
ZIMBABWE: Region commits to rebuilding universities

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Universities in Southern Africa have rallied to support the rebuilding of higher education in Zimbabwe, in what could evolve into a model of regional collaboration. Following a meeting of vice-chancellors in Cape Town convened by the Southern African Regional Universities Association, a special envoy to Zimbabwe will be appointed to identify priority needs and develop an action plan to assist a sector devastated by a decade of political turmoil.

SARUA organised the meeting on 24 April following a request from the Zimbabwean Universities' Vice-chancellors Association, ZUVCA, for strategic assistance to stabilise universities under threat from an exodus of academics and professionals, weakened research and teaching infrastructure, and lack of internet connectivity and access to resources.

The meeting, called the SARUA Leadership Dialogue on Rebuilding Higher Education in Zimbabwe, led to a **"Cape Town Accord and Call for Action"** that was finalised last week.

"It was an historic moment, the potential of which was probably not clear in the minds of vice-chancellors when we started talking," Professor Derrick Swartz, Vice-chancellor of South Africa's Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, told *University World News*.

"By the end of the conversation, we had reached a momentous agreement on support for higher education in Zimbabwe."

Vice-chancellors from across Southern Africa, Swartz said, committed to actions ranging from encouraging academics to visit or return to Zimbabwe to ease critical staff shortages and helping to train postgraduates to connecting universities to fast broadband now available in South Africa and using ICTs for joint teaching programmes.

Professor Lindela Ndlovu, Vice-chancellor of the National University of Science and Technology and chair of ZUVCA, said one achievement of the dialogue "was the willingness of vice-chancellors to respond to our clarion call for assistance". Another was realisation of how useful a regional body could be in bringing universities together to tackle challenges.

The appointment of a special envoy will be coordinated by SARUA in partnership with the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education and ZUVCA, which will convene a steering committee to guide the work of the envoy and ensure that development of an action plan for assistance is led by the Zimbabwean higher education sector.

SARUA, in consultation with Zimbabwean university leaders, will draft a proposal to raise funds to support and host the work of the envoy in the coming months. The envoy's tasks will be to ascertain the higher education sector's priority needs, propose strategies to respond to them, identify implementation means and draft an action plan and budget.

The African Development Bank had already expressed interest in supporting the initiative, said Piyushi Kotecha CEO of SARUA, which works to develop a regional identity for higher education and enhance university collaboration in the Southern African Development Community.

"We believe this could evolve into a model for regional higher education collaboration," she told *University World News*.

The Cape Town Accord endorsed the need for collective leadership, on a regional level, to realise the developmental benefits of higher education in Southern Africa.

But it also stressed that higher education was first and foremost a national responsibility. "The outcomes of the dialogue tend towards supporting the leadership of the higher education sector in Zimbabwe in their process of rebuilding and revitalising the sector," it stated.

Higher education in Zimbabwe made a significant contribution to the region, and decline in its performance weakened the sector across Southern Africa.

Zimbabwe had the second highest student enrolment in the region, 18% of total student enrolment in science, engineering and technology, nearly a quarter of students in business management and law, and close to 20% of enrolments in the humanities and social sciences.

However, the sector faced "significant challenges that threaten its very survival". While demand for graduates and academic services continued to grow, resources to meet those demands had dramatically diminished during Zimbabwe's political and economic crises.

Institutions now operated with "grossly inadequate financial, material, human and other resources. The exodus of senior academics, in particular, exerts an enormous constraint on the capacity of the system to reproduce itself," the Accord reported.

Zimbabwean university leaders at the meeting identified four areas of priority needs:

* A critical need for qualified academic and teaching staff. Measures to assist staff to become better qualified were the highest priority. Also needed were teaching and learning facilities, equipment including better-

resourced libraries, computers and access to the internet.

* An increase in research funding to expand knowledge production. Mentoring through collaborative research was required to develop the skills of young researchers. The visibility of Zimbabwean research needed to increase through communication and publication.

* Significant expansion of teaching, laboratory, administrative and research infrastructure was required to accommodate growth in student numbers. Universities needed support to connect to new broadband availability in South Africa so that they could acquire reliable and cheaper connectivity and use ICTs in management, teaching, learning and research.

* Improvements in institutional governance and management, which had been eroded by lack of funds and personnel. Turnover of senior managers was high and vacancies could not be filled due to poor working conditions, the political situation and a scarcity of qualified skills.

The Accord called on governments, donors and universities to actively support student and staff mobility, exchange and collaboration in higher education in Southern Africa. Mutual reciprocity was fundamental to making cooperation work and should be a core criterion guiding collaborative projects, it said.

The vice-chancellors committed to a range of collaborative activities aimed at rebuilding higher education in Zimbabwe.

One short-term pledge was to find innovative ways to make staff available to Zimbabwean institutions for limited periods. Many academics in the region, the Accord pointed out, already had working relations with colleagues in Zimbabwe and these could be developed, where practical, and extended to increase support for universities in that country.

Staff could be made available through, for instance, secondments, exchanges and research supervision. Institutions were encouraged to take full advantage of ICTs for teaching and learning within and across borders.

The Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education would collect information on specific staff shortages, and would facilitate contact between local universities and institutions across the region so that support could be negotiated.

"Vice-chancellors are encouraged to issue a communiqué that informs academics at their institutions of this request for assistance and that encourages them to assess opportunities for providing support," the Accord stated.

Medium-term action will focus on the appointment and work of the special envoy. While universities required immediate assistance, the Accord said, vice-chancellors were "hopeful that the process of stabilising higher education in Zimbabwe will create a strategic space for thinking through the long-term sustainability of the sector in that country".

Challenges faced by higher education in Zimbabwe were challenges to all of SADC, the Accord concluded. "We are convinced that cooperation and partnerships among higher education institutions in the region and other stakeholders such as government, donors and the private sector are a *sine qua non* for addressing the plight of Zimbabwe and the region."