



# Transforming Universities Through Strategic Plans in South Africa and Zimbabwe: Continuities and Discontinuities

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## ABSTRACT

The decade-long strategic planning cycles designed to enhance efficiency in universities have become increasingly significant in higher education. However, their effectiveness has diminished due to evolving educational demands and dynamic contexts. This study analyzed the effectiveness of strategic planning in achieving institutional goals, emphasizing the need for universities to reevaluate their relationships with local communities, businesses, national economies, and other entities. The study employed a multi-case study methodology to analyze the continuities and discontinuities in transformations instigated by the strategic plans of two South African universities, the University of KwaZulu-Natal and the University of South Africa, as well as two Zimbabwean universities, the University of Zimbabwe and Great Zimbabwe University. The research conducted a thematic and content analysis using a desktop examination of examples and evidence related to the execution of strategic plans. To authenticate secondary data, interviews were conducted with important informants, including vice-chancellors, faculty deans, quality assurance directors, and academic and non-academic staff members. The study revealed that although university change necessitates a clearly articulated strategy, the strategic plans of these institutions, primarily project-oriented, serve just as a means to document current activities and projected outcomes. Although Zimbabwean institutions had "effective" strategic plans, their execution was inadequate. To alleviate the challenges now afflicting universities, the research advocates for a shift from strategic plans to the formulation of comprehensive strategic frameworks that correspond to the advancement of national policies. The study offers insights into how strategic plans can serve as proactive instruments of universities' sustainable transformation in unstable economic and political contexts.

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## INTRODUCTION

Due to globalisation, democratisation, and liberalisation, higher education institutions (HEIs) face mounting demand to exhibit their relevance and importance to society.<sup>1</sup> The revolutionary power of

<sup>1</sup> John Brennan, Roger King, and Yann Lebeau, *The Role of Universities in the Transformation of Societies: An International Research Project* (Centre for Higher Education Research and Information/Association of Commonwealth Universities, 2004); Jean-Paul D Addie, "Urban (Izing) University Strategic Planning: An Analysis of London and New York City," *Urban Affairs Review* 55, no. 6 (2019): 1612–45; Sybille Reichert, "The Role of Universities in Regional Innovation Ecosystems," *EUA Study, European University Association, Brussels, Belgium*, 2019.

universities in sociocultural and economic realms appears to be more recognized.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, universities are expected to significantly and directly contribute to innovation, economic growth and development, democratization, social cohesion, and sustainability.

This study analyzes the effectiveness of universities' strategic plans in achieving their institutional objectives. The study employs a multi-case analysis of specific universities in Zimbabwe and South Africa, examining the change in these institutions and their capacity to deliver quality higher education. Comprehensive and pertinent education guarantees success as it is the sole discipline that cultivates awareness and fosters an exemplary, ethical character in the student. Quality education entails valuable knowledge and information provided by educational professionals and platforms, fostering a promising future for pupils.

In Zimbabwe, higher education encompasses post-secondary institutions, including universities, polytechnics, teachers' colleges, and various entities within government ministries, parastatal organizations, and the private sector. Non-governmental organizations frequently participate in higher education. Universities and further education institutions, including technical colleges, polytechnics, and teacher training institutes, fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Innovation, Science, and Technology Development. Agricultural training colleges are governed by the Ministry of Agriculture.<sup>3</sup>

Established in 1957, the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland was the inaugural higher education institution publicly founded in the region then referred to as Rhodesia. The university, currently recognized as the University of Zimbabwe (UZ), was once linked to the University of London. The initial enrollment consisted of merely 58 pupils, although the figures subsequently increased consistently.<sup>4</sup> Originally a university college, it attained full university status in 1970, becoming the University of Rhodesia. Well-resourced, it functioned according to international standards.

In South Africa, a decade after the establishment of democracy, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) initiated a significant overhaul of the higher education sector in 2004. This was accomplished via the mergers and incorporations of universities and technikons. Prior to 1994, higher education was racially segregated, resulting in significant disparities across institutions regarding leadership, organizational structure, resource distribution, governmental funding, and student retention and throughput.<sup>5</sup> The transformation agenda aimed to establish new institutional structures, identities, and cultures that embodied the post-apartheid vision for democracy.

Today, International Development Cooperation Agencies recognise that higher education significantly contributes to political, social, and economic development.<sup>6</sup> The World Bank currently asserts that higher education is vital for enhancing social cohesion, fostering trust in social institutions, and promoting democratic engagement through open discourse. Higher education fosters an understanding of differences in gender, race, and religion, thus improving national unity. Higher Education Institutions aim to serve as catalysts for social justice and economic development.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, the discussion on transformation is crucial in evaluating the degree to which higher education institutions fulfill their roles as agents of social justice and economic development. In 2006, the national government of Zimbabwe established the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE) as a quality control measure to register and accredit higher education institutions.<sup>8</sup> ZIMCHE's mandate is "to promote and coordinate education offered by higher education institutions

<sup>2</sup> Brennan, King, and Lebeau, *The Role of Universities in the Transformation of Societies: An International Research Project*.

<sup>3</sup> Edward Shizha and Michael T Kariwo, "The Development of Higher Education in Zimbabwe," in *Education and Development in Zimbabwe: A Social, Political and Economic Analysis* (Springer, 2011), 125–33.

<sup>4</sup> Evelyn Chiyevu Garwe, "Quality Assurance Challenges and Opportunities Faced by Private Universities in Zimbabwe," *Journal of Case Studies in Education* 5 (2014).

<sup>5</sup> Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), *Transforming Higher Education for a Transformed South Africa in a 21st Century World: A Call to Action*. (Higher Education Summit, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Theocharis Kromydas, "Rethinking Higher Education and Its Relationship with Social Inequalities: Past Knowledge, Present State and Future Potential," *Palgrave Communications* 3, no. 1 (October 13, 2017): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-017-0001-8>.

<sup>7</sup> Colin Lucas and G Boulton, "What Are Universities For," *League of European Research Universities*, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE), "ZIMCHE Speaks out. Document Prepared for Press Release," 2012, <http://www.zimche.ac.zw>.

and to serve as a regulator in establishing and upholding standards for teaching, examinations, academic qualifications, and research in these institutions".<sup>9</sup>

ZIMCHE is currently establishing the minimum body of knowledge (MBK) required for each student enrolled in study programs at higher education institutions in Zimbabwe. The assessment is conducted by a team of specialists from several academic disciplines; this team convenes at a workshop to develop criteria aimed at establishing comparable standards for students enrolled in similar degree programs across different universities in the country. The MBK project resembles the "tuning" initiative, which provides comparability and compatibility of university curricula for the worldwide higher education community.

During Zimbabwe's political independence in 1980, there was a growth of education at all levels.<sup>10</sup> Kariwo observed an increase in elementary school enrollment from 20% in 1980 to 86% in 1981. The rise in lower education levels led to an increased demand for higher education in the country, hence necessitating the establishment of additional universities. The growth of postsecondary education in Zimbabwe was mostly a reaction to the ripple effects generated by the substantial increase in primary and secondary enrollments.<sup>11</sup>

For more than forty years, higher education in Zimbabwe has transitioned from an exclusive elite system to a mass system. The recent change has led to numerous obstacles in the provision of education. Upon gaining independence in 1980, the nation had a solitary university with an enrolment of 2,200 full-time students; currently, there are 11 public and seven private institutions, accommodating approximately 160,000 full-time students.<sup>12</sup> In South Africa, two public universities were established post-apartheid: Sol Plaatje University in Kimberley, Northern Cape (formed in 2013) and the University of Mpumalanga (created in 2013), with a campus in Mbombela, formerly known as Nelspruit.

The higher and tertiary education system in Zimbabwe is fraught with numerous challenges. The success of a nation is contingent on its resources, both financial and human. When resources are used effectively and appropriately, success becomes inevitable. The scarcity of resources and funding in Zimbabwe results in brain drain. Consequently, numerous qualified lecturers, PhD holders, and professors sought better opportunities abroad.<sup>13</sup> In contemporary society, great education is seen as the fundamental catalyst that can elevate a developing country to a developed nation. Similarly, in South Africa, there is a burgeoning tendency of brain drain and the flight of highly educated human capital to Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America.

Policies that influence macroeconomic conditions in a nation also determine the delivery of education. The unemployment and/or underemployment of university graduates, higher education, and secondary school graduates indicate that Zimbabwe's education system has outpaced economic growth. Inefficient investment in education incurs significant societal costs; nonetheless, reallocating the money towards higher education has been attempted since 1999 to generate marketable graduates. The emphasis is on cultivating competencies in essential industries and enabling the populace to achieve self-employment through income-generating initiatives. Nonetheless, significant deficiencies in gender mainstreaming persist within higher education. Policy initiatives are necessary to enhance the enrollment of girls at all educational levels, beginning with basic education. This study examines the challenges associated with the execution of strategic plans in higher education institutions in Zimbabwe and South Africa, using a mixed-method approach.

<sup>9</sup> Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE), "ZIMCHE Speaks out. Document Prepared for Press Release."

<sup>10</sup> Michael Kariwo, "Higher Education and Development in Zimbabwe: A Policy Analysis," in *Education and Social Development*, ed. W. T. Pink and G. W. Noblit (Sense Publishers, 2008), 167–79, [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789087904401\\_013](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789087904401_013).

<sup>11</sup> C. Majoni, "Challenges Facing University Education in Zimbabwe," *Greener Journal of Education and Training Studies* 2, no. 1 (March 20, 2014): 020–024, <https://doi.org/10.15580/GJETS.2014.1.021714111>.

<sup>12</sup> Dzvimbo, K. P., "Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE) Annual Performance and Strategic Review Workshop from the 29th to the 30th of November, 2022," 2022, <https://www.zimche.ac.zw/blog/zimche-evaluates-2022-performance-and-charts-course-for-2023/>.

<sup>13</sup> Christopher J. Chetsanga, "An Analysis of the Cause and Effect of the Brain Drain in Zimbabwe," *A Report for the National Economic Consultative SIRDIC/UNDP* (Harare, 2002).

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Institutional Theory

This study is grounded in institutional theory, which enhances understanding of institutional change through strategic planning. In recent years, institutional theory has emerged as a fundamental and widely applicable theoretical framework within the social sciences.<sup>14</sup> Several factors complicate the elucidation of institutional theory's significance to strategic planning, particularly within academic institutions, such as universities. The primary cause is the ambiguity surrounding the definition of institution. Therefore, we concentrate on what it clarifies and the manner in which it is to be clarified. Numerous definitions of 'institution' exist. It represents a social structure comprising norms, rules, beliefs, and organizations, providing individuals with normative, coordinative, cognitive, and informational foundations for behavior, thereby guiding, permitting, and encouraging adherence to desired conduct.<sup>15</sup> In this study, the term institution refers to systems of social elements that are external to each entity and affect their behaviour.<sup>16</sup> Institutional theory offers several perspectives on the operational dynamics of organizations within society for strategic planning. Moreover, viewing institutions as 'little societies' illustrates that these organizations require systematic planning.

The academic focus on understanding how organizations like universities implement tactics to ensure enhanced performance within a structured environment characterizes the essence of institutional theory.<sup>17</sup> Institutionalists' research that promotes effective processes of perspective and choice grounded in competence suggests techniques rooted in strategic planning, leading to the conclusion that entities must adapt.<sup>18</sup> Institutional theory elucidates the framework and expansion of educational and public organizations, since effective institutions function as archetypes independent of their specific contexts. The institutional theory aims to elucidate the reasons for nations' dedication to scientific organizations and the structures these organizations assume. It examines the mechanisms and procedures through which structures, routines, and rules are acknowledged as authoritative guiding principles for social conduct.<sup>19</sup> Compliance with external regulations, social norms, and standards is essential for institutions to obtain support, relevance, and legitimacy. Institutions must comply with environmental rules.

Institutional theory elucidates how external dynamics shape the strategies of tertiary education institutions and lead to institutional transformation, especially as they strive to conform to external standards like the Sustainable Development Goals and address societal demands regarding macroeconomic and industry relevance.<sup>20</sup> The primary theme is that stakeholders, including donors and policymakers, perceive institutional architecture as an indicator of progress in modern institutional development.<sup>21</sup> Regardless of the progressive or non-progressive results of institutions, the activities of higher education institutions, along with the maintenance and implementation of specific frameworks in higher education and government, contribute to advancing this commitment.

## METHODOLOGY

This study used a multi-case design, utilizing a desktop assessment of cases and complemented by evidence obtained via interviews with key informants. The University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) and the University of South Africa (UNISA) are South African universities. The University of Zimbabwe (UZ) and the Great Zimbabwe University (GZU) were intentionally chosen from Zimbabwe. The desktop evaluation was corroborated by key informant interviews with vice chancellors, faculty deans, quality assurance directors, and both academic and non-academic personnel. The research employed a qualitative methodology, which was appropriate for this study as it allowed the researcher to gather

<sup>14</sup> David T. Adamo, "Reading Psalm 23 In African Context," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 39, no. 1 (April 16, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v39i1.1783>.

<sup>15</sup> David M Scott et al., "Investigating Educational Responses to Diversity in Brazil during a Time of Curriculum Change," *Comparative Education Review* 63, no. 3 (2019): 377–97.

<sup>16</sup> Claudius Graebner and Amineh Ghorbani, "Defining Institutions-A Review and a Synthesis," 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Harry Sminia, *Strategizing With Institutional Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009357654>.

<sup>18</sup> Scott et al., "Investigating Educational Responses to Diversity in Brazil during a Time of Curriculum Change."

<sup>19</sup> Sminia, *Strategizing With Institutional Theory*.

<sup>20</sup> Sminia, *Strategizing With Institutional Theory*.

<sup>21</sup> Sminia, *Strategizing With Institutional Theory*.

participants' perspectives on the difficulties of executing strategic plans as a tool for transformation. Data were presented and analyzed using thematic content analysis.

The study adhered to established ethical qualitative research standards.<sup>22</sup> The participation of key informants in the interviews was voluntary. The researchers obtained informed consent from all participants before data collection. The anonymity and confidentiality of the respondents and responses were assured. In addition, permission was sought and granted to conduct interviews and access institutional documents by the university authorities.

## PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

### The Decline of Strategic Planning in Education

In 1991, Kaufman and Herman asserted that strategic planning risks becoming merely an educational trend. Mintzberg authored a comprehensive, meticulously researched work titled *The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning*.<sup>23</sup> Miech expressed similar questions.<sup>24</sup> This drop is partially due to the insufficient quality of research connecting strategic planning to organizational success, such as student outcomes on standardized tests.<sup>25</sup> Greene observed that 60% of organizations fail to connect strategic planning with budgeting, 75% do not associate employee incentives with strategies, 86% of business owners and managers dedicate less than one hour per month to strategy discussions, and 95% of the average workforce lacks comprehension of their organization's strategy.<sup>26</sup> The term strategy has been so extensively abused and misapplied that many deem it devoid of significance (Why a strategy is not a plan, 2013). Zuckerman elaborated on this notion, asserting that strategic planning is not genuinely strategic but instead is ritualistic and reductionist.<sup>27</sup> According to Axson, "Today you can define strategy in virtually any manner you choose, and that constitutes a significant portion of the issue."<sup>28</sup>

### Planning and Management in Higher and Tertiary Education

Expectations of the contributions of universities in African nations transformed during colonization.<sup>29</sup> African nations have adopted the concept of the knowledge economy and have endeavored to enhance their higher education systems.<sup>30</sup> This can only be accomplished with sufficient strategic planning. Planning is the methodical process of identifying a necessity and subsequently devising the optimal approach to fulfill that necessity, within a strategic framework that allows for the identification of priorities and the establishment of operational principles.<sup>31</sup> Planning refers to the process of contemplating the future to enable proactive measures in the present. This does not inherently imply that all will proceed as intended. It is unlikely to occur. However, if you have planned adequately without undermining your overarching objective, your capacity will be enhanced.

The proliferation of higher education in Zimbabwe has led to competition among both commercial and governmental institutions. Considering that Zimbabwe currently has 11 state and seven private universities, strategic planning is necessary. Strategy is fundamentally a military concept

<sup>22</sup> Michael Nii Laryeafio and Omoruyi Courage Ogbewe, "Ethical Consideration Dilemma: Systematic Review of Ethics in Qualitative Data Collection through Interviews," *Journal of Ethics in Entrepreneurship and Technology* 3, no. 2 (December 14, 2023): 94–110, <https://doi.org/10.1108/JEET-09-2022-0014>; Aldis Gedutis, Maria Teresa Biagetti, and Lai Ma, "23. The Challenges for Research Evaluation Ethics in the Social Sciences," *Handbook on Research Assessment in the Social Sciences*, 2022, 367.

<sup>23</sup> Henry Mintzberg, "The Fall and Rise of Strategic Planning," *Harvard Business Review* 72, no. 1 (1994): 107–14.

<sup>24</sup> E. J. Miech, "The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning and Strategic Planning in Education," *The Harvard Educational Review*, 1995, <http://www.hepg.org/her/abstract/310>.

<sup>25</sup> Vicki Basham and Fred C Lunenburg, "Strategic Planning, Student Achievement and School District Financial and Demographic Factors.," *Planning & Changing* 20 (1989): 158–71; Ezra W. Zuckerman, "Construction, Concentration, and (Dis)Continuities in Social Valuations," *Annual Review of Sociology* 38, no. 1 (August 11, 2012): 223–45, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-070210-075241>.

<sup>26</sup> W. Greene, *Econometric Analysis*, 7th ed. (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2012).

<sup>27</sup> Ethan Zuckerman, "New Media, New Civics?," *Policy & Internet* 6, no. 2 (2014): 151–68.

<sup>28</sup> David A J Axson, *Best Practices in Planning and Performance Management: Radically Rethinking Management for a Volatile World*, 3rd ed. (John Wiley & Sons, 2010). 1.

<sup>29</sup> Damtew Teferra, "Charting African Higher Education: Perspectives at a Glance," *International Journal of African Higher Education* 1, no. 1 (August 1, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.6017/ijahe.v1i1.5642>.

<sup>30</sup> Tebeje Molla and Denise Cuthbert, "In Pursuit of the African PhD: A Critical Survey of Emergent Policy Issues in Select Sub-Saharan African Nations, Ethiopia, Ghana and South Africa," *Policy Futures in Education* 14, no. 6 (September 1, 2016): 635–54, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1478210316641567>.

<sup>31</sup> T. Bennet, "Sustainable Approach to Development. A Case of Ethiopia" (London: Nelson and Sons, 2001).

that signifies a competitive edge over an opponent.<sup>32</sup> It pertains to surpassing competitors within a specific domain of activity. A strategic plan is not only a thorough outline or blueprint; it is a program that consolidates the efforts of an organization or individual to surpass competition.

Grant delineates the following characteristics of an effective strategy: firstly, goals must be straightforward and coherent; secondly, there is a necessity for a comprehensive understanding of the competitive landscape; thirdly, an objective evaluation of resources is essential; fourthly, there must be cognizance of the resources at hand; and fifthly, successful execution is marked by commitment, consistency, and resolve.<sup>33</sup> Grant's notion of an effective strategy is particularly relevant to higher education, especially at a time when it is considered a crucial component for socio-economic advancement.

### **Planning the Quality of Education in Higher and Tertiary Institutions**

A plan is deemed successful when it incorporates quality assurance, which in this research is defined as the process of guaranteeing that students who enroll in a program graduate with the necessary level of competence or outcomes anticipated by the university.<sup>34</sup> Quality assurance encompasses attitudes, objects, actions, and procedures that guarantee the maintenance and enhancement of proper academic standards in each program.<sup>35</sup>

A significant barrier to higher education is the absence of educational platforms that provide free access to all individuals. The primary objective of numerous tuition centers is profit generation. University students face significant difficulties in paying the exorbitant tuition fees imposed. This circumstance has resulted in a significant prevalence of prostitution and criminal activity. The proliferation of higher education in Africa has resulted in overcrowded classrooms as the student population expands. It is essential to maintain a comfortable and roomy classroom; therefore, the student-to-staff ratio should be reduced to give pupils greater attention from educators. Ergonomic classrooms will enhance children's concentration at school due to the availability of adequate desk space and seating arrangements.

The ZIMCHE conducts audits in higher education institutions in Zimbabwe to assess the existing conditions within these entities. ZIMCHE meticulously examines factors such as staff quantity, the credentials of educators in relation to the levels they instruct, and enrollment data for each program throughout these audits. The facilities accessible to students are a primary priority, encompassing lecture rooms, library resources, hostels, recreational amenities, and specialized equipment that foster academic achievement.<sup>36</sup>

The verification is conducted using audit instruments and site visits; audit teams consist of proficient peer reviewers, and when necessary, overseas external reviewers are included. ZIMCHE has urged universities to establish Institutional Quality Assurance Units to conduct internal audits that ensure operational quality. Nilson discovered that a robust internal quality assurance framework can enhance institutional teaching and educational processes, benefiting both students and stakeholders.<sup>37</sup> Likewise, Selesho asserted that internal self-evaluation guarantees that pupils obtain high-quality academic programs.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Lee J. Krajewski and Larry P. Ritzman, *Operations Management: Strategy and Analysis* (Addison-Wesley, 1993).

<sup>33</sup> Elizaveta Fouksman and Hannah J. Dawson, "Redistributive Politics and the Temporalities of Crisis: Reconfiguring Social Protection in a Post-Pandemic South Africa," *Global Social Policy* 24, no. 2 (August 30, 2024): 242–60, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14680181231201493>.

<sup>34</sup> Takawira Cuthbert Gwarinda, "A Critical Evaluation of Assessment Procedures in the Context of Quality Assurance in Distance Education; A Case Study of the Zimbabwe Open University" (University of Fort Hare, 2006).

<sup>35</sup> Jenny Glennie et al., *Perspectives on Open and Distance Learning: Open Educational Resources and Change in Higher Education: Reflection from Practice* (Commonwealth of Learning (COL) and UNESCO, 2012).

<sup>36</sup> Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE), "Act (2006)," 2006, [http://www.law.co.zw/downloads/statutes/25/Zimbabwe\\_Council\\_For\\_Higher\\_Education\\_Act.pdf](http://www.law.co.zw/downloads/statutes/25/Zimbabwe_Council_For_Higher_Education_Act.pdf).

<sup>37</sup> S. Nilson, "Quality as Transformation: Professional Development and Course Evaluation," *Academic Development* 3, no. 1 (1997): 9–20.

<sup>38</sup> J. M. Selesho, "Does Self-Evaluation Assist the University in Improving the Quality of Academic Programmes?," *Interim: Interdisciplinary Journal* 7, no. 2 (2008): 220–30.

## Dynamics of Strategic Planning in Higher and Tertiary Education

Majoni examined the obstacles confronting university education in Zimbabwe, focusing on pedagogy, research, and publication.<sup>39</sup> Findings indicated inadequate compensation and non-remuneration of part-time academics, with incomes being lower in comparison to regional universities. Financial limitations are a prevalent obstacle to higher and university education in Zimbabwe. In contrast to Omoregie's recommendation for a transition to state finance of higher education, Zimbabwe has progressed towards the privatization of education since 2000.<sup>40</sup> Consequently, access to education is almost unattainable for the poor. Garwe similarly discovered that budgetary limits lead to associated issues, such as inadequate compensation for professors and personnel.<sup>41</sup> The economic issues faced by non-state institutions in Zimbabwe have resulted in a brain drain, as Amponsah identified that high-caliber faculty members were migrating to private colleges in West Africa.<sup>42</sup>

Strategic plans facilitate the resolution of difficulties in the delivery of higher and tertiary education. We inhabit a dynamic environment where, despite the emergence of COVID-19, pedagogical approaches have transformed, shifting from in-person lectures to online education. Consequently, numerous institutions in the developing world encounter infrastructural challenges, necessitating more investment in information and communication technology (ICT). Expanding education requires the availability and maintenance of basic facilities, including accommodations for students and staff, as well as external infrastructure such as access roads to universities.

The macroeconomic conditions in Zimbabwe have influenced resource distribution, including libraries, e-learning, computers, accommodations for individuals with disabilities, and laboratory equipment, inside public universities. This has resulted in an impetus for the commercialization of UZ, with, among other sources, revenues from arming contributing to the financing of university operations. Before 1994, the higher education system in South Africa was unresponsive to the requirements of a democratic state. It was entrenched in societal disparities as a consequence of the institutional marginalization of black individuals and women throughout colonialism and apartheid, akin to all other domains of social existence. Social, political, and economic discrimination, along with class, racism, gender, institutional, and spatial disparities, have significantly influenced and persist in shaping South African higher education. The issues compelled South Africa's newly established democratic government in 1994 to pledge to reform higher education from the legacy of apartheid's social and economic framework to a new democratic social order.<sup>43</sup>

Subsequent to 1994, numerous transformation-focused projects aimed to implement institutional modifications. This encompassed the redefinition of the objectives and aims of higher education, as well as the development of policies that required adoption and implementation. Transformation centered on governance necessitated the adjustment of finance, academic frameworks, programs, and quality assurance mechanisms. The process included the implementation of new laws and regulations, as well as significant restructuring and reconfiguration of the higher education institutional landscape and its entities.<sup>44</sup> The policies and regulations sought to eliminate unjust discrimination, improve access to higher education and training possibilities, and improve the quality of training.

<sup>39</sup> Majoni, "Challenges Facing University Education in Zimbabwe."

<sup>40</sup> Norah Omoregie, "Issues and Challenges in Private University Education in Africa: Funding of Private Universities in Nigeria," *LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research* 8, no. 4 (2011).

<sup>41</sup> Garwe, "Quality Assurance Challenges and Opportunities Faced by Private Universities in Zimbabwe."

<sup>42</sup> Emmanuel B. Amponsah and Luke N Onuoha, "The Performance and Challenges of Private Universities in Ghana and Nigeria," *International Journal of Business and Social Science* 4, no. 5 (2013): 256–63.

<sup>43</sup> Saleem Badat, "The Challenges of Transformation in Higher Education and Training Institutions in South Africa," *Development Bank of Southern Africa* 8, no. 1 (2010): 1–37.

<sup>44</sup> Council on Higher Education (CHE), *South African Higher Education in the First Decade of Democracy* (Pretoria: CHE, 2004).

## The Efficacy of Strategic Plans in Transforming Universities

### Zimbabwean Context

The April 2022 population census indicates that Zimbabwe's population is around 15,178,957.<sup>45</sup> It has a strong higher education system of 18 accredited universities. In the age of heightened globalization, quality assurance in higher education is essential in the strategic frameworks of any nation. This is essential to improve competitiveness and fulfilling international expectations and norms. The definition and methodology of quality assurance vary by country; therefore, it is essential to comprehend the geographical context, indicators, frameworks, and successes and challenges related to the implementation of quality higher education in each nation. This information helps to devise quality delivery by using best practices from other contexts and bypassing established problems.

Despite the longstanding presence of quality within university culture from the inception of modern universities, quality assurance has gained global significance only in recent decades due to several factors.<sup>46</sup> One of the factors was the determination by governments that conventional academic regulations were insufficient.<sup>47</sup> The reasons for this included a surge in enrollment figures, particularly in developing nations; Mohamedbhai termed the phenomenon of expanding higher education without a corresponding rise in resources as "massification."<sup>48</sup> Additional motivations for the implementation of quality control encompass cross-border higher education and the proliferation of diverse instructional modalities driven by technological advancements. Moreover, the heightened need for social accountability necessitates that university leaders continuously enhance quality and foster transparency to protect the public interest and trust in the credentials conferred by these institutions.

The remarkable expansion of educational services initiated in 1980 by the newly established government aimed to rectify past disparities and foster socio-economic growth. This subsequently resulted in significant expansion at UZ, including heightened enrolments and the establishment of new colleges, departments, and programs necessary to address the socio-economic demands of the emerging nation.<sup>49</sup> UZ augmented its enrollment from 2,240 students in 1980 to 19,017 students in 2021. According to the housing officer at UZ:

The University of Zimbabwe has nine halls of residence: New Complex One to Five, Manfred Hudson Hall, Swinton, New Hall and Carr Saunders with a capacity to accommodate over 4,500 students of its over 19,000 students. Over 14,500 students are expected to look for self-accommodation. The university also has off-campus hostels for social work students, which are Montrose and Georgette, and Mount Royal a hostel for medical students located in the city centre of Harare. The university has other housing facilities located in different areas throughout the country for its visiting students.

Regarding Great Zimbabwe University, the management of the institution goes for an annual results-based management retreat to review its strategic plan. As has become customary, the review and setting of targets by management are based on nine key result areas:

- Requisite physical structures;
- Academic excellence;
- Information communication technology-driven university;
- Vibrant and well-resourced library;
- Efficient financial management systems;
- Efficient human resource management and administration;

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<sup>45</sup> Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency (ZIMSTAT), "Zimbabwe 2022 Population and Housing Census Report (Vol. 1)," 2022, [https://www.zimstat.co.zw/wp-content/uploads/Demography/Census/2022\\_PHC\\_Report\\_27012023\\_Final.pdf](https://www.zimstat.co.zw/wp-content/uploads/Demography/Census/2022_PHC_Report_27012023_Final.pdf).

<sup>46</sup> Elaine El-Khawas, "Quality Assurance for Higher Education: Shaping Effective Policy in Developing Countries," *Higher Education in the Developing World: Changing Contexts and Institutional Responses*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group Inc, 2002, 197–215.

<sup>47</sup> Darwin D. Hendel and Darrell R. Lewis, "Quality Assurance of Higher Education in Transition Countries: Accreditation -- Accountability and Assessment," *Tertiary Education and Management* 11, no. 3 (September 2005): 239–58, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11233-005-5111-y>.

<sup>48</sup> Goolam Mohamedbhai, *The Effects of Massification on Higher Education in Africa* (Association of African University Press Accra, 2008).

<sup>49</sup> Charles M. Nherera, "Globalisation, Qualifications and Livelihoods: The Case of Zimbabwe," *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice* 7, no. 3 (November 9, 2000): 335–62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09695940050201343>.

- Effective student affairs management systems;
- Effective communication with internal and external stakeholders; and
- Resource mobilisation.

The strategic plan delineates the developmental trajectory that Great Zimbabwe University aims to pursue from 2021 to 2025. This entails synchronizing all institutional functions to achieve specialized excellence in arts, culture, and heritage studies while augmenting institutional capacity to fulfill the primary objectives of teaching and research. The plan delineates the university's intended trajectory, using its strengths while acknowledging national demands and imperatives.

The strategic plan of Great Zimbabwe University is augmented by the outcome chain and a monitoring and evaluation system, supported by funds to guarantee the effective execution of established goals and objectives, facilitating the prompt achievement of deliverables. Great Zimbabwe University must remain vigilant, including monitoring its competitors, to acquire and maintain a sustainable competitive edge. The Faculty of Arts at Midlands State University has extended into Zvishavane, leading to a decline in enrolment at the Great Zimbabwe Faculty of Arts. Consequently, the institution must possess the ability to modify its strategy and plans as the circumstances demand.

The severe macroeconomic conditions that have persisted in Zimbabwe since 2008 have adversely affected higher education institutions.<sup>50</sup> Great Zimbabwe University experienced a notable increase in the number of students who postponed their education. Furthermore, enrolment declined; however, this issue was rectified in 2013 with the introduction of five new programs in the School of Social Sciences. Prior to 2013, there was a singular yearly intake in August; however, since then, the introduction of a second annual intake has resulted in a doubling of enrolment. Universities function using a committee framework that supports effective corporate governance.<sup>51</sup> The committee system is a participative method that guarantees the efficiency and effectiveness of institutions. It significantly contributes to improving team building by ensuring the representation of all stakeholders.

Great Zimbabwe University aspires to be a paragon of excellence in arts, culture, and heritage studies, as well as in the progression of other academic subjects. This vision aims to foster social growth. Acquiring the institution's objectives is predominantly contingent upon the university's capacity to leverage its strengths and mitigate and rectify any flaws. The school must capitalize on all chances and actively mitigate any problems that threaten the university's success.

The university is named after the ancient city of Great Zimbabwe. Therefore, it should improve its visibility through robust marketing efforts. This can be accomplished through collaborations with other organizations, such as UNESCO. Its mandate is supported by a cultural niche. As a state institution, and as outlined in its mission statement, the culture of good governance must be maintained. The strategic plan requires the institution to foster a culture of responsibility and transparency to sustain a fruitful partnership with the government. This will establish more robust connections with government agencies, hence facilitating increased governmental support.

Among state universities, Great Zimbabwe University has a distinctive advantage due to its location in Masvingo, which is almost equidistant (about 300 km) from the major cities of Harare, Mutare, and Bulawayo. This has obviously led to the recruiting of students nationwide. Students evaluate not only distance but also the degree programs available while selecting their favorite university. Due to the insufficient number of students, the university needs additional outreach programs to enhance its awareness. The multi-campus concept has facilitated operational decongestion, though it incurs logistical and transportation expenses.

### **South African Context**

Policies alone do not affect social transformation. It is the execution of the policy that actualizes the envisioned higher education system. South Africa requires greater efforts to implement policies, which requires monitoring and assessment to increase efficiency and effectiveness. Certain aspects of the

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<sup>50</sup> D. Conyers, *Regional Redevelopment* (Harare: Zimbabwe Open University, 2010).

<sup>51</sup> Gwarinda, "A Critical Evaluation of Assessment Procedures in the Context of Quality Assurance in Distance Education; A Case Study of the Zimbabwe Open University."

South African higher education system have been enhanced, enabling it to foster social fairness, economic and social development, and democracy. The South African system has also aided the developmental requirements of the southern African region and the African continent overall.<sup>52</sup> Since the advent of democracy, higher education in South Africa has seen significant transformation through advancements in pedagogy and learning methodologies. The emphasis has been on creating a system that addresses national and international development requirements through partnerships that improve collaboration and networking in higher education delivery. Similarly, quality assurance and gender concerns have become central to the functioning of educational institutions.

Mashile and Matoane assert that UNISA has made substantial investments in the advancement of ICT solutions for remote and web-based education. Initiatives like Internet Laboratories (i-Labs) have been implemented.<sup>53</sup> The university has established 26 online laboratories catering to more than 1,000 students in the College of Engineering, Design, Art, and Technology through the use of i-Labs. These facilitate the expansion of students' learning through international networks and collaborations. In the context of student-centered learning, advancements in pedagogy have necessitated the incorporation of field attachments and internships to enhance the practicality and relevance of their education. This subsequently provides university graduates with the opportunity to expand their perspectives.

The UKZN has implemented a comprehensive and adaptive research program to tackle national development challenges. It embodies national interests and advances both fundamental and practical research. The research agenda serves as a means for the university to enhance knowledge and connect academia with policy and other evidence-based national development issues. Historically, the university's research was exclusively intellectual and had no practical applications. The university has recently shifted towards the incubation and commercialization of ideas by leveraging the forward and backwards connections with productive industries. Incubation centers have been formed specifically in technology firms, commercial clusters, and food value chains.

It is anticipated that the theory and practical skills provided by the incubation centers would facilitate the emergence of spin-off firms, generating job opportunities for both university graduates and the broader business community. Government assistance has been important in this skills development initiative. Collaborative partnerships that facilitate networking in the delivery of pertinent higher education have been established. These collaborations guarantee that the information produced addresses current and future community development requirements. This encompasses programs targeting health, lifestyle, and infectious illnesses; agricultural advances addressing drought and food security; and difficulties related to governance, leadership, and legislation, among others.

The UKZN emerged from the amalgamation of the former University of Natal with the previous University of Durban-Westville. The university currently functions on a multi-campus structure with four hubs: Howard, Westville, Pietermaritzburg, and Edgewood campuses. The UKZN strategic plan for 2017–2021 aimed to enhance the educational experience for students, foster a dedication to lifelong learning, and empower students to thrive as innovators and entrepreneurs.<sup>54</sup> Additionally, Albert van Jaarsveld observed that the communication system at UKZN, comprising e-mail, newsletters, and leadership communiqués, is regarded favorably. Considering the significance of communication as a fundamental instrument for attaining comprehension, employees require enhanced consultation on critical matters. As stated by Williams et al. communication is seen as a pivotal factor for cultural transformation.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Badat, "The Challenges of Transformation in Higher Education and Training Institutions in South Africa."

<sup>53</sup> Elias Oupa Mashile and Matshepo Catherine Matoane, "E-Learning Development: The Case of UNISA," in *E-Learn: World Conference on EdTech* (Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education (AACE), 2012), 1152–57.

<sup>54</sup> Albert Nguong Baul Ling and Muhammad Sofwan Mahmud, "Challenges of Teachers When Teaching Sentence-Based Mathematics Problem-Solving Skills," *Frontiers in Psychology* 13 (February 1, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1074202>.

<sup>55</sup> Dilafruz R Williams and P Scott Dixon, "Impact of Garden-Based Learning on Academic Outcomes in Schools: Synthesis of Research between 1990 and 2010," *Review of Educational Research* 83, no. 2 (2013): 211–35.

## DISCUSSION

Zimbabwean universities have encountered significant challenges in transitioning from traditional research and teaching to encompass innovation and industrialization, while possessing robust strategic plans, due to the influence of macroeconomic factors on the execution of these plans. This situation has arisen because Zimbabwe's economy has not been able to create a conducive climate for sustainable transformation. According to Nedelea and Paun, strategy implementation results from gradual enhancements, internal transformations, the cumulative impact of various managerial decisions, and consistent modifications in the behaviors and actions of both executives and staff.<sup>56</sup> Mubanga and Lesa recommend that managers consider implementation throughout the planning phase to enhance strategic success through incremental modifications.<sup>57</sup>

UNISA specializes in distance education and has significantly invested in electronic infrastructure and communication over the past few decades. They have prioritized the extension of the accessibility of e-learning and associated methodologies as instruments for raising the quality of higher education. University libraries play a crucial role in the transition to digital education. Not only do they obtain, organize, and disseminate digital information, but they also advocate for and facilitate its utilization. Libraries serve as a conduit between digital content and the end-user, facilitating navigation through the complexities of the internet.

According to a senior academic in the Faculty of Social Studies, University of Zimbabwe: “The UZ vision is ‘to be a leading university in a peaceful and prosperous Zimbabwe’, and its mission is ‘enabling our clients and customers to make meaningful contributions to sustainable development in Zimbabwe.’ Furthermore, a library staff member at UZ highlighted that:

The library seeks to embrace its vision of becoming the leading university library in a peaceful and prosperous Zimbabwe. Not only did the library seek to do this by virtue of its half-century of age but also through the high quality of its services to customers. The library focused on implementing these critical areas in the University of Zimbabwe Strategic Plan, 2019–2025, which fell within its mandate. It specifically focused on the following strategic goals: produce graduates who are ICT literate, create an environment supportive of graduate students, and create an environment conducive to learning.

He further noted that the library has a niche role in the UZ university’s strategic planning document, which states that the UZ “seeks to produce graduate students who are ICT literate. The library has fulfilled this role not only by providing electronic content but also by ensuring that students are trained in the use of electronic content.

Since 2000, the tertiary education sector in Zimbabwe has seen significant obstacles that have undermined the quality of output, arising from the prolonged effects of political and economic crises. Since 2000, when the Zimbabwean government implemented the Fast Track Land Reform Programme, the country's social and economic dynamics have experienced multiple stages of significant instability. This has induced structural alterations that have impacted socio-economic provisions. For instance, in 2003, the Cadetship Scheme and Presidential Scholarship, which had previously financed further and tertiary education, were discontinued.<sup>58</sup> A respondent from Great Zimbabwe University highlighted that:

The major challenge has been the lack of adequate infrastructure. The university needs to enter into public–private partnerships in its endeavours to expand. This also entails resource mobilisation to acquire more land and develop capital projects. Though the state has provided land for the construction of the main site location factors, such as student accommodation will remain a challenge.

<sup>56</sup> Stefan Nedelea and Laura Adriana Paun, “The Importance of the Strategic Management Process in the Knowledge-Based Economy,” *Review of International Comparative Management* 10, no. 1 (2009): 95–105.

<sup>57</sup> Angela Mubanga and Christine Nakamba Lesa, “Evaluation of Factors Influencing the Implementation of Strategic Plans in Public Universities—A Case of the Copperbelt University,” *American Journal of Industrial and Business Management* 14, no. 02 (2024): 148–64, <https://doi.org/10.4236/ajibm.2024.142007>.

<sup>58</sup> Leonard Chitongo, Prince Chikunya, and Timothy Marango, “Do Economic Blueprints Work? Evaluating the Prospects and Challenges of Zimbabwe’s Transitional Stabilisation Programme,” *African Journal of Governance and Development* 9, no. 1 (2020): 7–20.

A lecturer in the School of Commerce GZU argued that:

The university's strategic plan strives to increase the number of postgraduate programmes in all schools. The major impediment to this is the limited pool of qualified personnel at the professional level. Staff development has to be a priority at the same time, introducing non-monetary benefits in order to retain the staff.

Although it may be contended that state universities in Zimbabwe have effective strategic plans, the emphasis and quality of research within these institutions are insufficient. This is primarily due to resource deficiencies and the excessive workloads of lecturers, which impede their ability to do research. Moreover, whereas novice researchers frequently lack adequate induction and training for substantive research, experienced researchers typically go for better opportunities, particularly in underdeveloped nations like Zimbabwe.<sup>59</sup> In the absence of the necessary allocation of resources, the transformation of higher education would remain an unattainable aspiration.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The move from a strategic plan to a strategic framework, together with alignment with progressive national policies, is proposed as a potential strategy to alleviate the issues that now afflict universities. Fostering multistakeholder collaboration, even in times of economic and political instability, is necessary. This involves university councils, private sector partners, and government ministries building collective platforms that promote university transformation efforts. Stakeholders in higher education must not wait for full political and economic stability before convening to establish collaborative connections that will facilitate the transformation of high-quality tertiary education. In addition, to ensure systematic implementation of strategic goals and accountability, university management must implement robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. To bridge the gap between strategic planning and execution, dedicated implementation committees and performance audits also need to be established.

## CONCLUSION

The study examined the role of strategic plans in transforming universities in Zimbabwe and South Africa. The study highlighted the continuities and discontinuities in the design of strategic plans. While the change of universities towards creative, sustainable growth necessitates a clearly articulated strategy, the strategic plans of these institutions have predominantly been project-oriented. The strategic plans have functioned solely as a mechanism to document the current condition and to delineate the envisioned future. The resurgence of the public and civic role of universities has prompted inquiries on how these institutions should assess and contemplate their outcomes, rather than merely their products. The results indicate variations in the use of strategic plans within and between universities in Zimbabwe and South Africa. The universities in Zimbabwe possess commendable strategic goals, yet exhibit subpar execution.

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<sup>59</sup> Mohamedbhai, *The Effects of Massification on Higher Education in Africa*.

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