declining Private Sector

The Gross Enrolment Ratio remains below 21.99%, well under the global average of 40.35%.

The private sector, once responsible for over 20% of enrolments in 2012, has dropped to just 11%.



## Complementary Strengths

While public universities struggle with delayed funding and overcrowding, private universities offer uninterrupted calendars, smaller class sizes, and location-specific access, particularly for women, working adults, and rural learners.

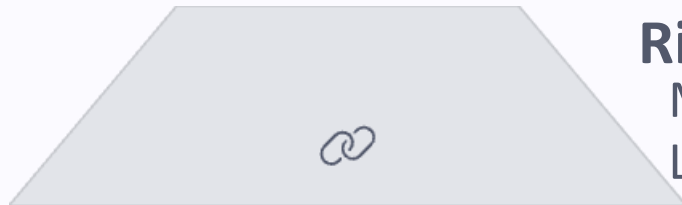
The paradox is stark: the very institutions best positioned to deliver differentiated, equitable access are systematically under-supported. This signals a policy architecture that not only overlooks the private sector but actively sidelines its contributions.

# Structural Constraints Facing Private Universities



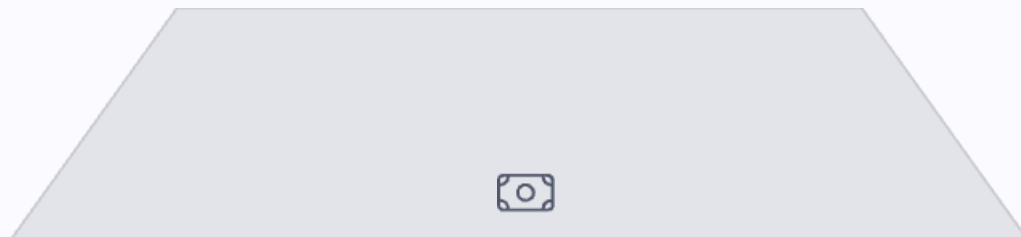
## Charter and Accreditation Delays

Prolonged processes for obtaining independent degree-awarding status



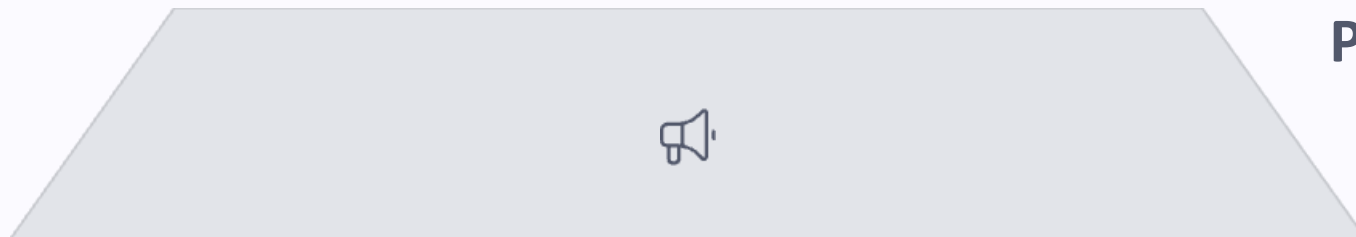
## Rigid Affiliation Requirements

Mandatory affiliation with public universities limiting autonomy and this is a legal requirement. Prior to Act 1023 < 10 years & Post Act 1023 < 4 years



## Funding Constraints

Limited access to funding and financial support coupled with capital intensive demands



## Policy-Induced Distortions

Public perception shifts due to government policy about free tuition

Together, these constraints construct an environment where innovation is penalized, diversity is suppressed, and survival depends on mimicry and compliance rather than excellence and fit.

# Research Objectives and Questions

## Research Questions

The central question:

**What are the systemic barriers affecting the growth of Private Higher Education Institutions in Ghana?**

## Purpose

Explore enrolment patterns, faculty trends, policy impacts, regulatory structures, and potential repositioning strategies for private higher education.

## Objectives

1. Ascertain changes in student enrollment rates (2019-2024)
2. Examine trends in faculty attrition and institutional staffing
3. Evaluate effects of recent policies on private university competitiveness
4. Analyze regulatory frameworks affecting institutional autonomy
5. Propose reforms to strengthen private universities' positioning

# Theoretical Framework

## Public Good Theory

Asserts that higher education should be seen as a collective social investment providing benefits beyond the graduate—such as national innovation, civic participation, and social mobility.

## Coercive Isomorphism

Explains how institutions under heavy regulation tend to mimic dominant models to gain legitimacy. For Ghana's private universities, this means reshaping themselves to resemble public institutions.

This captures what I describe as the Assimilative Conformity Syndrome, where PrHEIs sacrifice differentiation to secure approval.

## Combined Insight

Together, these frameworks reveal that public-private differentiation in Ghanaian higher education is not organic—it is structured, shaped, and often distorted by state priorities, regulatory enforcement, and public narratives.

# Research Methodology



## Qualitative Design with Descriptive Statistics

Mixed approach allowing for interpretive depth and analytical clarity



## Multiple Data Sources

Institutional reports, key informant interviews, surveys and policy reviews



## Purposive Sampling

Selection based on accreditation status, geographic geographic diversity, ownership model, and academic academic focus

The study employed semi-structured interviews with vice-chancellors, founders, and executive directors from seven selected private higher education institutions. Each session lasted 25-30 minutes and was conducted in person or virtually. Institutional identities were anonymized to maintain confidentiality while preserving context.

# Findings Overview

## Enrollment Disparities

Significant drop in enrollment and increasing dependence on niche demographics  
20% in 2012 to 11% in 2023

## Legitimacy Crisis

Undermined by dominant public narratives

## Faculty Attrition/Structural Brain Drain

Talent drain from PrHEIs to public sector or international academia

## Regulatory Mimicry

Innovation sacrificed for perceived conformity

## Funding Exclusion

Exclusion from core state funding mechanisms



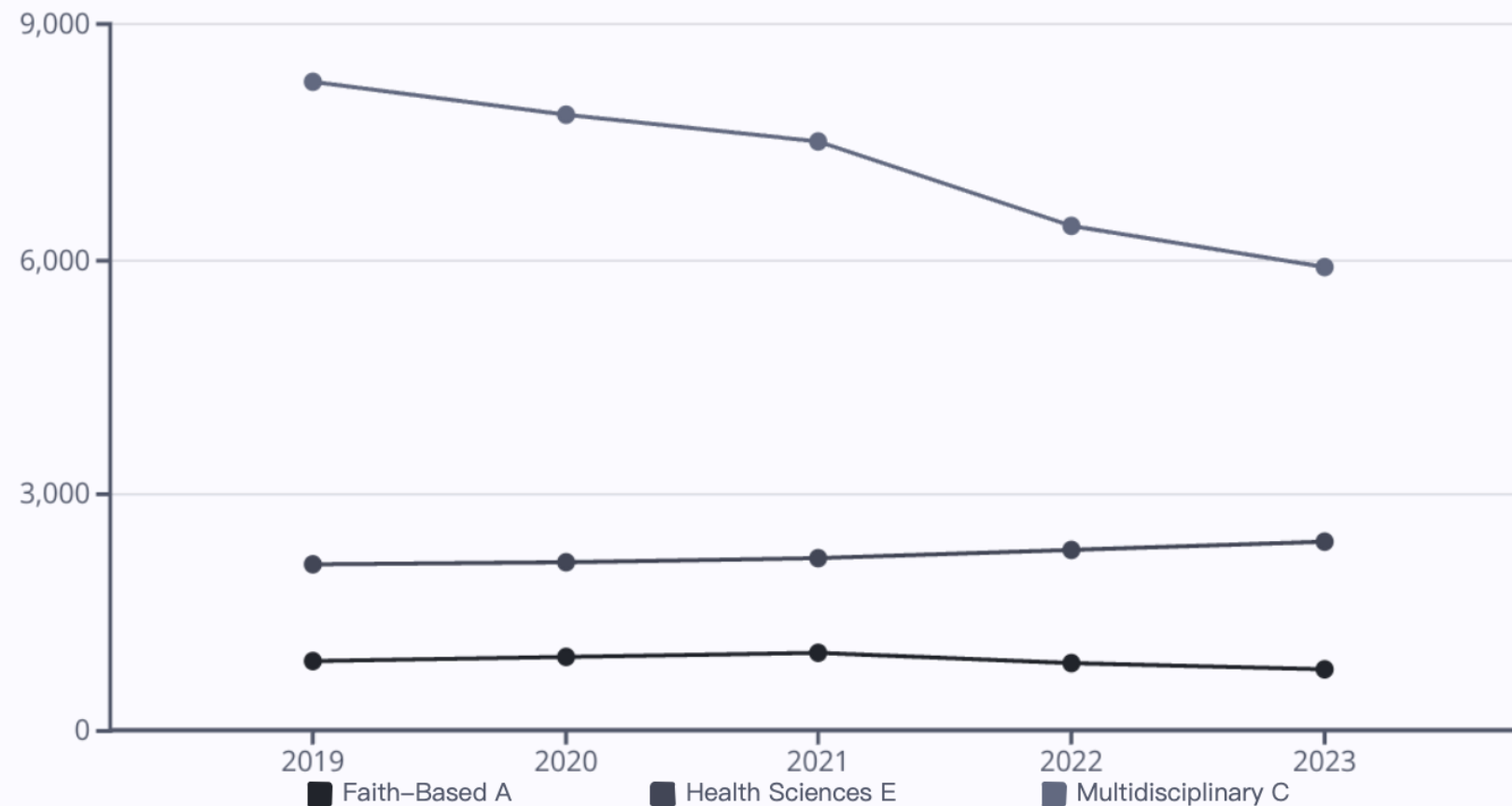
These five interconnected findings illustrate what I conceptualize as the Equity Displacement Effect—a situation where policies meant to expand access unintentionally or indirectly crowd out institutions that could otherwise improve educational equity.

Each finding illuminates a distinct but overlapping structural barrier undermining the role of Private Higher Education Institutions in Ghana.



# Finding 1 – Enrollment Trends

Enrolment Trends (2019–2024)



The data reveals three distinct patterns: **Undergraduate-focused multidisciplinary** institutions experienced the steepest declines (up to 28% over five years), **faith-based universities** reported more modest shifts, while **health-focused institutions** displayed steady or growing enrollment.

Public universities have increasingly relied on **fee-paying** streams to accommodate **excess demand, demand**, creating a paradox where **private universities are outcompeted** by public institutions charging institutions charging comparable fees but with greater perceived legitimacy.



# Finding 2 – Faculty Composition and Attrition

## High Turnover Rates

Faculty attrition reached as high as 22% in 2023 at some institutions, particularly among early and mid-career academics.

## Remuneration Gap

Senior lecturers in public universities earn approximately GHC 9,000 monthly, while equivalent roles in private institutions average around GHC 5,000.

## Career Advancement Limitations

Affiliated institutions cannot promote faculty beyond certain academic ranks, creating frustration among qualified academics.

## Coping Mechanisms

Institutions increasingly rely on adjunct scholars and contract-based hiring of industry professionals to maintain academic quality.

# Finding 4

## Institutional Autonomy and Regulatory Influence



### Constrained Independence

Private universities operate under multiple external controls that dilute their strategic independence despite legal autonomy.



### "Academic Colonisation"

Public mentors impose curriculum design, approve faculty qualifications, and moderate final assessments, limiting institutional innovation.



### Dual Reporting Obligations

Institutions submit compliance reports to both GTEC and their mentoring public university, creating redundant bureaucracy.



### Unclear Charter Transition

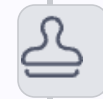
Despite meeting eligibility requirements, many institutions report no clear feedback or timelines for charter approval.

# Insight into the Program Accreditation Process



## Internal Quality Assurance

Programmes must first pass through institutional vetting processes



## Mentor University Endorsement

Affiliated institutions require approval from their public university mentor



## External GTEC Review

Final validation by Ghana Tertiary Education Commission



## Extended Waiting Period

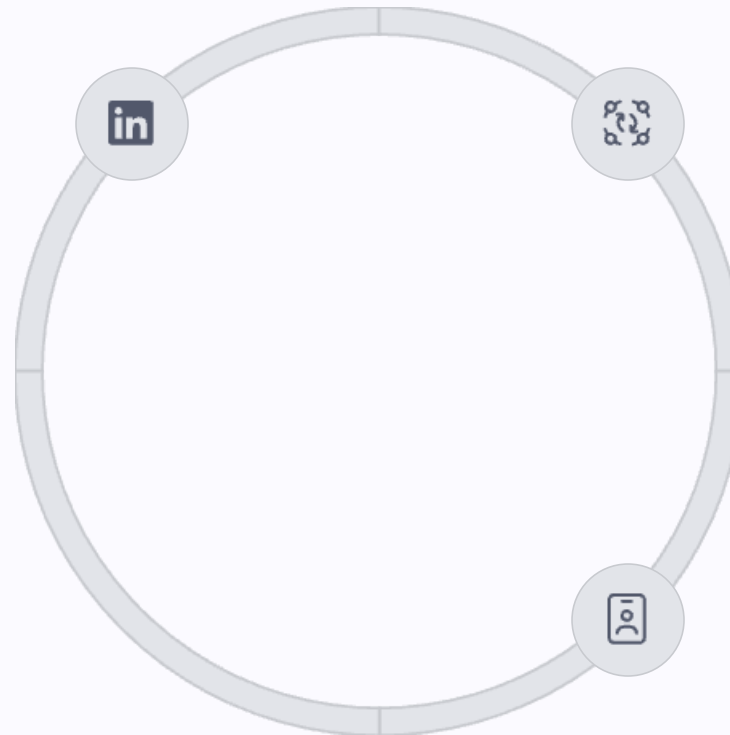
Process often results in delays of up to 18 months for new programmes

This sequential validation often discourages curricular agility and pedagogical experimentation. Even minor curriculum adjustments frequently require full documentation resubmission, creating significant administrative burden.

# Assimilative Conformity Syndrome

## Strategic Affiliation Dependence

Institutions maintain affiliation with well-known public universities to attract students seeking prestigious credentials. Private Universities' Funders Association PUFA has petition government to make affiliation voluntary against the Mandatory Charter transition of 4 years which elapsed in December 2024



## Recursive Regulatory Assimilation

Private institutions reshape internal structures to mirror public universities as a pre-emptive strategy for approval

## Policy-Induced Identity Suppression

Institutions surrender distinctiveness in favor of compliance with expected standards from public university archetypes

# Finding 5 – Equity Displacement Effect



## **Redirected Access**

State-led financial interventions intended to promote equity ultimately redirect disadvantaged students away from private institutions that might better serve their needs.



## **Overcrowded Public Institutions**

Students are compelled to pursue spaces in congested public universities simply because of funding availability, despite capacity constraints



## **Underutilized Private Capacity**

Private institutions with flexible learning models and smaller class sizes remain underutilized due to financial barriers and policy distortions.



# Structural Underfinancing

0%

## Public Infrastructure Funding

Percentage of GETFund allocations available to private private universities

2/7

## SLTF Access

Only two of seven studied institutions had functional Students' Loan Trust Fund liaison offices

22%

## Faculty Attrition

Peak faculty departure rate in in arts and social sciences at one one chartered institution in 2023 2023

Private institutions rely almost exclusively on tuition revenue to cover all costs, including research, research, salaries, and infrastructure. This tuition-dependent financing model has become increasingly unsustainable, especially in light of declining enrollment and competition from subsidized subsidized public universities.

# Conclusion and Recommendations

This study does not frame private universities as perfect institutions—but it insists they are essential. The empirical evidence shows that PrHEIs are structurally sidelined by a policy and regulatory ecosystem that was not designed to accommodate their role in expanding access, diversifying delivery, and responding to contextual learning needs.

If left unaddressed, the current trajectory risks the extinction of a valuable sector. But if tackled holistically, Ghana can unlock the full potential of its private universities to complement—not compete with—the public sector.

## **Reframe Private Higher Education as a Public Good**

Adopt a dual-track model with flexible, mission-sensitive benchmarks focused on outcomes, employability, and innovation for private institutions

## **Develop Differentiated Accreditation Pathways**

Reconceptualize private provision not as a commercial alternative but as a strategic pillar for achieving national equity and inclusion goals.



# Conclusions and Recommendations -2

## **Expand Student-Centric Financing**

Ensure equitable access to funding through embedded SLTF liaison desks, co-funded bursaries, and merit-based competitive funding schemes.

## **Establish National Graduate Employability Index**

Create a publicly accessible database to hold all institutions accountable and debunk stereotypes about private university graduates.

## **Formulate a Higher Education Equity Compact**

Develop agreements where private universities commit to affordability and access targets in exchange for tangible benefits like tax incentives and research grants.

## **Clarify Charter Process**

Clarify the Charter process and provide sensitization and support for institutions rely on strategic affiliation  
affiliation dependence to attract students for financial sustainability within the next two years. and improve advocacy  
improve advocacy against negative perceptions of private institutions

THANK YOU! 😊