

The contribution of higher education to national education systems: The case of Zambia

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1. Introduction/overview

The paper explores the contribution of higher education in the national education systems. Earlier emphasis since the Jomtien Platform of Action and World Declaration on Education for all has been on Basic education provision so that countries can attain the education for all goals by year 2000. Current global efforts are that countries should attain the Millennium development goals and that is why higher education has to come into the arena. The millennium development goals require countries to: eradicate poverty and hunger, achieve universal primary education, promote gender equality and empower women, reduce child mortality, improve maternal health, combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, ensure environmental sustainability and develop a global partnership for development. Higher education needs to be at the center of all this by producing the trained human resources needed for all these goals, carrying out the research and development activities in the sectors and monitoring programme activities.

There is need to provide a ‘strong intellectual and scientific environment’ for the advancement of basic, secondary and other levels of tertiary education. To this effect, higher education is expected to play a central role in the development of scientific knowledge and its subsequent application in various sectors. This is part of a growing shift from overemphasis on basic education to recognizing and giving higher education its rightful role in development. Higher education plays critical roles in training high-level scientific, professionals, managers, and other human resources needed to implement development activities. It provides research capacity as well as being the center for knowledge and provides the needed professional and community service. In this paper, higher education refers to the universities and affiliated institutions.

The place of higher education in relation to other levels of the education system has been central since the inception of university education. In Zambia, the Lockwood report that recommended the establishment of university education stated as follows:

...the university must be responsive to the real needs of the country and be an institution, which on merit will win the respect and proper recognition of the university world. ...it must combine practical service to the nation with fulfillment of the historical purposes of a university as a seat of learning, a treasure house of knowledge and a creative center of research (Lockwood, 1963).

The original mission statement has to a large extent influenced the current mission of the University of Zambia. The core functions are:

- Teaching, which is the provision of higher education itself through advancement of learning;
- Research, which entails the promotion and execution of research; and
- Service, which entails professional, public and community outreach to the entire community.

The purpose of the university as outlined in the mission statement in the University of Zambia Strategic Plan for 1994-1998 is to: fulfill the historical purpose of a university through the pursuit of excellence in teaching, research and scholarship; advance national development through the application of learning and research; promote learning by offering opportunities for advanced education to all suitably qualified persons, without distinction of race, gender, religion or political affiliation; enhance Zambia's potential to promote the goals of the wider African and International communities (University of Zambia, 1993).

The university strategic plan and motto emphasize 'service and excellence' in the implementation of the university mission. Universities are the highest institutions of learning, capable of producing the highest and most valued human resources needed for the other sectors and levels of education. Universities by nature of their work have to collaborate with the other levels of education, as their existence partly depends on inputs from the other levels of the system.

The contribution of higher education is different at the various levels. At the tertiary level, some colleges are affiliated to universities. This ensures a close working relationship between them in terms of quality assurance in the syllabuses, examinations, instruction and other aspects of the college curricula. Specialist doctors, teachers, economists, agriculturists, and others are trained in higher education institutions. Further, higher education provides research capacity to individuals and institutions. Research done by staff in higher education is important in providing data for planning, policymaking and reform in education.

2. Context and Issue

The issue relates to the linkages between higher education research and national education in the Zambian context. There are several challenges that the national education experiences which could benefit from higher education research. For example, when policy makers in the Ministry of Education want critical data, they hire academics and researchers from higher education institutions to do the research and provide them with the needed information. Alternatively, when researchers in higher education carry out studies in education, they give their studies to the Ministry of Education for their use and reference. Various studies have been completed, disseminated to interested actors and copies have been deposited in the Ministry of Education Documentation Center for ease of access.

Funding

Research funding comes from different sources such as the government, the bilateral agencies, international agencies and partners, nongovernmental organizations and individual higher education institutions. Most of the assured funding is however from development assistance that comes as part of bigger programmes or for specific research studies. The Ministry of Education also has some research budget, which usually goes to the planning unit or other specialized sections such as examinations, standards, teacher education, and curriculum. The multiplicity of sources of research funding makes it difficult to establish how much funding goes to research function per annum. Most institutional budgets are small and kept secret.

Utilization of research findings

What is happening is influenced by global views about higher education as having a wider role to play within national education systems. It is believed that higher education plays important roles such as capacity building of human resources at other levels, providing advanced training in different fields, taking the lead in developing and providing capacity for research and development as well as in promoting national culture, its transmission and in spearheading educational reforms. Globally, higher education is viewed as critical in relation to national development. World Bank (1997: 2) stated:

Universities play a more important national role in Africa than in other regions...they house the bulk of the continent's research capacity and technical (consultancy) expertise. They are often the only national institutions with the skills, the equipment, and the mandate to generate new knowledge through research.

It is within this context that the contribution of higher education to national education is discussed in Zambia. The Ministry of Education so far has been commissioning and utilizing research findings by higher education staff. There has been an on-going link between the research findings and recommendations and the policies and practices on the ground. In addition to tracer studies, other research included those on quality, relevance of curricula, education and employment/unemployment, gender and equity, teacher training and deployment, resource utilization, school infrastructure and others.

3. Policies and programmes

Ministry of Education policy on education has a chapter dedicated to research and development as a priority area. The policy states in part that:

Research is important in the operation and development of the educational system. The isolation of successful strategies and interventions, the identification of problems affecting the system or any of its parts, the analysis of policy options that could make the delivery of education more effective and efficient, and the evaluation of policy effectiveness, all require the information and insights that come from well-designed research. (Republic of Zambia 1996a:148)

The Ministry of Education has taken research studies seriously and has provided the policy environment and framework within which collaboration with higher education can

be realized. The challenge is how to operationalize the policy so that research projects in education can be used to influence educational policy, reforms and practice.

3.1. *Current policy framework*

The policy framework in the Ministry of Education demonstrates commitment to giving research its rightful position in linking to policy, planning and practice. The policy says that the Ministry will support and inform its decision-making by a systematic use of research, some of which will be conducted by the Ministry itself and others by the universities and other research partners. (Republic of Zambia, 1996a: 148). Similarly, the Ministry of Education Strategic Plan (2003: 20) states that ‘several strategies in the strategic plan will require further research and studies to be carried out, before the final implementation plans can be drawn up.’ Where the strategic plan mentions research it has provided university research reports as the means of verification and therefore making the link of higher education to national research agendas more evident. The national policy on education, directs the research units in the ministry of education ‘to establish close linkages with the universities and other research agencies in order to ensure that research is undertaken in priority areas and that the data base on the education system and research findings are disseminated to interested parties. (Republic of Zambia 1996a:149).

wider reforms in education at a time of economic depression. The government accepted the study and its recommendations and it became the basis of the educational reforms from 1986.

b. Research agenda on girls' education

Since the 1990s, several research studies have been commissioned and implemented with assistance of researchers in higher education institutions. A research agenda was put in place as a collaborated effort between Ministry of Education, UNICEF and CIDA. The research study entitled: *A research agenda on the girl child* by Claudia Mitchell set the stage for the research programme. The initial studies were part of what became the Programme for the Advancement of Girls' Education (PAGE). PAGE was designed to promote girls and women's education. The programme objectives were to deliver quality primary education and to reduce gender disparities in primary education enrolment, retention, completion and achievement. Interventions implemented were: Research studies, Advocacy and sensitization, Affirmative action to increase the number of women in management, Gender across the curriculum in teachers' colleges, Gender sensitive pedagogy, Single sex classes, Family Pac, Community action, Basic teaching/ learning materials. The package of studies commissioned included the following:

- i. *A research agenda on the girl child* by C. Michel, November 1994.
- ii. *Below the poverty line in education. A situation analysis of girl child education in Zambia* by M.J. Kelly, December 1994.
- iii. *Survey of conditions in 20 Zambian schools* by D. Aspinwall, March 1995.
- iv. *Barriers to girls' education. A study of knowledge, attitudes and practices of Zambian educationalists* by M. Munachonga, June 1995.
- v. *Learning from the outside: gender and social change in primary school. A course on gender* by C. Mitchell. November 1995.
- vi. *Listening to the girl child* by D. Mwansa, December 1995.
- vii. *Learning from inside the classroom* by I. Maimbolwa-Sinyangwe and B. Chilangwa, December 1995.
- viii. *In the best interest of the child* by T. Mabula and Y. Chondoka. December 1995
- ix. *Comprehensive education analysis* (Chipata District, Eastern Province) By G. Lungwangwa, December 1995.

The studies were disseminated at a national symposium on girls' education, with representatives from all provinces, districts and other key actors in education. The findings and recommendations from the studies influenced what was adopted as the *Zambian Statement on Girls Education* as well as the chapter on gender and equity issues in the national policy on education.

c. Education policy studies

During the 1990s, the education system experienced decline in quality due to lack of educational materials, lack of infrastructure, overcrowding in classrooms and general dilapidation of both physical and human resources. The Ministry of Education wanted ways of rehabilitating the whole system. Policy oriented research studies were identified as a strategy in order for the system to generate information that would inform policy makers and planners on the way forward. The policy studies were part of the Zambia Education Rehabilitation Project (ZERP), which was supported by a World Bank loan.

A researcher, from the University of Zambia, coordinated the policy studies whose objectives were: to provide data for government policy formulation and planning; to contribute to the understanding of the education sector; to provide plans and models for improved education provision; to provide data for directing future educational investment and to provide a database for training education managers. (Republic of Zambia, 1996b)

Researchers from higher education institutions were engaged to do the studies. The final studies according to our informants and available records were on the following:

Financing of education; The organization and management of the education system; Increasing access to secondary education; Training and utilization of teachers; Gender issues in education; Curriculum review; Environmentally related illnesses in schools; The development of higher education; Out of school youth; Community participation and Transport and communication infrastructure.

All the studies were disseminated at a national workshop that involved all stakeholders in education. One shortcoming was the lack of institutional base and political will from the Ministry of Education to sustain the studies beyond phase one.

The case of the educational management training programme (EMT)

The university as a leading seat of knowledge and research was again given the responsibility for in-service capacity building of education managers through education management training. The key emphasis of the programme was on improving the capacity of the education sector to manage the system and provide instructional leadership to education managers. This came out of research studies that suggested that the capacities of education managers needed rehabilitation. (Ministry of Education, 1994).

The project was designed to reverse the deterioration in the education sector that came up after years of economic decline in the education system. The training programme was justified on the ground that it would correct the situation where school heads, standards and education officers were ineffective because they were not trained for their jobs. They were promoted to the senior positions after years of experience as good teachers and hence they trained on the job through trial and error. The objectives of the programme were to: provide the officers with knowledge, skills, and techniques for effective functioning; enhance their overall performance on the job; assist them respond positively to changes such as those brought by decentralizing the system; provide knowledge and skills for initiating and managing change and reform.

4. Research Results

4.1. Research methodology

The study utilized qualitative methods such as semi-structured questionnaires, informal interviews, and content analysis to collect data for the case study. The informants were researchers from higher education, Ministry of Education officials in planning and policy divisions and former project staff. The informants were purposively selected depending on their positions in the ministry of education or in a project and/or their involvement in

research, policy making or planning. Data analysis was in line with the methods to identify thematic representations and categories.

4.2 Key findings

This section discusses the key findings of the study on the contribution of higher education to national education in Zambia. Findings show that higher education institutions are active in undertaking research in educational fields. Some of the findings are communicated to appropriate stakeholders in the line ministries directly, while others are deposited in the resource centers and libraries for use by any interested persons. Research funding has been a small in the government budget and this has resulted into a situation where most research undertakings are funded externally. In spite of external funding, there are examples of research studies that have influenced policies and practices in the Ministry of Education such as the ones presented here.

a. *Provision of education for all*: The study *The Provision of education for all*, made key recommendations that brought about wider educational reforms. The reforms affected the running of education at all levels and introduced major changes in the system of education. Policy reforms that emerged included the re-introduction of boarding and examination fees in public schools, re-introduction of cost sharing, requiring parents to be responsible financially for the costs of their children's education and encouragement of the development of private schools.

b. *Research studies on girls' education* revealed constraints faced by girls in school and community that hinder their progression in education. The disparities between girls and boys at different levels of education called for measures to deal with the underlying causes of gender inequalities in education such as lower enrolments, premature drop outs, and lower performance in Math and science for girls, negative attitudes among teachers

time (Republic of Zambia, 1966b:62-66). Another contribution has been on teacher training through the introduction of a teacher education course, '*Gender across the curriculum.*' Additionally the research studies had an impact on practices in schools through changes that made schools child friendly. There have also been transformations in the ways teachers do things, their attitudes and behaviors towards girls. There was increased collaboration between schools and communities where parents through 'Family Pack' programme sat in classrooms to help their children and be part of their children's education process.

c. Policy studies: Policy studies initiative generated data on different aspects of education. They have contributed to the education database and some of the information and recommendations have impacted on policy and practice such as in areas of financing education, alternative routes to education provision, and management of education, gender issues, curriculum, and higher education. One shortcoming is that the studies were donor funded and directed and hence their scope and implementation depended on good will from the development partners. The studies got funding pledges amounting to a total of USD1.6 million from different partners, but only USD 669 was released implying a shortfall in funding. Therefore, only phase one of the project was completed and other planned activities to cover all the objectives fell off (Lungwangwa, 1998). One key feature was the collaboration between academics and practitioners. Although the studies did not go beyond phase one, the educational policy has recognized the value of research in policy formulation, strategic planning and system evaluation and has pledged to establish a National Institute of Education to be responsible for research (Republic of Zambia, 1996a: 148-9).

d. Education management training: Out of the targeted 200 officers, 142 were trained in two and half years using university vacations. Institutionalization of the programme at the university was good as it gave staff experience in developing and managing such programmes. It resulted into the development of a Masters programme in Educational Administration and several short-term consultancies by staff to do similar courses. The programme contributed to affirmative action, to managers being able to collect, store and use information better, organizational changes at district and school levels and boosting of self-confidence and moral among officers. A key impact has been the requirement for all education managers to undergo training and the linking of career development with management training. The national policy on education states that 'appropriate training will be a pre-condition for appointment or promotion to a professional post as an Inspector of schools or Educational Manager; that the ministry will take whatever steps are needed to provide regular in-service training to educational managers and that in liaison with higher education institutions and universities, the Ministry would establish a National Institute of Education to provide training in educational management,' (Republic of Zambia, 1996b:147-8).

5. Recommendations

Based on this evaluation of the research linkages between higher education and national education, the following recommendations are made:

- The policy on research and development needs to be developed further to make it more effective and responsive to major challenges facing the nation in the new millennium such as poverty, educated unemployment, HIV/AIDS and equity issues.
- More investment in higher education is needed to strengthen research capacity further to be able to address development needs through quality research outputs.
- There is need for development of appropriate policies to guide proper development of higher education into strong research centers.
- It is important for MOE to mobilize sufficient funding in order for it to be able to determine and implement its research agenda.
- The MOE should engage national reference groups on research to monitor the quality, relevance and utility of educational research done to determine if it can be utilized.
- There is need to strengthen the weak link between higher education and Ministry of education so that political will is evident in order to assure sustainability of programmes. A focal point or a link person between higher education and the Ministry is needed to create a more formalized link.
- Need to strengthen national, regional and international networks and linkages that address research issues and challenges in higher education

5.2 Plans for action

A plan of action to operationalize the recommendations is suggested as follows:

- Most research studies in education are commissioned and funded by external donors. It is critical for the MOE to set up different committees of national reference groups on research to give direction to researchers and serve as brokers where conflicts of interest might emerge.
- The MOE research unit needs to facilitate collaboration between internal and external researchers and a process of external review of research done.
- The national system should develop a culture of disseminating research findings at national symposiums or colloquiums, which include some research participants.
- Efforts should be made to have research outputs published.
- Developing and implementing transparent accounting systems in the use of research money.
- Simplified versions of research should be made available for the different levels of education to develop appreciation for research at other levels.

6. Operational Aspects

6.1 Resources

Finance is a major constraint in terms of undertaking research in Zambia, as it is not budgeted for. Research done is most of the time externally supported. This makes the undertakings risky and unsustainable. Research capacity is also very critical in research, yet it still needs to be developed. Support resources such as computers, software and other information technologies are still lacking both in higher education and Ministry of Education.

6.2 Preliminary evaluation: SWOT analysis

Strengths

- Research and development policy in place in the Ministry of Education.
- Supportive external environment

Weaknesses

- Research agendas are externally funded and donor dependency may affect the direction of research as well as the utility to which it is put.
- Inadequate capacity for research, which may make it inevitable to hire external consultants who are very expensive.
- Inadequate research funding

Threats

- Insufficient appreciation for the value of research findings for use in planning and policy.
- Poor research outputs, which may bias policy makers against utilizing research outputs and giving priority to research.
- Withdrawal or reduction of research funding by donors without warning makes research undertaking precarious.
- Having studies that are donor motivated and conceptualized.

Opportunities

- Inadequate capacity can be used to lobby for more funding and support to improve research capacity.
- Existing policy environment can be used to mobilize resources for research.
- Increased demand for research that link into the policy and planning process.

6.3 *Monitoring*: suggested indicators

- Increased policy research implemented through higher education.
- Research plans in place and implemented as core activities of higher education.
- Budgets with research funds and financial reports in place.
- Research capacity building programmes in place.

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