

**Volume 10 Number 1 March 1998**

**ISSN 1013-3445**

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# ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST UNIVERSITY EXPANSION IN ZIMBABWE

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## ABSTRACT

*In recent years, expansion of university education has been widespread throughout Africa despite the significant economic demands and constraints such expansion places upon government budgets. Both cases for and against university expansion are compelling. This paper examines the rising tide of university expansion, giving the arguments supporting and opposing such a move from economic, social, and political points of view. The need for a national dialogue on the future of tertiary education is suggested in the conclusion.*

## Background

It was not until independence (1980) that the government of Zimbabwe embarked on an educational policy which was designed to make primary and secondary education available to all children. This policy led to the rapid expansion of education, despite the economic difficulties that followed later, especially during the drought years of 1990 to 1994. In the 1988/89 financial year, 22% of the total government recurrent budget went to education (Williams, 1989).

The first impact of post-independence expansion of the secondary education system was felt in 1984 and 1986 when hundreds of thousands of students who had begun secondary education in 1980 had now completed their 'O'Levels and 'A' levels respectively. The large numbers of secondary school graduates became the tail that began to wag the dog of university enrolment.

The growing mass education at secondary school level therefore began to signify the coming of mass higher education as students began to compete for the few places that were available at the University of Zimbabwe and in other colleges of higher education (e.g. teachers colleges and polytechnics).

When the Zimbabwean government realised that it could not take into university all those who qualified on completion of their Upper Sixth form studies, it appointed the Williams Commission in 1989 in order to find ways of establishing how the educational needs at university level could be addressed. The commission recommended the establishment of a second University in Zimbabwe's second largest city of Bulawayo, with a bias towards science and technology. It also recommended the establishment of private universities that would operate subject to certain safeguards which would ensure that the interests of the government as well as those of the people of Zimbabwe would be protected.

Subsequent to the publication of this report, the National Council for Higher Education Act was passed in 1990 by the Zimbabwe Parliament. As soon as the Act was passed, the irresistible rising tide of university expansion began due to the insatiable demand for higher education by those who had passed their 'A' levels but could not enter the University of Zimbabwe which had insufficient places to absorb all of them.

Despite budgetary deficits, the government felt compelled to establish a second university. The National University of Science and Technology (NUST) was therefore established in 1992, even before buildings could be put up for it. Students were placed in different locations wherever government had existing buildings. In the same year, the American Methodist Church established Africa University in Mutare while the Seventh-Day Adventist Church decided to turn Solusi College on the outskirts of Bulawayo into a fully-fledged university in 1994.

In 1993, the University of Zimbabwe also established the College of Distance Education which within two years had enrolled over 3 000 students.

More recently in 1996, the Bindura University College of Science Education was also established. Zimbabwe continues to ride the crest of the rising tide of university expansion as plans are also underway to turn Gweru Teachers College and Masvingo Teachers College into fully-fledged university colleges offering degrees.

There are also plans to establish the Zimbabwe Open University (*Herald*, August 19, 1996) which is aimed at serving both Zimbabwe and the international community. The Anglican Church has also made plans to host a private University in Chivhu (*Herald*, 1996) while plans by the Catholic Church to establish another private university near Harare Airport are at an advanced stage. (*Herald*, November 22, 1996).

It is against this background that this paper seeks to analyse the implications of university expansion in Zimbabwe. In particular, the article analyses the equity arguments supporting and opposing such expansion.

## **Arguments Supporting Expansion**

### **(a) General Reasons**

It is a known fact that the government of Zimbabwe, despite economic constraints has made a commitment to expand the availability of education at all levels. It can be argued that an educated nation is a civilised nation. Since independence in 1980, government policy with regard to educational expansion has been based on the premise that education is a fundamental human right as well as being basic to economic growth.

The citizens of Zimbabwe, in pressing the government for educational expansion also see it as the key to employment in the modern economic sector. There has been clearly a compelling range of social and economic advantages that have come to many Zimbabweans as a result of the vitality of the education system. The income-generating potential of activities such as agriculture in the rural areas and other informal sector initiatives

**(b) Political Reasons**

Another reason used for supporting university expansion is simply political. There has been a lot of pressure on politicians over the last six years from their constituents who wanted places for the growing backlog of 'A' level leavers who met the minimum university admission requirements but due to the stiff competition at the University of Zimbabwe could not be offered these places. This type of pressure has opened the way for universities in specific regions by both government and religious organisations. In 1996 the Minister of Higher Education directed the Vice Chancellor at the University of Zimbabwe to work out ways of increasing enrolment due to this pressure which it is feared, could bring political instability. Such a decision, no doubt, has the effect of reducing the pool of disenchanting qualified 'A' level school leavers who would otherwise be a social problem to the politicians and society in general.

Many people also believe that expanding the university system will be one way to resolve disharmony among ethnic groups, politicians, scholars, and the clergy as each group has the freedom to build its own university or attend the university that will meet its needs.

**(c) Social Reasons**

It is often said that increasing student enrolment at universities is an important symbolic act that not only reaffirms the fundamental system of equal rights and justice, but also gives such universities international credibility, especially if careful attention is given to academic standards and the criteria used for access to the university system. Another positive outcome of university expansion, it is argued, are the benefits often associated with a more educated populace. If the country has more trained teachers, an over-supply of doctors, more qualified engineers, accountants, agriculturists etc, greater returns to society would be achieved. Besides, a more informed and knowledgeable society would be created.

have been severely hampered over the years by factors such as unpredictable weather (e.g. the drought of 1992-1993), scarcity of land, unpredictable markets, lack of capital, poor management, poorly implemented policies on rural development, and poor reward structures for those who, although uneducated, wish to work hard. It is also universally accepted that many people who have come from the lower ranks of society have ended up in positions of privilege, status and economic benefits due to the education system which acts as a mechanism for upward mobility.

The need to expand the education system is therefore simply a result of the realisation that a close relationship exists between education and formal sector employment. Other alternatives to wage employment open to most of the uneducated citizens seem to be unreliable. It is also a known fact that remuneration for most wage employment in professional areas which demand educational qualifications often exceeds the income-earning potential of other initiatives. When the government announced free primary education for all in September 1980, even though attendance was not compulsory, enrolments soared from 819,586 in 1980 to 2,251,319 within the first eight years of independence, according to the 1988 Annual Report of the Secretary for Education. Although secondary education was not free, there was even a greater enrolment explosion as numbers soared from just 66,215 at independence to 604,652 in 1987. Although this number began to stabilise after the first ten years of independence, enrolments continued to rise. By 1996 there were 751,349 students enrolled in secondary schools throughout Zimbabwe as day scholars while another 78,175 students enrolled as boarders (see Table 1).

It can also be argued that by providing mass education to almost all school-going age children in Zimbabwe, a higher output of those who qualify for university intake is yielded and therefore only quality students with high points at 'A' level can be selected from a much wider base. With more and more students entering university, it can also be argued that the elitist ethos often associated with university graduates will eventually be abandoned.

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**Table 1: Summary of Secondary School Enrolment Throughout Zimbabwe in 1996**

	I		II		III		IV		LVI		UVI		SPECIAL		TOTAL		BOARDERS	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
<b>Harare</b>	11994	11762 23756	11478	10981 22459	11454	9953 20407	9589	8663 18252	2207	1251 3858	2074	1153 3227	200	162 362	47996	43925 91921	1685	1254 2939
<b>Manicaland</b>	18676	16014 34690	16534	13701 30235	14958	11554 26512	12866	8484 22550	779	547 1326	750	487 1237	0	8 8	64563	51795	7858	6860 14818
<b>Mas. Cent.</b>	7933	6329 14262	6923	5244 12167	6538	4296 10834	5197	3171 8368	299	187 486	279	166 445	0	0 0	27169	19393 46562	2532	1835 4367
<b>Mash. East</b>	14219	12874 27093	12956	11039 23995	11791	9509 21300	10097	7214 17311	622	447 1069	650	429 1079	17	33 50	50352	41545 91897	8126	7094 15220
<b>Mash. West</b>	11614	9684 21298	10160	8085 18245	9568	7054 16622	7864	5072 12936	385	134519	335	140 475	22	31 53	39948	30200 70148	3004	2126 5130
<b>Masvingo</b>	16316	14226 30542	15019	12435 27454	14506	11485 25991	12477	9219 21696	576	288 864	557	316 873	71	40 111	59522	48009	5379	4394 9973
<b>Mat. North</b>	11434	12367 23801	9775	10619 20394	8824	9323 18147	7488	7578 15066	779	782 1581	795	713 1508	0	0 0	39115	41382 80497	3258	3704 6962
<b>Mat. South</b>	6374	6896 13270	5689	6214 11903	4734	5205 9939	3911	3887 7798	418	158 576	350	178 528	9	3 12	21485	22541 44026	4723	4457 9180
<b>Midlands</b>	14995	14613 29608	13446	12500 25946	13340	11428 24768	11046	8765 19811	754	454 1208	652	386 1038	22	8 30	54255	48154 102409	5125	4461 9386
<b>Total</b>	113555 218320	104765	101980	90818 192798	94713	79807 174520	80535	63053 143588	6839	4248 11087	6442	3968 10410	341	285 626	404405	346944 751349	41690	36485 78175

Source: Ministry of Education: Secretary's Report of 1996-Summary



University expansion prevents the illusion that higher education should remain the domain of the privileged few. With expansion, equity of access becomes a benefit to those from poor family backgrounds instead of only those from the advantaged.

#### **(d) Economic Reasons**

Another view given by those who support university expansion is that it is better to accommodate as many students as possible in order to save the foreign currency that might be spent by those who end up pursuing university education in other countries after failing to get places at local universities. According to Mugabe (1993) the government of Zimbabwe was spending over \$163 million in foreign currency every year which was being paid to foreign institutions such as the University of South Africa (UNISA) by Zimbabwean students who had found it difficult to enrol at local universities.

Not only does the education abroad result in the loss of significant foreign currency, but for those students who actually go abroad to seek university education, the chances that they will return to Zimbabwe become diminished. The problem of the 'brain-drain' has often been associated with overseas training particularly when the duration of training or study is long (Maliya-Mkono, Ishumi, & Wells, 1982). It is therefore argued that if students are trained locally, they will most likely seek employment locally on completion of their studies.

From an economic perspective, it is also argued that expansion of universities compels administrators to utilise facilities and human resources that are available more efficiently. With more students, more tuition fees could be collected for the same lectures and the same lecture hours that were given to fewer students in the past, but careful attention needs to be given to quality.

## Arguments Opposing Expansion

### (a) General Reasons

Although the Williams Report of 1989 recommended the establishment of another university, it also pointed out that for the 1988/89 financial year, 22% of the total government recurrent budget went to education as a result of the expansion that took place after independence. University education in Zimbabwe is heavily subsidised by government. Even those Zimbabwean students in private universities use government grants and loans to pay for their studies. It is therefore argued that university expansion takes a lot of money from the tax-payer and that university education should only be a privilege for those who can afford to pay for it. The most obvious argument against expansion is therefore financial since the money required to subsidise this growth has to be diverted from other important developmental projects or alternatively, it must come from an increased taxation of all salaried workers.

Another argument often levelled against university expansion is that standards will be lowered and that the quality of the graduates will be compromised. As more students are enrolled, the criteria for selection is lowered and more students will fail, write supplementary examinations, repeat, or drop out. This has an adverse effect on resources as academic staff maybe required to do remedial work, more paper-work including writing of extra examinations and other time-consuming tasks may need to be performed. It is often argued that the quantity of students and the quality of education have an inverse relationship.

Expansion may make it difficult for faculties to do a proper screening of students. Because of the large numbers, marking of assignments becomes an almost impossible task. Examination results consequently become unreliable as staff find it difficult to cope with the large numbers.

Mass produced graduates, it is argued, are often ill-prepared to make any significant contributions to the fast changing economic and technological aspects of the Zimbabwean industry. For instance, most graduates leave

university before they have acquired any knowledge on how to use a computer or how to access internet and e-mail due to the fact that their respective universities, due to economic constraints could not afford the acquisition of these facilities from which the students could be trained.

Many universities already operate with a shortage of staff. This in itself creates a problem for expansion as staff are compelled to take on extra students for no extra compensation. This often results in low morale, lack of motivation, and minimised ability to conduct any research on the part of staff. The nonavailability of qualified staff may therefore be the most critical factor militating against the expansion of universities.

### **(b) Economic Reasons**

With expansion, more buildings which include classrooms, dining halls, hostel accommodation, and laboratories will be required. If these are not made available, enrolled students will have to be over-crowded in small lecture rooms and up to six may have to sleep in rooms originally designed for two in the halls of residence.

On completion of their studies, the graduates may find themselves competing for jobs in an already over-crowded labour market. Graduates in fields that the economy is unable to employ often become disenchanted and it is often these who become a strong political force in the same way that the unaccommodated university applicants are.

It is a known fact that an ideal university should have student-staff ratios that will allow some individual attention to the development of research and analytic skills. Lecturers and tutors should have more contact hours with individual students in order to cater for individual needs, but it seems, universities can no longer afford to employ adequate numbers of staff to deal with this important area. By the same token, research boards are no longer properly funded in order to meet the funding of important research which is crucial for national development.

It is not unusual to see only two or three same-titled books available in university libraries which are meant to be read by over 500 students over a short period. Library facilities are simply inadequate mainly due to economic reasons. At the time of writing this article, the University of Zimbabwe was still struggling to computerise its libraries. It is ironical that the same university administration, when considering applications from other colleges for associate or affiliate status, always insists on the institutions having adequate library facilities, yet it does not appear to appreciate its own inadequate facilities.

Some departments in universities, due to lack of funds, have gone for years without photocopying facilities or computers which in this day and age are essential tools of the trade. The photocopying of even important documents such as examination papers and other confidential reports ends up being done by outsiders who have nothing to do with the activities of these departments. Not only is confidential information likely to end up in the wrong hands if this continues, but this practice invariably renders most of these departments inefficient since most of their work is done by people whom they have no control over.

Table 2: Summary of University of Zimbabwe

Students Enrolment Statistics for 1996

UNDER-GRADUATES DEGREES, DIPLOMAS	AGRIC		ARTS		COMM.		EDUC.		ENG.		LAW		F	MEDICINE		SCIENCE		SOC. ST.		VET. SC.		TOTAL	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F		M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
TOTAL	202	75	604	391	390	238	262	87	648	48	147	78	495	249	573	190	657	427	86	24	4064	1807	5871
TOTAL UNDER GRADUATES	202	75	767	439	390	238	355	169	648	48	147	78	614	347	717	456	717	456	86	24	4516	2060	6582
TOTAL POST GRADUATES	43	14	104	33	125	18	277	144	18	1	2	22	63	44	141	55	141	55	6	3	911	361	1272
OVERALL TOTAL	245	89	871	503	515	256	634	313	666	49	152	101	677	391	861	513	861	513	92	30	5444	2408	7912
ENTREPRENEURSHIP FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION																							
TOTAL																					2204	948	3152
DIPLOMA IN APPLIED ACCOUNTANCY																					161	39	200
JUSTICE																					109	12	121
GRAND TOTAL																						11385	

In 1996, the University of Zimbabwe had a total enrolment of 7,912 full-time undergraduate and post-graduate students, compared to 7,231 in 1993 while those enrolled to study through Distance Education totalled 3,152. The Bindura University College of Science Education, had 121 students making a total of 11,385 students enrolled in 1996 (see summary in Table 2). A government directive to increase these enrolment figures in 1997 and 1998 was issued, despite the budgetary deficits which have prevented the expansion and improvement of existing facilities. It is a matter of time before the newly established private universities are faced with similar budgetary deficits.

#### **(c) Political Reasons**

It has often been argued that many politicians are advocating the expansion of universities in their home areas or constituencies, not because these universities are desperately needed there, but simply to appease their constituencies in order to get votes and to be seen to be doing something by the electorate. Such expansion, at the expense of the taxpayer, it is argued, is a waste of money and an unnecessary creation of buildings which might end up as white elephants – all in the name of ‘development’.

#### **(d) Social Reasons**

It is also argued that when too many people hold degrees, the social fabric of society is eroded as the degree holders lose respect of their own cultural and traditional values in favour of Western social ideals. This is probably the reason why most of those with degrees prefer to live in urban centres as opposed to rural areas where the extended family respect for elders and other traditional African values are still the norm. Degree holders, it is argued, become arrogant and lose respect for almost anything that is African.

## Conclusion

From the above account, it becomes evident that one of the most serious educational problems faced by the government of Zimbabwe since independence has been how to deal with the demand for education that far exceeds what is available in terms of classroom space. The problem becomes particularly obvious when those who have completed secondary school fail to get university places despite having met university entry requirements. This is also compounded by their failure to get jobs. A few of them end up taking courses in technical and vocational education while others go to teacher-training institutions. The rest are seen loitering in the streets of the country's cities, wondering what to do next. This problem is not isolated to Zimbabwe only. In Botswana the school-leaver problem is a well-known phenomenon (Mautle, 1994). In Kenya, the Presidential working party of 1988 which was commissioned by President Moi directed the Minister for Education and the vice chancellors of the four national universities to work out ways of admitting most of the 13,000 qualified students who had been left out in the selection process. A decision was then made to increase university intake after appeals and pressure from affected parents was brought to bear on Kenyan politicians (Hughes & Mwiria, 1990). In Zimbabwe, while church-related organisations may have established universities for reasons other than merely to expand the university system, the government has welcomed this as a way of relieving itself from the pressure of expanding its own institutions in view of the budgetary deficits. There is no doubt, however, that both government and private university graduates will soon be faced with another kind of pressure, that is the pressure of an economy which creates high-level employment at a rate insufficient to adequately absorb these graduates.

The significant economic demands of expanding educational opportunities for all will inevitably choke out other governmental efforts such as land resettlement, rural development, health delivery for all, and employment creation. However, it is well documented that expansion of mass higher education has become a global phenomenon as has also been seen in Nigeria and India in the past two decades. This has the advantage

of breaking away higher education from its 'elitist' tradition but unfortunately, the quality of university education may in the process be compromised through this influx of students. As mentioned earlier, new problems may also be created in the labour market. There is also evidence of decline in the per capita support for universities. Expanding universities, unfortunately, does not always mean expanding employment opportunities.

However, for governments to survive, educational planning becomes a political matter. For this reason, not all planning is rational as it becomes an intense political endeavour that touches upon the government's legitimacy. No doubt, there is need for a national dialogue to determine the direction which Zimbabwe should take regarding university expansion. There has got to be a way of solving how higher education should be financed in future and what should happen to those school leavers not admitted to higher education. The current system needs to be overhauled in order to accommodate new realities. Experts in the field of education together with policy makers ought to get together this challenge.

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