

Commodification of Zimbabwe's higher education amid funding decline: Impact on universal access

Barbara H. Tsverukayi, Leon Poshai

Abstract

The volatile economic environment in Zimbabwe, which is characterised by persistent hyperinflation has exposed the education access inequalities in Zimbabwe's public Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The persisting harsh economic conditions in Zimbabwe have further worsened the decline in higher education funding in addition to the budgetary cuts and the removal of student financial support systems in the late 1980s. This study aims to examine the impact of these neoliberal approaches on inclusive education access in Zimbabwe's HEIs. The study used the qualitative research approach. The study participants included purposefully selected university managers and students at a state university in Zimbabwe. Data were collected from university managers through interviews while a combination of interviews and focus group discussions was used to collect data from the students. The study revealed that the adoption of neoliberal approaches such as austerity measures in Zimbabwe created a domino effect in the higher education sector as HEIs started to introduce market-based approaches. The adoption of market-oriented approaches in HEIs denigrated universal access to higher education and incapacitated students financially as shown by the declining enrolments and soaring student debts in the studied HEI. Based on the study results, this article concludes that there is a glaring need for restoring financial support towards empowering Zimbabwe's public HEIs to be responsive to the financial needs of students. This will contribute towards achieving inclusive and equitable education, which promotes universal lifelong learning opportunities as embedded in Sustainable Development Goal 4 and Sustainable Development Goal 10.

Contribution: Through an in-depth account of the experiences of students and managers in HEIs, this study provides an empirical understanding of the challenges associated with the adoption of neoliberal approaches in Zimbabwe's higher education institutions.

Keywords: neoliberal approach in higher education; inclusive education access; austerity measures; decreased enrolments; SDG4; SDG10