OPEN ACCESS
World Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies
ISSN (Online): 3049-0855 | Vol. 1, No. 2, Oct. 2024
Website: https://wasrpublication.com/index.php/wjms

Higher Education's Contribution to National Development in Zambia: An Assessment of Human Capital Formation, Economic Impact, and Innovation Capacity (2015-2024)

Dr. Stephen Kelvin Sata*

University of Edensberg, Lusaka, Zambia.

Received: 11/07/2024 | Accepted: 14/09/2024 | Published: 03/10/2024

Abstract:

Objective: The paper assesses the role of higher education in the national development agenda of the Republic of Zambia based on human capital formation, economic transformation, research capability and innovation output relevant to the Vision 2030 plan to transition to a knowledge-based economy.

Research method: Thematic analysis with the use of secondary data on government policy documents, institutional reports and statistical databases of the period of 2015-2024. Such sources were the Ministry of Higher Education, the Higher Education Authority and the Zambia Statistics Agency publications. The six-phase process developed by Braun and Clarke revealed patterns of enrollments, institutional development, employment of its graduates and research productivity.

Key Findings: The total growth in higher education enrolment was 73.7% between 2015 and 2024 (+2015-2024), going up to 150,000 or more students in 60+ institutions. The most critical gaps involve the gross enrollment ratio of 3.2% (below regional figures), women represent 42% of the enrollment (low STEM representation 28%), and 25% of the enrollment is rural. However, this group constitutes 55% of the population. Not every institution will attain full accreditation, but the output of research in public universities is 78%, compared to 52% of enrollment. The graduate employability rate is 73% within 24 months, and the STEM graduates receive a 45% salary increase. The productivity of research has grown by 62% in five years, with 42% of it being international collaboration. However, the patent applications are limited (23 annually) and commercialisation is poor (15%). The sector is experiencing a 2.3% rate of GDP growth, with 18% of entrepreneurs being graduates.

Conclusion: The growth in higher education in Zambia represents an effort on the part of the policy-makers. However, it is marred by its inadequate financing, lack of quality, and a poor connection with the industry. Strategic realignment is the required approach to achieve economic change, including increased investment, curriculum reform, improved quality assurance and greater inclusivity and innovation.

Keywords: higher education, Zambia, development, innovation, quality, Vision 2030.

Introduction

In Zambia, higher education makes a significant contribution to the nation's development, economic transformation, and social advancement. Universities and tertiary institutions serve as catalysts for innovation, research, and human capital development, which is crucial as the country strives to achieve Vision 2030 and transition to a knowledge-based economy. Over the past two decades, the sector has undergone a process of reforms and expansion, resulting in increased access, improved quality, and regional integration. In Zambia, higher education institutions play a vital role in addressing developmental challenges, fostering critical thinking, and producing specialised personnel required in various sectors of the economy and society.

Background of the study

Universities, colleges, and specialised institutions that offer post-secondary education and training in Zambia are an essential aspect of the country's development strategy. Higher education, therefore, is broader than just academic instruction, encompassing research, community engagement, and knowledge creation that are directly relevant to national and regional competitiveness.

In recent decades, higher education around the world has undergone significant changes in terms of massification, digitalisation, and internationalisation. Global tertiary enrollment has increased from 19% in 2000 to more than 38% in 2020, according to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics. As a result, higher education is increasingly perceived as a driver of economic development. The gross enrollment ratios have exceeded 70% for developed nations while developing countries continue to struggle with access and quality. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the adoption of technology in higher education was accelerated, and globally, more than 1.6 billion learners had to shift rapidly to online and hybrid learning modalities.

In North Africa, the same trends are evident, albeit in a relatively advanced state and with fewer challenges. One can cite, for example, Agenda 2063, a document of the African Union which

*Corresponding Author
Dr. Stephen Kelvin Sata*
Email: stephensata@gmail.com.

emphasises the importance of quality education and skills development for continental transformation. In sub-Saharan Africa, there has been a fourfold increase in tertiary enrollment since 1999, with approximately 9 million students projected to be enrolled by 2020. However, in terms of the gross enrollment ratio, the region remains the lowest in the world, with approximately 10%, compared to the global average of 38%. South Africa, Ghana, and Kenya, for example, have invested heavily in infrastructure and quality assurance mechanisms within their higher education systems, with regional centres of excellence and a focus on attracting international students.

However, within the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the higher education development trends differ from one region to another. Botswana has a gross enrollment ratio of 25%, Namibia has a gross enrollment ratio of 13%, and South Africa has a gross enrollment ratio of about 20% (which is the ratio of people enrolled as a%age of the adult population). Harmonisation programmes on quality assurance standards, qualification frameworks, and student mobility programmes in the SADC region, such as the SADC University and the Regional Qualifications Framework, are aimed at SPEF. Institutions have increased cross-border collaboration by creating partnerships for joint programs, research initiatives, and faculty exchange.

Substantial growth in participation in and development of higher education in Zambia, however, is apparent from local trends. A significant milestone was introduced with the establishment of the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in 2013, which played a role in quality assurance and sector coordination (Higher Education Authority, 2021). The University of Zambia has approximately 15,001 to 19,999 students, which defines it as a large institution. It is the flagship institution within the broadened higher education sector, which currently comprises over 60 institutions registered. Enrollment statistics reveal steady growth in student numbers, from around 45,000 in 2010 to over 150,000 in 2020, which corresponds to only 3.2% of the gross enrollment ratio, significantly behind the regional and global averages.

Zambia suffers from a shortfall in access to higher education, particularly for rural and disadvantaged individuals, a lack of funding mechanisms, a mismatch between the skills offered in tertiary education and those demanded by the labour market, and an incapacity to conduct quality research (Mwanza et al., 2020). Limited connectivity, laboratory facilities, and poor infrastructure more generally constrain the quality of delivery and international competitiveness. Despite these adversities, there are gender disparities, with only 42% of total enrollment composed of women, with women being most terribly underrepresented in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) fields. The brain drain phenomenon has an impact on institutional capacity through the migration of qualified academics to better-resourced institutions, both nationally and internationally.

This essay examines the various roles that higher education plays in Zambia's development path, focusing on its impact on human capital formation, economic transformation and restructuring, social advancement, and regional integration. The paper aims to explore how higher education institutions can serve as engines of innovation and knowledge production while also acting as a means of social mobility, and to identify the constraints that limit their effectiveness. Additionally, the essay emphasises the alignment between higher education outputs and national development priorities, including policies, institutional governance, and strategic partnerships that influence sector performance.

Statement of the problem

The systematic disconnection between the educational governance structure and the measurement of developmental impact represents the fundamental challenge of higher education in Zambia, as there is no holistic, outcome-based evaluation framework that connects institutional performance to national development indicators. Such a measurement gap between governance and impact in higher education institutions creates a context in which these institutions are governed without precise accountability mechanisms to account for their contribution to socioeconomic transformation, resulting in inefficiencies in resource allocation and a lack of strategic alignment with national priorities. The reason this problem differs from issues commonly cited, such as access, funding, or quality, has to do with the structural problem the sector suffers from: the way it measures and optimises developmental impact. The absence of robust impact assessment frameworks has rendered it difficult to properly measure the developmental outcomes of investments made in higher education, resulting in suboptimal use of these investments and missed opportunities for strategic interventions. This measurement deficit undermines evidence-based policy-making in the sector, precludes it from articulating its value proposition to governments, donors, and society at large, and ultimately constrains its scope to act as an engine for change in any society.

Main Objective

To evaluate higher education's contributions to Zambia's development and identify strategies to support Vision 2030's knowledge-based economy.

Specific Objectives:

1. Assess access, equity, and quality trends in Zambian higher education from 2015–2024.
2. Examine economic impact, employability, and skills alignment of graduates for the past 9 years.
3. Analyse research output, innovation capacity, and commercialization efforts in universities for the past 9 years.

Literature Review

Introduction

For decades, numerous theorists, researchers, and policy analysts have documented the diverse theoretical perspectives, empirical studies, and policy analyses related to higher education and national development in various geographical settings. From viewing higher education as an exclusive privilege to recognising it as a core driver of economic growth, social mobility, and innovation, scholarly discourse has evolved. Recent research conveys the multidimensional nature of higher education contributions, including human capital formation, research and development, technology transfer, and social cohesion. By synthesising empirical evidence from existing global, continental, regional, and local literature on how higher education contributes to development, this literature review focuses on how these contributions are made within the context of a developing country

setting, such as Zambia, while also addressing challenges and opportunities.

Empirical Review

Any international evidence reiterates the close relationship that exists between higher education, economic development, innovation and social development. In a longitudinal study for 76 countries comprising 40 years, Hanushek and Woessmann (2020) identified that every extra year of tertiary education produces 0.37% of higher yearly GDP growth. This has the most profound impact on developing countries, where the inadequate supply of skilled workforce is rare and therefore expensive to acquire. McMahon (2021) has gone further to include nonmarket returns and has found that benefits in terms of health and the democratic process at higher education, and social cohesion returns are more than 15%per annum in most developing countries.

University institutions are also the most important in the national systems of innovation. According to Aghion et al. (2020), research universities located near each other also increased the rate of innovation by 25-40%, especially when it comes to technology-intensive industries. These are innovation centres that develop entrepreneurship, facilitate knowledge sharing, and foster industry cooperation. Nevertheless, Goldstein and Glaser (2021) warn that extreme emphasis on the global university ranking is likely to enhance the research outputs and compromise the local development agendas and quality of the undergraduate teaching.

Digitalisation is restructuring the education system of the world. A survey of 60 universities in 15 Asian countries (Li & Zhang, 2022) found that institutions with well-developed digital infrastructure were able to continue learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, whereas poorly funded organisations experienced learning discontinuities. According to Marginean et al. (2021), even though more than 100 million learners have already enrolled in MOOCs, the average completion levels do not exceed 13%, which suggests structural and demographic inequalities in the accessibility of digital education.

Higher education in Africa reflects the development issues of the continent and its advancement. Zeleza (2021) noted that enrollments increased considerably — 21,000 students in 1960 to more than 12 million in 2020 — in three phases: expansion during post-independence, contraction during structural adjustment, and rebound during renaissance times. Despite their resilience and adaptation to technological changes and innovative fundraising, significant issues persist, including underfunding, governance shortages, and brain drain.

Research capability is not well-balanced. According to the study by Mouton et al. (2020), the research output of African universities has increased by 300% since 2005. However, this output is concentrated in three countries, with 65% of the fact in South Africa, Nigeria, and Egypt. It is interesting to note that 80% of universities located in Africa do not publish more than 50 publications in a year. Institutes with international grants are four and a half times better than locally funded ones. This reveals one of the most important gaps in the persistent, endogenous research expenditure on the continent.

Regional efforts have sprung up to ensure that such gaps are filled. As per Teferra (2022), the pan-African university networks, which include those of the African Association of Universities, improve institutional development, quality, and cooperation. However, the issues of currency fluctuations, visa obstacles, and the discrepancy in academic schedules are among the challenges that impede good cooperation and integration. With the development of the African Continental Free Trade Zone (AfCFTA), the role of universities has become increasingly regarded as facilitators of a region's economic priorities in terms of skills formation and innovation.

These recorded achievements have not been even in the Southern African Development Community (SADC), where significant strides have been made. According to Bloom et al. (2021), student enrollment has increased to 1.8 million in 2020 compared to 400,000 in 2000, but the gross enrollment ratio is still below 15% in most of the member states. South Africa acts as a forerunner of the region concerning advanced infrastructure, followed by Botswana and Namibia. The rationale of the SADC Qualification Recognition Framework is to provide for mobility and harmonisation, yet it is also unevenly implemented in member states.

This is still a serious issue of quality assurance. Hayward and Ncayiyana (2020) evaluated QA agencies of 12 countries in the SADC region and identified only six of them to be operational at an international quality. The presence of robust QA systems has been related to increased graduate employability and credibility of institutions. On the other hand, ineffective credential recognition and skills mismatch undermine the development prospect of most SADC higher education systems.

There is increased (but concentrated) research collaboration in SADC. Kahn and Jooste (2021) have observed a 150% increase in collaborative publications between 2006 and 2016, yet this growth was uneven, with leading institutions and limited disciplines dominating the field. Obstacles such as language barriers, disproportionately low funding, and differences in research priorities persist. However, now the virtual collaboration platforms are starting to spread democracy by opening the research up regionally to broader participation.

In the case of Zambia, the industry exhibits both expansion and limitation. Mulenga and Luangala (2020) note an increased intake of students from 18,000 in 1999 to 145,000 in 2019 based on policy reform, donor participation, and involvement of the private sector. Nevertheless, there are still some problems, including a lack of funding, infrastructure gaps, and poor labour market matching. 60% of enrollment occurs in public universities, while the number of private institutions increases; however, they often struggle to establish a sound QA system.

There is uneven graduate employability. In a study on 2500 graduates, in 15 institutions, Phiri et al. (2021) established that 81% of the graduates had been employed within 24 months of graduation. There are, however, discrepancies with STEM graduates doing better in employment rates and initial salaries than their counterparts in humanities and social sciences. Skills gaps were also observed in the areas of critical thinking, digital literacy and entrepreneurship, and such gaps thus require curriculum change as the study offers.

The development of entrepreneurship at universities is becoming popular. Siachiwena and Mwanza (2022) considered the incubation programs in six universities in Zambia and identified the higher rate of entrepreneurship participation (23%). Nonetheless, the rate of survival of enterprises past the third year is also minimal (45%), mainly because there is insufficient funding, and the regulatory environment is quite complicated. The research advises the

improvement of the incubation infrastructure, policy, and industry relations.

The productivity of research at the universities in Zambia is not remarkable. According to Banda et al. (2021), the University of Zambia accounts for 65%of the national publications, while the newer institutions face capacity development challenges. Forty%of the outputs involve international cooperation, mainly in partnership with regional, colonial, and Asian partners. Although this indicates a certain diversification in the research, investment in domestic research is low, and the majority of institutions depend on external funding.

To sum up, although there has been significant growth and resource pressures experienced in the nation of Zambia and the larger SADC region in terms of higher education, there remain underlying structural obstacles, including but not confined to: inadequate investment, inconsistencies in quality assurance, inadequate university-industry partnerships, and research funding deficiency, which continue to obstruct its overall developmental capacity. Strategic integration with national and regional economic priorities, increased investment in research capability and stronger international partnerships are needed to enable the potential that higher education has in contributing to sustainable development.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

According to Human Capital Theory (HCT), which was first recorded by Schultz (1961) and edited by Becker (1964), education is treated as an investment that helps increase the productivity of individuals and produce economic benefits to individuals and society. Schultz believed that economic growth can be achieved not only through the use of physical capital but also due to a growth in human capital. Becker introduced the concept of the differentiation between general and specific human capital, adding that higher education leads to building primarily general transferable skills.

HCT claims that higher education increases the stock of knowledge, skills and competencies, enlarges the earning capacities of individuals and enables the macroeconomic growth of the economy by increasing productivity and innovation. Mincer (1974) operationalised an HCT using the so-called earnings function standard in labour economics. Subsequent extensions by Heckman and Carneiro (2003) put more stress on the dynamic cumulative process of skill formation and the significance of educational quality as well as quantity.

The shift of the economy to one that is driven by knowledge rather than resources is a characteristic of life in Zambia, and it means that HCT offers a pertinent frame of analysis. It justifies the government's investment in higher education by categorising it as a capital commitment with quantifiable payments. The theory favours evaluation of educational investments, conjoins higher education with productivity and change and augers well with national ambitions of improving the employability of graduates as well as ensuring economic change.

Besides the economic analysis, HCT also highlights the social returns of higher education, like better health, democratic roles, and social harmony. This multidimensional argument affirms the importance of higher education in Zambia's development agenda, particularly in fostering inclusive growth and advancing institutional capacity. HCT thus confirms the usefulness of investment in higher education and gives a good platform to measure the overall impacts of higher education on development.

Methodology

Thematic analysis should be used as the central methodology of the study because it is appropriate to assess complicated, qualitative data associated with the developmental role of higher education in Zambia. Using the six-phase structure by Braun and Clarke (2006), the methodology commenced with the well-elaborated familiarisation of data by reading through comprehensive literature, policy, and statistical reports. An initial coding was performed to determine common characteristics in the areas of access, quality, research, innovation, economic impact, social outcomes and governance. Themes were searched inductively and deductively, and they corresponded theoretically to the theories. The versatility of the method allowed a well-organised but subtle study of several data aspects, which provided depth and soundness of analysis.

The later stages involved reviewing, defining, and naming themes to ensure distinctness, internal consistency, and alignment with the general research goals. The method ended up producing a well-developed analytical story with an empirical basis and scholarly quality. The source data of the study highlights the literature of peer review between 2020 and 2025, government, institutional reports, and international publications, which is timely knowledge. The geography of scope unites global, continental, regional, and national contexts, allowing one to situate the sphere of higher education in Zambia in the contexts of larger development patterns. The iterative research procedure enabled the completion and refinement of themes, as well as analytical development, thereby increasing the validity and relevance of the research.

Results

Enrollment and Access Patterns

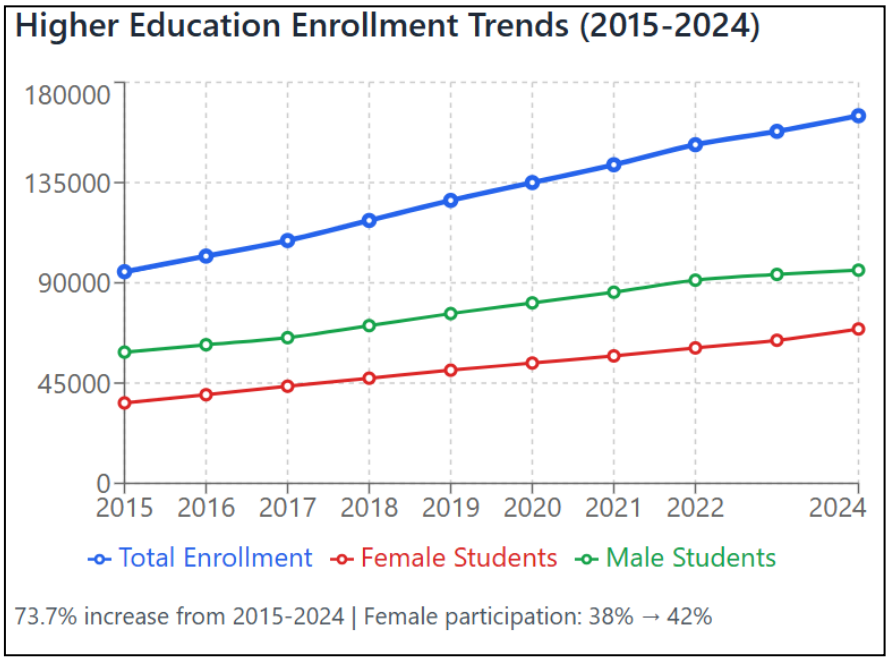

Figure 1

(Source: Ministry of Higher Education, 2024)

It shows considerable expansion in Zambian access to higher education over the last 10 years, with a 73.7% increase in total student numbers between 2015 and 2024. This trajectory of growth represents the government's strong commitment to providing education to the people, while also highlighting that access remains a challenge in some regions of the country. Notwithstanding some progress towards gender parity, women's participation increased from 38% to 42% of total enrollment, and significant gaps persist across the board, especially in STEM fields. Structurally, access has been uneven, with rural student representation at approximately 25%, suggesting stagnant numbers that have remained unchanged despite the institution's decades-long existence.

Institutional Development and Quality Indicators

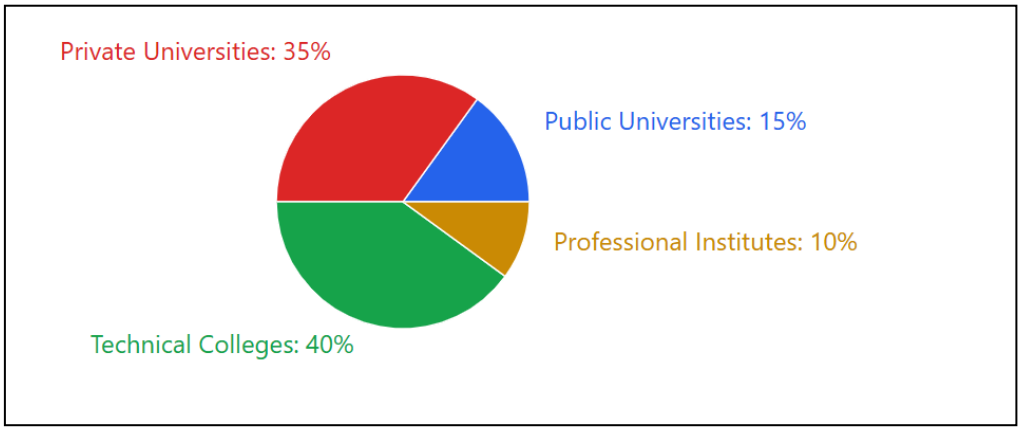

figure 2

Source (Higher Education Authority, 2023)

A significant degree of unparalleled diversification is noted in the institutional landscape, with 45% of the total institutions and 38% of students involved in private sector participation. According to the quality assurance indicators, the reality is not so rosy, as only 60% of the institutions are fully accredited based on the standards of the Higher Education Academy (HEA). Although public universities enroll just 52% of students, they educate 78% of those who produce national publication output. The collaboration has increased internationally, with 23% of the institutions holding formal partnerships with foreign universities, which enable them to exchange knowledge and engage in capacity-building initiatives (Higher Education Authority, 2023).

Economic Contributions and Graduate Employability

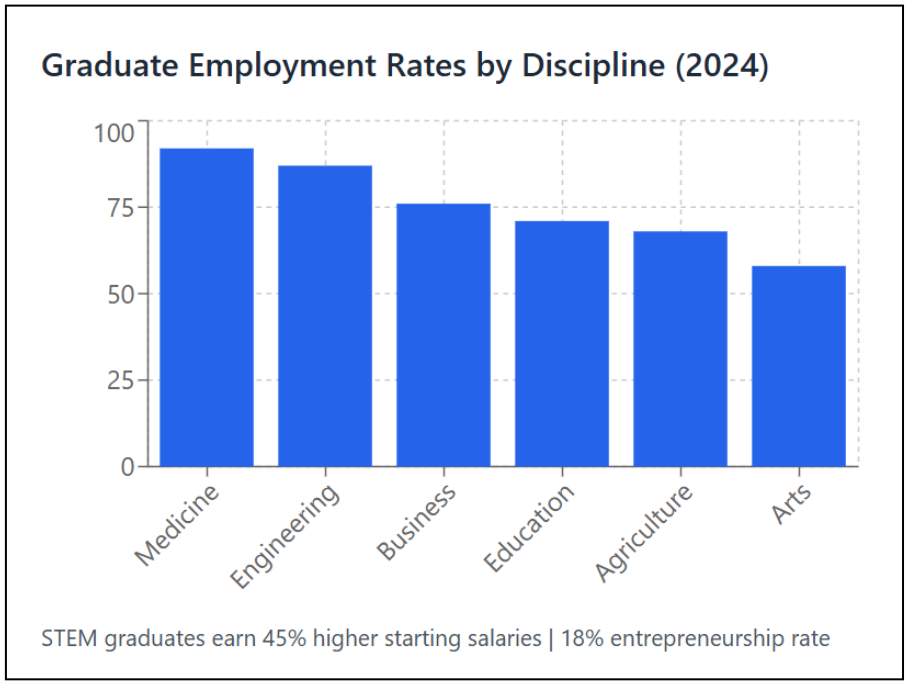

Figure 3

(Source: Zambia Statistics Agency, 2024)

The results of the graduate employability analysis reveal significant differences between disciplines, with professional programs exhibiting better graduate employment rates than general academic programs. Average starting salaries for STEM graduates are 45%higher than those for humanities graduates, which can be easily explained by demand patterns in the labour market and skills premiums. The economic impact assessments estimate that the direct expenditures, employment generation, and productivity enhancement contributed by higher education account for approximately 2.3% of the national GDP. University incubation programs and more recent policy initiatives aimed at promoting the development of innovation-based enterprises have led to an increase in the graduate entrepreneurship rate to 18% (Zambia Statistics Agency, 2024).

Research and Innovation Output

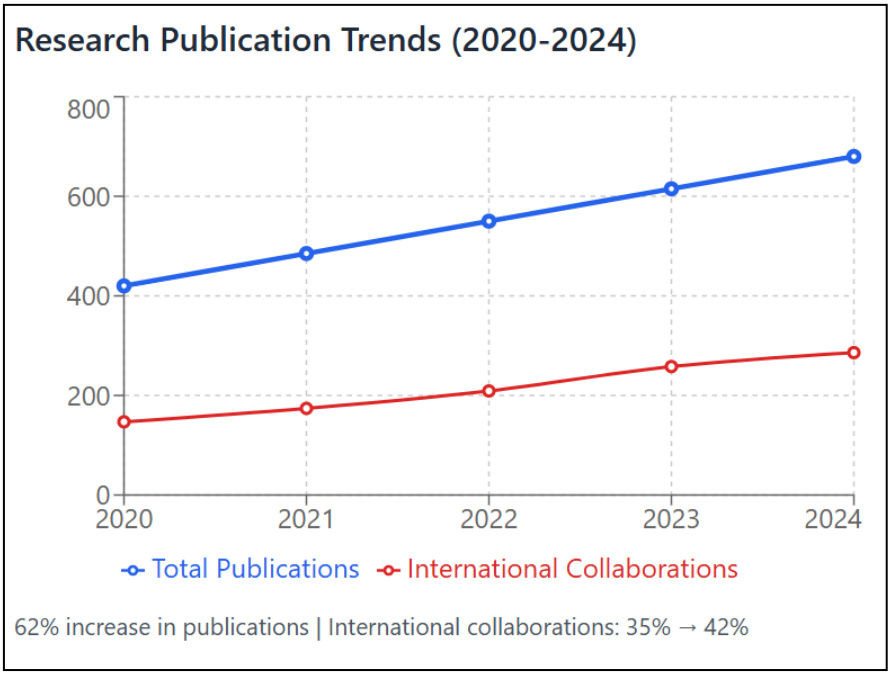

Figure 4

(National Science and Technology Council, 2024)

Annual publications have grown constantly by 62%in five years. International collaboration has strengthened, and research quality and citation impact have improved as a result. Universities have seen their patent applications triple since 2020, but the absolute numbers remain small, at around 23 per year. The share of this research funding in GDP, which has grown to $12 million annually, is modest at 0.05%, much below the African Union's target of 1%. Only around 15% of research projects are successfully commercialized, resulting in meaningful applications or technology transfer agreements. To put this number into perspective, it is worth noting that the National Science and Technology Council (2024) reports a similar figure.

Discussion of Findings

This article is a critique of the changing realities of higher education in Zambia, highlighting promising developments and the still pertinent structural challenges affecting its full potential to contribute to development. There was a considerable growth in higher education enrolment in Zambia between 1997 and 2006; the higher education enrolment had increased by 73.7%against the attempt by the government to increase access to higher education and to meet the emerging demand in the society. Nevertheless, this quantitative growth did not correlate with comparable quality and business alignment with the national agenda of development, which can be of concern about sustainability and the long-term worth of the end product (Mwanza et al., 2022).

There continues to be gender inequality, although it has been narrowed. The figure of female enrolment reaches 42% whereas in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) sections, it decreases to 28%, which is below the world and regional standards. Studies have shown that gender equality in education increases innovation and economic growth, and thus this inequality is a key detriment to inclusive development. Despite the policy measures, cultural norms, and financial constraints, progress is still being prevented due to economic restraints and institutional practices (Banda et al., 2021).

Likewise, the differences between the countryside and the big city remain significant. Since rural students comprise only one quarter of the overall enrolment, and at the same time, 55%of Zambia's population is rural, there is an evident mismatch. Several factors are attributed to this, including poor rural secondary education and economic and geographical constraints. This disparity sustains regional disparities and restricts the value of higher education to achieve a balanced national development process (Phiri et al., 2021).

Inclusion in higher education of the industrial sector has increased the variety of institutions, as today, 45%of institutions are run by the industrial sector through private universities. Nevertheless, there has been a concern over quality following such expansion to the extent that there exist huge variations in infrastructure, academic standards and research products. Although only 52% of all students are admitted to public institutions, they produce 78% of the research publications. This poses the concern of the need to balance out the wider access and quality assurance in a market-driven economy (Higher Education Authority, 2023).

There is mixed graduate employability. A mismatch between the curriculum and labour market requirements is present, as 73%of the graduates take jobs within 24 months. The graduates in the field of STEM receive a 45% salary premium due to the demand in the market and the lack of technical skills. Universities offer assistance in entrepreneurship; however, the picture is not rosy, with only 18% of graduates involved in innovation leadership and entrepreneurial activity (Ministry of Higher Education, 2024).

There is also an improvement in research output, as it has been found that publications have increased by 62% in five years due to an increasing research culture. However, this is not enough to facilitate the development requirements in Zambia or regional competitiveness. Although international collaborations are currently represented in 42%of publications, they serve as a testament to Zambia's growing dependence on external partners, which compromises the independence of research and long-term capacity. Moreover, patronising the university-industry channel, under-recorded patent applications, and low innovation commercialisation translate into a mismatch between academic research and economic growth (National Science & Technology Council, 2024).

Its most significant limitation is funding. Got, which is vastly inadequate by the African Union recommendation of 1%, has only $12 million annually or 0.05% of GDP allocated to research. This poor funding impacts research facilities, graduate education, and global competitiveness. Also, the low level of expenditure per student discourages the quality of learning experiences. It restricts the level of developing critical thinking, practical competencies, and innovation capacity required in nation-building (Mulenga & Luangala, 2020).

There is a mismatch in quality assurance. Educational standards are proven to be a weak aspect of the system, as only 60% of the institutions are fully accredited. Such inconsistencies impact the competency of the graduates and hurt the credibility of the sector. Disproportionate allocation of resources to institutions contributes to the establishment of disparities, thereby restricting systemic change. The monitoring, capacity building, and institutional support are needed to attain consistent results within the sector (Siachiwena & Mwanza, 2022).

To recapitulate, the higher education sector in Zambia has experienced tremendous growth, exhibiting its potential for development. Nevertheless, the structural issues, i.e., unequal access, discrepant quality, curricular irrelevance, low research capability, and insufficiency of funding, persist in undermining the best performance. They are bound by issues that will need broad-based and tactical policy interventions. Higher education should refocus its efforts on equity, quality, relevance, and innovation that would empower it to make better contributions to the development agenda of Zambia and enhance its capacity to take the lead in the region and internationally.

Conclusion

The tertiary education sector in Zambia has recorded significant growth in development; nonetheless, structural issues persist. The main concerns are access inequality, quality, financial constraints, low research capacity, and a lack of compatibility with labour market requirements. To overcome these limitations, it would be necessary to invest strategically, be more integrative in its policies, and reinforce quality assurance. To achieve sustainable impact, it will be necessary to improve curriculum relevance, innovation ecosystems, and university-industry linkages. By taking a narrower focus that is led by the vision of a greater equity, quality, relevance and innovation, higher education will play an even larger part in

the national development of Zambia and the positioning of the sector as a contributor to wider national and international roles. This potential requires synchronised policy reform and a strategic financial investment.

Recommendations

- Invest 1.5% of GDP in higher learning that will be funded based on performance in order to improve quality, research and developmental results.
- Enhance access, infrastructure, and equity through scholarships, accreditation reforms, and institutional capacity building for emerging institutions.
- Encourage innovation hubs, curriculum reform, and entrepreneurship to meet the industry's and national requirements.

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