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Private Universities in Zimbabwe: The Case of Africa University

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Abstract

In 1992, Africa University had the unique experience of being the first institution to be granted a charter by the government of Zimbabwe to operate as a private university. The university operates as a church-related private and Pan-African institution. Over the years, the nature of the university has brought with it many challenges. Whilst many of these challenges are shared with other private universities in Zimbabwe, a few are peculiar to Africa University. This paper discusses Africa University's experience with regard to establishment, nature, institutional marketing and student recruitment, programmes, governance, funding and other external factors with the view of identifying some of the challenges for private universities in Zimbabwe.

Introduction

Africa University, chartered in 1992, had the unique experience of being the first private university to be established in Zimbabwe. As the first private university, some aspects of its experience, and hence challenges may not be shared by all other private universities operating in Zimbabwe. However, there are many other aspects of Africa University's experience and challenges that would be common with other private universities in Zimbabwe.

This article intends to share the Africa University experience as a private university with the view to identifying some of the challenges for private universities in Zimbabwe. Specifically, the article addresses the challenges to the University posed by the following; establishment, nature, institutional

marketing and student recruitment, programmes, governance, funding and other external challenges.

Establishment

The impetus towards the establishment of Africa University started with African Bishops of the United Methodist Church in 1984 when they invited their colleagues at the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry to contribute to the provision of higher education in Africa. At that conference, the African bishops, including Bishop Emilio de Carvalho of Angola and Bishop Arthur Kulah of Liberia, deplored the efforts of the United Methodist Church (hereinafter also referred to as the Church) in the provision of higher education on the continent of Africa. It was noted, at the time, that although the Church had made great strides in the provision of educational facilities for primary, secondary and teacher training, there was not a single university of the Church on the continent of Africa. In addition, the Bishops noted that that the Church had invested as substantial amount of resources in building universities and other institutions of higher in Latin America, North America and Asia among others, but no such Church institution existed in Africa. The revelation touched the hearts of Bishops and members of the Church worldwide. A commitment was made by the General Conference of the Church to establish a university on the continent of Africa.

A Site Selection Committee visited six African countries in 1987 to select the appropriate location for Africa University. Finally, Old Mutare in Zimbabwe was selected as the location of Africa University. A 1545-acre land at Old Mutare was donated by the Zimbabwe Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church for the establishment of the University. In 1988, the General Conference of the United Methodist Church held in St. Louis, Missouri, USA gave the final approval to the establishment of the university as a private,

United Methodist Church-related, Pan African institution of higher learning.

Once a site had been selected and land for the institution had been obtained, the university needed a charter in order to become operational. The first challenge that the university faced was getting the government to permit it to operate as a private institution of higher learning. When the request was made to the government of Zimbabwe for permission to operate the university, the government was uncertain as to what to do because there was no legal framework to accommodate the operation of private universities. The government of Zimbabwe at the time, just like many other governments in Africa, did not have a clear notion about the nature, role and demands of such universities, and hence how to relate to one. The period 1987-1992 saw the government of Zimbabwe grappling with the nature, the need for, and the role of a private university in Zimbabwe through a Commission set up by the government. Eventually, in January 1992, after about five years of reflection, the government of Zimbabwe granted a Charter to Africa University (Statutory Instrument 29 of 1009 in terms of the National Council for Higher Education Act 32/90) as the first private University in Zimbabwe.

Through the experience with Africa University, the government of Zimbabwe acquired more understanding of private universities and has since 1992 more readily approved the establishment and operation of other private universities in Zimbabwe. What Africa University went through in getting recognized by the government in the process of its establishment may not be a big challenge for new private universities in Zimbabwe now. However, it could be a big challenge for private universities in other African countries where private universities are yet to be established.

The university started operating with forty students from six different African

countries in mid-March 1992 in the two Faculties of Agriculture and Natural Resources which had three quarters of the students, and Theology. However, the official opening of the university took place on 23 April 1994. President Robert Mugabe officially opened the university at which time he was awarded the first degree of the university, an Honorary Doctors' degree

Nature

Africa University is a church-related, private, and Pan-African institution of higher learning. It is church-related in that it is not church-owned or church-controlled. In special circumstances, such as qualification for admissions or appointment in the Faculty of Theology, the Charter makes room for religious backgrounds to be considered. Other than that, the university is completely free to make its academic and non-academic decisions without reference to the Church. Students admitted to the university and staff employed by the university need not be members of the Church. In fact, the university has staff and students who come from many religious backgrounds, including Catholic and non-Christian backgrounds such as Muslim. Staff members are also free to pursue teaching and research in a very free environment where the Church does not, in any way, influence the subject of the content of teaching and research.

Where a private university is church-owned or church-controlled, there could be problems relating to the degree of academic freedom in the institution. Staff members may feel restricted in their pursuit of knowledge through research and teaching although such feelings could be more the result in a less than completely objective pursuit of knowledge.

Africa University is private, in the sense that it does not receive any subventions

or financial support from the Zimbabwean or from any other African government. It operates largely on support from the worldwide United Methodist Church, plus some donations from various agencies and of course student fees. As support from the Church begins to dwindle, as it will, the university will be expected to operate on endowments and student fees. Currently, the challenge facing the university is to build up sufficient amounts in its endowment fund to enable the university to sustain its future operations. This is a big challenge because the university needs funds for its current operations, but some these funds have to be put away towards the endowment.

Africa University is a Pan-African institution of higher learning in that it consciously attempts to gear its programmes and activities towards meeting the needs of continental Africa, and not necessarily any one specific country. Consistent with its Pan-African orientation, although there is no explicit policy, the university attempt to attract top academics and researchers from all over Africa. A major challenge in this endeavour relates to how to entice such top scholars to leave their countries or wherever they are to come and work at the university. Efforts in this direction are often undermined by the macroeconomic conditions in the country. *Immigration requirements also impose constraints that undermine the ability of the university to bring in qualified international staff.* For example, the immigration requirement for work permits for international staff that does not allow for tenure and thus debar such staff from receiving pension., undermines job security for international staff. Within the country, there is competition from State universities and private corporations as well as greener pastures outside the country for such highly qualified Zimbabweans needed by Africa University and other private universities in the country. Private universities thus need to be very highly competitive in order to attract the highly qualified staff from both within and outside Zimbabwe needed for their operations.

Institutional marketing and student recruitment

In line with its Pan-African nature, the university makes conscious efforts to admit students from all over Africa. In fact, during negotiations with the government of Zimbabwe regarding the composition of the student body, it was generally agreed that a proportion of 40% Zimbabwean and 60% international would be ideal. Currently the university is very far from achieving this goal since it has only about 22% of students from other African countries. However, we are pleased with the fact that in the 1999/ 2000 academic year, these students represented as many as sixteen (16) African countries.

One of the biggest challenges Africa University faces has been attracting students from both Zimbabwe and other African countries. The university has to compete for students with government institutions where students pay very little due to heavy subsidies from government. Given the general poverty in Africa with parents and guardians having very little money, student prefer going to government institutions where there are nominal or no fees charged.

The university also faces challenge of student recruitment as a result of lack of appropriate infrastructure in many of the countries from which the university obtains its students. For example, lack of efficient postal systems and limited internet facilities militate against the university's efforts to reach a large number of prospective students in several African countries. For this reason, the university has been working through various diplomatic missions in an attempt to reach students but unfortunately these missions also face some difficulties. The university has also used United Methodist Church Conferences as avenues for reaching prospective students. The risk in the use of such recruitment channel is that the number of prospective candidates to be reached could be restricted to those from United Methodist Churches.

It is essential that as a higher educational institution. Africa University needs to

have an aggressive marketing and student recruitment strategy aimed at reaching most, if not all prospective candidates. In this way, the university would be able to increase the pool of students from whom to select because there could be many well—qualified and financially capable students who may not be aware of our existence. This is a challenge that Africa University and other private universities in the country still face.

Programmes

One effective way of meeting the challenge relating to the recruitment of student is to have high quality and relevant programmes that will attract students in spite of the relatively high of attending a private university. Private universities need to move into areas of high relevance to the needs of African nations. At Africa University, providing such relevant and high quality programmes is not only meant to meet the challenge of attracting students. It also meets the challenge of our mission, namely, to provide higher education of high quality that is buttressed in Christian values towards the preparation of a new leadership of African nations.

At Africa University the current five faculties of Agriculture and Natural Resources, Education, Humanities and Social Sciences, Management and Administration and Theology have responded quite well to the needs of Africa by developing a number of very relevant undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes. These programmes include those leading to degrees in Agriculture. Arts, Business, Education and Theology have attracted students from Zimbabwe and other African countries.

The Board of Directors of Africa University has recently approved the establishment of a Faculty of Medical Sciences that would begin with programmes for para-professional health officers with a full-fledged medical

degree programme to follow. There are plans to establish a Faculty of Science and Technology soon. It is anticipated that Distance Education programmes in various fields of endeavour will also be introduced in the near future. These new endeavours are likely to attract more and more students to the university in the future.

Governance

Since African universities have traditionally been state owned, government appointees have often dominated their governing bodies or Councils. The Chancellors of these state universities have also often been the Heads of State. Many African governments are yet to come to the realization that private universities need to have their independent Councils composed of those deemed appropriate by those universities.

Africa University opted to use the concept of the Board of Directors rather than a Council for its governing body. Members of the Board of Directors represent many African countries, and there are some members from the United States and Europe. In its bid to meet the challenge of ensuring that all stakeholders are represented in the decision making process of the university, the Board has representations from staff; Senate and students of the university. The government, with two members on the Board, has been very accommodating in its influence over the operation of the university.

Funding

Funding is a challenge that faces all universities, both private and public, in Africa. It has been argued that “Private universities offer a way of diversification without adding to government costs” in the provision of higher education in Africa (Amonoo-Neizer, 1998:305). But in order for private universities to take on the challenge of contributing effectively to reducing

costs on government in the provision of higher education, these universities have to come to grips with the issue of how they can fund themselves. At Africa University, a number of strategies have been instituted towards raising funds from other sources. It should be realized that we are talking about funds for operational and recurrent activities. Funding for capital projects and other major undertakings of the university are derived from various donations and grants that we believe would continue. One of these strategies of raising funds for recurrent expenditures is that in the long run, the university aims at having student tuition fees contribute at least 60% of its operational funds. The university is attempting to achieve this by raising the fees reasonably well for those who can afford to pay to do so, while soliciting funds from various sources to support the genuinely poor but academically capable students.

A major challenge faced by the university at its initial stages had to do with selling the concept of a private university to prospective students and their parents/guardians. The idea of the student paying substantially towards his/her education at university level was not a familiar concept in Africa in the early 1990's, and is not fully appreciated even now. In fact, in the first few years of its operation, Africa University virtually had to pay students to attend the university. No user fees were charged and students were given living allowances as well as allowances for books. Insisting on the payment of user fees at the time would have spelt the doom for the university since it could not have attracted sufficient number of qualified at the time we wanted it to start operating.

When the student populations increased it became impossible for the university to sustain that sort of support for all students. The university began to orient the students towards what was meant by a private university and the need to change

fees. The introduction of fees was not well received by students, and a major conflict arose between students and the university. Eventually reason prevailed, and students accepted the need for them to contribute something towards their education. However, the university continues to face still resistance whenever it tries to adjust its tuition fees to economic levels. All the same, we still believe that we are in the right direction. We thus hope that students and their parents/ guardians would come to accept the realities of the situation and come to our side as we gradually increase fees towards our goal of deriving 60% of operational funds from tuition fees.

Additionally, subsidies on various services such as accommodation, meals, examinations, and registrations are gradually being removed so that these services would become self-sustaining. The university is also encouraging programmes that can be self-supporting to operate as such. Thus, programmes like the full-time and part-time Masters in Business Administration (MBA) that attract financially capable candidates are being offered at charges that bring in some income to the university.

Research and consultancy activities are other areas that have been identified for fund raising by universities. Africa University is not at this time extensively engaged in these activities. However, these areas could become major sources of funding if staff members are given time and resources to do these. There are universities that have established units specifically for these activities with staff and departments getting a percentage of funds they raise through their research and consultancy activities.

Other external challenges

Africa University, like other institutions of higher learning in Africa, is confronted with a number of other challenges from its external environment that it has to meet, if it is to be seen as relevant. Among these are access to higher education, impact of the HIV/ AIDS pandemic, natural disasters, and the issue of leadership, peace and governance. Africa University has made a conscious decision to respond to these challenges.

Access to higher education

With the increase in the number of universities in many African countries since independence, access to higher education has improved. However, there is still room for improvement in access to higher education in many African countries. Available records (UNDP, 1994) indicate that in the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) Region, tertiary gross enrolment ratios in 1990 ranged from a low of 0.2% in Mozambique to a high of 4.5% in Zimbabwe with no records available for South Africa. If we compare these figures to those reported by UNDP (1994) for other countries like Canada (66% in 1991), Chile (20.6% in 1990), Republic of Korea (37.7% in 1990) and Indonesia (9.2% in 1990) it can be seen that access to tertiary education the SADC Region is very low. Such low access to tertiary education is true of the whole of Africa, particularly sub-Saharan Africa. Access to higher education is, therefore, a challenge in all countries of Africa. Access to higher education by female students in Africa is even more limited and hence poses a greater challenge in the provision of higher education. (Imahe, 1998)

Although Africa University is a private higher educational institution, and depends on student contributions as part of its income, the institution has to be sensitive to the challenge of access to higher education, and hence be prepared

to open its doors to under-presented groups in higher education. The university has been making deliberate attempts to attract such under-represented groups as women, the disabled and the poor. Africa University is vigorously doing its part to ensure that there is good representation of females in our student enrolment. Thus in the 1999/2000 academic year, female students constituted 43.8% of our student population.

To maintain high academic standards as well as to bring in all qualified students, irrespective of financial background into the university, Africa University has a number of awards to assist students in various categories of abilities and need. Normally students with high academic performance are given full scholarships that cover their tuition, boarding and all other fees. Other students are provided with various levels of financial assistance on the basis of their academic performance and established need. However, to enable students to appreciate the importance of work, all students who receive scholarships or other levels of financial assistance from the university are required to put in a minimum number of hours of work at various university work stations under the university's 'work study' programme.

Academically average students who demonstrate need are also given an opportunity to go to the university's 'work for pay' programme under which they undertake various types of work for remuneration from the university.

The impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic

The HIV-AIDS pandemic is a worldwide phenomenon but the degree of its devastation in Africa has made Africa stand-out in the pandemic. A recent United Nations Report noted that in the first ten months of 1998, Zambia lost 1,300 teachers. This was reported to represent approximately two thirds of all new teachers produced in Zambia in that year. In Zimbabwe, it was estimated the

HIV/AIDS pandemic was killing about 1, 200 people per week. The National AIDS Coordination Programme has reported that the HIV/AIDS adult prevalence rate of 20% in 1996 in Zimbabwe would rise to 22% in the year 2000 (Ministry of Health and Child Welfare, 1998). The impact of the prevalence of HIV/AIDS has been identified to include increasing costs of health care, reduction in quantity and quality of labour and fall in productivity (Ministry of Health and Child Welfare, 1998).

Higher educational institutions which have as their clientele the most sexually active members of society have to accept the pandemic as a challenge and institute programmes and actions directed at reducing the incidence. Africa University has put in place an aggressive HIV/ AIDS awareness programme including peer education activities among students.

Natural disasters

Africa has always lived with disasters of all kinds; floods, droughts, famines, and more recently a cyclone. As a continent, we need to be ready and well prepared for these emergencies. In response to the various disasters of Africa, the university has created an Outreach Office that has been running short-term programmes in Emergency and Disaster Management for workers in these areas from various parts of Africa and around the world. The programme was started in 1998 and so far over 200 people from all parts of Africa and from as far as Papua New Guinea, have benefited from the programme.

Leadership, peace and good governance

One of the challenges that the continent has been facing since African countries attained their independence has been related to leadership, peace and good governance. Wars are constantly being waged in various parts of the continent, while poverty and squalor are still prevalent in almost all parts of sub-Saharan

Africa. It has been argued at various fora and in many publications that mismanagement, nepotism and corruption have been among the major factors contributing to Africa's wars, poverty, squalor and underdevelopment in general. Africa University has identified itself with this challenge and has recently, in collaboration with United Nations units, initiated the process of establishing post-graduate programmes in Leadership, Peace and Governance.

Conclusion

Private universities constitute a new breed of institutions in Africa. Given the limited resources of the various African governments and the critical need for expanding access to higher education, private universities have the potential to play a pivotal role in the provision of higher education in Africa. However, from their establishment to their operations, private universities face a number of major challenges. Some of these challenges have been discussed in this paper using the case of Africa University. It is hoped that administrators of private universities would take on these challenges with determination and vigour with the hope of making a contribution to the qualitative development of higher education in Africa. In Zimbabwe, it is also hoped that the current trend towards a healthy partnership among the government, private universities and other providers will continue to be encouraged for the benefit of the nation. Such positive trends could become an example for other African countries.

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