

Quality assurance in higher education in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to furnish local and global stakeholders with detailed information regarding the development and current status of quality assurance in the Zimbabwean higher education sector. The study used document analysis, observation and interviews with key informants as sources of data. This paper addresses the dearth of documented information on issues of quality assurance in Zimbabwe. In addition, it discusses examples of programmes and best practices that could be emulated.

Keywords: Quality, quality assurance, higher education, Zimbabwe



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INTRODUCTION

In the era of increased globalisation, quality assurance in higher education is critical in every country's strategic plans to enhance competitiveness and to meet international expectations and standards. The definition and approach to quality assurance differs from among countries and hence it becomes imperative to understand the geographical context; the indicators and frameworks; the successes and challenges associated with implementing quality higher education in each country. This information helps in formulating strategies for quality delivery by taking advantage of best practices elsewhere and avoiding already known pitfalls. Sadly, locally research-based literature pertaining to issues of quality and quality assurance in the Zimbabwean higher education sector is limited.

Although the notion of quality has been part of the university culture since the establishment of modern universities, quality assurance has only recently assumed greater importance worldwide because of various reasons (El-Khawas et al. 1998; El-Khawas 2002). Governments have decided that traditional academic controls are inadequate (Hendel and Lewis, 2005). Among some of the reasons are the growth and development of higher education provision characterised by, especially in the developing countries, explosion in enrolment figures (a phenomenon referred to as massification by Mohamedbhai, 2008) without commensurate increase in resources. Other reasons include cross-border higher education and the emergence of various forms of instruction fuelled by developments in technology. Furthermore, the increased need for social accountability requires leaders of universities to constantly improve quality and promote transparency in order to safeguard public interest and confidence in their awards.

Zimbabwe is among the countries that embraced quality assurance in higher education as far back as 1990 through the establishment of the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE). However, with respect to the higher education sector in Zimbabwe, there are very few publications that provide information on quality assurance, its development and current status. This paper aims to fill in this gap in information provision.

METHODOLOGY

The study used document analysis, observation and interviews with key informants as sources of data. The author works within the higher education sector and has been an active participant in developing and implementing quality assurance systems in Zimbabwe. The documents used in the study included the Government of Zimbabwe (GoZ) and the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE) policy documents and circulars and literature search for books, chapters in books, Journal articles and conference/workshop papers on quality education related issues. The key informants included GoZ senior officials in the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, The Chairman and Directors of ZIMCHE as well as Vice Chancellors and senior Managers in universities.

FINDINGS

Universities in Zimbabwe

According to the August 2012 population census, Zimbabwe has a population of about 12 973 808 people (ZIMSTAT, 2012). It has a robust higher education system, which consists of fifteen registered universities (nine public and five private), fifteen teachers' colleges, eight polytechnics and two industrial training centres. This study concentrated only on university education, which forms the jurisdiction of ZIMCHE. Table 1 shows a list of the registered universities, their years of establishment and their ownership.

It can be seen in Table 1 that there was only one university at independence in 1980 with the rest being established from 1991 to 2010. At independence in 1980, the new government embarked on a massive expansion of educational provision to address historical imbalances and promote socio-economic development (Nherera, 2000). By 2005 there were fourteen universities, a development which strengthened calls for the establishment of a more robust quality assurance body to replace the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) that had been established in 1990. Accordingly, the GoZ established ZIMCHE in 2006, to register and accredit higher education institutions. The mandate of ZIMCHE is “*to promote and coordinate education provided by institutions of higher education and to act as a regulator in the determination and maintenance of standards of teaching, examinations, academic qualifications and research in institutions of higher education*” (ZIMCHE Act, 2006).

Historical Background of ZIMCHE

The establishment of ZIMCHE came as a logical consequence in developing university education. Formal higher education was first introduced into Zimbabwe, then Southern Rhodesia, in 1957, with the establishment of the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland which initially enrolled 57 students (Shizha, 2011). The university later changed its name to the University of Zimbabwe (UZ) when the country gained independence in 1980.

The phenomenal expansion of educational provision embarked upon by the new government from 1980 to correct historical imbalances and promote socio-economic development led to massive expansion at UZ, which was done by way of increasing enrolments and the introduction of new faculties, departments and programmes required to meet the socio-economic needs of the new nation (Nherera, 2000). UZ increased its enrolment from 2 240 students in 1980 to 9 017 students in 1990.

The year 1991 saw the establishment of a second university, the National University of Science and Technology (NUST), in the country’s second largest city, Bulawayo. This was followed by the establishment of the Bindura University of Science Education (BUSE) in 1996 and Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) in 1998 (Shizha, 2011). Again, the establishment of the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) was done in the spirit of increasing access to higher education but through open and distance learning (ODL).

In yet another move to increase access into higher education Government decided to allow private providers of higher education. In 1990 the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE), was established whose main task was to receive and consider applications from would-be higher education private providers and make recommendations to the Minister for possible approval of private university charters. While the NCHE would also advise the Minister on any matter pertinent to higher education it remained a non-autonomous arrangement appended to the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education with the Secretary to the Council being a civil servant also working as Director in the same Ministry.

The establishment of eight more universities between 1999 and 2005 (five public and three private) prompted a relook at quality assurance in university education. It was observed that the establishment of so many universities in such a short time had led to the decline of standards. The establishment of a new body, which would advise the Minister on all relevant issues related to quality assurance, the monitoring and evaluation of the performance of higher education providers, standardization of higher education qualifications and accreditation of new higher education provisions was therefore necessary. Consequently, ZIMCHE was established in 2006 to guarantee and sustain quality in university education in Zimbabwe.

Structure of Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE)

ZIMCHE is made up of 21 Council members appointed by the Minister of Higher and Tertiary Education on a three-year term. Three of the members are drawn from reputable international higher education and quality assurance concerns. Members are selected in such a way as to ensure that the functions of Council are executed in accordance to high standards of professionalism and in line with best practices (ZIMCHE Act, 2006). Accordingly, only highly experienced experts in the field of university education, who are willing and able to guide and offer advice pertaining to higher education and quality assurance issues, can sit in Council. Council is the governing authority, it meets at least four times a year and its key responsibility is to provide direction on policy matters (ZIMCHE Act, 2006).

Council executes its functions through five specialist Committees namely: Executive Committee; Higher Education Quality Assurance Committee; Higher Education Funding and Financing Committee; Human Resource Committee; and Academic and Student Affairs Committee. These Committees, occasionally with the help of experts, research, deliberate and make recommendations to Council on specific issues.

The day-to-day tasks of the Council are performed by the ZIMCHE Secretariat, which has a current establishment of 41 staff members and is headed by the Chief Executive Officer. The Secretariat operates through a total of three directorates consisting of two directorates dedicated to discharging the core business of Council and one support directorate. The core directorates are Registration and Accreditation and Academic and Institutional Audits whilst the support directorate is that of Human Resources, Administration and Finance. Top management posts are offered on a three to five year contractual basis depending on level of post. Only candidates that are appropriately qualified and experienced in university management are recruited for these posts. Middle management and support staff are also recruited competitively and are given permanent positions.

Core Activities of ZIMCHE

In order to guarantee and sustain quality in university education the ZIMCHE carries out registration, audits and accreditation of all higher education institutions and their programmes/courses.

Registration of Degree Awarding Institutions

ZIMCHE has since its inception received numerous applications to register institutions and has so far approved the registration of three new state universities and one new private university. An institution is initially awarded a provisional registration certificate after being found to meet a given criteria.

Accreditation of Institutions and their Programmes/Courses

All higher education institutions, state and private, have to be accredited by ZIMCHE. There are two types of accreditation, institutional and programme accreditation. ZIMCHE issues an accreditation certificate to an institution has achieved the minimum standards as shown in the agreed benchmarks. These include issues concerning the availability of suitable infrastructure, equipment and other resources, quality assurance systems and procedures as well as the execution of academic pillars of teaching, research and community engagement.

Academic and Institutional Audits

ZIMCHE carries out audits in Higher Education Institutions as a way of verifying situations prevailing in these institutions. In carrying out these audits ZIMCHE gives special attention to:

- Staff levels in institutions;
- Qualifications of staff teaching at various levels;
- Enrolment statistics per programme;
- Facilities available for use by students including lecture rooms, library facilities, hostels and recreational facilities; and
- Special facilities and equipment that promote academic excellence.

The verification is done by using audits instruments and making audits visits. Well trained peer reviewers make up audits teams and where it is deemed necessary, foreign external reviewers are engaged. ZIMCHE has also encouraged universities to create Institutional Quality Assurance Units which carry out internal audits for the purpose of guaranteeing quality in their operations. Nilson (1997) found out that effective internal quality assurance mechanism can help institutions to improve their teaching and educational processes since it benefits both students and stakeholders. Seletso (2012) avers that internal self-evaluation will ensure that the students acquire quality academic programmes from HEIs.

Minimum Body of Knowledge

ZIMCHE is in the process of determining the minimum body of knowledge (MBK) which must be learnt by students who undertake each study programme at the higher education institutions in Zimbabwe. The determination is done by experts in each of the study areas. The experts are called to a workshop where they spend some time to work on the documents. This work will help in achieving comparable standards in what is learnt by students embarking on similar degree programmes at different universities. The MBK project is similar to the “tuning” project which offers the comparability and compatibility of university curricula for the global higher education community. Tuning of higher educational structure started in Europe in 2000 as a project to link the objectives of the Bologna Process and at a later stage the Lisbon Strategy to the higher education sector.

Research and Intellectual Expo

ZIMCHE organises the Research and Intellectual Expo (RIE) annually. RIE provides a platform for showcasing the best research and intellectual work by Zimbabweans both at home and in the Diaspora as an attempt to exhibit how investment in higher and tertiary education is benefiting the country (RIE, 2012). The event is aimed at harnessing leading innovations, research and intellectual output from Zimbabweans and utilising these to spur development of the country. Cognisant of the realisation that no nation can develop without exploiting the knowhow and wisdom inherent in its citizens, ZIMCHE aims to pool and direct outstanding intellectual work, creativity and research outputs develop Zimbabwe and to enhance the country’s competitiveness.

Each year, RIE provides researchers with an opportunity to present select, peer reviewed research as well as artefacts and other creative works. From the presented papers, a selection of the best papers is made and these are then published in the *Journal of Zimbabwe Studies: Arts, Humanities and Education* or the *Journal of Zimbabwe Studies: Science, Technology and Health* depending on the discipline (RIE, 2012). The Expo also provides a platform for the exhibition of prototype products developed by Zimbabwe’s science, technology and innovation specialists, as

well as an opportunity for individuals and institutions to showcase their activities and achievements.

The event attracts all academic institutions of higher learning, research institutions, industrialists, high school students and the public. In 2011, 2012 and 2013 it ran under the themes, *Leadership in Research and Intellectual Excellence in Zimbabwe: Past, Present and Future*; *Research, Innovation and Creativity for Sustainable Development and Research Partnerships for Wealth Creation*, respectively (RIE, 2011, 2012, and 2013). ZIMCHE is currently preparing for the 2014 RIE under the theme: *Engagement, Innovation and Diversity for National Transformation and Development*.

Figures 1, 2 and 3 show some of the exhibits and activities at the Expos.

The ZIMCHE working environment

Figure 1 illustrates the Organisational chart for ZIMCHE's working environment. In order to fulfil its mandate, ZIMCHE works closely with the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education and Higher and Tertiary Education Institutions. ZIMCHE advises the Minister who in turn advises the President about all issues pertaining to higher education. ZIMCHE interacts with all the stakeholders of higher and tertiary education in a cordial manner.

Best practices from universities

The Academic and Student Affairs Committee (ASAC) is responsible for informing Council of students' welfare in institutions of higher learning, while making the necessary recommendations that would help enhance such welfare. The ultimate objective is for the Zimbabwe Council of Higher Education (ZIMCHE) to contribute towards the sustenance of environments conducive to learning thereby enhancing the quality of human capital produced in Zimbabwe's institutions of higher learning. The ASAC following a study carried out in 2012, documented best practices from universities. The best practices included sexual harassment strategies, dealing with out of campus students and increasing pass rates in female students and.

CONCLUSION

ZIMCHE is relatively very young, having only been established in 2006, but it has already made an impact in quality assurance in higher education in Zimbabwe. Programmes that have failed to meet agreed minimum standards during accreditation exercises have been suspended and due advice has been given to the affected institutions on how to address the shortcomings. The GoZ has on the other side taken heed of advice given to it by ZIMCHE without giving any favouritism to public institutions. As a result the higher education system in Zimbabwe is poised for positive growth and development.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

Table 1: Universities in Zimbabwe

Name of University	Public/ Private	Year Established	Website Address
1. University of Zimbabwe (UZ)	Public	1957	www.uz.ac.zw
2. National University of Science and Technology (NUST)	Public	1991	www.nust.ac.zw
3. Africa University (AU)	Private	1992	www.africau.edu
4. Solusi University (SU)	Private	1994	www.solusi.ac.zw
5. Bindura University of Science Education (BUSE)	Public	1996	www.buse.ac.zw
6. Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU)	Public	1998	www.zou.ac.zw
7. Midlands State University (MSU)	Public	1999	www.msu.ac.zw
8. Catholic University in Zimbabwe (CUZ)	Private	2001	www.cuz.ac.zw
9. Reformed Church University (RCU)	Private	2001	www.rcu.ac.zw
10. Chinhoyi University of Technology (CUT)	Public	2001	www.cut.ac.zw
11. Great Zimbabwe University (GZU)	Public	2002	www.gzu.ac.zw
12. Women's University in Africa (WUA)	Private	2004	www.wua.ac.zw
13. Lupane State University (LSU)	Public	2004	www.lsu.ac.zw
14. Harare Institute of Technology (HIT)	Public	2005	www.hit.ac.zw
15. Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University (ZEGU)	Private	2010	www.zaogafif.org

APPENDIX 2



Figure 1: Bulawayo Polytechnic showcasing research in traditional fashion at RIE 2011

APPENDIX 3



Figure 2: Research Institution showcasing fertiliser research at RIE 2012



APPENDIX 4



Figure 3: High schools students going through the exhibits