



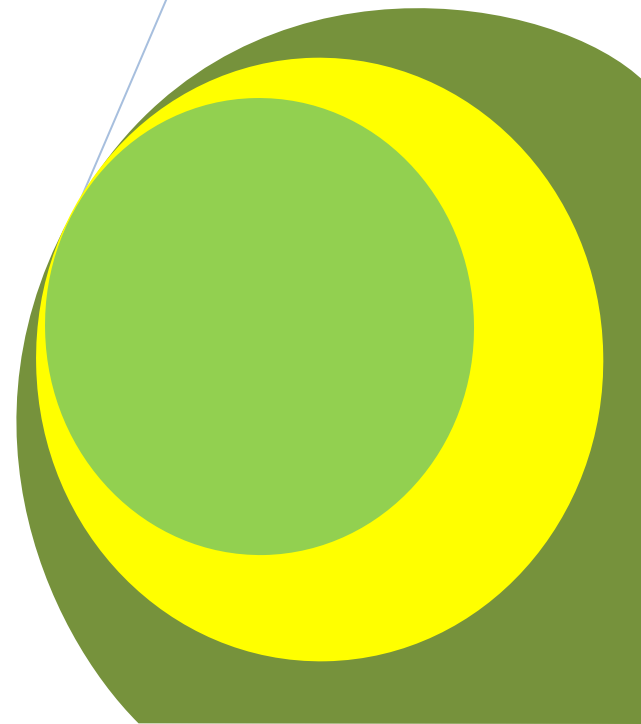
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Challenges Facing University Education in Zimbabwe

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Research Article

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to find out the challenges faced by universities in Zimbabwe. Data were collected through the use of an open-ended questionnaire, from a sample of 20 academics in three universities in Zimbabwe. All the respondents included Deans of faculties, Chairpersons and Programme Leaders. The data were qualitatively analyzed. The findings revealed that universities were facing challenges in research and publication, quality assurance, loss of qualified and experienced staff, high student dropouts, and lack of funding. The recommendations are that industry and commerce need to assist universities in funding and collaborative research. Public and private partnerships could assist in quality assurance in their operations.

Keywords: Challenges, University Education.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education in Zimbabwe faces challenges which include dropouts, high tuition and accommodation fees, under funding, staff shortages and economic decline, foreign currency shortages, hyper- inflation, and large public debt. The government's budgetary allocation to the higher education has been in drastic decline (Chetsanga 2000). In a developing country like Zimbabwe the challenges include reduced state funding, brain drain, quality assurance. The challenges highlighted above have impacted on the functions and operations of universities in Zimbabwe. This study sought to find out the challenges currently facing university education in Zimbabwe.

LITERATURE REVIEW**Expansion of University Education in Zimbabwe**

At independence, Zimbabwe had only one state university and today there are 13 universities and eight are state universities and four are church run universities. The expansion of the university system in Zimbabwe was mainly in response to ripple effects created by massive expansion of primary and secondary education soon after the attainment of political independence in 1980. Similar expansion has been experienced with Teachers' Colleges, Polytechnic Colleges and Vocational Training Centres. Not only did the number of applicants overwhelm higher education but also the existing facilities were overstretched. While in 1980 only 2 240 students attended university today over 45 000 are enrolled for university education (Kariwo 2007, Nherera, 2000).

According to Chombo (2000) approximately 300 000 students graduating from secondary education only 18% get admitted into higher education institutions. This means over 80% of potentially productive persons are left with no opportunity for training and acquiring employable skills. The challenge for higher education is the ability to cope with the ever-increasing numbers of those potential students not absorbed in higher education institutions.

Quality Issues

The government of Zimbabwe through the Council for Higher Education Act (ZIMCHE) (2006) has set up a body to monitor quality in institutions of higher learning. Many universities do not have formal quality promotion policies or structures to meet the audit requirements and are in the process of reviewing their practices. Most universities in Zimbabwe use peer review as the main mechanism for quality assurance and use external reviewers or examiners. The senate is the main quality assurance body. The Senate is the main custodian of academic quality. According to the Human Rights Report (2003) Zimbabwe is experiencing increasing poverty as its economy continues to decline .

Zimbabwe has a population of 12 million people but the GDP of US\$8.2 billion and as such it can be considered, as one of the poorest countries in the world yet it has one of the highest literate rates of over 90%. Higher education institutions face the challenge of eradicating poverty by coming up with alternative strategies to overcome the ever-dwindling economy and consequently arrest underdevelopment.

METHODOLOGY

The descriptive survey design was used. This design was preferred because the researcher can give a detailed explanation of the views of the participants.

Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to select the subjects to participate in this research. This was preferred because the participants could provide rich information and were willing to provide information on challenges faced by universities. The participants included 3 Deans of Faculties, 8 Chairpersons and 9 Programme Leaders participated in this research. The survey method was seen to be appropriate since it “gathers data from a relatively large number of cases at a particular time. The idea was to get individual input which was then abstracted and generalized to show generally, what students get and expect from careers days.

Data Collection

An open-ended questionnaire was used to collect data. The questionnaire was preferred because it enabled academics to give their views on challenges facing universities in Zimbabwe, and open-ended questions gave participants the opportunity express diverse views on challenges facing universities in Zimbabwe. The data were gathered from University of Zimbabwe, Bindura university of Science Education and the Zimbabwe Open University.

Research Questions

The research answered the following questions:

- What are the challenges related to teaching and learning, research and publication?
- What are the challenges related to quality assurance, access and financing of university education?

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

University Teaching and Learning

In relation to teaching and learning the following challenges were identified:

- Lack of access to computer hardware and software in relation to information communication technologies (ICT) assisted teaching and learning.
- Shortage of skilled and experienced teaching staff.
- Lack of proper infrastructure for teaching, and libraries have outdated books.
- Unavailability of modules for students.
- New staff lack of training and induction.
- Poor academic leadership and management of processes.
- Low remuneration and non-payment of part time lecturers affect teaching and as a result there is lack of quality preparation and delivery.
- Need for more learning time, semester is too short due to late start of lectures or tutorials.

Universities need rapid adaptations and redesigning of courses to match the rapid changing environments and the demands of a diverse world. While in Zimbabwe the number of graduates has increased significantly since independence (1980) this has not translated into positive economic development. Educational reform in Zimbabwe should involve the dynamic involvement of industry and commerce. This involves designing a demand driven curriculum being assisted by industry. The Nziramasanga Commission of Inquiry into Education and training (1999)

also found out that the education system had lost direction and was producing graduates who were arrogant and unrefined. Employers charged that graduates from colleges and universities were too theoretical, had wrong attitudes and were unwilling to learn. According to Nherera (2000) students in the continent face the problem of unemployment since employers feel universities are offering courses that are not in line with their requirements and graduates are ill-equipped for the jobs available. The challenge is to produce graduates who can create employment and can be absorbed by industry.

Research and Publication

The following findings were uncovered in relation to researches and publication.

- Lecturers lack computer literacy, skills for research.
- Researchers lack the necessary induction and training. Research not given the emphasis it deserves in universities, the focus is on teaching.
- Very few journals are available locally to publish articles.
- Research is hampered by lack of internet connectivity.
- Lack of exposure to research and publication.
- Workload too high to promote research.
- Failure to get support by way of information on sponsor of research.
- Lack of education on the publication process.

It seems universities are concentrating more in churning out graduates without critical review of the contributions of their research to the Zimbabwean industry. Universities in Zimbabwe have the biggest challenge of incorporating the private sector to participate and support research through university-industry partnerships. Makhurane (2000) Government needs to support the above given proposal through policy initiative which promote and oblige industry to commit part of their budget. Staff retention in Universities in Zimbabwe continues to be a big challenge. Academics are being lured to join Universities in the neighboring countries including South Africa because of poor remuneration. Universities in Zimbabwe need to come up with incentives that will ensure retention of staff both academic and non-academic.

Quality Assurance

The following were identified as challenges faced by universities in relation to quality assurance. These include

- Lack of funds to acquire resources, bring external assessors as well as put in place quality assurance committees and panels by universities.
- Quality assurance has always been in place through peer review and student evaluation but these are not being fully utilized due to lack of funds. There are also inadequate quality controls mechanisms in place hence lack of quality teaching and lecturing.
- Most universities lack effective quality monitoring and evaluation systems.
- The courses offered by universities do not meet the needs of industry standards.
- Leakage of exam papers and cheating impact negatively on quality.
- Harsh economic climate facing tends to impact negatively on quality. Lecturers are poorly remunerated as such their morale is low.
- Faculties and departments are not well trained and inducted in the area of quality assurance.

The above raised issues were identified as main challenges in terms of quality.

Brain drain' is one of the main causes of "skills crisis" in Zimbabwe. The brain drain has accelerated in the last five years in Zimbabwe with most professionals going to countries such as Britain, Australia, New Zealand Canada, South Africa and Botswana. It is estimated that more than 1, 5 million Zimbabweans are outside the country with 500 000 being professionals. Universities have a challenge of retaining highly qualified lecturers by improving their salaries and conditions of Academics in Universities have enjoyed academic freedom as a result the quality of their service delivery has not been critically scrutinized. The main challenge is that of introducing a performance appraisal system relevant to assessment of the performance of both academic and non-academic or administrative staff. Quality of teaching and research should be maintained. In some conventional universities in Zimbabwe the lecturer produces the course outline, delivers lectures to students sets, and marks both assignments and examinations, and

ultimately the lecturers determines the passing or failing of students. This has implications on quality and accountability to stakeholders. In these institutions the use of external assessors is not a requirement expected of departments.

Funding University Education

- Most universities rely on Government funding but funding of universities by the state has reflected a negative trend, funding has been left to individuals pay for their education.
- Higher education is under funded. Salaries are low compared to Regional universities.
- University education has now become a preserve for the elite.
- Very few students are able to pay for their education.
- Loans for students are not being availed. Academics cannot go for contact leave as well as being sponsored for external study programs.
- Government is unable to provide sponsorship and bursaries for education yet the Cadetship scheme is not accessible to students.

The massive increase in student enrolment significantly exerted pressure on the national budget. Funds allocated to higher education in the national budget are dwindling resulting in reduced expenditure per student by government. Zimbabwean universities need to be able to generate income and realize profit where possible, hence rely less on government funding. This meant Zimbabwe Universities need to generate income and become self-sufficient. This perspective was necessitated by the fact that government subsidies to state universities are decreasing annually. Higher education institutions rely heavily on state funding, this seems the policy of state funding is changing and institutions are being encouraged to find alternative ways of funding themselves. (Dzvimbo 2000)

Access in University Education

- Fees are too high and most students cannot afford to study with universities especially from a poor background.
- University education has become a preserve of the elite.
- Very few students are able to pay for fees hence the inability to attract viable classes.
- Student's accommodation fees are also high and students are deferred from joining universities
- There is restricted entry to university education barring those with less A' level points.
- Adult students are sacrificing their studies so that their children access university education.

CONCLUSION

The challenges discussed in this paper are not exhaustive. This paper focused on pertinent issues affecting university education currently. More researches need to be done in this area to get a broader picture of the situation.

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