

## GAINING COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE: THE CASE OF FIVE SELECTED INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING IN ZIMBABWE

Angela Maposa

Shepard Mutsau

Tawanda Dzama

### **1.0 ABSTRACT**

This paper used a business lens to analyse human resources and marketing strategies used by Zimbabwean Universities to gain competitive advantage. It recognised the intense competition among institutions of higher learning, collected data, arrived at plausible conclusions and finally arrived at recommendations. This paper concluded that there was business in non-profit making organisations like universities. It also found that the majority of Human Resources Strategies and Marketing Strategies traditionally associated with industry (i.e. manufacturing, processing, financial services sector, retail) where the target is to make profit were relevant to institutions of Higher Learning. The drive to redress pre-independence inequalities and increase access to education saw the number of schools going up rapidly. Subsequently, the number of Universities had to follow suit, in order to cater for those who wanted to further their studies. As expected the universities found themselves competing. Strategic management had to be effectively utilized for attracting new students and minimizing attrition rates. Human resources strategies were found to be to attract, develop and retain suitably qualified employees too. Equally significant were the Marketing strategies. Several recommendations were arrived at, at the end of the study.

*Key words: Strategy; Strategic management; Human Resources; Marketing; Competitive edge / advantage*

### 1.1. INTRODUCTION

Universities ought to borrow the idea(s) of gaining competitive advantage from industry. Who says there is no business in education? In the business of creating and supplying human capital, business- level strategies are employed to address how an institution can compete with rival institutions. Moreover, universities can raise their own funds through commissioned research, consultancy and short courses. The driving force of Human Resources Management is the pursuit of competitive advantage in the market. Employees are to be managed in such a way that they are motivated to help their institution to outperform its rivals. Appleby (1994) says Human Resources Management is the process by which employees are selected, developed and rewarded for achieving enterprise objectives. It has been claimed that human resources are the most valuable asset that any organisations has. However, the intense competition that now exists among universities makes it imperative to examine the marketing strategies alongside the human resources strategies.

### 1.2. THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

Universities (State & Private) are involved in intense competition for student enrolments, which is likely to compromise the quality of university education. There is a dichotomy between quantity and quality since the terms, “crisis” “challenges” are frequently used to describe the condition of most Universities in Zimbabwe.

### 1.3. Significance of this paper

Findings of this study were aimed at fostering cooperation and collaborative work, between and among universities. This paper did not merely expose the unprofessionalism that characterises the so called strategies towards competitive advantage. It went further to show the extent of the intricacies involved in some of the practices in Institutions of Higher Learning. Policy makers and institutional managers should be informed by this study to spruce up the execution of duty without tarnishing the ethics of higher learning. The two strategic functions of Marketing Management and Human Resources were targeted as the direct beneficiaries of the findings of this paper.

### 1.4 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

When Zimbabwe gained its political independence in 1980, there was only one University (University of Rhodesia: UR) in the country. The Africans were eager to correct all the

inequalities and forms of segregation that had been long established by the British, colonial rulers. One avenue of bringing an end to the discriminatory practices was the education system. Efforts were therefore made to increase access to education, starting from basic education and progressing to higher level. The massive expansion of the education sector was enormous. Everybody was free to go to school and with time, the ripple effects of education for all (EFA), entered university level. According to the Register of Higher Education Institutions from the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE, 2012) the scenario changed as detailed in the table that follows:

**Table 1.1 REGISTERED UNIVERSITIES IN ZIMBABWE**

<b>Institution</b>	<b>Owner / category</b>	<b>Year Established</b>
University of Zimbabwe (UZ)	State	1957
National University of Science and Technology (NUST)	State	1991
Africa University (AU)	Pvt (United Methodist Church)	1992
Solusi University	Pvt. (Seventh Day Adventist)	1994
Bindura University of Science and technology (BUSE)	State	1996
Catholic University in Zimbabwe ( CUZ )	Pvt (Roman Catholic Church)	1998
Midlands State University (MSU)	State	1999
Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU)	State	1999
Reformed Church University	Pvt.(Reformed Church)	2001
Great Zimbabwe University ( GZU)	State	2001
Chinhoyi University Of Technology ( CUT )	State	2001
Women's University in Africa(WUA)	Private	2002
Lupane State University (LSU)	State	2004

Harare Institute of Technology (HIT)	State	2005
Ezekiel Guti University	Pvt (ZAOGA church)	2010

In a space of two decades, Zimbabwe had a total fifteen Universities (9 State and 6 Private). This kind of quantitative expansion placed pressure on the top management that was responsible for strategic management. Competition rose to unhealthy levels, forcing competitors to use unorthodox means to gain competitive advantages over their rivals. Special attention had to be paid to the generation and implementation of Human Resources Strategies and Marketing Strategies. The increase in the number of universities was, to a large extent politically motivated with the danger of total sidelining the skill-requirements of the job market.

### 1.5 DELIMITATIONS:

The study was not exhaustive in any way. It included all responsible authorities (Government and Private); the conventional and the purely Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions like the Zimbabwe Open University. Universities that conducted parallel programmes and block-release programmes were also included. The conventional universities were found to be the most common in Zimbabwe. The study confined itself to Human Resources and Marketing Strategies.

## 2. 0 REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The review of related literature was carried out so to find where / how this particular study fits in with what has already been written about gaining competitive advantage either in industry or/and in higher education. The review was presented under sub-themes, as follows:-

### 2.1 Building Organisational Capabilities

Organisational capabilities depend on competent personnel appropriate skills and competitive capabilities. This is a source of uniqueness for achieving competitive advantages, which is confirmed by strategic management theorists like Schendel and Treece (1991:23) who attribute sources of competitive advantage to organisational capabilities rather than product market positions or tactics. Ulrich and Lake (1990) refer to this as competing from the inside out.

Quality: commitment to quality became one of the leading ideas in management in the 1980s, manifesting itself from Porter, through to Peter and Waterman (1982) and on to a series of techniques (quality circles, customer care and total quality management). Guest (1989) supports

the competitive position in the market. Data collection included questions on quality issues, particularly how universities promoted and assured quality.

## 2.2 Human Capital

Cronje *et al* (2001) refers to three inter dependent aspects of human capital : attracting employees; developing employees and retaining them. Prasack (1997) sees a very thin line between human capital and intellectual capital. Dess and Lumpkin (2003) also point out that an organisation's values are derived from knowledge, knowhow and intellectual asserts all embedded in people (human resources) Jack (1992) confirms that the more people understand what is taking place, the more eager they are to contribute to the success of the organisation ZigZaglar, in Mullins (1999:68) says "there is only one thing worse than training employees and losing them,. And that is **not** training them and keeping them"

Human resource planning, also known as manpower planning is identified by Turner (2002) as the acquisition, utilization, improvement and preservation of an organization's human resources. This paper examined if the institutions of higher learning ensured that the right quantity and quality of people were available. Armstrong (1999) identifies manpower planning as a process of ensuring that the human resources requirements of an organization are identified and plans are made for satisfying those requirements. Our task was to check how effectively the universities conducted human resource planning, paying special attention to both quantitative and qualitative forecasting.

Grunberg (1997) insists that job restructuring enhances personal satisfaction that people derive from both job enlargement and job enrichment. He is supported by the motivation theories of Taylor (Scientific Management); the Hawthorne Studies and Elton Mayo (Human Relations Movement); Maslow( Hierarchy of Needs). We were very much concerned with the motivation of the workers in both institutions whose enrolment figures were stable/ increasing and those whose enrolment figures were going down each semester. Maybe a relation could be found between satisfaction of employees and student-enrolment trends. Even student needs would be considered with a view to relate why they preferred certain universities to others.

## 2.3 Internal Analysis of Institutions

McKinsey' 7- S model and Jerome Mc Cathy's 4 Ps provide means of attaining a competitive edge. Both models were perceived in the context of higher education and found to be very relevant recipes for success. The SWOT analysis (Shapiro and Varian: 1996) helps organisations

make informed decisions by identifying strengths and weaknesses. However I found that this strategy could not be relied upon because a strength did not always lead to a competitive advantages. For instance, the recruitment of PhD holders did not necessarily guarantee quality service. The value chain concept was found to be at work on the competitive arena. Its primary activities tallied very well with university activities. What follows here is adapted from Porter's Value Chain (1985). The table that follows has the details, under each column.

**Table 2.1 Primary Activities of the Value Chain**

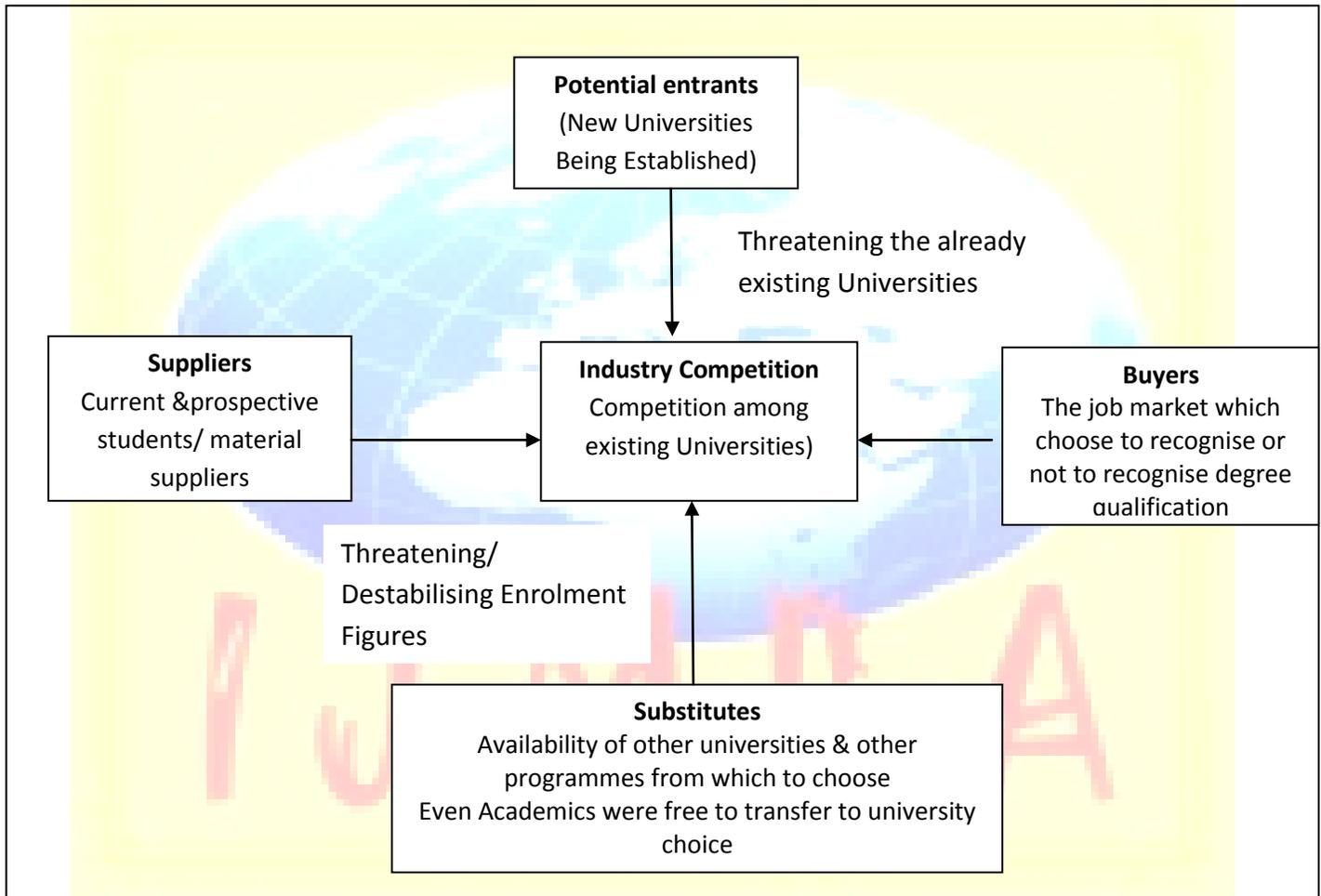
In bound logistics	Operations	Outbound Logistics	Marketing and sales	Services (after sales)
Suitably qualified students Suitably qualified Tutors Quality learning materials Effective instructional processes Adequate funds.	Implementation of institutional strategy at all levels Effective leadership, supervision and evaluation Embraces all activities of the university.	Release of examination results Numbers of students graduating at end of programmes Communication concerning important events like registration, lectures/ tutorials any changes Degree holders going out into job market	Marketing initiatives which differ from one institution to another. Selection of appropriate media and strategy to advertise the institutions programs and use of effective marketing strategies.	Feedback from students and other stakeholders Follow up of students' queries concerning errors on their certificates, missing transcripts etc.

Source : Porter M. E(1985)

In our data collection were guided by the features that appear under each heading (Table 2.1) per column. The onus was on the participants to confirm or dismiss the perspectives. The balanced score-card developed by Kaplan and Norton (1992) uses four perspectives to measure performance: the perspective of customers; internal perspectives, innovation & learning and the responsible authorities that provide funds. I went on to check the extent to which Universities

that were vying for competitive advantage, could be assessed from these four perspectives. The score card tended to be stronger than the 5 – forces. Questions were designed to cater for this comparative analysis. Deliberate efforts were made to juxtapose operations management at Universities with the conceptual framework(s) expressed by Porter (1980) and Kaplan & Norton. The magnitude of applicability and relevance was subsequently revealed.

**Fig. 2.1 CONTEXTUALIZING THE 5- FORCES MODEL**



**Source: adapted from Porter’s 5 forces model (1980)**

As we collected data, we deliberately included factors that determine rivalry. We had plans to critically examine the behaviours of the employees. Data collection was conducted in such a manner that it would cover the professional ethics of the academics and all the support staff.

**2.4 The role and function of performance management**

The manager works with and through other people, whose performance has to be managed. The main purpose of performance management, according to Northcraft and Neale (1990), is to provide feedback to employees. Identify strengths and weaknesses of employees so that the effectiveness of programmes in respect of their contribution to the entire organization can be determined. Spangenberg (1994) points out that human resource management is the focal point in the search for competitive advantage. In agreement with this, Gratton (2000) proposes that a business strategy that does not have people issues at its core is bound to fail. We made sure that our data collection instruments touched performance management, which Robins (1988) places in the context of organisational strategy and goals. Johnson and Scholes state that organizational competencies are embedded in the skills and abilities of its staff. We went out to critically examine the effectiveness of performance management in the selected universities.

### 3.0 METHODOLOGY

The research design for this study was a descriptive survey. Haralambos and Holborn (1991) recognize that the aim of such a design is the 'attempt to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the group under study'. Our choice of the design was also based on Robson(1993) who describes the central features of the survey method as the collection of a small amount of data in standardized form from a relatively large number of individuals; one that is conducted to acquire both qualitative and quantitative data.

Both secondary and primary data sources were used during the course of the study. Primary data was obtained from the participants and the observations that we made at the selected institutions. Annual reports, books manuals and websites were used to review the related literature, which preceded the fieldwork and the construction of research instruments. We discovered that quantitative data either led to a qualitative position or was prompted by qualitative data. For instance, a trend in enrolment figures pointed to qualitative questions that had to be answered. Similarly, the descriptions given by participants led us to be curious about examining what the implications were on the quantitative arena.

Purposive sampling was used so as to ensure that both types of Universities, (Private and State) are included. Thereafter, random sampling was used to come up with a sample which constituted fifteen chairpersons/ programme leaders; twenty-five lecturers; ten admissions staff; fifty

students and ten former students. That gave us a total of one hundred –and-ten participants. The data

#### 4.0 DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Differentiation strategies were valued but participants felt that it was not enough to be different. We found that the premium price (s) may be too high and differentiation may be easily imitated. Such a strategy does not lead to the competitive edge that universities were looking for. The essence of focus is exploitation of a particular market niche that is different from the other universities. The focus did not seem to protect universities from new entrants and imitation.

#### 4.1 Universities SWOT Analysis

University staffs from the 5 universities were asked to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of their respective universities and how these contribute to competitive advantage.

**Table 4.1 Summary of responses to questions pertaining to the SWOT analysis**

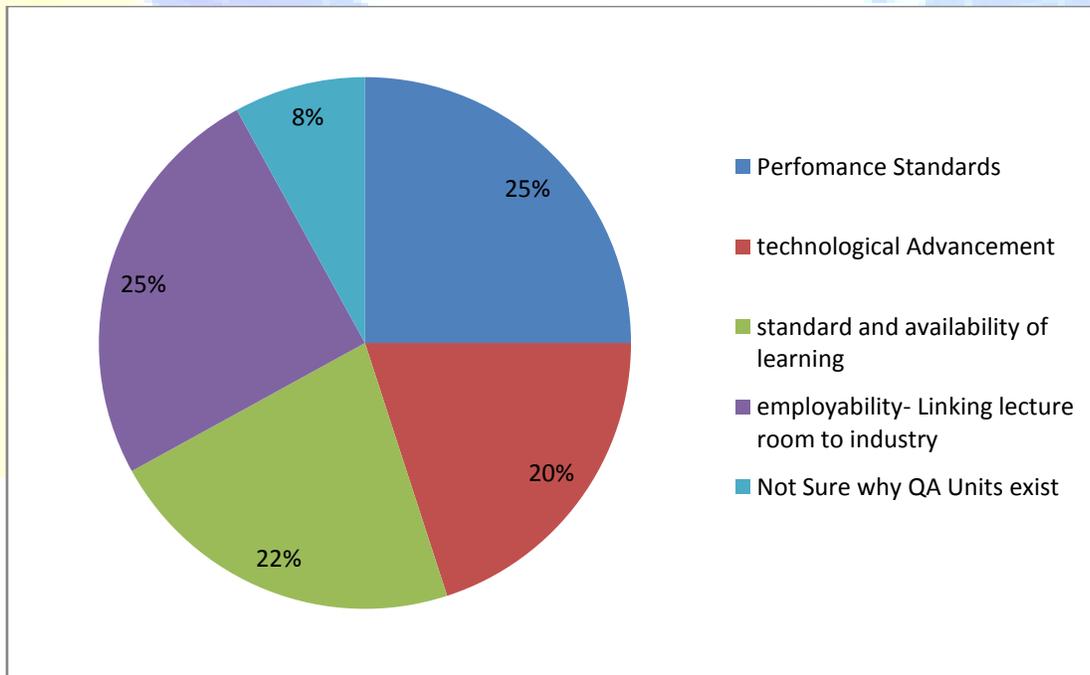
<b>Institutions with increasing or stable enrolment figures (successful)</b>	<b>Institutions with drastic declines in enrolment figures</b>
<p><b>Strengths</b></p> <p>History of good performance</p> <p>Experienced and suitably qualified personnel</p> <p>Use 360 degree – mode of evaluation</p> <p>Quality assurance unit that carries out quality audits throughout the year</p> <p>Adaptability</p>	<p><b>Weaknesses</b></p> <p>Negative publicity by media</p> <p>Breaching ZIMCHE rules &amp; regulations</p> <p>Obsolete Degree programmes</p> <p>Infrastructural gaps</p> <p>Technological gaps</p> <p>Lack of funds to source basic requirement for core- business of University</p>
<p><b>Opportunities</b></p> <p>Reaching out to the people (all the 4P S in the Marketer’s tool box)</p> <p>Increasing sessions to cater for more student populations</p> <p>Coping what has worked for other Universities</p>	<p><b>Threats</b></p> <p>External pressure in the form of competition</p> <p>Better resourced institutions</p> <p>Virtual Universities that utilise e learning</p> <p>Change</p>

(e.g. ODL, block release parallel programmes  
De-campaign rival institutions

Those universities that were struggling to attract and retain students can learn a lot from the successful Universities. Some university lectures disclosed that they never took part in strategic marketing programmes because the demand for vacancies was always very high at their organisations. They boasted that they were the people’s choice and even turned away some applicants with very good passes at Advanced Level, simply because the demand exceeded supply. Marketing strategies were popular among those universities which were looking for opportunities to grow. Then there were those that were haunted by enrolment- figures which were at the nadir. This affected universities whose enrolment trends followed the stages of a product life-cycle PLC, and were experiencing the “decline” stage. Other universities were seen to be penetrating new markets and opening satellite offices throughout the country.

**4.2 Responses on the role/ function of Quality Assurance Units**

The participants were asked to explain the part played by quality assurance units in their universities.



**Fig 4.1 Responses on the role/ function of quality assurance**

We found a myriad of challenges which set some universities ahead of others. Some institutions were doing very well without quality Assurance Units, while others had the Quality Assurance Units and yet failing to attract learners. Best practices were found to be lacking from pivotal personnel in the organisations. Those who were more concerned about amassing wealth and felt they were “politically correct” caused a lot of harm because they knew that they were indispensable. Quality Assurance made no sense to them.

#### 4.3 Reasons for student enrolment decline in some universities

Former and current students were asked why some universities are attracting few students. Several factors were said to be responsible for the decline of student enrolment. Some institutions suffered heavily because they had no systematic supervision of staff. The hardest hit were those that employed part-time tutors for their evening and /or weekend tutorials and never supervised them. Some participants even had the audacity to say, “Our coordinator does not bother us. We only meet to sign contracts and the only time we meet again is when we collect our money” Others demoralized students by the derogatory remarks they passed about their part-time employer. Instead of tutoring, they spent time boasting about their own qualifications. This came from the students we interviewed.

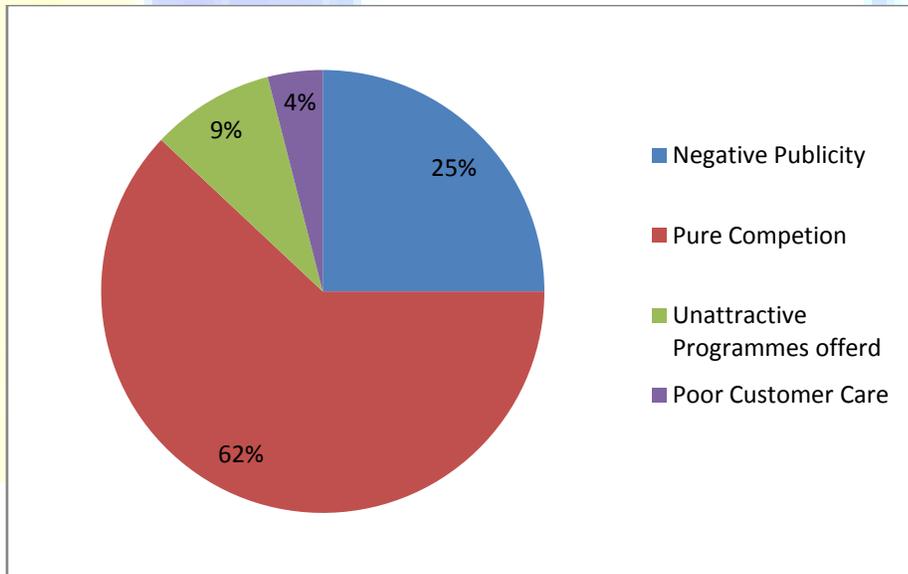
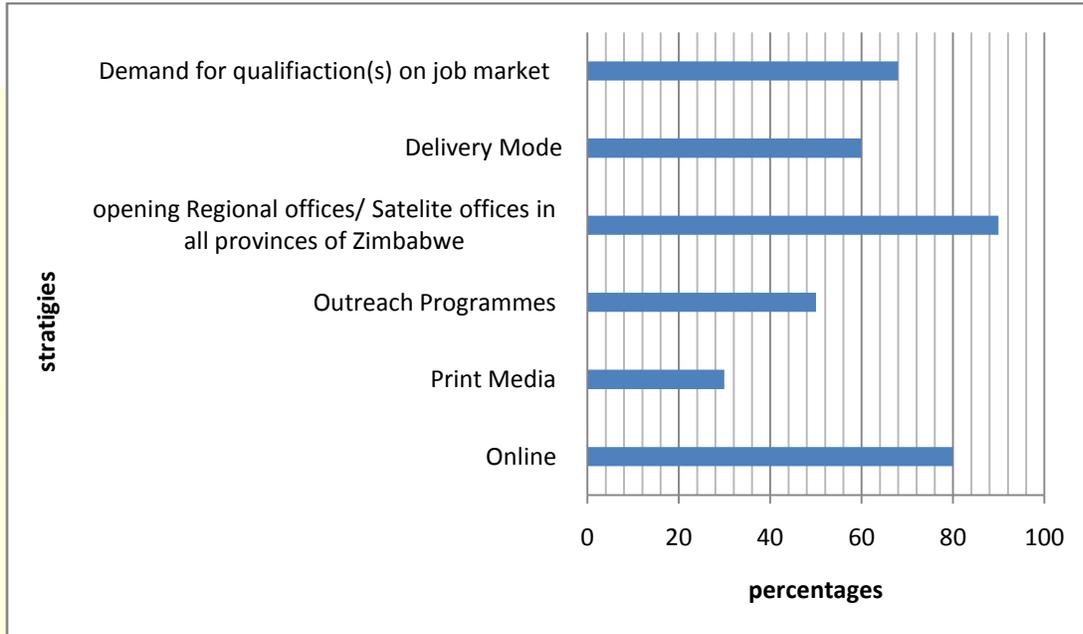


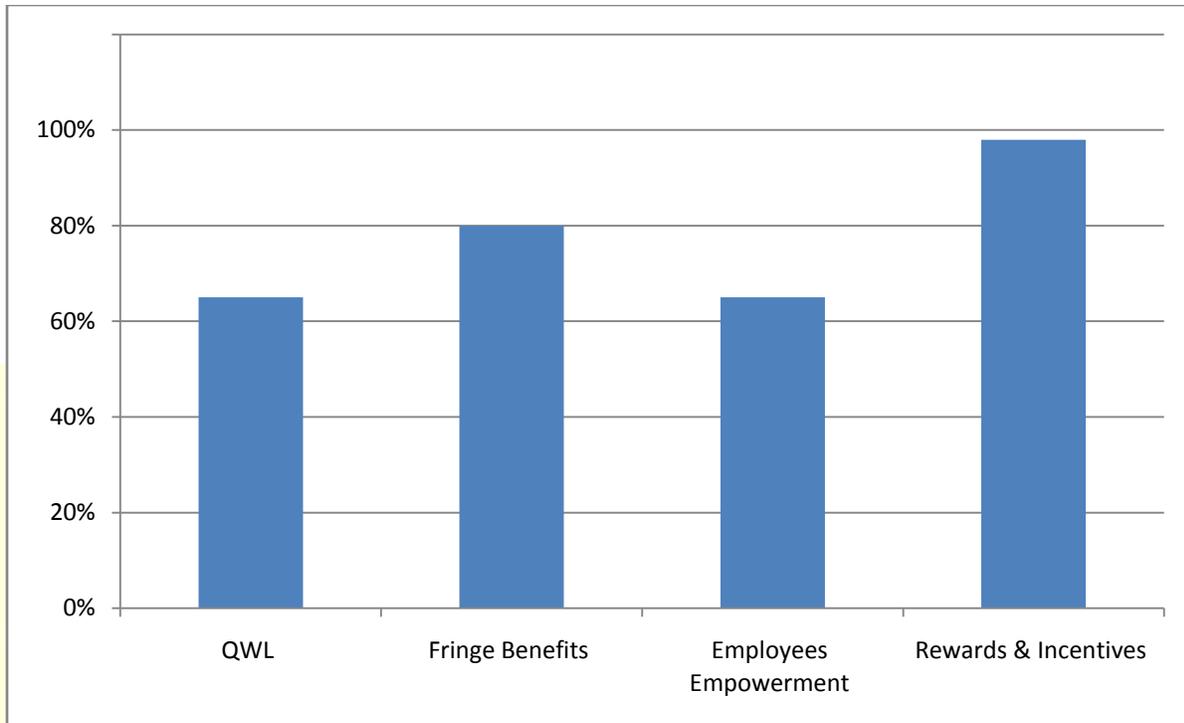
Fig 4.2 Reponses relating to decline of student enrolment figures some universities

#### 4.3Marketing Strategies Which Proved Effective

Amidst the intense competition, some institutions of higher learning continued to grow and experience massive expansion. They said they had to introduce evening classes, block release programmes and parallel programs in an effort to cater for the overwhelming number(s) of applicants. They attributed their success/ large market share to the factors shown in Fig4.3 which follows.



**Fig 4.3 Factors leading to success**  
**Strategies used for attracting and retaining employees**



**Strategies**

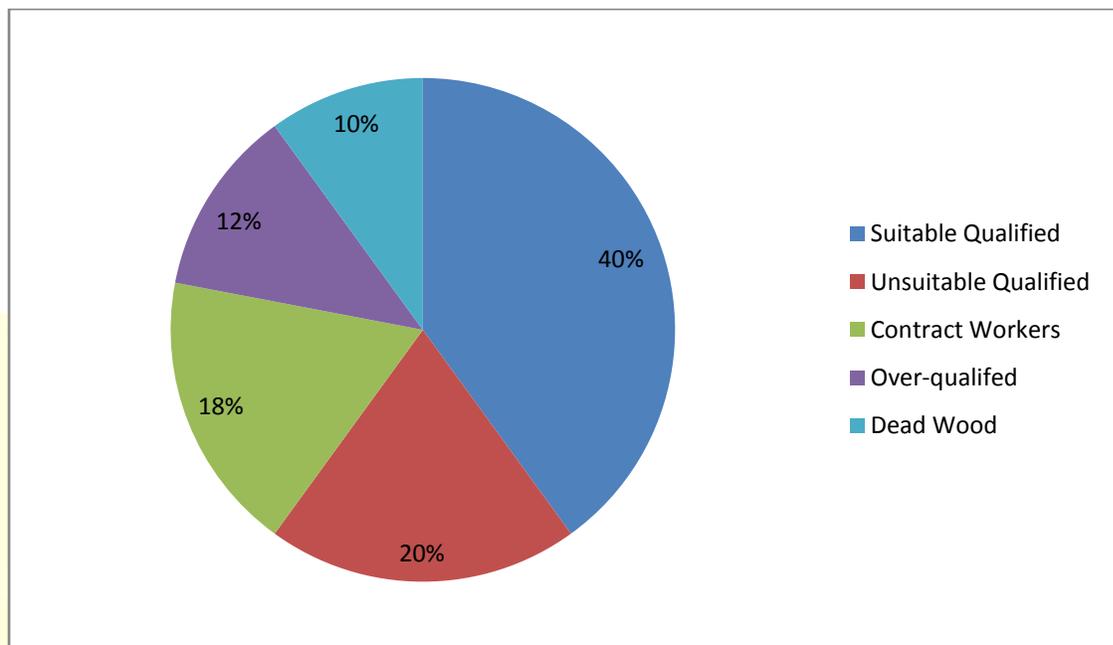
Employees wanted to be recognized and appreciated. Too much bureaucracy caused delays and pronounced lack of professionalism by top management frustrated employees.

• **Responses on current and former students Evaluation of their own intuitions**

	SA	A	SD	D
University did not prioritize their core business				
Inadequate interaction with tutors in ODL, parallel block – release programmes				
No demand for degrees in job market				
Confusion and lack of organization by administration				
Low fees mean low standards				
Too much corruption				

That was the reflection of the majority of participants. Some of them even went on to say they would not recommend their spouses, children and friends to enrol with certain universities. Such sentiments came out during interview sessions, even though they were not solicited.

**Responses concerning status of the Human Resources**



It turned out that nepotism and inequitable policies spoilt the recruitment and selection procedures. This ultimately affected performance of the universities in a negative manner. Some academics were so old that they were seen as more of liabilities than assets to the organisations. It became evident though that ZIMCHE (Zimbabwe Council for higher Education) was out to ensure there was quality in Higher education, a lot of unscrupulous activities were unearthed. However, not all the ills could be picked out and some universities would continue to struggle towards attaining a competitive advantage. Plans adopted by some universities for recruiting student were akin to desperation. For example , one university was actually prepared and pay incentives to recruiting officers.

**Table 3.1 Lectures/Tutors’ Responses on whether completion in Higher Education was acceptable**

Response Category	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	54	75
No	18	25
Total	72	100

So the competition is appreciated. Most participants agreed that competition kept the quality of work/ products very high and so it should continue. What all institutions had to guard against was the infringement of procedures. I found that some employees had never had sight of the

procedure manuals for their positions/ departments. This situation increased the possibility of using unprofessional means to win favours from students.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Students and potential employees should place value on indicators of differentiation strategies.
- Strategic alliances between among universities ought to cultivate and sustain professional and collegial relationships, for instance through collaborative Research and inter library loan services.
- Agility is a necessary strategy for university to survive (Goldman et.al) 1995 say agility implies operating profitably in an environment of dynamism which is unpredictable, yet at the same time being in a position to meet and even exceed customers' expectations.
- Turn around strategies which may involve making unpopular decisions.
- Geographical market development, achieved by establishing markets and partners outside Zimbabwe.
- Liaising with the job market to ensure that programmes offered are acceptable and still on demand.
- Move on to e-learning and offer online degree programmes.
- Budgets should support strategic marketing programmes, especially where an institution's viability is threatened

## REFERENCES

- Appleby, R.C. (1994) *Modern Business Administration*, UK, Pitman Publishing.
- Armstrong, M. (1999), *A Handbook Of Human Resource Management Practice*, Kogan Page.
- Cronje et al (2001) *Introduction To Business Management*, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition, Oxford University.
- Dess and Lumpkin (2003) *Strategic Management: Creating Competitive Advantages*, McGraw-Hill, Irwin.
- Gratton, L (2002) *Living Strategy: Putting People At The Heart Of Corporate Purpose*; Prentice Hall.
- Guest, (1989) *An Introduction To Human Resources Management*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, Alan Price
- Kaplan, R. S. and Neale, M. A. (1990) *Using the Balanced Scorecard As A Strategic Management System*; Harvard Business School.

Haralambos, M. And Holborn, M(1991) *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives*, London: Collins Educational Publisher.

Peters T. And Waterman R. H. (1982) *In search Of Excellence*.[www. businessballs.com](http://www.businessballs.com)

Porter M. E. (1980) *Competitiveness and Economic Development*, Harvard Business School.

Mullins, J. (1999) *Management and Organizational Behaviour*, Prentice Hall.

Schendel, D and Treece, J *Competitiveness and Economic Development*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston.

Shapiro ,C, and Varian, H. R.(1999) *Information Rules: A Strategic Guide To The Network* , Harvard Business School Press Boston.

Northcraft, G.B, and Neale, M. A. (1990) *Organizational Behaviour: A Management Challenge*, Chicago. The Dryden Press.

Robbins(2003) *Essentials Of Organizational Behaviour*; Pearson Education, Ltd. Prentice Hall.

Robson, (1994) *Red World Research: A Resource For Social Scientists Practitioner Researchers*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

**Author's Profile:**

**Angela Maposa**

Angela Maposa is a lecturer at the Zimbabwe Open University. Her research interests embrace instructional processes, Leadership in Educational Institutions, Organizational Development: The Quality/Quantity debate In Education and Gender Issues in Organisations.

**Shepard Mutsau**

Shepard Mutsau is a lecturer at Zimbabwe Open University in the Department of Development studies, Faculty of Applied Social Sciences. He is a holder of MSc Rural and Urban Planning (University of Zimbabwe), MSc In Development Studies (National University of Science and Technology), Post Graduate in Project Planning and Management, (University of Zimbabwe) BSc Psychology (Zimbabwe Open University) Bachelor of Arts General (University of Zimbabwe), Certificate in Monitoring and evaluation (UZ), Certificate in Community Development (UZ) . He takes special interest in broader development planning issues which include education, disaster management, peace and conflict.

**Tawanda Dzama**

Tawanda Dzama is a lecturer at Zimbabwe Open University in the Faculty of Commerce. He is a holder of MBA, BCom (Honors) degree in Marketing Management, Higher National Diploma in Marketing, National Diploma in Marketing Management. His research interests include Strategic management, Societal marketing, Corporate Governance and Service Marketing.