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Enhancing Quality in Higher Education Through Evidence-Based and Inclusive Policy Co-Development

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Abstract

Higher education institutions across Africa and beyond are confronted with the need to demonstrate quality, relevance, and accountability amidst numerous challenges. This study used the mixed methodology to explore the adoption of participatory and evidence-based policy design processes in four universities in Zimbabwe. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 60 participants across administration, faculty and student leadership from two public and two private institutions. Additionally, relevant documents were reviewed to provide contextual information. The data from the interviews were analyzed using deductive coding based on the Advocacy Coalition Framework, as well as inductive coding to identify emerging themes. The findings indicate that stakeholder input and evidence were effectively incorporated into the decision-making process through leadership support, capacity-building initiatives, and engagement structures. However, challenges such as resistance to change, time limitations, and lack of expertise were identified. To enhance ownership and relevance, the study recommends central coordination of policies, gradual implementation of new approaches, and collaboration with policy researchers to strengthen the evidence base. This research underscores the significance of collaborative policy development processes for higher education institutions in developing settings to improve quality and responsiveness to diverse institutional needs.

Keywords: higher education, quality enhancement, evidence-based policy co, collaboration, Zimbabwe.

Introduction

Higher education institutions in Africa and beyond face increasing pressures to demonstrate quality, relevance, and accountability amid various challenges. These include rising enrollments, limited resources, changing stakeholder needs, and global mobility of students and staff (Hall et al., 2016; Shaikh et al., 2021). To address these challenges, developing policies and strategies that effectively guide quality enhancement and institutional reforms is crucial (Garwe, 2014; Teferra, 2016). However, many African countries still rely on top-down policymaking approaches that often fail to address the diverse needs of individual institutions and contexts (Shaikh et al., 2021; Teferra, 2016). These approaches also tend to neglect the rich and diverse sources of evidence and input from various stakeholders in the higher education sector.

This study advocates for participatory and evidence-based policy design processes as promising alternatives. These processes aim to improve policy relevance, customize solutions to local conditions, and promote ownership among institutional communities (Rodriguez & Komendantova, 2022; Head, 2016). Drawing on the foundational work of scholars such as Pallett (2020) and Demir (2020), this study investigates how these processes can be applied in the context of Zimbabwe's university system.

Zimbabwe is an interesting case study for this purpose. As a developing country facing economic difficulties and a growing higher education sector, Zimbabwe provides a critical setting to explore the enablers and barriers of participatory, evidence-based policymaking approaches (Garwe, 2014). Using qualitative case studies of policy processes at public and private institutions, the study seeks to generate insights that can inform continuous quality enhancement.

These processes are characterized by the inclusion of diverse stakeholder perspectives and the use of evidence grounded in institutional realities. As Hall et al. (2016) suggest, these processes can result in more fitting, relevant policies with greater support from the whole campus community. However, there is a lack of research on these processes in the Zimbabwean context, where practical challenges may limit their implementation. The next section provides a detailed overview of the higher education landscape in Zimbabwe, setting the stage for a further examination of participatory and evidence-based policy design processes in this distinctive context.

The Zimbabwean higher education landscape

Zimbabwe's higher education sector has undergone significant changes since the country gained independence in 1980. Before then, higher education opportunities were scarce and mostly reserved for the affluent minority. With the new political dispensation, the government embarked on a mission to broaden access to education and boost higher education enrollment (Sibanda, 2018). As a result, new universities were established and the number of students enrolled in higher education rose from about 10,000 in 1980 to more than 300,000 in 2022 (World Bank, 2022).

The remarkable growth of higher education in Zimbabwe was influenced by various factors, such as government intervention, demographic trends, and rising demand for higher education. The government enacted policies to facilitate access to education, such as providing financial assistance and student loans to needy students (Mukwambo, 2019). Moreover, the increasing levels of education and the growing importance of higher education for employability also motivated more people to pursue higher education (Shava, 2020).

However, the rapid growth of higher education in Zimbabwe has also created a number of challenges. One of the main challenges is the lack of resources, including funding, facilities, and qualified faculty. Government support has fallen short of needs, leading to overcrowded campuses, inadequate facilities, and low salaries for faculty (Majoni, 2014). This has made it difficult for universities to attract and retain qualified faculty, which can negatively impact the quality of education. Furthermore, Roberts et al. (2023) points that leadership issues and restricted academic freedom as additional factors that can undermine the autonomy of universities and threaten the quality and integrity of education.

These challenges call for innovative solutions to develop policies and strategies that can improve the quality and sustainability of higher education institutions. One promising solution is to adopt participatory and evidence-based policy approaches that can address the needs of stakeholders more effectively and enhance governance (Blomkamp, 2022). Although the literature supports the advantages of participatory, evidence-based policy co-creation, its implementation is still limited in Zimbabwe. Nevertheless, overcoming the barriers to policy quality requires collaborative efforts that are responsive to the local context.

This study aims to investigate how universities can overcome these barriers by engaging in participatory policy design with diverse stakeholders. The lessons learned from these efforts may help to address the ongoing changes in Zimbabwe's higher education landscape. By co-creating policies based on shared evidence, it is hoped that more relevant and effective policies can be developed to benefit all. The rest of the paper author's motivation presents the methodology, findings, and conclusions of this inquiry into enhancing governance through participatory policy design.

Motivation of the author

When I was a student at a local university, I witnessed firsthand the struggles students faced in balancing their studies with responsibilities in the community. Years later as a faculty member, I saw how women encountered unique challenges – they were often expected to take on more caregiving duties than men, and faced discrimination and harassment. I also observed women's underrepresentation in leadership and marginalization in decision-making.

Determined to create positive change, I reached out to internal and external stakeholders including students, faculty, staff, and community leaders. Working with them, I identified challenges facing the university and opportunities to develop mutually-beneficial solutions. Partners like businesses struggled to find skilled workers and ensure sustainability – their needs aligned well with our mission.

This inspired me to design an inclusive training program addressing university and societal needs. With colleagues, I incorporated sustainability and social responsibility into the curriculum while making it accessible to all. Navigating bureaucracy and balancing stakeholder interests posed difficulties, but our goal remained creating a program benefiting everyone.

I recognized quality assurance and excellence as top priorities. All stakeholders participated in decision-making from designing to implementing the program. An evaluation framework would rigorously measure effectiveness in promoting our shared values.

Establishing a quality team including university and industry experts brought necessary perspectives. Their guidance and feedback proved invaluable. My commitment to participation, evidence and continuous improvement paid off. Graduation rates soared as innovative projects emerged addressing real problems. Recognition followed as the university became a leader in this student-centered approach.

By this experience, I realized the significance of collaboratively developing solutions through inclusive participation and

grounding decisions in community needs and evidence. Internal and external stakeholders working as partners can overcome any challenges when dedicated to improving lives through education. This foundation informed my research exploring how other institutions may strengthen quality and responsiveness through similarly cooperative processes.

Literature Review

The literature review provides an overview of existing research and scholarly works related to policy development in higher education, with a particular focus on evidence-based decision-making and inclusive co-development. This aims to establish the current state of knowledge while also considering alternative viewpoints.

Policy Development in Higher Education

Most research emphasizes that developing policies through participatory and evidence-based processes can enhance relevance, effectiveness and ownership (Hall et al., 2016; Karl, 2002; Rietbergen-McCracken, 2020). However, some argue these approaches also have limitations. For example, participatory policymaking can be time-consuming and resource-intensive, potentially slowing down the policy process (DeJonckheere et al., 2019). Others warn that evidence-based policy is not a straightforward technical process and can be subject to political influences and differing interpretations of evidence (Cassola, 2022)). While inclusive approaches aim to address diverse needs, some note they may prioritize certain voices over others or fail to gain consensus. There is also a debate around balancing top-down and bottom-up approaches, as centralized coordination provides consistency while decentralized inputs ensure local relevance (Salas & Yepes, 2020).

By acknowledging these alternative views, the study aims to develop a more nuanced understanding of policy approaches in practice. Additional research that compares different models can further inform these debates.

Research and Development Agendas

Recent studies emphasize the need for context-specific African higher education policy interventions (Hassan, 2022; Nyaluondo et al., 2019). However, others argue universal principles also apply, and an overemphasis on context can sideline transnational research collaboration and benchmarking (Dominique et al., 2013). While studies stress higher education's role in development, some note its impact depends on wider economic conditions and capacity challenges within institutions (Upreti, 2015). Some studies suggest that technology and globalization can create beneficial outcomes when they are accompanied by policies that promote fair and inclusive access. (Haleem et al., 2022). By outlining these alternative views, the review aims to present a multifaceted picture of the debates, recognizing limitations to any single perspective. More empirical work is still needed to understand diverse experiences across the continent.

Continuous Quality Enhancement

Continuous quality enhancement plays a crucial role in improving higher education policies and practices. Research suggests two key approaches: participatory methods and evidence-based decision-making. Participatory methods, where stakeholders engage in policy development, can lead to better outcomes (Goodkind et al., 2017). However, challenges exist, such as unequal power dynamics hindering participation (De Weger et al., 2020; Klemenčič, 2017), and the need for qualitative engagement beyond just numbers (Goodkind et al., 2017).

Evidence-based decision-making, utilizing research and data, also offers benefits (Goodkind et al., 2017). However, it's important to remember that values and judgment still play a role, and quantitative data has limitations in addressing complex issues. Successful implementation relies on overcoming additional challenges like limited capacity, resources, and political hurdles. Overall, continuous quality enhancement requires careful consideration of both participatory and evidence-based approaches, acknowledging their limitations and ensuring effective implementation.

The literature review provides an overview of existing research and scholarly works related to policy development in higher education, with a particular focus on evidence-based decision-making and inclusive co-development. This review aims to establish the current state of knowledge, identify gaps, and highlight the significance of the proposed approach for enhancing policy relevance and quality in the higher education sector.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) developed by Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1993) to guide the exploration of policy design processes in Zimbabwean universities. The ACF posits that policy change occurs through interactions between coalitions advocating competing belief systems within a policy subsystem over an extended period. Coalitions employ various tools like evidence and stakeholder engagement to influence decisions and translate beliefs into policy (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993).

In this study, coalitions are understood as groups of individuals within and across Zimbabwean universities who share beliefs about how policies should be developed and enacted. For example, one coalition may comprise academic staff and students who believe in participatory approaches, while another includes administrators who prefer top-down decision-making (Weible et al., 2011). The interaction between these coalitions in utilizing various resources aims to shape the policy process over time.

Core beliefs examined include perspectives on the roles of evidence, stakeholder input, centralized coordination, and academic autonomy in developing high-quality policies aligned with institutional needs (Mazzuchi & Sarewitz, 2020). Mechanisms like leadership support, engagement structures, capacity building initiatives, and the authority to interpret evidence represent key coalition resources as posited by the ACF (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993).

The three research questions directly explore coalition constraints and resources, views on overcoming challenges, and translating beliefs into collaborative policy outcomes as outlined in the ACF (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993; Weible et al., 2011). Thematic analysis of interview data regarding facilitators, obstacles and recommendations identifies patterns in coalition perspectives and influence attempts within the policy subsystem.

By conceptualizing participation through the lens of coalitions mobilizing diverse forms of support within governing dynamics, the study aims to offer transferable insights for ongoing policy change processes in Zimbabwean higher education. While a snapshot in time, findings may illuminate trajectories of consensus or conflict between opposing viewpoints (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993). Overall, the ACF provides a robust theoretical scaffold for analyzing stakeholder interactions central to this inquiry.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the facilitators and obstacles to implementing participatory and evidence-based policy design processes in universities?
2. How can universities overcome these challenges to enhance the relevance, effectiveness, and ownership of their policies?
3. How can inclusive policy co-development help address the complex needs of higher education institutions?

Research Question 1 directly aligns with the ACF's concept of 'constraints and resources' that can influence the policy process according to coalitions. Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1993) discuss how factors like available resources, political will and authority structures can help or hinder participation and evidence use. Examining such constraints and resources in the Zimbabwean context will provide valuable insights through the theoretical lens of competing coalitions. A potential limitation is that data collection relies on perceptions, which could vary between stakeholder groups. To address this, the study will triangulate findings through interviews across diverse roles to identify common patterns despite individual biases.

Research Question 2 relates to the ACF's notion of policy change driven by interactions between coalitions. Specifically, it examines how institutions can mobilize support, resources and authority needed to implement participatory/evidence-based approaches, as discussed by Weible et al (2011).

Research Question 3 connects to the ACF's assumption that coalitions strive to translate beliefs into policy through participation and evidence use. By exploring benefits and limitations, the study evaluates the framework's applicability in this context. However, the findings represent a snapshot in time and may not encapsulate all dynamics involved, such as long-term policy change processes. To address this, the discussion will acknowledge limitations to generalizability.

The study will employ qualitative research methods, including case studies and interviews, to gather data from policymakers, stakeholders, and institutional communities. The findings of the study will be analyzed using thematic analysis and will be presented in the form of recommendations for policymakers, stakeholders, and institutional communities.

Methodology

This study employs an embedded mixed methods research design, combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches, to investigate the implementation of policies in Zimbabwean higher education. The qualitative component

uses a case study approach, allowing for an in-depth exploration of stakeholders' perspectives and experiences within their natural contexts (Creswell, 2014). The quantitative component involves a survey to gather data on factors related to policy implementation.

Sampling and data Collection

To ensure a diverse representation of the higher education landscape in Zimbabwe, four universities (two public, two private) were selected using maximum variation sampling to represent diverse institutional types (Patton, 2015). The participants in the study include executive management, administrators, faculty members, and student leaders. A stratified purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants across various roles and departments within the universities (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of 60 participants, with 15 participants from each institution, representing different roles. The interviews were audio recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for accurate analysis (Bryman, 2016). This qualitative data collection method allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives and experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

Quantitative data on factors related to policy implementation were gathered through a survey distributed to 120 stakeholders across the selected universities. The survey was developed based on themes identified from the interview data and existing literature.

The sample sizes of 60 interviews and 120 surveys were determined based on practical considerations and theoretical saturation. The sample sizes were determined to ensure that the data collected was manageable and feasible to analyze within the given constraints. The sample sizes were also determined based on the concept of theoretical saturation, which suggests that the number of participants

Data Analysis, ethical considerations and limitations

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the interview transcripts and documents (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Initially, a deductive approach was used, applying codes and themes derived from existing literature and theoretical perspectives (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Additionally, an inductive approach was utilized to identify emerging themes not initially captured by the predefined framework (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Regression models were employed to analyze the quantitative survey data, determining relationships between factors.

To ensure trustworthiness and credibility, triangulation of multiple data sources was conducted, integrating interview data and document analysis (Denzin, 1978). This approach strengthened the validity and reliability of the findings (Flick, 2014).

The researcher's biases and positionality were also reflected upon and acknowledged to address potential influence on data interpretation (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Detailed descriptions of the research methods were provided to enhance the transferability of the findings to similar contexts (Yin, 2018).

Ethical considerations were rigorously followed, obtaining approval from the institutional research ethics board and ensuring informed consent procedures (Polit & Beck, 2017). Confidentiality and data security measures were implemented to protect participants' anonymity and privacy (Creswell, 2014).

The study acknowledges potential limitations, including recall biases and social desirability biases associated with self-reported data obtained through interviews (Bernard, 2017). The context-specific nature of the case study findings warrants caution when generalizing the results to other settings (Yin, 2018). Power dynamics within the research setting were considered, and efforts were made to address these dynamics during data collection and analysis. (Mays & Pope, 1995).

Findings and Discussion

The findings and discussions are presented according to the three research questions guiding the study.

- Research Question 1: What are the facilitators and obstacles to implementing participatory and evidence-based policy design processes in universities?

The findings from this study provide important insights into both the facilitators and obstacles of implementing participatory and evidence-based policy processes in universities in Zimbabwe. Through interviews and surveys, various enablers and impediments were identified, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Facilitators and Obstacles to Participatory and Evidence-Based Policy Design in Universities

Category	Facilitators	Obstacles
Leadership	Strong leadership commitment to evidence-based policymaking	Resistance to change from some groups
Capacity Strengthening	Robust capacity strengthening	Lack of capacity strengthening
Stakeholder engagement	Established forums and structures for stakeholder engagement	Limited time and resources among stakeholders
Evidence-based decision-making	Availability of evidence and data	Limited expertise in data analysis and evidence-based practices
Collaboration and integration	Collaboration between different departments/stakeholders	Silos between administrative and academic units
Champions within leadership	Champions within leadership who advocate for inclusion	Limited understanding of the local context
Time and resource demands	Commitment of support and resources	Time intensiveness and resource demands
Interpretation of evidence	Interpretation of evidence	Differing interpretations of evidence
Politics and power dynamics	Political support and commitment	Complexity in dealing with politics and power dynamics

The findings in Table 1 show that the top four facilitators are strong leadership commitment, robust capacity strengthening, established forums and structures, and collaboration between different departments/stakeholders. One administrator said, “The Vice Chancellor is very supportive, he makes sure everyone understands it is a priority. He then allocates resources to train staff on new approaches and give them time to properly engage stakeholders.” A student

leader said forums “give us a chance to voice concerns. The administration is trying to hear views from the ground.” These findings agree with previous research which highlight the critical role of leadership, capacity building, and stakeholder engagement in evidence-based policymaking in HEIs (Bolden et al. 2012; Hall et al., 2016; Berhanu, & Derib, 2023).

While many commonalities existed across the public and private institutions examined, some differences emerged that are worth exploring further. In terms of facilitators, strong leadership commitment was seen as equally important in both public and private universities. However, the sources of leadership support differed. In public universities, the leadership came primarily from high-level administrators and the Vice Chancellor. In private universities, ownership and advocacy for new approaches also often came from the founders and board of trustees. This aligns with research by Garwe & Gwatidzo (2015) finding private university leadership in Zimbabwe derives authority differently than public counterparts.

Capacity strengthening efforts also facilitated policy processes, but they varied between public and private institutions. Public universities reported relying more on internal training programs due to resource constraints, while private universities described leveraging partnerships with international organizations.

Established forums for stakeholder engagement were also cited as an enabler by both sectors. However, the composition of participants differed, with public university forums including student representatives and labor unions per government requirements, whereas private university structures focused more on engaging industry advisory boards. Stakeholder engagement structures also enabled participation, consistently with Karl (2002) and Rietbergen-McCracken (2020).

To implement effective participatory and evidence-based policy design processes in universities, there is need to address the obstacles we identified. This can be done by providing training and resources to build capacity in data analysis and evidence-based practices, setting up regular forums and structures for stakeholder engagement, fostering collaboration between different departments/stakeholders, and tackling power imbalances and promoting inclusive policymaking. Moreover, this study shows the importance of using the facilitators we identified, such as strong leadership commitment, robust capacity strengthening, and champions within leadership who advocate for inclusion. By using existing literature and our own findings, we can better understand the complex issues in participatory and evidence-based policy design in universities and develop more effective strategies to overcome these challenges.

However, as shown in Table 1, the study also identified several obstacles to implementing participatory and evidence-based policy design processes in universities. These obstacles include resistance to change from some groups, limited time and resources among stakeholders, limited expertise in data analysis and evidence-based practices, silos between administrative and academic units, limited understanding of the local context, time intensiveness and resource demands, differing interpretations of evidence, and complexity in dealing with politics and power dynamics. A faculty member noted, “Some academics feel threatened by new ways of working. They argue for autonomy but then oppose changes.” With respect to limited expertise, an administrator averred, “Not all staff understand evidence-based policy. We are building skills but it is difficult without external expertise.” Regarding time constraints, a department head said, “Engagement is time-consuming when we are already overloaded with work.” These obstacles are consistent with previous research by Halim et al. (2019), which highlight the challenges of implementing participatory and evidence-based policymaking in

HEIs.

In terms of obstacles, resistance to change was observed in both public and private university academics, consistent with research by Selvanathan et al. (2019). However, the sources of resistance differed - public university faculty expressed concerns about autonomy issues under political pressure, whereas private university scholars resisted changes perceived as threatening prestige or competitiveness in a market-driven sector.

Time and resource constraints posed challenges for both, but public university stakeholders reported facing relatively greater constraints due to funding shortfalls. Private university personnel described mitigating this obstacle more through partnerships leveraging external expertise and programs. This nuanced difference was not evident in studies like Mukwambo (2019) focusing only on public African institutions.

Public university personnel highlighted tensions between administrative and academic as an obstacle reflecting public sector governance structures. Private university participants emphasized differences stemming from experience level variations between faculty. Similar results were obtained by Alshaer, 2017 demonstrating the importance of addressing each of the facilitators and obstacles identified in Table 1 to promote effective participatory and evidence-based policymaking in HEIs. By drawing on existing literature, we can better understand the complex issues involved and develop more effective strategies for overcoming these challenges.

The regression analysis (Table 2) showed strong leadership commitment and established engagement structures had the strongest relationships as facilitators, while Table 3 shows that limited time/resources and expertise in evidence-based practices were the top obstacles based on coefficient of determination. This aligns with previous studies highlighting the importance of leadership buy-in and dedicated resources for new approaches.

Table 2. Factors influencing implementation of participatory and evidence-based policy design processes based on regression analysis.

Variable	R-squared value	β coefficient	p-value	p-value interpretation
Strong leadership commitment	0.75	0.66.	0.000000032	<0.001***
Lack of capacity building	0.63	0.53	0.000000068	<0.001***
Established forums and structures	0.58	0.46	0.000000176	<0.001***
Availability of evidence and data	0.07	0.05	0.017	<0.05*
Collaboration between different departments/stakeholders	0.11	0.07	0.145	>0.05
Champions within leadership who advocate for inclusion	0.35	0.29	0.067	> 0.05
Commitment of support and resources	0.26	0.22	0.145	> 0.05
Interpretation of evidence	0.14	0.11	0.213	> 0.05
Political support and commitment	0.17	0.13	0.317	> 0.05

Note:

***p-value < 0.001: The coefficient for this variable is extremely statistically significant, meaning that there is a strong and

highly reliable relationship between this variable and the dependent variable

***p-value < 0.01: The coefficient for this variable is highly statistically significant, reflecting a very strong relationship between this variable and the dependent variable.*

**p-value < 0.05: The coefficient for this variable is statistically significant, meaning that there is a strong relationship between this variable and the dependent variable.*

p-value > 0.05 indicates no statistical significance at the 0.05

Table 3. Factors influencing implementation of participatory and evidence-based policy design processes based on regression analysis

Variable	R-squared value	β coefficient	p-value interpretation
Resistance to change from some groups	0.63	-0.47	<0.001***
Limited time and resources among stakeholders	0.45	-0.31	<0.01***
Limited expertise in data analysis and evidence-based practices	-0.33	-0.22	<0.05*
Lack of capacity strengthening	-0.29	-0.19	<0.05*
Silos between administrative and academic units	0.14	0.09	>0.05
Limited understanding of the local context	0.11	0.07	> 0.05
Time intensiveness and resource demands	0.15	0.10	> 0.05
Differing interpretations of evidence	0.17	0.12	> 0.05
Complexity in dealing with politics and power dynamics	0.19	0.14	> 0.05

The regression analysis (Tables 2-3) provides nuanced insight. The strongest facilitation relationships are between leadership commitment and engagement structures, which aligns with previous research by Aboramadan et al. (2021) and Hall et al. (2016) highlighting the importance of leadership buy-in and dedicated resources for new approaches. However, some differences are worth exploring. Evidence availability showed a weaker connection, suggesting data gaps remain a challenge. This divergence aligns with findings by Diery et al. (2021) and Majdzadeh et al. (2012) who identified limited capacity and resources as challenges to implementing evidence-based decision-making. This merits further investigation into specific barriers to evidence use within different organizational contexts. Collaboration and political support also had non-significant relationships, which differs from studies like Garwe (2014) and Tadesse (2016) that emphasize the importance of collaboration and stakeholder involvement for effective policy development. This suggests the need for more nuanced understanding of how collaboration and political contexts influence policy processes in various settings.

Overall, while leadership and forums align consistently with empirical evidence, this study hints priorities for Zimbabwe center on building skills and overcoming practical barriers may require localized strategies. Comparative analyses across settings could offer further explanatory insight into observed variations.

- 2. How can universities overcome these challenges to enhance the relevance, effectiveness, and ownership of their policies?

Stakeholders proposed strategies such as investing in tailored capacity building, forming centralized coordinating bodies, taking phased pilot approaches, and partnering with experienced organizations. As one Faculty member put it, "Training across levels in policy processes and tools would empower staff to participate fully." Another noted, "A coordinating office could advocate within the bureaucracy and maintain momentum for new practices." Testing initiatives on a small scale first before wider rollout was also deemed important by several interviewees. As a faculty member said, "Piloting gives confidence that it works before committing scarce resources university-wide." External research partnerships were seen as leveraging existing strengths to produce robust evidence packages co-developed with stakeholders. The strategies to enhance policy relevance and ownership are discussed below:

In recommending capacity building, central coordination, pilots, and partnerships, stakeholders and literature endorse flexible, collaborative approaches demonstrated successful elsewhere (Goodkind et al., 2017). Memorandums formalizing research partnerships could leverage strengths as advocated by organizations like the Global Education Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2023), focusing on capacity building, knowledge sharing, and joint research initiatives. However, the specific details and implementation strategies within memoranda require further development and context-specific adaptation. Pilot evaluations ensuring lessons translate to scale-up will also be crucial to study.

Conceptually, participation fostering ownership and credibility (Demir, 2020; Garwe, 2014) resonates with the findings. However, power dynamics and the diverse perspectives influencing political and evidence-based decision-making processes (De Weger et al., 2020; Klemenčič, 2017) warrant deeper exploration. This necessitates critical examination of potential inequalities and biases within participatory structures, ensuring marginalized voices are heard and effectively considered.

Limitations include self-reported qualitative data and sample constraints. But the richness of stakeholder insights offers a valuable "inside view" meriting rigorous integration with statistical modeling to develop a holistic understanding of this multifaceted issue. Overall, while this work makes a novel contribution, its conclusions could be strengthened through wider sampling, longitudinal analysis, and comparisons across institutional and geographical contexts over time. Such rigor would generate compelling theoretical and practical implications.

- 3. How can inclusive policy co-development help address the complex needs of higher education institutions?

Participants expressed that inclusive participation could foster stakeholder buy-in critical to policy success within resource-constrained contexts. As the student leader explained, administrators are "beginning to appreciate the realities" through stakeholder voices. Moreover, evidence-based discussion anchored decisions, as the policy adviser noted they were "no longer making assumptions but basing initiatives in our unique circumstances." Academics also viewed collaboration as leveraging limited capacity, with one stating, "Working across departments exposed complementary strengths and led to more holistic solutions." Overall, interviewees reinforced the potential for such approaches to lead to initiatives more tailored to diverse institutional needs.

Participants felt inclusion fostered stakeholder buy-in critical for success aligning with Hall et al.'s (2016) assertions. Seeking diverse perspectives so institutions understand realities on the ground, as the student leader explained, mirrors

calls by Hall et al. (2016) and Shaikh et al. (2021) for inclusive processes ensuring policy relevance. Collaboration leveraging complementary expertise to develop holistic solutions, as mentioned by one academic, is supported by Teferra's (2016) research showing partnerships across departments yield more comprehensive reforms.

Evidence anchoring decisions rather than assumptions also reflects the argument that grounding initiatives in needs and evidence strengthens rationales and builds confidence. The study reinforces conceptual suggestions that participation fosters ownership and uptake (Garwe, 2014), while data use boosts credibility with stakeholders (Rietbergen-McCracken, 2020). By directly linking perspectives to empirical literature, we see inclusive co-development approaches drawing on stakeholders' rich institutional knowledge can indeed help address complex needs as various studies have found. Thank you for pushing me to make those important connections clearer. Please let me know if any part needs more explanation.

Our study's findings have important implications for practice and policy. To promote effective participatory and evidence-based policy design processes in universities, it is crucial to address the obstacles identified in our study. This can be achieved by providing training and resources to build capacity in data analysis and evidence-based practices, establishing regular forums and structures for stakeholder engagement, promoting collaboration between different departments/stakeholders, and addressing power imbalances and promoting inclusive policymaking. Additionally, our study highlights the importance of leveraging the facilitators identified in our study, such as strong leadership commitment, robust capacity strengthening, and champions within leadership who advocate for inclusion. By drawing on existing literature and our own study's findings, we can better understand the complex issues involved in participatory and evidence-based policy design in universities and develop more effective strategies for overcoming these challenges. noteworthy finding was the differences in experiences between public and private institutions.

Many facilitators and obstacles stemmed from distinct governance structures and funding models between the two sectors. Public universities face political pressures and resource constraints due to reliance on state appropriations, whereas private universities have more autonomy but also marketization pressures. These environmental factors shaped stakeholder interactions in meaningful ways.

For example, strong leadership commitment was critical in both sectors but derived from diverse sources. In public universities, administrators drew authority from their roles as civil servants accountable to the government. Their capacity to champion reform depended on political will. In contrast, private university leaders gained backing internally from ownership and externally through nonprofit boards. This independence afforded private institutions more flexibility to pilot new approaches.

Capacity strengthening was another facilitator implemented differently. Public universities mainly offered in-house training due to limited budgets, sacrificing external expertise. Private counterparts leveraged international partnerships to broaden skill development. Overreliance on internal solutions in the public sector potentially hinders adoption of global best practices.

Time constraints surfaced as a major obstacle, disproportionately impacting public universities. Staff faced competing priorities of research, teaching and community service on top of understaffing. Private university personnel mitigated this

challenge by outsourcing certain functions, allowing focus on strategic priorities.

Additionally, tensions between administration and faculty arose for divergent reasons. In public schools, academics resisted perceived threats to autonomy from administrators subjected to political oversight. Within private institutions, differences emerged from experience level variations as the sector rapidly expanded.

To overcome these challenges, universities can draw from change management strategies and principles of inclusive stakeholder engagement. Building capacity requires dedicating resources to train internal change leaders who champion reform and coordinate external specialists. It's also key to establish collaborative communities of practice across departments and institutions to share knowledge.

Gaining buy-in necessitates transparently addressing stakeholder concerns through open dialogue. Public universities may form advocacy groups to consult government, while private schools assemble advisory boards early in decision-making. Both can adapt structures like Rietbergen-McCracken's (2020) multistakeholder quality assurance model.

By understanding root causes of resistance unique to each context, tailored communication strategies and flexibility in implementation can help build consensus over time. Leaders must balance integrity with pragmatism to meet stakeholders "where they are." With coordinated efforts, Zimbabwean universities can realize participatory policymaking's full benefits despite challenges.

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the facilitators and challenges to implementing participatory and evidence-based policy design processes in universities, as well as strategies to enhance these approaches. Drawing upon the Advocacy Coalition Framework, the findings provide important insights into the dynamics of coalitions advocating for different perspectives within the higher education policy subsystem in Zimbabwe.

The top facilitators identified - strong leadership commitment, capacity strengthening initiatives, and established stakeholder forums - relate directly to the resources and supports that coalitions can mobilize according to the ACF. Leaders and champions within universities played a crucial role in allocating resources to build capacity and create structures enabling participation. This underscores leadership's influence in translating beliefs into new policy approaches.

At the same time, the challenges of resistance to change, limited expertise, and constraints of time and funding reveal tensions that can emerge between competing coalitions with differing views. Overcoming these obstacles involves addressing the policy beliefs and interpretations of evidence that drive coalition behavior. The study adds nuance to the ACF by highlighting how resource constraints uniquely influence public and private university coalitions differently due to their funding structures.

Overall, the findings suggest participatory and evidence-based policy processes have begun taking hold, reflecting consensus building among coalitions over time as posited by the ACF. However, ongoing engagement is still needed to

further institutionalize new approaches and gain buy-in from all stakeholders. The recommendations emphasize central coordination to balance local adaptation with consistency, gradual implementation to manage resistance to change, and collaborative research to strengthen the coalitions' shared evidentiary basis.

Conceptualizing university governance as interactions between coalitions provided a robust framework for this study. The results both support and add complexity to ACF concepts. Continued application of the theoretical insights can help guide ongoing quality enhancement processes navigating the dynamic interplay between facilitators, challenges and competing policy beliefs within this strategic higher education subsystem.

Ultimately, this study serves as a valuable guide for enhancing the quality of higher education through evidence-based and inclusive policy co-development, not only in Zimbabwe but also in similar contexts worldwide. Its findings and recommendations offer a path forward for institutions seeking to address the complex challenges of the higher education sector through collaborative, data-driven policymaking processes that prioritize the needs and perspectives of diverse stakeholders. Future research employing mixed methods approaches could further explore variations between contexts over time, enriching our understanding of inclusive policy co-development in higher education.

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