

Harmonisation challenges and opportunities in Zimbabwe's higher education sector: A case of Zimbabwe Credit Accumulation and Transfer System, (ZIMCATS)

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Abstract: The study sought to explore the challenges and opportunities Zimbabwe's higher education sector faces as it seeks to harmonise education provision focussing on the ZIMCATS initiative. The study employed the qualitative research approach hinged on the case study research design. An open ended questionnaire and an interview guide were enlisted for data collection. Purposive sampling was employed to solicit for the views on 10 quality assurance practitioners. All the participants completed an emailed questionnaire and five were selected to participate in interviews basing on their experience in quality assurance practice. Data was code, categorised and reviewed into emerging themes. The study established the following challenges for harmonisation of Zimbabwe's higher education: lack of quality assurance structures in some universities; lack of a common minimum body of knowledge for degree programs; limited ZIMCATS orientation time to universities; congested and competing Higher Education imperatives; resistance by some institutions; conflict of interest between ZIMCHE and Universities' leadership and limited scope of the ZIMCATS. The study also established that Zimbabwe's Higher Education sector should take advantage of the following opportunities: alignment of ZIMCATS with the regional and international CATS like SADC CATS and Africa's Tuning initiatives, providing for vertical progression of students from colleges to universities and providing for lifelong learning opportunities. The study recommends that quality assurance be institutionalised in universities. A level platform for universities to implement the harmonisation goals should be developed. Capacity building on ZIMCATS should be an ongoing strategy. ZIMCATS should also be broadened as to include Dphil and PhD credits.

Keywords: Credit Accumulation and Transfer System, harmonisation, mobility and Universities, Higher Education, internationalisation, harmonisation

I. INTRODUCTION

Reforming higher education for harmonisation is at the centre of current debates globally as there is a growing demand for comparability and compatibility between the educational programmes of different universities, nationally, regionally and internationally, (Onana et al., 2014 and Ngara, 2017). This growing call for harmonisation of the higher education sector is being precipitated by the need to foster,

among other reasons; quality, the employability of qualifications across regions and the mobility and exchange of teachers and students (Watson, 2013; Association of Colleges (AoC), 2014; Otera, 2014). Harmonisation of higher education is a demanding space, but a desirable and fundamental milestone for ensuring attractiveness and accessibility of the sector by students.

Harmonisation of higher education refers to the coordination of educational programmes with agreements to minimum academic standards and ensuring equivalency and comparability of qualifications between and within countries, thus facilitating the promotion of quality and mobility of both staff and students (Mohamedbhai, 2013; Pollard et al., 2017; Collucci, 2019). Woldegiorgis (2013), Structural Reforms Working Group (SRWG), (2014) and Soongsawang (2018) concur with the preceding observation by describing harmonisation as a process of ensuring articulation, both horizontal and vertical, between programs and institutions among various higher education systems by establishing benchmarks for qualifications, program delivery and certifications. Thus harmonisation may include synchronising of credit systems, quality assurance mechanism, accreditation, recognition of the diplomas, management of quality and language teaching. As such, this study focussed on harmonisation as it relates to the Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (CATS).

While harmonisation has thus been noted to be operable at such higher levels as the intercontinental, continental and regional levels, higher education remains fragmented and disparate despite a global popularity on the importance and need to harmonise the sector, Pollard et al., (2017). In the Latin America region, the higher education harmonisation process has been criticized for not involving universities and research institutions in the process of policy formulation (Woldegiorgis, 2013). In Africa, while some harmonisation initiatives have been set in motion through the (Revised) Arusha Convention of UNESCO and the Harmonisation and Tuning initiatives of the African Union and European Commission, the process is being deplorably slow (Onana et

al., 2013). The same is notable for the SADC Region which has proposed National Qualifications Frameworks but the progress is considered also to be very slow (Oyewole, 2013). There has been very insignificant movement towards harmonisation of higher education internationally, regionally and locally.

1.1 Statement of the problem

The implementation of the credit transfer system has serious disparities characterised by misconceptions, misunderstandings and lack of supportive mechanisms (Adamu, 2012; Pollard et al., 2017; Ngara, 2017 and SWRG, 2018). In the Zimbabwe higher education sector, a harmonisation deficit is also conspicuous despite the establishment of the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education since 2006. According to Ngara (2017) the Zimbabwe's higher education system has been operationally fragmented resulting in a situation which makes it difficult for students to transfer from one institution to the other. This also limited research on the implementation of the credit system in developing countries, (Adamu, 2012). This study intends to explore this area and shed light on the current challenges bedevilling this area, to explore the respective opportunities and to proffer practical insights in the implementation of the Zimbabwe Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (ZIMCATS).

1.2 Research questions

The study was therefore guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the challenges to ZIMCATS implementation in Zimbabwean universities?
2. What are the opportunities for improvement in the implementation of ZIMCATS in Zimbabwean universities?

II. THE HIGHER EDUCATION LANDSCAPE IN ZIMBABWE

Zimbabwe's higher education is regulated and monitored by ZIMCHE which was established in 2006 through the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education Act, Chapter 25:27, of 2006 which repealed and replaced the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) Act of 1990. The ZIMCHE's mandate is to promote and co-ordinate education provided by institutions of higher education and to act as a regulator in the determination and maintenance of standards of teaching, examinations, academic qualifications and research institutions of higher education (Garwe, 2014).

Zimbabwe's higher education sector comprises universities, polytechnics and teacher training colleges (Kotecha, 2010). Nonetheless in the draft Higher and Tertiary Education, Science and Technology Bill (2017) the higher education was proposed to only comprise of Universities with polytechnics and teacher training colleges constituting the tertiary level. From this perspective, higher education refers to universities.

This study is going to take this line of argument since it focuses on harmonisation particularly from the Universities subsector of the higher education. It becomes important then to provide an overview of this subsector.

Currently, there are twenty universities in Zimbabwe. Twelve of them are state-funded while eight are privately-owned. These universities offer a wide range of disciplines including humanities, social sciences, business studies, architecture and the natural, health and pure sciences, and include engineering and agriculture. According to Kotecha (2010) the public universities are at different stages of development and maturity. The oldest is University of Zimbabwe (UZ) established in 1957. This is followed by National University of Science and Technology (NUST) and Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) established in 1991 and 1993, respectively. Other universities such as Midlands State University (MSU), Bindura University of Science Education (BUSE), Chinhoyi University of Technology (CUT), Great Zimbabwe University (GZU), Harare Institute of Technology (HIT) and Lupane State University (LSU), Gwanda State University (GSU), Marondera University of Agricultural Sciences and Technology (MUASt) and Manicaland State University of Applied Sciences (MSUAS) were established in the last two decades. The sizes of public universities also vary considerably in terms of the variety of academic programmes they offer and their student enrolments, and in terms of infrastructure and physical plant (Kotecha, 2010). The preceding observation hence raises some questions on the feasibility of the envisioned harmonisation goals as the operating field seems uneven given the variations of levels of development of Zimbabwe's Higher Education Institutions. Having discussed on Zimbabwe's higher education landscape in general, it is now important to have a specific overview on the credit accumulation and transfer system concept in Zimbabwe.

2.1 The Zimbabwe Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (ZIMCATS)

ZIMCATS is a national framework for academic credit arrangements in higher education in Zimbabwe. It is based on Notional Study Hour (NSH) system (ZIMCHE, 2017). The NSH system is the estimated learning time taken by the 'average' student to achieve specified learning outcomes of the module-unit or programme. Its main objective is to ensure comparability of qualifications offered by higher education institutions in Zimbabwe and facilitate student mobility between institutions. At least two guiding documents have been produced under this system namely 'A guide to the Notional Study Hour Credit System' and the latest one 'Guidance on programme design and credit weighting in Higher Education (ZIMCHE, 2017). There are also some prospects for more documents to be produced to form an ecosystem of documents that presents the ZIMCATS with a broader picture.

ZIMCATS maybe argued to be a tool that is used for programme design, delivery and quality assurance by higher education institutions in Zimbabwe as it provides a framework that enhances programme comparability. According to ZIMCHE (2017) and Dvimbo and Kwandayi, (2020) programme design involves the mapping of a curriculum and its components in the form of credits. Thus in the new ZIMCATS dispensation, higher education institutions in Zimbabwe are required to indicate how credits are applied in their respective program designs in order to dovetail with the ZIMCATS requirements. For example, important principles from the ZIMCATS documents that guide programme design are that Zimbabwe uses the notional study hour notional system where one credit is equal to 10 notional study hours. The NHS system (also referred to as “learning hours”) represents an estimate of the time spent by an average full time equivalent student to master a unit of learning (Ngara, 2017). Ibid (2017) further notes that the approach is also commonly used in countries such as Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania and the United Kingdom (England, Wales, and Northern Ireland). In this approach, the ‘hours’ referred to include all the learning activities of the student, inclusive of contact time (lecture time), private study, research, assignment writing and examinations (Ngara, 2017).

2.2 Literature Review

According to the South African Qualification Authority (2013) a credit is understood as a measure of the volume of learning required for each qualification or part of a qualification. The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (2003) share a similar view by pointing out that credits account for the volume of learning achieved "by estimating the amount of time required by the average learner, at a particular level, to achieve the outcomes" (SCQF, 2003). In simple terms credits can thus be described as a measure of the time typically required to complete a module successfully. Thus where credit systems exist, a degree is awarded after the student has successfully completed all the curricular requirements, one of which is normally the accumulation of a minimum number of credits. From the foregoing, one can thus deduce in the words of Butler and Hope, (2000) that credit accumulation is...the totalling of credits required to complete a qualification... usually limited to a specific programme, often within a particular institution.

Another key sub component of CATS is Credit Transfer which entails the vertical or horizontal relocation of specific credits towards a qualification... on the same or higher level, that usually takes place between programmes, often between different institutions (SAQA, 2006; Dzvimbó & Kwandayi, 2020). According to Butler and Hope, (2000) “Vertical” credit transfer implies a student moving from an institution at one level ...to another institution at a higher level taking with him/her the credits earned at the former institution. “Horizontal” Credit transfer, on the other hand, involves students moving between institutions at the same level and receiving credit at their home institution for the time

spent away dimensions (Butler & Hope, 2000). Therefore, as a composite term, credit accumulation and transfer (CATS) can thus be defined as a: ‘a mechanism which allows credit awarded by a higher education awarding body to be recognised, quantified and included towards the credit requirements for a programme delivered by another higher education provider and/or between programmes offered by a higher education provider (QAA, 2009).

CATS are important for a number of reasons. Firstly they facilitate transfer of students not only within but between countries, and thus enable widespread mobility both inside systems (at institutional and national level) and internationally (The Government of the Hong Kong, 2016). As a result this can enhance life chances and social mobility even of underrepresented groups in higher education (Bekhradnia, 2004; QAA, 2009). Thus CATS can lead not just in the potential benefit for learners but also for nations at large. Additionally, it is also argued that in the case of a closure of a learning programme, course or institution, CATS could play a role in protecting students by allowing them to move to either other courses/programmes or institutions (BIS, 2016; AoC, 2014). Consequently, this facilitates lifelong learning and promotes greater flexibility in learning and qualification processes. Transparency and comparability of study programmes, qualifications and education systems is also enhanced. Mutual recognition of qualifications is also achieved as employers more especially as employers get a better understanding in terms of interpreting qualifications.

While the credit system has been applauded in the preceding section, it is important to realise that the system is riddled by its own weaknesses which its implementers should take cognisance of. Osborne (2006) validates the preceding view by arguing that CATS have rarely fulfilled their promise of flexibility, and the unintended consequences of their introduction. Firstly one should observe that where common systems of credit are agreed and in force, these only give an account of the volume of learning that has been achieved. Credits alone say nothing about the content, its relevance to other courses that a student may wish to pursue, nor, crucially, about the standard that the student has achieved. Students transferring academic programmes or modules may not have covered the same or similar ground deemed necessary to pass the new course and, as a result, may not have developed the same level of understanding as their new peers (GuildHE, 2016; Souto-Otero, 2013). The differences in course or programme content between institutions of higher learning, regarding what is taught and when may thus complicate the implementation of CATS (GuildHE, 2016; AoC, 2014). For this reason, attention has been given to the development of other associated instruments to enable this such as the level descriptors (Bekhradnia, 2004).

In addition, institutional protectionism and elitism, is another key challenge that affects the harmonised adoption and implementation of credit accumulation and transfer systems (Watson, 2014; SEEC, 2016; Atlay, 2016). This is because

institutions may not necessarily have faith in the quality of other institutions' provision and, as a result, is reluctant to recognise learning and credits awarded elsewhere (Hatt, 2006; Atlay, 2016; IPPR, 2013; AoC, 2014; Souto-Otero, 2013). As such not surprisingly, there is still great uncertainty in the HE sector as to what can be considered good practice for compensation and condonement (UK Credit Forum, 2012). Some institutions have clear criteria and procedures concerning compensation and condonement, while others rely on the judgement and discretion of examination boards; and this has clear implications for lack of consistency (Stowell et al, 2016). Other challenges that have been noted include ambiguities in the calculation and awarding of credits, failure of CATS to guarantee student transfer as universities reserve the right to assess the capability of the student and perhaps the study that they have undertaken and the growing expectation for institutional diversity (Bekhradnia, 2004; Osborne, 2006).

Having looked at the challenges encountered in the implementation of the credit system, it is now logical to examine scholars' perspectives on the opportunities that can be explored to promote harmonisation of higher education particularly in the context of CATS.

Developing and effectively implementing a quality assurance system at institutional, regional and national levels helps to ensure that required standards for a certain qualification are met (Adamu, 2012; Dzvimbo & Kwandayi, 2020). The Government of the Hong Kong (2016) argue that CAT systems and procedures should be subject to rigorous quality assurance measures. It is observed that credit transfer arrangements and articulation agreements should be subject to normal QA arrangements at the time of programme validation and registration (The Government of the Hong Kong, 2016). It is also generally acknowledged that NQF development and implementation is critically dependent on well-functioning communities of trust – sometimes also referred to as communities of practice or zones of mutual trust. A fully functioning CAT system in an NQF will be equally dependent on trust between stakeholder communities.

A related proposition is that learning credits should be available for learning wherever or however it is achieved, including learning obtained within the workplace or even on the job - workplace or work-based learning. Though this seems to add a further level of complication to what is already a fairly complex set of notion (Otero, 2014). Further still, for the optimal functionality of CAT, articulation agreements between institutions should be documented and promulgated, and be subject to regular review and update as the programmes evolve and develop over time. Institutions should also arrange suitable training on the concept and principles of CAT to the staff involved in the implementation of CAT, including understanding the outcome-based approach in teaching and learning and the use of learning outcomes and other criteria in matching the relevant content of programmes (The Government of the Hong Kong, 2016). This will enable

the staff to make the appropriate professional decisions and judgements on advising the applicants and learners on the CAT system.

III. METHODOLOGY

The research adopted a qualitative approach guided by the interpretivist paradigm. Muijs and Reynolds (2011) project that generally interpretivism believe all knowledge is generated rather than directly discerned through the senses. This implies respondents interacting with the same phenomenon should ultimately derive varied meanings from it. Data meanings are inferred from the respondent's perspective and researchers make efforts to comprehend the sphere from the respondent's frame of reference and attach meaning to it (Gray, 2009). Consequently the focus of the researchers is to solicit for Quality assurance practitioners' views of the implementation of the credit transfer system in the Zimbabwean higher education system. The study adopted a case study research design. A case study is an enquiry design which allows the researcher to develop an in-depth analysis of a situation (Creswell, 2014; Gray, 2009). The instruments for data collection were an open ended questionnaire and an interview guide. The utilisation of the open ended questionnaire and an interview schedule facilitated triangulation which enhanced trustworthiness of the study findings and created opportunities for the researchers to probe the respondents' responses to attain greater clarity, (Creswell, 2014 & Gray, 2009). The instruments were pilot tested with two quality assurance practitioners and adjustments made for clarity of questions. See Appendix 1 and 2 for data gathering instruments. The study' population consisted of twenty people responsible for quality assurance in the twenty public universities in Zimbabwe and ZIMCHE. Purposive sampling was applied to choose Quality Assurance Directors in Universities and ZIMCHE office bearers basing on their involvement in quality assurance issues. Ten quality assurance practitioners were purposively and conveniently sampled for the study. All the participants completed the open ended questionnaire and five participants were interviewed basing on availability. Qualitative data analysis method was employed to analyse data from the open ended questionnaire and interview guide. For this study, the collected data were analysed using guided Creswell (2014) and Braun & Clarke (2006) principles. The data was coded and placed into categories in order to identify emerging themes, trends and to attach meaning to them. Themes were reviewed, defined and named. Data interpretation made it feasible to obtain relevant information relating to the research questions and study objective. Some striking responses from the respondents were quoted in the text verbatim for illustrative purposes. The quotes from the participants' responses are significant in substantiating any assumptions by either affirming or refuting claims.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Demographic characteristics of respondents

The pre-dominant sex in the demographic results was the “male” who in fact constituted 80% of the interviewees. The largest number of interviewees was found to be within the 31 - 50 years range suggesting that the majority of the interviewees were from the middle to old aged category which may imply some high degree of maturity in most of the responses. In terms of marital status 100% of the respondents were married. The largest numbers of respondents (60%) was within the 0-5 years working experience category, while the least (10%) being in the 11-15 years working experience domain (30%). These results seem to reveal a dominance of the less experienced quality assurance directors (0 to 5 years category) suggesting that the establishment of quality assurance portfolios might have been a recent phenomenon in local Universities. In terms of the highest educational qualifications, the majority of the respondents (70%) had only gone up the masters’ level. A summary of the Demographic characteristics of respondents is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1 presents the interviewees’ demographic characteristics in tabular form.

Table 1: Interviewees’ demographic characteristics

Characteristic	Option	Frequency N = 10	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	8	80%
	Female	2	20%
Age	21-30 years		
	31-40 years	3	30%
	41-50 years	6	60%
	51-60 years	1	10%
Marital status	Married	10	100%
	Single		
Highest Educational Qualification	Masters	7	70%
	PhD	3	30%
Work Experience	0-5 years	6	60%
	6 -10 years	3	30%
	11-15 years	1	10%
	16 and above	-	

4.2 Challenges faced by Zimbabwean universities in the implementation of ZIMCATS

A number of themes emerged from the analysis of the gathered data to illustrate the challenges likely to be faced in the implementation of a harmonised Credit Accumulation and Transfer System in Zimbabwe’s Higher Education. Prominent among them were the lack of quality assurance structures in some Zimbabwean public universities which had an approval

rate of 90% of the respondents. This will be the first focus of this discussion.

4.2.1 Lack of quality assurance structures in some universities

The participants raised the lack of clear cut quality assurance structures in some universities as a serious challenge that ZIMCHE will have to grapple with. To illustrate this, some interviewees had this to say:

“Some universities do not have focal persons for quality assurance hence universities have not been moving at the same pace. Those with focal persons for quality assurance have been progressing much better than those without” (Interviewee, C)

“Our university has been reluctant to set up a standalone unit for quality assurance. Quality assurance issues are currently being handled by the deputy registrar academic.” (Interviewee E).

Out of the eight respondents from universities four (50%) were represented by Quality Assurance Directors while four (50%) were represented by Deputy Registrars for Academic Affairs. This attested to the fact that the quality assurance function in some universities is housed under the office of the Deputy Registrars (Academic Affairs). While in all due respect, Deputy Registrars for Academic Affairs may have scope to answer to some quality assurance questions, it may be argued that this may mean clogging them with responsibilities that could be performed by a separate unit for improved efficiency. It is the researchers’ argument that for effective inculcation of the quality assurance culture, quality assurance roles should be ceded to a fully fledged quality assurance unit. The finding is inconsistent with the Government of Hong Kong, (2016) and Dzvimbo and Kwandayi, (2020) who projected that CAT systems and procedures should be subject to rigorous quality assurance measures subject to review by the relevant QA bodies to ensure that it is functioning effectively.

4.2.2 Lack of a common minimum body of knowledge for degree programs

“Lack of a common minimum body of knowledge for degree programs and modules’ is another challenge that emerged from the study. 80% of the participants were of a strong conviction that before the development of the ZIMCATS prior work should have been focused on the development of the minimum body of knowledge for modules and degree programs. One interviewee had this to say:

“Efforts of ZIMCHE are misplaced; the starting point should have been the development of minimum body of knowledge for degree curricula. So the starting point for harmonisation should not be at CATS but at degree curriculum stages” (Interviewee, C).

This finding seem to resonate well with earlier observations by Bekhradnia (2004) that to enable credits to lead to a qualification there generally need to be ‘rules’ to ensure the

coherence of the curriculum in terms of the breadth and depth of topics covered. Establishing a common body of knowledge thus instils a sense of confidence to academic institutions that the students they are receiving from participating institutions had fulfilled certain body of knowledge expectations for particular programs. In addition, establishment of minimum body of knowledge also instil confidence in industry and relevant professional bodies that the students being churned out of the university system have acquired certain minimum level of knowledge for a particular profession.

4.2.3 Limited ZIMCATS orientation time

It is also evident from the responses that 70% of these participants were concerned with limited ZIMCATS orientation time. Some of the interviewees had this to say:

“You would still see from the various workshops that I have attended that people needed time because even us asthough we have been ahead in terms of implementing the notional hour credit system, it took us time to understand it and even up to now not everyone in the university has fully understood the system. Even in the workshops that I have attended you would realise that sometimes it would be a day’s workshop and you would not really cover all that would have been scheduled for coverage” (Interviewee, B).

“Some of the facilitators of the ZIMCHE workshops seemed not to be very conversant with the key concepts such as Notional study hours, “(Interviewee C).

“It might have served the purpose better if ZIMCHE was able to conduct more institution based workshops to explain and train staff on how to implement ZIMCATS. In the process of coming up with the MBKS what has been noted is that even the so called thought leaders have limited understanding of ZIMCATS and how to implement the notional study hour system. However at every institution there is a substantial number of people who understand this and can be used by institutions to explain the concept and assist in the implementation,” (Interviewee, E)”.

This theme seems to resonate with prior observations by Gall and Vojtek (1994) that single workshop sessions are only effective in building awareness and not inculcation of skills. Only longer-term, multiple-session approaches that incorporate follow-up strategies are more likely to bring about actual changes in instruction (Gall and Vojtek, 1994). This validates the need for ZIMCHE to organise for longer term and multiple sessions to generate more positive impacts from the workshops and to source for well grounded facilitators.

4.2.4 Congested and competing Higher Education imperatives

Another theme that emerged from the analysis of data responses was ‘competing higher education imperatives’ which was noted in a way to stifle the harmonisation of the credit accumulation and transfer system initiatives. This was put forward by about 80% of the participants highlighting their frustrations with the prevailing environment. The following

sentiments from some of the respondents give a measure of their perceived frustrations competing higher education imperatives:

“A lot more other issues are coming through for example the STEM, the Transformation of Higher Education matrix and the Higher Education Bill which have their other separate demands. A lot has to be done in Higher Education currently and a lot of issues are being clustered into a very short space of time” (Interviewee, B).

“At the moment it appears many in the system are keen to embrace the system especially the younger stock. The older ones may resist this as they see it as a way to standardize higher education when they have been used to an autonomous system, (Interviewee E)”.

This sentiment seems to be consistent with Eisenhardt and Sull (2001)’s observation that too many goals and objectives are paralyzing. Thus it can be deduced that there was need at national government level or Higher Education ministerial level to allow time to implement the ZIMCATS and assess the results without having to clog the higher education space with a lot of competing imperatives. A lot of goals set to be achieved at once may serve to weary down and divide the focus of the implementers.

4.2.5 Resistance by some institutions

The results indicate that resistance to implement the ZIMCATS by certain institutions may derail the harmonisation efforts. For example some of the interviewees had this to say:

“We have not accepted the ZIMCATS because the notional hour system being adopted is arbitrary. How do you objectively calculate the self directed learning hours? The whole credit system is applicable to students staying in University residence and more so in a metropolitan university set up. Non resident students who stay in places like Chitungwiza spend time in buses commuting to and from the university and how do you account for the time they lose travelling? But you want the same time for travelling being counted for self directed learning? Never! We will not accept that.....We will not take students from the other universities in Zimbabwe because of the differences in the teaching and learning environments. Some universities have no laboratories nor lecture rooms but our facilities are much better” (Interviewee, C).

At the boarding high school I attended, everyone could get compulsory two hours self study learning time after dinner. Now at university how do you control that? How certain are you that students who stay off campus will be studying when they go home? In the high density suburbs where they stay, the environment is not conducive for learning. Electricity will be erratic; some will be staying near beer halls where there is incessant noise from the disco music. Some will be sharing accommodation; with four students staying in one room. The accommodation will not be conducive for learning at all and

self directed learning will not take place. Honestly we are doing a disservice to the credit system (Interviewee, D).

The finding is consistent with (Dzvimbo & Kwandayi, 2020; Kotecha, (2010) who argued that the higher education institutions in Zimbabwe are generally at different stages of development, with only one university, the University of Zimbabwe being the only one that can be described as having reached full maturity status. To ignore these inter university infrastructural parities generates consternation in the more developed institutions as they believe the lesser developed institutions have to upgrade their standards and catch up with them first in order for the harmonisation playing field to be level.

Thus, one can deduce that though the implementation of the credit accumulation and transfer system is set to be mandatory in Zimbabwe, its implementation is not going to be a smooth flow process. However this situation will not be peculiar to Zimbabwe as in other regions of Europe, countries have actually opted out from regional and continental credit accumulation and transfer systems due to conflicts of interest. This brings the discussion to another notable weakness in ZIMCHE's whole scheme of things: *the conflict of interest* which is another theme that emerged in the analysis of the study results.

4.2.6 Conflict of Interest

One participant had this comment to illustrate this theme:

“Some Universities have programs that fall short of ZIMCATS' minimum requirements but their Vice Chancellors or former Vice Chancellors are on the ZIMCHE council. There might be a challenge of conflict of interest” (Interviewee, D).

It can thus be deduced from the preceding quote that harmonisation may therefore be hampered by *conflict of interest* as some certain universities have already been noted to be complacent in their approach to ZIMCATS. Such universities have arguably been noted to enjoy undue protection through their 'high powered' representation at ZIMCHE. It should thus be appreciated that ZIMCATS implementation is critically dependent on well-functioning communities of trust between stakeholder communities. Without trust between ZIMCHE and universities, the goals of ZIMCATS may not be achieved.

4.2.7 Limited scope for the ZIMCATS system

Another theme that was observed during the analysis is the limited scope for the ZIMCATS system. Quotes to illustrate this include:

“ZIMCATS is not very explicit on PhDs, but only clear on undergraduate and master's programs on the way it allocates credits per academic year or level. The ZIMCATS document talks of one and half year's masters program and its silent about the two year masters' programs; it talks about three year and four year degree programs. It is silent on the five

year degree programs. There are certain two year honours programs, one year special honours programs. The document is also silent on them all but it's already in circulation” (Interviewee A).

“The 540 maximum number of credits cap for all undergraduate degree programs is a serious challenge for other degree programs as it is limited. There are some degree programs that have more courses and as such tend to shoot through the cap. Instead of the cap which is 540 credits, they end up with 600 credits. For example Pharmaceutical Technology has mandatory modules that are prescribed by the Pharmaceutical Council of Zimbabwe and there are certain minimum body of knowledge modules from the University. Add them together, they shoot beyond the ZIMCATS range, reduce the modules to suit the cap, then you miss out on some critical discipline imperatives” (Interviewee, B).

“Almost all our degree programs have projects and workshops components over and above the laboratory contact hours due to the nature of the programs. It is therefore difficult to put us in the same basket with institutions offering social science degrees. It's a different story all together we need more time” (Interviewee A).

It can thus be noted from the preceding quotes that the ZIMCATS has critical scope or coverage issues to grapple with, which in a way also affect the harmonisation exercise. These discrepancies seem to confirm why ZIMCAT systems have not been fully adopted by all universities even in the developed world and why some countries have opted out of them.

4.3 Opportunities for the harmonisation of the Credit Accumulation and Transfer System in Zimbabwe's higher education sector

The majority of the respondents indicated some opportunities which could be exploited by the higher education sector to enhance the implementation of the credit accumulation and transfer system. Some of the opinions raised by 90% of the participants express optimism for better future prospects. Three thematic areas emerged from the data analysis namely: tapping into the regional and international CATS. The avenue of taking advantage of the regional and international CATS was explored first.

4.3.1 Explore the regional and International CATS

A common theme gleaned from all the responses was that ZIMCHE should tap into the regional and international CATS. Comments to support this theme include:

“There are initiatives within the whole continent and the region to harmonise the Credit Accumulation and Transfer System. These initiatives should continue to give us guidance in terms of coming up with a robust national credit accumulation system” (Interviewee, A).

“ZIMCHE is well placed with respect to harmonisation efforts in Africa. It should tap into the current SADC CATS as well as Africa Tuning Project” (Interviewee, D).

“Within SADC there are other institutions that have already started implementing this; therefore we have a wide learning platform which ZIMCHE should take advantage of. We should make use of their experience to come up with something that is even much better” (Interviewee, B).

It is thus clear from the preceding quotes that ZIMCATS has an opportunity to learn much from the ongoing CATS initiatives at the regional and continental levels. This theme therefore seems promising as the Tuning Africa uses an internationally best practice approach and methodology which has been influenced by the Tuning Educational Structures in Europe project in harmonizing curricula (Tuning Africa, 2014).

4.3.2 Vertical progression of students

Another important theme that emerged is the need to explore vertical progression or transfer of

Students and credits from for example tertiary institutions like polytechnic colleges to the universities. To illustrate this theme, one interviewee had this to say:

“Currently there are no provisions for vertical progression in the ZIMCATS system, which I am recommending should be explored in the future. For some institutions they say if you have a Higher National Diploma from a polytechnic college, you can come into their degree program at a certain level for example at second year while some do not have such provisions. But other institutions in Zimbabwe do not do that, they simply grant exemptions at a module by module basis. Actually they would say you are starting from first year. Actually those that say you can start from second year are acknowledging prior learning” (Interviewee A).

This theme therefore resonates very well with international practice elsewhere. For example, in North America, by and large, systems have been developed to enable students to begin courses

At a college and complete them at a university. Bekhradnia, (2004) made similar observations by noting that the College-University transfer route in California is so well developed with the great majority of transfers being between colleges and universities in the same area. This provides a foundation which the local ZIMCHE can also use as a stepping stone to further develop the ZIMCATS. It has been noted that currently in Zimbabwe, CATS has been structured for the lateral transfer perspective. Vertical progression should thus be viewed as an opportunity which ZIMCATS should effectively consider for its future development.

4.3.3 Lifelong learning opportunities

‘Lifelong learning’ is another important theme that was generated in line with the opportunities for further enhancing

harmonisation of higher education in Zimbabwe. One respondent had this to say to illustrate that theme:

“Last year I was in California dealing with the same issue and they have gone a lot further. If somebody has served in the army, the knowledge that they have acquired through experiential learning can be transferred to higher and tertiary education if they are taking up an academic program there. And will not be required to repeat what they would have already covered. Here in Zimbabwe we are still far behind because we are talking of comparisons between institutions of higher learning alone and not with the professional institutions. We need for example to exempt the working block release students from industrial attachment and instead devise a way to translate their experiential learning gained from their workplace, into credits that can be accumulated and transferred into their degree programs” (Interviewee, C).

This finding is consistent with the Government of the Hong Kong, (2016) that CATS should allow learners to gain a qualification having undertaken study at different places and in different learning contexts which may have been formal, non-formal or informal and at different times. ZIMCHE can thus in future consider extending the scope of the current ZIMCATS to accommodate such transfer of credits from the non formal to the formal training institutions.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The study concludes that the harmonisation process of Zimbabwe’s Higher Education is faced by at least seven types of challenges which include the lack of quality assurance structures in some universities, lack of a common minimum body of knowledge for degree programs, limited ZIMCATS orientation time for the universities, congested and competing Higher Education imperatives, conflicted interest between ZIMCHE and universities leadership and the limited scope for ZIMCATS. Three opportunities to enhance the higher education harmonisation agenda were also noted. They include the need to explore regional and international CATS like SADC CATS and Africa’s Tuning initiatives, providing for vertical progression of students from colleges to universities and providing for lifelong learning opportunities.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

The study therefore recommends that quality assurance be institutionalised in all universities in Zimbabwe to leverage ZIMCHE’s harmonisation initiatives. It is further recommended that the scope of the ZIMCATS be broadened as to include certain programs which were omitted in the published ZIMCATS document. For example a system should be devised to measure Dphil and PhD credits to avoid dubious degrees. The ZIMCATS document should be revised to accommodate five year and two year degree programs. It is also recommended that the teaching and learning environments in Universities be improved in order to facilitate development of a level platform for universities to implement the HE harmonisation goals through the credit system.

Capacity building should also be considered as an ongoing strategy to enhance understanding in the application of the credit system among both the university staff and the students. Individual universities should take an active role in delivering the capacity building trainings to their respective staff and students to complement the ZIMCHE efforts. The study also recommends that ZIMCHE should enforce the implementation of the ZIMCATS to level out any resistances from universities.

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APPENDIX 1

CHINHROI UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY



Teaching and Learning Academy

Dear Respondent

Re: Academic Research: Questionnaire

My name is Brighton Hurombo and I am studying for a Post Graduate Diploma in Higher Education in the Teaching and Learning Academy at the Chinhroi University of Technology. I am also a lecturer in the Department of Travel and Recreation at the Chinhroi University of Technology. My research is entitled: **“Harmonisation Challenges and Opportunities in Zimbabwe’s Higher Education Sector: A Case of the Zimbabwe Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (ZIMCATS)”**. I am requesting you to participate in my study as a respondent in which I will be seeking your opinions on a number of issues related to the topic in question. Attached is the interview guide with the interview questions.

Please note:

- Your answers will only be used for academic research purposes and will be kept in strict confidence.
- If you have any queries about survey, please do not hesitate to contact the undersigned.

Thank you for your time and help.

QUESTIONNAIRE

SECTION A: HARMONISATION CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

1. What do you understand by Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (CATS)?
2. Do you think ZIMCATS is necessary to Zimbabwe Higher Education (HE)?
Yes No
Explain your answer
3. What ZIMCHE efforts to promote the implementation of ZIMCATS in HE institutions have you noted?
4. What could be the weaknesses of the HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR/ ZIMCHE efforts you have cited above?
5. What challenges are likely to be experienced by the Zimbabwe’s Higher Education/ ZIMCHE in the implementation of ZIMCATS?
6. What opportunities should be tapped by ZIMCHE/ Zimbabwe’s Higher Education sector in developing ZIMCATS?
7. What strategies would you suggest to enhance the effective implementation of ZIMCATS in Zimbabwe’s HE?

SECTION B: RESPONDENT’S BACKGROUND INFORMATION

8. State your post at your work place
9. State your work experience in that post
10. Highest educational qualification?

11. Marital status: Married Single Divorced

12. Age: Below 20 21-30 31-40 41-50 51 and above

13. Sex: Male Female

THANK YOU!

Appendix 2

INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. What do you understand by Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (CATS)?
2. What ZIMCHE efforts to promote the implementation of ZIMCATS in HE institutions have you noted?
3. What could be the weaknesses of the HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR/ ZIMCHE efforts you have cited above?
4. What challenges are likely to be experienced by the Zimbabwe's Higher Education/ ZIMCHE in the implementation of ZIMCATS?
5. What opportunities should be tapped by ZIMCHE/ Zimbabwe's Higher Education sector in developing ZIMCATS?