ACADEMIA | Letters

Harmonisation of Higher Education Tensions: Does one size fit all?

Evelyn Chiyevo Garwe

Introduction

In the spirit of quality enhancement, many institutions, nations and regions embarked on the process of harmonising various aspects of their higher education systems such as structures, policies, regulations, credit systems, standards, programmes, competencies, approaches and activities (Cahapay, 2020; Tennant & Karuku, 2016; Van der Aa, et. al., 2019). Harmonisation is a multi-dimensional, collaborative and stakeholder-driven process that "addresses challenges associated with intra- and inter-institutional/national/regional variability in quality delivery of higher education" (Garwe & Thondhlana, 2019:1). Harmonisation ensures transparency, alignment, convergence, coherence, cooperation, partnership, integration, collaboration, compatibility, and comparability in higher education systems (Hahn & Teferra, 2013; Knight, 2012). Harmonisation enhances graduate employability as well as local and international recognition of qualifications to promote mobility (AUC, 2018).

In order for harmonisation to achieve the intended purposes, it is important for the national steering agencies to get a shared understanding, buy-in, participation and ownership of the change process from higher education stakeholders who often have divergent views steming from their varied experiences (Leisyte & Westerheijden, 2014; Woldegiyorgis, 2018). Typical of all change processes in higher education systems, harmonisation is fraught with complexities such as tensions and misconceptions (Clark, 1983; Gaoming, et.al., 2012). As stated by Holzhey (2010) "Tension abounds in moments of crisis, which form an important and crucial phase in a process, a stage where decisive change is imminent."p. 13. Tensions encourage

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people to think deeper in order to come up with solutions that are acceptable to all stakeholders (Johnson, 2016). However, very few studies have highlighted the nature and extend to which such tensions can pose challenges in the process and success of harmonisation (e.g. Bolu-Steve et.al., 2015; Ngalim, 2014; Van der Aa, et. al., 2019). There is therefore a gap in literature that informs those intending to benchmark their processes against best practices to avoid re-inventing the wheel as well as any attendant pitfalls.

This article uses the case of Zimbabwe to interrogate the tensions amongst stakeholders regarding harmonisation of higher education. Zimbabwe undertook a comprehensive harmonisation process as part of the reform process to position higher education to better contribute to the needs of society through continuous quality improvement (Garwe & Thondhlana, 2019). Harmonisation included many facets inclusive of: developing common frameworks for minimum bodies of knowledge and skills (MBKS) for study programmes; staff grading and promotion; common quality assurance standards; credit accumulation and transfer systems (CATS); internationalisation of higher education (IHE); higher education management information systems (HEMIS) and university-industry linkages (see Table 1). The harmonisation process culminated in the finalisation of the Zimbabwe national qualifications framework which is aligned with the regional (SADC) qualifications framework. The harmonisation of higher education in Zimbabwe showcases the challenging and demanding efforts to gain consensus amongst stakeholders. This case brings out learning points on the importance of stakeholder co-ordination and interaction in harmonising higher education.

The objective of this study was to interrogate the tensions arising from the changes brought about by the harmonisation of higher education. The study pursued the following research questions:

1. What are the tensions regarding stakeholder perceptions on harmonisation?
2. How can these tensions be effectively handled?

Methodology

A qualitative study methodology involving 35 semi-structured virtual interviews with quality assurance officials (6), university management (9), academics (12) and students (8) was employed. The sample was deemed sufficient because data saturation was achieved as evidenced by the presence of similar repetitive themes during content analysis. In addition to asking questions on the participants' understanding and perceptions about the harmonisation process, the interview guide also included probing questions regarding the existence, nature

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Figure 1: Harmonisation of Higher Education dimensions in Zimbabwe Source: Garwe (2017)

and form of tensions, as well as possible ways of resolving them. The final part of the interview guide gave the participants an opportunity to suggest ways of improving harmonisation of higher education . The interviews followed ethical protocols. They were recorded, transcribed, and subjected to summative content analysis wherein a descriptive approach is used to identify key themes and concepts (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). The write-up of the results was sent to scholars with experience and expertise in quality assurance and harmonisation from different contexts and their perspectives were incoroporated to enrich the findings.

Findings and Discussion

Table 1 shows the details of the interviewees in terms of their roles, rank/level and gender. Thematic data analysis showed that tensions exist regarding two domains of harmonisation of higher education domains namely conceptualisation and the harmonisation process as shown in Table 2.

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Category	Role/Rank/Level	Number		
		Male	Female	Total
Quality assurance officials (6)	External Quality Assurance Director	3	-	3
	Institutional Quality Assurance Director	2	1	3
University management (9)	Pro VC	1	1	2
	Registrar	2	2	4
	Dean	2	1	3
Academics (12)	Professor	2	2	4
	Senior Lecturer	3	2	5
	Lecturer	1	2	3
Students (8)	Final Year	1	2	3
	Second Year	1	1	2
	First Year	2	1	3
Total		20	15	35

Table 1: Details of interviewees in terms of their roles, rank/level and gender.

Tension Dimension	Tensions according to stakeholder category	
	Quality assurance officials, university management, students	Academics
Conceptualisation of harmonisation	Collaboration	Destroys diversity
	Transparency	Promotes subsidiarity
	Convergence	Standardisation/homogenisation
	Coherence	Removes institutional identity
	Allows flexibility	One size fit all
	Facilitate the comparability	Assimilation
	Integration and fairness	Alignment and compliance
	Ability to interact more effectively	Lack of autonomy
	Enhances quality	Reduces quality
	quality assurance mechanism	Regulatory mechanism
Process of harmonisation	Awareness creation	Unilateral process
	Goal identification	Top-down imposition of goals
	Infuse stakeholder input and view	Academic voice ignored
	Sharing and teamwork	Thought leaders representation

Table 2: Dimensions of tensions in harmonisation

Conceptualisation of harmonisation

As shown in Table 2, quality assurance officials, university management and students exibited similar understandings of harmonisation that were at varience with those of academics regardless of rank. Quality assurance officials, university management and students under-

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stood harmonisation as the convergence of pre-existing higher education tenets such as curricula, processes, systems, policies etc. towards a common goal. On the other hand, academics perceived harmonisation as a process ochestrated by the quality assurance regulator to standardise and create informity for ease of asserting control and stamping their authority. Table 2 illustrates the conflicting terms used to conceptualise harmonisation by the participants.

An example of a positive understanding of harmonisation was given by QAO1 who averred:

> We began the harmonisation exercise by a capacity strengthening session where we explained harmonisation as an endevour or undertaking done to increase comparability of similar aspects of higher education by limiting their degree of variation whilst still maintaining agreed levels of uniqueness and independence. This process ensures quality, integration and fairness in higher education.

This was further explicated by UM5:

> In setting minimum standards to guide recruitment and promotion of academic staff, us as universities have the leeway to set our own parameters as long as they do not fall below the minimum standards and guidelines. For example at my university they require at least 50 publications for one to attain the level of full professor – well above the minimum of 35 spelt in the ZIMCHE guideliness.

This notion of harmonisation as convergence, transparency, comparability and dialogue that narrows variances but infuses flexibility agrees with various scholars (Hahn & Teferra, 2013; Woldegiorgis, 2013; Yavaprabhas, 2014).

An example of an understanding of harmonisation from the negative end was succinctly put across by AC3, "harmonisation is a futile attempt to make 'one size fit all' through the use of the straitjacket philosophy by the powers that be. We know that some big brother institutions want to impose their practices." Similary AC2 argued that:

> We must be given our freedom as academics, we do not need to be treated like sardines. This harmonisation business is just about control. How can people who know nothing about teaching English come and tell me that all universities in Zimbabwe should have a common body of knowledge. Even when I was at university myself, each university used its own set of literature different from others.

Whilst noting similar perceptions of harmonisation as attempts towards assimilation of one system by another within the Cameroonian higher education context, Ngalim (2014) recommends the need for a common higher education space whilst leaving room for diversity.

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The conceptualisation of harmonisation among academics resembles the"territorial" response to harmonisation efforts as reported in the context of South East Asia (Sirat, Azman & Bakar, 2016).

The process of harmonisation

The process of harmonisation also created controversies between quality assurance personnel, management and students on one hand and academics on the other hand. The former groups viewed the harmonisation process as an exercise involving awareness creation, goal identification and consideration of the input and veiws of all key players. UM2 opinioned that:

> The harmonisation process afforded a rare opportunity for experts, practictioners and managers to dialogue and work together collaboratively thus encouraging exchanges, sharing and teamwork. The process inculcates a feeling of oneness, cooperation and involvement which in turn improves quality of outputs.

However, academics felt that the process of harmonisation alienated them by suppressing their view points. Regarding the harmonisation of curricula through establishing minimum bodies of knowledge (MBKs) academics complained about the use of "thought leaders" to represent them in the harmonisation deliberations. AC3 explained:

> The thought leaders selected from various institutions cannot represent a whole Faculty or discipline since they are not experts in all the programmes on offer. As a result some of our high flyer programmes were scrapped from the 'harmonised' curriculum. Our attempts to engage the quality regulator and present our contribution to new MBKS did not bear fruit.

In support of this position, AC5 argued:

> Thought leaders cannot solely determine our destiny, they usually base their arguments on experience and international best practices. A mixture of these authorities and young minds was needed to infuse innovativeness and institutional context.

This viewpoint is supported by Ndoro (2020) who, publishing in the local Zimbabwean press, indicated that students enrolled in one of the scrapped programmes where solidly in support of the position of academics. Similarly, the process of harmonising academic staff grading and promotion was another isse that academics found problematic. AC2 commented:

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> The process was top down and the minimum number of publications demanded for each academic promotion level do not speak to the environment we are operating in, considering the enormous teaching loads we have and the shortage of research resources notably funding, facilities, equipment and experienced mentors.

In order to correct the existence of disparate criteria for academic staff grading and promotion, ZIMCHE harmonised these guidelines across the 20 registered universities in Zimbabwe. This piled pressure on academics to publish or perish. Whilst institutions reserve the right to establish promotion criteria with respect to teaching and community service, the ZIMCHE instrument harmonised issues to do with the quantum of research outputs. This puts pressure on academics to 'publish or perish' to such an extent that some may engage in academic integrity breaches inclusive of: publishing articles in low quality ('predatory') journals; manipulation of research results; forming authorship cartels, making use of ghostwriters or publishing on the basis of plagiarizing work done by students or other sources.

Aspects/Facets of harmonisation

Table 3 reveals that the existence of tensions resulting from the harmonisation process largely varied depending on the aspect of higher education being harmonised. Tensions were evident only in two aspects of harmonisation namely staff grading and promotion and MBKS. Commenting on why there were no tensions regarding the other facets of harmonisation with specific reference to IHE, AC1 elucidated as follows:

> The harmonisation of IHE was a bottom-up process that started with engagement of higher education institutions on their understandings, activities, aspirations and challenges regarding IHE. The institutions are the ones that suggested the approach involving a common national approach to IHE. All higher education stakeholders then participated at every stage of the IHE process until the final "harmonised" framework was produced.

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Harmonisation Aspect/Facet	Existence of Tensions (Yes/No)	Nature of Tension
Quality assurance standards	No	N/A
Staff grading and promotion	Yes	Process and context
CATS	No	N/A
MBKS	Yes	Process
IHE	No	N/A
HEMIS	No	N/A
Internationalisation of HE	No	N/A
University-industry linkages	No	N/A

Table 3: Aspects/Facets of harmonisation with or without tensions

Strategies that could be used to diffuse some of these tensions

The perceptions of the participants helped in identifying tensions regarding harmonisation as well as reflecting on ways of dealing with them. From the findings it can be deduced that the tensions arising from the conceptualisation of harmonisation be diffused by conceptualising the higher education system as shown in Figure 2. It can be seen from Figure 2 that entities in a higher education system can operate in a continuum ranging from completely disparate to completely uniform. Harmonisation is thus a process wherein stakeholders agree on the desired degree of harmony and uniqueness.

Whilst quality assurance officials and university management emphasised the need for capacity building before and during the harmonisation process to avoid tensions, academics suggested that the regulatory agent should negotiate with higher education institutions to find out their varied needs depending on their contexts. The process of harmonisation should then be anchored on the outcomes of the preliminary engagement to allow for the necessary flexibility.

Views of experts from other contexts

The emergence of harmonisation of higher education as a new quality assurance policy mantra was acknowledged as a global phenomenon which has potential for success when adapted to suit the different national contexts. Whilst harmonisation does not necessarily signify homogenisation but accommodates divergences, there are areas of concern that must be considered during the process of conceptualisation, strategizing and operationalising harmonisation. The four concerns raised include:

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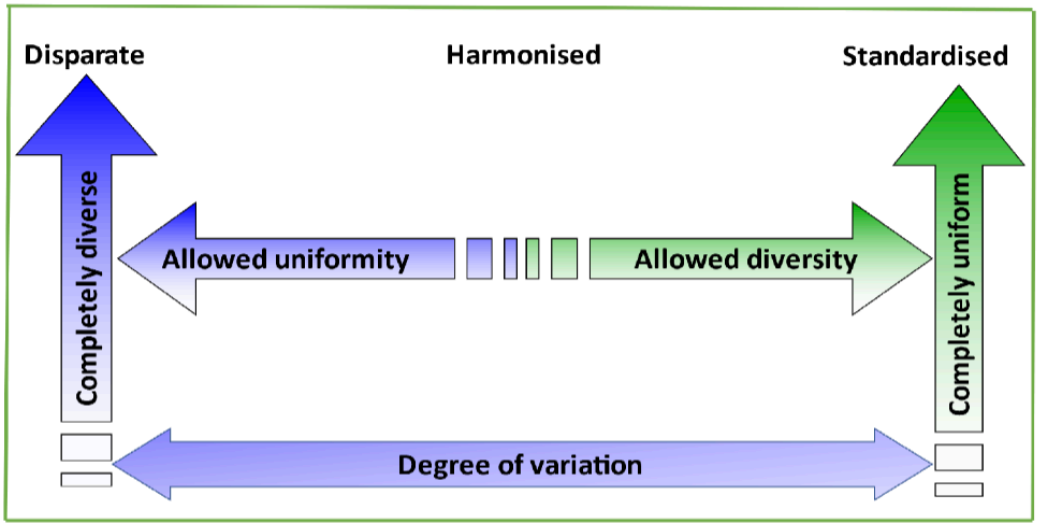

Figure 2: Harmonisation Continuum

1. Policy borrowing/transfer - the adoption of policies and practices that originated and have succeeded elsewhere with little consideration historical and contextual realities (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983)

2. The need to accommodate and get the buy-in of all active and passive players in higher education instead of relying on consultants who will not be available for implementation.

3. The importance academic freedom in higher education institutions is often overlooked with staff being treated like toolboxes and not important stakeholders.

4. Instead of collaborating with universities, some external quality assurance agencies assume that they have power to superintend over higher education institutions, resulting in the stifling of innovations to improve quality. As a result, institutions passively accept the injunctions for the sake of peace.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to use the case of Zimbabwe to investigate tensions associated with harmonisation of higher education and generalise therefrom. The findings revealed ten-

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sions in contextualising harmonisation, tensions arising from the process of harmonisation as well as tensions in some aspects of harmonisation namely MBKS and academic staff grading and promotion. The article argues that viewing harmonisation as a continuum ranging from complete diversity to complete uniformity can assist players to correctly conceptualise harmonisation. Participants also suggested ways of dealing with these tensions notably capacity strengthening and negotiations as opposed to top-down approaches. Quality improvement was fronted as the major push for harmonisation, thereby creating further tensions on whether reducing the degree of variation improves or reduces quality and inequality.

The article concluded that although there might be misgivings, suspicions and personal prejudices by some stakeholders in the beginning, if harmonisation is approached correctly it brings about synergies, connectedness and impact.

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