

Quality Dilemmas in Higher Education in Zimbabwe: Qualitative Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This study analysed the systemic challenges undermining the quality of higher education in Zimbabwe, tracing their roots to colonial legacies, post-independence policy shifts, and persistent socio-economic instability. Despite ambitious frameworks like Education 5.0, resource constraints and political-economic crises have created a paradox where institutional goals outpace practical capacity. Using the Social-Ecological Systems Theory, the research adopted a qualitative, interpretive approach, engaging 30 academic staff and students across five universities through interviews, focus groups, and observations. Findings reveal severe staff demotivation driven by plummeting salaries, unrealistic promotion criteria, inadequate research funding, and deteriorating collegiality, perpetuating declining educational standards. These challenges reflect more profound structural failures, including misaligned policies and underfunded infrastructures, which collectively sustain quality dilemmas. The study advocates for transformative interventions to rebuild supportive academic ecosystems, emphasising equitable resource allocation, fair incentive systems, and collaborative governance to institutionalise quality assurance. By linking macro-historical factors to micro-level experiences at the institutional level, the research contributes to theoretical debates on educational quality in crisis contexts. It offers practical insights for policymakers seeking to reconcile Zimbabwe's higher education aspirations with its fragmented realities.

Keywords: Higher education, quality in higher education, quality dilemmas in higher education, academic staff

BACKGROUND

The quality of higher education has been a subject of ongoing research globally, with various studies revealing numerous challenges and opportunities for improvement. In Zimbabwe, the landscape of higher education has undergone significant transformations over the past few decades, influenced by political dynamics, socio-economic changes, and global educational trends. As the country strives to position itself as a leader in education within the Southern African region through Education 5.0, quality dilemmas work against this aspiration. In particular, the rapid expansion of the higher education sector in the context of a sustained economic decline placed significant pressure on universities and other providers of higher education, leading to concerns about the quality of higher education (Amadhila & Guest, 2022). Historically, Zimbabwe boasted a robust higher education system that produced skilled professionals who have made positive vibes across the global job market. However, brain drain due to sustained economic decline and political instability adversely impacted the quality of higher education over the past 3 decades, particularly from the mid-90s through to the 21st century.

A chronicle of Zimbabwe's higher education historical legacy provides the foundation for understanding the quality dilemmas that are the focus of this study. In the 1980s and 1990s post-independence euphoria, Zimbabwe's higher education system emerged as a beacon of intellectual renewal, anchored by the triumvirate of academic freedom, shared governance, and collegiality. These principles were not mere ideals but lived practices: universities thrived as spaces of collaborative decision-making, where faculty, students, and administrators collectively shaped institutional trajectories, and scholarly discourse flourished unimpeded by