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Celebrating 60 Years of University Expansion in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

In the spirit of celebrating Zimbabwe's higher education and the inspiration coming from the University of Zimbabwe, the country's first university, which is currently enjoying 60 years of existence since its inception, this article focuses on the history of university expansion throughout Zimbabwe. 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 argument 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

Although the University of Zimbabwe had been in existence since February, 1955, the need for university expansion was not felt until 35 years later as enrolment at this institution was limited to a privileged few during that period. 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 between 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 realized 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 interest of the government such as quality control 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 (now known as Zimbabwe Open University) which within two years had enrolled over 3 000 students.

In 1996, the Bindura University College of Science Education was also established. Much later, the rising tide of university expansion reached greater heights as plans were also underway to turn Gweru Teachers College and Masvingo Teachers College into fully-fledged university colleges offering degrees. These have now become Midlands State University and Great Zimbabwe University respectively.

In 1996, The College of Distance Education became Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) while in the same year, yet another university, the Catholic University was established near Harare Airport (*The Herald*, November 22, 1996).

Pros and cons of university expansion

General reasons for university expansion

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 civilized 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 the basis 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 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 educational system which acts as a mechanism for upward mobility.

The need to expand the education system is therefore simply a result of the realization 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.

Political reasons for university expansion

Another reason used for supporting university expansion is simply political. There has been a lot of pressure on politicians over the last twenty 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 ways for universities in specific regions by both government and religious organisations. In 1996 the Ministry 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 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. In 2012, the government also established the Marondera College of Agricultural Science and Technology under the University of Zimbabwe as another political move to please the people of that region.

Social reasons for university expansion

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 give 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, is 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.

Table 1
Summary of Secondary School Enrolment throughout Zimbabwe in 1996

	I		II		III		IV		V		VI		SPECIAL		TOTAL		BOARDERS	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Home Total	11994	11762	11478	10981	11151	9953	9589	8663	2201	1251	2074	1153	200	162	4796	4705	1685	1254
	23756		22459		21097		18257		3456		3227		362		91021		2919	
Manicaland Total	18676	16014	16534	13701	14958	11554	12866	8454	379	547	750	487	0	8	64563	51795	2858	6960
	34690		30235		26512		22150		1326		1237		8		116358		4483	
 Mash Central Total	7931	6329	6923	5244	6538	4296	5197	3171	299	496	279	186	0	0	27169	19393	2521	1835
	14262		12167		10814		8368		795		485		0		46567		4367	
 Mash East Total	14219	12874	12956	11039	11791	9589	10897	7214	622	1069	650	429	17	33	50152	41345	8176	7084
	27093		23695		21000		17111		1699		1079		50		91897		15770	
 Mash West Total	11614	9684	10169	8085	9568	7054	864	5072	385	134	535	140	22	31	99948	30201	3094	2126
	21298		18345		16622		12916		519		475		53		70148		5130	
 Masvingo Total	16316	14226	15019	12435	14706	11485	12477	9219	578	288	657	316	71	40	59522	48069	5379	4594
	30542		27454		26091		21696		864		973		111		107531		9975	
 Mat North Total	11444	12167	9775	10619	8821	8323	7388	7578	779	782	795	714	0	0	9115	41382	4258	1704
	23611		20394		18147		15066		1581		1508		0		30497		6962	
 Mat South Total	6374	6096	5609	6214	4754	5265	6912	3887	418	158	350	178	9	1	21385	22541	4223	4457
	12370		11903		9919		7998		576		528		12		44026		9180	
 Midlands Total	14895	14613	13446	12500	13340	11428	11046	8767	754	454	652	386	22	8	54255	46154	5125	4461
	29508		25946		24768		19811		1208		1038		30		102409		9586	
Total Grand Total	113555	104765	103960	96818	98713	89007	80535	63053	6839	2248	6442	3865	341	285	404405	346944	41890	36485
	218320		192798		174520		143588		11087		10410		626		71349		78175	

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

University expansion prevents the illusion that higher education should remain in 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.

Economic reasons for university expansion

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, 2002). 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.

General reasons against university expansion

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 subsidized by government. Even those Zimbabwean students in private university use government grants and loans to pay for their studies. The salaries of lecturers and their support staff also come from the government. 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 university, 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 minimized ability to conduct any research on the part of staff. The non-availability of qualified staff may therefore be the most critical factor militating against the expansion of universities.

Economic reasons against university expansion

With expansion, more buildings which include classroom, 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 un-accommodated 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 for 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 fully computerize 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 adequate equipment such as power point projectors, 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 Student Enrolment Statistics for 1996

UNIVERSITY GRADUATES DEGREE DIPLOMAS	AGRICULTURE		ARTS		COMMERCE		EDUCATION		ENGINEERING		LAW		MEDICINE		SCIENCE		SOCIAL SCIENCES		TELE SCIENCE		TOTAL		GRAND 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	78	661	309	398	274	262	87	638	48	14	75	498	249	873	196	657	437	86	74	4063	1967	6030
TOTAL UNIVERSITY GRADUATES	202	78	661	309	398	274	262	87	638	48	14	75	498	249	873	196	657	437	86	74	4063	1967	6030
TOTAL POST GRADUATES	44	14	104	33	135	48	177	111	48	1	7	72	63	44	141	55	741	55	6	1	913	94	1007
OVERALL TOTAL	246	92	765	342	533	322	373	198	716	49	21	147	561	293	1014	251	1198	492	92	75	4976	2061	7037
CENTRE FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION																							
TOTAL																						3152	3152
BINDURA UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF SCIENCE EDUCATION																						121	121
GRAND TOTAL																						11385	11385

Source: University of Zimbabwe Admissions Office 1997

In 1996 the University of Zimbabwe had a total enrolment of 7912 full-time undergraduate and post-graduate students, compared to 7231 in 1993 while those enrolled to study through Distance Education totalled 3152. The Bindura University college of Science Education had 121 students making a total of 11385 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 private universities are faced with similar budgetary deficits.

Political reasons against university expansion

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'. Although the government at the moment seems to be struggling to pay its employees in state universities, there is talk about the establishment of the University of Manicaland. Pressure has been mounted on the current Minister of Higher Education who hails from that region to establish a university there.

Social reasons against university expansion

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 ideas. 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. It is also argued that in this day and age where there are thousands of holders of doctorate degrees, the value this level of education held in the past is no longer the same.

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 were 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 reliving 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 to deal with this challenge. After all it is 60 years since the University of Zimbabwe was established.

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