

ZIMBABWE: Top university reopens, but no new students

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The University of Zimbabwe finally reopened last week after an eight-month delay - but Vice-chancellor Professor Levi Nyagura ruled out a fresh intake of students this year. He said students who enrolled last November had not attended lectures due to the university's closure since January, and that it could not afford or cope with two groups of first-year students.

An economic crisis blamed on years of mismanagement and autocratic rule by President Robert Mugabe, and a long lecturer strike, were among the reasons why the University of Zimbabwe - the country's top institution - failed to open this year. For students, almost an entire academic year was lost.

The Vice-chancellor said in a statement that the United Nations Children's Fund, UNICEF, had drilled 13 boreholes at the university as there was no water - another reason for delays in re-opening. Four of the boreholes had good water output, Nyagura added, but the supply was not sufficient to enable students to return to halls of residence.

The institution was hit by a water crisis in January at a time when Zimbabwe was in the grip of a cholera outbreak that claimed the lives of more than 4,000 people and affected 100,000 others after the first case was first detected in August last year. On Tuesday Health Minister Tendai Madzorera declared the epidemic over, with no new cases reported since June.

The World Health Organisation has provided the University of Zimbabwe with vehicles as part of efforts aimed at its re-opening.

The August intake will be the first in which students must pay fees in foreign currency - United States dollars or South African Rands - after the government abandoned use of the local currency to escape world record-breaking inflation of over 11 million percent.

Students in the humanities faculty will pay US\$404 and those in veterinary sciences will fork out \$504. In a country where senior civil servants earn US\$180 a month after tax, the university fees are out of reach of most parents.

As an illustration of the precarious state of affairs, when university authorities said the institution was going to open on 30 March this year, only 68 students out of 12,000 managed to pay. The institution in any case failed to re-open because there was no drinkable water on campus.

The University of Zimbabwe used to have one of the most beautiful and best-maintained campuses in Africa. But it has reached a state of collapse following more than a decade of neglect. Its floors have potholes, lecturer rooms can go for months without being cleaned, broken furniture lies around campus and buildings are cracking. When halls of residence were open, the food was awful.

But despite the challenges, students have held their own against others in the region and from international universities.

In 2007, the university won the Pan African Moot Competition on International Human Rights Law held in Tanzania, beating 11 other institutions of higher learning from 10 English-speaking African countries. It also came third out of 444 universities in a Students in Free Enterprise world competition held in New York.

Comment:

The government must simply agree to the fact that it has failed to perform its function of catering for the welfare of university students. Students are now paying fees so that lecturers can get their salaries. The government must admit that it has failed and the education sector is now privatised. Period...

nyasha nyakura

Comment:

It is true that the university has finally opened after nearly a whole year. While we students are pleased with this development, we are also equally worried by the fees that are being charged and the rationale behind setting of such fees. The truth is that most of us will not be able to pay those fees meaning the end of our dreams to attain a university degree. We are now paying for other peoples corruption.

Simbarashe Makunde

Comment:

We all welcome the reopening of UZ and wish Professor Nyagura and his staff plus students a fruitful term. Zimbabweans in the Diaspora who have PhDs can offer support to UZ and NUST in particular to support postgraduate training.

Those of us who travel home regularly can offer seminars and lectures during weekends. For those who cannot travel, we should explore the possibilities of assisting online. For those of us with textbooks that we no longer need, especially in the sciences and medicine, let us send these either to the VCs of UZ and NUST or to librarians in the two universities.

If you are in South Africa and wish to send books to UZ or NUST, please send them to me: KP Dzvimbo at PO Box392, Unisa 0003, South Africa. My suggestion is that we should all be positive and help towards the reconstruction of our two main universities.

You can do this by offering your services or donating your old or new books to NUST or UZ. Once these two universities are up and running we will most likely be able to start the training of more postgraduate students, who are essential for all sectors of our economy.

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