

Improving the Qualifications of Academic Staff in a Major Zimbabwean University

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Received: June 1, 2015

Accepted: June 10, 2015

Published: June 20, 2015

doi:10.5296/gjes.v1i1.7895

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5296/gjes.v1i1.7895>

Abstract

The findings from the baseline survey (MoHTE, 2010) revealed high attrition of senior academic staff (doctorate degree holders) from higher education institutions resulting from the economic meltdown faced by Zimbabwe from 2000 to 2009. It is thus imperative for Zimbabwe to train more staff at doctorate level in order to replenish the ones lost to brain drain and improve the quality of teaching, learning and research. The objective of this study was to establish the extent to which universities have fared in their staff development endeavours. A quantitative case study approach was used focusing on Great Zimbabwe University (GZU). Documentary evidence and structured questionnaires were used to collect data from Deans of Faculties. The results showed that the academic staff members pursuing doctoral degree studies increased from one in 2009 to 133 in 2015. Eleven of these are studying in five Zimbabwean universities whilst 122 are enrolled with 19 foreign universities in six different countries. The number of academic staff members increased from 197 in 2009 to 293 in 2015. The university registered its first cohort of 19 Doctor of Philosophy students in 2015 of these 5 are members of GZU staff. The study concluded that Great Zimbabwe University was poised for greater heights in improving the quality of their staff. The study recommends similar studies in the other universities in Zimbabwe.

Keywords: Quality, Staff development, Doctoral studies, Brain drain, Great Zimbabwe University

1. Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that higher education is the key to technological advancement and the concomitant socio-economic growth and development of nations (Omebe & Omebe, 2014; Oyeade, Oladipo, & Adetoro, 2012). It is in recognition of this fact that quality assurance bodies, universities, policymakers, academics, students and the general public commit immense resources to ensure the provision and acquisition of quality higher education (Jacob, Xiong, & Ye, 2015). The academic staff members of a university form its intellectual resource pool and constitute the key resource to the institution's success (Arubayi, 2009; Bayissa & Zewdie, 2010; Tella & Daniel, 2013). The achievement of excellence in teaching and learning is therefore dependent on the calibre and motivation levels of the academic staff in universities (Fielden, 1998; Harnash-Glazer & Meyer, 1991; Hill, Lomas & MacGregor, 2003; Rowley, 1996). Indeed, Bowen & Schuster (1986, p. 1) proffer that "excellence in higher education is a function of the people it is able to enlist and retain in its faculties."

Mushonga, (2005) reported that universities in Zimbabwe were grappling with a huge exodus of qualified and experienced academics. The findings corroborate with those from the baseline survey of human capital in Zimbabwe (MoHTE, 2010) which revealed high levels of attrition of quality senior academic staff (doctorate degree holders) from universities as a result of the economic meltdown faced by the country from 2000 to 2009. The situation was so dire that some departments and postgraduate programmes had to be closed (Kotecha & Perold, 2010). In addition, universities were unable to attract equally experienced academics to replace those who left (Chetsanga, 2010). In some cases, recent graduates of the same universities were employed as lecturers leading to a phenomenon referred to as 'academic inbreeding' (Yudkevich, Albatch & Rumbley, 2015). The reasons for the exodus and the failure to attract suitably qualified and experienced academic staff were the uncompetitive remuneration packages, poor conditions of service and inadequate research opportunities and facilities (Adi, 2012; Mupemhi & Mupemhi, 2011; Mushonga, 2005). It is thus imperative for Zimbabwe to train or recruit more staff at doctorate level in order to replenish the ones lost to brain drain and improve the quality of teaching, learning and research. The study aims to establish the extent to which universities have managed to address the staffing challenges through home-grown staff development programmes.

1.1 Academic Inbreeding/Incest

The term "inbreeding" or "incest" is used in academia to denote a situation where former students are employed as academic staff members within the university where they obtained their highest qualification (Basak, 2013; Blau, 1994; Yudkevich, et al., 2015). Academic inbreeding reduces academic quality and has for a long time been viewed as a taboo and thus a cause for concern in the higher education fraternity (Eliot, 1908; Horta, Veloso & Grediaga, 2010; Inanc & Tuncer, 2011; Sivak & Yudkevich, 2012). This phenomenon has been criticised and associated with a stream of damaging effects on academic achievement and productivity inclusive of limited scholarly output, lack of a broad outlook/worldview, less collegial and reduced openness to global scientific issues (Bridgeland, 1982; Dutton, 1980; Hargens & Farr, 1973; Hollingshead, 1938; McNeely, 1932) Eells and Cleveland (1935)

cautioned that universities ought to be vigilant and desist from allowing inbreeding to undermine or even sterilise their academic productivity. It is generally accepted that hiring academics with diverse academic backgrounds results in increased productivity (Ashby, 1956; Carlan, Lewis, & Dial, 2009; Page, 2007; Patterson, 2004).

1.2 Importance of Doctoral Qualifications in Higher Education

Doctoral education has been well acknowledged for producing scholars with cutting edge skills to teach and research effectively (Brown, 2008; Hadjioannou, Shelton, Fu, & Dhanarattigannon, 2007; Mujtaba, Scharff, Cavico, & Mujtaba, 2008; Stevens-Long, Schapiro, & McClintock, 2012). Tribe (2003, p. 39) emphasised the importance of strengthening “academic staff research and scholarly activity to ensure the currency and validity of what is taught.” Thus research is a pertinent activity that positively impact on the quality of academic staff members (Lindsay, Breen & Jenkins, 2002; Lofthouse, (1974). In addition, doctoral education leads to increased research output (Cloete & Maassen, 2015; MacGregor, 2013; Muriisa 2010).

1.3 The Zimbabwean Context

The Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE), the quality assurance watchdog requires that the lecturers in universities should be holders of an earned academic qualification that is pitched at a minimum of one level above the exit level of the programmes they are teaching or supervising. This translates to at least a Masters degree for undergraduate programmes and a doctorate for Masters and Doctoral programmes. Arguably, the critical role of staff developing or recruiting lecturers with doctoral qualifications is to employ highly qualified academic staff who would then assist in developing more doctoral graduates resulting in a ripple effect (Garwe, 2015). However, the baseline survey (MoHTE, 2010) reported that the percentage of academics holding doctoral qualifications averaged 8.1% and ranged from 1.5 to 16.8% depending on university (refer to Table 1).

Table 1. The proportion of academics with doctorates by institution (July 2009)

University	No. of doctorates	Total academics	% of doctorates
Africa University (AU)	10	57	17.5
Bindura University of Science Education (BUSE)	4	157	2.5
Catholic University in Zimbabwe	2	29	6.9
Chinhoyi University of Technology (CUT)	3	148	2
Great Zimbabwe University (GZU)	3	197	1.5
Harare Institute of Technology (HIT)	2	49	4.1
Lupane State University (LSU)	1	18	5.6
Midlands State University (MSU)	12	351	3.4
National University of Science & Technology (NUST)	28	251	11.2
Solusi University (SU)	6	45	13.3

University of Zimbabwe (UZ)	90	537	16.8
Women's University in Africa (WUA)	2	62	3.2
Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU)	5	169	3
TOTAL	168	2070	8.1

Source: (MoHTE, 2010).

It can be seen from Table 1 that the university that registered the lowest percentage of academics with doctorates (1.5%) in 2009 is the Great Zimbabwe University. It was therefore important to monitor the university's progress in improving the quality of its academic staff members. The paper is therefore focused on studying the developments that have taken place at this university in terms of improving the quality of academic staff members.

2. Methodology

In line with the objectives and the nature of this study, a quantitative case study research design was used. A case study is defined as an empirical method of enquiry that entails the systematic collection of data about a particular issue, parameter or setting that allow the researcher to understand fully how it operates, unfolds or functions (Bassegy, 2002; Berg, 2007). Yin, (1994) argues that the case study methodology allows for the extrapolation and generalization of issues by following up on previous knowledge and building new insights. Case studies are therefore invaluable when there is need to transcend the frontiers of knowledge concerning the current status of previously investigated cases (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Voss, Tsikriktsis, & Frohlich, 2002). In addition, data can be gathered over a period of time allowing the researcher to proceed beyond mere cross-sectional snapshots of a process (Ghuri, 2004; Stuart, McCutcheon, Handfield, McLachlin, & Samson, 2002).

The target population in this study included all the 293 academic staff members employed on a full-time basis by the Great Zimbabwe University (www.gzu.ac.zw/). Table 1 shows the details of the staff members categorised by Faculty.

Table 2. Number of academic staff members by faculty (2015)

	Faculty	Number of Academics
1	Agriculture and Natural Resources	34
2	Arts	39
3	Commerce	50
4	Culture and Heritage Studies	15
5	Education	104
6	Law	4
7	Social Sciences	47
	TOTAL	293

Source: Compiled from: www.gzu.ac.zw/index.php/gzufactories/.

A questionnaire requesting for information on the number of academics engaged in doctoral studies, the universities that they are enrolled with and the number of doctoral students enrolled by the Faculty from 2009 to April 2015 was sent to Deans of all the seven Faculties at the Great Zimbabwe University via email. In addition, the questionnaire required the respondents to list the number of academics with Doctoral qualifications as of April 2015 in order for the researchers to track progress since 2009 by computing and comparing the share of academics with doctorates. The responses were returned to the researcher using the same communication channel. The response rate was 100% displaying the culture of seriousness exhibited by staff at the university under study.

3. Results

Figure 1 shows the number of staff enrolling for doctoral studies from 2009 to 2015.

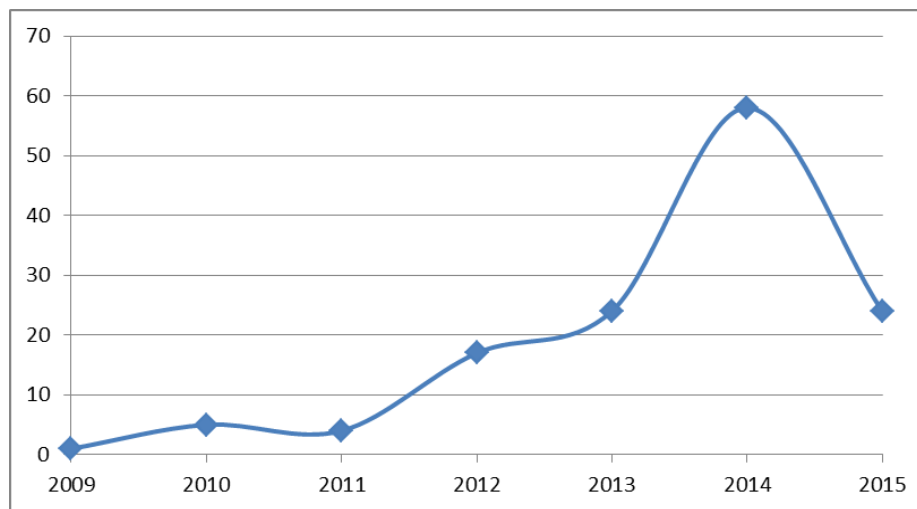


Figure 1. The number of academic staff enrolled for doctoral studies (2009-2015)

It can be seen from Figure 1 that the trend in the number of academic staff members enrolling for doctoral studies has been increasing steadily from 2009 and peaked in 2014. The records for the year 2015 ended in April and therefore there is a possibility that by December 2015 the numbers would have increased. Figure 2 shows the cumulative number of academics pursuing doctoral studies from 2009 to 2015.

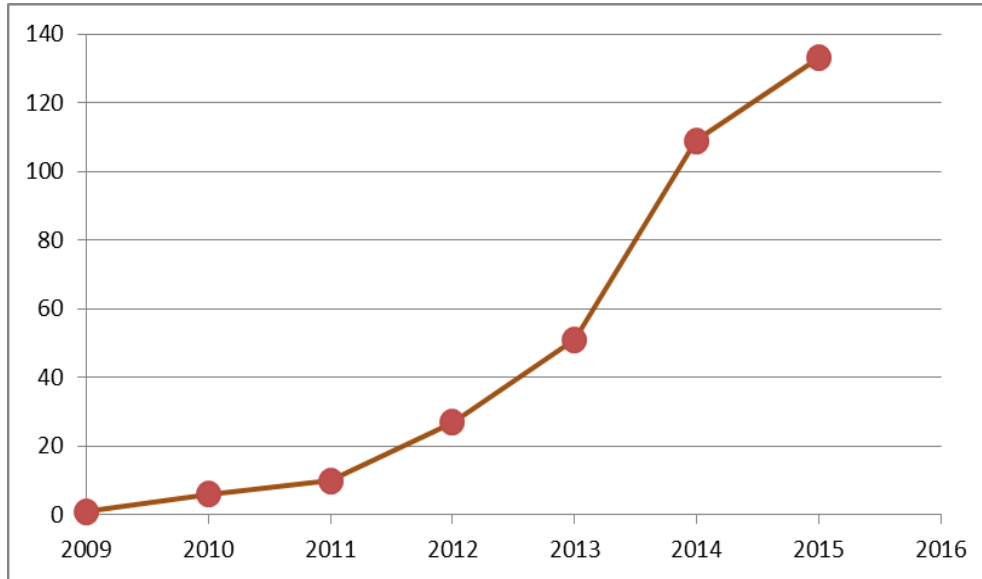


Figure 2. The cumulative trend of academics pursuing doctoral studies (2009-2015)

Figure 2 shows that the trend in the cumulative statistics of academic staff members enrolling for doctoral studies has been increasing from 2009 through to 2015. Figure 3 illustrates the proportion of doctoral students enrolled in universities in Botswana, India, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom (UK), South Africa and Zimbabwe.

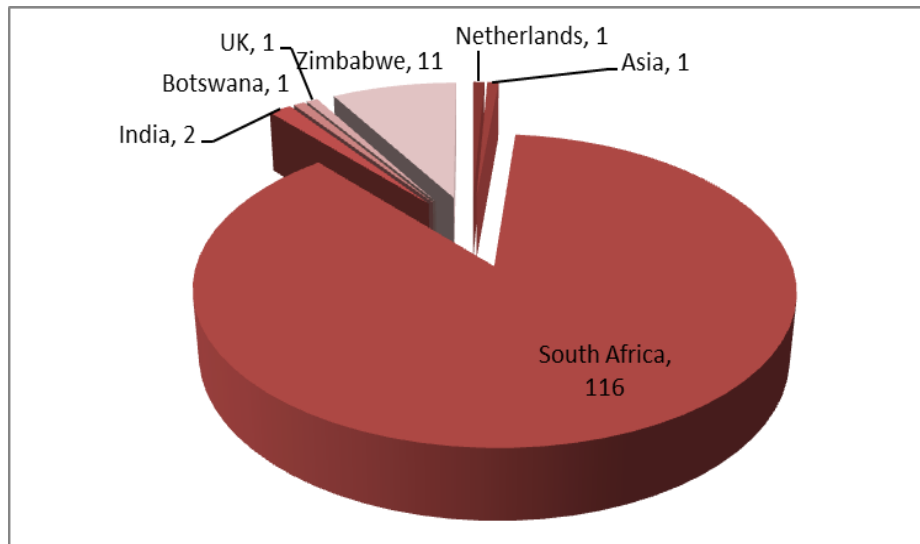


Figure 3. The proportion of doctoral students enrolled in 7 countries

Figure 3 shows that 116 (87%) academics are enrolled in universities in South Africa, 11 (8%) in Zimbabwe, 3 (1.5%) in UK, 2 (1%) in India, 1 (0.8%) in Botswana, 1 (0.8%) in Asia and 1 (0.8%) in the Netherlands.

Table 3 shows the number and year of enrolment in the various universities.

Table 3. The number and year of enrolment of academics in the various universities

		2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
	South African Universities							
1	University of Kwazulu Natal				1	1	25	33
2	University of Free State					3	6	6
3	University of South Africa (UNISA)		3	5	13	21	27	29
4	North West University				1	2	4	5
5	University of Venda				2	6	10	11
6	University of Western Cape				1	1	1	2
7	University of Johannesburg	1	1	1	2	2	6	6
8	University of Cape Town						1	1
9	University of Limpopo					1	1	2
10	University of Fort Hare			1	1	2	3	5
11	University of Pretoria			1	2	4	6	7
12	University of Witwatersrand			1	1	2	4	5
13	Central University of Technology						3	3
14	University of Stellenbosch						1	1
	Other universities							
1	University of Botswana					1	1	1
2	University of Reading (UK)						1	1
3	Leiden University (Netherlands)					1	1	1
4	Christ University (India)				2	2	2	2
5	Universiti Brunei Darussalam (Asia)							1
	Universities in Zimbabwe							
1	University of Zimbabwe						1	1
2	Great Zimbabwe University							5
3	Zimbabwe Open University						1	2
4	National University of Science & Technology		1	1	1	1	2	2
5	Midlands State University						1	1
24	GRAND TOTAL							133

Table 3 shows that the 133 academic staff members pursuing doctoral studies are enrolled in a total of 24 different universities. The university with the highest enrolment (33) is the University of Kwazulu Natal followed by UNISA (29) and the University of Venda (11). None of the academics who are pursuing doctoral students since 2009 has graduated largely because they are studying on a part-time basis since they are full time employees of GZU.

Great Zimbabwe University enrolled its first cohorts of doctoral students in 2015. These

include five members of staff from within the university. Table 4 shows the statistics of doctoral students enrolled in each Faculty.

Table 4. Statistics of doctorate holders and doctoral students enrolled in each Faculty

	Faculty	Number of Academics with doctorates	Doctoral Student enrolment (2015)
1	Agriculture & Natural Resources	3	1
2	Arts	3	1
3	Commerce	3	4
4	Culture & Heritage Studies	3	5
5	Education	5	7
6	Law	1	0
7	Social Sciences	2	1
	TOTAL	20	19

It can be seen from Table 4 that the number of doctoral students enrolled are determined by the potential number of adequately qualified supervisors within the faculty. This also explains why the university only managed to enrol doctoral students in 2015. Table 5 compares the student enrolment and the number of academics at the Great Zimbabwe University in 2009 and 2014 as well as the percentages of academics with doctorates.

Table 5. Statistics of student enrolment and academics and as the percentage of academics with doctorates

Year	Student enrolment	No. of doctorates	Total academics	% of doctorates
2009	3291	3	197	1.5
2014	9810	20	293	6.8

Table 5 shows that in 2009 the university only had 3 academics with doctoral qualifications. However, due to better remuneration and conditions of service the university has managed to attract more doctorate holders and the number currently stands at 20.

4. General Discussion

Great Zimbabwe University registered the lowest percentage of academics with doctorates (1.5%) in 2009 (MoHTE, 2010). The objective of the study was to monitor the university's progress in improving the quality of its academic staff members. The findings of the study shows that the university has made great strides in recruiting more academic staff and in ensuring that academic staff members pursue doctoral studies. The number of academic staff members employed by the university increased by 49% from 197 in 2009 to 293 in 2015.

This is a great achievement and in line with the recommendation by Tettey (2006, p. 5) who stated that “an appropriate and critical starting point for addressing the issue of human resource capacity building and, by extension, socio-economic development, is the university.” This position is supported by Evenson (2004) who argues that universities produce the high level skills necessary to drive the economy forward. Ng’ethe, Iravo & Namusonge (2003) bemoans the inadequate staff development and retention strategies as the major causes of universities’ failure to develop enough intellectual resources required for teaching and research. It would therefore appear that in the case of Great Zimbabwe University, the increase in academic staff numbers and engagement in doctoral studies can be attributed to improved recruitment and retention strategies as well as the expansion of the university.

The number of academics with doctorates increased from 3 (a share of 1.5% of academics with doctorates) in 2009 to 20 (a share of 6.8% academics with doctorates) in 2014. This increase has enabled GZU to enrol doctoral students in 2015 for the first time since the university was established. This finding agrees with Garwe (2015) who asserts that in the case of Zimbabwe, one of the key reasons of encouraging doctoral education is to create a critical mass of academics qualified at the highest level that would then spearhead the production of more doctoral graduates resulting in a ripple effect. Mapolisa (2014) found that academics with doctoral qualifications increase the visibility of universities and that the higher the number of lecturers with doctorates, the more popular and attractive the programmes of the university will be to prospective students. In addition, the more famous the university is the easier it is to retain qualified lectures since lecturers are motivated by fame, status, success and prestige of the university.

Theoretically, if all the 133 academics who are undertaking doctoral studies manage to complete, the share of academics with doctorates will increase to 52% within the next four years. However, it is disturbing to note that none of the academics who have been pursuing doctoral students since 2009 has graduated largely because they are studying on a part-time basis since they are full time employees of GZU. It is hoped that the serious cases of low persistence rates and long durations of completing doctoral studies reported in literature will not bedevil GZU. Several studies have reported high attrition rates in doctoral candidates ranging from 33% to 88% (Gardner, 2008; Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Golde, 2005; Herman, 2011; Ivankova, & Stick, 2007; Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueschel, & Hutchings, 2008).

The academics are enrolled in 24 different universities in 7 countries. There include 11 academics enrolled in 5 Zimbabwean universities and 122 academics enrolled in foreign universities. This clearly shows the limited capacity of Zimbabwean universities to offer doctorate degrees for reasons elaborated by Garwe (2015). On a positive note, this dispels fears of inbreeding since GZU academics are exposed to a wide array of institutions in different countries. Several researchers cautioned universities to be vigilant and desist from allowing inbreeding to undermine academic productivity (Ashby, 1956; Bridgeland, 1982; Carlan, Lewis, & Dial, 2009; Eells & Cleveland, 1935; Inanc & Tuncer, 2011; McNeely, 1932; Page, 2007; Patterson, 2004; Sivak & Yudkevich, 2012).

5. Conclusion

The study concludes that Great Zimbabwe University is poised for greater heights towards improving the quality of their staff through staff development and ensuring that they avoid academic inbreeding. The study was, however, only limited to Great Zimbabwe University. Whilst it is possible to generalise and apply the findings to the other eight public universities in Zimbabwe since the remuneration packages are similar, it would be prudent to do thorough studies in each of these universities. This stems from the strategic importance of universities in the success of the country's economic blueprint, the Zimbabwe Agenda for Socio-economic Transformation (ZimASSET) which relies heavily on the provision of adequately qualified human resources. The study therefore recommends that similar studies be performed to ascertain the status of academic staff development efforts in the other universities in Zimbabwe.

Acknowledgement

The research was supported by the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education and the Great Zimbabwe University.

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