

Quality-driven university curriculum reform in Zimbabwe: a critical conceptualisation of harmonised minimum bodies of knowledge

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Abstract

Purpose – The surging demand for higher education in Africa for expedited socio-economic growth and global sustainable development demands customising gains made elsewhere for local benefit through quality provision. This study contributes to local and international discourses on the refinement of results-based university learning content determination on the lines of the Bologna Process, and advocates the development of situationally relevant curricula for successful national advancement in Zimbabwe.

Design/methodology/approach – The qualitative study uses records and documentary analysis, interviews and meetings with key participants involved in shaping academic processes at one of the country's young and fragile universities. The introspective research approach enabled the cumulative experiential and reflective contributions of participants to shape both the dialogue and follow-up action on the adoption of minimum bodies of knowledge in university curriculum reform.

Findings – Participants celebrated efforts to pit harmonisation alongside autonomy in academic discourses, and suggested improvements on the mechanisms to define policy and operational frameworks for diversely-oriented academic establishments. They lauded and interrogated the discourse around minimum bodies of knowledge, calling for further critical research and analysis for defining clarity on its harmonisation function.

Originality/value – This paper traverses the rapidly expanding Zimbabwe higher education system's endeavours to regulate mandates and operations, in pursuit of relevance, quality and excellence and examines stakeholder efforts at determining streamlined university curricula. It contributes uniquely to collective regulation of multiple institutions towards quality academic agendas that underpin the life-long competences of the institutions' graduates.

Keywords Minimum bodies of knowledge, Harmonisation, Quality, Higher education, Learning content, Curriculum reform, Mobility

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Despite recent significant progress, the efficiency and sufficiency of education provision in Africa still falls far short of demand and lacks utility and alignment with average international standards (UNICEF and African Union Commission, 2021). The continent trails most developing and emerging markets in educational outcomes and in meeting UN-SDG

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goal 4 (Future Africa Forum, 2020). Africa still harbours populations with minimum wherewithal to free themselves from age-old vices rooted in poverty, ignorance and poor health; vices already successfully managed in progressive communities elsewhere, who have long realised that higher education (HE) drives the achievement of meaningful national development expedited by socio-economic growth. Accelerated participation in higher education worldwide is because school leavers increasingly choose proceeding to HE either fulltime or part time alongside work (Flannery and O'Donoghue, 2013). Meanwhile, improved income levels, socio-economic status, general unemployment and desire to earn high incomes (Gölpek and Çiftçiöglü, 2014) have also pushed demand up, as society today regards the university degree a pre-requisite for decent employment (World Bank, 2017).

The socio-economic gap between Africa and wealthier continents continues to invite both sympathy and derision (Woldegiorgis and Doevenspeck, 2013). While aiming for relevant knowledge production for economic growth and social development and uplifting the socio-economic fortunes of their countries' citizens, African universities, heavily constrained by relics of their colonial past, still largely execute alien academic agendas and roles not benefiting the societies they purport to serve, even despite Africanisation of curricula. The rapidly expanding Zimbabwean HE system has instituted endeavours to negotiate the direction of university curricula to enhance alignment between taught skills and knowledge on one hand, and the needs of industry and development on the other. This conceptual gap, motivating this study, persists despite efforts at harmonisation and internationalisation in theory and practice.

Background

Zimbabwe has, in the last three decades, experienced an unprecedented upsurge in university education provision, from one university in 1990 to 20 in 2020, translating to one university established every 18 months, leading to the current average one university per 750,000 citizens, and from around 1,000 students in 1990 to the current nearly 120,000. This defines the huge massification ensuing from the successful post-independence revolution in basic education provision.

The fledgling public and private universities established under very tough economic conditions, have experienced prolonged routes to full infrastructural and operational development, enduring a protracted physical development journey. Yet, in their state of physical ill-preparedness, they are pressured to deliver, through incremental enrolments and quality outputs, to local and international standards. The under-privileged sections of the local citizenry have had no choice but to accept and tolerate this circumstance, for its meagre benefits, while the affluent Zimbabweans have preferred sending their children to more expensive foreign institutions, with attendant inconveniences. Consequently, Zimbabwe universities have struggled to gain acceptance and due recognition locally and abroad, in the vicious but tolerant scramble for visibility in the global HE space.

Massification has impacted heavily on the curriculum with different universities simultaneously seeking both uniqueness and conformity, a struggle that manifests in substantial duplication of courses and programmes, regulations and operational practices. The country's watchdog for quality assurance in higher education, the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE), established in 2006, and in the process of consolidating its own mission and mandate, was established partly due to declining standards attributed to numerous universities blossoming within a short period (Garwe, 2014). In the decade and a half of its existence, ZIMCHE has developed guidelines and policies, implemented interventions into university education and administration processes (ZIMCHE Annual Report, 2018), accomplishing many functions including institutional and programme registration and accreditation, academic staff grading and promotions, quality assurance standards, credit accumulation and transfer system, national qualifications framework, and development of minimum bodies of knowledge (MBKs). The perceived decline in university

education standards, and the externally-driven push for harmonisation and quality, invites pertinent questions. How is Zimbabwe coping in the search for relevant, effective and quality university education that addresses unique national needs? In particular:

- (1) What is the general perception and expectation for quality HE in light of the introduced MBK?
- (2) Are efforts of harmonising university curricula through MBK fulfilling the global perception of quality higher education?
- (3) What improvements can be made on current efforts towards quality higher education?

Scholarly debates on the need to continuously update the knowledge base of university graduates have centred on the conceptualisation of the minimum bodies of knowledge. Some educationists wary of internationalisation have proposed strategic decolonisation of the HE harmonisation agenda (Mukeredzi, 2020) while additional unpublished debates have been created in the corridors of academia to add voice to Zimbabwe's approach to harmonisation.

Philosophy of harmonisation and minimum bodies of knowledge

The impetus behind harmonisation and development of MBK in HE derives from the Bologna Process (BP) initiated in the European Union towards the turn of the century. Universities and allied organisations in 46 (now 49) European countries engaged on an inter-governmental HE reform exercise (the BP) aimed at enhancing the quality and recognition of European HE systems and to improve the conditions for study exchange and collaboration within and beyond Europe [1]. The BP, amongst other things, highlighted the three-cycle degree, the European Credits Transfer and Accumulation System and the European [Standards and Guidelines \(ESG\) for quality assurance in higher education also known as the European Higher Education Area \(EHEA\)](#). The process enhanced acculturation, at times focussing on specific curriculum content, recognising mobility experience as contributing immensely to learning, and adding value to degree qualifications and professions ([The Good Schools Guide, 2020](#)). The Process triggered HE reform in Portugal, showing that with poorly qualified populations and workforces, HE framed as a global public good was the soundest grounding for development and democratisation ([Heitor and Horta, 2014](#)). Furthermore, legally empowered higher education institutions (HEIs) reinforce their legitimacy, mandate and contribution for societal development by proffering affordability, accessibility, quality, capacity, adaptability and autonomy ([Heitor and Horta, 2016](#)).

Student mobility requires standardised curriculum content across institutions ([Knight, 2012](#)). The rise in European student mobility post-BP was hailed as “pedagogic reform” ([Neave and Veiga, 2013](#)). From the point of view of an institution's key stakeholders, the BP enhances administrative reorganisation and builds institutional capacity to meet the demands filtering down from the national level. European institutions, thus, were not the authors of the BP, but agents of determined national and continental political agendas. The African agenda may acknowledge that, despite scarce comparative analyses outside Europe, “the largest ongoing reform initiative in higher education” has, so far, had a huge impact, both positive and negative, on policies and governance modes for managing transnational HE reform initiatives ([Vogtle and Martens, 2014](#)). Such acknowledgement is proffered assuming that, in the global village, the journeys and destinies of all graduates are typically similar. The quest for decent, modern, science and technology-based careers and livelihoods dominate goals for higher education. In essence therefore, policies influenced by the BP on student mobility, programme structure and harmonised learning content are transferable across continents. However, policies aligned to education financing, the

contribution of student fees, for example, may differ markedly between institutions and countries, influencing mobility differentially. The African university therefore should situationally customise application of Bologna style policies and models.

The African HE system, for its part, has warmly embraced the BP and has taken a keen interest in focussing on the bodies of knowledge in university education. In essence, the BP of Europe was considered by the African Union (AU) a benchmark for regional HE reform (Woldegiorgis, 2018), against other models. The Working Group on Higher Education (WGHE) (Working Group On Higher Education WGHE Webinar Series, 2016), in tandem with the Association of African Universities (AAU) have deliberated on the smooth mobility of HE staff and students within the continent, to be achieved through harmonised processes and protocols, for instance, by standardising the durations of degree qualifications, and adopting a common body of knowledge (BOK) for each such programme applicable to all countries and with minimum contextual variation (WGHE, 2018). The AAU-developed Pan African Quality Assurance and Accreditation Framework is spearheading recognition of HE qualifications across Africa based on compliance to a MBK for each discipline in every country and eventually the whole continent (Kokutse, 2018). Another ongoing AAU project, the EU-funded Harmonisation of African Higher Education Quality Assurance and Accreditation (HAQAA) supports the development of a harmonised quality assurance and accreditation system at institutional, national, regional and Pan-African continental level [2]. In principle, the BP has influenced the African HE system to shape its own thematic and sub-regional outlook (Woldegiyorgis, 2018) where the harmonisation programmes are localised in, amongst other regions, Central Africa, East Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Yet Africa should visualise the complex challenges of the BP in Europe to influence its own economic, political and cultural rationales regarding HE agendas. The cultural theory analysis employed by Velga and Amaral (2008) to understand such challenges through four cultural lenses (fatalism, individualism, hierarchy and egalitarianism) in the grid/group sociality dimensions in Portugal, invites African nations to balance their approaches to HE reform, whether it be about degree structure, student mobility, the credit system and qualifications framework, quality standards or other benchmarks. On the other hand, while importing the BP tools and concepts has been fruitful, it has not been as effective as expected, since evidently, Africa requires some decolonisation before any other reform agenda can be effectively pursued, with some internal and local changes to HE required before the adaptation or adoption of externally designed policies (Alemu, 2019). Decolonisation entails freeing African minds and goals towards unity of purpose and collective perception of choices, attaining self-empowerment and self-emancipation from both external and internal enslavement, and the control of erstwhile colonisers (Kgatla, 2018; Bresciani, 2020). Educators with a clear perception of their problems and aspirations select the best choices for their courses of action, and adopt collectively determined sovereign principles.

Zimbabwe, through ZIMCHE, has moved rapidly on the MBK revolution. Hart and Baehr (2013) describe BOK as codified knowledge existing in various forms, and whose boundaries are often inter-disciplinary to include theories, practices, standards, research and general information. Furthermore, Baehr (2013) observes that BOK represent breadth and depth of knowledge in a specific field, with overarching connections to other disciplines and industry-wide practices, and that effective content strategy is iterative and evolving, subsequently closely linked to standards and practices that govern a body of knowledge. The Zimbabwe story on development of MBK has taken key players through cardinal processes including policy development, planning and implementation of training activities through stakeholder workshops and selecting thought leaders on each degree programme or study area, before drawing up the actual subject content presumed definitive of the programme.

Despite acclaimed support for harmonisation of HE policy, systems and curricula and dissenting voices have drawn the attention of analysts to the requirements for university

autonomy and academic freedom. Indeed, critics have murmured that changes introduced under the BP had undermined institutional autonomy and universities' ability to educate students to high standards (Times Higher Education, 2012), since traditionally, universities are regarded as loosely coupled organisations with flexible connections between different professional groups and autonomous academic staff (Honkimaki *et al.*, 2021). It is important to legally promote the institutional development of HEIs, granting them the opportunity to become more autonomous and adaptable, and to assume independent legal status (Heitor and Horta, 2014). For Africa, was HE itself driving harmonisation or was its external factors such as trade, geo-political, immigration or industry-related forces pursuing their own agendas? (Knight, 2017) Mature, competent and visionary African HEIs seek institutional and academic autonomy to enhance their competitiveness and collective contribution to socio-economic development.

Research methodology

Perceptions of utility and relevance of educational programmes and curriculum innovation require extensive exploration and deep analysis, tapping on ideas from a variety of sources. A qualitative approach to data collection and analysis was thus ideal for this study, using the Zimbabwe case as technique to answer questions about experience, meaning and perspective on harmonisation and MBK for Africa, most often from the participants' viewpoint (Hammarberg *et al.*, 2016), and with room for subjective interpretation by the researcher, an integral part of the research process (Mojahan, 2018). In particular, the study adopted researcher introspection, a controversial yet powerful research approach, acceptable for enquiring on human experience (Xue and Desmet, 2019). This research design was thus chosen because it integrates subjective views of participants with factual experiential descriptions of the on-going curriculum review process. Since the development of the MBK concept in Zimbabwe is unfolding, it is crucial to document the process as well as to reflect on it as it unfolds. This study design has the advantage that all participants own the research and its outcomes, and they identify with history developing around the theme. The study can be replicated in different institutions or at different stages of curriculum reform processes.

The critical search for, and analysis of, the development of ideas and activities meant to orient the key stakeholders in the review of nation-wide university curricula was done through records review and document analysis. The key records and documents comprised correspondence between the national HE quality regulatory body, ZIMCHE and the institutions, as well as the summative annual reports of both. In addition, interviews were conducted with academic practitioners at one state university, and covering three categories namely three deans of faculties, seven heads (or chairpersons) of academic departments and 14 lecturers, two each from seven faculties.

Further document analysis was carried out on the programme descriptions and syllabi that depicted the intended learning content and methods, including MBK in selected study programmes. Participant observation and interrogation was achieved through involvement in meetings between the researcher and some respondents in the study. The above outlined techniques applied some considerable measure of data and methodological triangulation, improving the rigour and trustworthiness of the research (Salvador, 2016; Mojahan, 2018). This also improved the truthfulness of the study findings, as well as the credibility, conformability and transferability of results through the said triangulation (Tonkin-Crime *et al.*, 2015). The rich data emanating from engaged participants, sharing ideas and reporting on their professional practice, underpin the phenomenological inclination of the study (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). In the data analysis, the viewpoints of the researcher and the participants were identified and elucidated separately to manage researcher bias and influence, which could conjure a negative effect on the collected data (Mojahan, 2018).

The viewpoints of the researcher were formed around the analytic commentary, while those of the participants were recorded and analysed by a research assistant who then presented at the unit meeting. Data thus collected were summarised in sub-themes conjured up in the study but linked to the key concept of quality university curriculum reform. The relevant ethical considerations of confidentiality, informed consent, privacy, anonymity, protection from harm and voluntary participation were adhered to throughout the investigation. The study was not reviewed prior to data collection due partly to COVID-19 restrictions but the participants' wide prior exposure to curriculum reform produced rich data for analysis.

Results and discussion

The presentation and critical discussion of findings in this study integrates the data from all the interviews, observations, records and documents under the selected themes below.

Rationale for minimum bodies of knowledge

The desire for systematic presentation of teaching and learning content within and between different HEIs is pertinent in the delivery of university curricula in general, and was echoed amongst study participants. A particular degree qualification from any institution in the world must equip the holders to perform certain basic functions and to display specific capabilities inherent to the purposes of that degree. However, according to one lecturer respondent,

[...] it is common knowledge that in many or all the fields of study, there is excess knowledge being taught, which is not necessary for all university students to learn [...], no two textbooks are identical, even when they aim to cover learning content at the same study level. [...] [...] after graduation, no two graduates will go on to do identical jobs. That is why life-long learning is real and important. Some of the components are to be learned later during the working life of an individual. Moreover, many people forget what they learned at university, and have to re-learn the same throughout their working lives. [LCT08]

The packaging of degree programmes and courses should thus be systematic to achieve specific goals, and to suit desired contexts. In addition to the university's thrust for a STEM focus ([Vice Chancellor's Annual Report, 2017](#)), and the declared ZIMCHE purposes for MBK for harmonisation and academic mobility, the composition of a degree programme has to give the degree holder the basic skills to function successfully in the workplace ([ZIMCHE Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education, 2017](#)).

Harmonisation, autonomy and minimum bodies of knowledge

A broad vision of creating a single, well-aligned and harmonised Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) regional educational qualifications framework, to enable comparable standards and qualifications across institutions and countries to promote the mobility of students and lecturers, emerged around 2000 and was heightened in the period towards 2016 ([SAQA, 2017](#)). Zimbabwe developed its National Qualifications Framework (NQF) in 2017 ([Mashininga, 2018](#)), aligning the three fragmented qualifications models administered separately by the Zimbabwe Schools Examinations Council (ZIMSEC), the Higher Education Examinations Council (HEXCO) and ZIMCHE, respectively ([ZIMCHE Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education, 2019](#)). Without a NQF aligned to the SADC Regional Qualifications Framework (RQF), veritable vertical and horizontal progression of learners across higher and tertiary education institutions, and between schools and tertiary education providers was problematic. For example, learners could not easily move from one local university to another ([ZIMCHE, 2018](#)). Similarly, universities struggled to determine credit

for national diploma and higher national diploma holders who sought admission into degree programmes.

Quality of staff and student mobility

Lecturer respondents expressed their general perceptions and expectations of a quality HE system as one highly influenced as much by the content knowledge as by the quality of academic staff, whose knowledge, skills and attitudes must be continuously nurtured by rich and empowering experiences. One faculty dean noted:

In the same institution and faculty, you find that academic staff differ by age, gender, qualifications, experience, attitude, teaching methods and even their depth of knowledge and skills [...]. The standardisation process must start there. The university does orientation, induction and continuous academic development activities aimed at bridging gaps between individuals. The same is expected between institutions and countries [DN01].

Institutional recruitment processes influence staff quality and stability. Zimbabwe's protracted socio-economic instability has disrupted normal recruitment, driving away highly sought-after, local and foreign staff, rendering the country a net exporter of much-needed expertise (Garwe *et al.*, 2020). Recruitment, staff development, promotion and dismissal processes all collectively determine the quality of academic staff attracted to and retained in the institution (Alemiga and Kibukamusoke, 2019).

The desirability of bilateral or reciprocal staff and student mobility for African universities is undeniable. The majority lowly ranked institutions in Africa benefit from interaction with resourceful partners as well as exposure to their higher ranked premises and processes, but only if there is harmony between the curricula and study programmes in the collaborating institutions. Admittedly, the reverse is also true. Tran *et al.* (2021) found that mobility from higher ranked Australian and New Zealand universities to lower ranked Indo-Chinese institutions through learning abroad programmes held both strategic and transformative appeal and were centred around building experience, employment opportunities and the resume of the participants. The outward mobility exercise is meant to encourage students and staff from developing countries to return and contribute to their homeland, yet however, most of the beneficiaries tend to stay abroad, evoking issues of mobility ethics or brain drain (Yildirim *et al.*, 2021). The provision of successful cross-border HE between the sending and the receiving country affords cooperation in the quality assurance of transnational education to the participants (Trifiro, 2019).

As one of ZIMCHE's strategic directions to improve comparability and mobility in higher and tertiary education (ZIMCHE, 2018; MHTESTD, 2019), Zimbabwe undertook the internationalisation of higher education for harmonisation, improving transparency and coherence of the quality assurance framework and enhancing mobility nationally and internationally (Mukeredzi, 2020). This was part of the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Science and Technology Development (MHTESTD)'s broader initiative to reconfigure HE to drive innovation and spur national sustainable development (ZIMCHE, 2018 report). Sentiments from several lecturers were summarised thus:

Mobility is a great motivator. For the lecturer, it assists to awaken the spirit of comparison between my institution and the one I visit. I see the differing standards of operation, the environments, the behaviours, the culture and so on. [...] [...] But I need a solid ground for benchmarking my institution against the other one; and the more the opportunities for exchange, the better [LCT03].

Growing interest is manifesting on how modern universities create, update and manage the content of their degree programmes and how they package that content for student learning, in pursuit of innovation and change, and particularly for the increasing popularisation of online teaching and learning. HE has experienced a "disruptive innovation" in recent years,

that of opening unfettered access to a service previously only afforded by a privileged few, and now encouraging broader participation (Andrade, 2018). Despite such a scenario, degree programmes respond to demands of society, namely employers and the nature of occupational requirements, through shaping the profiles of the graduates. Thus, a response from a faculty dean:

We have a process of initiating changes to courses or making proposals for new courses or programmes from members in the teaching departments. But many times there would be a push from industry and stakeholders. We do necessary consultations and seek support for any curricular reforms, since this is also a requirement of ZIMCHE. [...] [DN02]

On whether universities should offer identical degree qualifications, with a uniform BOK in terms of content, deans, heads of departments and lecturers were all agreed that this was not desirable or even possible unless universities deliberately copied each other's programmes.

Ideally universities should offer different programmes, in content and perhaps in name as well, so that the different skills bases are covered. You cannot teach everything in one programme. But in cases where the country and the employers want more of one qualification, e.g. bachelor of marketing or engineering, there is no harm in offering nearly identical syllabuses if that is what the market demands [LCT11].

Undergraduate university programme structure is increasingly becoming flexible and sophisticated with the popularisation of double, joint or combined honours degrees in response to employer and student demands [3] making it easier to determine and prescribe a BOK in a single honours degree compared to a joint honours degree where the BOK covered is shared between two study areas prescribed in the revised Frascati Manual. Many emerging combinations of degree programmes and closely related offerings make it difficult for a prescription of the curriculum content, e.g. the *mechatronics engineering* degree combining mechanical and electronics engineering.

Determination of minimum bodies of knowledge

Of three configurations of degree programme structures suggested to them, respondents preferred the structure in Table 1, showing the relative proportions of content knowledge used to define a degree programme.

The concept of introducing MBK in Zimbabwe embodied a numerical rationale based on percentages. The rationale for this, according to ZIMCHE, was:

Content category	Approximate weighting	Minimum credits	Description (for accounting degree)
Unique, programme-specific content	50–60%	250	Strictly accounting module content that defines the programme
Discipline common and shared content	25–30%	120	Relevant and supporting modules picked from other commerce programmes e.g. finance, banking, economics, etc.
Generic knowledge and skills	15–20%	72	Universally relevant modules needed by university students e.g. ICT and computer literacy, research, communication, entrepreneurship, etc.
Other cross-disciplinary content (connective knowledge or enrichment)	5–10%	24	Usually not related to the category of the programme under study but useful for professional purposes e.g. French language, literature, social studies, etc.
	100	480	

Table 1. Preferred packaging of a credit bearing 4-year bachelor degree programme

To ensure that 80% of the content of each programme is covering the same basic BOK conforming to the agreed MBK/S; the remaining 20% will be constituted by relevant modules of the institution's choice to provide the unique flair of their programmes (ZIMCHE, 2018)

Practitioners responded by raising at least three questions. First, how would the 80% be packaged in light of Table 1? Second, where would the 80% be determined? Would it be 80% of the courses or 80% of the curriculum content within each study module or course? Third, how would uniqueness between different universities be achieved? Different universities had embarked on the Zimbabwe credit accumulation and transfer system (ZIMCATS) to package their content in credits, based on notional study hours, in line with the Southern Africa Regional Qualifications Framework (RQF), and guided by the principle in Table 2, with university bachelor degree programmes carrying anything between 120 and 135 credits per year depending on their resources. In such a scenario, the proposed 80/20% principle would collapse.

In a case of three universities, each offering a specified four-year degree programme, and each adopting the proposed uniform 80% MBK (Figure 1) there is the anomaly of limiting universities with the capability to offer more programme content.

Attempting to apply the 80% rule to three different university scenarios with different programme credit weightings (480, 500 and 540, respectively) for their comparable 4-year programme would produce a mathematical inaccuracy where the 80% would be unequal (Figure 2), deriving from different total credit units.

If, alternatively, MBK were defined in terms of credits, and the three universities chose to offer 480, 500 and 540 credits respectively for their 4-year bachelor's degree, the task is to determine the credit threshold for the programme to accurately define minimum body of knowledge. In Figure 3 the threshold is 384 credits, in Figure 4 432, and Figure 5 480, respectively. This last scenario appears plausible.

Qualification type	RQF level	Minimum credits	Maximum credits
Three-year Bachelor's degree	8	360	405
Four-year Bachelor's degree	8	480	540
Two-year Master's degree	9	360	420

Table 2. Minimum and maximum credits allowable for different qualification types

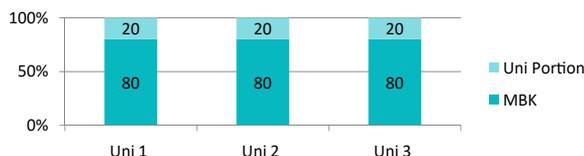


Figure 1. Comparison of three universities all adopting the prescribed 80% MBK

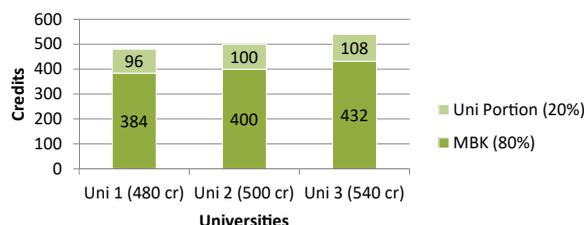


Figure 2. Three universities depicting 80% MBK of their differing programme credit weightings

Clearly then, prescribing MBK for universal institutional application must give assurances to the institutions, employers and other stakeholders that the prescribed knowledge content is systematically determined. It is a process that would require strong management, control and providing appropriate training to practitioners on the ground. Summarising the views of deans and heads of departments, one dean noted:

There is merit in organising learning content in various disciplines in a systematic manner such as in the form of credits. But the assigning of MBK must be done in an easily understandable manner. It must be mathematically accurate, giving institutions the freedom to offer programmes they want, [...] fulfilling the employers' requirements. [DN02]

Higher education relevance and agenda

Indications are that African universities are constrained to fulfil their localisation mandates, despite their entrapment in foreign academic agendas. The core business of teaching, training and research for development of local talent and resources has not delivered as expected, in

Figure 3.
All universities
adopting MBK of 384
credits weighting

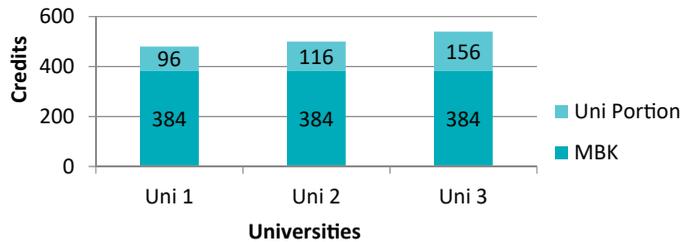


Figure 4.
All universities
adopting MBK of 432
credits weighting

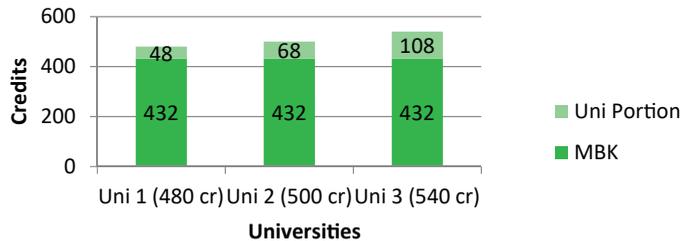
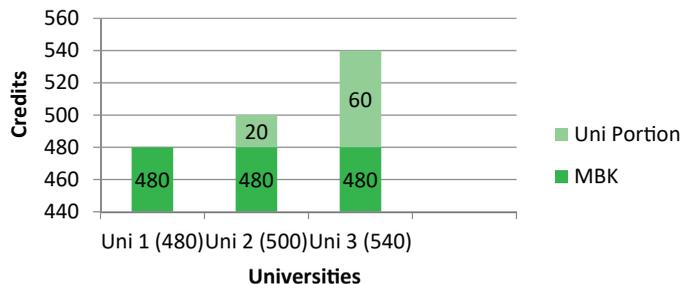


Figure 5.
All three universities
adopting MBK of 480
credits weighting



fact, in instances it has been stalled or buried (Afolabi and Idowu, 2020). The expected knowledge production, research and teaching outcomes appear to dwindle. This is attributable, in part, to low quality management of human and material resources, poor funding, bad leadership, increasing enrolments and brain drain (Afolabi and Idowu, 2020), which also internally strains relations between universities and other tertiary education institutions (Phuthi and Maphosa, 2007). Most influential African research is produced in collaboration with foreign countries, and most research issues are decided externally. The use and application of foreign languages as instructional media has made HEIs dependent on knowledge systems conceived, developed and organised on Western values, while mobility has experienced more African academics travelling abroad in search of better education, pay and improved working environments (Alemu, 2014).

Given the opportunity to set own agendas, universities and their quality assurance agencies should tap on the internationalisation drive intended to increase the visibility of African universities and their contribution to continental development, opening up channels for Africa to benefit from the global stock of scientific knowledge. Such knowledge is acquired and processed by individuals and groups with common goals and interests promoting their welfare and survival. They include some of the poorest communities that require advanced and well-researched solutions to their problems (Phuthi *et al.*, 2009). Determination of robust local university curricula answers this call, embedded fully in designing responsive curricula that address current student and future workforce needs (Andrade, 2018).

Wang *et al.* (2021)'s portrayal of a disjuncture between internationalisation/globalisation and localisation for non-Western societies, dogged by unequal participation, encourages the Chinese university to move from knowledge-borrowing from the West to local knowledge production and innovation. The tools for knowledge production and innovation are available to all, westerners and non-westerners alike. In Portugal, democratising HE and access to science entails increasing student engagement and graduation levels, promoting system specialisation, improving staff qualifications, strengthening research, promoting internationalisation and securing funding (Heitor and Horta, 2014). In such an environment lie indications of a dream for a quality-driven university curriculum reform. The expanding African HE landscape and its transformation agenda demand that the continent and its individual nations seek and run solutions to their problems internally. The resources for the mammoth task are abundant within, but can be supplemented by tactful engagement with the endowed counterparts from other continents, and learning a thing or two from both their struggles and breakthroughs.

Conclusion

Discourses on bodies of knowledge in African HE and in its research community have become enmeshed with extended concerns including the decolonisation of the curriculum, mainstreaming of indigenous knowledge systems, tolerance of disparate “knowledge domains”, and recognition of alternate ways of thinking (Canham, 2018). Such a route empowers researchers and practitioners to refine their approaches to university curriculum reform focussing on quality delivery. This paper has sought to critically analyse a crucial pathway in the shaping of a young and fast-growing Zimbabwe HE system, pointing to how it attempts to address the relevance and effectiveness of university education. Participants in the system believe that quality higher education, though elusive, is attainable.

Prescribing MBK is effective if the process is conscientiously planned, implemented and continuously updated to competently accomplish harmonisation. It is appreciated that concerned Zimbabwean pundits have adopted a proactive stance to search for relevant, effective and quality university education that addresses unique national needs, while seeking conformity with global norms. The views of the HE practitioners and their mentors

suggest a tolerance for quality-driven growth and transformation in the university sector, with accuracy in the interpretation of goals and principles and a rationalisation of the MBK concept. The past, present and future efforts at harmonisation of HE typified by the BP and similar initiatives, local, regional, continental or global, have challenged Zimbabwe universities to define quality in terms of both local relevance and international benchmarking. Stakeholders in the implementation process suggest that the philosophy is ideal, but it requires refinement and improvements. This paper has preferred the use of credit against percentage weightings in defining minimum content knowledge required for a defined programme of study. In the end, the university system and its perceived deliverances in learning content and research specialisation, stand a good chance of both meeting national needs and conforming to global standards and internationalisation agendas.

Notes

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