

Student voice and quality enhancement in higher education

Evelyn Chiyevo Garwe

Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education, Harare, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the impact of the student voice in enhancement of the quality of educational provision in universities.

Design/methodology/approach – The study used the longitudinal approach, carried out as two separate surveys covering a period of three years. An initial survey to determine the issues affecting teaching and learning quality in eight public and five private universities was made from June 2011 to May 2012. In 2013, a follow-up survey targeting three state and three private universities was done to check whether the issues of concern raised by students had been addressed. The study used triangulation of qualitative and quantitative approaches. Data were collected using observation, document analysis, semi-structured questionnaires and focus group discussions with students and academic staff.

Findings – The findings showed that the major issues affecting quality of teaching and learning were inadequate assignments, absentee lecturers, poorly qualified lecturers, sexual harassment and the lack of public address systems for mass lectures. During the second survey, results showed that all universities had addressed the students' concerns but new challenges caused by the ever increasing enrolments had emerged.

Practical implications – The study pointed to the need to continuously engage the student voice as a way of improving the quality of the teaching and learning environment.

Originality/value – The study adds to the body of knowledge on utilising the student voice to improve the quality of educational provision in institutions of higher learning

Keywords Longitudinal study, Sexual harassment, Student voice, Quality enhancement, Teaching and learning

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

Higher education institutions in Zimbabwe are continuously searching for innovative ways to improve the quality of educational provision in order to remain globally competitive. The current global developments in higher education show that heeding the student voice goes a long way in achieving this goal (Blair and Noel, 2014; Bloxham and Boyd, 2007). The effectiveness of utilising the student voice in improving the quality of teaching and learning in higher education has not been investigated in the Zimbabwean context. The current study was therefore aimed at addressing this gap in knowledge by initially investigating the factors affecting the quality of academic offering from the point of view of students and then monitor whether these institutions heed the student voice.

The concept of "student voice" has been endorsed and incorporated across a broad spectrum of contemporary educational thinking, research, policymaking and provision (Bahou, 2011; Bragg and Manchester, 2012; Rodrigues *et al.* (2013). The student voice



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phenomenon covers a whole gamut of initiatives focused on providing students with the opportunity to reflect, actively articulate their views and to be partners in the planning, implementation and appraisal of their teaching and learning experience (Fielding, 2004; QAA, 2012) with the aim of improving quality (Rogers, 2005). Although the need to heed the student voice has been recognised for a long time in secondary schools (Brice Heath, 2004; Rudduck, 2007), it is fast emerging as a dominant concept in higher education (Leach, 2012) and has been described as a panacea to solving inherent problems. Carey (2013) marvels at the fact that the student voice concept has an unusually widespread appeal as it is backed by governments, non-governmental organisations university managers, academic staff as well as being championed by student bodies.

Students are central to the higher education system, they contribute time, money, energy and intellect (Jackson, 2006) and hence they are critical in the advancement of knowledge. Bloxham and Boyd (2007) aver that since students play an active role in the “judgement process” and knowledge creation, it is unfair to view them solely as recipients of wisdom. This assertion was also raised by Rudduck (2007) who reported the huge potential of students to actively contribute to knowledge creation. Proponents for utilising the student voice argue that students always say something worth listening to (Blair and Noel, 2014). Biggs (2001) found that interrogating students on quality of their learning experiences was valuable, because they are able to pinpoint what they believed to be the best practices. Levin (2000) posits that indeed it is the students who are best placed to explain their experiences, indicate what motivates them, spot what works and what does not work and why, suggest what needs to be included in the curriculum and contribute in evaluating alternatives. This is so because students directly experience the teaching and learning, they are the ones who fail or drop out, are frustrated, bored, and/or cannot find a job. It should be noted that even successful students are perceptive enough to identify with the challenges faced by their peers.

Most higher education institutions provide platforms and opportunities for students to put across their views, dialogue and have their voice heeded (Floud, 2005). Many universities, in a bid to hear and heed the student voice, encourage students to provide feedback on all student experiences during the study period. Students do not only proffer their opinions on the quality of social services and university resource provision, but also pass judgement on the content of the curriculum, length of studies as well as teaching and learning methods. Reid (2010) found that students are kept motivated when they are involved, participate and contribute in activities that enhance the quality of their education. This results in the improvement of their learning environment (QAA, 2012). For this to be effective, the university should create a culture and a conducive environment which has transparent formal and informal mechanisms of engaging students in their quality processes.

Hodkinson and Shaw (2013) reported that the current mechanisms used by institutions to capture the student voice include surveys, evaluations and special project focus groups (individual voice) as well as representative systems at all levels (collective voice). The mechanisms make use of questionnaires and other data gathering instruments to collect feedback, utilising student representatives to sit on various university-wide Committees, carrying out student consultative events, involving students in university projects, encouraging students to participate in discussion forums available online and carrying out quality assurance processes, including course and programme reviews (QAA, 2012). In some universities students receive training to enable them to get their voices heard more effectively (McKeachie and Svinicke, 2006).

Quality assurance in higher education

Ensuring quality at the institutional level is understood in this study to refer to all efforts aimed at implementing, monitoring and raising the standards of educational delivery to enable students to get the best out of their learning experience. This includes all aspects of university life, for example, the quality of teaching, systems, procedures and processes put in place for students to air their views, lodge appeals and complaints as well as student engagement in ensuring that the student voice is heard and acted upon to improve their experience whilst studying.

Research has revealed that quality assurance, quality improvement and professional development of staff are hitherto considered to be the major motivations for institutions of higher learning to embrace the student voice (Campbell *et al.*, 2007; Duffy and O'Neil, 2003; Shah and Nair, 2006; Williams and Cappuccino-Ansfield, 2007). The rationale for utilising the student voice is aligned to the institutional policies, statutes and strategic plans which encourage feedback, evaluation and reflective practice (Briscoe *et al.*, 2008; Turner, 2006).

Many countries have now established external quality assurance bodies that work closely with institutions of higher learning to assure and promote quality of educational provision. For example, in the UK the Quality Assurance Agency involves students in external reviews of institutional quality and standards (QAA, 2009).

In Zimbabwe, the massive expansion of the higher education sector without commensurate increase in funding brought issues relating to quality assurance to the fore (Garwe, 2014). In response to the need to assure and enhance quality, the Zimbabwe Council of Higher Education (ZIMCHE) was established to oversee quality in higher education institutions, and to make available to the public, information concerning the quality of degree programmes offered locally and internationally. The ultimate objective is for ZIMCHE to contribute towards the sustenance of environments conducive to learning thereby enhancing the quality of human capital produced in Zimbabwe (ZIMCHE, 2012). Quality is assessed at programme and institutional level. The key aspects that are looked at by experts are similar to those given by Stacey (1999) relating to issues to do with curriculum design, content, organisation and assessment of teaching and learning. The assessment process also takes into account the adequacy of educational resources as well as the progression, support and achievements of students.

ZIMCHE also carries out studies in universities to investigate the effectiveness of those institutions in addressing issues raised by students as a way of developing and implementing institutional approaches to enhancing the quality of provision. This serves to identify issues that students consider to affect quality of the learning and hence assist institutions in quality enhancement in line with the assertion by many researchers that quality enhancement is achieved when institutions can better understand the shortcomings of their policies, practices and procedures through harnessing the student voice (Aldridge and Rowley, 1998; Brookes, 2003; Jackson, 1996). Hodgkinson and Shaw (2013) indicated that a strong student voice has a positive impact in quality enhancement. Students are able to identify and analyse problems, provide alternatives and explore solutions. They further explain that students feel listened to and encouraged to have continued input when they notice changes in areas that they have pragmatically raised their concerns and recommendations for improvement. The authors therefore concluded that being listened to and taken seriously builds confidence in the students.

Fielding (2001) indicates that critical as it is, the voice of the student usually goes unheeded. The study therefore sought to investigate whether Zimbabwean universities heed the student voice in as far as quality assurance matters are concerned.

Objectives of the study

The study aimed at first establishing the problems deemed to have adverse effects on the academic well-being of either individual students or the student body as whole in Zimbabwe's higher education institutions with the ultimate aim of investigating whether universities heed the student voice. The specific objectives were to:

- identify the opinions of students *vis-à-vis* the quality of educational provision in higher education institutions; and
- evaluate the perceptions and views students concerning the extent to which their voice is heeded.

Methodology

The study used a triangulation of qualitative and quantitative approaches. Triangulation is the use of more than one method in collecting data using different vantage points (Tritter, 1998). Data was collected using observation, document analysis, questionnaires, interviews and focus group discussions involving students and academic staff. Students were asked to provide information relating to different aspects of their experience and to suggest ways of tackling areas requiring improvement. King *et al.* (1999) averred that cross-sectional surveys provide just a snapshot of student feedback therefore adding little value to research on assessing the incorporation of student views. Wilson *et al.* (1997) and Oppermann (1997) recommend the use of the longitudinal approach in such studies. Accordingly, the longitudinal approach, carried out as two separate surveys covering a period of three years, was adopted in this study in order to check whether the student voice was heeded by the higher education institutions. The initial survey to determine the issues affecting the quality of educational provision in eight public and five private universities was made from June 2011 to May 2012. Although there are nine state and six private universities in Zimbabwe, the Zimbabwe Open University (state) was left out since it uses the open and distance learning model. Reformed Church University (private) was left out because at the time of the first survey all its students were using the block release model and thus did not have conventional students.

The study was designed, analysed and documented by the researcher who is an employee of ZIMCHE. However, the research by was carried out by ZIMCHE officials as part of their mandate to promote institutional quality. The results were made known to all the higher education institutions involved and they made their input and comments before publication of the results. The issues of concern raised by students from each university were communicated to the lecturers and the university administration by ZIMCHE officials. This was done in order to inform them of issues that students might find difficult to raise in the presence of their superiors. In 2013, a follow-up survey targeting three state and three private universities was done to check whether the issues of concern raised by students had been addressed. Those universities that did not have any major issues of concern raised were left out of the survey.

Stratified random sampling was used to select the students representing all fields of study, year of study (for undergraduates), level of study (undergraduates and postgraduates) and gender. The researcher pre-determined the number of students to be sampled that was in these categories. The researcher distributed questionnaires equivalent to 5 per cent of the students at each university. Such a representation allowed the researcher to undertake university-specific analysis which would assist

respective universities to improve those aspects that might need improvement while at the same time giving an overview of the conditions affecting quality of teaching and learning. The total student population for the 13 universities was 69,000 and hence a total of 3450 questionnaires were distributed. However, a total of 2,001 questionnaires were satisfactorily completed, the response rates differed from university-to-university.

Questionnaires and focus group discussion guides were designed to collect data on current student problems as well as obtaining feedback on how the concerns raised in the first survey were addressed. Although the main target of the study was the student body, it was necessary to verify and seek explanations from the teaching staff on issues raised by the students, given that teaching and learning involves both students and staff. Hence, focus group discussions were first undertaken with students, and later with staff. Focus group discussions were intended to explain the issues identified in the quantitative survey and at the same time contextualizing the issues raised. Students and academics who participated in these discussions were randomly picked from their respective faculties.

Onwuegbuzie *et al.* (2009) defined a focus group as a facilitated group discussion involving multiple participants carried out for purposes of collecting comprehensive information about a particular subject simultaneously. Focus groups are considered to be user friendly, thus creating an environment conducive for discussing perceptions, thoughts, facts, ideas, beliefs and suggestions (Krueger and Casey, 2000). The focus group discussions in this study were aimed at exploring views, experiences and suggestions by students and staff. The focus group discussions followed the procedure described by Gillespie *et al.* (2001) wherein the researchers from ZIMCHE employed a structured method in order to improve the quality of information gathered whilst ensuring that each participant was afforded an opportunity to be heard. The researchers started by asking broad open-ended questions and then gave each participant a chance to respond before opening up the question for group discussion. Gillespie *et al.* (2001) argues that asking broad open-ended questions ensures that the information collected is driven by participants. The researchers then asked further questions to probe and explore deeper into the experiences and perceptions of the participants. At the end of each broad question, the researcher summarised the responses given and requested for comments, additions or changes. This process was repeated for each of the question areas. Each focus group discussion was allocated one hour and was recorded.

Results

The results and discussion for the first survey are presented first before those from the follow-up survey are presented.

Findings from the first (2011-2012) survey

Socio-economic and demographic characteristics of students. A sample of 2,001 students completed questionnaires from 13 universities. Table I shows the proportion of students that were involved in the first survey from each university. The largest proportion of students (12 per cent) was from the University of Zimbabwe and the lowest (4 per cent) was from Great Zimbabwe University. The survey included students from all study disciplines (see Figure 1) as well as from all levels of study (Figure 2). A total of 3,800 students and 500 academics participated in the focus group discussions.

Students' rating on quality of teaching. The students rating of the quality of teaching is shown in Table II. The average scores for excellent, good and poor quality of

Table I.
Percentage
distribution of
universities from
which students
were sampled

Institution	Enrolment (2011)	Sample (%)
University of Zimbabwe	12,099	11.6
Midlands State University	13,009	9.4
National University of Science and Technology	5,132	8.5
Bindura University of Science Education	3,018	9.3
Chinhoyi University of Technology	3,018	8.1
Great Zimbabwe University	3,721	4
Lupane State University	1,999	9.6
Harare Institute of Technology	1,710	9.6
Women's University in Africa	1,970	6.3
Africa University	2,100	8.3
Solusi University	2,089	8.2
Catholic University in Zimbabwe	402	7.5
Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University	20	34

Note: $n = 2,001$

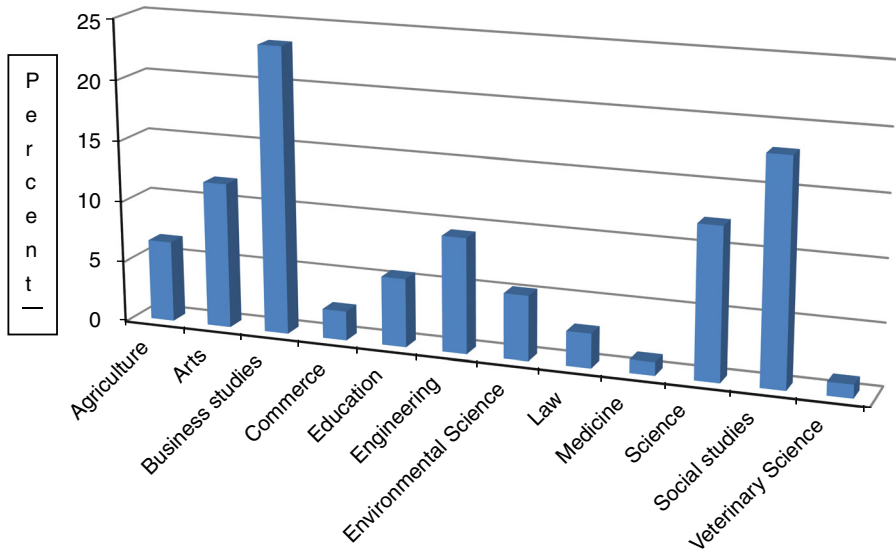


Figure 1.
Percentage
distribution of
academic disciplines
from which students
were sampled

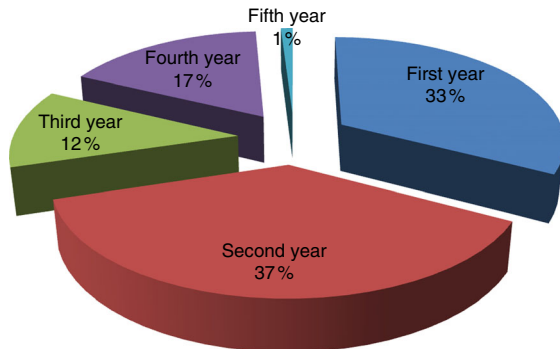


Figure 2.
Percentage
distribution of levels
of study for students
were sampled

Institution	Excellent (%)	Good (%)	Poor (%)
University of Zimbabwe	46.4	45.6	8
Midlands State University	26.4	50.6	23
National University of Science and Technology	51.3	41.7	7
Bindura University of Science Education	40.3	48.7	11
Chinhoyi University of Technology	54.1	31.9	14
Great Zimbabwe University	16	72	12
Lupane State University	39.7	36.3	24
Harare Institute of Technology	68.1	23.9	8
Women's University in Africa	42.6	33.6	24
Africa University	44.8	51.2	4
Solusi University	44	37	19
Catholic University in Zimbabwe	8.1	44.9	47
Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University	43	34	23
Average	40.4	42.4	17.2

Note: $n = 2,001$

Table II.
Percentage
distribution of
rating on quality
of teaching

teaching ratings were 40.4, 42.4 and 17.1, respectively. The university where the students had the highest excellent rating for quality of teaching was Harare Institute of Technology (68.1 per cent). Great Zimbabwe University had the highest score for good quality of teaching of 72 per cent. Catholic University in Zimbabwe had the highest rating for poor quality of teaching of 47 per cent.

The major reasons given for rating quality of teaching as poor at all the universities are shown in Figure 3. These included: inappropriate teaching aids and methods; insufficiently qualified lecturers; limited reading material; lecturers do not give assignments; lecturers do not care about their work and sexual harassment.

Inappropriate teaching aids and methods. The reason that was prioritised by most students (28 per cent) to lead to poor quality teaching was to do with teaching venues and inadequate teaching aids. During focus group discussions, students reported cases where mass lectures of over 300 students were performed without using public address (PA) systems. In some cases lecturers were still using archaic teaching methods like dictation when students expected to be given electronic hand-outs and literature. Some universities had not yet invested in laptops and projectors and were still using chalk boards even for large classes thus making it impossible for everyone to see. Focus group discussions with academic staff buttressed these issues that had been put forward by students. They lamented the inadequacy of state of the art equipment

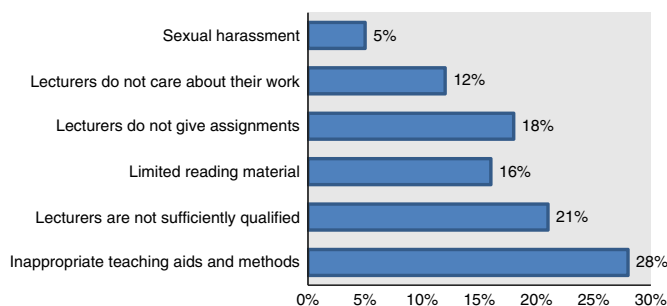


Figure 3.
Reasons for poor
quality teaching

as contributing to the poor quality of delivery. However, when asked whether they had made these issues known to management, some staff members admitted that they had not done so. One lecturer argued that “I am a professional, my job is to teach and not to procure equipment as there is a whole Bursar’s department responsible for procurement”.

Academic staff qualifications. The assertion by students that some lecturers were not sufficiently qualified to teach was further explored using secondary data on staff qualifications. The academic staff statistics for 2012 (see Figure 4) revealed that the majority of academic staff had masters’ degrees (72 per cent) as compared to bachelors (16 per cent) and doctorates (12 per cent). However, the proportions of academic staff with these three qualification levels differed according to the different universities. For example, Midlands State University had the highest proportion of staff with first degrees (32 per cent), whilst Great Zimbabwe University and Catholic University in Zimbabwe had the highest proportion of staff with master’s degrees (94 and 88 per cent, respectively). Universities with the highest proportion of staff with doctorates were Africa University (29 per cent), Solusi University (17 per cent) and University of Zimbabwe (15 per cent). Universities with the lowest proportion of staff with doctorates in 2012 were Great Zimbabwe University (6 per cent), Chinhoyi University of Technology (5 per cent) and Harare Institute of Technology (0 per cent).

The proportion of lecturers with doctorate degrees (12 per cent) fell below the international and regional standards. For example, in Nigeria, the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Goodluck Ebele Jonathan reported that 40 per cent of lecturers in universities possess a doctorate degree (Adeyemo, 2012). However, lecturers argued that this was so because of the effect of brain drain experienced from 2005 to 2009 and lack of opportunities as well as funds to enable them to further their studies. This problem was more rampant for lecturers in the science fields as they require specialized equipment for research and higher degree studies.

Reading material. The students who complained about inadequate reading material (16 per cent) mentioned both library hard copies as well as electronic resources. These students were mostly from Lupane State University, Women’s university in Africa, Catholic University in Zimbabwe, Solusi University and Harare Institute of Technology. Students from the University of Zimbabwe, Chinhoyi University of Technology, National University of Science and Technology and Africa University lauded their universities for providing adequate books whilst those from Midlands State University, University of Zimbabwe, Bindura University of Science Education and Chinhoyi University of Technology praised the adequacy of electronic resources at their institutions.

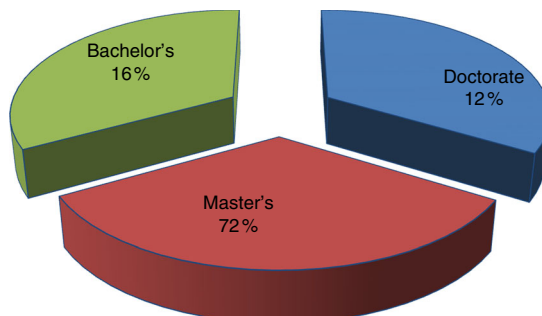


Figure 4.
Staff qualifications

Sexual harassment. A critical problem which was mentioned at four universities was sexual harassment. According to Argus (2004), sexual harassment refers to gender discrimination that involves the imposition of an unwanted condition, display or requirement on the continued education of the victim. It means therefore that sexual harassment is defined in terms of the subjective experience of the victim as well as the degree to which the behaviour exhibited by the perpetrator is unwelcome and unwanted. In this study respondents reported that sexual harassment took many forms (see Table III), the most common of which was verbal harassment through sexual comments, insults, stories and jokes on appearance, age and/or private life. The problem was very serious at one of the universities where students reported that there were three male lecturers who abuse female students. These academic staff would ask female students to take their assignments to their respective homes, while some would threaten to fail the students. Students remarked that a group of students can be failed if such lecturers suspected that the group was involved in the lecturer's failure to harass a female student. One of the students was quoted saying: "It is painful to know that you are competing with a lecturer who will not marry your girlfriend but will probably infect her with HIV. It is not fair at all."

At one of the universities sexual harassment was so rampant that even non-academic staff members were abusing female students. On the other hand, there were male lecturers who were also abusing male students. The sexually harassed students go through psychological trauma such as fear, anger, depression, humiliation, self-pity and sorrow. Similar results by Shumba and Matina (2002) revealed that students exposed to sexual harassment experience confusion, worry, stress, irritability, low self-esteem, helplessness, anxiety, vulnerability and alienation. Many countries in the world including Zimbabwe, have reported rampant sexual harassment of students in universities (Muchena and Mapfumo, 2012; Zindi, 1994, 2002). These results clearly reveal that the hostile and unfavourable gender environment that prevails in universities adversely impacts on the quality of teaching and learning. Win (1994) depicts the relationship between students and lecturers as similar to the biblical David and Goliath situation, where the one with authority uses their power to get what they want. She suggests that institutions must create and adhere to policies and grievance procedures for those who are sexually harassed. Singer (1989) found that institutions without well-documented policies and grievance procedures on sexual harassment had higher cases of harassment compared to those that did.

Forms of sexual harassment	Frequency (%)
Sexual comments, insults, stories and jokes on appearance, dress, age and/or private life	25.1
Demanding sex in exchange for good grades	21
Physical contact, for example, touching, pinching, patting	16.4
The use of threats or rewards to solicit sexual favours	14.3
Sexual advances and sexually suggestive gestures	10.3
Unwelcome telephone calls and correspondences e.g. e-mails/sms	5
Display of sexually explicit or suggestive material	4
Whistling	3.9

Note: $n = 2,001$

Table III.
Forms of sexual
harassment

Institutional reporting mechanisms

Immediately after completion of the focus group discussions with students and subsequently with staff members, ZIMCHE officials met with each institution's top management to highlight to them the key issues pertaining to the positive and negative issues raised by students and staff. After compilation of each institutional draft report, the reports were sent to the institution management for verification and for comments. The institutions were then requested to take action regarding the issues. If there were concerns raised, the management was asked to take corrective measures. If the issue was positive, the management was tasked to compile a report of the good practice for the benefit of other institutions. The universities in turn, used their internal systems to come up with action plans meant to address the issues raised by students. Since the major concerns had not been raised at all institutions, the follow-up survey performed in 2013 only targeted three state and three private universities in order to check whether the issues of concern raised by students had been addressed.

Findings from the second survey

Teaching venues, teaching aids and methods. All the six universities had addressed the problems highlighted in the first survey. Projectors had been installed in most of the teaching venues and mobile projectors and laptops were also available. PA systems were now available at teaching venues used for mass lectures. However, students and lecturers bemoaned the ever increasing enrolments (see Table IV) which were resulting in further problems that adversely impacted on the quality of teaching. Teaching venues were being overstretched beyond their carrying capacities. The problem was so serious one university that rooms that were meant to accommodate 100 students were expected to cater for up to 300 students. This resulted in half the students boycotting lectures and even then some students still had to stand outside the teaching venues.

Lecturer qualifications. Table V shows a comparison between the ratio of doctorate, master's and bachelor's degree holder between the first survey (2012) and the second survey (2013). It is clear from Table V that overall the proportion of academic staff in the universities who are doctorate degree holders increased by 25 per cent. This improvement

Institution	2011 enrolment	2013 enrolment	% change
University of Zimbabwe	12,099	12,273	1
Zimbabwe Open University	13,512	7,133	-47
Midlands State University	13,009	18,966	46
National University of science and Technology	5,132	8,512	66
Bindura University of Science Education	3,018	6,405	112
Chinhoyi University of Technology	4,999	5,675	14
Great Zimbabwe University	3,721	5,819	56
Lupane State University	1,999	2,488	24
Harare Institute of Technology	1,710	2,438	43
Women's University in Africa	1,970	2,751	40
Africa University	2,100	2,504	19
Solusi University	2,089	2,142	3
Catholic University in Zimbabwe	402	558	39
Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University	20	34	70
Reformed Church University	70	197	181
Total	65,850	77,895	18

Table IV.
Change (%) in
student enrolments
for 2011 and 2013

was attributed to recruitment of Zimbabwean lecturers from the diaspora as well as staff development of lecturers who were previously master's degrees holders. There was a marked (60 per cent) decrease in the proportion of academic staff with bachelor's degrees.

Sexual harassment. Students reported a decrease in the incidence of the menace of sexual harassment that had existed in at the time of the previous survey. They attributed this to intervention by university management in making sure that: implicated staff members were reprimanded and in some cases dismissed; sexual harassment policies and procedures were crafted, enacted and enforced and awareness of students' rights was improved. The sexual harassment policies and procedures clearly stipulated the actions and situations that constitute sexual harassment as well as the procedures to be followed in addressing complaints and reports. The universities had put the following strategies in place:

- seminars on sexual harassment provided during orientations for new students;
- suggestion boxes and hotlines enable students to provide information on perpetrators anonymously;
- workshops and training sessions on ethics;
- induction of new employees and signing to acknowledge having read and understood the sexual harassment policy;
- counselling and self-awareness sessions given students; and
- continued listening to students' concerns through ensuring their representation at meetings, for example; departmental boards, faculty boards, senate and council.

Discussion and analysis

The findings of the study revealed that inappropriate teaching aids and methods; insufficiently qualified lecturers; limited reading material; lecturers do not give assignments; lecturers do not care about their work and sexual harassment were the major factors impacting on the quality of teaching. It was encouraging to note that when lecturers and administrators were made aware of the student concerns, they were able to address them to the satisfaction of students thereby increasing student morale and the quality of teaching and learning. Students appreciated the process of soliciting views from them and addressing their concerns and suggestions extremely beneficial. Hodgkinson and Shaw (2013) also reported that when students notice that their inputs are respected and when they derive benefit from their contribution, there is increased engagement and improved quality of the learning environment. Academic staff members who engage students in identify loopholes in the teaching and learning system. Students, when engaged by an external body like ZIMCHE, felt free to reveal tough issues that they would normally not highlight to their lecturers and administrators. These included reporting sensitive matters like sexual harassment as well as exposing inherent injustices.

Qualification	2011	2013	% change
Doctorate degree	12	15	25
Master's degree	72	75	4.2
Bachelor's degree	16	10	60

Table V.
Proportions of
academic staff
holding doctorate,
master's and
bachelor's degrees

Lundy (2007) proposed a pertinent model comprising of four elements as a way of making sure that the student voice is well accommodated. The elements are space (opportunity to express a views), voice (facilitation to express their views), audience (listening to student feedback) and influence (acting upon the feedback given). It is clear from this study that regardless of which model is used, the benefits derived from heeding the student voice abound. The benefits identified by this study accrued to both the students and the higher education institutions as discussed as follows.

For students

Heeding the student voice was akin to empowering the students through having their views, wisdom, experience and contributions valued by the institution. This encourages the students to learn with purpose and they can individually and collectively improve their learning environment and academic performance through relevancy and relationships. Although the study showed that other challenges can resurface after the others had been solved, students felt that they can remain relevant through continuously having their voice sought for and heeded.

For higher education institutions

Heeding the student voice will improve the reputation of the institution through outstanding academic achievement and creation of supportive and accommodative teaching and learning environments for all students regardless of gender. In a study by Lizzio and Wilson (2009) the benefits of utilising the student voice were categorised as functional (for the institution), developmental (for the individual students) and social (for the society). The authors reported that the functional level, student play a critical role in expressing their views and concerns thereby partaking in quality enhancement. In this case Visser *et al.* (1998) emphasise the uniqueness of students in having the experience from a “practiced” vs a “planned” perspective.

From a developmental point of view, the study by Lizzio and Wilson (2009) found that students tend to benefit by participating and getting insights into the organisation and management of higher education institutions. The society benefits when higher education institutions are run in a democratic way since this encourages students to be grounded in active citizenship.

Conclusion

The study concludes that indeed higher education institutions in Zimbabwe were heeding the student voice as a way of enhancing the quality of educational provision. The relevance of external quality assurance bodies in the process was highlighted by the fact that there were some sensitive issues, for example, issues of sexual harassment that students are not at liberty to reveal to internal staff members. However, they are open and free to discuss such issues with officials from external quality assurance bodies like ZIMCHE.

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About the author

Dr Evelyn Chiyevo Garwe is the Deputy Chief Executive Officer for the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE). She is a holder of four degrees and a Former Dean at two universities. She is the Chairperson of the Agricultural Research Council (ARC) of Zimbabwe and the Secretary of the Research and Intellectual Expo Organising Committee. Dr Evelyn Chiyevo Garwe can be contacted at: garweec@gmail.com

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