

TRADE OFF ISSUES IN TEACHER EDUCATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ZAMBIA (UNZA): GROWING STUDENT NUMBERS AND THE QUALITY OF TEACHER EDUCATION PROCESSES

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Abstract

This paper examines the hypothesis that quantitative expansion of an education system unaccompanied by proportionate expansion in physical, financial and human resources is often accompanied by qualitative deterioration. The paper reports on data from a study that investigated the implications of the enormously expanded student enrolments at the University of Zambia (UNZA), School of Education on the quality of teacher education processes. Data was collected in 2015 from a sample of 24 lecturers and 200 students from UNZA School of Education, and 4 principal officers at the institution. Semi-structured interviews, observations and questionnaires were used to collect data. Collected data was coded into emergent themes and grouped into categories. Analysis of the data revealed several fundamental bruises occasioned on the quality of teacher education at UNZA in the process of quantitative expansion. The study found that expanded enrolments had outstripped the capacity of the institution to accommodate admitted prospective teachers. The contact between student teachers and their lecturers was found to be increasingly unsatisfactory due to the huge student population. The average seating capacities of the lecture venues in the School of Education and in two other admitting schools vis Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) and Natural Sciences (NS) fell far too short of the numbers that had been enrolled in the sampled courses and this had great implications on the teaching activities. It was clear that quality had been traded off for quantitative gains and this had great implication for producing quality teachers. This paper recommends inter-alia, that to ameliorate the negative implications of quantitative expansion of enrolments, it would be necessary for admitting authorities at the School of Education, UNZA to tie any future expansion of enrolments to the available resources for teaching and learning in a university, the number of students admitted each year should tally with the available seating, reading and lodging facilities available.

Key words: expanded enrolments, quality, teaching education processes, university of Zambia

INTRODUCTION

The University of Zambia, one of the institutions playing a huge role in teacher preparation in Zambia has expanded since its inception in March 1966. Over the years, UNZA has enjoyed significant growth in terms of expansion in the number of student enrolments, schools and programmes. For instance, when it opened in 1966, UNZA only had a total 312 students and three admitting schools namely, School of Education, School of Natural Sciences and School of Humanities (Mwanakatwe, 1974). By 2015, its student population had risen to approximately 26,000 and the number of admitting schools had also grown to ten.

The School of Education at UNZA, which is the focus of this paper, has also expanded rapidly. The major expansion has been in the number of enrolled students as well as in the programmes being offered. The school has seen an increase in student enrolments from approximately forty-two in April 1966 when the school opened to approximately 9,500 in 2015. One of the goals for expanded enrolments is to meet the high demand for higher education following increased secondary school completion rates. Additionally, the expansion is in response to Ministry of Education's desires expressed in the national policy on education, *Educating our Future*, to increase the quantity and quality of teachers in the country (MoE, 1996). Unfortunately, these significant leaps in student enrolment have, to a larger extent, been unaccompanied by a proportionate expansion of financial, physical and human resources. For instance, despite the expanded enrolments, the biggest lecturer theatre (New Education Lecture Theatre-NELT) still has the sitting capacity of 250. Additionally, the reading spacing at UNZA main library remains at

1650 while students' accommodation is at 3274 bed spaces. This increase in student population without a proportionate expansion in infrastructure and human resources (as in this case) brings up one question: can the university maintain the quality of teacher education standards under such conditions?

Studies elsewhere have shown that one major way in which quality can be compromised in education is through overcrowded classrooms and school campuses. Duraishamy *et-al* (2004) wrote of a 'trade-off' between quality and quantity in primary and secondary education in developing countries in general and in India in particular. This study found that as enrolments increase at primary and secondary levels of the Indian educational stratum a number of implications arise. Additionally Wilson (1993) tried to evaluate the adjustment problems faced by students at the University of Zambia. Wilson (1993) opined that sometimes the presence of huge numbers of students had the potential to lead to loss of valuable teaching time.

The desire to produce quality teachers is at the heart of many educationalists and governments. This is because high quality teachers are said to be the most important in-school contributors to student learning (Harries, 2012). There are concerns related to the quality and relevance of students' performance and completion rates among other things resulting from expanded higher education among scholars. Available literature indicates that quantitative expansion of higher education, unaccompanied by proportionate increase in financial, physical and human resources often results in qualitative deterioration (Tremblay, Lalancette & Reseveare, 2013).

The issue of quality in education has generated keen interest among researchers. Several research studies focusing on quality in education show that there is little agreement among researchers in the field of Education about the exact conceptions of quality. Some scholars opt to conceive of quality in terms of inputs into a system or process or outputs of the system (Beeby, 1966; and Kelly, 1991). The benchmarks of a quality education system may include the size of the classes, teacher-morale, availability of teaching and learning resources, the length of contact between instructor and learners (Kelly, 1991). The aforementioned can be classified, per Meki (2005), as 'input indicators'. Says Meki: 'Output indicators refer to the acquisition of measurable skills like reading, writing, numeracy, including a great range of facts about history, geography hygiene and so on'.

In this paper quality was looked at as evolving around several fundamental input variables namely: availability of learning and teaching resources; the students' access to well-furnished lodging facilities; availability of reading space as well as fairly recent books, journals and other academic literature; ample time for individualized contact between Lecturers and their respective students; accurate and complete assessment packages for students with ample time for lecturers to effectively, justly and objectively evaluate their students; and a learning and teaching process that vibrates with energy and that is devoid of serious shortcomings such as lack of desks or chairs, poor ventilation and lack of lecturer audibility due to overcrowding.

Statement of the problem

Since its birth in April 1966, the School of Education at UNZA has recorded significant increase in the student population which has been unaccompanied by proportionate increase in financial, physical and human resources (Chipindi, 2009). The effects of these expanded student enrolments on teacher training processes at UNZA's School of Education have not been studied closely. Critical analysis might seem to suggest that it may be useful to establish what would benefit the country more between: giving high quality university education to a few citizens; and offering university education on a large scale, with the very real possibility that quality might be compromised by quantity.

Purpose of the study

The study investigated the implication of the enormously expanded enrolments at the University of Zambia's school education on the quality of teacher education processes.

Research objectives

1. To assess the effect of huge student population on quality of teaching and learning.
2. To determine the effect of the huge student populations on the Lecturers' research activities.
3. To appraise the effects of expanded enrolments on the quality of life of student teachers.

Research questions

1. What is the effect of huge student population on quality of teaching and learning?
2. How have the huge student populations affected Lecturers' research activities?
3. What has been the effect of expanded enrolments on the quality of life of student teachers?

Methods

This was a survey of student teachers and lecturers in the school of education. The study sample comprised 20 lecturers and 200 students from UNZA School of Education, and 4 principal officers. Purposeful sampling was employed in the selection of the 20 lecturers. Lecturers were selected because they either, had been teaching in the school for a sufficiently long period to have felt the impact of expanded enrolments on the academic activities, or were otherwise in charge of courses which had student populations more than 300 students. The number 300 was chosen because preliminary desk research had revealed that on average the biggest lecture room at UNZA had a total seating capacity of 250 students. The student-respondents were selected from each of those courses which had student populations more than 300. The following principle officers were selected purposefully: Dean of the School of Education, Dean of Student affairs, Librarian and registrar.

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. Questionnaires were used to collect data from lecturers and students. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the 4 principal officers. Document analysis was carried out. The information obtained from document analysis was used in interpreting information from interviews and questionnaires. Observations were also done. Collected data were coded into emergent themes and grouped into categories.

Results and discussions

Results of this study indicate that the number of students in the School of Education at the University of Zambia had increased without corresponding increases in infrastructure, education resources and human resource and this had serious implications on teacher education processes.

Effects of expanded enrolments on the quality of teaching and learning activities

Limited and overcrowded lecture theatres

The increases in the student populations in the School of Education, were largely unaccompanied by corresponding increases in infrastructure. The average seating capacities of the lecture venues fell far too short of the numbers that had been enrolled in the sampled courses. Three lecturers teaching one of the school courses felt that to describe the physical infrastructure as inadequate would be an understatement as there was barely any room big enough to accommodate their huge courses even after the same had been split into four groups. The biggest lecturer theatre (New Education Lecture Theatre) in the school has the seating capacity of 250 and yet one of the school courses had slightly over 2500 students. It was observed that some students attending some of the big courses would stand throughout the year and others would even stand in the corridors outside the lecture theatre.

The study also found that due to the limited lecture rooms in the school, the number of lecture hours had reduced from three (3) hours per week to two (2) hours per week in some courses. Furthermore, a good number of lecturers reported that they had cut off tutorials in some of their courses because of lack of tutorial venues in the school. Other lecturers reported to have classes as early as 06:00hrs due to the limited number of venues.

Diminished lecturer-student contact

The study revealed that a far less amount of time was available for lecturer-student than the lecturers and students considered sufficient for a thorough and enriching academic intercourse between them. All the lecturers described the duration of their individualized interaction with their students as 'unsatisfactory' citing time constraints. Ten lecturers (50%) said that on average they had one-on-one interaction with twenty-five students per week. Five (25%) said they saw approximately twenty students each week, while five others said they saw only about ten students every week. This limited contact between students and lecturers is a regrettable subtraction from teaching-learning activities. Individualized interactions between lecturers and

their students are very important in teacher education processes. It is through this process that the students' analytical skills would be sharpened and questions that the students would not ask during lectures could be ironed out. Hornsby, Osma and Matos-Ala (2013) argue that large classes make it impossible for lecturers to give students meaningful feedback. If lecturers are to devote ample time and energy to enhance learning by attending to students' academic needs not adequately addressed during regular contact hours, increase in the number of students should correspond with increase in the number of lecturers.

Inadequate reading space and high student text-book ratio

Reading space at UNZA main library was found to be insufficient given the number of students. The seating capacity at the library was 1650 against 26,000 students. Additionally, the growing numbers of students had increased the student-textbook ratio to 1,000 per two copies of the key texts in some courses. The number of books in the library and the number of times the students use the libraries are, per Grisay and Mahlck (1991), crucial indicators of quality. One can only argue that the frequency of students' use of the libraries and their access to key texts on their respective courses was severely limited by the lack of books and reading space much to the detriment of quality.

Diluted assessments

Some lecturers said they had to seriously compromise the continuous assessment packages for their students to fifty percent of the traditional student assessment programme. One lecturer stated '*it is difficult for me to give work that requires extended writing as the marking of such work is challenging*'. Some lecturers reported that they had to do away with tutorials due to the huge number of students and lack of tutorial venues. The compromise of the assessment package constituted another major subtraction from the quality of education in the school (Heyneman and Loxley, 1983). The compromise of the assessment packages for the students also meant that the students' acquisition of knowledge would not be measured with the appropriate accuracy and completeness and as such the students may very likely fail to acquire the knowledge that they are supposed to have by being university students. The only compensation to the society would be that such students are produced in mass.

Effects of huge student populations on the lecturers' research activities

The increased teaching load resulting from expanded enrolments prevented the members of the academia from carrying out mandatory research to professionally advancing themselves and enriching their expertise in their respective fields of study. All the twenty lecturers uniformly agreed to the view that the sheer hugeness of the classes they handled severely affected their ability to conduct research. They reported that they were too pre-occupied with marking and lecturing to undertake such research.

It is mandatory in the university world for academicians to not only teach but also to be actively involved in the continuous broadening of the frontiers of knowledge through research (MOE, 1996; Tuckman 1990 and Wolf, 1993). Unfortunately for lecturers at UNZA School of Education, the huge number of students that they handled had made it challenging for them to conduct research. This lack of research of research meant that students were being deprived of more informed instruction among other things.

Effects of expanded enrolments on the quality of life of student teachers

The study revealed that there were not enough boarding facilities for student teachers at UNZA. The total number of bed spaces within UNZA was 2274 against the student population of approximately 26,000. This meant that even if the entire available bed space in the university was reserved for student teachers, there could still not be enough even for them to share. It was found that UNZA did not have any other accommodation outside campus and it did not have any arrangements with private businesses to accommodate its students. Therefore, the full-time student teachers had to fight for this severely limited accommodation within UNZA. Some student teachers have found themselves in very poor accommodation outside, including the famous rooftop compounds that the authorities had to shut down in 2010. About half of the sample (50%) reported living in boarding houses outside the university. Living outside the university has its own problems. Some students reported that they find it very difficult to attend early morning lectures and to stay up in the night to use the library.

CONCLUSIONS

The study found that expanded enrolments had outstripped the capacity of the institution to accommodate admitted prospective teachers. The huge student populations negatively affected the teaching activities of the members of staff. The expanded enrolments had no obvious link to the available resources crucial to effective teaching and learning. It was clear that quality had been traded off for quantitative gains and this had great implication for producing quality teachers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper recommends *inter-alia*, that to ameliorate the negative implications of quantitative expansion of enrollments, it would be necessary for admitting authorities at the School of Education, UNZA to tie any future expansion of enrolments to the available resources for teaching and learning in a university, the number of students admitted each year should tally with the available seating, reading and lodging facilities available.

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