



Bridging Courses: The Doctor's Prescription for Dwindling Student Teacher Enrolments at Teacher Education Colleges in Zimbabwe?

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ARTICLE INFO

Article No.: 102412138

Type: Research

DOI: 10.15580/GJER.2013.4.102412138

Submitted: 24/10/2012

Accepted: 15/06/2013

Published: 22/06/2013

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Keywords:

bridging course, teacher education, conventional, mainstream programme

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the perceptions of students and lecturers as regards the recently introduced bridging courses programme in teacher education in Zimbabwe. To gather data for this paper, the qualitative research paradigm was employed. A case study of teacher education colleges that have adopted and implemented the bridging courses concept was done. Interviews with the administrative authorities at the teachers' colleges, students and lecturers were done to ascertain their views about the programme. Observations of the situation on the ground were also done. The study brings up the rationale for the programme and illuminates the situation obtaining in teacher education colleges in relation to the way it operates and its difference from the mainstream teacher education programme. It establishes that although it is a way of boosting enrolments for teacher education programmes, it raises such issues as the probability that all the students will pass, what to do with the failing students, the amount of time spent pursuing one or two subjects at the same time masquerading as a teacher education student. Thus, these issues become grey areas which the responsible authorities need to clear to ensure viability of the programme. This paper therefore recommends the adoption of the conventional bridging course concept akin to the one in many worldwide universities whereby a student is assisted in handling the concepts in the bridged course.

BACKGROUND

In Zimbabwe, Ordinary Level has become the gateway to further education and the world of work. To further education, five O-level subjects of which English and Mathematics form the basic requirements. Mathematics, especially, has proved difficult to pass for many pupils partly because the subject is taught in a language which the learners will still be learning as a subject in its own right. Also there is a dearth of both material and human resources. Over the past ten years the country has been experiencing an economic meltdown which has seen many teachers especially of

sciences and Mathematics migrating to neighbouring countries and abroad where remuneration packages are more attractive. The net result has been dismal performance in Mathematics by most O-level candidates. Consequently, most of them cannot meet the basic five O-level requirements to enter institutions of higher learning such as teachers' colleges.

The past two years saw a sharp drop in teacher education enrolment with some colleges getting as little as 20 students per intake. A case in point is Morgenster teachers' college where from 2006 to 2009 enrolment was declining. The table below illustrates the declining enrolments.

Morgenster Teachers' College Enrolment 2006-2010

Year	Intake	Enrolment
6	2006	306
7	2007	313
8	2008	150
9	2008	86
10	2009	17
11	2009	22
12	2010	80

Figures supplied by the college administration.

Although the drop is attributable to the economic situation in the country which makes O-level graduates to opt for better paying jobs shunning the teaching profession which has lost its credibility, it also has to be borne in mind that colleges failed to attract people with Mathematics at ordinary level.

Research Design

The qualitative research paradigm was employed in this study to gather the required data and to have an in-depth understanding of the issue at hand. The case study was mainly used to collect and analyse the required data.

In a case study the investigator attempts to examine an individual or unit in depth. The investigator tries to discover all the variables that are important in the history or development of the subject... (Ary, Jacobs and Razaciek, 1990: 451).

This chosen research design, like any other belonging to the qualitative paradigm, is concerned primarily with the process rather than the product; looks at meaning, that is, how people interpret their own experiences; views the researcher as the main data-gathering instrument in the field and is descriptive as well as inductive (Merriam, 1988; Creswell, 1994; Glesne and Peshkin, 1992). Case studies aim to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the group or unit under study by, among other things, describing the subject's history and environment by gathering data about the subject's present state, past experiences, environment and how these factors relate to one another. (Ary, Jacobs and Razaciek, (1990). Since it is very much dependent on the researcher(s) as the

main data-gathering instrument(s) the three researchers had to carry out on-site observations, interview all the main actors in the environment: representatives of the lecturers, bridging course students and student-teachers in the mainstream training programme the aim being to 'study real-world situations as they unfold naturally...' (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982: 28).

When information is finally gathered, the qualitative paradigm demands a detailed descriptive account of what was observed before inductive conclusions are made. The goal of qualitative research is "to portray the complex pattern of what is being studied in sufficient depth of detail **so that one who has not experienced it can understand it**" [emphasis added] (Ary, Jacobs and Razaciek, 1990: 445). The main data gathering techniques were interviews, observation and open-ended questionnaires.

Conceptual Framework

This paper is rooted in the framework of curriculum change and innovation. Fullan (1991) says change is multi-dimensional and "involves individual, classroom, and school, local, regional and national factors at work in interactive ways" It is important to point out that change is not always progressive. Change is different from innovation. Marsh (1997) defines an innovation as "the planned application of ends or means, new or different from those that exist currently in the classroom, school or system and intended to improve effectiveness for the stakeholders". Thus, the bridging course programme should therefore be viewed as a novel idea in the teacher education system which

is meant to solve an existing problem of declining enrolments as Ndawi and Maravanyika (2011:106) argue that curriculum should not be treated “as God-given”, but as a social *contrivance deliberately designed to meet specific social purposes at specific periods in a nation or country's history and therefore subject to periodical modifications as new needs arise.*”

Any innovation no matter how noble is always supported, opposed and sometimes rejected by sections of people. Nkomo (1995:126) observes that “*it is not in the nature of human beings to welcome change with open arms*” “To that effect, the bridging course programme like any other innovation in the education system is bound to meet with mixed conceptions from the wide spectrum of the populace in the context in which it operates.

Requirements for Teacher Education

For one to be enrolled in a teacher education college, they must have five Ordinary Level passes of which English, Mathematics, Science and a national language such as ChiShona or Ndebele are core. However cognizance has to be taken of the fact that up until the 1990s an O-level Mathematics pass was not a requirement for Primary School Teacher Education in Zimbabwe and most of the schools are staffed with such teachers. To date O-level Mathematics is a requirement and the question which arises is: Does one need O-level Mathematics to teach in the primary school when we have a host of practising teachers who do not have it? In Zimbabwe today, many students fail to register passes in English, Mathematics and Science hence declining enrolments have characterised teacher education colleges. Mention also has to be made of the fact that the teaching profession in Zimbabwe has lost its credibility due to the dismal remuneration packages (Nyoni, Jinga and Nyoni 2008). To that end, an ordinary level graduate would stray into the teaching profession as a last resort after trying better options. The emphasis which has been placed on core subjects as a requirement for a full ordinary level certificate has barred many from admission into teacher education colleges. This has led to the birth of an innovation in teacher education colleges in the name of bridging courses especially in Mathematics, English and Science which have proved difficult to pass for many students.

The Bridging course concept in the university system

The bridging course concept is not a new phenomenon on the Zimbabwean education landscape. It has been done in Zimbabwe before but in a different form. For instance the Zimbabwe Cuba Teacher Education Programme in the 1990s had a six months Spanish Language course before the students travelled to Cuba for the 'proper' course. This was done to prepare students for interaction with a society that spoke a language unfamiliar to them. Also it was done to enable students to study curriculum materials written in

Spanish. It was therefore imperative that a bridging Spanish course had to be done. It has to be noted that Spanish was an entirely new course and students would not have indicated a weakness or registered a fail in it as a subject at any particular level. It was a compulsory course for all students who intended to join the programme. The University of Zimbabwe used to have a Communications Course for those students who would have a marked weakness in communicating. Africa University has been running an Intensive English course for students from non-English speaking countries such as DRC and Angola. In the education systems of many countries, it is practiced at university level in order to assist the student have a 'soft' landing. For instance in Australian universities bridging courses in Mathematics aim at among other things:

- Developing mathematical skills for tertiary study.
- Help students become familiar with the academic language of mathematics.
- Help students to strengthen their mathematical skills and understand mathematics before beginning tertiary studies.
- Make students update or build upon the mathematical skills they already have for career development or preparation for tertiary studies.

The bridging courses can either be free or paid for. At Griffith university for example self paced students work through nine mathematics modules to meet pre-requisites for university study.

Midlands State University in Zimbabwe recently advertised for Mathematics for bridging courses (The Sunday Mail, 23 May 2010). This form of a bridging mathematics course aims at assisting students without mathematics at O-level to qualify for university programmes in Faculties of Arts, Natural Resource Management and Agriculture, Science and Technology and Social Sciences. The bridging course programme runs for three months and after completion, students are accepted into the degree programmes of their choice.

Bridging Courses in Teacher Education colleges

In comparison with bridging courses at universities, the Zimbabwean Teacher Education colleges follow the O-level syllabus and students write the O-level Mathematics examination. The question which arises is: Can it be called a bridging course when they pursue the O-level syllabus for the whole year? Another related question would be: what guarantee is there that they will enrol for teacher education when they pass O-level Mathematics? Probably, if teacher education colleges wanted 'captive students', it would have been better to introduce shorter Mathematics bridging courses which qualify the students for teacher education programmes or to run bridging courses parallel with the mainstream teacher education curriculum. As the situation stands today The bridging course concept is the buzz term in

Zimbabwean teacher education colleges be they government or privately owned; for example Morgan ZINTEC Teachers' College recently advertised for a bridging course in Maths and English (*The Sunday Mail*, 9-15 May 2010), Morgenster Teachers' College (*The Sunday Mail*, 20-26 June 2010) and Nyadire Teachers' College (*The Sunday Mail* 3-9 October 2010) for Maths, English and Science.

The case of Marymount Teachers' College

Interview with the programme coordinator

Marymount Teachers' college was one of the pioneers of the bridging course concept in the teacher education system in Zimbabwe. At this college, the Bridging Course is termed Fulfilling Educational Requirement

Programme (FERP), an attractive characterization especially to students supplementing the ordinary level subjects and also those who might have had several unsuccessful sittings for either Mathematics or English. These special students are given the FERP identity card which resembles the real college identification card but it does not show the programme. The FERP identity card is a 'passport' for the student to access college facilities such as the library.

The college currently enrolled 265 FERP students in the year 2010. Out of these 23 are supplementing English while 242 are doing Mathematics. To qualify, one should have three non-core subjects plus either Mathematics or English or have five non-core subjects without both Mathematics and English a scenario which can be shown diagrammatically as follows:

Student category	Number of non-core subjects in possession of candidate	English	Mathematics	FERP subject to be done
1	3	+	-	Mathematics
2	3	-	+	English
3	5+	-	-	Mathematics and English

Asked to explain why this is the case, the Programme Co-ordinator said that those without at least five O-level passes and without both Mathematics and English would find the going extremely tough, especially since the FERP programme is supposed to be a crash course; while those with at least five passes but without the critical subjects would manage since they would have displayed a higher capability.

One reason why many students enrolled, the coordinator explained was low registration fees. Registration fees for would-be students that is USD\$10, administration fee \$10 and tuition is \$20 per month. These fees are relatively lower than at the commercial institutions offering the same service hence the high number of takers.

As per government requirement, an informal education provider such as providers of the FERP project had to be registered with the Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture and also had to register as a Zimbabwe Schools Examination Council (ZIMSEC) exam centre.

Because of the large number of candidates doing Maths, three extra teachers were engaged from outside to augment the efforts of the six internal teachers (the college lecturers). The English section is manned by two college lecturers. Besides the co-ordinator and the teachers there are what are referred to as direct service providers who have something to do directly with the students who are paid per cycle (a

cycle refers to an intake up to the time it writes the examination e.g. June and November).

The students are grouped according to when they intend to sit the examination in the bridged course that is either June or November. This is done to enable lecturers establish the right pace at which the teaching of the course should move. The contact time is one and a half hours per day per subject and lessons start at 16.00 hours during the term and 08.00 during college vacations.

According to the Dean of Students, 13 of the FERP Students are in residence. Asked whether their existence does not prejudice the mainstream students, the Dean of Students said that because of the decline in enrolment hostel occupancy was also negatively affected; For example he indicated that the occupancy rate for male hostels was 23/176. He singled out males because he said these are now conspicuous by their absence not only at the college in question but also at many more they interact with. The other factors are the relatively lower costs of staying off-campus where 3 or 4 students can pool resources together and rent a single room. They can even occupy what are referred to in Mutare as 'boards'. These are wooden cabins which are not as expensive as conventional houses or rooms.

Reasons for FERP establishment were cited as follows:

- To prop up the declining student populations.

- to help by capturing those interested in teaching but who do not have the prerequisite qualifications what can be referred in the Chishona language as the 'kukodzeka/kufundika philosophy' that is to preserve for later or future use.
- to raise funds for the college and supplement lecturers' income (overtly)
- to give back to the community in terms of skills development (mainly communication and numeracy)
- to cater for the disadvantaged candidates who can no longer feel comfortable to go back and redo ordinary level in the conventional secondary school

ANALYSIS OF RESPONSES FROM STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRES

Respondents' ages ranged from 21 to 39. This shows that some students have been trying to rewrite some ordinary level subjects without success hence the bridging course programme is a relief to many. Mathematics had the most unsuccessful sittings per student, an average of three.

Students' reasons for joining the programme

The bridging course students proffered the following reasons for joining the programme.

- The college has a richer environment in terms of material resources for their studies.
- lecturers have the experience of diagnosis and remediation of weaknesses. Also, lectures were likely to be O-level markers so they would be in a good position to coach the candidates effectively.
- The assurance of a place when one passes the bridged subject(s) is very appealing.
- Students have more time for studies and consultation and the college provides a conducive atmosphere for studying.

Perceptions of bridging courses students on the programme

- As a recent innovation in the teacher education system, 70% of respondents said that there is a misconception about the programme especially from outsiders. Many are not aware of the difference between the bridging course and the Diploma course. 30% said the outsiders are in the picture of what the programme entails. They think that the bridging courses students have already embarked on the teacher education programme. One respondent pointed out that this

misconception might have been caused by an unclear advert for bridging course students.

- all respondents indicated that if successful they will proceed to do the Diploma in Education at the college where they are currently enrolled as bridging course students.
- 40% of respondents favoured a certificate of competence from the college rather than the Zimbabwe Schools Examination Certificate (ZIMSEC) examination because the college would have equipped them with the appropriate skills and would have satisfied themselves of their competencies. 60% of the respondents favoured the ZIMSEC examination because:
 - ZIMSEC examinations are recognized country wide and regionally
 - A ZIMSEC pass can be used in other fields
 - A ZIMSEC pass enables one to study further where the specific subject is a prerequisite
 - Not sitting the subjects makes one to be looked down upon as inadequate.

Perceptions of diploma students about bridging courses students

20% of the respondents indicated that the Diploma students were encouraging while 80% indicated that they were scornful. These are some of the responses verbatim:

- *they regard us very lowly*
- *they are very discouraged (sic). They laugh at us. They are so discouraging (sic).*
- *They are downtrodden (sic) me as a Bridging course student*
- *They are laughing at us, saying secondary students*
- *They are full of scorn and they think Bridging course students are failures and are wasting their time.*
- All the students indicated that both teaching and non-teaching staff are encouraging.

RESULTS FROM THE QUESTIONNAIRE FOR LECTURERS

While some lecturers indicated that the meaning of bridging course entails that the college/university teaches and certifies the competence level of its products, others felt that the bridging course students should be taught and sit the O-level subjects before they are admitted into the diploma programme. However, most lecturers who teach bridging course students indicated that their performance was satisfactory and that they grouped the students according to when they intended to sit the examination, that is, in June or November.

Although lecturers indicated that the existence of Bridging course students meant extra income for them, the programme presented challenges of extra work. According to the college administration point of view, the programme has brought about staff squabbles over pay, pressure on resources and more disciplinary problems.

CONCLUSIONS

Failing Maths at O-level does not necessarily mean that one is 'innumerate' or Mathematically illiterate-one can still effectively teach Maths from ECD to grade 7. The question which can be raised is: how many secretaries perform computer operations which require application of Mathematical concepts without having passed Maths at O-level? What is the miraculous difference between a 48% a fail at O-level and a 50% a pass perhaps obtained through some experience (not competence) after ten sittings? Currently UNESCO has embarked on an ECD paraprofessional teacher programme in conjunction with primary teachers' colleges which recruits those who have as few as 3 O-levels. If these with such modest qualifications are trainable, why should it be difficult for those with more subjects at O-level but not necessarily Mathematics?

The fact that the bridging courses students will be studying subjects at O-level does mean the course cannot be referred to as 'bridging. A more appropriate term has to be coined.

Time is wasted pursuing one subject. For example most of the students at Morgenster Teachers' College are residents and most do one subject. Some respondents felt that opportunities could be wasted as they could have been doing other productive activities concurrently with their studies if they were at home. However, a counter argument given by others is that the Bridging course programme gives them an opportunity to concentrate on the 'problematic subject' away from the helter-skelter of everyday chores. As the bio-data reflected most of the students are family people and therefore the 'bridging course retreat' gives them the opportunity to focus on their studies 'far from the madding crowd'.

Students are kept idle during the greater part of the day awaiting their bridging lessons. Some cannot resist the temptation of getting into mischief as they do not have much to do.

Another observation from the study is that students are given the false impression that they are in tertiary institutions yet they will still be pursuing an ordinary level programme.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Since it is a government regulation, negotiations should be held with the responsible ministries to find a way of enrolling students without Mathematics so that enrolment in teachers' colleges is enhanced. Bridging courses could run alongside the teacher education course as prior to this, teachers trained without Mathematics. Another alternative would be, in the case

of Mathematics, to let students do O-level Mathematics but do not get their diploma certificates until they pass.

Shorter courses in Mathematics could be introduced and since the bridging courses students will be studying subjects at O-level the course cannot be referred to as 'bridging. A more appropriate term has to be coined.

Money is wasted paying for admissions at Teachers' Colleges when they are not really bona fide students. Resources could be better used if such students could be enrolled as Diploma students, then they can be permitted to study the subject at college as an extra if they do not have it and have it on their transcript as proof that they would have done it. If they fail that one subject they could supplement it. The course does not have to be a duplicate of the O-level one. The trained college curricularists need to select what is relevant for one to practise as a teacher at primary school level.

Maths dominates the remedial cases yet students would have applied it in their different subjects such as Agriculture, Fashion and Fabrics, Computer Studies, Accounts, Economics and Science.

Is the level of difficulty especially of Maths at O-level not exclusionary, especially to those who might not want to pursue Maths beyond Form 4? In the light of this concern, it is prudent to think about introducing a basic numeracy subject which could be titled Functional Mathematics?

Colleges could be allowed to enrol students without Maths at O-level who would then study Applied Maths as a college course and have it on their transcript when they successfully go through the course, which would aim at equipping one to teach the subject at primary school level.

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Cite this Article: Nyoni M, Chinyani H and Nyoni T (2013). Bridging Courses: The Doctor's Prescription for Dwindling Student Teacher Enrolments at Teacher Education Colleges in Zimbabwe?. *Greener Journal of Educational Research*, 3(4): 168-174, <http://doi.org/10.15580/GJER.2013.4.102412138>.