Factors influencing student enrolment in young universities: A case study in Zimbabwe

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Abstract
Purpose: This study explored factors affecting students' enrolment in young universities, focusing particularly on one young university in Zimbabwe. Young universities are experiencing enrolment challenges, which involve investigating the causal factors for sustainable development and operations of the universities.

Research methodology: The study adopted the interpretivist paradigm and used a combination of qualitative approaches for data collection and analysis within a case study design. The study's sample comprised ten heads of department, one admissions registrar and forty-eight students purposively selected from a young university. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions were used to generate the data. The data were analyzed using a directed content analysis approach.

Results: The study revealed that students' university enrolment is affected mainly by students' experiences, career orientations, changes in high school graduate preferences, admissions process, transport, accommodation, programmes offered, competition in university education, social capital variables, government policy, cost of education, and disasters.

Conclusions: The revealed key stakeholders influencing students' enrolment in young universities reflected strategies that can be used to increase students' enrolment, chiefly public awareness, academic support, and student support services.

Limitations: While this study adopted a qualitative methodology, which can be a limiting factor in terms of inference, for further research, the study recommends the adoption of a quantitative method.

Contribution: This study recommends that universities strategically plan for student enrolment using a multi-stakeholder approach. The study also recommends that the government adequately fund university development and ensure that university education is affordable to everyone.

Keywords: *Enrolment, Factors, Students, University, Young Universities, Zimbabwean*

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1. Introduction
In 1980, Zimbabwe attained independence from colonial rule, which marked the beginning of a new dawn where ruling systems and structures had to be reconfigured for the benefit of previously marginalized black Zimbabwean societies. In the colonial era, there were many inequalities cutting across all sectors, including mining, agriculture, and education. This study focused on higher education enrolment, particularly in universities. The devolution of state universities is one of the many attempts to eliminate social stratification in the post-independence era, where the government of Zimbabwe tried

to close inequalities to ensure fairness in accessing higher education. This was initiated through a Growth Equity framework as a transition mechanism tool towards socialism from the previous colonial-driven capitalism ideology. In 1981, the government of Zimbabwe introduced the Growth with Equity policy (Sibanda and Makwata (2017), where economic programs were established and practiced for economic growth. The policy had a direct impact on Zimbabwe's higher-education development. Students' access to higher-education institutions has increased. The economic development policies introduced by the government were periodically categorized by Sibanda and Makwata (2017) as 1980-90 socialism, 1991 - 96 structural adjustment with a market-driven approach to development, and the third phase from 1996 onwards, which is characterized by crisis management.

In an attempt to understand the factors affecting students' enrolment in higher education, a survey was conducted at one of the young universities in Zimbabwe. Bearing in mind, out of twenty-one universities, the University of Zimbabwe is the leading higher education institution in students' enrolment and programmes of study. This study therefore reviewed the background of the Zimbabwean higher education, students' enrollment, and attempts made by the Zimbabwean government to enable access to higher education. From the review, questions were generated to understand the factors affecting the enrolment of students in universities with reference to a young university.

According to Kurasha (2015), the post-colonial transition state was used to examine the relationship between the socialist rhetoric of the government and the demands of civil society. This informs that enrolment into higher education was a result of colonization, which was to be addressed from 1980. It is important to note that this marked the beginning of the drive towards opening access to higher education, eliminating stratification. Mlambo (1997) concurs that at independence in 1980, Zimbabwe inherited a skewed educational system which had been built to cater to the interests of the dominant white minority, restricting opportunities for black Zimbabweans at the higher level of education. According to Isnaini, Melisa, Rusdinal, and Gistituati (2021), the democratization of education is a process in the world and in certain countries and areas in which the inherited class and other restrictions in access to the realization of the right to education are avoided, and ways of its mass use are opened at all levels. This is usually spearheaded by social influence in politics, which has been the case in Zimbabwe since 1980, where education was supposed to be accessible at all levels to promote equity. The new nationalist government, intent on establishing an egalitarian society, embarked on a largely interventionist development strategy, which led to increased expenditure on education (Sibanda & Makwata, 2017).

According to Ndlovu (2013), the inaugural Minister of Education in independent Zimbabwe revamped the education system away from the colonial education model that did not equip students to reach university level. The presentation in Table 1 below is evidence of the milestones in enrolment across all faculties at the University of Zimbabwe (UZ) between 1987 and 1990, and Table 2 shows enrolment at UZ in 2019. Table 3 shows enrolment across all state universities in 2019, and Table 4 shows enrolment at one of the young universities from 2017 to 2022.

Table 1. University of Zimbabwe enrollments between years 1987 to 1990

Faculty	1987	1988	1989	1990
Agriculture		391	280	671
Arts		516	1 080	1 596
Commerce		1 781	1 598	3 379
Education		137	257	394
Engineering		1 031	251	1 282
Law		284	467	751
College of Health Sciences		986	1 087	2 073
Science		1 483	1 067	2 550
Social Studies		1 557	2 953	4 510
Veterinary Science		127	90	217
Total		**8 293**	**9 130**	**17 423**

Source: Zimbabwe Second Five-Year National Development Plan

Table 2. University of Zimbabwe enrollments by faculty 2019

Faculty	Male	Female	Total
Agriculture	391	280	671
Arts	516	1 080	1 596
Commerce	1 781	1 598	3 379
Education	137	257	394
Engineering	1 031	251	1 282
Law	284	467	751
College of Health Sciences	986	1 087	2 073
Science	1 483	1 067	2 550
Social Studies	1 557	2 953	4 510
Veterinary Science	127	90	217
Total	**8 293**	**9 130**	**17 423**

Source: ZIMSTAT (2021)

Table 3. Enrolment at state universities in 2019

	University	Students
1	Bindura University of Science Education	5676
2	Chinhoyi University of Technology	10009
3	Harare Institute of Technology	1823
4	Midlands State University	21878
5	University of Zimbabwe	17423
6	National University of Science and Technology	8845
7	Lupane State University	3073
8	Great Zimbabwe University	15534
9	Gwanda State University	363
10	Zimbabwe Open University	15441
11	Marondera University of Agricultural Sciences and Technology	344
12	Manicaland State University of Applied Sciences	616
Total		92025

Source: ZIMSTAT (2021)

Table 4. Enrolment at a young university from 2017 to 2022

Faculty	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
A	11	35	105	224	269	315
B	0	6	38	89	127	148
C	0	0	20	59	68	106
D	295	381	425	379	397	321
Total	306	422	588	751	861	890

Source: One of the young university (2022)

The presentation in Table 1 shows that there was a massive increase in the enrolment of students across all nine faculties. Kurasha (2015) further postulated that such phenomenal increases in enrolments show that the Zimbabwean state has been able to democratize education. Table 3 shows that 92025 students were enrolled in state universities in 2019. Table 4 shows enrolment at one young university from 2017 to 2022. Today, Zimbabwe has 21 universities, 14 of which are state universities and four are private universities (MHTESTD, n.d.). The student enrollment in the Zimbabwe's universities according to statistics released by Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency in December 2021 states that 94131 were enrolled in 2018 Bartlett, Horwitz, Ipe, and Liu (2005); ZIMSTAT (2021) and in 1980 enrolment at University of Zimbabwe was 1000 student, this is a great indicator of developments in reducing stratification and democratisation of higher education. Universities are now closer to the people, with every administrative province having at least one university in the country. In light of these

developments, it is therefore of paramount importance to understand the factors affecting students' enrolment in higher education.

This young university was established through an act of parliament. The university was incubated by a large university for five years as a specialized college. The young university had four faculties that were growing insignificantly with low student enrollment, as shown in Table 4. Three other young universities were also established almost at the same period as this young university, and they are also facing students' enrolment challenges. Understanding the factors affecting student enrollment in universities is necessary for the sustainable development of higher education institutions. It is believed that the enrolment of students in these universities is furthering and creating new stratifications in higher education (Moses, Emily, & Kudzai, 2012). Higher education in Zimbabwe seeks to create employment and develop the nation through knowledge creation, research, innovation, community service, and industrialization. With the stratification of higher education, universities have had unexpected outcomes as students' enrolment criteria and choices differ among universities.

For the past five years, from 2017 to 2022 (Table 4), overall student enrollment at this young university has been growing at a decreasing rate, with serious unpredictable fluctuations in the sciences department. Some faculties have very few students, and some departments even fail to operate on their own and are consolidated into other viable departments. Established institutions like the University of Zimbabwe, Chinhoyi University, and Great Zimbabwe, among others, are enjoying steady student enrolment. The majority of students at this young university are from its province, despite it being a national university that is also international. Typically, an increase in student enrollment determines university development, especially with the enrolment of regional and international students (Chinyoka & Mutambara, 2020). Enrolment figures at this young university indicate compromised university growth. There is a reason to believe that there are factors affecting students' enrollment at young universities that need to be unearthed to better increase students' enrolment.

2. Literature review
2.1 University historical context
Universities are viewed as centers of critical learning and research. Universities are considered industry-producing HEIs. Higher education is a continuation of studies from secondary or high schools to colleges, polytechnic institutions, and universities. Universities represent industries and teach a wide range of subjects, courses, and programs at different levels, ensuring that students attain knowledge that prepares them for the work environment (Keche, 2021). A university, on the other hand, represents both a higher learning institution and a community of scholars or persons.

A university is a higher learning institution that brings men and women to a high level of intellectual development in the arts and sciences and in traditional professional disciplines and promotes high-level research (Alemu, 2018). It also signifies a community of persons engaged in studies and research. University education in Zimbabwe is premised on the colonial phase (university education before 1980) and post-colonial phase (university education after 1980). University education before independence was only for the white minority, while the black majority had to work on farms and in mines (Dube, 2019). The colonial education system divided education along racial lines, concerned with developing the whole person, favoring the white minority, and affecting the black person (Garwe, 2014). Censored and limited access to higher education was targeted at controlling the blacks by the whites. The University of Zimbabwe was the only university during the colonial phase, then known as the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, introduced in 1957 (Garwe, 2014). University education was Eurocentric, structured to reinforce white settlers' supremacy despite their small numbers. Black people were limited in their chances of progressing to university as they ended their primary and secondary education for labor exploitation. More educational resources were offered to whites and fewer resources were offered to blacks; the white government controlled enrolment in quality schools and institutions of higher learning based on socio-economic status and race (Ndlovu, 2013).

After independence, changes in education began to take place. From to 1980-1990 notable changes were recorded in the employment and education sectors. New institutions of higher education were

opened to train teachers, specialized workers, and professionals (Kurasha, 2015). The economy of Zimbabwe was stable from 1990 until around 2000, when there was a massive decline in industries, factories, and farms (Ndlovu, 2013). Therefore, education became a source of distrust and risk as the economy collapsed versus expected returns. Students would ponder whether they should risk attending university. Most students would prefer to risk going unprofessionally or leaving the country (Guha, 1977). After Zimbabwe's 1980 independence, new policies were introduced to redress the past. Education was declared a basic human right by the government, which changed the constitution to recognize primary and secondary public education as free and compulsory. Education in higher and tertiary education was almost free, with university students being paid grants that afforded them a decent life while studying (Kurasha, 2015). This was meant to promote the black population, retrospection at the laws that administered education before independence.

In 2006, the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE) was formed to guarantee quality and accreditation for university education. There are 21 registered universities (13 public and eight private), eight polytechnics, 15 teachers' colleges, and two industrial training colleges (ZIMSTAT, 2021). Public universities are also regarded as state universities, and they are enacted by an act of parliament. Their operations are funded by the government through grants. Some of the state universities in Zimbabwe are Manicaland State University, Chinhoyi University of Technology, University of Zimbabwe, and Gwanda State University. The president of the country is the Chancellor of all state universities in Zimbabwe. Private universities are established through charters granted by the government. They are privately owned, and their operations are independent of the government. Some of the private universities in Zimbabwe are Solusi University, Africa University, and Ezekiel Guti University. Matorevhu (2023) explains the consideration of philosophy for restructuring higher education in Zimbabwe and reveals that the Ministry for Higher and Tertiary Education Science and Technology Development tries to boost the creation of employment by graduates and employment prospects of graduates. Digital transformation in the industry is affecting university education. Most industries are automating using novel technology; thus, workers need new skills. Universities can change their curricula, but if businesses do not keep up with technology, graduates will be prepared for jobs of the future, not the jobs on offer currently. This poses a threat to university enrolment. Zimbabwean university education has long been expected to produce a better-skilled and more competitive labor force, which would give the country competitive opportunities in the globalized market economy.

In Zimbabwe, university education has become a marketable commodity that is expensive and marketable only to the economically privileged. The underprivileged have difficulty obtaining higher qualifications. Tuition is excessive, and there is a reduction in state financial aid for students, leading to students not enrolling at universities (Bigirimana, Chinzvende, & Masengu, 2016). The rise in tuition fees has been forced by tough economic conditions. For those who have proceeded to university education and graduated, the majority have not managed to get jobs. This has led to an increase in unemployment, resulting in a surge in poverty and human anguish (Dube, 2019). The key paybacks of university education have become private since charging fees, and universities seem to have become business enterprises. Universities compete with one another in producing and marketing their courses to students, who are seen as customers engaging with the higher education market (Oketch, 2016). This study offered a pronounced opportunity to analyze the factors that affected the enrolment of students in state universities. Reviewing other scholars' views on the current economic and political situations explores the factors that affect university enrolment. In the context of university education in Zimbabwe, from a historical perspective to the current scenario, a number of factors influence enrolment into universities.

2.2 Students' enrolment at universities

Students' enrolment is the act of enrolling at an institution or in a class. A fee is charged for each year/semester/term of study and is payable upon enrolment. The enrolment process is completed after a student is granted admission to a school. Students can then select courses through their school's information service (Adejimi & Nzabalirwa, 2021). The extent of university enrolment is very detailed; it includes a number of diverse elements, not only educational but also elements of social life, university reputation, research opportunities, extracurricular activities, and faculty and staff. According to

Spearman, Rahim, Ghanayem, and Ljepava (2016) educational feature is the most significant but it cannot be reflected distinctly from general educational practices. Thus, enrolment and functions at the university are interrelated, with word of mouth being one of the most imperative ways of university promotion (Adejimi & Nzabalirwa, 2021).

Scholars had also revealed that most of the prospective undergraduate and postgraduate students use university website to know comprehensive information regarding the university they are looking for to study at (van Klaveren, Kooiman, Cornelisz, & Meeter, 2019). According to Bıshau and Samkange (2015), it is important for universities to have an attractive and interactive online presence, as today's students mostly conduct online investigations of a university rather than physical visits. Online presence provides students with definite information on university mandates and what they offer. A research by Adejimi and Nzabalirwa (2021) showed that university websites play an important role in forming students' opinions and choices about the university they will study in. When looking for a university, potential students stated that they mostly focused on the academic programs and courses that a university has to offer (Welding, 2024).

2.3 Theoretical framework - Theories of factors affecting enrolment

Social capital theory and Knowles theory of andragogy provided the foundation for inquiries, guided the research, and helped interpret the results in relation to factors affecting university enrolment. Rostila (2011) advanced social capital theory, championed by Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988), which can be considered to assist in explaining factors affecting the enrolment of students in universities. According to Rostila (2011), social capital theory considers possessions that someone has the privilege of because of their position in a society that permits them to realize their goals. Other persons have access to information, money, material resources, favors, and knowledge (Ghorbani and Khanachah (2021) based on social relationships, which may be used to progress to higher education. Social capital is noted by the size of the network influencing the reactions and circumstances that are possible to happen, thus apparently influencing the decision of students to enrol in university.

Knowles' theory of andragogy furthers the theoretical framework used in this study. Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2005) defined andragogy as a set of essential adult learning principles that apply to all adult learning contexts. The essential principles of andragogy are the learner's need to know, previous experience of the learner, self-concept of the learner, willingness to learn, approach to learning, and drive to learn. Scholars have agreed that the essential principles are not adequate to clarify learning choices because they concentrate entirely on the learner. Subsequently, Knowles et al. (2005) created a model that recognized situational and individual learner differences, societal and institutional growth, as well as the purposes and goals for learning as affecting the decision-making process to enrol as a learner. These theories are used to comprehend the reasons for the factors affecting the enrolment of students in universities.

2.4 Factors affecting students' enrolments

Factors mean determinants of students' enrolment in universities. The determinants can be found internally within the university and externally in society. These factors can have a positive or negative effect on student enrolment. The cost of university education, programmes (courses) offered at state universities, personal factors, academic support, student support services, competition, and public awareness are discussed below as factors affecting students' enrolment in universities.

The Zimbabwean government was in charge of all university education funding until 2006. Since 2006, cost-saving and cost-sharing strategies have been introduced to address economic challenges. Grants that were paid to university students were removed, and students started paying tuition fees (Chinyoka & Mutambara, 2020). Grants were government loans given to students for tuition fees and upkeep while studying at university. The government only continued to pay salary grants for employees and operations grants, which are not guaranteed. Presently, the government expects parents to share the cost of their children's education, by which the government offers salary grants for staff and infrastructure development while parents pay fees to fund university operations (*Education 5.0 and Vision 2030…re-configuring Zim university degrees. News*, 2019). Today, students are paying very high fees in

universities, which is beyond the affordability of many. The cost of living in universities is very high, thus other students cannot enrol for university education.

Most graduates' anticipations are often devastated upon entering the job market when they comprehend that getting a job of their dreams is not easy, despite being armed with a university degree (van Klaveren et al., 2019). The subject of university graduates joblessness certainly highlights the importance of the kind of education being provided today in universities. According to Keche (2021), some of the programmes (courses) being offered are not linked to the evolving needs, and people are moving around after being trained in these courses. The jobless graduate dangles in the poise with a big number resorting to unrelated jobs for survival. Many are so despairing that they end up in the informal sector, vending markets, dealing, running tuck shops, selling vegetables, mending shoes, and even working as touts (Muya, 2004). Thousands of prospective university students are considering their post-high school alternatives more cautiously and gradually selecting options other than university. Alternatives to college, such as boot camps, apprenticeships, trade schools, and others, allow students to obtain qualifications without spending much on universities. Recently, employers in the information, communication, and technology industry, such as Microsoft and Google, have awarded their own in-house certifications, which are preferred by employers more than degrees (Bertlett, Horwitz, Ipe, & Liu, 2005).

2.5 Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework served as a framework for understanding the factors affecting students' enrollment in universities, stakeholders affecting students' enrolment, and developing strategies to increase students 'enrolment in universities.
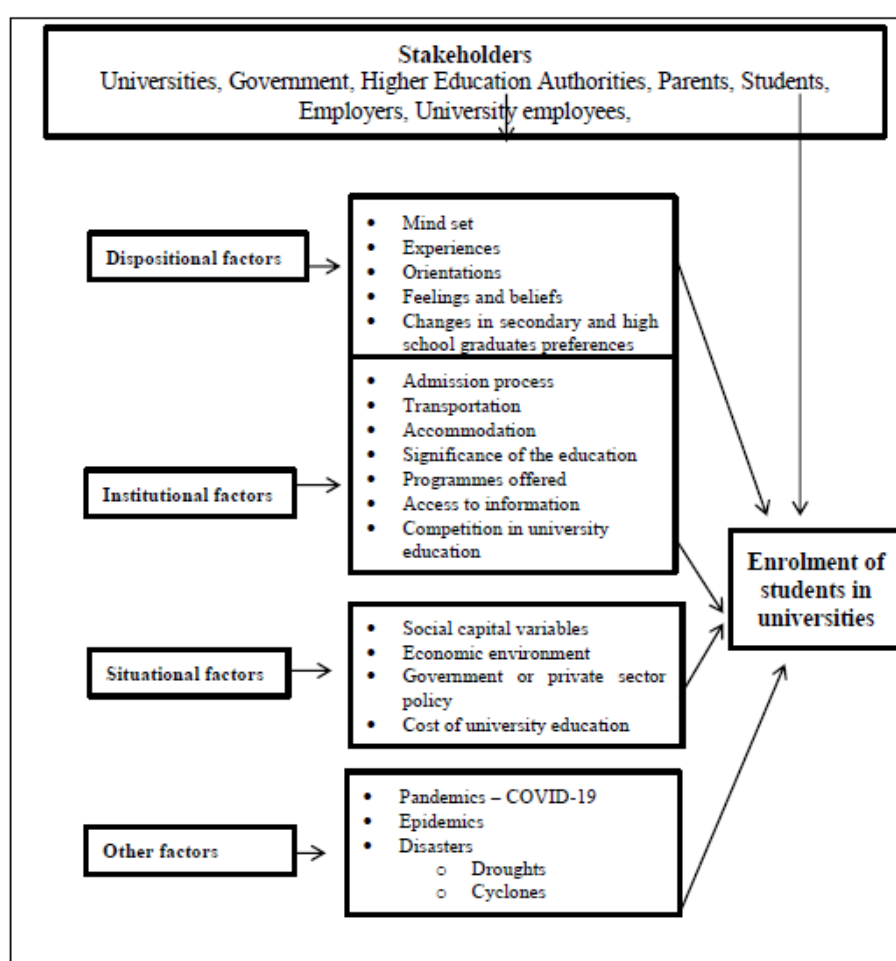

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of factors affecting enrolment of students in universities
Source: Author's own formulation

3. Research methodology

This study applied an interpretivist research design using a qualitative research approach to study the factors affecting the enrolment rate of students in young universities using a case study of a young university. The study was carried out in participants' natural settings, and participants were selected using non-probabilistic sampling. The description of the participants and their contexts is given using non-numeric interpretive approaches (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019). Babbie (2013) explains that qualitative designs are usually appropriate for research that seeks to understand the state of a certain phenomenon. This study adopted a qualitative approach because it sought to understand in detail the factors that affect the enrolment rate of students in young universities. Mwesigwa, Wahid, and Sohheng (2021) and Hsu, Chen, and Feng (2024) adopted this approach in their business related investigations and obtained convincing results hence its adoption in this investigation in the business of education.

A single case study design was adopted in the study due to time limitations, and the characteristics of new young universities are relatively the same throughout the country; thus, the findings can be generalized. There are seven young universities in Zimbabwe, four of which are state-owned and of interest in this study. The case study was recommended for the interpretivist research design (Kothari, 2004; Saunders et al., 2019) as it is ideal to respond to the "what, who, why, how, when" questions, thus providing an in-depth understanding of the problem. This research focused on information obtained from August to December 2022, during the academic semester at a young university.

The researcher used in-depth qualitative interviews to collect data. The study consisted of a series of individual interviews that lasted approximately 20 minutes with the heads of departments and admissions registrars. During the interviews, the researcher only jotted down notes. The interviews were less structured to explore the topic in detail. Open-ended specific questions were posed. The interview guide was used to structure the topics and questions. The interviews did not necessarily follow the questions or themes in the established order. The study used FGDs to understand the factors affecting students' enrollment at a young university from students' opinions in a non-controlled environment that encouraged open discussions. The themes and questions were structured into a focus group discussion guide. Twelve focus group discussions were conducted, one from each department (program of study). Each focus group discussion was made up of at least three to six members, and each discussion session lasted at least 30 minutes and at most 40 minutes. The group sizes were small enough to permit participants to get enough chance to share their experiences and yet big enough for diversity. Krueger (2014) asserts that focus group discussions should be composed of five to ten people, which is in line with this study, despite other groups having three members due to them being only students in that program of study. Qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the interview transcripts. Data were analyzed for content using thematic analysis. This study adopted a directed content analysis approach. Data were coded according to the themes determined from the literature. Additional themes that emerged from the focus group discussions and interviews were coded independently and then combined into a larger method (Easterby-Smith, Valizade, Thorpe, & Jaspersen, 2021). The privacy of respondents and the specific university name was kept unknown to protect confidentiality and respect their rights.

4. Results and discussions

4.1 Study findings

Three levels of respondents were considered in the research: students, chairpersons of departments, and admissions registrars. A sample of 48 respondents was considered sufficient for the study. The age, gender, and year of the respondents are shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Age and gender of respondents

Age in years	Males	Females	Total
Students			
18-24 years	13	18	**31**
25-35 years	8	6	**14**

35 years and above	2	1	**3**
Head of Departments (Chairpersons)			
30- 39 years	6		**6**
40- 49 years	4	1	**5**
50-59 years	1		**1**
60 years and above			
Admissions Registrar			
40-49 years	1		**1**
Year of Study	**Males**	**Females**	**Total**
1st year	9	13	**22**
2nd year	5	6	**11**
3rd year	3	5	**8**
4th year	2	1	**3**
5th year	1	3	**4**
Total	**20**	**28**	**48**

The data revealed that the majority of the students were around 20 years old and the department chairpersons were relatively young managerial age–30-39 years. Very few 5th and 4th year students participated in the study. The majority of the respondents were first- and second-year students, probably because they were the ones in session during the study period.

During discussions, students responded to which faculty they were and the programs of their study. The students considered in the focus group discussions came from all faculties. Discussions were conducted just before or after a lecture with the arrangement with the respective lecturers.

4.2 Theme One: The factors affecting students' enrolment
4.2.1   Sub theme one: Dispositional factors
Heads of departments and students were asked why there was a low rate of student enrolment at this young university. Students from the focus group indicated that there is a high unemployment rate among graduates in society, expressing that they are likely wasting their time pursuing a degree. Head of Department H3 indicated that

> *It is likely that high school graduate preferences have changed in recent years. Very few pursue university degrees; some students prefer polytechnics and apprenticeship training. In the past, if one went to an advanced level, it was definite that he or she would go to university.*

From the focus group discussions, it was clear that students felt that a university degree is no longer very valuable in Zimbabwe's economy. In all eight focus group discussions, sentiments like the following were captured:

> *You can spend four or five years at university, but your economic status will be far less than that of street hustlers.*
> *Even if you get the degree, you will not get the job without connections in the industry.*

The above responses revealed that university enrolment is affected by students' mindsets shaped by experiences from society.

4.2.2   Sub theme two: Institutional factors
From the focus group discussions, it appears that students were not comfortable commuting long distances to campus. One student from SFGD5 indicated:

> *Walking 8 km every day to come to the university is not an easy task. You will be tired and will not be able to study as expected.*

Another member from the same focus group, SFGD5, humorously commented:

> *You get here exhausted and feeling sleepy after waiting long in town to catch a ZUPCO bus.*

The above sentiments were in line with comments from AR that some students are not enrolling here because there is no accommodation on campus, she said. AR indicated that most students used to come for engineering programmes. With increased competition in university education, we are enrolling anyone with a minimum of two points for normal entry. AR noted that:

> *Very few of our students had 15 points. If we do not consider minimum university entry requirements, other programs will not attract students.*

AR further highlighted that the mode of entry for the majority of students is normal entry, with students studying under conventional. There are very few students under mature entry and those studying under block release. AR remarked:

> *All our block students are employed full-time. They attend classes during block releases. The mining degree used to have a big enrolment under block release, but the number of block students has significantly reduced across programmes. Other programs do not have block students.*

Heads of departments were impressed that some of their degree programmes were not known in the community. H10 remarked that:

> *People think that our university only offers science and engineering degrees. We offer human resource management and psychology within our Faculty of Social Sciences.*

Focus group discussions with students and interviews with the head of department and admissions registrar revealed that the admissions processes, transportation, and accommodation affected enrolment significantly.

4.2.3 Sub theme three: Situational factors

From the interviews, it appeared that the government's higher education policy is on research, teaching, community service, innovation, and industrialization, as enshrined in the Education 5.0 doctrine. The higher education philosophy revamped university degrees and introduced new ones, giving students a wide choice of degree programmes to choose from. This young university is state-owned, and all its developmental projects are funded by the government. Inadequate infrastructure was noted in the focus group discussions. A member of the students' focus group, SFGD6, indicated that

> *We hardly find space to sit while doing group discussions. Even during lectures, we will have two classes in one, which is very disturbing.*

The head of the department indicated that the degree programmes were reviewed and that some new programmes were failing to attract students as they were not well known. The head of the department, H2, remarked:

> *Some programmes are failing to kick-start as no students are enrolling for them. Prospective students have no full information about degree programmes.*

The head of department H5 remarked:

> *Other students are dropping out of college due to financial challenges; the fees used to be affordable, but now they are too high.*

The admissions registrar commented on the development of infrastructure at the university. Admissions remarked:

> *We hope the government will prioritize the construction of student accommodation, which will improve student enrolment.*

In focus group discussions, economic hardships were cited as a reason for choosing to enroll at a young university. One member of SFGD 4 highlighted that

> *This is a hometown university that is affordable to us. I cannot afford to travel to a distant university. Here, I am coming from home, staying with my parents.*

Correspondingly, from the focus group discussions, it was found that the majority of the students were failing to pay university tuition. A member of focus group SFGD7 noted that:

The tuition fees are far beyond our parents' incomes, and we hope the government will do something so that we can finish our studies. It is tough; I failed to finish my last semester because of fees.

Almost all the chairpersons and students reiterated that the economic environment is unfavorable for pursuing a university degree. The admissions registrar explained that the fees paid were meant to cover university operations.

4.2.4   Sub theme four: Other factors
The study showed that pandemics and disasters also affect university enrolment. Other students were forced to enroll at a young university because they could not travel freely when they finished high school due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Disasters such as Cyclone Idai affected the livelihoods of many families in Manicaland. A student from focus group SFGD2 indicated:

My parents operate a food outlet in town. During COVID-19, we struggled; I really wanted to go to the University of Zimbabwe. I enrolled here because it was the only option my parents could afford.

The admissions registrar noted the following:

A number of students dropped out of university during COVID-19. What happened to those students who dropped out is very clear, but I suspect that it was due to the economic hardships brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.3 Theme two: The stakeholders influencing students' enrolment at young university
4.3.1   Sub theme one: Universities
From the interviews with chairpersons and admissions registrars, it seemed that there was serious competition among universities for students. The universities offer similar degrees and attract students for enrolment using their competitiveness. A head of department H8 stated:

Engineering programmes require state-of-the-art laboratories, which we do not have. Students prefer to attend established universities such as UZ and MSU.

The admissions registrar remarked:

We enroll students at the same time as other universities. It is a challenge to compete with them as our university is still growing.

From the heads of departments and admissions registrar, it is evident that there is serious competition in the university education business.

4.3.2   Sub theme two: Government and authorities
The study showed that the government is a major stakeholder because it gives a mandate to the university. Infrastructure development and operations are funded by the government. The Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education accredits university degree programmes. The head of department H9 stated*:*

The development of infrastructure is going slowly, which is disturbing the growth of our department. The government is not providing adequate funding for the expansion of learning facilities.

The head of department H4 remarked:

We cannot introduce programs that are outside the university's mandate. Our programs were introduced as complementary to those in the sciences and engineering. New programmes must be accredited by ZIMCHE after being approved by the university senate.

The head of department H1 remarked:

Given the state of the economy, it will take time to develop competitive infrastructure. The government has failed to allocate adequate funding to universities.

4.3.3 Sub theme three: Parents and guardians

The investigation showed that low income levels, parents' education, and social background influenced the enrolment of students at a university. Parents and guardians are critical stakeholders in university students' enrolment. The majority of students indicated that their parents were low-income earners with low levels of education. A member of focus group SFGD3 noted:

> My father is a teacher, and he can afford to send me to a state university. I also wanted to attend a private university, but I cannot afford it.

The majority of students come from Manicaland, precisely from Mutare City. One student from the focus group discussion, SFGD5, commented:

> I come from Harare, where my parents stay, but their origin is from Manicaland, so they sent me to come and learn from here.

From the interviews and focus group discussions, the study revealed that there are no students under scholarships.

4.3.4 Sub theme four: Industry

During the interviews with heads of departments and discussions with students, it was observed that industries (employers) are also major stakeholders affecting students' enrolment at the university. Industry expectations from graduates are not being met. Students shun enrolling at the university because they have challenges in getting employment. A student from focus group SFGD5 remarked:

> It is a challenge to compete with students from big universities in interviews, even if we have the same degree.

The above sentiments indicate that the industry is a critical stakeholder in students' university enrolment. Industries expect to hire competent graduates, and there is a need for a linkage between industries and universities in the training of students.

4.3.5 Sub theme five: University staff

It appears that universities have two distinct groups of staff: academic and non-academic staff. There is a shortage of qualified staff in departments, with low motivation and high turnover. The head of department H10 remarked:

> At the moment, we have few qualified lecturers in our department; the majority are teaching assistants but carry a full lecturer's workload. Lecturers are leaving to work in mines where they receive better salaries.

Furthermore, head of department H9 noted:

> Lecturers are not delivering their best due to poor working conditions.

Similar sentiments were recorded in all the focus group discussions.

4.4 Theme three: The strategies to increase students' enrolment at young university
4.4.1 Sub theme one: Public awareness

The study found that there is a need to increase public awareness about the young university. Students reported that they learned about the university while searching for a university. Other students, despite coming from Mutare, knew nothing about the university. Students in focus group discussions SFGD 1 remarked:

> I did not know this university existed; I was directed here after failing to get enrolled at the University of Zimbabwe. I was told to come to the Midlands State University Mutare Campus.

SFGD 4 highlighted:

> During career guidance at high school, we were not told anything about this young university.

The admissions registrar indicated the following:

We used to visit other places in Manicaland to enroll students on-site. The marketing department also assists us in marketing the university at exhibitions and fairs.

The data show that students' enrolment is hindered by low public awareness of the university. It is still regarded as a college of the Midlands State University.

4.4.2   Sub theme two: Academic support

Lack of academic support was also revealed as another factor contributing to low student enrolment at the young university. The respondents recommended improving academic support as a strategy to improve student enrolment. Students in SFGD2 noted the following:
The reading facilities are inadequate; the library is very small and not conducive to its purpose.

The head of department H5 remarked:
We do not have a library dedicated to our faculty. Computers are inadequate, and when it comes to practical applications, it is a challenge.

Online learning during COVID-19 was nonexistent as students and staff could not afford the data. The university had no online learning platform at that time. The head of the department, H6, noted:
During the lockdown, no learning took place.

The data show that there is a need for academic support to enhance students' university enrolment.

4.4.3   Sub theme three: Student support services

The study revealed the need to improve student support services at universities to increase student enrolment. Students in focus group SFGD2 remarked:
Transportation needs to be improved from residences to campus; otherwise, I will not recommend anyone to come here.

The admissions registrar noted the following:
With accommodation facilities on campus, our enrolment will improve.

In nearly all the focus group discussions, the issue of poor food quality was raised. Students complained of poorly cooked meals. The provision of better food services at universities can enhance student enrolment.

4.5 Discussion of the study results

The results revealed that the Zimbabwean government is responsible for developing infrastructure at state universities. Chinyoka and Mutambara (2020) found that university development is slow due to funding challenges, which was also noted in this study to affect student enrolment. Currently, parents are struggling to pay fees for their children, and the cost of living at university is high, causing other students not to enrol for university students. This is in line with Kayange (2021) findings highlighting students' challenges at university, such as failure to eat regular standard meals due to lack of funds. Students are expected to buy computers and data for their studies, which are too expensive. Students drop out of university due to financial challenges, as revealed by the results. noted similar findings that the direct costs of university education have an effect in relative to future aspirations, particularly with respect to advance studies.

The results revealed that students are discouraged from enrolling for university education due to employment challenges, which was also highlighted by (van Klaveren et al., 2019). The subject of university graduates joblessness certainly highlights the importance of the kind of education being provided today in universities. Degree programmes are changing in line with Education 5.0, and the effect remained the same. Keche (2021) observed that students failing to pursue their careers after graduation is a factor leading to students not enrolling for higher education. After graduating, students end up in the informal sector, vending markets, dealing, running tuck shops, selling vegetables, mending shoes, and even working as touts, which discourages students from enrolling in universities.

Results revealed that some programmes at young universities are considered to be marketable, such as science and engineering-oriented courses, similar to what was observed by Matsolo, Ningpuanyeh, and Susuman (2018) in their analysis of factors affecting university enrolment in the Gauteng province of South Africa. The unmarketable courses at young universities include tourism and hospitality, human resources, and business studies. At Young University, there is tandem enrolment in all programmes, which opposes ZIMSTAT (2021) findings that there is evidently lower student enrolment in marketable courses compared to unmarketable courses. Students ought to be correctly directed in their choice of subjects at the advanced level for the right combinations compulsory to qualify for definite courses at the university and several careers in Zimbabwe.

The young university is mandated to offer science and engineering courses, which gives it a comparative advantage. However, the uptake of university programmes is no longer based on uniqueness since the standardization of university programmes, as noted by Dube (2019). The uptake of university programmes may be affected by the elements of the marketing mix, as noted by Adejimi and Nzabalirwa (2021). These were similarly brought out in the study results that are prevalent economic conditions, market structure, university size, competition, costs, laws, and regulations. These marketing mix elements might enlighten university preferences by students to a certain degree. The service quality of young universities was noted to be below expectations and had a negative impact on the success of the university and its brand. As highlighted by Sawyerr (2004), service quality is the most potent competitive trend in the determinant of university marketing strategy. Students are derived from the service quality proclaimed by universities for enrolment. Universities compete among themselves and leverage their competitive advantages to enrol and retain students.

The study results showed that the cost of university education hinders students' enrolment. This corroborates Bigirimana et al. (2016) findings that the cost of higher education is influencing secondary graduates' career choices, as university education is now expensive and beyond the reach of many. Students are pursuing alternatives to universities, such as apprenticeships, trade schools, and others that allow students to obtain qualifications without spending much on universities. Bertlett et al. (2005) reported that employers in information, communication and technology industry like Microsoft and Google award their own in-house certifications which are preferred by employers more than degrees.

The study revealed that other factors, including personal reasons, pandemics, epidemics, and disasters, affect students' enrolment at universities. Welding (2024) similarly reported the same noting that university education moved online, and other universities and lecturers failed to deliver online, which made other students decide not to enrol in a university. Epidemics and pandemics have had negative effects on university enrolment.

5. Conclusion

This study investigated the factors affecting students' enrolment at young universities for the sustainable development and competitiveness of young universities in Zimbabwe. Through understanding the factors affecting students' enrolment, holistic measures will be employed to improve students' enrolment for the development and competitiveness of young universities.

5.1. Conclusion

The study concluded that students' enrolment in universities is affected by a number of factors, including students' related factors, institutional-related factors, operational environment-related factors, and other factors. From students and chairpersons' perspectives, it can be concluded that some of the dispositional factors affecting students' enrolment in universities are students' experiences, changes in career orientation preferences, and beliefs. The admission process, transportation, accommodation, programs offered, and economic environment affect students' enrolment. Pandemics and disasters were confirmed in the study to also affect student enrolment. Stakeholders influencing students' enrolment at young universities include universities, government and authorities, parents, industry, and university staff. The shortage of qualified staff and low staff morale prevailing in universities is a serious concern for students' enrolment. Employers have a wide pool from which to recruit, exposing graduates to

exploitation and manipulation. Parents social and economic status determines the university to which they can send their children.

5.2. Limitation
The study was conducted at one university and is subject to disparagement for being too narrow and problematic to generalize the results and theory creation. Nevertheless, the study provides better control over differences in the characteristics of universities and challenges that are explicit to the university. Single case studies can be replicated in other cases, and the results can be related cross-sectionally and longitudinally over time.

5.3. Suggestion
The study suggests that universities need to strategically prepare for student enrolment, considering their infrastructure, human resources, and financial capability, which could improve student enrolment in Zimbabwean universities. Young universities need to market vigorously by all means and enhance academic and student support services. Library facilities should be built, and enough computers should be installed to improve the students' learning environment. Students require services that enhance the learning and teaching environment to feel at home at university.

The study was conducted considering a single case study, and it was purely qualitative; hence, it is recommended that a similar study be conducted in other universities (multi-case study) and again in the similar university at a later time and compare the findings. A similar study can be conducted using quantitative methodologies.

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