

An Exploration of the Concept of Value in Higher Education

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I. Introduction

The concept of “value” in education has emerged as a critical area of study by academics and administrators as higher education institutions seek self sustenance. The drive to pursue self sustenance by universities emanates from a decline at a global level in state funding for higher education and the increased competition in the higher education sector due to globalization. Survival and sustainability of higher education institutions therefore depend on the ability of the institutions to understand and create “value”.

An analogy has been used to describe the value of higher education as that which a learner earns in the process of being educated, which is similar to the value inputs receive as they are transformed into a product or service, (FrankOUNL, 2014). A proposition is posed by McFarlane (2012) who observes that many people seeking some form of training and education to improve their skills enhance their prospects for employment. Many learners are preoccupied with the acquisition of the necessary training, skills, and education required to enhance the value of their education, which in turn makes it easier for them to enter the job market.

Lawrence (2014) poses a question on the value of education and proposes a few guidelines on what value in education is and how it could be measured. The value of a college education is what the learner acquires after going through a period of learning, which could be measured in the number of certificates, in the short term, or the type of job the learner gets, in the long term. The acquisition would reflect the ability, or abilities, a learner learns. The value is measured by how well the education imparts critical abilities that students will need to thrive, not just in the short term, but in the years and decades to come. The acquisition of the critical abilities allows graduates to fulfill their potential and to make a difference in the world. This is grounded in the belief that students have the right to create meaningful lives for themselves in whatever field they choose. This could be in social services or business, in teaching or entrepreneurial enterprises. The right comes from the realisation that when people speak about the “value” of education they are speaking about the personal and professional trajectory of a human being.

Lawrence (2014) further observes that the value of education enables the learner to acquire six critical abilities, which are; to think analytically, to express ideas effectively in writing, to exchange ideas effectively through oral communication, to bring innovation to their work, devise and carry out an independent project, and to accept and act on criticism. These are the abilities that set the learned apart from those not learned and, because of these abilities, the employer pays the holder of a certificate that proves the learner reached a certain level of learning more than those who do not hold the same certificate. This is the value of education society places on the holder of the education. The graduates, armed with the abilities, believe they need to fulfill their personal destinies in life after college and they also believe they are a cut above those who do not hold the same value of education, as reflected by the qualification they hold. What this effectively means is that the value of education, as reflected by the qualification one has, differs according to the level of education.

Barrett *et al* (2000) brings in a different view to the value of education, equating value to quality of education; quality that emphasises learning for social development, through the promotion of life skills. They give what they call the economist view of education which uses quantitative measurable outputs as a measure of quality. For example, enrolment ratios and retention rates, rates of return on investment in education in terms of earnings and cognitive achievement as measured in national or international tests. The progressive or humanist tradition tends to place more emphasis on educational processes, which result in the quality of education and it is that quality which depicts the value of education. UNESCO, cited in Barrett, *et al* (2000), view education as essential although not sufficient for human development and as having cultural, even spiritual, benefits which are reflected in the quality of the education; the higher the quality the greater the value of the education.

The current study seeks to identify and pin down the concept of value in education, with special reference to higher education. There is some confusion between the concept of value in education and value education, with a lot of attention being focused on the value of education, where disparity in the interpretation of the concept has been rife. There seems to be less heated debate on value education, which tends to be self-explanatory.

Statement of the problem

There seems to be as many definitions of value in higher education as there are researchers on the topic. This study seeks to explore the concept of value in higher education, with special reference to the Zimbabwean situation.

Significance of the paper

The stakeholders of higher and tertiary education institutions could be the core beneficiaries of this study. The study places education in context. Education is an investment and the investors should derive value out of that investment. This paper will allow stakeholders to appreciate the value of education they are either giving, receiving or managing. The study would open their intellect to the value of higher education.

The Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to expose the different interpretations of the value of higher education with special reference to Zimbabwe.

Research Question

The primary research question is:

1. What is the meaning of value in higher education?

The secondary question is:

2. How do the different explanations of the value of education converge into a single overriding concept of the value of higher education?

Research objectives

The primary objective of the study is:

1. To narrate the various meanings of value in higher education

The subsidiary research objective is:

2. To state one overriding concept of the value of education in higher education.

Limitations

The major limitation is devising a relevant instrument with which to explore the various explanations of the value of education. The instruments the researchers identified tend to have limitations in extracting the data from respondents. The researchers adopted a position information questionnaire since it helps to define and classify the positions of stakeholders on the value of education. This is because there is limited agreement or convergence of views on what constitutes value in higher education. The normal questionnaire, the close-ended and the open-ended questionnaire, would not be able to classify the captured data.

Review of related literature

The purpose of the review of related literature was to enable the researcher to explore the concept of value in higher education as it is covered by authors; to discover what other researchers say is the value of education and to unpack the concept of value.

McFarlane (2012) defines the value of education from both the economic and marketing standpoints. Value refers to the extent to which the product or service is perceived to meet the wants and or needs of the user. In this respect value is measured by the client's willingness to pay a certain price for the product or service. Normally, a client refuses to pay a price thought to be beyond the value of the service or product. Thus, value from this perspective depends more on the customers' perceptions of the worth of the service than on its intrinsic value. In the economic sense, value arises from the benefit and the right of ownership, or the interaction with a product or service. Value, in the economic sense, is derived from the use of a product or service and from ownership of the same. The power of the product or service to command a price is derived from the benefit of the good or ownership of the product or service.

It often argued that society places value on education based on its economic cost or the perceived benefit from the use the product. Educational value obtains in a society where increasing competition and decreasing available opportunities are forcing employers and other institutions to discriminate in the types of talents and degrees they select in terms of perceived value when it comes to competencies of knowledge workers. In the current Zimbabwean economy too many prospective employees are chasing after too few jobs, the few employers available select their employees by asking for progressively higher qualifications for example; an economy that require potential security guards to be degreed has a high unemployment rate. The value of education rises astronomically in such an economy. The utility of a good or service, or the power of a good or service to command other goods, services, or money, in voluntary exchange, reflects the product's ultimate value, in this case the value of education (McFarlane, 2012).

The researchers were interested to determine if McFarlane (2012) definition of the value of education obtains in the Zimbabwean sense. It is common sense that students have and do foster great expectations of the higher education institutions meeting their needs, which expectations are expressed in the form of needs, wants, desires, and opinions and are translated into the interpretation of what defines quality, effectiveness, and all the variables of customer satisfaction which ultimately translates to value.

Dolors (1996) contends that the long-term goal in education is to ensure that everyone completes a basic education of adequate quality, acquires foundation skills, which include literacy, numeracy, reasoning and social skills such as teamwork. Education also exposes the learner to opportunities to learn advanced skills throughout life, in a range of post-basic education settings, right up to higher education level. At higher education level, institutions are expected to equip learners with various components of educational quality that can be taken to form a useful analytical framework for the concept. The components can be summarised into five areas, which are: effectiveness, efficiency, equality, relevance and sustainability.

Effectiveness. This refers to the depth to which the objectives in an education system are attained. Normally, the component is divided into internal and external effectiveness. Internal effectiveness relates to how an institution operates. The external effectiveness component relates to the degree to which the needs of the learner are provided for in the education system.

Efficiency. The concept of efficiency is primarily concerned with the conversion of inputs into outputs. The more inputs the system requires to produce a given number of outputs the less efficient its production system.

Equality. This component of educational quality commonly arises from a position that takes quality education as a human right. The component features prominently when a discussion includes or involves disadvantaged communities.

Sustainability, the component of sustainability is becoming more and more conspicuous in education. It addresses considerations of the future, the present generation should not exhaust current resources but care for them in such a way those future generations will use the same resources. This brings in the elements of efficiency and quality.

Relevance. Education should save a given purpose otherwise it ceases to be valuable. For instance, the greater portion of education syllabi is devoted to development issues.

Excellence. ENQA AISBL (2014) extend the concept of value to education by bringing in the concept of excellence; for education to be valuable it has to be excellent, which means it has to be of the highest quality.

II. Concepts of Value in Higher Education

The concept of value in education is a product of many variables; value is determined and affected by an individual's experience, level of satisfaction, psychological and mental state, the totality of experience concerning a service or product, image, price and those same characteristics in substitutes or alternatives and the perceived customer value. According to McFarlane (2012) there are efficacy perceptions that also affect the perceived value and quality in higher education. Earlier in the study value was defined as the design and delivery of customer value. In the case of higher education, customers are students and institutions employ graduates who seek jobs with their distance learning skills, certifications, degrees, and education. Apart from the satisfaction that students get with a certain level of education, there are expectations which concern value that programmes and institutions must meet. In higher education programmes must be accredited, and this somehow guarantees that every programme meets basic requirements which an external body sets in order to ensure that the programme satisfy minimum needs of stakeholders.

Pearigen (2013) considers a number of studies done in United States of America on the value of education and the finding was largely reflective of the investment learners committed to the acquisition of education. This value is reflected in the quality of life lived by a graduate of a higher education institution. Overall, people with college education do better in the labor market than people with no education beyond high school. Higher levels of education correspond, on average, to higher levels of employment and higher wages.

In a study on the value of higher education by Masterson the same findings were arrived at; in addition to the high financial value of higher education, higher education also makes individuals much more intelligent than what they would be with just a high school education. The more intelligent an individual is the better quality of life they are likely to have. The value of education is invariably linked to the quality of life the learner lives after graduating. The cost of acquiring the education is viewed as an investment whose return is the job the learner gets and the salary level; the higher the qualification the higher the returns in terms of salary earnings.

In a paper on Spotlight Report in USA on value of education the same findings as those recorded above emerged. The value of education is realised through the role the university plays in terms of its contributions to the moral and intellectual life of the learner. Poor Americans have used education as a stepping stone to bridge the poverty divide. Education has always been used to solve problems of inequality and low social mobility because improving the quality of and access to education has the potential to increase the equality of opportunity

for all Americans. The world acclaimed ticket out of poverty has always been the degree certificate. The value of an education has risen significantly in the past decade, but the actual price in the form of university fees for many lower- and middle-income students has not been affordable. There has been the realisation that there are very few investments that yield similar or comparable returns to a good education. The conclusion in the Spotlight Report in USA was that education offered three times greater chance of moving from the bottom rank of poverty, as represented by higher wages and an increased chance of securing higher employment. This is the concept of the value of education prevalent in the United States of America.

Admittedly, learners with a higher education qualification experienced higher exposure to labour opportunities than their uneducated counterparts. They also experience an added advantage to study or work abroad, unlike those whose level of education was low; the higher the education level the higher the value a learner received. The value increased with the length of time spent pursuing an education because it left the learner with enhanced skills that are essential for success in life. These are the skills of critical thinking, problem solving, and written and oral communication.

The College Board of America released a report entitled 'Education Pays 2013': The Benefits of Higher Education for Individuals and Society in which it documents ways in which both individuals and society as a whole benefit from increased levels of education. The report finds that benefits include increased earnings, higher employment levels, and greater tax revenues; better health and increased civic engagement. More specifically, it finds that higher education degree holders make 27% more than those with only a high school diploma.

Pew Research Centre (2011) has reported that the results of virtually every measure of economic well-being and career attainment, which includes personal earnings, job satisfaction and the employed full time has shown that young higher education graduates are outperforming their peers with less education. There is a wide gap between the current young adults compared with those from previous generations. Because women now surpass men by record numbers in university enrolment and completion, they now have a more positive view than men about the value higher education provides.

North Dakota State University (2014) found, in a study, that the rate of return on investment (ROI) of a learner can be mathematically calculated, and objectively demonstrates that a learner's investment, in the form of fees, in higher education, offers an ROI well in excess of common investment alternatives. This means that the value people attach to higher education is viewed in terms of job opportunities and the quality of life for the graduate of higher education institutions.

Kishore (2013) says the major value for higher education in India is employability, if an education does not bequeath to the learner the necessary collection of soft skills, communication skills and multidisciplinary knowledge, which is essential to become employable, then the education, ceases to be valuable. The Indira Gandhi Open National University started short-term courses for ODL graduates in order to transfer to them skills and value-added outputs that are expected in the employment market or for self-employment so that they could contribute to the growth of the nation. The value placed on the education is its ability to attract employment for the learner, just like was found to be the case in the United States of America. In both situations an employer wanted a graduate job seeker who possessed the skills and abilities to match the job profile that needed to be filled.

Higher education provided without the potential to nurture values, losses its heart and soul, according to Sushma and Pant. They believe that whatever a learner learns will determine how the learner will live out their lives in future. Normally, a nation pins its hopes and aspirations for a prosperous and successful life of the public and society on education. Education was thought to be a cultural good for individual moral development and was to have very little to do with economic well-being or material progress. Education had to provide principally the codes of behaviour, as exemplified in the instructions above, initiation to the value system and an understanding of the ultimate objective of life in terms of spirituality. The ultimate goal of the whole process of education was to unravel the 'truth', to manifest "the perfection already in man", to combine knowledge with compassion and efficiency with moral excellence.

III. Research Methodology

The study employed the qualitative research methodology, adopted from the awareness that paradigms were worldviews or belief systems that guided research. The study was spread over all the universities in Zimbabwe, the state owned institutions and the privately owned universities. The targeted constituents were the management, academic staff, administrators and students. The respondents were selected through the stratified random sampling technique so as to get representation from the important stakeholders interested in the value concept of higher education sector in Zimbabwe. The study was based on a sample of 20 respondents; of these 5 were managers, 5 academic staff, 5 students and 5 administrators. Data were collected through in-depth interviews. Data presentation was done through smart art graphic and narrative methods.

IV. Findings

The senior managers' perspective

Senior managers defined the concept of value in education from a more strategic level with consideration of the mandate of the university and the significance of its outputs to the socio economic development of the country. Figure 1 below summarizes and contextualizes the concept of value as understood by senior managers of higher education institutions.



Figure 1: Concept of value in higher education, Management's perspective

The senior managers in state owned universities generally perceived the concept of value as the ability of a university to fulfill its mandate as defined by the government. State universities have specific mandates which direct the institutions' focus, for example the National University of Science and Technology and Bindura University of Science education have specific mandates to teach science and engineering subjects. Other Universities have also been required to spearhead industrial growth of the country through teaching science, technology, engineering and mathematics related subjects in support of the Government' STEM policy.

With STEM, higher education is expected to transform the country's youth from employment seeking learners to employment creating entrepreneurs hence enhancing the socio-economic development of the country and of its citizens.

Respondents also indicated that universities are regarded as of national value and relevance only to the extent to which they effectively executed their mandates in producing tangible outputs on the clusters of the Government's Zim-ASSET economic blueprint.

The students' perspective

The students' understanding of the concept of value was deviating from the definitions by the senior managers in both state and private universities in Zimbabwe. Students' dissection of the concept of value was purely based on their needs hence the major parameters underlined by students were service quality, employability, international relevance and the ability of education to produce critical thinkers.

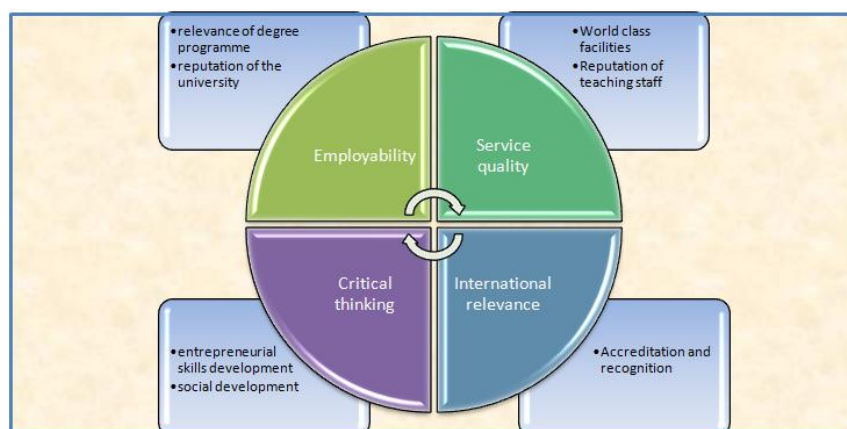


Figure 2: students understanding of value in education

The perspectives of academic staff

Academic staff interpreted the concept of value in a business minded orientation, with economic sustainability as the major objective of a higher education institution. The supporting activities and dimensions

include the generation of sustainable industry income streams. The respondents were of the view that universities create value when they develop solutions to industry problems and partner industry in developing products.



Figure 3: Academic staff perceptions of value in higher education

It was the view of academicians that the concept of value in higher education is captured by patentable research outputs and intellectual property. The respondents indicated that universities have a mandate to carry out research and scholarship activities and the credibility of any university is hinged on the quality and quantity of research output.

The academics emphasized the importance of quality teaching and learning for the reputation of any university. Successful programmes are launched and sustained by the availability of reputable professors who expertly impart knowledge to the students. The study also revealed that there was an increased impact of the quality of facilities available to students and employees, physical facilities and online services on the perceived value of higher education institutions.

The employees' perspective to value in education

The general administrators in universities defined the concept of value in education as an interface of service quality, self sustenance, relevant programmes and the achievement of the national mandate of the university.

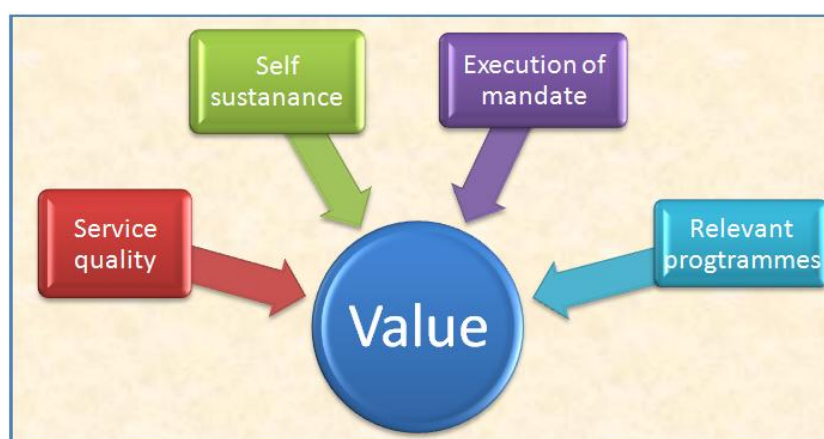


Figure 4: Administrators description of the concept of value in higher education

The general administration staff in higher education institutions conceptualized value as a construct of service quality to internal and external customers. The study revealed that customer satisfaction and goodwill have become important key result areas in modern universities as signaled by the increased effort to mobilize universities alumni bodies.

The study revealed that there was an increased effort towards making state owned universities self sustainable through increasing enrolment and rationalization of costs. Of particular significance was the widely reported intention of the University of Zimbabwe to cut a minimum of 700 jobs as the university implemented a staff rationalization programme. The respondents indicated that universities were anxious about the Government's commitment to paying salaries in the long run hence the preemptive efforts to increase self sustenance.

Administrators were also in agreement with management on the importance of the execution of a university's mandate hence alignment of this mandate with the university's programmes. The study revealed that universities were considered as creating value by offering relevant programmes which empower industry and also develops the students' entrepreneurial capacity.

V. Conclusion

The study concludes that value in higher education in the 21st century has developed into a student centric and marketing oriented concept. Universities are required to offer demand driven programmes which empower students with critical thinking skills and boost students' chances of securing employment. More importantly value in higher education is perceived from a macro and micro level, institutions are required to produce outputs of national value and also contribute effectively to transforming individual lives.

VI. Recommendations

The study made the following recommendations based on the findings and conclusions;

- Higher education institutions should adopt a marketing orientation and create student centred value
- Universities should develop competencies in line with strategic national objectives so that they make national and international impact
- Universities should set up think-tanks of national significance and contribute effectively to national discourse and influence government policies
- Universities in developing countries should strive to improve standards through implementing internationalisation strategies
- Strategies for achieving self sustenance should be flexible and include collaboration with upcoming entrepreneurs with new ideas

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