

## AN EXPLORATORY SURVEY OF THE EFFECTS OF ECONOMIC CHALLENGES ON LECTURER QUALITY AT A ZIMBABWEAN UNIVERSITY

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**Abstract-** Zimbabwe experienced a serious brain drain to neighbouring countries in the past decade. The study sought to explore the state of lecturer quality at one state university in the year 2011 when the economic situation in the country was improving. Qualitative and quantitative analyses of data obtained through a self administered questionnaire and semi-structured interviews indicated that most lecturers are lacking in the most relevant professional characteristics. The career progression of most lecturers lacks focus on the acquisition of professional teaching qualifications and research. It is recommended that lecturers be encouraged to acquire professional teaching qualifications and engage in research and publications. Further expository studies on the effects of the brain drain in the developing academic world need to be carried out.

**Keywords:** Lecturer, quality, lecturer quality, professional qualification, academic qualification

### Introduction

Zimbabwe experienced a myriad of social and economic challenges in the past decade. The year 2011 was chosen for this study because it was a period of the manifestation of economic challenges in Zimbabwe, which were at their peak between 2007 and 2009. Teachers, lecturers and other professionals got very little in terms of salaries and their living conditions deteriorated. This period could have far reaching effects on lecturer quality in Zimbabwean universities as they were not spared from the problem of staff turnover as indicated by the quotation below:

The University of Zimbabwe has less than 500 of the required 1 200 Lecturers, forcing the institution to halt enrollment for some programmes, particularly sciences. Of the 211 lecturers needed in The Faculty of Science, only 32 are available with the rest having gone either into the private sector or crossed the borders [1].

Thus the economic and social problems affected lecturers in Zimbabwe including other workers. Consequently many lecturers migrated to neighbouring countries to seek better paying jobs. For instance in February 2010, the highest paid lecturers at the University of Zimbabwe were getting US\$290 per month compared to US\$1500 being paid to their counterparts in South Africa [1]. In view of the brain drain, the issue of lecturer quality in Zimbabwean universities and other developing countries becomes significant. While the critical shortage of lecturers in the country due to the unfavourable economic situation is well documented [2, 3, 4], not much is known about its effects on the quality

of the lecturers available in the universities. It is against this background that the researchers carried out an exploratory study on the current state of lecturer quality at one state university in Zimbabwe.

### Review of literature

#### **Conceptions of quality in higher education**

Every stakeholder in higher education; students, lecturers, parents and administrators, views quality differently depending on their specific needs. It is important to highlight that observing the quality of higher education, particularly in universities, has never been an easy task [5, 6]. This is because the pursuit of the principle of quality entails the maintenance and application of academic standards, which means compliance with specific expectations and requirements as a way of aiming for ideals of academic excellence [7]. It however, remains a fact that the primary goal of quality assurance (QA) is to give guarantee to all stakeholders like funding organizations and individuals, institutions and the public, that the university in question is keeping its promises of quality and adherence to standards. The Southern Africa Universities Vice-Chancellors' Association (SAUVCA) acknowledges that the concept of 'quality' in higher education is subjective since:

... institutions have broad autonomy to decide on their visions and missions. Any statement about quality implies a certain relative measure against a common standard; in tertiary institutions such a common standard does not exist. Various concepts have evolved to suit different contexts ranging from quality as a measure for excellence to quality as perfection, ... quality as fitness for

purpose and quality as transformation (in a learner) [8].

It is therefore, apparent that those who are involved in the field of quality assurance (QA) have difficulties in agreeing on what quality really is. However in higher education, the phrase 'fitness for purpose' is commonly used. This has also been supported by several authors [8, 9, 10]. Fitness for purpose can be regarded as meeting or conforming to the generally accepted standards as defined by an institution, QA bodies and appropriate academic and professional communities. This is the meaning that the researchers have adopted in the context of this study.

### **Characteristics of competent lecturers**

Arubayi is of the view that the power of good educational programmes is anchored by the quality and quantity of the academic staff and not the beautiful buildings, adequate equipment/facilities or sound curriculum [11]. He further argues that the lecturer's professional and academic qualifications are of great importance. Arubayi believes that lecturers in tertiary institutions are the ones who consign the pitch and practice of learning and they should therefore, be available in their quality and quantity in these institutions of higher learning. The quality and quantity of lecturers determine the quality of graduates that an institution produces [11, 12, 13].

Although different people perceive teacher quality differently, high quality teaching ranges in focus from pedagogical content knowledge, creativity, personality, professional development activities and the knowledge possessed [14]. Lecturer quality dimensions that were constantly highlighted by most authors from their studies include; expertise/competence (knowledge ability), communication skills [13, 15, 16].

### **Lecturer professional qualifications and further studies**

A teaching qualification is of prime importance in the provision of quality higher education. Teaching involves many related activities that include curriculum design, choosing relevant learning resources and preparation of learning and assessment tasks. For a lecturer to be competent in all these areas, a teaching qualification is essential to fully understand the teaching and learning process. The Cambodian Higher Education proposed a teachers' qualification as one of the main relevant factors in the quality of higher education [17]. Likewise the University Of Western Australia (UWA) is now encouraging its lecturers to pursue the recently introduced Graduate teaching certificate in a bid to develop their teaching skills, with 30 other Australian universities already offering similar part time studies over a period of 2 years [18]. To demonstrate the necessity of the teaching qualification, the University of Tasmania made part of their certificate compulsory to all new staff [19].

However, Clarke and Oey-Gardiner's study revealed that the career path of the typical lecturer in Indonesia is away from teaching [20]. Indonesia attempted to

increase the quality of undergraduate education by investing in education courses for lecturers but they were not interested. Rather they were doing further studies in other areas not related to lecturing.

### **Lecturer quality and research activities**

Tribe stressed the need, 'to strengthen staff research and scholarly activity....that ensures the currency and validity of what is taught' [21pg 39]. Research is a relevant activity in improving the quality of a lecturer. This is because a lecturer who is involved in research is usually aware of developments in his/her field of study [22]. Research is closely linked to teaching since it can be argued that, "at graduate level one spends teaching time talking about the current journal literature and thus research becomes the same as teaching" [23 pg 65].

Despite the known benefits of lecturer research, many studies consistently indicate that a few lecturers are engaging in research [17, 21, 23]. Various reasons for low research output have been put forward. Some authors are of the view that, "increasing demands of coping with day-to-day activities are squeezing out this vital part of investment into future quality" [21pg 39]. The area of research is lagging behind since quality assurance has paid less attention to it unless it is linked to some funding being given. Therefore, there is great need for quality assurance to, "take more account of research and monitor the impact of research and scholarly activity" [24 pg 289].

### **Delimitation of the study**

Lecturer quality in this study refers to fitness for purpose. The study focused on the professional characteristics of lecturers at one Zimbabwean state university which are: period of stay at the university, academic and professional qualifications, further studies being undertaken as well as research and publications as ways of assessing lecturer quality at a time when the country is recovering from the socio-economic challenges of the past decade. Professional qualification in this study is referring to a teaching qualification, be it a certificate, diploma or a degree.

### **Research questions:**

1. What is the lecturers' period of stay at the university?
2. What teaching qualifications and relevant experience do lecturers at the institution possess?
3. What type of further studies are lecturers at the university engaged in?
4. To what extent are lecturers involved in research and publication?

### **Methodology**

#### **Research design and instruments**

The researchers made use of the mixed methods approach (4<sup>th</sup> generation research). In this exploratory case study, qualitative and quantitative paradigms complemented each other. Self administered

questionnaires with both closed and open-ended questions were completed by lecturers while semi-structured interviews were conducted with three key personnel in the institution. The philosophical underpinnings of positivism and phenomenology guided this study where questionnaires and interviews were used for triangulation of the study [25].

### **Validity and trustworthiness**

The validity and trustworthiness of data were catered for through pilot studying the questionnaire together with triangulation of methods, instruments and the data collected. Content validity was done through checking whether items represented the content to be gathered. Debriefing of participants and member checking were also done to increase data credibility, as they verified that the processed data represents what they really meant [26].

### **Population and sampling**

The population for this study consisted of all 205 lecturers of the university. Stratified random sampling was then used so that a representative sample of each sex could be chosen. The researchers got an updated list from the Human Resources Registry Department. The list had 51 (25%) female and 154 (75%) male lecturers. The researchers initially aimed at getting 60% of the population as the sample of participants. Random numbers were generated through Excel resulting in the selection of 30 female and 90 male lecturers. The return rate was 68.3%, where sixteen female and sixty six male lecturers returned their questionnaires. This sample is 40% of the total population, which is more than the 25% proposed as a representative sample [27]. Three key people in the institution: one administrator, one chairperson and one officer in the examinations department were purposively sampled for face to face interviews as they were deemed to be a rich source of data pertinent to this study.

### **Data analysis**

Qualitative data was coded, merged into themes and interpreted. Quantitative data analysis was done through the use of SPSS Version 16.0. Descriptive statistics was employed to interpret the data.

### **Data presentation and analysis**

#### **Period of stay at the university**

Almost half (40.2%) of the lecturers have stayed for 2 years or less at the university as shown in Table (1). They are still on probation hence they do not have much experience of teaching at the university.

The results indicate that almost all (98%) of the lecturers have taught for 6 years and below at the institution. This illustrates that there is a high staff turnover which was also emphasized by all the interviewees, one of who said that:

The 2008 to 2009 high staff turnover compromised the quality in a great way because you would find that in

some situations all the lecturers including the chairperson of a whole department left without giving notice, neither would they do the hand-over take-over process for the benefit of the institution and those who would join that department. Therefore, the culture of continuity was broken.

The above sentiments were also echoed by one administrator who stated that:

The person may resign or abscond or be away from duty without official leave. Then someone comes in to take up the students up to the end of the semester. Their approaches are different. Not only that, even the qualifications at times are different because the university in the past 2 years or so stooped lower to appoint first degree holders as lecturers, which of course, impacted negatively on the quality of product we were producing.

The lecturers' intention to leave is relatively high as indicated by the fact that of the lecturers undertaking further studies; very few (10%) are undertaking professional studies as shown in Table (2). This is a very small proportion in a situation where most of the lecturers (67.1%) do not have the professional teaching qualifications which are relevant in this field.

### **Teaching qualification and experience**

The study revealed that the majority (81.7%) of the respondents had some teaching experience before joining the university, mostly in high schools. It is however, interesting to note that most of these (67.1%) do not have the basic professional teaching qualification. This may negatively affect many aspects related to teaching and learning, for instance, planning and delivery of lectures as well as setting and marking of examinations even though the lecturer may have knowledge of the discipline. The negative impact is worsened by high staff turnover, which implies that at any one time there are many new lecturers. This was reiterated by one of the interviewees who mentioned that, "...examinations have been compromised because of new staff members. The new lecturers are in the process of learning and it is very difficult for us."

### **Current studies, type of studies and age**

The study revealed that less than half (42.7%) of the lecturers are currently undertaking further studies. Generally, most lecturers who are undertaking further studies are between the ages of 31 and 50 years. Most of those between the ages of 31 and 40 are pursuing Masters' degrees while the majority of those between 41 and 50 years are doing PhD studies as shown in Table (2).

It appears most lecturers are pursuing Masters' degrees because, under normal circumstances, that is the minimum qualification for teaching in a Zimbabwean university. This reflects a serious shortage of qualified personnel at the university. It is also apparent that generally people pursue PhD studies when they are above 31years but more so after 41 years of age as shown in Table (2). This is the trend in most African countries, usually because of the financial constraints

which dictate that one prioritizes the role of breadwinner first. As such when an individual has a first degree, which enables them to get employed, chances are that further studies may be delayed or postponed [28].

#### **Number of publications in relation to sex and period of stay at the university**

About half (58.5%) of the lecturers who participated in the study have published research papers. While the number of publications per lecturer ranges from 1 to 16, it is important to note that the majority (74%) of the lecturers has between zero and one publication as indicated in Fig (1). It is apparent that males are publishing more than females, but generally research output in the institution for most individuals is very low regardless of sex.

The Pearson Product-Moment Correlation test showed that there is a moderate relationship (0.47 at 0.01 confidence level) between the period of stay at the university and the number of publications. The moderate relationship could be as a result of two lecturers who have published 10 and 16 research papers respectively, yet the true picture is that the majority of the lecturers are not really involved in active research and publishing of journal articles. This may result in ineffective supervision of students' research projects. One of the university administrators echoed similar sentiments when she said that:

Projects are a problem particularly in the Faculty of Commerce. They are complaining of large numbers of students and some of the lecturers are inexperienced. Most of them are first degree holders and some never did a project during the time they did their undergraduate studies. Supervision is a problem and the pass rate was also discouraging.

In summary, the findings show that most of the lecturers at the university do not have a professional teaching qualification. There is also a high staff. Fewer lecturers are pursuing further studies. There is very low research output, which has got a negative impact on the aspect of lecturers' supervision of students' dissertations. The few lecturers who have published once could have done so simply because one publication is an important prerequisite for tenureship.

#### **Discussion**

Only a few lecturers are studying towards obtaining a teaching qualification. The trend revealed by this study concurs with other studies, which have shown that lecturers do not prioritize getting a teaching qualification [20].

Similarly, according to the interview response from one of the administrators, plans are under way to have a Teaching Learning Centre (TLC) at the university since most lecturers do not have a professional teaching qualification. Doing further studies in teaching could help them to develop their pedagogical skills. They also become better equipped due to the broadened spectrum of knowledge and skills [29].

The above view has been supported by Radloff cited in Cervini who stressed that the reason why lecturers are encouraged to obtain a teaching qualification is because most of their qualifications, in particular postgraduate studies, do not prepare them for the challenging job of teaching since being an expert in a discipline or being a good researcher does not guarantee good teaching [19]. This concurs with one of the administrators' sentiments during an interview session in this study. Radloff stated that there is a weak correlation between the above mentioned aspects, since pedagogy, just like any other discipline, requires stern persistent learning to bring about expertise [19]. Therefore, lecturers need to be experts in both their disciplines and in the pedagogy of their disciplines through having a qualification in education.

Nevertheless Rich's study revealed that 70% of the science academics think that having a teaching qualification would not enhance the likelihood of promotion hence the tendency to study for other academic qualifications [18]. The high rate of staff turnover negatively affects the quality of education at the university.

The study indicated that there is a severely low research output, though this is not peculiar to this university alone. Earlier studies revealed that despite the known benefits of lecturer research, few lecturers are engaging in research [17, 21, 23]. In their study, Chen *et al* found out that the majority (85%) of lecturers never published [17]. Monetary rewards for research, encourage lecturers to carry out studies without affecting their personal budgets [18, 30]. Provision of research opportunities and financial support could be ways of demonstrating institutional lecturer support.

Tribe stressed the, 'need to strengthen staff research and scholarly activity.....that ensures the currency and validity of what is taught' [21 page39]. Lindsay and others also reiterated the relevance of research activity in improving the quality of lecturers [22]. This is because lecturers who are involved in research are usually aware of developments in their discipline. According to the interviewed chairperson in the study, at one time research funds were allocated to departments for those who wanted to do research but some departments did not receive a single proposal from the lecturers. This may signify lack of research skills or research culture. Therefore, the ability of lecturers to supervise students' research projects and the contemporary nature of the content they teach are questionable.

In addition, students benefit a lot from lecturers who are actively involved in research. This is because these lecturers will have enhanced, relevant and recent knowledge to pass on to their students. They also earn more credibility while improving their competence in the supervision of students' dissertations and theses [22].

The above discussion indicates that lecturers at the university under study are not actively involved in research. The majority are not doing further studies to obtain a professional teaching qualification which may negatively affect the quality of their teaching. This also

partly concurs with the findings that low lecturer quality in Cambodian Higher Education is signified by lecturer characteristics such as qualifications, research experiences as well as teaching methods [17].

### Conclusion and recommendations

The study revealed that most lecturers have been at the university for a very short period of time due to high staff turnover. Most of them do not have professional teaching qualifications. Whilst a few lecturers are pursuing further studies, not many of these are studying towards obtaining a teaching qualification. In general, they are not actively involved in research and publication, which is a critical component in university teaching. Therefore, most lecturers at the institution under study are lacking in some of the areas that are vital for high lecturer quality in universities. These inadequacies may compromise the quality of teaching and learning and by implication the quality of the graduate.

It is recommended that universities should strive to retain adequately qualified lecturers and support them with research funds to help improve the quality of staff. An improvement in the conditions of service of lecturers could reduce the high staff turnover. A lecturer quality improvement framework could be developed as part of the institutional policy and strategy for continuous lecturer improvement. Now that the economic situation is improving, further studies could be done to ascertain whether lecturer quality is also improving. As this was an exploratory study at one Zimbabwean university, further expository studies on the effects of the brain drain in the developing academic world need to be carried out.

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Table 1- Period of employment at the university

Period /years	Number of lecturers	%
0-2	33	40.2
2.1-4	24	29.3
4.1-6	23	28.1
6.1-8	1	1.2
8.1-10	0	0
10.1-12	0	0
12.1-14	1	1.2
Total	82	100

Table 2- Age range, current studies and type of studies

Age range frequency & percentage			Current & type of studies (N=82)			
Lecturer age range (years)	Number	Percentage	Masters	Professional	PhD	Total
30 & below	19	23.2	7	2	0	9
31 to 40	33	40.2	8	0	3	11
41 to 50	22	26.8	3	3	6	12
51 to 60	5	6.1	1	0	0	1
61 & above	3	3.7	0	0	2	2
Total	82	100	19	5	11	35

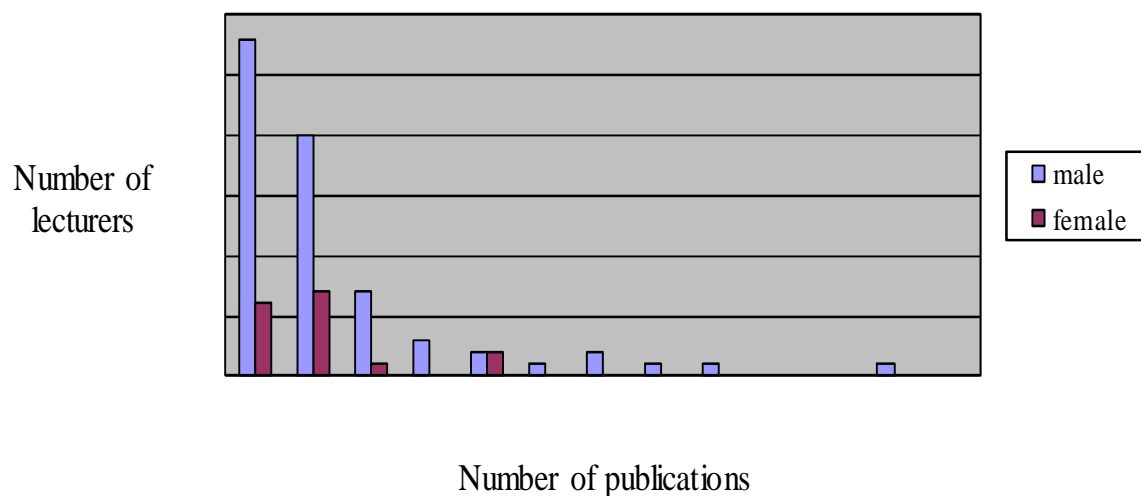


Fig 1: Publications by sex