

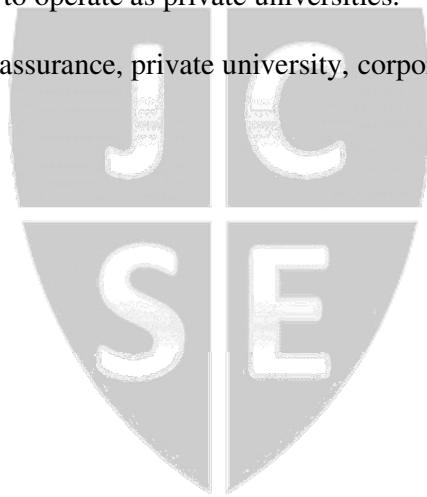
Quality assurance challenges and opportunities faced by private Universities in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

The study sought to provide an understanding of the quality assurance challenges and opportunities faced by private universities in Zimbabwe. The study analyzed the factors determining provision of quality higher education in private universities and the resultant effects of failing to achieve the minimum acceptable standards. The author employed the case study method which falls within the qualitative research paradigm. The major techniques used were documentary analysis, direct observation and participant observation by the author. The results showed that financial constraints and poor corporate governance were the major factors leading to failure by private universities to uphold high quality standards. The study also highlighted the need for an effective national quality assurance agency in making sure that only institutions with the necessary financial, material and human resources should be allowed to operate as private universities.

Key words: Quality, quality assurance, private university, corporate governance



INTRODUCTION

Private universities in Africa should be considered a potential growth industry, which may generate revenue, employment and other spillovers to the rest of the economy (Nyarko, 2001). In Zimbabwe, private universities started in 1992 in response to the need to fill in gaps in access to higher education. The legislative measures initiated to establish private institutions of higher education also opened doors for the entry of cross-border higher education which is offered through private providers. Kariwo (2007) reported that the private higher education sector in Zimbabwe contributed a small share of enrolments and programme offerings in higher education. However, there was so much hope that this sector would provide a solution to the current high demand for higher education. Quality is the biggest challenge for private universities in Zimbabwe. This paper will interrogate the quality opportunities and challenges faced by private universities in Zimbabwe.

Historical Antecedents on University Education in Zimbabwe

Higher education was formally introduced in Zimbabwe in 1957, when the first intake of 58 students was enrolled at the then University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland affiliated to the University of London. The University of London was responsible for setting and ensuring that standards were upheld. The University College became a fully fledged independent University of Rhodesia in 1970 (later to be renamed the University of Zimbabwe in 1980) and continued to uphold the same high standards since the university had the staff, the systems, the values, the resources, and the facilities to maintain quite high levels of teaching and scholarship. Thus in the colonial and early independence years, the question of quality at the university was never an issue as the institution was able to operate at “international standards.” In addition, staff enjoyed reasonably good conditions of service, and there was in place a robust and adequate staff development programme which ensured that young faculty moved on to higher qualifications, while senior faculty had leave and other opportunities for self-renewal and updating.

At independence in 1980, the new Government of Zimbabwe instituted policies to expand educational provision at both primary and secondary school levels. Prior to 1980, less than 20% of the students who completed primary education could proceed to secondary school in the academic stream. At independence, this bottle-neck was removed and the transition rate increased from 20% in 1980 to 86% in 1981 (Kariwo, 2007). In response to the ripple effects created by these deliberate policies, the Government then instituted measures to increase access to higher education, while at the same time recognising the need to shift emphasis from quantitative expansion to the improvement of quality in education and training (Nherera, 2000). Initially access was improved by increasing enrolments and establishing more faculties and departments at the University of Zimbabwe. However, by 1997 a whopping 74% of the qualifying candidates could not be absorbed by UZ (Ministry of Higher Education and Technology, 1997). This necessitated the establishment of more universities. Figure I (Appendix 1) shows the trends in university students' enrolments from 1980 to 2004.

The Government opened up the higher education sector to allow private players involved in the provision of education to be granted permission to establish their own universities. The National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) was established by an Act of Parliament, (Chapter 25:08), in 1990 to receive and process applications to establish private universities. The Council was also mandated to advise the Minister of Higher Education on any matters pertinent to higher education.

The first private university charter was granted in 1992 to Africa University, a United Methodist Church related institution, followed by Solusi University (SU), a Seventh Day

Adventist Church related institution, in 1994. To date five private university charters and one provisional registration permit have been granted by the Government of Zimbabwe. Meanwhile the number of universities rose from one university in 1980 to the current 15 universities as indicated in Table 1 (Appendix 2).

The unprecedented demand for university education prompted universities to increase enrolments without corresponding increases in appropriate facilities, infrastructure, and adequate competent staff. Such a scenario led to some problems especially with private universities. The revocation of the Charter issued to the Chinhoyi based “Zimbabwe International University of Medicine and Dentistry” by Government in 2001 and the closure of programmes at the Reformed Church University in 2004 are cases in point. These unfortunate developments made it imperative for Zimbabwe to take appropriate measures that would guard against falling standards and uphold quality in university education. Accordingly, the National Council for Higher Education Act was repealed and was replaced by a new Act establishing the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE), a new body with enhanced powers to guarantee and maintain quality in higher education.

Private universities in Zimbabwe: Challenges and opportunities

The emergence of private universities in Zimbabwe was a very welcome development because it was anticipated to contribute increasing access to higher education. In addition, during the period 1999-2008 Zimbabwe faced serious economic challenges which led to flight of academic personnel to other countries and thus negatively impacting on the capacity of established local higher education institutions to increase enrolments (Chetsanga, 2003 and the Nepachem Survey, 2009). Meanwhile, the number of students successfully completing their ‘A’ levels kept increasing. This resulted in a number of students seeking enrolment at alternative higher education institutions both in the region and abroad (Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, 2009).

Private higher education in Zimbabwe is provided by private universities and agents of foreign institutions. The regulation of private higher education players is provided for first and foremost, by the charters (legal documents) granted to them by the government. The charter spells out the functions and governance of the university. The ZIMCHE Act also provides for the regulation of private universities as far as quality assurance matters are concerned.

There are two types of agents of foreign higher education institutions. The first group is that of agents whose role is simply to facilitate the recruitment of Zimbabwean local students for the foreign institutions. The student may be assisted in identifying an appropriate programme being offered at the foreign higher education institution. The agent receives the required papers from the student and submits them to the foreign institution. The student may receive communication from the foreign institution directly or via the agent especially if it is general information for prospective students. Quite a number of such agents have been set up recently. These agents often do not require complex facilities. A single office with basic communication facilities is considered adequate.

The second group of agents of foreign higher education institutions is made up of those who, apart from recruiting students, provide tuition for certain programmes. Students visit these agents during certain times for organised lessons.

The mushrooming of private providers of higher education has brought concerns of quality in private universities to the fore. Some of the private providers are bogus institutions that masquerade as providers of ‘quality higher education.’ Unconfirmed reports are to the effect that some of these institutions are manned by unqualified personnel and that most of the facilities are sub-standard. Most of these agents are not registered and therefore it is

impossible to tell how many they are. ZIMCHE is currently making arrangements to have all arms of foreign institutions of higher education registered as stipulated by the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education Act.

It was against the backdrop of the failed two private universities and the grey areas in quality of provision by private providers that this study was conceived to ascertain the quality assurance challenges and opportunities faced by these institutions in Zimbabwe.

METHODOLOGY

The paper has been developed from a case study of one of the six private universities in Zimbabwe, the Reformed Church University. This institution was selected in order to allow an in-depth study of the quality assurance challenges that led to its demise in 2004 and the quality assurance opportunities that led to the institution being allowed to re-open in 2012. In addition, appropriate data from the other five private and nine public universities was also collected to provide a basis for comparative analysis of attributes such as student enrolments, staff statistics and tuition fees. The five private universities currently operating in Zimbabwe are Africa University (AU), Solusi University (SU), Catholic University in Zimbabwe (CUZ) and Women's University in Africa (WUA) and Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University (ZEGU)

The nine public universities are University of Zimbabwe (UZ), National University of Science and Technology (NUST), Bindura University of Science Education (BUSE), Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), Midlands State University (MSU), Chinhoyi University of Technology (CUT), Great Zimbabwe University (GZU), Lupane State University (LSU) and Harare Institute of Technology (HIT)

Data was collected through:

- i) Institutional questionnaire designed to gather information on mission statement; year of establishment; history of institution; degree programmes offered; fees charged; number of staff and students; gender of staff and students; academic qualifications of teaching staff; facilities and equipment available);
- ii) In-depth interviews with officials from the National Council for Higher Education, ZIMCHE, Reformed Church and from the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education;
- iii) Document analysis of policies, reports and other publications; and
- iv) Direct observation.

The quantitative data was analysed, using a variety of statistical techniques. The qualitative data were extracted and reviewed before inclusion in this paper.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

All the authorities of the universities completed the institutional questionnaire. Information provided by ZEGU was limited only to mission statement and programmes offered. This was so because ZEGU was recently given a provisional registration permit and will only commence student recruitment in 2013 after completion of the university infrastructure and facilities. The author managed to obtain information pertaining to the events and quality assurance challenges leading to the closure of programmes and subsequent re-authorisation of RCU to commence programmes.

Mission Statements

RCU's mission "to be a relevant world class centre of excellence in special needs education, theology and community services embedded in Christian values" was in line with

that of AU, CUZ, SU and ZEGU. These five institutions proclaim laudable mission statements which underscore their commitment to moral, holistic and quality education in line with their status as church related institutions. The mission statement of the sixth private university, WUA also embraces quality education but is inclined towards addressing gender disparity consistent with the fact that it is not a church-related private institution.

Degree programmes

Table 2 (Appendix 3) indicates the focus of the degree programmes in private universities. Emphasis is on Education, Business Management and Agriculture followed by Humanities, Social Sciences and Theology. Engineering and Medicine were not offered by private institutions. RCU used to offer Law whilst WUA used to offer Health Sciences but these programmes were discontinued after failing to meet quality assurance requirements. By and large, the courses that are offered in private institutions are not as diversified as those by public universities in Zimbabwe. Chivore, (2006) reported similar findings and stated that areas like Engineering, Medicine and Geology among others are a preserve of well-established state universities such as UZ and NUST.

Tuition Fees

The private universities charge 'full cost' fees. Table 3 (Appendix 4) shows the tuition fees charged by private universities in comparison to those charged by public universities. All the nine public universities charge similar fees. The fees depend on the type of programme the student is pursuing. Science-based programmes attract higher fees. RCU charges the lowest fees due to reliance on subsidies by the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe, which is the responsible authority. This might be a contributing factor to poor quality of delivery that led to its closure in 2004. Fees at public universities are subsidized by the government. The differences on student funding at private universities with other countries such as Kenya is that currently students from private universities cannot access government funding schemes like the Cadetship Scheme.

Students' Enrolments

The RCU charter was granted on the understanding that RCU had facilities and resources to initially cater for 600 students. The university would then build more facilities to increase capacity with time. However, in order to meet the demand for places as well as to increase income from fees, RCU increased intake to 2000 students within a period of two years. Buzindadde (2000) asserted that institutions of higher learning have become overwhelmed by the large number of applicants, which have forced many of them to admit students beyond their intake capacity. However, overwhelming numbers beyond the intake capacity affect quality delivery because of limited resources such as library, furniture, computer laboratory, lecture rooms.

Table 4 (Appendix 5) shows the share of enrolments for private universities whilst Table 5 (Appendix 6) shows the share of enrolments by gender. The contribution of enrolments from private universities rose from 4.6% in 1995 to a peak of 10.2% in 2008. It is interesting to note that the share of enrolments for private universities is higher (13.1%) for females. This can be explained by the positive role being played by the Women's University in Africa in empowering disadvantaged women. The percentage of female enrolment for WUA was 75% but its vision is to end up with a share of 85% women. The share of enrolments in private universities is likely to increase following the approval of one more

private university (Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University) and the recommencement of degree programmes at RCU.

The reasons given for lower enrolments at private universities compared to state universities are: limited number of programmes on offer; limited teaching learning infrastructure; limited accommodation facilities for both students and staff and high fees.

Academic Staff

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 the Catholic University in Zimbabwe, out of a total of 29 academic staff in 2009, 26 were part-time. In the same year, 40 out of 62 academic staff at the Women's University Africa was part-time. The academic staff's level of qualifications is shown in Table 6 (Appendix 7). The public universities have more PhD degree holders among their academic staffs than private universities and presumably a higher calibre of teachers than the latter if this is adjudged by the number of doctorate *vis-à-vis* those with Masters' degree holders. However, in terms of the ratio of PhDs to students, AU, a private university, has the lowest ratio which is better than public universities. AU is the only university in Zimbabwe that did not have Bachelor degree holders as part of its academic staff. This is largely because of the regional nature of AU, whose policy demands that a quota (25%) be set aside for staff and students of foreign origin. On recruiting these, they normally consider holders of higher qualifications.

It should be noted that in all universities whether private or public, the minimum academic qualification required for one to be a lecturer is a Masters degree.

Corporate governance and quality of university management

The major reason for the demise of the Reformed Church University was poor corporate governance and weak leadership from the university management who had the requisite academic qualifications but lacked adequate experience. The university, run by the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe, was torn apart by wrangles between stakeholders over the composition of the university Council. Some informants reported that the individual appointed as university Vice Chancellor was weak, not competent and lacked administrative potentials, integrity and failed to lead by example. The then moderator (Head) of the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe distanced himself from the university upon failing to reconcile different competing stakeholders of the university. Kumba (2010) also reported a leadership controversy at one of the religious private universities in Kenya where a Presiding Bishop of the sponsoring church dismissed a Vice Chancellor without regard to procedure or written law which regulates and licenses institutions of higher learning in Kenya.

Kinyanjui (2007) stated that visionary and creative leadership is critical to the transformation of higher education. He noted that restructuring of the leadership, governance and management systems of each institution should be a priority. He recommended that administrative and management structures of the public universities should be analyzed and streamlined to create efficient, effective, responsive and lean structures to avoid wastage of resources, duplicated responsibilities and overlapping mandates where members of different levels are members at next level and to institute checks and balances. Gudo, *et al.*, (2011) raised a critical question on the fact that, because Vice Chancellors are chosen to deliver against performance indicators, is institutional performance related in any way to the characteristics of the Vice Chancellors? According to the findings of this study, the answer seems to be yes.

ZIMCHE works closely with all university leaders to make sure that they make quality their primary concern. Below is an excerpt of a paper presented to Vice Chancellors by the Chairman of ZIMCHE at a workshop on quality assurance:

The expectations of ZIMCHE when looking at the duties of Vice Chancellors are that the Vice Chancellor shall be the chief quality assurance officer of the university. In other words he/she is the gatekeeper of standards at the institution and should critically look at and act decisively on all variables that affect quality including the human resources variable, the programmes, the facilities, the equipment etc. The Vice Chancellor will inform ZIMCHE of the decisions that were made by the university to assure quality.

In view of the afore-mentioned, when RCU applied to re-open ZIMCHE made sure that the issue of governance was thoroughly addressed and a suitably qualified Vice Chancellor was appointed in line with the provisions of the ZIMCHE guidelines.

Quality of infrastructure, facilities and equipment

The Reformed Church University was using inappropriate infrastructure meant for a teachers College and it was also renting out pre-schools as lecture rooms. The facilities were not adequate; there were not enough ICT resources to cater for the 2000 students. Running an institution, requires significant investment in providing and maintaining a basic level of infrastructure, facilities, and equipment. Public Universities in Zimbabwe are supported largely by government but private universities have to fund themselves and this has invariably led to the quality being adversely affected. ZIMCHE has now made sure that no private university will be given a charter before it satisfies the set benchmarks in this respect.

Internal Quality Assurance

The internal quality assurance system at RCU was very weak. Although the students admitted met the general requirements for entry into a university in Zimbabwe, many failed to meet the specific criteria for certain degrees for example law. Generally for the two public universities that offer law in Zimbabwe, the University of Zimbabwe and Midlands State University, students admitted generally have at least 12 points at Advanced level. RCU was admitting students with as low as two points. In addition, these public institutions admit a limited number of students per year for example Midlands State University admits only 15 law students per year. RCU had an intake of 400 law students. This led to the condemnation of the RCU's law degree programme by the Council for Legal Education and accelerated the two-year-old university's slide towards its demise, prompting Government intervention to rescue students. Oladipo, *et al.*, (2011) assert that to ensure internal control and quality assurance, student intake and quality of university products must be controlled right from the admission stage. However, it can be argued that 2 Es at A level see many students enter university in many countries. In some countries the entry is even lower. Therefore, it could not stand as a factor in the quality assurance challenges of RCU but the issue of too many students being enrolled in the absence of adequate teaching staff and learning materials is the causal factor.

The role of ZIMCHE

ZIMCHE was created through an Act of Parliament (Chapter 25:27) which was promulgated in 2006 to repeal the National Council for Higher Education Act (Chapter 25:08) and to require ZIMCHE to register and accredit institutions of higher education.

The mandate of ZIMCHE as provided for in Section 5 (1) of the Act is:

to promote and coordinate education provided by institutions of higher education and to act as a regulator in the determination and maintenance of standards of teaching, examinations, academic qualifications and research in institutions of higher education.

The Act further states in Section 6 (d) that the function of Council is: to design and recommend an institutional quality assurance system for higher education, that is, a system whereby the courses, programmes and degrees offered by institutions are evaluated on a regular and objective basis, and to recommend to the Minister institutional quality assurance standards.

The ZIMCHE Act, therefore, clearly mandates ZIMCHE to be the gatekeeper of standards in higher education institutions.

The coming in of ZIMCHE managed to assist many higher education institutions to improve their standards. ZIMCHE sets the benchmarks in consultation with these institutions and in adherence to international standards. ZIMCHE assists institutions to establish internal quality assurance units as well as to improve quality of provision in general. ZIMCHE worked together with the defunct RCU in crafting quality curricula, recruiting highly qualified personnel and in providing all assistance needed for the university to be granted authority to re-commence programmes.

Apart from the advisory role, ZIMCHE also monitors and accredits programmes offered by institutions. Any programme that does not meet quality standards is suspended. To date seven programmes in state universities have been suspended. In addition, twelve private colleges have been closed down. This has greatly assisted in making institutions aware that they cannot afford to ignore quality.

CONCLUSION

The outcomes of this study points to the fact that it is vital to focus on quality in the emerging private universities. These universities are contributing to higher education in terms of increasing access to higher education. They are also doing extremely well by engendering higher education and hence empowering women in view of the ratio of male to female students that is skewed in favour of females. Some of these institutions have a greater percentage of academic staff with PhDs than public institutions and hence offering greater opportunities for imparting quality education.

However, private institutions face quality assurance challenges brought about largely by poor financial resources which render it impossible for them to acquire adequate human and material resources to support quality teaching and learning. Private institutions need to attract more qualified academic staff because most of them are bereft of holders of doctorate degree. They are also inclined to depend on lots of part-time teachers or those who are on sabbatical leave who are mostly drawn from the public institutions.

Inference can be made from the case of RCU that poor corporate governance and poor university management contribute greatly to poor quality delivery. University management should be able to put in place, maintain and continuously improve processes and procedures that leads to quality service delivery. Financial constraints leading to failure to access adequate and appropriate resources were also cases in point. The study also highlighted the critical role played by an effective national quality assurance agency in making sure that only institutions with the necessary financial, physical, material and human resources should be allowed to operate as private universities.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

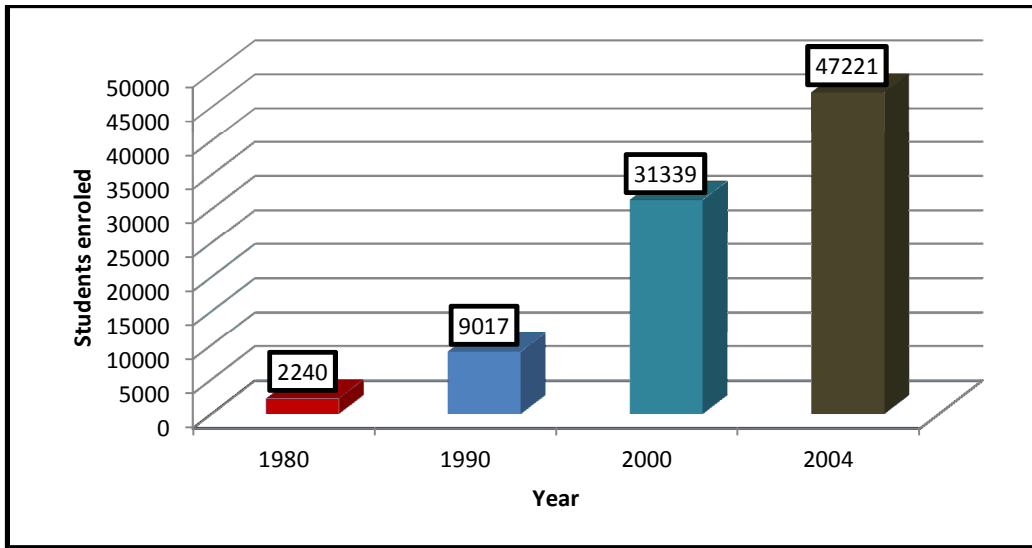
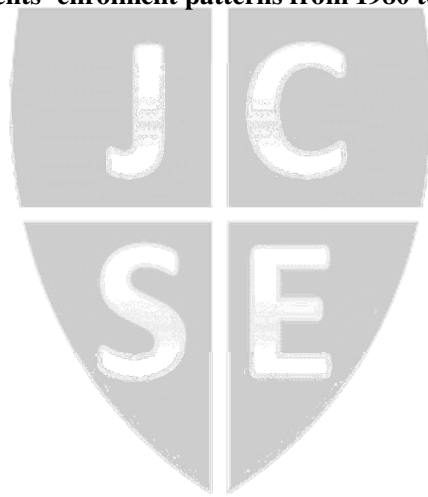


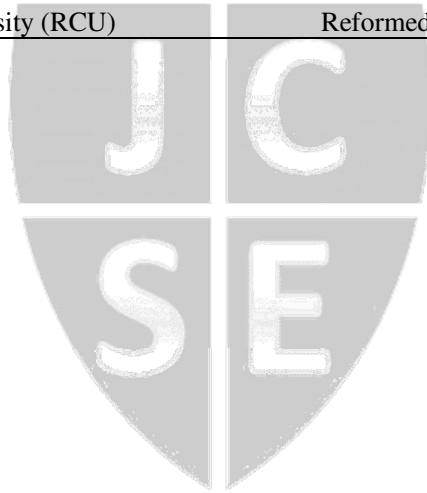
Figure I: University students' enrolment patterns from 1980 to 2004 (ZIMCHE, 2012)



APPENDIX 2

Table 1: Universities in Zimbabwe

	Name of university	Responsible Authority	Year established
1	University of Zimbabwe (UZ)	State	1957
2	National University of Science and Technology (NUST)	State	1991
3	Africa University (AU)	United Methodist church	1992
4	Solusi University (SU)	Seventh Day Adventist	1994
5	Bindura University of Science Education (BUSE)	State	1996
6	Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU)	State	1998
7	Midlands State University (MSU)	State	1999
8	Catholic University in Zimbabwe (CUZ)	Catholic Church	2001
9	Chinhoyi University of Technology (CUT)	State	2001
10	Great Zimbabwe University (GZU)	State	2002
11	Women's University in Africa (WUA)	Private	2002
12	Lupane State University (LSU)	State	2004
13	Harare Institute of Technology (HIT)	State	2005
14	Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University (ZEGU)	Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Church	2011
15	Reformed Church University (RCU)	Reformed Church	2001/2012



APPENDIX 3

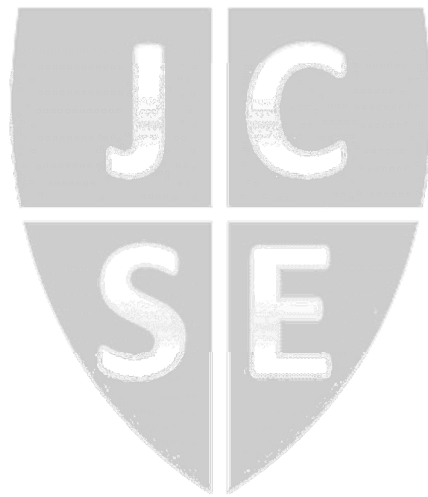
Table 2: Disciplines offered by Private Universities

Discipline	NAME OF PRIVATE UNIVERSITY					
	AU	SU	CUZ	WUA	RCU	ZEGU
Agriculture	✓	X	X	✓	X	X
Education	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Engineering	X	X	X	X	X	X
Health Science	✓	X	X	∅	X	X
Medicine	X	X	X	X	X	X
Humanities and Social Sciences	✓	X	✓	X	X	X
Law	X	X	X	X	∅	X
Science and Technology	X	✓	X	X	X	X
Business and Management	✓	✓	X	✓	✓	✓
Arts	X	✓	X	X	X	X
Theology	X	✓	X	X	X	✓

✓ Discipline offered

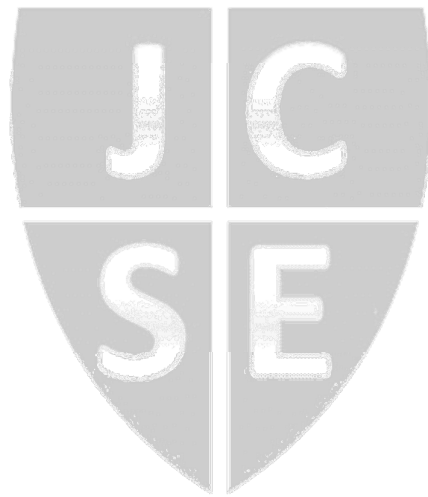
X Discipline not offered

∅ discipline discontinued



APPENDIX 4**Table 3: Tuition fees charged by universities in Zimbabwe**

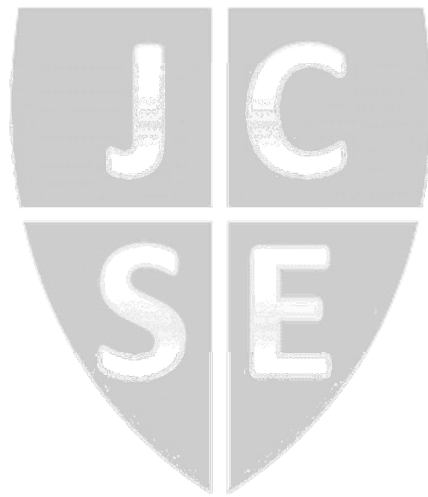
	Tuition Fees/semester in US\$)
Public	400.00/700.00
Women's University in Africa	700.00
Catholic University	750.00/800.00
Africa University	1250.00
Solusi University	1400.00
Reformed Church University	500.00



APPENDIX 5

Table 4:Share of enrolments in private universities

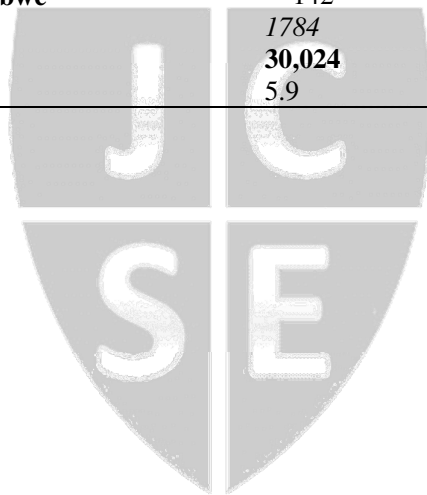
Year	Enrolment at public universities	Enrolment at private universities	Total	% Share private universities
1995	11,784	568	12,352	4.6
1996	16,166	933	17,099	5.5
1997	22,991	926	23,917	3.9
1998	17,586	1,485	19,071	7.8
1999	26,122	1,706	28,192	6.1
2000	29,390	1,534	31,339	4.9
2001	33,334	1,419	34,753	4.1
2004	47,221	2,705	47,221	5.7
2005	44,078	3,713	47,791	8.4
2006	44,000	4,130	48,130	8.6
2007	43,700	3,814	47,514	8.0
2008	43,000	4,864	47,864	10.2
2009	45,284	4,361	49,645	8.8



APPENDIX 6

Table 5: Share of enrolments in universities by gender

Name of University	Number of Students		Total
	Male	Female	
<i>Public</i>			
Zimbabwe Open University	9,709	6,586	16,295
University of Zimbabwe	7,953	4,318	12,271
National University of Science and Technology	3,446	1,686	5,132
Midlands State University	2,218	1,778	3,996
Great Zimbabwe University	1,587	1,151	2,738
Chinhoyi University of Technology	1,557	824	2,381
Bindura University of Science Education	1,399	524	1,923
Harare Institute of Technology	261	82	343
Lupane State University	110	95	205
Sub-TOTAL	28,240	17044	45284
<i>Private</i>			
Solusi University	854	982	1,836
Women's University in Africa	305	898	1,203
Africa University	483	524	1,007
Catholic University in Zimbabwe	142	173	315
Sub-TOTAL	1784	2577	4361
Total	30,024	19,621	49,645
% Share private	5.9	13.1	8.8



APPENDIX 7

Table 6: Lecturing staff qualifications`

University	PhD Holders			MSc		Bachelors		Total		
	No.	Ratio*	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	Ratio**	%
Public (Enrolment 45,284)	144	1:314	7.6	1248	67	481	25.8	187	1:24	100
AU (Enrolment 1,007)	10	1:100	17.5	47	82.5	0	0	57	1:18	100
WUA (Enrolment 3,551)	2	1:601	3.2	56	90.3	4	6.5	62	1:19	100
SU (Enrolment 1,836)	6	1:306	13.3	26	57.8	13	28.9	45	1:41	100
CUZ (Enrolment 315)	2	1:158	7.0	24	82.7	3	10.3	29	1:11	100

*Ratio of PhDs to total number of students.

**Ratio of total academic staff to students.

