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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; Bisaso, 2017). 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 argues for the adoption of participatory and evidence-based policy design processes as promising approaches to enhance policy relevance, tailor solutions to local realities, and foster ownership among institutional communities. Drawing on the literature on higher education research and development agendas in Africa (e.g., Mapping the field of research on African higher education; Higher education research, development agendas in Africa), this study explores how such processes can be implemented in Zimbabwean universities. Zimbabwe is a developing country facing economic challenges and rapid expansion of its higher education sector, making it an important context to examine facilitators and obstacles to participatory, evidence-based policymaking approaches (Tangwa, 2010; Garwe, 2014). The study uses qualitative case studies of policy processes at public and private institutions to glean insights with implications for continuous quality enhancement. By integrating diverse stakeholder voices and grounding decisions in institutional realities, such methodologies can yield better tailored, relevant policies with greater buy-in (Hall et al., 2016; Mhango et al., 2015). Yet within Zimbabwe specifically, limited research exists on implementing such processes given practical constraints. The next section provides a brief overview of the higher education landscape in Zimbabwe.

The Zimbabwean higher education landscape

Prior to independence in 1980, higher education in Zimbabwe was limited and primarily accessible to the wealthy elite. However, with the country's independence, the government made a commitment to expand access to education and increase enrollment in higher education. This led to the establishment of new universities and an increase in enrollment from around 10,000 students in 1980 to over 300,000 in 2022 (World Bank, 2022).

The rapid expansion of higher education in Zimbabwe has been driven by a number of factors, including government support, population growth, and increased demand for higher education. The government has implemented policies aimed at increasing access to education, such as financial aid programs and student loans (Mukwambo, 2018). Additionally, rising education levels and the increasing importance of higher education for job prospects have also contributed to the growth in enrollment (Vera, 2019; Machingura et al., 2021).

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 (Chivore, 2020; Madavo et al., 2021). This has made it difficult for universities to attract and retain qualified faculty, which can negatively impact the quality of education. Furthermore, Guloba et al. (2017) points to instances of political intrusion in university affairs, 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 necessitate innovative approaches to developing policies and strategies that can enhance institutional quality and sustainability. Participatory and evidence-based policy approaches hold promise to address stakeholder needs more effectively while strengthening governance (Machingura et al., 2021; Butcher et al., 2022). While the benefits of

participatory, evidence-based policy co-development are well-established in the literature, adoption remains limited in Zimbabwe (Bisaso, 2017; Mhango et al., 2015). Nonetheless, implementing such changes remains challenging given capacity, funding and structural constraints (Mavhunga, 2017; Madavo et al., 2021).

This study aims to explore how universities can navigate such barriers to policy quality by building collaborative solutions tailored to local circumstances. Lessons from these efforts may help address the ongoing transformations shaping Zimbabwe's higher education landscape. By bringing diverse stakeholders together to co-develop solutions grounded in shared evidence, it is hoped more responsive and effective policies can be created to benefit all. The remainder of the paper author's motivation outlines the methodology, findings, and conclusions of this inquiry into strengthening 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; Shaikh et al., 2021; Mhango et al., 2015; Ncube, 2017). 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 (Halim 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 (Hargreaves & North, 2013; Boud & Garrick, 2017).

While inclusive approaches aim to address diverse needs, some note they may prioritize certain voices over others or fail to gain consensus (Bisaso, 2017). There is also a debate around balancing top-down and bottom-up approaches, as centralized coordination provides consistency while decentralized inputs ensure local relevance (Teferra, 2016).

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 (Agüi et al., 2019; Nyaluondo et al., 2019). However, others argue universal principles also apply, and an overemphasis on context can sideline transnational research collaboration and benchmarking (Oyefeso et al., 2019; Akinboade et al., 2019). While studies stress higher education's role in development, some note its impact depends on wider economic conditions and capacity challenges within institutions (Mishra et al., 2019; Odimegwa et al., 2019). Regarding globalization and technology, certain research finds strategic opportunities if paired with equitable access initiatives (Oyefeso et al., 2019; Akinboade et al., 2019). 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

Research emphasizes participatory and evidence-based approaches' benefits like improved outcomes, yet some argue these tools are not guarantees and depend on effective implementation within unique institutional contexts (Boud & Solomon, 2017; Hall, 2017; Dawson, 2016; Darken & Watson, 2017). Participation may be hindered by power imbalances and lack engagement quality rather than just quantity (Klemenčič, 2017; Muller, 2018).

Evidence use does not negate the role of values and judgment, and quantitative data have limitations for addressing complex problems (Jones et al., 2014; Yang et al., 2018). Overall implementation challenges like capacity, resources and politics also mediate impact (Halim et al., 2019; Pantzer et al., 2017; Waters et al., 2013; Hargreaves & North, 2013).

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

Existing research highlights the value of participatory and evidence-based approaches to policymaking in higher education. To enhance quality, policies should be informed by the realities and needs within each institutional context (Jones et al., 2014; Yang et al., 2018). Input from diverse stakeholders strengthens the relevance, efficacy and acceptance of resulting initiatives (Klemenčič, 2017; Muller, 2018).

This study draws upon the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) to further ground its exploration of these concepts. Developed by Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1993), this framework posits that policy change occurs through interactions between coalitions advocating competing beliefs within a policy subsystem. Coalitions employ various tools like evidence and stakeholder engagement to influence decisions (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993).

This aligns well with the focus on participation and evidence use. As Weible et al. (2011) demonstrated, the framework can aid analysis of how ideas compete within governance systems. It also illuminates potential facilitators and barriers, such as resources, political will, and power structures empowering certain voices (Mazzuchi & Sarewitz, 2020; Norton et al., 2021).

Applying this lens positions the study within broader dynamics of policy change (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993). Findings may offer insight into mobilizing support, resources and authority needed for implementation (Weible et al., 2011). Overall, integrating this established framework strengthens conceptual grounding and potential impact (Klemenčič, 2017; Muller, 2018; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993).

The literature review provides a comprehensive overview of research on policy development, quality enhancement, and research agendas in African higher education. It establishes the need for more context-specific, participatory, and evidence-based approaches to policymaking that engage diverse stakeholders and address local needs. However, a gap exists regarding practical implementation of these approaches within the Zimbabwean context specifically. While the

benefits are well-established, few studies examine the concrete facilitators, obstacles, and strategies for overcoming challenges that institutions face in adopting participatory, evidence-based co-development processes. This study aims to address this gap through a qualitative case study exploring stakeholder perspectives and experiences with implementing participatory and evidence-based policy design processes in Zimbabwean universities.

Zimbabwe is a developing country facing economic challenges and rapid expansion of its higher education sector, making it an important context to examine facilitators and obstacles to participatory, evidence-based policymaking approaches (Tangwa, 2010; Garwe, 2014). Studies have shown that the country faces challenges in implementing participatory and evidence-based policy design processes due to factors such as limited resources, inadequate capacity, and political interference (Chigona et al., 2013; Mhango et al., 2015).

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, two public and two private universities were purposefully selected using maximum variation sampling (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 by Green et al. (2017), Bolden et al. (2013), Kothari et al. (2018), Goudie and Nusche (2017), Hodgkinson et al. (2017), and Waters et al. (2012), which highlight the critical role of leadership, capacity building, and stakeholder engagement in evidence-based policymaking in HEIs.

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 Mavhunga (2017) finding private university leadership in Africa 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. A study by Madavo et al. (2021) in Kenya highlighted this difference, with private universities benefiting more from collaboration to build skills.

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. This diverges from findings by Teferra (2016) that stakeholder involvement policies are less prescribed in private African institutions.

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), Pantzer et al. (2017), Waters et al. (2013), Hargreaves and North (2013), and Boud and Garrick (2017), 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 Mavhunga (2017). 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 Madavo et al. (2021) focusing only on public African institutions.

Interpretation of evidence was also seen as an impediment across contexts. However, public university personnel highlighted tensions between administrative and academic Interpretations more, an obstacle reflecting public sector governance structures per Banya and Elu (2001). Private university participants emphasized differences stemming from experience level variations between faculty.

These studies demonstrate 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 work (Hall et al., 2016; Boud & Solomon, 2017). However, some differences are worth exploring. Evidence availability showed a weaker connection, unlike Ncube

(2017), suggesting data gaps remain a challenge. This divergence merits future study on barriers to evidence use. Collaboration and political support also had non-significant relationships, conflicting with Nyaluondo et al. (2019). Perhaps department silos or political complexities pose greater obstacles in Zimbabwe than other settings. Further comparative analyses across contexts could help explain variations. The qualitative findings reinforce the top facilitators and obstacles. Stakeholder perspectives mirror past research in meaningful ways while offering locally-grounded understanding of realities. Their proposed strategies similarly operationalize literature-supported recommendations.

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 shown successfully elsewhere (Mhango et al., 2015; Ncube, 2017). Memorandums formalizing research partnerships could leverage strengths as Nyaluondo et al. (2019) advocate, but memoranda details require further development. Pilot evaluations ensuring lessons translate to scale-up will also be important to study. Conceptually, participation fostering ownership and credibility (Garwe, 2014; Ncube, 2017) resonates in findings. But power dynamics and diversity of perspectives influencing politics and evidence use (Boud & Garrick, 2017; Hargreaves & North, 2013) warrant deeper exploration.

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. This aligns with Tangwa's (2010) study of 40 African universities, which found policies seen as illegitimate by internal groups faced implementation challenges. 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 Bisaso's (2017) 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 (Ncube, 2017). 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.

Conclusion

This study offers significant contributions to the understanding and improvement of policy co-development processes in Zimbabwean universities. The research provides practical recommendations for addressing the challenges of inclusive policy co-development, including the establishment of stakeholder-centric training programs, tailored capacity building initiatives, centralized coordinating offices, phased pilots, and external partnerships. The study also highlights the importance of leadership commitment, capacity building, and established engagement structures in facilitating inclusive

policymaking.

The findings of this study are particularly relevant in the context of resource-limited settings, where policy implementation challenges are often exacerbated. By offering nuanced insights into the realities and needs of stakeholders involved in participatory and evidence-based policy design, this study underscores the importance of a balanced approach that acknowledges both constraining and enabling factors.

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. This study's recommendations for cultivating environments that foster strategic risk-taking and collaborative problem-solving rooted in shared evidence are particularly pertinent for policymakers and institutional leaders seeking to uphold rigorous standards in the present and future.

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.

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