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## **Challenges Young Universities in Zimbabwe Face to Create and Ensure a Healthy Learning Environment and Academic Excellence**

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### **Abstract:**

*“Health is the state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being” (Berry, 2002, p.4). A healthy institutional environment is one in which the institution’s setting supports students’ health and well-being and helps them build a strong foundation for learning (Healthy School Campaign, Chicago). The authors of this paper believe that such an institution would recognize health as an integral part of excellence in education and would provide both lecturers and students with an enabling environment, knowledge and skills to create a healthy institutional environment. This paper will explore the meaning of a healthy learning environment and academic excellence before looking at the challenges which young universities in Zimbabwe encounter as they try to create a healthy learning environment and to ensure academic excellence. In light of those challenges, some recommendations will be made. This paper is based on the experiences of the authors of the paper as they taught some universities in Zimbabwe. While the literature may refer to schools and teachers, the authors of this paper believe that what the literature depicts is equally relevant to universities and lecturers.*

**Keywords:** *Healthy learning environment, young university, excellence in education, pedagogics, management of education, higher education*

### **1. Introduction**

Excellence in university education can be applied in the context of the many different roles and functions of higher education institutions. It applies to management and service delivery as well as the experience of staff and students and the outputs from study and research. While excellence used to be a concept closely linked with an individual virtue or quality (a result of the outstanding quality of an academic’s work), over the last thirty years (due to the global changes) it has become an organizational characteristic. University excellence is now convinced to be a result of the high level of quality that distinguishes the best universities from the others (Brusoni et al, 2014).

According to the Minnesota Department of Health, we must integrate health and wellness into the definition of a successful school and recognize the ways in which these elements support learning. As we evaluate school performance and seek to elevate successful practices, we must acknowledge the role that health and wellness play in student achievement.

A healthy learning environment and excellence in education can be identified at the level of the institution, faculty, department and individual members of staff. This paper will restrict itself to the learning environment and academic excellence as experienced by staff and students in institutions of higher learning, with particular reference to young universities in Zimbabwe. Young university would mean one that has been in operation for less than twenty years.

### **2. Development**

In this section, we look at the meaning of healthy learning environments and academic excellence and compare that to what obtains at young universities in Zimbabwe.

### 2.1. Meaning of a Healthy Learning Environment

According to Guidelines for a Coordinated Approach to School Health Connecticut State Department of Education (July, 2007) and the Minnesota Department of Health, indicators of a healthy learning environment for both staff and students include the provision of a safe and clean place to work in, provision of a comfortable learning environment, creating an environment that nurtures academic freedom and intellectual excitement and an allowance for academic, physical and other activities outside the lecture room.

Safety refers to physical, psychological, emotional, social conditions that affect the wellbeing of staff and students [Centres for Control Disease and Prevention (CDC, 2005)]. Trust, mutual respect, concern for others would form part of that safety. Psychological and emotional safety refers to intellectual safety which would give staff and students an assurance that it was safe to engage, without fear of retribution, in intellectual activities such as: intellectual debates, asking questions, answering questions, offering opinions, challenging existing opinions and theories, joining academic and social groups of one's choice, etc. Intellectual safety includes creating environments that nurture academic freedom and intellectual excitement.

Cleanliness would refer to the physical cleanness of the lecture rooms, laboratories and toilets. The cleanliness of schools is an important aspect of school environments. Clean schools not only lower the threat of the spread of illness, but also convey a caring message to the students and teachers. Cleaning and maintenance of schools is vitally important and is often underemphasized and underperformed. Students feel better going to clean classes with clean desks and surroundings.

Student and teacher comfort is indicated as the most important aspect of any school environment by the Council for the Advancement of Standards in the USA (2006). If students are comfortable, then learning becomes much easier. A comfortable physical learning environment includes enough lighting, enough ventilation, enough space, comfortable temperatures; comfortable chairs, etc. in the lecture rooms. It also means an environment with little or no distractions such as noise.

A comfortable psychological environment has already been discussed above. Berry (2002) noted that the classroom is the most important area of a school because it is where students and teachers spend most of their time and where the learning process takes place. Berry put forward, for consideration, the following conditions to help make the classroom a better place in which to learn (aspects the authors of this paper believe are of paramount importance too):

- Effective lighting of schools has been related to high performance test scores time and again.
- Classes should be designed such that lecture rooms can accommodate students comfortably. A lower density of students per classroom will increase teacher and student interaction and communication. Students should be able to easily see and hear the instructor and other students.
- Noise must be controlled to reasonable levels so that students do not begin to have difficulty understanding what is being said or get distracted by noise in other classrooms.
- Technology is at the centre of the modern educational process and computer laboratories and tools such as the internet are very important.
- Temperature and indoor climate is also important.
- Odours can also distract students, but can be removed with good ventilation.

The academic, physical and other activities outside the lecture room would mean, among others, engaging in group discussions, browsing the internet, reading in the library, having some time to relax or exercise physically, having breaks in between lecture hours to allow for reflections and internalization of learnt materials. The Council for the Advancement of Standards in the USA (2006) states that a high-performance school seeks and provides adequate space and opportunities for students and teachers to spread out, reflect, interact, exchange information, examine and test ideas.

Students' learning load and timetable are also very important aspects within a healthy learning environment. The students' learning load is what the student should learn and do in order to achieve the learning objectives. It is the volume of the content (its depth and complexity) the student has to learn in a given time, according to his psycho-physiological characteristics. It is influenced by the pedagogical mastery and by time, duration and the distribution of the activities.

The learning load is influenced by the following: the complexity of the contents of the courses; number of directed and self-directed learning hours for the courses; presence or lack of preceding courses whose contents are necessary for the following ones; lack of application of appropriate teaching approaches, methods and techniques that better suit the active learning of each student; junk exercises which demand reproduction of memorized contents, the number of learning and assessment activities per given time; lack of teaching media and materials to support the teaching learning process; lecture presentations and notes that are duplications of the book the students are working with or have as their set book.

Content varies from subject or course to another. The level of complexity of the content should be determined by the level of depth to which it is treated, the relationships established and the hierarchy among those relations. This complexity demands from the students an increase in their mental processes: analysis, synthesis, generalizations and abstraction.

Complexities above the students' capabilities may affect the functioning of the different systems of the organism resulting in more energy expense which could lead to stress. Demands below the student's capabilities may lower the students' level of interest in the content and activities on offer. Consequently, there will not be any positive influence on the students (Garcia, 2001). In other words, content and activities should be accessible to all the students, that is why, the authors of this paper postulate that the application of a differentiated instruction is a factor that contributes to a healthy learning environment and academic excellence since the academic needs of the different students would be identified and catered for.

When designing a timetable, it is necessary to consider the following: the students' intellectual working capacity during the time the timetable is operational (e.g. for how long can a student be meaningfully and productively engaged in intellectual or scholarly work during a day?); complexity of the courses and the level of fatigue they may provoke (complex courses are those that demand a high

level of abstraction and generalization from the students); timetables must allow for breaks in between lectures to allow students to have meals, refuel and re-energize, reflect and internalize, discuss with colleagues; allow for learning venues that are located in different but distant parts of the university campuses with no enough transport for students to move from one place to another; enable students to use university learning facilities such as the library and internet services.

## 2.2. *Meaning of Academic Excellence in Education*

According to Altbach's list of characteristics of leading international universities (2014), the indicators of academic excellence include: excellence in research, top quality professors, favourable working conditions, job security and good salary and benefits, adequate facilities, adequate funding, academic freedom and an atmosphere of intellectual excitement, faculty (i.e. members') self-governance.

The meanings of some of these indicators of academic excellence are discussed below:

Members of staff in universities should engage in research. It is research that would generate new insights in what we already know and solve humanity's social, economic and educational problems. For excellence in research, certain conditions must be in place. These conditions include favourable working conditions such as: having enough time outside teaching hours to do the research; flexible working hours that allow a member of staff to do research outside his/her office; funding for the research activities; existence of research capacity building activities such as workshops, national and international conferences; having time for paper presentations in departments and faculties and outside the universities at national, regional and international levels.

Adequate facilities include enough lecture rooms; large lecture rooms to accommodate large classes; adequate furniture in lecture rooms; enough LCD projectors for power point presentations; adequate and functioning internet facilities; libraries; functioning e-learning/online facilities.

Brusoni, et al (2014) points out common main patterns in the definitions of excellence in teaching. These patterns include:

- a focus on the student, student learning and personal support, rather than on formal teaching;
- a macro focus on the wider learning environment and on the development of the curriculum and the teaching-learning programme, rather than a micro focus on teaching;
- a focus on the student feedback ratings of the teacher, on the teachers' research record and subject knowledge, and on external recognition of the teacher;
- an emphasis on efforts to revitalise teaching, especially through innovation, through influencing others and through leadership of teaching.

The Council for the Advancement of Standards (2006) in the USA lists some attributes of good schools, attributes which contribute towards the creation of healthy learning environments in the schools. These attributes include:

- A school which commits itself to excellence in everything it does.
- The appearance of the school is inviting. Students, teachers, and the local community want it to be there.
- The school strives for student-friendly conditions throughout the students' stay at the school.
- The school is inviting to good teachers and supports their retention.
- The school is designed to reduce stress amongst teachers and students.

## 3. **Common Characteristics of Young Universities in Zimbabwe**

The following are some of the common characteristics the authors of this paper observed in young universities in Zimbabwe.

### 3.1. *Intakes, Resources and Infrastructure*

These universities take two or three large intakes in a year (February, August and December). They have to do this for a number of reasons. First, many people now want to take up university education. Secondly, these small and young universities are very long way to go in terms infrastructure and other material resources. Fees from these students would help in these projects and plans. Unfortunately, these large frequent intakes cause a tremendous strain on the university human resources and infrastructure. For example, in one of these universities and in one Department, there were five (5) degree programmes offering twenty-four (24) courses which were manned by six (6) members of staff including the Chairperson of the Department. The results of such lecturer heavy loads are not difficult to visualise.

#### 3.1.1. Inadequate time, with its obvious negative effects on:

- preparing for lectures;
- supervising research projects. It is quite common, in these universities, to find a lecturer supervising twenty or more research projects at any one time. In such situations, the quality of the supervision is heavily compromised;
- marking assignments, examinations, projects;
- engaging in research (writing and publishing papers; presenting papers locally, nationally, regionally and internationally).

#### 3.1.2. The large numbers of students have to live with:

- lecture rooms that are too small for their large numbers (in some cases students were seen outside the door of the lecture room, during lecture time, neither seeing nor hearing their lecturer);
- chairs and desks that are too few for their large numbers (the students were seen carrying chairs and desks from one lecture room to the another);
- limited internet services and library resources;

-limited accommodation space in the halls of residence (many students had to rent accommodation in the areas around the university at very exorbitant rates).

### 3.2. Teaching Time and Timetables

Universities use different modes of teaching. These could be the traditional face to face mode of teaching or the fast growing in popularity mode of teaching referred to as the on-line teaching or some such name. [It would be interesting to investigate which of these modes of teaching is more effective]. In the face to face mode, we can have conventional or block release options. Students are at university the whole semester for their conventional mode of learning. Students come during school holidays, for example, for their block release. Because students continue to work while learning at university during the block release, this mode of learning is very popular with students.

The problem with the block release is limited teaching time. To compensate for this challenge, universities come up with a packed timetable where the students are engaged from 8am to 6pm or even 8pm with no breaks in between from Monday to Saturday for the entire duration of their block release.

As a result of that congested timetable, students have their intellectual working capacity overstretched. The question is: *For how long can a student be meaningfully and productively engaged in intellectual or scholarly work during a day?* As the day progresses, most students are so fatigued that they just go through the motion of attending lessons. Furthermore, such a congested timetable would not:

-permit meaningful and engaging discussions between students and their lecturers during lecture sessions and seminar presentations (Both lecturer and students were preoccupied with running through the course).

-allow the students to use university learning facilities such as the library and internet services. At one of the universities, block release students told us that they had never been in the university library because by the time they finished their lectures, the library would have closed!

-give students time to reflect on and internalise and discuss with colleagues what they would have been taught, and to prepare for seminar presentations, assignments and in class tests;

-allow for breaks in between lectures to permit students to have meals, refuel and re-energise;

-time for students to relax or exercise physically both of which are important in academic work.

Some of these activities could be done after formal lectures only if the students were not dead tired by then.

While most of the challenges mentioned above are understandable for a young university (they are referred to as the 'teething problems' of all beginners), these universities have other unnecessary challenges related to human negligence of work, mismanagement at the lower managerial levels or lack of experience. For example, a lot of time is wasted when students arrive late, sometimes as late as one full week, for the four-week block release. The reason often given is that they were informed late of their student status. Sometimes when the students arrive, they have no knowledge of the course they will take for the semester and the lecturers who would teach them. Precious time is wasted when lecturer and students look for each other. On line registration, does not seem to have alleviated this problem. In addition, clashing timetables where a student has two different courses running at the same time or where two different groups of students claim the same lecture room at the same time waste a lot of valuable teaching time.

### 3.3. Research by Members of the Teaching Staff

As noted above, members of the teaching staff in universities should engage in research. It is research that would generate new insights in what we already know and solve humanity's social, economic and educational problems. For excellence in research, certain conditions must be in place. These conditions include favourable working conditions such as: having enough time outside teaching hours to do the research; flexible working hours that allow a member of staff to do research outside his/her office; funding for the research activities; existence of research capacity building activities such as workshops, national and international conferences; having time for paper presentations in departments and faculties and outside the universities at national, regional and international levels.

Because of the inhibitions mentioned above, young and small universities find it difficult to come up with meaningful and sustained research programmes. In the end, such universities become teaching universities rather than centers of academic research.

### 3.4. Numbers of Senior Academics

Typically, such universities are manned by academically junior members of staff with few PhD or DPhil holders and even fewer professors. Fortunately, the situation is improving but slowly. Senior academics would provide the much-needed academic guidance and they would act as role models to the junior academics.

### 3.5. General Maintenance of the Teaching Centres

The general maintenance of the teaching centres, which comprises classrooms, laboratories, toilets and the surroundings, is not developed in the frequency it should be; this causes deterioration of the buildings, as well as uncleanliness (including, sometimes, the non-availability of running water) and the creation of an uncomfortable learning environment.

## 4. Conclusions and Recommendations

On the whole, young universities in Zimbabwe still have a lot of challenges which militate against the attainment of a healthy learning environment which is a prerequisite of academic excellence.

As noted by Berry (2002), it is clear that there is a direct connection between healthy school environments, behaviours and attitudes of students and educators; and academic performance and achievement of students. The quality of the school environment shapes

attitudes of students and staff, and attitudes affect teaching and learning behaviour, and behaviour affects students' academic performance and educational performance determines future outcomes of individuals and society as a whole.

The authors of this paper have the same opinion as Marx & Wooley (1999) when they stated that a safe, clean, and well-maintained school with a positive psychosocial climate and culture can foster school connectedness, which in turn boosts student and staff physical and mental health as well as students' educational achievement and that creating a healthy school environment requires the involvement of virtually everyone in the school.

Unfortunately, learning excellence as measured in test scores alone tends to ignore the importance of the environmental quality in which learning takes place. Making cuts in routine cleaning and maintenance, repairs, and restoration is commonly considered less devastating than cutting academic programmes. This limited thinking is very short-sighted, and, in the long run, ends up adding to the cost of education (Berry, 2002).

From the observations and comments above, we make the following recommendations:

- We feel that young universities would need huge financial backing from the national government until they can begin to look after many of their financial and material resources obligations. We actually recommend affirmative action in favour of the young universities.
- The young universities should rationalise the frequency and sizes of their intakes in light of the available human and material resources. For example, classes must be small enough to fit comfortably in the existing lecture rooms with adequate furniture. Moving furniture from one room to the other is not just time consuming but it is also very destructive on the moved furniture.
- Timetables should allow for enough teaching and sufficient time for students to take responsibility of their own learning through studying and discussing issues with colleagues and their lecturers. Time must also be created for students to 'disengage' and use that time to reenergise.
- There is need for a mind shift, a paradigm shift amongst staff at these institutions where all the activities of the institution are seen as important and contributing towards the creation of a healthy learning environment which would result in academic excellence. Academic excellence is not just created in the lecture room only. Toilet cleaners, lecture room and office cleaners, grounds men and all other service providers need to see their work as important as that of those who teach. There may be need for seminars and workshops for university staff, teaching and non-teaching, on how to create a healthy learning environment at an institution. A good workable timetable should be seen as essential in creating a healthy learning environment.

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