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# **The Future of Higher Education in Zimbabwe: A Constantly Moving Target**

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## **Abstract**

*Higher education in Zimbabwe began in the 1950s with the establishment of the University of Zimbabwe (then known as the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland) being the first institution to offer university education. Since then there has been a rapid growth of universities, particularly after in 1990. What can be discerned from this growth of tertiary education is that the practice of imparting education to students is a consistently changing process in every society. What used to be traditional methods of imparting knowledge and skills to students are evolving, and Zimbabwe is not an exception to this change. The common brick and mortar institutions associated with modern education are now disrupted and at the same time complemented by new technologies. This disruption began with open distance learning. This article proffers insights into how the higher education (HE) system in Zimbabwe should continuously tap into this disruptive innovation initiated by new technologies. By constantly integrating new technologies in HE, Zimbabwe can maintain high standards associated with her globally renowned education system.*

## **Introduction**

Zimbabwe is currently the most literate country in Africa. This is a result of some very good education centred policies propagated, adopted and implemented at independence in 1980. The future of this highly rated education

in Africa and beyond lies in a strong higher education system. This is so against the stuck reality of the fact that the future of higher education in Zimbabwe is just but a constantly moving target. There are many reasons why the future of higher education is a constantly moving target. There are so many things that come in to impact in many ways and forms in higher education. These then help to shape and mould the future. For instance, in Zimbabwe, on one hand students are pondering over their future life after graduation. On the other hand, institutions of Higher Education (HE) are facing questions about their own future. Those questions need prompt answers so that the future of higher education which is a constantly moving target can be better targeted. This is happening at a time we are ceased with accepting the reality on the ground that the higher-education model of lecturing, cramming and examination has barely changed for centuries.

Zimbabwe is a developing country. Because of that, the country is in the midst of an increasingly rapid transformation in HE sector. This rapid and constant transformation is across many dimensions that include the purpose of education, the content that we teach to students, pedagogy and methodologies. There are also factors that impact on HE. Some of those directly impacting on higher education are the massive open online courses (MOOCs), open educational resources (OERs), new learning styles, mounting financial and sustainability pressures and the need for higher education to be the leader for sustainable socio-economic growth, development and transformation. These are impacting in one way or another on our education landscape. It means the hands of higher education leaders are kept full because they are constantly developing new strategies to leverage across these developing challenges and opportunities. Technology, social change and the decades-long trend of ever-increasing cost have left us with many unanswered questions, multiple

challenges and, of course, the need to be highly innovative in an educational culture that tends to be wary of change (Doss, 2015).

### **Students are the common denominator in higher education**

As Zimbabwe moves in the future, its higher education must be leading the way and pointing at the direction the socio-economic trajectories of the country must take. However, it has to be pointed out that in all what has to be done, it must be emphasised time and again that the common denominator amidst all these challenges and opportunities are the students. The students are the reason why we have a vibrant HE sector. They are the reason why we are in existence as an education prioritising nation. In that context, the future of higher education must be concerned first and foremost with the student in mind because they are the common denominator. It should be clear in the mind of everybody as to what should be taught in HE institutions. The student is the first answer if we ask whether our future is bright or is bleak.

### **What should students learn?**

Going into the future, it must be clear as to what students must learn when they should enrol in any of our HE institutions. The question of what students should learn is very important and it needs a convincing answer from all of us leading higher education. According to Doss (2015) critical thinking, wisdom, ethics, creativity, complex problem solving and the ability to produce are the skill sets that matter in the long term. This stance appears to be supported by Futurist Forum (2015), who put an argument that today's students are multi-disciplinary especially in science and technology. Futurist Forum (2015) then goes on to make the following argument to qualify this assertion:

Current models—reliant upon departmental space where curriculum is developed and fostered independent of the

university at large—must change. Today's students demand cross-disciplinary learning and thinking, particularly in science, engineering, and technology. This cross-disciplinary learning demand is manifesting itself in buildings that seek to be academies of tomorrow and entrepreneurial hubs focused on bringing business and creative minds together. Colleges and universities need to think about how these space changes serve as curriculum drivers (*Futurist Forum*, 2015, p. 2).

It is high time that we incorporate cross-disciplinary learning in our course designs so that our products will not be found wanting. Relying upon departmental space which has been a norm all this long must change. This is done in order to ensure that our students benefit from what Doss (2015)'s suggested that critical thinking, wisdom, ethics, creativity, complex problem solving and the ability to produce are the skill sets that matter in the long term.

### **Attracting students to HE institutions**

It is not enough to answer the question of what students should learn and stop there. There is need to attract those students to the institutions of higher education so that they go there to learn what they are supposed to learn. If one cooks delicious food, then one should be in a position to attract people to that food. There is no reason why government invest so much money in HE and that money is not put to good use. The first step in making good use of the vast investments in HE is to attract students to institutions of higher learning.

### **Empowering students learning**

In the last two subsections, we looked at what students should learn and attracting students to higher education institutions. This is not enough. One

more critical aspect concerning the students is to empower them through learning. The future of HE rests in our ability to empower our students so that they are in a position to take ownership of learning. However, as we give power to the students we must be careful that **empowering students** is not the same as abdicating control of our institutions of learning. Our student **empowerment** should simply be “student ownership of learning.” In another section, we will show that through open and distance learning, student can easily be empowered by giving students a voice, by giving students decision-making power and by encouraging meaningful technology use.

### **Students' safety, sustainability and wellness**

We now know what students should learn, we know how to attract them to institutions and we know how to empower them. Then another important issue becomes that of safety. There should be mechanisms that are put in place to ensure students are safe in institutions of higher learning. In some countries such as Japan, to best recruit and retain students, institutions of HE need to evaluate how they offer a student life experience that prepares students to be healthy and dynamic people in the future. Futurist Forum (2015) argues that institutions of HE need to embrace sustainability and wellness as key components to campus life.

### **What do they value?**

When we ask what we value as a nation, we are not asking new questions but because the target is shifting all the time, the answers to this old question are shifting rapidly as well. We need to remain relevant by aligning HE to what we value as a country, as a nation and as a people. What we value defines our future as a people. Our students in HE must learn all that we value.

## **Improvement of the teaching & research (T&R) nexus**

In principle, the teaching-research (T&R) nexus relates to ways in which research supports teaching and teaching supports research in effective student learning.

In the last section, we discussed what we value as a nation. In this section, we take the debate further and allege that one of the important goals of the universities and other higher education institutions (HEIs) in our country must be the improvement of the teaching–research (T&R) nexus. This teaching and research nexus relates to the ways in which research supports teaching it also relates to the ways in which teaching supports research. 'Teaching–research nexus' can be used to describe the multiple links that can be made between T&R to benefit student learning and outcomes. Improving the T&R nexus undoubtedly contributes towards quality teaching and learning. This was rightly pointed by Musthafa and Sajila (2014) who said:

Integrating new knowledge created through research with teaching has become an important area that needs prompt attention with the growing emphasis on the learning activities of students, procedures for quality assurance and research funding mechanisms.

In short, what this means for universities going into the future is that we must review practices and culture so that we can create an environment and a university culture that values research. In such a university culture, teaching can benefit from research and research can benefit from teaching while learning becomes an overlapping concept. According to Jenkins (2004), the main advantages of integrating research into teaching are:



- The teacher is able to give accurate and up-to-date information to students with relevant examples rather than second-hand knowledge from textbooks.
- The teacher's research is also beneficial when presented and opened to challenges from students, which could in turn stimulate new research directions.
- Teaching could be a recruitment platform for attracting students with a passion for research, which is important in the science and engineering fields where students form the backbone of the research undertaken.

### **Redesigning the curriculum**

Re-designing the curriculum in such a way that it is not found wanting in the area of transmitting research-based knowledge for effective teaching and learning in HEIs appears to be the missing link in our HEIs. The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education has in line with the Nziramasanga Report of 1999 started the ball rolling. It is HE which is now lagging behind. Time is now to realign and redesign our curricula so that it becomes relevant to the country's aspirations.

### **The cost-price nexus in HE**

Many institutions of higher education in Zimbabwe are building their future on a very fragile financial ground. What is obtaining in many institutions of HE is that they tend to think about their own internal cost basis. This practice differs sharply from the consumer paradigm which is about price. In HE, institutions have driven up their costs through a combination of higher fixed costs and lower productivity. Over the decades those added costs have been passed on to the consumer with price increases at the rate far beyond that of general inflation. What is worrying is that student debt continues to rise. Many parents

are increasingly challenged with finding affordable ways to pay for the education of their children. *The Economist* (2014), once wrote:

... a funding crisis has created a shortfall that the universities' brightest brains are struggling to solve. Institutions' costs are rising, owing to pricey investments in technology, teachers' salaries and galloping administrative costs. That comes as governments conclude that they can no longer afford to subsidise universities as generously as they used to  
(*The Economist*, 2014, p.5).

Because, in many cases HE is no longer sustainable, it then means new ways of delivering HE should be put in place and Distance education is sufficiently well placed to do the trick.

### **Distance education as the future of HE**

Society should not look upon Open and Distance Learning (ODL) as a stepchild in the higher education landscape. It is the best strategy to change the world and develop the knowledge faculty of individuals in society. It is also the only weapon available to government that they can use to reach many disadvantaged individuals. Life without university education is not an option and has never been one. Many Zimbabweans went without university education for many years due to colonial bottlenecks attached to Higher Education provision. Even after independence, there are many people who still need higher education to develop their mental capacities and become more useful to the society. There is continuous growth in the number of students who demand higher education, not only in Zimbabwe but world-wide. Conventional universities cannot meet the demand. Education is one of the principal means to build the 'defences of peace' in the minds of men and women

everywhere (UNESCO, 2000). Gross enrolment ratio in the higher education was at 4% in the sub-Saharan Africa by 1997. This then means that access to university education was regarded in most parts of sub-Saharan Africa as a privilege to which children of ordinary families could not aspire. It is still beyond their reach in much of the world today (UNESCO, 2000, p. 69).

Higher education must also do a better job preparing workers and supporting the acquisition of higher skills by existing workers to make each more productive. New initiatives in higher education should be linked more closely to the needs of employees and industry clusters.... Worker training programs must become much more effective and responsive to market demands in preparing workers with appropriate hard and soft skills (MSCU as cited in Grineski, 2000, p. 23-24).

Considering that there are many workers who lack university education and cannot leave work to join the conventional system, ODL becomes the best alternative to attain university education. ODL has moved from the periphery to the centre of university life (Feenberg, 1999). There is growing paucity of classroom facilities to offer university education to the ever increasing enrolments in many countries. To that end, ODL has the capacity to offer a world class education without worrying about classroom space.

Learners in the higher education fraternity today have at their disposal sets of tools in the form of the Internet and a science of learning and teaching that permits the alteration of the nature of instruction at the university level (Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006). For the reasons that not all who seek for university education are school leavers, some people who join higher education are workers who need to do both. Through ODL, such people are able to learn while they earn.

Universities are not there for local people. They should cover the universe and global world. Internationalisation of HE and student mobility is now the order of the day in the world which has become a global village owing to access to technology. In order to propagate knowledge to the universe, ODL becomes the roadmap. It is argued that universities, in their pursuit to educate “global scholars,” now require students to enrol in at least some online distance courses (Carr, 2000). Richard Moulton, one of the pioneers of university extension (first at Cambridge University, then at Chicago), expressed the rationale for extension activities as follows:

A university remains in an imperfect stage until it realises how it must extend its influence to the whole body of people; how it must extend its education to the whole period of the human life; and how it must bring its high ideas to bear upon all the vital interests of mankind (Moulton, 1917, p. 59).

In line with above argument, Storr (1966) quotes the University of Chicago Annual Register of 1896–1897: “University Extension...is for all classes, rich and poor, men and women alike, and in so far resembles...its comprehensiveness” (Storr, 1966, p. 196). ODL cuts across classes in society because it is open to everyone who needs higher education. It cuts across strata created in society in terms of gender, race, religion, region, ethnicity and all forms of inequalities that might act as hindrances to higher education attainment. ODL is a self-serving strategy of improving oneself by individuals. Universities should constitute, in Harper's view, a quintessential aspect of the commitment to the betterment of society and individuals. ODL is historical and was considered highly useful to society time immemorial. The University of Chicago's Official Bulletin of June 1892 stated that the goal of correspondence study programs was:

to provide instruction for those who, for social and economic reasons, cannot attend in its classrooms as a legitimate part of the work of every university. To make no effort in this direction is to neglect a promising opportunity for building up the university itself, and at the same time to fall short of performing a duty which, from the very necessities of the case, is incumbent upon the university (Mallory, 1916, p. 42).

Higher education classrooms should thus not be limited to the four walls but should be world-wide in order to meet international students who so demand for that level of education. This helps in the democratisation of higher education. Lighty (1915/1971) drew from Harper's vision and underscored distance education as a democratic undertaking:

Extramural teaching in the university answers to the social present-day demand for a share in the intellectual and spiritual pleasures and the material benefits of the accumulated knowledge and wisdom of the race. This is the demand for the opportunity to know—educational rights (Watkins, 1991, p.21).

Universities cannot claim that one of their major functions is to provide community service without serving the student in need of higher education. Serving the community how and when? ODL is the pathway to serving communities in real terms because communities need to develop their knowledge faculty as a measure to rise to world demands.

In Zimbabwe, it is important to remember that higher education institutions do not need to choose between online learning and traditional learning. What is needed is to find the right balance between the two. Futurist Forum (2015): 3)

insists that the truth is neither education delivery model is intrinsically better than the other. Hence institutions of HE should:

... strategically balance both platforms and also think about how they support the never-ending, 24/7 nature of today's learning that extends beyond the classroom. Institutions that begin to best leverage an appropriate balance can make better use of time in the classroom and also define tailored approaches to how the professor, student and material work together across the platforms (Futurist Forum, 2015, p. 3)

*The Economist* (2014) put this argument bluntly by declaring that:

a technological revolution is challenging higher education's business model. An explosion in online learning, much of it free, means that the knowledge once imparted to a lucky few has been released to anyone with a smartphone or laptop (*The Economist*, 2014, p5).

This clearly shows that universities are facing a new competitor. This competitor is in the form of massive open online courses, or MOOCs. According to *The Economist* (2014), these digitally-delivered courses, which teach students via the web or tablet apps, have big advantages over their established rivals. Some of the advantages include low start-up costs and powerful economies of scale. These MOOCs or online courses dramatically lower the price of learning. They also widen access to learning since they remove the need for students to be taught at set times or places. MOOCs can draw in those who want to combine learning with work or child-rearing, freeing them from timetables assembled to suit academics (*The Economist*, 2014).

### **Some challenges facing HE**

Going into the future, HE is faced with a plethora of challenges. Some of those that we are experiencing already are that many institutions are faced with two simultaneous events. These simultaneous events are the decline in enrolment and price deflation which is largely driven by alternative paths to education. It has to be pointed out that those institutions that are not prepared for this and those institutions that are not willing to be on the forefront of innovative practices, will find themselves in very difficult circumstances going into the future. The Nziramasanga Report (1999) also uncovered challenges in our education system that needs urgent attention. They pointed at the decline in standards, an ineffective curriculum and the poor attitude of both teachers and pupils as some of the things that need urgent attention going into the future.

### **Way forward: Technology and innovation directing future of HE**

The way forward for HE in Zimbabwe is that institutions should realise before it is too late that technology and innovation are creating increasingly attractive alternatives to existing systems of education. Our students are increasingly different now and more so into the future because they are learning how to take advantage of new technologies and innovative practices that come their way. According to Doss (2015), the many, many educational innovations that are developing around us are changing consumer habits. This can appear slowly at first, but sooner than later this will be at a rapidly increasing pace.

Futurist Forum (2015) adds to this debate as well. They point out that:

Today's students aren't just bringing their own technology devices to the classroom; they're also bringing them to the student centre, the gym and the dining hall. This increased use places greater demands on a campus IT infrastructure. Universities seeking to solve today's challenges will need to

respond with robust access and bandwidth upgrades. At the same time, institutions need to respond to the "mobility shift" which allows educators and students to be nimble and engaged from anywhere at any time (Futurist Forum, 2015, p. 4).

What this means for the future of higher education which is a constantly changing target is that improved sensor technology is likely to play a more prominent role in those institutions. Sensor technology has the ability to collect more complex data on environment, wildlife, and people, with regards motions, position, temperature, sound, light and electromagnetic fields.

### **Recommendations**

Higher education is and will never be a one man band. It requires collective wisdom, collective action and interdependency. These are key in shaping the development agenda of the next decades.

- More collective action is needed to produce the changes and outcomes we and many others are hoping for.
- now is the time to raise the profile of higher education as an agent of change, development and collaboration for the world beyond 2015.

### **Conclusion**

This paper concludes that the future of higher education in Zimbabwe is a constantly moving target. Going into the future, the entire value chain of services within higher education will go through disruption. For instance we now witness a surge in online enrolment and retention. In such a situation, the skill sets are vastly different for recruiting students in a digital world versus traditional campus recruiting. We will continue to see disruption and seeing partnerships being developed with the private sector for many of the services traditionally provided by HE institutions. However, ultimately, the future of



**higher education in Zimbabwe is poised to be an exciting and positive opportunity for students and their families. Futurist Forum (2015) says that there is no magic button to press to ensure education institutions success in the future. However, those seeking to differentiate themselves and best attract and empower students need to think about some of the issues raised in this discussion paper.**

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