#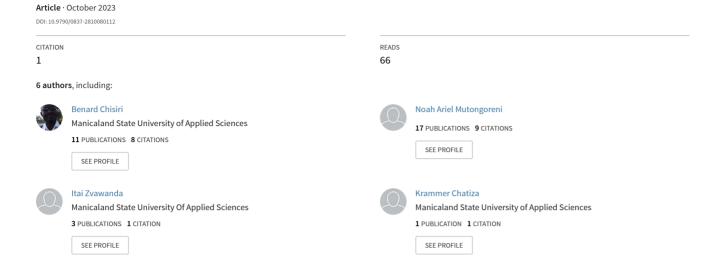 Normalising The Abnormal: Examining The Enduring Aftermaths Of Widening And Deepening Of Access To Zimbabwean Higher Education System

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Benard Chisiri
Manicaland State University of Applied Sciences
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Noah Ariel Mutongoreni
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Itai Zvawanda
Manicaland State University Of Applied Sciences
3 PUBLICATIONS **1** CITATION

Krammer Chatiza
Manicaland State University of Applied Sciences
1 PUBLICATION **1** CITATION

Normalising The Abnormal: Examining The Enduring Aftermaths Of Widening And Deepening Of Access To Zimbabwean Higher Education System

Benard Chisiri [1], Perfect Sianzvovu[1], Noah Mutongoreni[2], George Shava[3], Itai Zvawanda[4] , Krammer Chatiza[5] and Allen Mutumwa[6]

[1,2,4,5,6]*Manicaland State University of Applied Sciences*
[1]*Midlands State University*
[3]*National University of Science and Technology*

Abstract –
This study sought to identify the abnormal practices that have become the order of the day and endured in higher education institutions. These practices have been instigated by strides to widen and deepen access to education under the banner of 'education for all' as well proffer a way forward for achievement of best practices in higher education system. The study adopted a qualitative approach. A multiple case study design and phenomenological design (dual design) were used with a focus on one public and one private university all conveniently selected from Manicaland Province of Zimbabwe. Twenty Universities in Zimbabwe constituted the study population. In-depth interviews were conducted with the University Quality assurance officers who were purposively sampled. Fourteen students from each university were conveniently selected to participate in focus group discussions. The study found that "normalized" practices, which among others are: unchecked population explosions, staff shortage and high turnover, poor infrastructure and equipmentation challenges, compromised calibre of students enrolled, commoditization and commodification of education and declining government funding were rife. In view of this, it is recommended that in order to return to normalcy in the Higher Education system of Zimbabwe the "abnormal" practices should be expeditiously dealt with through: strict adherence to enrolment regulations, offering of attractive staff retention packages to curb qualified lecturer flight, higher education funding be prioritised and teaching and learning infrastructure should match global Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) standards and best practices. This would guarantee the production of high quality graduates.
Key Terms: Quality in higher education, Normalising, Abnormal, Widening and Deepening, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

I. INTRODUCTION

Undoubtedly and the world over, Higher Education (HE) is becoming a major driver of economic competitiveness in an increasingly knowledge-driven global economy. Henard (2009) regards it as a conduit towards improved employment skills and the tremendous economic transformations taking place in various sectors of our lives, and Keche (2021) notes that education produce goods and services that can be used in peoples' everyday lives. Shava (2010:1) also points out that "….in the knowledge based economy of the coming decades, quality education will be the cornerstone of broad based economic growth and poverty reduction…" In this light it is imperative therefore, to note that the aspect of quality within the realm of teaching in HE institutions cannot be underrated, as it plays a significant role in enhancing effective teaching and learning. Economic success of every nation is hinged on the university output. Despite enumerable benefits that can be derived from prioritising quality in higher learning, Zimbabwe has been renowned for irregularities and inconsistencies in as far as quality standards in teaching and learning is concerned (Nkala & Ncube, 2021). Such malpractices have then become normalized in the eyes of many over time.

The compromise on quality by local universities has been instigated by among other things, the desire to widen and deepen access to higher education (Shava, 2010). Zimbabwe as a signatory to numerous Education for all (EFA) Conventions, among them, the Jomtein (Thailand) Framework for Action (1990), All Sub-Saharan Conference for Education for All (Johannesburg) (1999) and The Dakar (Senegal) Framework for Action (2000), has not been spared by the repercussions of trying to educate every one everywhere. This has resulted in the massification of education (Mavhunga et al., 2009). In addition, the call for deepening and widening of access to

higher education in Zimbabwe was necessitated by the recommendations of the Chetsanga Commission of 1998, which called for among others, the establishment of a university in every province with the rationale being to absorb the ever increasing demand for higher education and also the need to spur economic development.

Background to the study

Zimbabwe is a former British Colony that was formerly known as Rhodesia. It was annexed from the British South African Company by the United Kingdom Government in 1923. A constitution that favoured the whites in power was formulated in 1961, and in 1965 the government under Ian Douglas Smith, unilaterally declared independence. The United Kingdom government did not recognise this development as had wanted the Rhodesian government to give more political and economic rights to blacks (Kanyongo, 2005). The higher education that ensured under the White minority government favoured the whites at the expense of the majority black population ((Sithole & Makumbe, 1997 (Chawatama & Musekiwa, 2007). Whilst it has been argued that higher education existed in the pre-colonial times in Zimbabwe, it took the form of what is called traditional knowledge or indigenous knowledge or ethno-science (Nyota & Mapara, 2009). Under this type of education, girls were taught female related duties and responsibilities. They had to know every type of edible plant, mushroom, fruits among others. Boys on the other hand were taught to be warriors, hunters and at best men who could lead society into posterity.

It has also been argued that education for black students under and during the colonial period was provided mainly by missionaries rather than by the government (Dzvimbo, 1991). Basically, two school systems existed prior to independence. The colonial government made education for white students compulsory and therefore offered universal education, spent as much as 20 times more per white student than the black student (Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture, 2001; Kanyongo, 2005).

Whilst the demand for education among the black population under colonial rule continued to rise, the colonial government stepped in to control the provision of education and ensure that missionaries would not 'overeducate' them (Nherera, 2000). Consequently, at independence only 2% of the student population at the University were black. With a vibrant economy at independence in 1980, backed by a strong currency regime with a Zimbabwe dollar which was worth about $1.50 US (Kapungu & Roselyn, 2007), the government pursued strategies to increase the number of black students in higher education.

It is worthwhile to understand that under the colonial system, the post-secondary tertiary education institutions available like Salisbury Polytechnic and Bulawayo Technical College, were producing highly qualified artisans and technicians based on the City and Guilds system in the United Kingdom. These Institutions served white students only. A technical college that had been built at Luveve (Bulawayo) to produce equivalent Black skilled workers was dismantled and its equipment sent to Salisbury Polytechnic because its products were seen to be competing with whites causing distortions in occupational roles in industry where they were supposed to work (Ministry of Higher & Tertiary Education, 2005).

The University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland (UCRN), an affiliate of the University of London became the first institution of higher learning in Zimbabwe offering degrees. (Garwe & Thodhlana, 2020). It assumed the University of Rhodesia under the minority colonial government, the University of Zimbabwe-Rhodesia in 1979 and finally University of Zimbabwe at independence. As a result of the racial practices of the period, celebrated in the 1961 constitution, white students (Europeans, Asians and colours) made up the majority of the student body. Only 2% were blacks (O'Callaghan and Austin 1977; Nherera 2000; Shizha 2006). The implication of this was discontentment, which was also part of the reason for the struggle for independent. Once, majority rule was attained at independence in 1980, the demand for more space for blacks in higher education became more evident.

The Mugabe led post independent administration adopted a socialist principle: 'Growth with equity' to redress the inequalities in access to education and other basic needs such as health services (Kanyongo, 2005). Guided by the same principle, the government adopted an "Education for All" policy in 1980. Under this policy, primary education was made free and this resulted in admission rates expanding dramatically (Kanyongo, 2005; Phuthi, 2022). As a consequence, and in response to the rising demand for education, there was a phenomenal growth in the number of schools offering primary and secondary education. The number of primary schools exploded from 2401 in 1979 to 4504 in 1989, an 87.6 per cent increase. Primary school enrolment showed a 177.5 per cent increase from 819,586 to 2,274,178 during the same period. (Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture, 2001). The number of secondary schools expanded by 748.6% from 177 in 1979 to 1502 in 1989, while secondary school enrolment climbed by 950.9% from 66,215 to 695,882. (Ibid). On the other hand, and on a positive note, public spending on education increased from 4.4 per cent of recurrent public expenditures in 1979-80 to 22.6 per cent by 1980 (Kanyongo, 2005).

The phenomenal growth in the number of schools and enrolments contributed to a spiralling demand for higher education. As a strategy to redress this challenge, government increased the number of higher education institutions. Whilst there were 5 teachers colleges, 2 polytechnic colleges, and 1 University in 1980, by 1990, the

teachers colleges had increased to 14, technical colleges to 8, 2 vocational training centres (VTCs) were established and still 1 University (Phuthi, 2022). It is argued that prior to the 1990s, the higher education in Zimbabwe was in a state on boom. Facilities that existed were at par with what existed in other parts of the world. (Garwe & Thondhlana, 2021). Consequently, the existing quality standards and benchmarks were in line with international best practice (ibid). Mavhunga et al., (2009) opine that the "Education for All" mantra which primarily was meant to address basic learning needs (primary education) and adult illiteracy, consequently, had a spill over effect on higher learning Institutions. The products from high school education were meant to be absorbed by Higher Education Institutions, as the society believed that for one to be considered as educated he/ she must be a degree holder.

In line with the populist socialist thinking, the Government of Zimbabwe phenomenally increased the number of universities from a single one in 1980 (University of Zimbabwe) to fifteen by 2005 (Garwe, 2014). Since then, an exponential increase in universities is still being witnessed up to today, whereby the number of universities has risen by the establishment of Gwanda State University established in 2012, Marondera University of Applied Sciences of 2015, Manicaland State University of Social Sciences established in 2016 and Southern Africa Methodist University; a private university culminating in a total of twenty universities by 2020 (Phuthi,2022).This translated to one university established every 18 months, leading to the current average one university per 750,000 citizens, and from around 9,000 students in 1990 to the current nearly 120,000. (ibid)

Of importance to note is that of the twenty universities established about 37% are composed of private players with majority that are church run. This means that in its quest to increase access to Higher Education, the Government of Zimbabwe allowed private players to offer the higher learning services. Resultantly, there was establishment of many universities within a short space of time. The increase in the number of higher education Institutions and the resulted boom in enrolments brought about questions in the terms of quality of products and services offered. Garwe (2014) argued that increased number of enrolments led to decline in educational standards. To cater for issues of quality, the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE) was established in 2006.Garwe (2014) as noted in Phuthi (2022) reiterates that ZIMCHE was established partly due to declining standards attributed to numerous universities blossoming within a short period. The inception of ZIMCHE was higher education quality malaises and challenges informed. Kasenene (2010) contends that the quality of higher education has continued to fall short of the stakeholders' expectations in many sub-Saharan countries despite the establishment of quality assurance bodies, institutions and conventions. This trap has not escaped the higher education terrain in Zimbabwe.

Aside from the foregoing, Government has not ceased to be creative and innovative in its expectations. It adopted a new philosophy in higher education, the heritage based Education 5.0. Under this philosophy, higher education should exhibit high level of teaching, research, community outreach, innovation and industrialisation. This is notwithstanding the fact that the resources available are inadequate. The academic charged with the teaching, research, community outreach, innovation and industrialisation is paid an equivalent of about 350 USD as at 15 May 2022. What is coming out clearly, is that there is an abnormal situation in higher education institutions and everyone has suddenly become blind. The abnormal has been given or accorded the status of normalcy. Pursuant to this, the study purports to examine the effects of widening and deepening of access to Higher Education in Zimbabwe.

Statement of the Problem

The Zimbabwean higher education system was characterised by very high quality standards when there was only one University of Rhodesia. This quality level was attributed to higher funding in form of student loans-government financial support was twenty-two percent (Mhlanga, 2008), low students enrolment for all courses/programmes, state of the art laboratory equipment, highly qualified teaching staff among others. Zimbabwe then became a signatory to a number of conventions which touted widening and deepening of access to higher education. The education for all pathway resonated well with the post independent government of Zimbabwe's desire to address educational imbalances emanating from the colonial government's separatist development agenda. Whilst this idea was embraced as panacea for inter alia economic development, improved national human capital base, fulfilment of the constitutional rights to education, it could have brought with it a myriad of normalized challenges. Up to 20 universities have now been established from a single one in 1980 (Phuthi, 2022). University funding fell to 3% (Mhlanga, 2008). Students enrolment went up to 120 000 in 2020 from around 9 000 in 1999. This represented a chance to almost everyone to attend university. The study apart from picking it up from Majoni (2014)'s call for more research to be conducted to bring more light and a broader picture on the challenges facing Zimbabwean universities, also seeks to decipher the incongruities emanating from the deepening and widening of access to higher education in Zimbabwe.

Main research objective
      The objective of the study is to examine the effects of widening and deepening of access to higher education in Zimbabwe. This objective is anchored on the following research questions:
1. *What are the quality incongruities associated with the deepening and widening of access of higher education in Zimbabwe, and to what extend have these incongruities affected quality of higher education?*
2. *What is the way forward for best practice to be achieved in the Zimbabwean higher education system?*

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition of Quality Assurance
      Quality assurance refers to systematic, structured and continuous attention to quality in terms of quality maintenance and improvement (Vroeijenstijn, 1995a; Kis, 2005). It is an ongoing development and implementation of ethos, policies, and processes that aim to maintain and enhance quality as defined by articulated values and stakeholder needs (Boyle and Bowden, 1997). Hayward (2001) in Neishefhefhel, Nobongoza and Maphosa (2016) says quality assurance entails careful and systematic appraisal practice of an organisation or curriculum to ascertain whether or not satisfactory standards of education are met. The endeavour has been to ensure fitness of purpose and fitness for purpose of Higher Education system (Netshifhefehel et al, 2016).
      In some jurisdiction-, quality assurance, is also known as quality enhancement, and refer to sophisticated national frameworks, formal quality standards, quality assurance agencies or other dedicated entities, and particular review processes and procedures (like accreditation), whether they are at the level of academic programs, higher education institutions, or both (Matei & Iwinska, 2016).
      Vlasceanu et al, (2007) in Schindler etal, (2015) defines quality assurance as the process of evaluating (assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining, and improving) the quality of a higher education system" and accreditation as "the process by which a (non- formally recognize it as having met certain predetermined minimal criteria or standards"
      Quality Assurance in higher education is a process of establishing stakeholder confidence that provision (input, processes, outcomes) fulfils expectations or measures up to threshold minimum requirements (Lemaitre & Karakhanyan, 2017).

Typologies of quality in a Higher Education Institution
      Harvey and Green (1993) argue that quality in a higher education institution could be perceived in the following five lens:
- Quality as exceptional/excellence – quality must meet the highest academic requirements and be exceptional
- Quality as perfection or consistency –quality is viewed as a procedure to get rid of flaws and strive for a reliable or faultless outcomes.
- Quality as fitness for purpose – According to this viewpoint, quality is determined by how well an institution or academic program achieves its declared purposes, missions, or goals.
- Quality as value for money – the output to input ratio is the main concern in an effort to increase efficiency. If a better or higher outcome can be obtained at the same cost, or if the cost can be reduced while the outcome level is maintained, quality has been realized.
- Quality as transformation – this approach emphasizes student-centered learning; it sees quality as value-added and the empowerment of a learner via the educational process. According to this system, learning is deemed to be of high quality when it transforms the student (Matei & Iwinska, 2016).

      Apart from this, quality in HE could also be understood within the context– perspective and the stakeholder perspective. The former relates to specific elements of the process such as quality of assessment, student intake academic programmes, teaching and learning or student experiences. Outdated teaching methods or curriculum,–, too big classes, or too high student teacher ratios or lack of sufficient resources are challenges tied to the context. Within the stakeholder purview, focus is on the diversity of perceptions regarding what quality of higher education is among different stakeholders such as policy makers, academics, students or employers (Santiago, et al., 2008).

The Uncertainty Model and Quality in higher education
      This models emphasises the unpredictability and uncertainties that characterises elements (organisations) in their pursuit of change under the influence of the external environment (Heisenberg 1927). It attempts to highlight the complexity and instability of institutional life brought by change. The level of uncertainty increases during periods of radical change (Zelvys, 2009). External factors compel institutions towards transformation. The Zimbabwean higher education system's student populations explosions were informed by external forces of the massification and deepening of access as championed by the Bologna Treat (1999) and World Declaration on Education for All, Jomtien, Thailand (1990), Dakar Framework for Action (2000) which also emphasised the meeting of collective commitment to educate all and several other conventions. The Uncertainty model has it that

these external treaties piled pressure which is a major cause of concern for unpredictability of quality attainment in HEIs in Zimbabwe. It therefore can be argued that all could have been well in terms of Zimbabwean higher education quality, had it not been the interference of the foreign treaties and conventions. The adhoc student enrolment changes is decried as a direct cause of quality uncertainties. The obtaining disturbing quality higher education compromise developments were thus instigated by external influences ratified to, as the country and educational authorities wanted to internationally conform and cooperate. The uncertainty theory therefore emphasizes the trade-off between quality and increased student quantities in the Zimbabwean universities. Zimbabwe education systems' high quality was traded off and foregone when quantity was emphasised by external foreign agencies which Zimbabwe adopted. Increasing student numbers (through massification and deepening of access) is not really compatible with quality attainment (Rhett, 2010), from an uncertainty principle perspective. Where funding and other critical provisions are held constant, the more improvement is done on another (enrolments), the more likely a compromise is made on another (quality education).

III.   RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative paradigm and premised on multiple case study design and phenomenological design. Interviews with two quality assurance directors, who are experts in the subject under study, were purposively sampled from one state and one private university respectively. The involvement of quality experts helped understanding of the quality departures and incongruities characterising the higher education system. A sample of 14 students from each university was conveniently selected out of the 150 students who were on campus to participate in focus group discussions. The campuses were depopulated due to due to Covid-19 pandemic social distancing restrictions and therefore had limited number of students. The focus group was chosen as a means which could harvest student perspectives, opinions and feeling about higher education's quality standpoint since they are the major informants of the phenomenon. There was an equal institutional representation on the students' sample. A total of 28 students thus participated in this research's focus group discussions. This sample was arrived at considering Fugard and Potts (2014) who opined that a good sample size should be around 10% of the population.

IV. FINDINGS

The quality incongruities that have been found associated with the deepening and widening of access of higher education in Zimbabwe are numerous and include:

The Quality controllers' tale

The two interviews with the quality controllers at the two higher education institutions produced the following findings:

- Government funding in higher education has been reduced from 22% in 1980 to 3% in 2022
- Student enrolment have increased dramatically due to either increase in number of student per program (which in a majority of faculty-wide modules exceeds 300 per class) as well as increase of programs on offer by universities.
- Students with passes that do not meet the cut off threshold are enrolled for degree programmes, including those that do not meet the minimum entry qualifications criteria.
- A majority of Natural Science and Agriculture programs have been run, without supporting infrastructure such as laboratories and related infrastructure and equipmentation since the universities' establishment.
- The universities do not have adequate managerial personnel for Departmental Director positions, Registrar, Bursar, Librarian and Pro-Vice Chancellors and Deans of faculties.
- Zimbabwe Council for higher education (ZIMCHE) guidelines on lecturer qualifications cannot be implemented due qualified lecturers' unavailability.
- Existence of political interference in the running of higher education institutions was rife and had profound effect on quality
- Staff exchange programmes are not prioritized.
- High labour turnover of PhD holders has become the order of the day.
- Teaching and learning facilities are insufficient for the student populations and lectures are either done in the verandas and corridors or a single lecture room is shared by two or more classes.
- Universities are failing to procure sufficient broadband which effectively covers the whole campuses
- Lecturers bring their own devices and gadgets and university support in hardware and software is very limited to provision of corporate emails to staff and provision of a teaching and learning administration system.
- No data for virtual teaching is provided and this compromises the blended teaching and learning process.
- Projectors to lecturer ratio is very worrisome given that an average of ten lecturers share one projector.
- Office space is scarce and in excess of ten lectures share an office meant for one lecturer.

- Salaries and benefits are too low to sustain the lecturer and bind her into corporate citizenship and engagement.
- Lecturers engages in moonlighting which compromise quality as little time is devoted to university obligation.

The Student's narrative
The discussion with focus group discussants deduced the following findings:
- Learners are more than 300 students per class and they hardly hear what the lecturer will be saying nor can they be attended to individually and there no audio visual support.
- The contact time per semester is around 15hrs which is very low and due to regular electricity load-shedding.
- The university tuition fees is around four hundred United States dollars and its quite exorbitant given the Zimbabwean average parent or guardian's income which is pegged in Zimbabwean local currency.
- While institutions are in blended learning model students are not provided with data for their virtual learning, nor are they provided with smartphones and computers to facilitate interactions with their educators
- Campuses do not have students' accommodation and students rent accommodation far away from the university campuses.
- Field trips are rarely conducted for due to mobility constraints.
- Incidences of petty corruption involving lecturers and student are rife.

V. ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS
Increase in the number of HEIs without a corresponding increase in support
There were five (5) teachers' colleges, two (2) polytechnic colleges, and one (1) University in Zimbabwe at the onset of independence in 1980. However, by 1990, the teachers colleges had increased to fourteen (14), technical colleges increased from two (2) to (8) eight. Additionally, two (2) vocational training centres (VTCs) were established (Kapungu & Roselyn, 2007). Whilst there was one University by 1990, as at 2020, the number ballooned to (20) twenty. This translated to at least one university being constructed every 18 months, resulting in an average of one university per 750,000 residents and an increase in student numbers from roughly 9,000 in 1990 to the current nearly 120,000 (Phuthi, 2022). The phenomenal increase in HEIs was not met with a corresponding increase in funding from the State. In fact, government support dropped to 3% in 2019 from about 22% in 1980. This celebrated developmentalist mission and thrust backstabbed the higher education system from a quality standpoint. Mhlanga (2008) reiterates that there was no point in creating a myriad of new public universities in Zimbabwe when the economy was too weak to support the institutions at a reasonable level of performance. The dire consequences of this unplanned and uninformed policy was serious compromise on the quality of delivery in these universities. This conclusion finds backing and support especially today when government support has dwindled to unprecedented, deplorable, insignificant and worrisome state, to the extent of senior lecturers jostling and stampeding for public transport to go to campuses due to government- failed inducements and conditions of service.

Presently, there is student population explosion in Zimbabwean universities due to increase in enrolment. The University of Zimbabwe for instance increased its enrolment from 2 240 students in 1980 to 9 017 students in 1990 (Garwe, 2020). There was an unprecedented student population explosion from 54 844 in 2007 exploded to 116 324 in 2020 (The Zimbabwe Statistics Agency Education Statistics Report, 2018-2020). Enrolments in higher education have been noted to have increased dramatically over the past 50 years in almost every country due to massification (Baker 2014; Marginson 2016; Tight 2019). The study also revealed that the majority of Zimbabwean Universities no longer set class size limits as they used to in the past and in line with best practice. What currently determines the class size is the number of applications received for the programmes and income requirement. The rejection rate of application wishing to enrol has dropped significantly to almost zero. Capacity to pay is now the entry criteria to enrol at university. What this effectively means is that Zimbabwe's higher education sector is in a state of crisis as it aims for quantity and not quality of education (Shizha & Kariwo, 2016). The pursuit of quantity has suffocated major aspect of quality in universities. The number of students admitted is not proportionate to the facilities available as there has been no expansion of facilities in line with increase in numbers (Shizha & Kariwo: 2011). Large faculty/department or class size are a major concern in higher education because increasing numbers of students per faculty or department and class is thought to be associated with fewer opportunities for faculty-student interactions and cause innumerable concerns over the quality of learning (Buckner & Zhung, 2020). The negative implications for these large numbers in classes is the impersonal, anonymous, "en masse" nature of education especially on first-year students (MacGregor et al., 2000), which is contrary to the preferred optimum 15 student classes which are more personalized, more amenable to active student involvement, and more conducive to the development of personal learner and educator responsibility (Buckner & Zhung, 2020). Moreover, Majoni (2014) buttress the above assertion by stating that not only did the number of applicants overwhelm higher education institutions but also the existing facilities and personnel are overstretched. The implication of population explosion is that classrooms are overcrowded while laboratories and

other learning materials are grossly inadequate (Omoregie, 2005). Explosion in enrolments also means that there are no enough sitting facilities, no space for teachers to move around in the classroom so as to facilitate the learning process (Ebisine, 2014). In the worst case scenario, it has been noted that some students learn out of the classroom as the classroom is filled to full capacity. This is notwithstanding the fact that the learners are operating under a Covid-19 environment where social distance should be maintained. Majority of them take notes on their laps. Ergonomically, this is an uncomfortable writing and learning posture which has an effect on learning and understanding.

Staff Shortage and unskilled teaching staff

Universities are being run by insufficient staff, this has been exacerbated by the Government freeze on recruitment and promotion of employees in the civil service in 2013 (The Zimbabwean Herald, 28/10/2017). State universities fall under the public sector and this embargo on employee recruitment handicapped operations in the universities. In this light Ebisine (2014) states that the success of any education system depends to a very large extent on the supply of teachers in terms of quality and quantity. Kafubi (1998) in Bunoti (2011) succinctly states that no education system can be better than the quality of its teachers. This means lecturers are thus critical quality indicators in the educational process. Nkala and Ncube (2020) expressed concern over the qualifications and experiences of lecturers in higher education institutions of Zimbabwe. Universities are faced with a serious shortage of experienced academic staff. The World Bank report (2020) acknowledges that Zimbabwean public universities are suffering an acute shortage of qualified academic staff, especially in STEM programs and this is negatively impacting education quality. Majoni (2014) bemoan brain drain and staff attrition as one of the main causes of "skills crisis" as the educators are attracted by better salary conditions in the region and elsewhere as Zimbabwean Lecturers' Salaries are low compared to other regional universities. Mass exodus of professors has been reported in major state universities (Muonwa, 03/10/21). Altbach et al., (2009) indicated that about 80% of all faculties in Latin American countries are operating with part time staff due to population explosions. Massification and deepening of access to education has also led many universities increasing contract faculty positions as a response (Finkelstein & Jones 2019). Universities are flouting ZIMCHE guidelines and allowing Master's Degree holders to teach Masters Students. In a majority of cases, Teaching Assistants are giving full teaching loads contrary to best practice. According to Majoni (2014) academic staff have too much teaching workload that impede on other important university roles that are expected of them, like research and community service and lately innovation and industrialisation.

Quality of students enrolled for higher education

In line with good university governance higher education institutions are guided by firm policies when enrolling students. These standards include; cut-off points to the programme, alignment of subjects taken at A' level to the programme that the person intends to pursue and the issue of work experience for mature entry students taken into cognizance. The focus on numbers in the recent years has compromised all the aforementioned standards. Nkala and Ncube (2022) opined that the quality of students undertaking higher education is a major quality determinant in HEIs. Shizha and Kariwo (2011) also concur to this notion and assert that contemporary higher education system has turned a blind eye to these critical standards under the auspices of boosting enrolment and fund raising. Massification has reduced the quality of students enrolled. The systems theory has it that a compromise on the input side of the production equation has a quality implications and ramifications on the output side no matter how much effort is expended on the transformation stage (Dzimbiri 2009). The quality input (student) is a critical quality determinant across the quality value chain. This generally means the graduates churned out from a compromised and defective raw material are unlikely to produce the best outputs. The worst case has been reported related to a former employee of Zimbabwe's higher education quality assurance Board who enrolled in one of the state universities without the requisite entry qualification. Before massification, student enrolment was solely based on merit, and the obtaining quality non-considerations have drastically impacted, if not a permanent indent, on Zimbabwean HEIs quality trajectory.

Commoditization and Commercialization of education

Commoditization is the process of making product or service be traded, bought or sold (Walcott, 2003). Due to high cost of the commodity, the service becomes expensive and exclusive as it goes out of reach of many potential consumers. Education is a public good, which students should access freely. The current practices of attaching a price tag on university programme means that, those who can afford the price are the only ones who get access to it, implying that the intellectually gifted students who cannot afford to pay the fees are not found in university corridors. The World Bank (2020) also reported that tuition fees for public institutions are also a significant deterrent for students from poorer households and the university doors are technically shut for the poor. In addition, the World Bank (2000) as quoted in Mhlanga (2008) did not only report the compromised nature of quality due to the expansionist thrust the countries adopted with their higher education system, but also

acknowledged the increased for-profit provision of higher education which had serious inequality and exclusion consequences to a poor majority. The commoditization (profit-monkering tendency) comes and succeeds at the backdrop of Faborode and Edigheji (2016)'s loud endorsement and affirmation of universities as providers of public goods to the citizens. Ufert (2011) as quoted in Nkala and Ncube (2020) stressed that students as the key stakeholders of higher education have engaged in protests across Europe in the recent past to maintain the role of higher education as a public good with public responsibility that guarantees equal access and success (Bergan & Damian, 2010; Ufert, 2011). Entrepreneurialism in higher education has short charged intellectually deserving but financially incapable students (Marginson & Considine, 2000). The commodification and commoditization of higher education which ensued is due the nature of university management contracts which have called for the performativity pursuit and managerialism at the sufferance of higher education accessibility (Mbhele, 2017), especially by the poor in Zimbabwe. The entrepreneurial thrust in higher education institutions in Zimbabwe translates to the attraction of lower performers at the expense of incapacitated higher performers due to the price accompanying the supposed free good. World Bank, (2013) opines that prospective students from poor and middle-income families were much less likely to attend a university while students from high-income background continued to do so leading to widening greater educational inequality. Majoni (2014) contends that fees are too high and most students from a poor background cannot afford to study with universities. He further asserts that university education has become a preserve of the elite. This system should not be tolerated especially by a national leadership who only were not educated from government sponsored bursary system but are pro-socialism and who share Winthrop et al., (2013)'s belief that education should be equally accessible as a foundational component critical for human development and key enabler and unlocking mechanism to the nation's social progress.

Government funding
Most universities and a majority of students rely on Government funding for their operations and school fees payment respectively (World Bank, 2020), but funding of universities by the state has reflected a negative trend towards this critical obligation, funding has been left to individuals pay for their education (Majoni, 2014). In 1957, during the colonial period, the government availed 50% grants and 50% was loan to students. The University of Rhodesia now university of Zimbabwe had a student population of 57.(Garwe & Thondhlana, 2020). In 1998 only 20% constituted the grant whilst 80% was loan. By 2000, the entire 100% support was in form of a loan. The government support for students in form of loans and grants has since disappeared and no one seems to care. The World Bank indicates that the Zimbabwean government has since neglected and deprived the tertiary education sector of much needed funding the burden to educate citizens now lies with the parents, who are in turn reeling under harsh economic environment (Majoni, 2014). The World Bank report (2020) acknowledges the upsurge in Zimbabwe's tertiary Gross Enrolment Rate between 2010 (6%) and 2015 (8.5%) against deteriorating public investment in education, Lack of this essential assistance has grossly impacted on students learning morale and motivation which has a spiral effect on quality. The quality compromises have been exacerbated by massive student dropout from universities due to high tuition fees charged and lake of government support. Zimbabwe as a country is reported (World Bank, 2020) to lacks a viable and sustainable financial-support system for tertiary students who are in quandary and quagmire. A quantum as high as 70% of dropouts cited tuition fees as the main reason (World Bank 2020). Is this not a prolonged normalized neglect on obligation and dearth of government assistance especially to the deserving and needy?

Inadequate physical and technological Infrastructure as well as tools of trade to support teaching and learning
Zimbabwean Universities currently suffer from a critical shortage of teaching and learning space. Universities are now awash in industrial and mining spaces. There is no quality and conduciveness consideration before a university opens its doors for students. Once a proclamation is made for a University in a province, what follows are students being enrolled. Teaching space is very scare at a majority of higher education institutions (World Bank, 2020). It appears ZIMCHE, the regulatory body, out of fear of political pressures just keep a blind eye. As result, universities have classes as big as 1000 using a facility that is meant for 200 students. In addition, the IT infrastructure is also grossly inadequate and incapable of supporting E-learning especial under the current Covid-19 environment. The average student-to-computer ratio among the institutions was reported to be 40 students per computer (World Bank, 2020), which is very high and worrisome as some learners find it difficult to access these technological tools, Some technical and vocational colleges in very extreme cases, do not have internet at all during this internet era. Kunda et al., (2018) indicate that IT software and hardware as well as lack of technical support among staff and time is also a challenge also bedevilling university institutions in Zambia. World Bank also reports poor broadband and internet connectivity in other Zimbabwean universities. Keche , (2021) argued that online teaching and learning was more of a saga as Zimbabwe's higher education Institutions still lagged behind the world order in terms of the internet of things

Academics have also found the going very tough on acquiring offices/workspace conducive for research and innovation. To date as a result of the dearth of working space, most are resorting to the use of vehicles as offices. In addition, there is no support for gadgets such as laptops, tablets, vehicles to anchor research, teaching and learning. The situation has been worsened under the covdi-19 pandemic as this also calls for use of data which they have source on their own as institutional budgets are too lean to buy data for its educators. The lack of tools of trade coupled with instant electricity outages and a poor internet infrastructure regime meant that blended learning and teaching and learning has for a long time been highly compromised.

Management /administrative infrastructures

The mushrooming of Universities in Zimbabwe has also seen a rise in the number of universities operating for in excess of a decade without a complete management infrastructure. Appointment to Executive positions is based on patronage and is done outside the parameters of merit. Whilst in primary and secondary schools, every school has a head, deputy, and teacher in charge among others, Universities are operating without a full complement of principal officers, who form the quality decision making body of universities. Whilst this constitute an affront of good corporate governance, in Zimbabwe it is normal. In a majority of cases, the Vice Chancellors, in acting capacities, are single handedly making decision for the whole institution as some of the critical principal officers are not yet appointed and their positions are vacant. No one seems to question the anomalies and irregularities.

Student lecturer Ration and Time

As a result of the need to deepen and widen access to higher education, the student lecturer ratio has risen in extreme cases to one to a thousand students. This scenario has serious implications for quality. There is no strategy in sight to address this problem. These large Zimbabwean HEIs class sizes exist at the backdrop of celebrated optimum standards of fifteen students per class (Fischer & Grant 1983; Barefoot, 1993; NEA, 2003; NCTE Guideline, 2004, Buckner & Zhong, 2020). It is taken as a normal. Insufficient contact time is also a critical issue. Goktas et.al.,(2013) bemoan the inadequacy of contact time between students and their educators since bulk of time is spend marking scripts and lecture plan preparation. This finding resonates well with our Zimbabwean HEIs' one hundred-plus-class sizes situation. Finn (1999) posits that small classes should be emphasized as a cornerstone of quality education achievement, and there for any education policy. The committee on review of education reforms in the President of Ghana's office also found that quality of teaching and learning as well as research is adversely affected by the high student-teacher ratio (Republic of Ghana, 2002). Large classes seem to militate against the very elements that promote students' involvement and intellectual development, learning, and success (Cuseo, 2007) Even at lower levels of schooling, the teacher-pupil ratio is also widely used as an indicator of school quality, (Paananen, 2020) Too much workload is a product of both the number of teaching modules allocated per educator as well as the class population.

Outdoor teaching and learning

Resources in universities are not able to support outdoor teaching and learning activities such as field trips since the new millennium. Students on work-related learning are assessed on line at a time when the higher education philosophy calls for pragmatism. The practical purposes of field trips and work-related learning is therefore lost. Raw graduates are unleashed into the world of work without the practical flavour which is a sine quo non for graduate excellency.

Staff/student Exchange Programmes

In terms of best practices staff would engage in exchange programmes to widen their scope and understanding of their disciplines. This sometimes can take the form of contact leave or sabbatical leave. Due to the Massification of higher education and reduction in funding, it is no longer possible for staff to go on exchange programmes. Students are also not having the opportunity to proceed on student exchanges. In essence, staff and students have no opportunity to benchmark what they have learned with best practice. The cumulatively has resulted in an inward looking staff without international exposure and graduate without international flavour.

Absence of best practice human capital management strategy

The Labour and Economic Development Research Institute of Zimbabwe (2015) reports serious and unprecedented wage theft in Zimbabwean public sector organisations where public universities as state-owned institution do belong. Low salaries offered to university staff was also decried by Nkala and Ncube (2022), and this latest acclamation on poor salaries communicate a serious and permanent employee effort and input determinants disregard by the employer in HEIs. As at 15 May 2022, a university senior academic was paid an equivalent of USD350 as his salary.   Best and enduring human capital outcomes are a product of employee good working conditions, (World Bank, 2021). Production of highly qualified graduates from universities is guaranteed

if employee are well catered for, since production is a natural follow-up to human motivation. Poor conditions of service are a form of employee disenfranchisement of conducive working environment which has for long time led to disengagement and serious misidentification of educators with their workplace. Disgruntlement has become the order of the day, more badly after the new dispensation or second republic this scenario has resulted in high staff turnover in terms of the highly skilled academics in STEM areas in universities. In addition, most staff in Universities are not tenured despite the fact that they qualify for tenure. The inaction on the part of the authorities points to normalization of the inappropriate practices.

Credentialism and Academic frauds

The normalisation of the abnormal in higher education has created a fertile ground for credential fraud involving both academic and professional awards and recognition. (Garwe, 2015). People across the world are eager to obtain a university education as a passport to employment and some go to desperate lengths to obtain the required certificate (Gatenby 2015). What is more evident and worrisome is the lack of due diligence by Zimbabwean higher education institutions either on standards gatekeeping as well as consideration of processes and procedure. It is important to note that whilst evidence points to this risk, the system is in a state of inaction. The occurrence of errors in admission and undeserving-degree conferment enmass could be a pointer to tolerated and normalised errors. The Grace Mugabe PhD saga is a credentials and academic fraud case in point. The then Vice Chancellor of the University of Zimbabwe (Professor Nyagura) was arrested for single handedly awarding a non-befitting awardee (Grace Ntombizodwa Mugabe) a PhD in Sociology when she only did not meet the minimum requirements to study for a Doctoral level, but was not also admitted to the university procedurally (Newsday , 06/06/2021). The stripping of a Politics and Public Administration degree by Great Zimbabwe University and HEXCO's dismissal of two Diplomas in Accounting and Secretarial studies as well as a Higher National Diploma in Office Management from Chimbumu Florence who only had one ordinary level subject and the others subjects forged (The Zimbabwean Herald, 13/01/21) also points not only to a trail and hullabaloos of gate-keeping quality check failures but also to a whole system's quality check neglect. The fact that the fraudulent certificate holder makes three different, yet successful applications for admission into three different programs indicate high level of tolerance of admission errors, and the acceptance again of the same fraudster to a different university casts a black cloud on the whole quality trail of HEIs of Zimbabwe.

VI. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

In conclusion, the abnormal practices identified to be normalized by higher learning institutions in this paper are only an eye opener. This paper focused on significant and more visible issues affecting quality in higher education institutions that have endured for quite a long time up to the present day. However more current research work can unveil new quality information as every new day is unleashing new macro and micro challenges which have a spiral effect on quality in HEIs.

Recommendations

Pursuant to the foregoing, and in order to maintain sanity and normalcy in institutions of higher learning there is need to revamp and revert back to basics in learning through the adoption of the following:

- Student enrolment should be in tandem with available resources and the Zimche should be vested with powers to set class limits.
- Staff attractions mechanisms can be adopted so as to ascertain the right and international calibre of staff whose experiences, exposures and competences pass the international standards litmus test.
- Promotion of staff development programs, especially supported by university financial assistance to ensure that right skills matrix are addressed on the available man power. This improves the qualifications of academics which will be a critical move towards enhancement of tertiary education quality in Zimbabwe.
- During the selection process, student regulations must be stringent on the set cut off merit. Cut off points and standards should be adopted as a national guiding principle of admission. This ensures that higher education should be a privilege of the intellectually gifted and capable.
- Reintroduction of adequate educational funding to both higher learning institutions and the learners.

Suggested issues for further study

Future studies should delve on the performance of higher education graduates in the world of work as a follow up on the HEIs's product conformance and performance to end user's quality expectations.

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