

The effect of institutional leadership on quality of higher education provision

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ABSTRACT

The study was carried out with the aim of examining the effect of institutional leadership on the quality of educational provision in higher education institutions in Zimbabwe. The study analysed the indicators determining provision of quality higher education in state and private universities and how they are influenced by institutional leadership. The major techniques used were documentary analysis, questionnaires, interviews and direct observation. The results showed that institutional leaders who promote intellectual growth of both staff and students and who create a culture of learning make it easy for their institutions to uphold high quality standards. The study also highlighted the need for an effective national quality assurance agency in making sure institutions are supported in the global quest for quality.

Keywords: institutional leadership, quality, higher education provision



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INTRODUCTION

The vital role that higher education plays in the development of the society has been highly acknowledged (Mustard, 1998). Muhammed, et. al., (2011) observed that with the advent of knowledge based economies and globalization, higher education has become more important, and in particular the quality of education is critical to national development. Quality is at the top of most agendas and improving quality is the most important task facing any higher education institution (Sallis, 2002). The need for quality was brought about by the global trends in higher education, such as massification, funding reduction, adoption of new public management ideals with their stress on the accountability and efficiency domains, brought about by the taxpayer backlash (Alexander, 2000), the rapid growth of the Internet, increasing internationalisation of higher education, new relations and forms of relations with the state, and the adoption of market mechanisms and competition (Van schalkwyk, 2011).

Higher education in Zimbabwe also faced similar quality challenges that lead to the establishment of the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE) to guarantee and maintain quality. ZIMCHE recognises that quality assurance is the primary responsibility of individual universities and has described Vice Chancellors as the gatekeepers of quality (Chetsanga, 2011) hence the need to advocate for stronger and visionary leaders in universities. It is also critical to have leaders in universities who are capable of turning their visions into reality.

There exists a multitude of definitions of leadership, but for the purpose of this study, the definition by Van Schalkwyk (2011), suffices. He defined leadership as the mobilisation and influencing of people to work towards a common goal through the building of interpersonal relationships and the breaking of tradition to achieve the organisation's objectives despite risk and uncertainty. Kouzes and Posner (2007) found that this is achieved by engaging in the following leadership practices: modelling the way, inspiring a shared vision, challenging the process, enabling others to act and encouraging the heart.

Weese (1996) and Lim and Cromartie (2001) found a significant correlation between leadership and organizational effectiveness. Indeed, many researchers agree that institutional leadership is the key to improving quality (Goetsch and Davis, 2006; Hellriegel et al., 2006 and Evans, 2011). Gibbs et. al., (2009); and Murphy, (2005) aver that leadership plays a pivotal role in the success of higher education institutions and is a critical factor in sustaining and improving the quality and performance of universities. University leaders must understand new challenges that affect quality delivery including the new regulatory requirements instituted by quality assurance agencies and be able to effectively restructure in order to ensure that standards and quality of educational provisions are being maintained.

Shahmandi et. al., (2011) urged university leaders to improve their leadership competencies to enable their institutions to survive and continuously develop. These competencies include leadership skills, communication skills, persuasive skills and professional skills. Yang (2005) identified four categories of leadership competencies namely: personality and disposition, personal knowledge and skill, administrative competency and social responsibility competency. However, Bargh, Scott and Smith (1996) and Rowley (1997) observed that university Vice Chancellors that were appointed were usually prominent academics who did not possess any formal training beyond their academic credentials, achievements and experiences in the academia. In the face of the challenges facing higher education today, there is need for a paradigm shift and appointing a new breed of university leaders capable of navigating our new complex environment.

Bryman (2009) and Gibbs et. al., (2009) recognise that effective university leadership evolved to be more explicitly associated with specific indicators and practices. Middlehurst et. al., (2009) advocated for transformational leadership in higher education whereby the

leader inspires followers through a shared vision for the future. Transformational leadership dissociates itself from the concept of having one super leader and embraces delegation of responsibilities and constant monitoring and dialogue. Anderson and Johnson (2006) and Bolden et. al. (2008) acknowledge that this style of leadership is highly appropriate for the higher education sector because of its focus on shared accountability thus enhancing the hierarchical structures that exist in higher education. Martin et. al. (2003) found a strong link between transformational leadership and the quality of student learning processes and outcomes.

The foregoing highlighted the need for university leaders to guarantee provision of quality university education through effective leadership. In neighbouring South Africa, the former Minister of Education, Mrs. Naledi Pandor indicated that South Africa had a shortage of effective educational leaders. According to her, most of the leaders could not formulate strategic plans or formulate perspectives that will lead to success. (Niemann and Kotze, 2006). Sadly, no study has been carried out in Zimbabwe to determine the link between university leadership and quality of educational provision. Based on the critical indicators that determine provision of quality higher education, this study sought to establish the extent to which university leaders in selected universities have played their role in quality assurance. It was hypothesised that effective leadership will have a positive impact on service quality in universities. This will thus impact on the competitive advantage which, in turn, will then lead to the long-term sustainability of the institution.

METHODOLOGY

There were nine public and six private registered universities in Zimbabwe when the study was undertaken. The researcher used documentary analysis and direct observation over a period of five years as the basis of selecting two public and two private universities to include in the study.

This study was based on a descriptive methodology. The target population for this study consisted of a cross-section junior to senior level academic and non-teaching staff as well as students from two public universities and two private universities. The perceptions of staff concerning their Vice Chancellor were closely studied to identify the Vice Chancellor's commitment and contribution to quality of educational provision. The data collection took six (6) months with a total of 186 responses (161 questionnaires and 25 interviews) from designated staff (Pro Vice Chancellors, Registrar, Bursar and Librarian), Deans, Academics, Directors, Heads of both academic and non-teaching departments and students. Table 1 (Appendix 1) shows the categories and numbers of respondents included in the sample.

Self-administered questionnaires were distributed to collect individual data on the respondents. Overall the response rate was 85 percent. In addition to the questionnaires, interviews using open-ended questions were posed to enable participants to express their views. This was done for triangulation purposes in order to validate the responses from questionnaires. Although all participants answered to the same set of questions, there was flexibility to probe and explore issues that could surface during the interview as recommended by Merriam (1998). The interview protocols were based on the same questions posed in the questionnaire and consisted of seven semi-structured, open-ended questions in the endeavour to gain insights into the respondents' perceptions on university leadership's contribution to quality. The following questions were propounded:

1. How do you rate your Vice Chancellor in relation to his commitment to the realisation of the organisation's vision and mission
2. Is staff generally satisfied with their jobs and the university climate?

3. How concerned is the Vice Chancellor about staff development and encouraging others to improve their skills and abilities?
4. What are your comments on the quality of university facilities and equipment
5. What do you think should be done to maintain academic quality?
6. How responsive is the Vice Chancellor to changes brought about by ZIMCHE?
7. Comment on the effectiveness of the university leadership

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study identified six major issues that university Vice Chancellors had to grapple with in order to ensure quality of educational provision. These are:

1. Maintaining institutional quality
2. Recruitment and retention of experienced staff
3. Complying with the regulatory requirements on quality assurance
4. Securing funds for university core business and operations
5. Inadequate and inappropriate university facilities
6. Providing effective leadership

Maintaining institutional quality

With the advent of ZIMCHE, all the four universities under study had implemented systematic and formalised internal/institutional quality assurance processes in line with the assertion by Burke & Minassians (2001) that these result in increased efficiency and accountability within higher education institutions. This view was also supported by Vaira (2007) who averred that the main thrust of formal quality assurance is to stimulate, attain and increase systems' and institutions' effectiveness, efficiency, cost savings, quality and transparency towards stakeholders interested and involved in it. The quality management systems thus developed by the universities under study focused on quality assurance and self-evaluation at all levels in accordance to the standards set up by the national quality assurance agency, ZIMCHE. ZIMCHE provided the external assessment to ensure quality of the educational processes in each university. The universities together with ZIMCHE focused on the development of a culture of organizational excellence that is meant to impact on staff and stakeholder satisfaction and the society at large.

The findings revealed that although no quality assurance policies were in place yet, all the Vice Chancellors had to set clearly defined strategies on quality assurance and incorporated these in their strategic plans. The two public universities had each employed a Director responsible for quality assurance. The Directors were busy establishing fully-fledged quality assurance units in accordance to the regulatory requirements. However, the two private universities were yet to establish quality assurance units but they were willing to do so as evidenced by the establishment of Quality Committees chaired by the Vice Chancellors. One of the private universities had incorporated the quality dimension in the theme of their 2012-2015 Strategic plan ("Growth with Quality") as a way of continuously reminding staff of the importance of embracing quality.

Some of the issues that were brought up as challenges in the maintenance of quality include:

- a) Respondents castigated the continued increase in student enrolments in some of the programmes citing that this practice had a negative bearing on quality. Cases were given where in one of the state universities a single intake for the Accountancy degree had 365 students. Traditionally the entry requirements for entry into that degree programme were pitched at a very high level of at least 12 advanced ('A') Level

points. However, the current Vice Chancellor lowered these points to at least four 'A' Level points. The argument proffered was that observation over several years had shown that entry points per se had no bearing on the subsequent performance of students. Consequently, as long as the prospective student met the minimum requirements for entry into the university (two 'A' Level points obtained from at least two 'A' Level subjects) and satisfied other requirements, they were eligible for entry into programmes of their choice. However, respondents were of the opinion that the major reason for increasing enrolment was for fund-raising purposes. Accordingly, they expressed a need to strike a balance between competing demands such as access, resource mobilisation and maintenance of academic quality. Raising the entry requirements of students will result in lower enrolment numbers and better learning environment hence ensuring quality of delivery. Zezekwa & Mudavanhu (2011) averred that differences in entry qualifications for a particular university course maybe strong predictors of students' educational performance

- b) The excessive teaching loads impacted negatively on the quantity and quality of research by lecturers and yet the promotion criterion was largely based on the quality and quantum of research. Some lecturing staff also complained that they were undertaking a lot of administrative work at the expense of academic work and research. They challenged Vice Chancellors to identify a sustainable and collaborative model which balances the needs of administrative demands and quality of delivery. This was consistent with findings by Garcia-Gallego et. al., (2012) that quality of university teaching is positively affected by published research and that higher teaching loads decrease teaching quality. They also found that administrative duties interfere with quality of teaching if these duties do not entail a compensating reduction in teaching loads.
- c) Vice Chancellors from private universities were accused of failing to actively embrace staff and students' ideas and feedbacks. This behaviour demotivated staff and negatively impacted on quality. Staff also felt that their leaders were not promoting the notion of academic freedom. Barnett (1990) advocated for the expansion of the definition of academic freedom from its narrow definition of staff immunity from censorship towards a universal freedom to present and to criticize ideas. Interviewees refrained from expressing their opinions about their Vice Chancellors citing fear of intimidation and lack of appreciation of their views. Ong (2012) found that repression of ideas and opinions by top management came in the form of threat of dismissal or questioning the competency of the staff to handle a particular task. He also discovered that fear of discrimination by university leaders discourage staff from discussing openly important subject matters which could promote critical thinking about controversial ideas.

Recruitment and retention of experienced staff

The massive brain-drain experienced in Zimbabwean universities during the years of economic turmoil (2005-2009) resulted in serious loss of expertise, skills and institutional memory with medicine, applied sciences and engineering the worst affected disciplines (Machawira, 2009). According to the study, these losses of highly qualified staff in universities were reflected in the low percentage (7.9%) of lecturing staff with doctoral degrees. The current study found a remarkable improvement in recruitment of highly qualified and experienced staff in public universities. They had more PhD degree holders among their academic staff than private universities and presumably a higher calibre of lecturers than the latter when this is adjudged by the number of doctorate vis-à-vis those with

Masters' degree holders. Private universities found it difficult to attract experienced and well qualified staff due to the lower salaries, absence of non-salary incentives and generally poor working conditions prevalent in private universities. Whilst the government increased remuneration for staff in state universities, private universities failed to do the same as they rely on funds from tuition fees and well wishers. The private institutions are characterized by a strong complement of part-time staff, with several of the part-time staff being full-time employees at public universities and in industry. For instance, at one private university, 65% of the academic staff was part time.

Both public and private universities were involved in implementing conscious and serious professional development plans for staff as a way of motivating them and improving quality. Staff members were involved in determining the content of the plans. These plans outlined the support provided for various staff developmental activities including the following:

1. Scholarships for attainment of higher degrees
2. Support for foreign training on specific aspects related to members jobs
3. Support for attendance at conferences, workshops, seminars and meetings
4. Staff exchange programmes
5. Contact and sabbatical leave
6. Support for publishing scholarly work
7. Exposure to administrative opportunities e.g. Departmental Chairs were on two-year rotational basis

In addition to this ZIMCHE offered opportunities for university staff members to be appointed as peer reviewers. These were given assignments in their areas of expertise and were responsible for accreditation, registration, setting benchmarks and assessing foreign qualifications. ZIMCHE's requirement for engaging only peer reviewers with at least eight publications motivated staff members to meet this requirement at the same time this improved their quality of research and teaching. ZIMCHE also provided an opportunity for staff members to interact, research and showcase their innovations through the Research and Intellectual Expo which is an annual event. In this respect, the university leaders and ZIMCHE should be applauded for creating a conducive environment in line with findings by Shahmandi et. al. (2011) that the most significant function of an institution higher education is its leadership effectiveness in creating a pleasant environment which promotes good quality of education.

Complying with the regulatory requirements on quality assurance

Special mention is made of the Vice Chancellor from one of the public universities under study. Respondents gave an account of how the Vice Chancellor spearheaded implementation of quality assurance processes as soon as ZIMCHE was established. The Vice Chancellor, being a member of the ZIMCHE Council, took it upon himself to transform his institution in line with the regulatory requirements. Several meetings were held involving staff and students to discuss quality matters and to formulate appropriate strategies. The Vice Chancellor proactively organised a workshop on quality assurance where officials from ZIMCHE were invited to facilitate. This was able to put the university community in the picture of the emerging global trends and the required changes. The attribute of the Vice Chancellor in this respect was similar to the one described by Jansen (2000) as that of a transformational leader who involves everybody in the transformation process and ensures that they acquire the necessary skills and training to participate effectively in the change process. In her study on studied leadership competencies of Mexican institutions of higher learning, Gonzalez (2004) found that national policies and trends in higher education

demanded leaders with a broad understanding of the national situation, with the resources to support the national initiative, and with the ability to make appropriate responses in their own institutions.

In the other three universities, staff and students only became aware of what was happening in the quality assurance arena when ZIMCHE officials held quality assurance workshops at their universities in order to make staff aware of the new regulatory framework. These workshops were very useful as they managed to put to an end the apparent lack of transparency and the absence of useful information concerning the quality assurance processes and guideline. Prior to these workshops, Vice Chancellors would intimidate staff by telling them that ZIMCHE would fire them for lack of compliance without giving full details. In some instances lectures were fired on the pretext that ZIMCHE had decreed so when in actual fact it was the Vice Chancellors who, for reasons known to them, wanted to relieve them from their duties.

Securing funds for university core business and operations

All the four universities experienced serious financial difficulties. In respect of state universities, Treasury allocations fell far short of the institutional requirements. Student fees seemed to be one of the main sources of institutions' expected income. Private universities received funds from other sources, but respondents were reluctant to reveal the exact amounts generated from these sources. Public universities were fortunate in that the salaries for staff were paid by Treasury whereas in private universities they paid from own resources and these salaries tended to be at least 40% lower than those paid in public universities.

Inadequate and inappropriate university facilities

In all the universities, the buildings and other facilities used for learning purposes were inadequate, unsuitable for institutions' needs, or incomplete. One of the state universities used inherited infrastructure that was not commensurate with their mandate. The second state university under study and the two private universities were far from completing the construction of required infrastructure, and thus faced a shortage of essential structures. The building structures that were not available in sufficient quantities or sizes were student halls of residence, dining halls, libraries, lecture rooms, theatres and seminar or tutorial rooms, student union blocks, student and staff clinics, office complexes, laboratories and workshops, and sports and recreational facilities. Poor ICT connectivity in was prevalent in the private universities, had a negative impact on teaching and learning as well as for their operations. Generally, equipment required for teaching, learning, administrative processes, sporting, and social activities were in short supply.

Providing effective leadership

Respondents from the two private universities and one public university were concerned that their Vice Chancellors were always travelling on the pretext of attending conferences, workshops and other events beneficial to the institution, when in actual fact they were enriching themselves at the expense of the institution. A very interesting and opposing view was given by respondents from the second public university. They stated that it was important for the Vice Chancellor to travel widely as this brought the following benefits to the institution:

- a) The leader marketed his institution abroad. Each time he came back he would have networked and obtained scholarships, exchange programmes and opportunities for his staff and students
- b) A lot of staff members with PhDs had been recruited from abroad after they had initially interacted and were courted and encouraged to join the university by the Vice Chancellor
- c) Donations of funds, books and facilities were given to the university as a result of the efforts from the Vice Chancellor during these trips
- d) The university leader gained a lot of exposure and insight on how things are done from other institutions through the visits. This enabled benchmarking to be done leading to improved institutional quality
- e) The absence of the leader empowered the cadres who were left in acting positions and gave them the opportunity to improve their leadership capabilities in preparation for future career advancement. This motivated them greatly. Empowering subordinates, according to Morakul & Wu (2001) depicts a transformational leader and such leaders are sine qua non to the success of a university (Anderson and Johnson, 2006 and Bolden et al 2008).

With the exception of one public university, respondents reported on the lack of trust between leaders and their staff. Allegations were that Vice Chancellors only surround themselves with people whom they can trust at the top echelons well as in some other strategic positions in the university. The rest of the staff members were treated with suspicion and their views are always disregarded. These findings were similar to those by Ong (2012) who found that whilst respondents found university leaders to be technically competent and to possess cognitive abilities, they lacked in emotional competencies.

CONCLUSION

The study revealed the need for university leaders to embrace changes and work with their staff to achieve institutional goals. Institutional leaders who promote intellectual growth of both staff and students and who create a culture of learning make it easy for their institutions to uphold high quality standards. The results confirmed the hypothesis that effective leadership will have a positive impact on service quality in universities. This will thus impact on the competitive advantage which, in turn, will then lead to the long-term sustainability of the institution. The study also highlighted the need for an effective national quality assurance agency in making sure institutions are supported in the global quest for quality.

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APPENDIX 1

TABLE 1: Categories and numbers of respondents included in the sample

| Category | State | Private | Total |
|---------------------------|--------------|----------------|--------------|
| Designated staff | 8 | 6 | 14 |
| Directors | 6 | 4 | 10 |
| Deans | 14 | 8 | 22 |
| Heads of Departments | 22 | 12 | 34 |
| Academics | 20 | 20 | 40 |
| Junior non teaching staff | 10 | 6 | 16 |
| Students | 15 | 10 | 25 |
| TOTAL | | | 161 |