

Exploring the Roles of Private Institutions in Provision of Higher Education In Zambia: Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract: *The research focused on assessing the role of Private Institutions in provision of Higher Education which is education provided in colleges, institutes and universities. The study explored the roles private institutions were playing in provision of Higher Education and the opportunities and challenges of such roles. The research analysed secondary data supported by observation of three Universities and one College of Education in Lusaka and Kabwe districts respectively. The findings highlighted that Private Institutions were key partners in provision of Higher Education in the country. Their main role was to complement the Government's efforts in providing Higher Education considered to be of central importance to the economic and social development of the country. Private Institutions extend their education opportunities to students who could not otherwise be enrolled in Public Institutions due to various reasons. This has resulted in increased access to Higher Education of many Zambians. The advantages of Private involvement in provision of Higher Education are that they have contributed to development of diversified programmes not offered in public institutions thereby leading to development and training of human resources needed in the country and often meeting the job market demands. Private Institutions it has been observed have provided uninterrupted educational services throughout the year which leads to smooth running and efficient operations of the programmes. However, one of the challenges highlighted is that Private Institutions in many cases compromise on quality of education provided due to inadequate physical infrastructures befitting an institution of higher learning, inadequate qualified staff, and over-enrolment of students in order to get profit while disregarding the services being offered. It is therefore being recommended that the Higher Education Authority strengthen and tighten their quality control and assurance efforts to guard against any practice compromising the provision of quality Higher Education in the country.*

Keywords: *Challenges, Higher Education, Institution, Opportunities, Private and Roles.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The study explored the role of private sector in provision of Higher Education (HE) in Zambia with the view to establish if the sector make any meaningful contribution towards development of higher education in the country. Higher education in Zambia refers to all post-secondary education training and research done at institutions of learning such as Universities, Technical and Vocational Training institutes as well as Colleges of Education. Masaiti (2024) exemplified higher education as education provided after secondary school education leading to a qualification of certificate, diplomas, bachelor's degrees, masters or doctorate degrees, provided in Universities, colleges, Technical and Vocational institutes among others. From the time of independence, the government of the Republic of Zambia took over from the colonial masters the running of education from Primary to Tertiary which encompasses higher education. The government controlled all levels of education in order to standardize education that was being offered in the country.

Higher education in this paper will be restricted to colleges of education and universities. From independence the government realized the importance of higher education which was considered to be responsible for the social and economic development of the country (Masaiti, 2018). In this vein the government upon attainment of independence established Teacher Training colleges being referred to as Colleges of Education today in all provincial centers of the country. This was done to curb the challenge of lack of trained personnel to train teachers to provide quality education that was needed for a newly independent country. Thus, from 1965-1980, seven (7) primary teachers' training colleges were established to supplement the work of three primary colleges that had been established by Missionary

societies before independence. In addition, three Secondary Teachers' Colleges were established and two universities one of which was affiliated to the other. These were tasked to produce the much-needed personnel in various economic sectors of the country.

1.1. Challenges faced by Public Institutions in Providing Higher Education

The government with time realized it cannot accommodate the increasing population in public institutions. Provision of Higher education in public institutions proved problematic. The government institutions could not accommodate the number of secondary school leavers off loaded every year in the society. This brought restrictive entry qualifications which discriminated many who would have entered tertiary education. Hence, entry to the university or colleges became a preserve of selected few individuals who managed to outstandingly pass the nation secondary school education examinations as it has been the case with many African counties (Mwebi and Simatwa, 2013). Secondly, with time most public institutions built at the time of independence deteriorated emanating in having crumbling facilities, overcrowded lecture halls in the case of the University of Zambia, dilapidated hostels, depleted libraries and laboratories among others in colleges and the university (Kajawo, 2019).

This scenario compromised provision of quality education and affected enrolment of many students. Moreover, the centralized approach adopted by the government at the time of independence led to inefficiencies and declining quality, due to governments' limited capacity to invest adequately in infrastructure, staff and students' services (Mwila et al, 2025). Thus, the increasing rates of enrolment in institutions of higher learning which were often faster than their capacities resulting in over-crowding of students, shortage of learning materials influenced the need to involve other stakeholders in provision of higher education. Furthermore, the inability of the public institutions to satisfy the growing social demands for higher education in the country necessitated the call for private sector involvement (Varghese, 2004). Above all the financial challenges the government was facing in funding higher education precipitated the need to include other stakeholders in provision of higher education. It was soon realized that provision of education in the county cannot be left to the government alone but needed a plurality of providers (MoE, 1996).

1.2. Liberalisation of Higher Education in Zambia

From 1990, it became evident that the government alone could not meet the growing population demand for higher education. The demand from an ever-growing population in the country in need of obtaining degrees which were seen to hold the promise of greater life time earnings and opportunities to work outside the country (Kajawo, 2019) forced the Zambian government to formulate reforms aimed at allowing other stakeholders to participate in providing higher education. However, private sector involvement in providing higher education was part of Global Revolution that came with liberalization of economy which was instituted as part of Structural Adjustment Programme required by World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) as conditions for borrowing money by Sub-Saharan African Countries (Masaiti, 2018).

This compelled the government to adopt liberalization policies. Liberalisation in this context refers to the shift away from state monopoly that call for reforms aimed at promoting institutional autonomy, deregulation, market competition and private sector participation (Mwila et al, 2025). In response to the global revolution, supported by the Multi-party Democracy (MMD) philosophy of liberal democracy, the Zambian government passed Acts that opened doors to private sector involvement in provision of higher education in the country (Bwalya, 2023). In 1997 the University Act no 11 allowed liberalisation of higher education and legal recognition of private higher institutions of learning (Mwila et al, 2025).

From 1997, private universities and colleges were established all over the country with majority concentrated in Lusaka and Copperbelt provinces respectively. The first private university to be established in the country was Cavendish, followed by Zambia Open University in 2002 (Simukanga et al. 2019). From this time Zambia witnessed incredible establishment of private colleges and universities. From 2000-2010 for example 35 private universities were established which increased to 63 by 2020 (Mwila, et al, 2025). This transformation went hand in hand with the establishment of colleges of education all over the country. As today 2025 the country has recorded 98 private universities and university colleges and about 141 Colleges of Education. (<https://hea.org.zm/higher-education-in-zambia-progress-and-challenges/>)

1.3. Theoretical framework

The study was guided by Human Capital Theory (HCT). The human capital theory was developed by economists such as Gary Becker and Theodoro Schults in the 1960s' who recognised education and training as forms of capital. Proponents of this theory argued and see education as an investment that accelerate productivity in those who acquire it. The components of human capital it is argued consist of abilities, knowledge, skills, personal talents, behaviour and effort that one acquires through increased levels of education (Rajabhat, 2017) which results in higher income and more productivity. Thus, education was considered to be a significant investment in human capital with clear benefits for the individual, the economy and society at large. This education is one acquired at high level being investigated in this study and that is what makes this theory suitable for this study.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study used descriptive and applied qualitative research techniques whose objective was descriptive as they existed. It utilised secondary data to analyse the role of private sector in provision of higher education in three private universities and one College of Education in Lusaka and Kabwe districts and arrived at an inductive ex post facto research for descriptive purposes.

2.1. Research Findings

Private sector it has been revealed has contributed to the advancement of higher education in the country (Mwila et al, 2025, Bwalya, 2023, Simukanga et al, 2019). The role of private sector as regards higher education has been seen in supplementing the governments' efforts in increasing access and attainment of higher education in the country (Masaiti, 2018). This has been achieved by the private sector setting up many higher education institutions which have allowed many Zambians to receive higher education. Many Zambian students who would not have accessed higher education due to limited opportunities in public universities and colleges, it has been revealed and observed have accessed this type of education through private higher institutions. Kajawo (2020:388) observed that "Private universities enroll significant number of students including those who would otherwise be unable to be enrolled at selected public universities due to the quality of their grades and other reasons. Hence, they widen students' access and choice in higher education." Moreover, private institutions it has been observed are quickly responsive to the changing needs and circumstances of society. This is because the institutions are run by the owners who are after profit hence, look for any opportunity that can bring speed profit. Thus, they offer curriculum and programmes which respond to the needs of society and industrial and market demands as was observed in all the universities studied.

Notwithstanding, private sector has expanded and continue to expand what public universities and colleges started which among others include research, technology, teaching and learning strategies. Masaiti (2018) intimated that higher institutions of learning such as universities have been conducting commissioned research in crucial areas such as education, agriculture, health, environment, natural resources, and energy among others which help to improve people's lives in the country. These researches are not limited to public universities but are also extended to private institutions as was observed. Through these researches, the society is being enriched with the knowledge, skills and competences needed for integral human development. In addition, private higher institutions of learning and their personnel it has been learnt serve as conduits for the transfer of knowledge and skills generated elsewhere into the country.

This is done through the various courses they offer in their institutions (MoE, 1996). Suffice to say, private institutions of higher education work to promote through education offered in their institutions economic growth and preparation of students who upon graduating would become productive workers for the labor market and economy (Mpolomoka et al, 2018) which Zambia as a country needs.

2.2. Opportunities

The establishment of private higher institutions of learning has reduced the financial constraints the government was facing in running the public institutions of higher education that existed in the country for a very long time. Standards went down in public institutions of learning due to poor funding by the government which resulted into deterioration of infrastructure and low quality of education. Private sector has however, considered education to be an investment hence put in a lot to attract many clients it was observed. This corresponds with the human capital theory that propagates for higher education

and encourage institutions to invest in this type of education (Rajabhat, 2017). The inclusion of private sector in provision of higher education, it has been noted and stated has led to expansion of programmes and innovation and diversification of higher education (Kajawo, 2020). The sectors' flexibility in management and administration of higher institutions of learning, be it universities or colleges, has enabled them to introduce and offer programmes not available in public institutions of learning but which are responsive to the job and market demand. This system in the end has helped to train human resources needed in many sectors of the country and has brought a lot of innovation in the higher education sector (Kajawo, 2019). This system was noted in all the universities and college of education included in this study.

In alignment with the above point, it has been observed that private institutions' need for profit has enabled them to invest in modern teaching methods and technology lagging behind in some public institutions. This situation has resulted in reaching many prospecting students by offering online programmes using well advanced gadgets and software not easily available in some public institutions. This was observed in two of the three universities studied. Besides, it has been noted that private institutions provide a wider choice of which university one should attend unlike when only one public university existed in the country. With the mushrooming of many higher education institutions, prospecting candidates are not restricted to few selected universities but have the opportunity to choose from so many private institutions that suit their desires. The choice of university depends on family expectations, reputation of the institution, affordability of fees, and courses or programmes offered among others (Mwila et al, 2025).

Most importantly, it has been found that private higher institutions have contributed to producing many graduates in society because they provide uninterrupted educational calendars and monitor students closely unlike what is happening in public higher institutions (Kajawo, 2019). The scenario was observed in all the three universities as well as the college of education researched on. This act leads to the smooth running of programmes without distractions and enable students to graduate on time. Correspondingly, private institutions of higher education are known to produce students who are more ethical and disciplined. Kajawo (2019) in his study found that private institution rarely enrolled and maintained students with unruly behaviour who indulged themselves in barbaric activities like violent demonstrations/ protests against management or breaking and stoning public properties whenever aggrieved. This lends private institutions a plus unlike what is taking place in public universities where protests, demonstrations are common features of the institutions. This situation was very outstanding in one of the church owned universities studied in this research.

On one hand it has been revealed that some private higher institutions provide relevant and quality education to their students. Suleiman et al (2017) in his studies conducted in private institutions in Nigeria but, which is applicable to the Zambian situation noted that quality and relevance is assured in private institutions and that whatever costs one spends on education, he/she is assured that it is valuable than what is pertaining in public universities. This entails private institutions offer courses and programmes of high quality and which are relevant and respond to the needs of the society. This they do by implementing best practices in pedagogy, curriculum and instructional methods which are significant to maintain relevance. Besides, it has been observed and pointed out that some private institutions have provided quality education because they hire retired lecturers, Doctors and Professors who are more experienced and knowledgeable as teaching staff. This was observed in one university studied. The recruited staff when equipped with resources and requisite learning materials such as updated text books, deliver quality material that culminate in quality education (Leng, 2010, Kajawo, 2019).

Admittedly, private institutions through their education have contributed to creation of many job opportunities both for academic and non-academic staff who operate in these institutions and offer various services. If these institutions were not established people working in these institutions would have been jobless. This aspect has led to reduction of unemployment rates in the society. Additionally, it is imperative to argue that the emergency of so many private institutions of higher learning has compelled the government to pass laws that opened up the creation of more public universities and colleges to compete with the ever increasing number of private institutions. The enacting of the Higher Education Act of 2013 saw the creation of more Universities and upgrading of some colleges to

Universities such as Kwame Nkrumah College to Kwame Nkrumah University, Chalimbana National In-Service to Chalimbana University, Copperbelt Teachers' College to Mukuba University among others (Simukanga et al, 2019). Thus to date the public Universities stand at nine (9) and 10 Colleges of Education. For effective provision of Higher Education, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) was established whose functions are to regulate and monitor standards in higher education Institutions so as to ensure that quality services are being rendered especially in private institutions of higher education. Therefore, all Higher Institutions of learning whether private or public fall under the umbrella of HEA for quality assurance of what they are doing in their institutions

2.3. Challenges

Despite the many opportunities scored as a result of involving the private sector in providing higher education, this has not been without challenges. One outstanding challenge has been the inequality in provision of higher education between rural and urban areas (Simukanga et al, 2019). It has been revealed that three (3) out of ten (10) provinces do not have a university in their areas. These include North-western, Luapula and Northern provinces respectively. This scenario has created inequality and affected access and equity to higher education to people living in these provinces who have to go to either Lusaka or Copperbelt where such institutions have been established with Lusaka having about 40 and Copperbelt 12 universities (Mwila et al, 2025). Secondly, Higher education provided in private institutions is selective thereby creating inequality. This is based on understanding that private institutions charge exorbitant fees which favors the rich and disadvantages the poor who cannot afford to pay such fees (Muyunda, 2021). This situation was observed in all three universities studied and restricts access to some individuals even when they have right qualifications for certain courses offered in private institutions which may be on high demand on the labor market.

To a certain extent, some private institutions of learning are compromising on quality of education. It was noted that most of private higher institutions of learning put profit making first, while disregarding the quality of service they offer (Obagan, 2006, Suleiman et al, 2017). Their administrators are more eager to recruit more students and introduce more courses that will attract more students without taking into account the physical and material resources available in their institutions for the courses introduced. This situation has contributed to low quality education offered in some private institutions and compromised standards. Coupled with this is inadequate physical infrastructure.

It has been noted and observed that some private higher institutions of learning do not have the required infrastructures befitting an institution of higher learning in line with the international standards (Garwe, 2015) despite being provided with standards by HEA. In a bid to make profit a good number of institutions established their institutions in houses which have been expanded though not bearing the face of an institution of higher learning. Some colleges and universities have been established in old dilapidated buildings and garages which after some renovations have been turned into higher institutions of learning. This was the case with one college of education visited and studied. These buildings provide low standard lecture rooms, theaters, laboratories, libraries. In this college the laboratories, computer rooms and libraries are poorly equipped with old books and equipment. The situation add to provision of low quality education. Suleiman et al (2017) observed that most of the universities did not have the financial resources to construct, establish and sustain the right physical structures required for quality learning. This scenario is the same with the Zambian situation.

Furthermore, in one college and one university studied, the compromise on quality is also fueled by their lack of qualified staff in some programmes they offer. It was observed the institutions offer a lot of courses and programmes without having enough qualified academic staff. It has been a common phenomenon in many countries which applies to the Zambian situation where private universities and colleges deploy a small number of full time lecturers and instead depend on part time lecturers (Ajadi, 2010, Kajawo, 2019). The part time lecturers leave the institution any time and may not put in the best because of commitments in some other places. Private institutions have also a tendency of hiring staff with lower qualifications where they do not have the right people to hire as was the case in one university studied. This situation is against HEA regulations and compromise on quality. Above all it was observed that higher institutions offering higher education are struggling with finances to help them offer quality training to their students. Private sector from the beginning has not received any help from the government to assist them establish themselves. The government provided no support or facilitated

their access to financial help (MoE, 1996). This has affected a good number of groups especially those not doing well in this sector to expand their capacity to offer highly valued programmes and furnish themselves with requisite physical and material resources needed to provide valuable trainings to prospecting clients.

3. CONCLUSION

The study has established that private sector plays a crucial role in promotion of higher education in the country. Since it was brought on board many Zambian people have graduated from their institutions and are contributing to the social and economic development of the country. The efforts being made cannot be overemphasized. The contribution made has helped to solve the challenges being experienced by public higher institutions of learning. The opportunities noted in increasing access and equity in provision of higher education outweighs the challenges hence private sector need to be supported as they are not competitors on the market but collaborators. However, the issue of providing quality of education which public universities are credited for needs to be taken serious so that no compromise is tolerated.

Higher Education Authority charged with the responsibility of ensuring quality must strengthen and tighten their quality control and assurance efforts on private institutions to check against any compromising actions by private institutions in the provision of higher education. More monitoring and inspections are needed to put these institutions in line with international standards and according to the expectations of the government.

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Exploring the Roles of Private Institutions in Provision of Higher Education In Zambia: Opportunities and Challenges

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