

## THE STUDENT SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS (2020)

### POLICY BRIEF



In 2020, under the Student Academic Freedom Regional Advocacy Program (SAFRAP) The Youth Empowerment and Transformation Trust (YETT) Zimbabwe, with regional partners the Zambia National Education Coalition (ZANEC) and the Swaziland Youth Empowerment Organization (Luvatsi), carried out a Student Situational Analysis (SSA) whose overall objective was to provide information that empowers higher and tertiary education students and stakeholders to drive change, strengthen student activism, advocacy and oversight at multiple levels, and to empower student led and focused organizations to advance student rights. Specifically, through this research, YETT and its SAFRA partners seek to develop a comprehensive understanding of the context in which higher and tertiary students in Eswatini, Zambia and Zimbabwe are thriving and struggling in tertiary institutions, including identifying the key issues affecting students, their priorities in life and for the future, and the ways in which they participate in (or do not participate in) the pursuit of quality education.

Research for this study was conducted using a multi-method approach which included secondary data analysis of available survey and administrative data. Primary data was gathered through a survey as well as Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with students and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with various stakeholders and experts. The analysis therefore was based on both the primary and secondary data sources. The study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated travel restrictions meant data collection for the survey could not be conducted in the different parts of the 3 countries. In the context of COVID-19 restrictions, an online survey was carried out.

# Findings

## Demographics



Of the 457 survey respondents, half (50 percent) were females, followed by 48 percent males and 2 percent that chose not to say. The study maintained a similar gender balance in the distribution of respondents in the FGDs with 57.5 percent of the respondents being males whilst 42.5 percent were females. More than half (74 percent) of the respondents were aged between 18-24 followed by 25 percent aged between 25-40 years with only 1 percent being those aged younger than 18.

The majority of the study respondents (20.4 percent) were studying social sciences, followed by 9.6 percent in engineering, 8 percent accounting, 7.6 percent law, 6.9 percent medicine, 5 percent humanities, 4.1 percent arts and the rest (38.4 percent) in other departments such as ICTs, other health sciences etc.

In terms of the year of enrolment for the students, the majority (30 percent) were in their second year followed by 25 percent in third year, 21 percent in first and fourth year and 3 percent in the fifth. A statistically insignificant number were doing their Masters or sitting for the BAR exams. The majority of the study's respondents (66 percent) stay off campus whilst 34 percent have accommodation on campus.

The majority of the students that responded to the survey (84 percent) were from universities, followed with 7 percent from polytechnical colleges and 4 percent from teacher training colleges with the rest (5 percent) from colleges such as vocational training centres, nursing institutions and other forms of tertiary institutions.

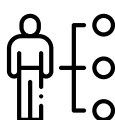
The study assessed whether the respondents belonged to any student representative body, council or organisation and noted that the majority of student respondents, 68.5 percent, did not belong to any of such bodies followed by 17.6 percent who are members of student representative organisations that operate in campuses and 10.2 percent who are in the student representative council and 7.9 percent that belong to some student representative body.

## Key Influences on Students in the Three Countries



The majority of students (86.4 percent) spend their time engaged in academic activities which includes attending lecturers or discussions. This was followed by participation in Clubs and associations (34.4 percent), Sports (21.1 percent) and Student activism (24.3 percent). Students are generally viewed as an opportunity, challenge or threat by various stakeholders and community members and this has a bearing on how their student career is influenced.

## Root Causes of Student Dissatisfaction



The majority of the students (65 percent) are not satisfied with their living conditions and their status in the tertiary institutions. The study observed that economic hardships or financial constraints both at the individual and institutional level are causing challenges in the way that students are living at the institutions. The other root cause that was noted by the students is the inability to engage and act on students' concerns by the college administration. Although new ICT based learning methods were introduced to counter the impacts of COVID-19, the majority of students feel that this was ill-planned and ill-considered because of the extra cost burden that fell on the shoulders of the students to ensure that they access data and therefore, learning resources and content. The lack of adequate infrastructure including recreational facilities has been noted as another root cause to the challenges that students face in the tertiary institutions.

## Student Aspirations and Challenges



The most common challenges that are faced by over half of the students are the high costs of basic needs (66.3 percent); high tuition fees (62.1 percent); and limited accommodation (51.2 percent). The other challenges include limited space to express views and opinions (45.7 percent), poor quality of education (33.5 percent) and limited opportunities to partake in social clubs and associations (25.4 percent), amongst others.

Some of the key aspirations that students have include the ability and means to finish their higher and tertiary education. The students also aspire for an improved learning and teaching environment in the tertiary institutions with improved

### **Student Aspirations and Challenges** *continued*

infrastructure to support their accommodation and provide for modern learning spaces. Another basic aspiration is affordable education that has various supporting mechanisms for those that are unable to afford paying tuition fees whilst at the same time creating opportunities for students to work or have entrepreneurial ventures that can help them to achieve a decent living in the institutions without them becoming vulnerable.

Generally, COVID-19 accentuated pre-existing inequalities in, and challenges to the higher and tertiary education sector. Although some of the institutions introduced e-learning following the restrictions imposed by COVID-19, students continued to face challenges in accessing these platforms due to high costs associated with data, equipment and at times the network infrastructure which does not have the adequate coverage to cater for students in all areas.

The COVID-19 crisis poses an opportunity for improving the three countries' digital and health infrastructures. One opportunity that needs to be enhanced is the introduction of online based learning for many institutions that have failed to adopt these new modalities for learning. The pandemic should also be taken as a key opportunity for learning and strengthening of the institutions in delivering better services and educational products to the students.

Overall, there is restricted academic freedom across the tertiary institutions in the three countries. Averaging the different elements of measuring academic freedom, the study established that below half (43 percent) of the students feel that there is academic freedom in their institutions, whilst 36 percent feels that this exists sometimes and on some issues. Two in ten students (21 percent) feel absolute that there is no academic freedom in their institutions.

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### **Student Civic Engagement**



Over half (57.8 percent) of the students are not aware of any platforms to engage with decision makers whilst 36.3 percent are aware of such platforms at the institutional level while 11.2 percent know of national level platforms and processes and 5.3 percent are aware of these platforms and processes at the regional level. Among those that indicated awareness of platforms and opportunities to engage decision makers, they noted SRCs, student unions, the parliament and parliamentary public hearings, student affairs departments including the dean of students, as well as demonstrations as some of the available ways of ensuring that decision makers give attention to their issues.

### **Role of Students and Student Activists in Academic Freedom**



The study showed that the majority of the students (58.4 percent) use engagement as a way or action on issues affecting students, followed by petitioning which is preferred by 56.9 percent of the respondents, while 48.4 percent of respondents say they have used peaceful demonstrations as a strategy of taking action on issues affecting students. 39.2 percent opt for other forms of action.

### **Policies Affecting Students**



Generally, the study noted that there are no specific and dedicated overarching policies that regulate tertiary education in the three countries. The policies that regulate tertiary education are found in various national legislative pieces. In the three countries the issue of affordable and quality education is a Constitutional issue which brings credence to the way that issues of education are managed and coordinated.

# Conclusions and Recommendations

## Policy Recommendations

KEY CONCLUSION	KEY RECOMMENDATIONS
<i>Generally, students in the three countries are not happy with their living conditions in tertiary institutions</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In the three countries there is need for the introduction of a holistic student focused policy or plan that will ensure that the challenges that confront students in institutions are given adequate focus and priority. Furthermore, there is need for policies and laws to be reviewed or enacted to encourage the effective participation of students in governance issues and decision-making processes and to express themselves in the context of academic freedom.</li> <li>The three countries need to enact legislation that facilitates the establishment of a Students' Council and a National Students' Policy that speaks to respective national development plans and gives a direct linkage between what the nation is trying to achieve in a product of a student beyond campus, in addition addressing the national skills database in the context of the relevance of some of the qualifications that are being offered to students in order to mitigate the challenge of "graduate unemployment."</li> </ul>
<i>COVID 19 ushered in new learning modes</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There is an urgent need for new policies and regulation guidelines to support the new demands for online learning so as to ensure that the quality of education is protected or even further enhanced.</li> <li>The governments in the three countries should make substantial investments in the digital economy and ensure that it supports programs that empowers or capacitates both the students and lecturers on using the online platforms. Financial resources should also be allocated to support infrastructure development as well as support the reintroduction or scaling up of the grants which will allow the disadvantaged students a chance to earn an education.</li> <li>Furthermore, the e-learning modality requires government and tertiary institutions to enter into partnerships with telecommunications companies to ensure data is affordable as well as subsidise ICT equipment such as computers, tablets and smart phones, for students that cannot afford.</li> <li>To facilitate access to e-learning for more students, there is need for decentralised centres that can support access to internet amongst students.</li> </ul>
<i>Although there are persisting threats from COVID-19, students are recommending that it is better that institutions reopen</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The government should develop a comprehensive policy that allows for institutional specific strategies to manage and contain COVID-19 including strict adherence to safety measures, considerations of rotational classes to decongest the institutions whilst at the same time strengthen the capacity to deliver online learning.</li> <li>With the advent of a vaccine, institutions of higher learning should take lead in promoting uptake and ensure that students get vaccinated as a way of promoting the herd immunity.</li> </ul>

## Program Recommendations

KEY CONCLUSION	KEY RECOMMENDATIONS
<i>Students want their curriculums to focus more on soft skills and life skill training</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tertiary institutions should introduce comprehensive programs on leadership, career building and activism as well as develop internship and mentorship programs to give the learners an opportunity to grow, build and enhance their skills and capabilities before they join the professional world.</li> </ul>
<i>SRCs' scope and level of influence is limited</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>CSOs should develop and support capacity building programs that seek to ensure SRCs deliver effectively on their mandate and create strategic convening for advocacy and lobbying.</li> </ul>
<i>Restricted academic freedom in the three countries and students are unable to fully express themselves without fear</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>CSOs should strengthen the role of institutions such as SNUS, ZANASU, ZACOSU, ZICOSU, and ZINASU to ensure that they give an alternative platform for students' issues to be represented outside the campus, where they are compromised politically.</li> <li>CSOs can consider providing election monitoring for tertiary institutions so as to further enhance internal democracy within the institutions.</li> </ul>

*Program Recommendations continued*

KEY CONCLUSION	KEY RECOMMENDATIONS
<i>Parliament is a key structure for advancing advocacy issues for students, but students are afraid to engage</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>CSOs should continue to petition Parliament to bring issues to the attention of policy makers through the relevant committees and submitting policy briefs and alternatives policy documents. CSOs should also lobby the Parliament to continue strengthening its relationships with them as strategic partners.</li> <li>CSOs should also convene common spaces that students can engage with Parliament in an environment that does not risk intimidation.</li> </ul>
<i>There is dilapidated infrastructure and recreational facilities in most of the institutions</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Institutions should invest in recreational facilities that ensure that students have activities that allows them to spend their free time in colleges meaningfully.</li> </ul>

*Recommendations on Partnerships*

KEY CONCLUSION	KEY RECOMMENDATIONS
<i>Academic Freedom and other freedoms for students remain constrained in the three countries</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Regional partnerships, lobbying and advocacy remain critical in building momentum on the issue of academic freedom which in isolation results in victimisation of activists.</li> </ul>
<i>Shrinking space for activism targeted at academic freedom and student welfare</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Civil society should continue to provide strategic convening space to ensure that there is engagement between college authorities and students including student representative unions.</li> </ul>
<i>Challenges of high costs of basic commodities, unaffordable tuition fees and accommodation challenges persists</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The governments in the three countries should enter strategic Public Private Sector Partnerships that are designed to mobilise for resources that go on to support infrastructural development as well as provide financial aid to some of the needy students. Former students are an important entry point to mobilising for support from the private as well as public sector.</li> </ul>

**CONTACT US**

You can find more resources and up to date information at [www.safrap.wordpress.com](http://www.safrap.wordpress.com)

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