

The presidential scholarship programme in Zimbabwe: A living case of the political will in promoting regionalisation in higher education

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ABSTRACT

The study sought to explore the impact of the commitment and political will exhibited by the Government of Zimbabwe through the Presidential Scholarship Scheme in promoting regionalisation of higher education. The methodology employed document analysis, interviews and questionnaires to gather data from the stakeholders. The officials responsible for the Presidential Scholarship Programme, Directors and officials in the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education and other government departments, parents, students and alumni were the respondents. The findings revealed that since 1995, Zimbabwe has sent in excess of 30 000 Undergraduate, Masters and PhD students to 15 universities in South Africa. The scheme contributed to regionalisation of higher education by promoting cooperation, building cultural bridges, promoting international managerialism, mobility and employability of graduates in the region and beyond. The respondents indicated that regionalisation of higher education helps in harmonisation of programmes and addressed quality issues within the region. It was concluded that the Presidential Scholarship scheme was an example of a best practice in internationalisation of higher education. It was recommended that similar schemes should be established in other SADC countries in order to reap full benefits.

Keywords: regionalisation, political-will, higher education, presidential scholarship, mobility, employability

INTRODUCTION

The Presidential Scholarship Programme was introduced by His Excellency the President of the Republic of Zimbabwe, Robert Gabriel Mugabe in 1995. The Scholarship was established primarily to assist talented children from underprivileged families acquire university education (<http://www.weekendpost.co.zw/articles>). These students are drawn from all the ten provinces of Zimbabwe and recommendations come through the provincial Governors who attest that the students are unable to raise funds. Initially all the students on this scholarship were sent to the University of Fort Hare in South Africa, where the President himself studied and obtained a BA Degree. As time went on, the objectives of the Programme were broadened to include the need to absorb local students who fail to be accommodated in local institutions which demand high pass rates for admission and the quest to promote internationalisation of higher education and improve employability of graduates. The demand for the programme has grown in leaps and bounds, spreading from just Fort Hare University to 15 other receiving universities in South Africa. These include Johannesburg University, Monash University, University of Cape Town, University of Venda, Rhodes University, University of Free State, University of Pretoria, Walter Sisulu University, Witwatersrand University and Stellenbosch University (<http://allafrica.com/stories/201206160053.html>). Today, at least 4 000 students are sent on the scholarship programme annually and well over 30 000 students have attained first degrees, masters degrees and doctorate degrees in various fields under the Presidential Scholarship Programme (www.news.dzezimbabwe.co.uk). The programme which was initially expedited by the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Science and Technology Development is now coordinated and monitored by the Executive Director in the President's Office.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Regionalisation in higher education is concerned with collaboration of higher education institutions within regions with the aim of improving on quality and comparability of programmes for credit transfers. Revenshill (2005) defines regionalisation of higher education as a form of collaboration of governments on higher education issues. Knight (2011) defined it as a form of collaboration in all critical areas of higher education including quality issues and harmonisation of programmes. Governments should take a lead role to make sure that this is achieved. Regionalisation in higher education endeavours to shape a better society through socio-economic participation.

Many blocks have been formed throughout the world with the aim of creating partnerships in various capacities. Such initiatives include the blocks such as the European Union (EU), the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the Association of South East Nations (ASEAN), and Southern African Development Community (SADC). Collaboration in SADC is on a wider scale to include political and economic ties. These blocks are more pronounced and functional in Europe and Africa is in its infancy in terms of promoting collaboration in higher education. This could be attributed to political and socio-economic backgrounds of most African countries. Yepes (2006) found that internationalisation of higher education has a regional dimension. The European Union has made great strides in promoting student mobility, faculty and programmes through the Erasmus programmes. An African initiative is the Association of African Universities. This Association is mandated with strengthening ties and collaborations in higher education on issues of quality and harmonisation of programmes. Exchange programmes are also one of the components of collaboration in higher education.

Research has shown that regionalisation of higher education creates transparency, transferability and recognition of academic achievements within the block and beyond. For instance, two universities from two different countries can offer joint degree programmes. This initiative strengthens collaboration and quality of programmes. Countries in East Asia have initiated inter-universities networks so as to increase ties and collaborations (Tsuruta, 2003).

Zimbabwe, through the Presidential Scholarship is collaborating with 15 South African Universities. The Government is planning to expand the Presidential Scholarship Fund to other universities in the region apart from South Africa to meet demand (Herald 2008) as South African universities can no longer offer the increasing number of candidates' places. Human capacity development within the region is critical since there is need to develop into a knowledge based society within the region and beyond (Muhlanga, 2012). SADC has forwarded for consideration various initiatives by member countries to harmonise and integrate higher education national systems with a view to forming a regional higher education space that is competitive in terms of scholarship and efficient in meeting the human resource needs of the region and the rest of the world.

The SADC Protocol on Education and Training has been put in place so as to harmonise higher education systems within the region. The objectives are:

- facilitation in the development and implementation of national qualifications frameworks;
- harmonisation of national qualifications frameworks into the development of a regional qualifications framework;
- strengthening of national assessment, quality assurance and accreditation structures, systems and procedures, and
- to facilitate the development of credit transfer systems. (COMEDAF III Report, 2007).

Further initiatives have led to formation of the Southern African Development Community Qualifications Framework (SADCQF) which is mandated with quality and harmonisation of programmes in institutions of higher learning. A lot of work is going on to operationalise the concept. A proposal to come up with a SADC Qualifications Agency has also been put forward to the various governments. The recommendations by SADC Ministers responsible for higher education institutions to focus on quality issues before they could embark on more challenging task of harmonising programmes within SADC shows some degree of political-will. The developed frameworks from universities within SADC have to be comparable for ease of reference and implementation within the region. These initiatives are a sign of great commitment towards greater harmonisation of higher education offerings, standardisation of quality assurance systems and the creation of a common regional higher education space. All these initiatives should recognise trends in Africa and beyond so as to be effective. Further initiatives such as the creation of the African Council for Distance Education (ACDE), the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA), the Southern African Regional Universities Association (SARUA) and the African Virtual University (AVU) are manifestations of Africa's efforts in internationalisation and regionalisation of higher education.

Robertson et al (2012) found that regionalisation and globalisation of higher education can lead to quality research, promotion of policy movement and adaptation within regions. In a study that was carried by Li and Bray (2007) in Hong Kong and Macau, it was found that cross border higher education was a stepping stone for students who wanted international exposure and experience.

Benefits of regionalisation of higher education

Ssempebwa et al (2012) found that studying abroad is one of the fastest growing phenomena in higher education the world-over. This approach gives a lot of advantages to the student and the institutions such as the perceived higher quality of education. Foreign institutions are perceived to offer higher quality education than home institutions. Students can also have a choice of programmes than those offered by home institutions. Brooks and Waters (2009a, 2009b) indicate that students study in an environment which offers opportunities to further education and employment opportunities in an international environment.

Wiers-Jessen (2008) found that foreign higher education in some cases are cheaper than home education and this relieves the parents who are already financially over-burdened. The receiving countries can also receive more students which can improve the financial status of these universities. Finally, it contributes to the internationalisation of academe, since higher education institutions teach internationally diverse students, who promote knowledge from their countries in the receiving countries and promote the knowledge acquired from these countries in their sending countries (Cross and Rouhani, 2004; Lassegard, 2006).

The impact of scholarships

It has been noted that scholarships have positive impacts on students, the economy and education in general. Higher education has become expensive and unaffordable by most low income families and individuals. In this regard, students will not bear the cost of paying fees. Also, scholarships are not paid back and therefore students and parents do not have the headache of paying back the principal amount with interest. Students do not also look for part-time employment in order to supplement the cost of their education, they will concentrate on their studies and this is likely to produce high quality results. It has also been noted that students who are on scholarships are highly regarded by employers because there is a perception that the graduates are hardworking and well disciplined. When organisations offer scholarships, the country is likely to train more people who add value to the economy. (http://www.america_benefits_of_scholarships_for_students).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The research objective of this study was to explore the impact of the commitment and political will exhibited by the Government of Zimbabwe through the Presidential Scholarship Scheme in promoting regionalisation of higher education.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Population and Sample

Approximately 10 000 beneficiaries of the scholarships, the officials in charge of the scholarship scheme, Directors in the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, parents, and members of the general public constituted the population of the study. Two officials responsible for the Presidential Scholarship Programme, four Directors and two officials in the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, fifteen officers from five different Ministries, twenty (20) parents, thirty five (35) current students and thirty five (35) alumni participated in the study. The sample for this study was therefore, one hundred and eleven (111).

Research instruments

The study used documents, interviews and questionnaires. The research questions and interviews included the following questions:

1. What made you join the Presidential Scholarship Programme?
2. Which degree programme did you choose?
3. What are the benefits of the Presidential Scholarship Programme?
4. Are you currently employed? If yes state the type of organisation i.e. local, regional or international.
5. As a parent what are your views about the Presidential Scholarship Programme?
6. As a Government official, what are your views about the Presidential Scholarship Programme?
7. In your opinion, do you feel that there is need to improve the Programme?

FINDINGS

On the reasons why the students and former students joined the programme, it was found that most of them (65) came from poor rural backgrounds with no opportunities of attaining a degree in sight. Five (5) of the respondents indicated that they were just requested to apply by their parents or relatives who are senior government officials. Fifty-eight (58) of the beneficiaries indicated that they had failed to secure places in local universities due to competition and lack of financial resources. The following table shows various degree programmes which are undertaken by the students.

Table 1: Degree programmes which students enrolled for

Degree programme	Male	Female	Total
Accountancy	8	5	13
Medicine	4	3	7
Engineering	4	0	4
Education	9	10	19
Agriculture	5	2	7
Social sciences	9	6	15
Law	4	1	5
Total	43	27	70

Table 1 shows education had the highest number (19), social sciences 15, accountancy 13, medicine and agriculture 7 apiece, law 5 and engineering 4. This table shows that there were more male students than female students.

Most beneficiaries (67) indicated that the Presidential Scholarship offered them the opportunity to enrol at a university and exposed them to a diversified work environment. The beneficiaries hailed the Government for paying tuition and accommodation fees during their stay in South Africa. The respondents indicated that this programme encouraged the transfer of skills and expertise within the region and beyond. Most of the beneficiaries (68) indicated that they could be employed anywhere within the region and beyond without facing challenges of quality.

All the respondents (70) indicated that regionalisation of higher education facilitates quality improvement, and also allows the academic credit transfers within regional institutions of higher learning. This also leads to qualifications recognition within the region. This initiative also creates harmonisation of programmes throughout the region.

The 70current and former students, 18 parents and all government officials (10) submitted that regionalisation of higher education creates strong ties within nations. All the former students indicated that they were employed. Interviews revealed that some of the respondents (9) were employed by the government. Table 2 shows the number of former students employed in various organisations.

Table 2: Employment of the beneficiaries by organisation type

Type of organisation	Male	Female	Total
Local organisation	7	9	16
Regional organisation	3	5	8
International organisation	6	5	11
Total	16	19	35

A table 2 show that more graduates (16) were employed by local organisations. Eleven were employed by international organisations and 8 by regional organisations respectively. It was also noted that there were more female employed than male.

Most parents (19) indicated that they had benefited a lot through the payment of fees by the government and the upkeep of their children while they undertook their studies in South Africa. Interviews revealed that this lessened the financial burden on parents since most students came from poor backgrounds. Parents hailed the programme since it afforded students from poor backgrounds realise their dreams. Most government officials hailed the programme. They felt that it was an opportunity for the poor to fulfil their dreams. It was also found out that this programme was good for the nation because it capacitated the locals with international skills. Some of the respondents (10) felt that even though this was a good programme, it was underfunded. Some of the respondents (17) also mentioned that there were delays in releasing the fees to the universities to the extent that some of the students ended up being stranded since they came from poor backgrounds. Seven respondents (7) felt that the recruitment process was not transparent and more needed to be done. Others also proposed that the programme should be administered by the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education so as to increase transparency.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Most students who joined this programme came from poor backgrounds and to them it was breaking new ground. The failure by many students to be admitted in local universities points to the fact that higher education in Zimbabwe is expensive and in high demand to the extent that the poor cannot afford. The fact that local universities fail to accommodate all applicants is a sign that higher education is on high demand in Zimbabwe. It is critical for the Government and other stakeholders to invest more in higher education so that more students can be accommodated in the local universities. On the other hand it is also good for students since they will be exposed to the international/ diversified work environment. The entry point for medicine in Zimbabwe is 15 points, Engineering 14 points and Law 15 points. There is stiff competition for higher education in Zimbabwe. Only the cream is being absorbed by the local universities. The scramble for higher education could mean that institutions of higher learning are not adequate. The government should build more universities or capacitate the existing ones so that more students can be accommodated. South African universities accept

students with lower points. This is a good thing for local students who cannot be accommodated in Zimbabwean universities due to various challenges.

Most students indicated that the Presidential Scholarship Programme was a good programme. Findings of this study are in agreement with Knight (2011) who found that regionalisation of higher education offers opportunities to students and staff to be exposed to the international working and research environments. It is critical that students are exposed to different cultures and work ethics. This also strengthens their capacity on an international platform. It was also generally agreed that regionalisation of higher education facilitates, promotes, builds, strengthens, collaborates, aligns among higher education actors, institutions, systems, organisations, networks, government and many others. It was critical to note that the Government of Zimbabwe through the Presidential Scholarship exhibited political will in promoting regionalisation of higher education. Even though Ministers responsible for Higher Education in SADC have come up with initiatives for harmonisation of higher education, political will has not been exhibited in their home countries. For such programmes to succeed, they need government support like in the case of Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe is the only country in the region with such a programme and it is encouraged that other African countries take similar initiatives. Zimbabwe is using the functional, political and organisational approaches in regionalisation of higher education. The findings are in agreement with Tsurutsa (2012) who found that regionalisation of higher education increases ties and collaborations as far as harmonisation of programmes are concerned.

The study found that most stakeholders supported the programme with a few respondents indicating that these resources could be channelled towards developing local institutions of higher learning. It is also one of the key responsibilities of the governments to help the poor with free or affordable higher education. Capacity building through collaboration and exchange programmes is important for any country to compete in the global economy. Exposure of staff to quality assurance systems is very important. This also creates a new dispensation in the management and focus of institutions of higher learning. This also facilitates easy student and staff mobility within the region and beyond. The programmes encourage the transfer of skills and expertise within the region. The graduates felt that they could be employed anywhere within the region without facing challenges of quality. It was found that the scheme contributed to regionalisation of higher education by promoting cooperation, building cultural bridges, promoting international managerialism, mobility and employability of graduates in the region and beyond. This initiative also improves on quality and transferability of credits from one country/university to another. This approach leads to harmonisation of policies and guidelines for quality assurance and the evaluation of qualifications across institutions of higher learning and facilitates equivalency and comparability. Such comparability further enhances student movement and credit transfer across countries/ institutions. Regional integration of higher education enhances both student and staff mobility across institutions within the region and beyond.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The implementation of similar schemes in other countries is critical as it will allow other SADC countries to reap full benefits. The overlap of this programme to other parts of Africa and beyond could be great achievement. The Government should capacitate local universities so that they can offer more affordable programmes.

CONCLUSION

The study concluded that regionalisation of higher education through political commitment helps in harmonisation of programmes and addressed quality issues within the region. It was concluded that the Presidential Scholarship scheme was an example of a best practice in the regionalisation of higher education. It was recommended that similar schemes should be established in other SADC countries in order to reap full benefits.

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