

By Simon Okitela
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Zimbabwean educationists have lauded the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) for successfully implementing the Higher Education Access Certificate (HEAC) programme, which offers alternative access to higher education for undeserved students.

Officials from the Zimbabwe Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE) and representatives from private universities in Zimbabwe on Thursday met with the executive director of NCHE, Prof. Mary Okwakol, to debrief her on their findings following a week-long benchmarking visit to Uganda.

BENCHMARKING FINDINGS

The team from Zimbabwe visited Busitema, Islamic University in Uganda and Ernst Cook University, among others.

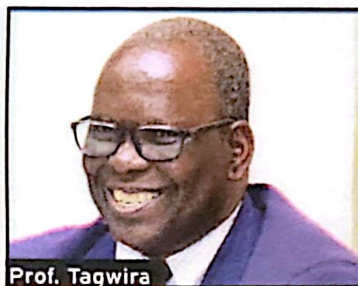
The delegation led by Prof. Fanuel Tagwira, the Permanent Secretary of Zimbabwe's Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, explained that across the universities, the implementation of the HEAC programme has been successful.

"My delegation is amazed by the findings and once we return to Zimbabwe, we shall immediately

Uganda hailed for advancing inclusive university access



Prof. Okwakol



Prof. Tagwira

consider deploying the HEAC programme. We are sure that through its implementation, we shall support the under-deserved students to attain higher education access," Prof. Tagwira noted.

WORK FOR FEES PROGRAMME

He described Uganda's model as practical, scalable and relevant to Zimbabwe's needs. He affirmed to foster mutual learning, observe institutional implementation and establish long-term collaboration.

"The goal now is to see how we support the students once they complete their respective courses through this programme. In Zimbabwe, we currently boost inclusivity through

a "work for fees programme" where a student can work in a hostel, kitchen or classroom for their tuition fees.

ZIMCHE chief executive officer Prof. Kuzvinetsa Peter Dzvimbo noted the importance of inclusive pathways that enable learners from diverse backgrounds to transition into university education.

SECOND CHANCE FOR THE MARGINALISED

Meanwhile, Prof. Okwakol said the HEAC pathway fosters equity and inclusion by providing a second chance for marginalised, especially young women who may never have accessed higher education.

She also explained that it has played a big role in increasing enrolment in

science-related programmes, with evaluations carried out showing that graduates from HEAC programmes perform as well and sometimes better than traditional direct-entry students.

"Before these standards, bridging programmes varied widely in duration, content and quality, with some lasting as little as one month and offering significantly fewer credit units than the current benchmark. The introduction of uniform standards has improved consistency and safeguarded academic integrity," Prof. Okwakol highlighted.

Despite its successes, the programme faces several challenges, with some HEAC students experiencing stigma from peers who entered university through direct admission.

The other challenge is limited funding, with many qualifying, yet few accessing HEAC programmes. Some of those who access them drop out, while of those who complete HEAC programmes, many fail to pursue degree or diploma programmes due to financial constraints.

ABOUT HEAC PROGRAMME

The programme targets academically able young people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds who

did not meet the minimum entry requirements for direct university admission. The one-year programme is positioned at Level Three of the national qualifications framework, alongside advanced secondary education.

It was initially designed to support foreign students, particularly from Commonwealth countries whose education systems do not include advanced-level qualifications equivalent to Uganda's A'level.

TRANSITION ROUTE FROM VOCATIONAL

The programme enables such students to undertake a one-year course, earn a certificate comparable to advanced-level education and qualify for university admission.

Over time, however, it has evolved to now accommodate students who completed A'level, but did not attain the grades required for direct entry into degree or diploma programmes.

It also serves as a transition route for learners from vocational and technical backgrounds seeking to progress to university education.

The programme further aims to bridge the divide between arts and science disciplines.