

The paradox of poor performance in Zimbabwean State Universities despite Training and Development interventions

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Abstract

The study sought to find out why poor performance continue to exist in Zimbabwean State Universities (ZSU) despite the training and development of academic staff. The study adopted a quantitative research strategy and used a sample of 351 academic members from 13 ZSUs. Data from respondents was collected through structured questionnaires. The study confirmed the existence of poor performance among academic staff despite the interventions and efforts by the institutions in training and developing them on how to deliver in teaching, research, community service, innovation and industrialisation. It was in the findings of this study that poor performance was driven by inadequate institutional capacity to support academic staff due to a turbulent economic environment. The study recommends that Zimbabwe State Universities (ZSUs) should do more than training and development, fund activities such as research, innovation and industrialisation. Training and development (T & D) practices should fit needs of individual academic members, students and the environment. The study further recommend that innovative teaching methods should be used for large classes and universities' training and development should move in tandem with technological advancements.

Key words: Training and Development, Performance

1.0 Introduction

Zimbabwe has 21 registered universities (13 public universities and 7 private universities) churning out over 45000 graduates every year (Garwe & Thondhlana 2019). Despite the high number of graduates being produced year by year, the country is still considered as one of the poorest countries in the world (Majoni, 2014). In order to produce quality graduates and improve the outputs from universities, universities and the government are investing much on training and development. Academic staff in ZSUs are exposed to various training and development methods with the objective of improving their performance. Training and development methods include workshops, staff development fellowships, visitations, exchange programmes, contact leaves, demonstrations, peer reviews and sabbaticals to mention but just a few. Although much is invested on T & D, the performance of academic staff is still low in terms of publications, income generation, research outputs, innovations and patenting. In light of that, this paper investigated why poor performance persists in ZSUs despite academic staff members receiving training and development.

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2.1 Importance of Training and development

Al-Mughairi (2018) views training and development as an act which helps organisations to achieve their ultimate target of elevating the satisfaction of employees hence generating quality production and a learning organisation. Healthy organisations have staff which continue to learn and this leads to employee retention which indirectly builds the image of the company and helps it earn goodwill on the market. Bhatt (2020) believes that training and development is like a bridge that reduces the gap between competence and performance. It is the key to employee satisfaction. Relatedly, Mdhlalose (2020) believes that training and development help employees to strengthen their wings and career. Training and development uplifts the production capacities of employees but most government departments do not consider the significance of training and development (Elnaga & Imram, 2013). Many of these organisations cut their training budgets when their economies are not performing or when sales decline. Consequently, Elnaga & Imram (2013) further argue that this lead to task turnover, higher costs of hiring new employees and lessening organisational lucrativeness.

Training is a necessity in the workplace, without it, employees do not have a firm grasp of their responsibilities or duties (Mdhlalose, 2020). Mdhlalose (2020) further confirms that training and development programmes provide workers with information, new skills, or professional development opportunities which address gaps or discrepancies between an ideal and an optimal stage of development. At the workplace, however, needs become apparent when desired and actual work techniques or results are compared. That is why Bhatt (2020) supports that training and development link the gap between the present performance and the standard desired performance. Training and development is provided to employees via different forms such as coaching and mentoring, peer evaluation, workshops, seminars and many more. Liambo (2018) argues that these methods of training and development restore the performance of all the personnel for organisational growth and success. Training programmes not only help employees grow professionally but also assist organisations in getting the most out of their human resources to acquire a competitive edge. Bhatt (2020) and Daniel (2018) believe that employees who undergo training and development activities turn out to be more efficient and productive, thus why organisations should create and enhance the quality of their present employees by providing widespread training and development. Equally, Akpalu and Markom (2022) view training and development not only as a way to expand productivity but also to motivate and inspire workers. Therefore, it seems mandatory to all organisations to engage in training and development programmes to enhance their employee's abilities and competencies that are needed at the workplace (Hamid, 2011). Training not only develops the capabilities of employees but also sharpens their thinking ability and creativity in order to take better decisions in time and in more productive manners (Ezigbo, 2011). Moreover, it also enables employees to deal with customers in an effective manner and to timeously respond to their complaints (Cross, 2018). Training develops self-efficacy and results in superior performance at work place through replacing the traditional weak practices by efficient and effective work-related practices (Cross, 2018).

Akipalu & Markom (2020) report that training and development are the means by which organisations invest in people in order to equip them with the required knowledge and skills at

their workplaces. These procedures are a component of a general human resource management strategy that encourages performance. Therefore, it is essential that all organisations, whether private or public, place a high value on staff training and development. However, there are significant differences across organisations in the number, quality and amount of training that is conducted. Some organisations have staff development policies to enhance their training and development initiatives (Lussier, & Hendon, 2017).

Training and development has become a key human resource practice in the world of business today, enhancing both employee productivity and company effectiveness (Yozi, 2018). In the higher education sector, Akinfolarin and Babatunde (2014) believe that training and development are mechanisms designed to strengthen educators' professional skills, knowledge and attitudes which enhances teaching and learning in higher education.

2.2 Academic Staff Performance

Utin and Yosepha (2019) define performance as the amount and quality of work that an employee achieves while performing the duties assigned to him. According to Shmailan (2016), performance is an action that employees do in carrying out the work for the company. When performing duties, performance is not autonomous but always linked to employee work satisfaction and the amount of benefits offered. Individual skills and abilities, competencies and characteristics have an impact on it. In support, Al Mehrzi and Singh (2016) view it as the result or level of success of a person as a whole during a certain period in carrying out tasks compared to various possibilities such as work standards, targets or predetermined criteria that has been mutually agreed upon. Performance is essentially what employees do or do not do (Yang et al., 2016) whilst Altındag and Kosedagi (2015) believe that performance can be understood as a measurable and qualitative expression of an employee/ person or group to perform given work to achieve organisational goals using the competencies, knowledge acquired, capabilities and skills possessed. Therefore, employee performance can be said to be a source of strategic advantage and is the key to success for the organisation (Diamantidis & Chatzoglou, 2019; Rusu et al., 2016). Sustainable employee performance development is a solution to maintain the existence of the organisation in a constantly changing environment (Diamantidis & Chatzoglou, 2019). To find out whether the performance of employees is good or bad, a performance appraisal can be carried out in which the assessment must adjust to the conditions of each organisation (Rusu et al., 2016). With performance appraisals, organisational leaders can make administrative decisions, either in the form of dismissals or promotions or remuneration (Altındag & Köseadağı, 2015). Furthermore (Dehaghi & Rouhani, 2014) suggest that there are various ways that organisations can do to evaluate employee performance, but the most important thing is to determine the right method according to organisational goals, and usually employee performance appraisal can use more than one way. Furthermore, Rusu et al., (2016) explained that every organisation must also have standards for evaluating employee performance, taking into account internal and external factors. The availability of facilities and infrastructure as well as the environment of the organisation can determine whether the quality of employee performance is good or bad. In addition, social conditions such as leader behavior, employee trust in team management and relationships between employees as well as employee relationships with leaders also affect employee

performance (Pulakos et al., 2015; Zheng et al., 2012). Dermol & Cater (2013) add that in addition to performance appraisal standards, management systems, leadership commitment, conducive environment, organisational climate, education and training are supporting factors which improves employee performance. In the context of this study, academic performance is the outcome of education, indicating how well a student, lecturer, or institution has accomplished the educational objectives. According to Steinberger (1993), academic performance is a multidimensional concept related to human growth and cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development. Asif, Merceron, Ali, & Haider (2017) explain academic performance with relevant to teaching and research. Hazelkorn (2015) considered peer review and accreditation as faculty member's performance assessment in most of higher education institutions. Moreover, training and development of academic staff is necessary for the attainment and performance of institutions' vision, mission, and goals. By participating in training and development activities, academic staff members increase their competence, which in turn improves the university's competitiveness in research and development as well as its core business.

2.3 Reasons of poor performance

Lumberjack (2021) believes training and development assist the university community in adapting to change, increasing productivity and improving the quality of the work environment and the employees' relations with each other. T & D opportunities are considered important towards the development of employees. Different studies highlighted teaching, learning and research activities as the main key activities of academic members in the context of higher education (Elrehail, Emeagwali, Alsaad & Alzghoul, 2018, Madhan, Gunasekaran & Arunachalam, 2018).

Machawira (2010), Chetsanga & Muchenje (2012), Mashaah et al. (2014) and Garwe (2015) reveal why there is poor performance in the quantity, quality and contribution of research in HEIs by academics. First, there is lack of financial and material resources to enable the growth of research and innovation. The problems with material resources included restricted access to both physical and e-library materials (books, journal and articles). Where electronic resources were accessible, access to internet was restricted because of inadequate connectivity, limited bandwidth, and/or frequent power outages which made it difficult to retrieve information.

Garwe, Thondhlana and Saidi (2021) said that the second major issue was the exodus of senior academics across all HEIs in Zimbabwe who were then replaced by less qualified researchers and professors. This suggest that the critical mass of highly accomplished and seasoned academics and researchers needed to support doctorate training and specialised academic research was no longer present in the higher education system. There were also detrimental effects from the lack of knowledgeable research mentors and advisers. For instance, there was an increase in the incidences of violation of academic and scientific integrity. There were reports of plagiarism and cheating among academics (Garwe & Maganga, 2015). In addition to reporting similar tendencies elsewhere, scholars found HEIs academics to be more inclined to publishing in journals with low impact (Madhan, Gunasekaran & Arunachalam, 2018).

Additionally, because of the rise in student enrolment, lecturers spent most of their time teaching rather than doing research.

Thirdly, the supportive environment for commercialisation of research and innovation for industrialisation and modernisation of the country is not there (Chetsanga & Muchenje 2012). The fourth challenge is the lack of strong institutional support structures and systems to guide, incentivise and promote research (Mashaah et al. 2014).

Muchemwa and Masuku (2015) note that ZSUs lecturers are exposed to large classes (high lecturer student ratio). Research is not given the emphasis it deserves due to shortage of resources and heavy workloads for lecturers which consumes their research time. These resources include new technological changes, better infrastructure, supportive environment for doing research. Once more, researchers (lecturers) lack the initiation and training required for fruitful study, while the more seasoned researchers are constantly leaving for better pastures due to environmental changes and personal obstacles.

Heavy workloads, insufficient training materials and lack of clear T&D objectives make it almost impossible for employees to take T&D programmes seriously (Dorji, 2005). Some trainees and managers have the wrong attitude towards T&D and some middle managers do not support it (Phillips & Phillips, 2016). Sometimes people view training and development as a ritual that must be carried out periodically without any meaningful purpose. Some managers utilise training as a way to honour their most devoted workers. Furthermore, in some cases, employees are not properly prepared for training and consequently lack the motivation to participate in training activities (Oladimeji and Udosen, 2019).

3.0 Methodology used in this study

This investigation was carried out using a quantitative research approach. The population of this study encompassed academic staff members in ZSUs namely University of Zimbabwe, Chinhoyi University of Technology, Midlands State University, Bindura University of Science and Education, Great Zimbabwe University, Lupane State University, Manicaland State University, Marondera University of Agricultural Science and Technology, Gwanda State University, Harare Institute of Technology, Zimbabwe National Defense University, National University of Science and Technology and Zimbabwe Open University. The total population of academic staff members from ZSUs were 3990 and a representative sample of 351 was used. The sample was calculated using Raosoft sample calculator. The study employed the mixed sampling technique for data collection which include stratified random sampling, systematic random sampling, purposive sampling and convenience sampling. This means that the sample was divided into four strata (lecturers, senior lecturers, professors, and associate professors). Using the stratified random sampling approach, samples were chosen from each stratum using the systematic random sampling technique. Additionally, certain important members of the sampled community were chosen using the purposive sampling method, while convenience sampling was utilised for key informants who were conveniently located. A structured questionnaire was designed for the academic members. Most questions were presented using

the Likert scale because of its advantage of ease of completion. By using Cronbach Alpha, the instrument's reliability was determined. Data collected were critically analysed using SPSS version 26.

4.0 Results and discussion

Research results revealed that poor academic staff performance exists despite training and development due to various reasons shown on Table 4.1 below.

Table 4.1: Mean and standard deviation on the reasons for poor performance

Reason number	Item description	Mean score	Response	Std. Deviation
1	Personal challenges	3.47	Neutral	1.085
2	Training not appropriate to the practice of the participants	4.08	Agree	.838
3	Technological changes	3.74	Agree	1.021
4	Large classes	4.08	Agree	.730
5	Heavy workload	4.01	Agree	.642
6	Lack of provision of a bridge between theory and practice	3.68	Agree	.912
7	Inadequate facilities and infrastructure	3.82	Agree	.705
8	Lack of conducive teaching and learning environment.	3.65	Agree	1.239
9	Training & Development is only availed to old staff members	3.42	Neutral	1.127
10	Low level research activities	3.55	Agree	.901
11	Mismatch between graduate output and employment	3.48	Neutral	.973
12	Nepotism in promotions	3.75	Agree	1.304
13	Corruption in recruitment of staff	3.82	Agree	.910
	Overall mean	3.69	Agree	.92

Source: Field Survey

As shown on Table 4.1 above, the most frequent response for these reasons for poor performance was 4 (agree). This indicates that majority of the respondents agreed that most academic members perform poorly due to corruption in recruitment of staff (13), low level of research skills (10), inadequate facilities and infrastructure (7), lack of provision of a bridge

between theory and practice (6), heavy course workload (5), large classes (4), technological changes (3), training not appropriate to the practice of the participants (2) and also due to nepotisms in promotions (12). This implies that majority held the view that, despite being trained and developed, academic staff perform poorly due to the aforementioned reasons in ZSUs.

The results confirm with Machawira & Mbizvo (2010), Chetsanga and Muchenje (2012), Mashaah et al. (2014) and Garwe (2015) who believe poor performance in universities is due to inadequate financial and material resources to support research and innovation development and limited access to physical and electronic library resources (books and journal articles). In institutions where e-materials are available, data retrieval is hindered by limitations such as poor internet connectivity, low bandwidth and frequent power shortages and this result in poor performance of academics. Relatedly, Garwe, Thondhlana and Saidi (2021) said the reason of poor performance by academics is also a result of massive exodus of high and well experienced senior academics and being replaced with junior less experienced academics. This suggests that ZSUs no longer possess the critical mass of exceptionally qualified and accomplished academics and researchers required to support doctoral training and specialised scholarly research. There were also detrimental effects from the lack of knowledgeable research mentors and advisers. For example, breaches of academic and research integrity which is now occurring frequently. In support, there were reports of incidents where plagiarism and cheating were rampant among these academics (Garwe & Maganga 2015).

According to Chidarikire (2021), ZSU lecturers lack computers and majority of universities have poorly equipped laboratories which affected the delivery of online lectures during this COVID 19 era. In agreement with the above, Madzimure (2016) reports that laboratories in most institutions are too few, poorly equipped and lack reagents to use. In addition, Chidarikire (2021) notes that computers in most universities are pathetic and internet is unbearably slow which also affect the performance of lecturers. Moyo, Nyede and Ndoma (2020) argue that lecturers in State Universities are usually used to traditional face to face teaching methods and lack knowledge of using e-learning platforms such as Big Blue Button, Google class, Video Conferencing, Moodle and Zoom. Due to the Zimbabwean economic situation, majority of lecturers cannot afford to buy laptops for themselves to use and this becomes a hindrance in performing their duties well. This implies that ZSUs should facilitate the acquisition of laptops by academic members. All this supports the results.

World Bank (2020) said that the teaching space in ZSUs is inadequate and ZSUs are characterised with large numbers and heavy course workload. Also, universities are using traditional curricular and pedagogical practices. This makes the training provided not appropriate to the participants. Inadequate laboratories, workshops and other specialized facilities significantly weaken education quality, especially in STEM programs which makes it difficult for an academic member to improvise (World Bank, 2020, September Report).

Shava, Shonhiwa, Ngwenya and Moyo (2021) believe that large classes in universities compromises quality in higher education. The most crucial investment in advancing the fulfilment of the global development goals set forth in the UN agenda for 2030 is high-quality education. Zimbabwe will not be able to take advantage of trade and development possibilities

in a technologically driven and quickly integrating global economy without significant improvements in efforts to increase the quality of higher education. It can be difficult and illusive to define and describe quality in the context of higher education. Providing students with high levels of employability as well as analytical, critical thinking, problem-solving and practical abilities that can be applied in many work-related settings is how we define quality in education. Quality higher education should provide learners with education that will make them independent and critical thinkers (Shava, et al.2021). Due to large classes, there are material resource shortages, dilapidation of infrastructure, lack of classroom space and declining quality of research (Teferra, 2015). This makes it harder for lecturers to perform well in such conditions. This was confirmed by World Bank (2009) report on higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa which pointed out that rapid increase in enrolment has eroded the quality of education and affecting the contribution of higher education to economic growth. Odhiambo (2011) stated that there is a general consensus that the quality of education and therefore, the competence of university graduates has deteriorated.

5.0 Conclusion

Despite the existence of training and development practices in ZSUs, the academic members continue to perform poorly due to various reasons. From the analysis it can be concluded that academics in ZSUs are performing poorly due to inappropriate training provided, technological changes, teaching large classes, heavy workloads, negative macro environmental changes, lack of provision of a bridge between theory and practice, inadequate facilities and infrastructure, lack of conducive teaching and learning environment, low research activities, nepotism in promotions and corruption in recruitment of academics.

5.0 Recommendations / Suggestions

The study recommends the following:

- Institutional facilities should continue to be supported to enable effective teaching and knowledge delivery as it improves academic performance.
- Managers of higher education institutions should provide enough resources to academic staff and should make sure the environment conducive for teaching and learning is provided. This also promotes a good relationship between the manager and academic employees thus promoting performance.
- Heads of HEIs should also create a conducive environment which enables full participation of employees on vital academic issues as this enhances performance.
- Motivation is very essential in HEIs so that universities should motivate their staff to improve performance.
- Institutions should train and develop employees in line with new technological changes for staff to perform better

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