Chapter 6

The Viable System Model (VSM) in the Management of Institutions of Higher Education in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed assessing the application of the viable system model (VSM) to institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe. There is increased competition between the institutions themselves, and institutions of higher learning face decreasing budgets owing to the reduction in government financial support. These challenges threaten the viability of institutions of higher education in Zimbabwe and affect unprecedentedly their strategic orientation. The viable system model (VSM) has been recognised as a conceptual tool for understanding organizations, redesigning them (where appropriate) and supporting the management of change. From a sample of 150 respondents including vice chancellors, staff, parents and guardians, students, and other stakeholders, this study found principles of the viable system models are applied through existing organisational structures, although all institutions examined are suffering from various systems pathologies.

1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education refers to postsecondary institutions such as universities, polytechnics, teachers colleges, and other units in government ministries, government parastatal organisations and the private sector as well as other non-governmental organisations (Shizha & Kariwo 2011). In Zimbabwe at independence in 1980, there were five teachers' colleges, two polytechnic colleges, and one university (Mumbengegwi 2001). By 1990, teachers' colleges had increased to 14, technical colleges to eight, and two new vocational training centres (VTCs) were established –but there remained only one university (Mumbengegwi 2001). Zimbabwe educational reforms since 1990 were more focused on the relevance and quality of education. They included new approaches to curriculum content, new technologies and teaching methodologies, skills provision, decentralization of colleges, and the establishing of college advisory boards (Kapungu 2008). The 1999 Presidential Commission on Education and Training, known also as the Nziramasanga Commission, recommended a wide range of educational reforms with a primary focus on teacher education, the sciences, technology, and skills (Kapungu 2008). Many of the country's tertiary institutions have successfully computerized their operations through Educational Management Information Systems (EMIS).

However, institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe are facing unprecedented competition owing to rapid internationalization of institutions in other countries (Altbach and Knight 2007) and a virtually unstoppable global migration movement for educational purposes (Varghese 2008). Majoni (2014) has identified challenges ranging from instruction and teaching, research and publication, quality assurance, staffing (loss of qualified and experienced staff) and decrease in the student population. These challenges occured in a context where institutions of higher learning face decreasing budgets owing to the reduction in government financial support (Mhukahuru 2015, Mawonde 2015, Dzimbo (2015). Moreover, potential students in Zimbabwe have access to universities in other countries because of increased internationalization and globalization (Magwa 2015, Altbach and Knight 2007, Varghese 2008). Internal competition is also on the increase given the unprecedented expansion of the higher education sector in Zimbabwe (Zindi 2015) leading to increased competition for resources, students and qualified staff. Moreover, potential students in Zimbabwe have alternative modes of delivery such as open and distance learning (Kurasha 2015) and online learning (Rourke & Coleman 2011).

These challenges threaten the viability of institutions of higher education in Zimbabwe and affect unprecedentedly their strategic orientation. The Viable System Model (VSM) has been recognised by Espejo and Gill (1997) as a conceptual tool for understanding organizations, redesigning them (where appropriate) and supporting the management of change. Viability refers to the capacity of an organism to maintain

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