

QUALITY OF TEACHING AND LEARNING IN RESOURCE QUANDARY: THE CASE OF A UNIVERSITY IN ZIMBABWE

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Abstract

Zimbabwe has faced severe economic challenges that impacted on all spheres of life for both individuals and organizations. Universities were not spared either. Resource accumulation and availability from the environment became a major challenge leading to a decline of quality of teaching and learning. Resource Dependence Theory which advocates that organizations are dependent on the environment for resources for survival and achievement of their set objectives was used as the analytical framework for the study. The study investigated the critical resource related factors that influenced quality of teaching and learning at the selected university.

A case study approach with one university as the case was used to study the factors that influenced the quality of teaching and learning in the ten faculties of the institution. Ten department chairpersons and ten academics participated through interviews. Forty-five students participated through focus groups. Results of the study revealed that resource related factors namely infrastructure, staff, materials, finance, management and students influenced the quality of teaching and learning at the university. Results of the study gave evidence of the value of sufficient resources for the higher education institution (HEI) to achieve quality in its set objectives in teaching and learning.

Key words

Quality; teaching and learning; resource quagmire

The scope of the study

Over the last decade, Zimbabwe recorded annual inflation rate of 5 billion percent in 2008 (Central Statistical Office, 2009). The economic situation impacted on all spheres of life including individuals and organizations. Resource accumulation and availability were some of the major challenges that the selected university faced. While the Resource Dependence Theory (RDT) advocates that organizations are dependent on the environment for resources for survival and achievement of their set objectives which includes the quality in teaching and learning, the university faced its fair share of challenges while the institution sought alternatives to keep itself afloat.

‘Quality’ is a highly contested concept and largely a conundrum. Thus it highly exposed to contextualization as an option. For this study, quality in teaching and learning was regarded as the ability of a university to achieve its set objectives, satisfying its stakeholders such as university department chairpersons, teachers and/or students.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was used in this study. Purposive sampling was used to select the case and participants based on the researcher’s judgement to select cases that were likely to be information rich (Robson, 2002). The purposive sampling resulted in having one case for the study, the selected HEI. Tony Becher identified some useful dimensions that described disciplinary variations, which the study was based on for the choice of participants. Participants from diverse institutional categories (faculties) based on Becher’s (1994) broad disciplines which are associated with disciplinary cultures were chosen. The participants for the study were therefore derived from the following disciplines: hard-pure, hard-applied, soft-pure and soft applied. Department chairpersons, teachers and students from each broad academic discipline participated in the study with ten department chairpersons (2 females and 8 males), 10 teachers (3 females and 7 males) and six focus groups (13 female and 32 male students) participating.

Department chairpersons were chosen as the key informants as they were the link between the university administration, teachers and students. Robson (2002) proposes the use of more than one source of information as this provides a means of testing one source of information against the other while data triangulation improved the quality of the study. Additionally, forty-five university students and ten teachers also participated in this study since they were viewed crucial as other stakeholders at the HEI. They were perceived as potential providers of the other side of the story in relation to their perceptions and experiences of the quality of teaching and learning at the institution whereby information from them complemented that from chairpersons of departments.

Interview was used as the main method of collecting data from chairpersons of departments and teachers with personal experience used to design the interview guide. A semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions elicited perceptions and experiences of department chairpersons and teachers as their viewpoints were ‘more likely to be expressed in an openly designed interview situation’, (Flick, 2007:149). The interview guide increased the strength of the comprehensiveness of the data while it also made the process ‘fairly conversational and situational’ (Patton, 2002:288). With the use of open ended questions whenever any of the

participants did not understand any of the questions, rephrasing and explaining for clarity sake were done. Questions were clarified and responses pursued in an effort to seek further details. Thus open ended questions assisted in exercising some latitude to ask further questions in response to what were seen as significant replies (Bryman, 2004) thereby enabling the deeper probing to obtain more information (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2003). The semi structured interview guide also enabled obtaining of more information from the participants through their body language all of which assisted in answering the research problem that regarded the resource related factors that critically influenced quality of teaching and learning at the HEI.

Focus group interview was used to collect data from students from the different faculties and departments. Using the focus group, students got the chance to attend and respond to each other thereby giving themselves a chance to construct a common perspective in relation to quality of teaching and learning at the university within their groups despite differing on some issues. Focus group assisted the extraction of how students made sense of their situation at the university, thereby helping to understand why students thought, felt and reacted the way they did (Bryman, 2004) in focus groups with regards to factors that influenced quality of teaching and learning. Focus group saved time and money as there was a short distance to the HEI while a lot of detailed information was obtained from different students within a short space of time. While some students voluntarily opted out of the focus group discussions, that was acceptable as part of voluntary participation in the study. Besides getting common opinions of the students (sometimes after protracted clashes), some students later on volunteered with additional information after some focus group meetings.

Findings on resource situation and institutional options at the university

Funding

While the RDT emphasized that organizations such as universities need resources to survive and it is the environment that provides such resources (Davis & Cobb, 2010), findings revealed that the HEI received insufficient budgetary support that could sustain quality of teaching and learning in the institution. Funding from the government had remarkably dwindled although Altbach and Forest (2006) postulated that HEIs, the selected university included, saw the state as having the responsibility of funding HE. The HEI's state support had largely dwindled. 'So far we have no budget to talk about. Here in the department we have no money. Nothing completely,' one department chairperson remarked.

Faced by dwindling state support, the university had turned to 'tuition fees that students paid for its survival', one focus group concurred. This showed how organizations are able to find alternative ways from the environment in order to survive (Pfeffer and Salancik, 2003). At the same time this showed that the HEI had adopted the notion that the burden of HE had to be shared between the taxpayer and the recipients (students) (Eicher & Chevailier, 2002) whereby those who benefited had at least to share the costs (Johnstone, 2003). Unfortunately, tuition fees had become unreliable as most students could not afford to pay due to the economic hardships. Some students were bitter about the tuition fees that the university charged as they claimed inability to pay. This form of resource acquisition (tuition fees) had largely become 'problematic and uncertain' (Pfeffer & Salansik, 2003:258). Most of the students to whom the institution relied upon for payment of the tuition fees could not afford the amounts that the institution charged due to tough economic constraints that affected the larger part of the population, thus vindicating the assertion of the RDT that organizations faced constraints from the environment they relied upon. Many student participants were furious about the tuition fees the university charged while others cited poor economic backgrounds that left them with no capacity to pay.

Some students claimed that tuition fees at the university were too exorbitant since they had no sources of income like grants and loans available. 'The fees are grossly unfair considering that many intellectuals in this country passed through the university without paying even a cent. It's so frustrating that we are asked to pay tuition fees by people who paid nothing to obtain the degrees that they have', some focus groups agreed. It was also revealed that the tuition fees that the institution charged had forced some would be students to abandon enrolling into some programmes. The study revealed that some programmes had failed to lure required numbers of students leading to their postponement. For instance in one of programme out of all the students that were enrolled, only one student had managed to pay fees leading to an abandonment of the programme altogether. 'This year in our department out of all the students we enrolled, only one managed to pay fees. So we could not continue with one student. Instead we postponed the students' enrolment until the others get the fees', one department chairperson indicated.

High tuition fees forced some students to cancel their studies due to inability to pay tuition fees. Consequently, those from strong economic backgrounds ultimately enrolled on the basis of ability to pay the required tuition fees. 'When we enrolled for our BA programme, we were required to have eleven points but now the same programme is going for three points. Law

was fifteen points but it's going for nine points', one focus group agreed. Such a trend also led to the enrolment of students who, under normal circumstances, did not qualify. Other students involved themselves in some illicit activities. 'Some of our female students no longer hesitate to get involved in prostitution to raise fees or money to sustain themselves', one department chairperson indicated. Such behavior exposed the concerned female students to sexually transmitted diseases which could ultimately affect their participation in teaching and learning processes, and unavoidably quality too. Others resorted to digging trenches for communication companies for as little as six dollars a day on weekends to raise money particularly to sustain themselves. Asked how seeking such alternative sources of revenue affected their learning, some students agreed that that made them attend lectures exhausted and they were unable to concentrate. This could lead to a situation which might compromise the quality of teaching and learning.

The HEI also looked up to philanthropists and foreign donors (in some departments) as options for funding although these had equally become unpredictable sources in the environment in addition to uncertainty (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). Donor funding at the university had also declined drastically partly due to strained relations between the country, Zimbabwe, and the international community although some institutional departments still received some little external support from the donor community. 'We used to rely a lot on donor funding and now we can't attract any funding from outside and all we have to depend on is our government which is also broke', one department chairperson said. This had led to reduced budgetary support that had impacted on the quality of teaching and learning. It was difficult for teachers to deliver some high-quality lectures as the HEI failed to supply them with teaching and learning materials as indicated by some chairpersons of departments. In fact, some university teachers complained that they went subsidizing the university through buying teaching and learning materials.

RDT therefore predicted an organization-environment relationship with regards to the flow of resources. Situations when countries are literally in an economic meltdown such as the one Zimbabwe was in went a bit beyond the RDT prescription. The economic turmoil in Zimbabwe was characterized by an extraordinarily high inflation rate with negative economic growth that had bedeviled the country over the years. Economic development had literally ground to a halt.

Academic staff compliment

The RDT stressed that the importance of members of staff (such as academics in the case of universities) for the survival of an organization as ‘who to hire’ matters (Salancik, 1979 in Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003:xii). Academics play a crucial role since ‘no university can achieve success without a well qualified academic profession’ and ‘neither an impressive ...curriculum will produce good results without great professors’ (Altbach, 2009). This brings into the fore the importance of qualified teachers at the university to achieve quality in teaching and learning.

Results of the study revealed an existence of a critical shortage of qualified academics in most departments. ‘Currently I have nine lecturers instead of twenty’, a department chairperson remarked. ‘We are supposed to have thirty lecturers in this department but we only have eight’, another chairperson added. Brain drain was the major cause of the shortage of academics. At the university, there existed unattractive and deteriorating working conditions. Also, low salaries had negatively impacted the academic profession (Balbachevsky and Quinteiro, 2002; Enders, 2001). With unattractive and low remuneration academics ‘had to feed and the only solution is to go out’, one teacher indicated.

One department chairperson indicated that they had some programmes that were supposed to be run by registered psychologists but we are failing to recruit them because they are finding it more profitable to work in the private sector. The existence of bloated classes at the HEI was another issue that drove the qualified academics for alternative opportunities leading to increased teaching loads to the available academic staff and compromising of quality of teaching and learning. Most teachers and students found it problematic to cope with the teaching and learning processes due to the prevailing bloated classes. Other participants indicated that high student teacher ratio had led to students’ failure to interact with their teachers or even to make appointments for clarifications on taught concepts. Interaction between students and teachers had become a challenge. Some students expressed unhappiness with feedback from their teachers particularly regarding the return of marked assignments. They got some feedback but after a long time. One focus group agreed that they ‘get some of the assignments after we have forgotten about them in our department’. Asked to explain the possible causes of late feedback on assignments, some teachers expressed that they faced a lot of pressure when it came to marking of the numerous assignments for students. ‘Personally I find it really tough to finish marking assignments of two hundred plus students at the same

time... imagine the pressure at the end of a semester when we have to give students exams that have to be marked on time', one teacher remarked.

Most of the qualified staff who could have augmented the staff complement at the university had migrated to countries in the region and beyond leaving behind those that were mostly under-qualified. Higher wages and improved working conditions in foreign lands enticed most qualified academics. Additionally, some academics had moved abroad due to a volatile political climate that existed in the country. 'The political landscape in Zimbabwe is not good', one teacher remarked. Naturally qualified academics would avoid volatile political environments. Academics shunned harsh conditions, particularly those that put their lives at risk. The politics of the day could not be dismissed in its entirety. In situations where there is persecution of those who are perceived as critics or enemies of the state, any individual would naturally shun such volatile situations. In view of the political situation in Zimbabwe at the time of this study, the academia would have been construed as an ivory tower that sought to criticize the government but were unwilling to proffer any solutions. Hence academics probably feared for their safety if they joined the university.

Departments were not homogenous regarding qualified staff complement. Despite the general shortage of qualified academic staff, some departments at the university survived by having external organizational links as postulated in the RDT. Some departments had visiting academics from foreign universities who subsequently augmented those in some university departments. Such teachers augmented the institution's teaching fraternity. One department chairperson remarked that they often had 'guest lecturers from within Africa and Europe who assisted the staff particularly in staff development programmes' and 'analysis of our curriculum'. In the same department they also had permanent and part-time members of staff from countries such as South Africa. Staff mobility and exchanges were capable of exposing students and teachers to other approaches (Enders, 2007) thereby enhancing the internationalization of teaching and learning. Teachers from foreign universities could bring in other methods and approaches to teaching and learning to some departments at the HEI. Nevertheless some departments were shunned by teachers from the regional and international community. One chairperson expressed that they 'used to have exchange programmes between our staff and other universities internationally but no longer attracted even a single lecturer in a year'. At the time of this study, Zimbabwe still faced political polarization in addition to economic quagmire which could result in some departments failing to attract foreign academics.

In light of the shortage of qualified teaching staff at the university, alternatives were sought. To augment the staff complement, the HEI employed some master students as assistant teachers. It was common for most departments to engage students who pursued their master studies as assistant teachers. However the assistant teachers expressed that they were referred to as such in theory yet quite often they took full loads of work that were supposed to be taken by qualified academics. Engaging master students could have been an intervention strategy in the face of an environment that had become turbulent (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003) despite the engagement of individuals who lacked relevant qualifications. However, such a stopgap measure (employment of master students) could mean engaging ‘teachers’ who, most probably, struggled with their own studies! To an extent the requirement for them to devote much of their time to teach other students could ultimately translate to a very high likelihood of poor teaching and learning in some courses. The intervention strategy to alleviate the shortage of academics confirmed the finding by McGregor (2009) that in the SADC region (in which Zimbabwe is found), there was a critical shortage of staff throughout universities. Despite the daunting task that the master students cum teachers faced, it may have to be appreciated that they got staff development programmes (SDP) which possibly enhanced their scholarly approach to teaching and learning (D’Andrea & Gosling, 2005). Some SDP could possibly give some of them the ability to provide quality or improved teaching and learning. Nevertheless SDPs would most likely not equip them with the relevant teaching strategies to match qualified academics although they could act as plug-ins in the desperate situations. It should be noted that at the time of this study Zimbabwe faced various challenges which included brain drain. Engaging the under-qualified or unqualified individuals as teachers and also to develop their skills was perhaps a way of injecting some form of a lifeline into HE at the HEI. The university faced desperate times that required desperate measures, one of which could have been the employment of master students! Just as the RDT encourages organization to think of alternatives in the face of challenges, the university was at least trying to cope with the difficult situations of manpower shortages by engaging the master students as assistant teachers although the strategy had their own shortfalls. To some extent the HEI was attempting to negotiate its position to come up with some strategies in the face of constraints (Pfeffer and Salansik, 2003).

The student students

Students make part of the main stakeholders that critically influence the quality of teaching and learning at a university, including the university. Results of the study

revealed that there was a feeling that the quality of students that the HEI enrolled had fallen to below standard compared to enrolments in previous years. 'Looking at the quality of students themselves, they are not as good as what they used to be', one teacher remarked. It was indicated that the institution used to 'enroll quality students in the past years', a department chairperson indicated. Some departments enrolled many under-qualified students. For instance the cut-off points they used to enforce were no longer emphasized due to difficulties to lure students with the required qualifications. Some participants also attributed the enrolment of under qualified students to the unaffordable fees that the university charged which ultimately forced those with the required points but from poor economic backgrounds failing to take up HE. One focus group concurred that 'those who are rich even though they have very few points for any programmes are the ones now enrolling here. Bright ones are not enrolling or continuing with university education because they are riddled by economic problems'.

For most students at the university, absenteeism from lectures was a common phenomenon to an extent that some lectures had to be re-scheduled or cancelled altogether. 'You find a teacher getting only fifty percent of the turn-out', one teacher said. 'The other time I had to postpone a lecture three times because students were not coming' another teacher added. Such absenteeism could signal unpreparedness for HE or/and lack of motivation in students who enrolled at the HEI. Such behavior could also reflect non commitment to learning by some students. The students' approach to HE at the university could result in failures to complete course contents in various programmes thereby compromising the quality of teaching and learning. Absenteeism could be attributed to their academic unpreparedness for HE and lack of proper selection of students into the institution (World Bank, 2000).

Although unnecessary absenteeism from lectures could never be condoned, it has to be noted that in Zimbabwe other factors could contribute to the students' attitudes towards attending lectures. Since findings also revealed that some students were in dire economic situation, economic challenges could contribute to frequent absences from lectures. Some absences from lectures could be a means of cutting cost in the face of economic challenges that most students faced thereby sustaining themselves with the few resources that were available.

Other imperative resources

The World Bank (2000) observed that challenges faced by organizations were mainly due to lack of resources while Duncanson, Volpe and Achilles (2009) stressed that classroom space

enhances organization and opportunities for student learning. There was a shortage of classroom space at the university. It was commonplace for teachers and students to spend time locating vacant classrooms while teaching and learning time ticked away. Such inconveniences had the capability of contributing to loss of teaching and learning time which was another resource that could be regarded as irretrievable while students and teachers looked for vacant classrooms time ticked away. This could affect the completion of prescribed course content on time. At times vacant classes could be unavailable leading to some lectures being held in crammed in teachers' offices. Such environments could compromise the quality of teaching and learning as crowded rooms could subject participants to uncomfortable conditions that could negatively impact the teaching and learning processes. Such situations had the potential to negatively affect interaction between teachers and students among other effects. It showed that student numbers at the university had increased leading to infrastructural constraints. The situation resembled that of Mauritania where HEIs were generally overcrowded (Bloom, Canning & Chan, 2005).

Availability of relevant and adequate books is imperative to enhance quality in teaching and learning in any HEI yet the unavailability books at the university was dire. Due to the scarcity of books it was uncommon for some students to remove pages from some of the books once they got hold of them. 'So once one gets the book the common thing is to tear off the pages one needs', one student said. Such selfishness could reflect a correlation between shortages of teaching and learning materials and the unbecoming student behaviour. While the resources were scarce, such students' behavior exacerbated the situation. The behavior showed that some students had short term memories and did not consider the needs of the future students. This finding also revealed how short supply of resources was capable of inculcating unbecoming behaviours in individuals.

Since Laurillard (2000) propounds that it is on internet that best teachers can be gotten. Internet made part of the technologies that complemented the usual ways of teaching and learning (Bloom & Rosovsky, 2007; Laurillard, 2000). However, access to internet was a nightmare to most student and teacher population. 'It's painful to access internet in the computer lab here', one teacher remarked. 'You can only access the university page and you can't go beyond that', a department chairperson added. There was also inadequacy of computers in relation to the student enrolment at the institution. In some departments where the machines were available, though in fewer numbers, they lacked maintenance as they were either down or infected by viruses. In some departments where some internet could be

accessed, lack of electricity to power the machines was common due to load shedding although the World Bank (2002) emphasized the importance of electricity as global technologies relied on this for sharing information. Lack of proper ICT infrastructure resulted in teachers and students having inadequate opportunities to browse the internet so as to get important, current and relevant knowledge. Some teachers and students ended up accessing the internet in internet cafes. Access to internet in cafes could result in the students and teachers failing to exhaust their searches for knowledge due to overstretched financial situations they experienced. There were constraints in ICT infrastructure and low access to computers at the institution. While ICT could be regarded as poor this could also show a difficulty in shifting from the traditional and formal institutional type of teaching to the option of technology facilitated learning as Skilbeck (2001). The university experienced serious gaps and constraints in ICT infrastructure.

Poor access to the internet could also be understood in the context of the economic situation that prevailed in Zimbabwe at the time of this study. To some extent, purchasing of computers and even their maintenance could be regarded as one of the luxuries that the institution could not afford in the face of other challenges such as the procurement of teaching and learning materials availing reasonable salaries for qualified academics. This could not nonetheless be a justification of an underestimation of the importance of ICT in the enhancement of quality of teaching and learning. If the world has become such a global village through the internet, and if the university recognized the enhancement of quality in teaching and learning through access to internet, then teachers and students needed to be up to date with information through its provision and maintenance. ‘Information and communication technologies have the potential to facilitate communication among students, teachers...’ Bloom and Rosovsky (2007:449). ICT would arguably go long way in alleviating the dire material resource situation at the university, hence it needed relevant attention.

Conclusion

This research study concentrated on resource related factors that influenced quality of teaching and learning at the selected university. The study revealed the value of relevant and adequate resources for the maintenance and enhancement of quality of teaching and learning. The university situation required improved resource support that needed address at macro level as the country at large faced economic challenges. The study revealed that despite the harsh resource starvation that the HEI faced, there were measures that the university took to carry out its mandate - that of teaching and learning – through the adoption of alternatives.

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