

Research Application Summary

Refocusing the Direction of Agricultural Research and Education in Zimbabwe

Nyakudya, E.

Faculty of Agriculture, University of Zimbabwe, P.O. Box MP 167, Mt Pleasant, Harare, Zimbabwe
***Corresponding author:** elijah@agric.uz.ac.zw; elijahnyakudya@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract

This paper highlights on-going transformativ changes taking place at the University of Zimbabwe, which aligns to the Government of Zimbabwe Vision 2030. It focuses on efforts by the Faculty of Agriculture to create inter-disciplinary research groups to promote innovation and industrialization. The University seeks for partnership to strengthen the on-going efforts including in aspects such as retooling academic staff for development relevance.

Key words: Education 5.0, Faculty of Agriculture, Research Groups, University of Zimbabwe

Résumé

Cet article souligne les changements transformatifs en cours à l'Université du Zimbabwe, qui s'alignent sur la Vision 2030 du gouvernement Zimbabween. Il se concentre sur les efforts de la faculté d'agriculture pour créer des équipes de recherche interdisciplinaires afin de promouvoir l'innovation et l'industrialisation. L'université recherche un partenariat pour renforcer les efforts en cours, y compris dans des aspects tels que le rééquipement du personnel universitaire pour un développement approprié.

Mots clés : Éducation 5.0, Faculté d'agriculture, Groupes de recherche, Université du Zimbabwe

Background

The population in sub-Saharan Africa is characterized by fast growth (Simon, 2019) resulting into a demographic structure with a wider base, indicating the youth bulge (Sommer, 2011). This rapid population growth must be accompanied by a proportional growth rate in the supply of raw materials and food. However, the biggest challenge is the bulging youth base that poses potential risk to the governments of the developing nations (Ortiz and Cummins, 2012; Nordås and Davenport, 2013). For example, all these youth would require to be formally employed, thus resulting in governments failing to withstand the pressure, massive rural to urban migration to seek alternative employment other than agriculture (Eshetu and Beshir, 2017; Scoones *et al.*, 2019). Urban areas are becoming over-populated and have increasing evidence of social unrest and poor health facilities while the rural areas particularly agriculture are deprived of the most energetic working group (Eshetu and Beshir, 2017).

In Zimbabwe, more than 60% of formal and informal employment is in agriculture (Chitiyo and Duram, 2017) thus showing the relevance of the Faculties of Agriculture in catalyzing the

national and regional development. Agriculture must be done in a viable manner where sustainable intensification is done with little or no interference with the environment but simultaneously supplying health and nutritious food products, and raw materials with reduced carbon footprints on the environment. The UN Agenda 2063 has also identified agriculture as a top priority in solving regional challenges (Union, 2015). In line with the Agenda 2063, the Government of Zimbabwe with the New Dispensation has set Agenda 2030 where it aims to transform the country into an upper middle income economy within a decade. The Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, and Science and Technology Development spearheaded Education 5.0 where universities business extends from teaching, research and community service to innovation and industrialization.

This means that the Universities must radically shift from the traditional approach of training pure job-seekers but would use the programmatic approach that would unlock the innovation and the entrepreneurship capacity of the students thus allowing them to innovate and industrialize. This means that there is need to change the way business is done in the Faculties of Agriculture and the wider university. Dzomonda and Fatoki (2019) described the roles of institutions of higher learning towards youth entrepreneurship development in Africa while Sumberg and Hunt (2019) showed that the African youth can be innovative if guided by the appropriate policies. The University of Zimbabwe, as the national leading institution, has responded to the Government of Zimbabwe Vision 2030 by developing and implementing the University of Zimbabwe 2019-2025 Strategic Plan. The University of Zimbabwe 2019-2025 Strategic Plan is anchored on five pillars which are all underpinned by research. The Faculty of Agriculture at University of Zimbabwe which is now focusing on a fairly new business has implemented the formation of the Research Groups as a blueprint in the university's Strategic Plan. The recently adopted programmatic approach requires professors to lead trans-disciplinary research groups and programmes. The trans-disciplinary research groups are based on key thematic areas where experienced professors fine tune the research to allow innovation and industrialization in sustainable way. The Faculty of Agriculture has four departments, and each came up with one or more research groups to conduct demand driven research. The Faculty of Agriculture is expected to be the fly wheel to propel and uplift the national development. However, an internal self-evaluation of the Faculty highlighted some pertinent issues that are briefly discussed in this paper.

The Faculty of Agriculture has highly skilled manpower with the largest number of professors within the University of Zimbabwe and has strategic partners that include RUFORUM supporting its activities. However, the Faculty of Agriculture is challenged by the need to embrace transformation and changes in management that requires buy-in from the University staff members. Moreover, the Faculty is confronted by strong competition from world-class universities. To this end, the Faculty requires re-tooling in all areas ranging from staff development, laboratory re-equipment, and engagement of strategic partnerships. The backstopping of RUFORUM has been greatly felt in the Faculty and the University wide through training of staff members, and some are now PhD holders and renowned scientists and transformational leaders. At this point in time, the strategic partnerships with RUFORUM support is more needed than before. For example the Faculty can strengthen its programmatic approach by tapping from the on-going RUFORUM programs offered under Competitive Grant Systems (CGS), that include the Field Attachment Program in Agricultural Sciences (FAPA), Post-Doctoral Fellowship, Mini-Community Action Research program (mini-CARP) and the CARP. Furthermore, the Faculty of Agriculture require key expertise that could be obtained by hiring, staff exchange, collaboration or sending staff for training or relooking within and beyond the RUFORUM member universities consortium. For example, re-training is needed for some members who have less practical experience in particular areas to eliminate regurgitation and recycling of non-functional theory and practice.

In conclusion, the Faculty of Agriculture is faced by reality and huge expectation from the industry to turn around the agro-industry. In line with the Government of Zimbabwe's vision 2030, the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Science and Technology Development's Education 5.0 and the University's Strategic plan 2019-2025, the Faculty is reorienting its business. The Faculty is strengthening engagement with its strategic partners including RUFORUM to enable the Faculty accomplish its immediate and long term goals.

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