



An assessment of operational strategies which contributed to decline of student enrolments in Botswana's Private Higher Education Institutions from 2017 to 2021.

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| **Received:** 07.08.2023 | **Accepted:** 09.08.2023 | **Published:** 11.08.2023

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Abstract

This study reviewed the operational strategies of private higher education institutions which could have contributed to the decline of student enrolment over the period 2017 to 2021. The higher education sector of Botswana had twenty private institutions and twenty eight public institutions as of 2021. The paper assessed the impact of operational strategies adopted by private higher education institution on student enrolment over the period 2017 to 2021. Information was collected from published tertiary education statistics reports, marketing publications and websites of five private higher education institution which were sampled. The research found that over the period 2017 to 2021, private higher education institutions reduced the number of diploma and degree programmes they were offering, some closed satellite campuses in other towns and others relinquished strategic partnership arrangements they had with international universities. The study concluded that these operational strategies adopted by private higher education institutions contributed to the continuous decline of student enrolments over the five years. Therefore, private higher education institutions should revive strategic partnerships with international universities, open up their satellite campuses and accredit more learning programmes to boost their student enrolments.

Keywords: Student Enrolment; Strategic Partnerships, Satellite Campuses, Programme Development

Introduction

The period between 2007 and 2016 was a decade of rapid growth in the higher education sector of Botswana through increased number of registered private higher education institutions which also boosted the gross enrolment of students in the sector. Over the period, private higher education institutions expanded their facilities and established campuses in towns across the country. Some private higher education institutions signed memorandums of partnerships with international and regional universities for them to offer diploma and degree qualifications awarded by those partners which boosted the competitive position of private higher education institutions against the local public institutions. As of 2015, there were twenty-six public institutions and twenty private institutions registered by the Human Resources Development Council (HRDC). The twenty private higher education institutions accounted for 49% of the total enrolment of students who were in the system (HRDC, 2016). However, by the year 2021 total enrolment in private higher education institutions had declined to 34.59 % of all students in the system (Tertiary Education Statistics, 2021).

Over the period 2017 to 2021, the government remained committed to financing learners to study in both private and public institutions. Learners were funded through the Department of Tertiary Education Financing (DTEF). DTEF used an 'open market system' to allocate students to both private and public institutions. The system allowed students to freely choose the institution and programme they wanted to study. Accordingly, both private and public institutions openly competed for students who were eligible for sponsorship by the government. According to the DTEF system, all institutions had equal chances to as many students as they could depending on their learning programmes, capacity and the effectiveness of its marketing strategies. This paper therefore sought to assess how some operational strategies of private higher education institutions could have contributed to the decline in student's enrolment over the period 2017 to 2021.

Statement of the problem

The decline of student enrolment in private higher education institutions from 49% in 2017 to 34.59% in 2021 clearly indicated

loss of competitiveness by some private higher education institutions. This scenario has been of great concern to the Botswana Association of Private Tertiary Education Providers (BAPTEP) as well as Business Botswana (BB) Education Sector. It is important to establish the factors which could have contributed to this scenario. Although some contributing factors to the decline of student enrolments were beyond the control of the institutions. The paper focused on the operational strategies of the private higher education institutions, which could have contributed to the decline of student enrolments in private higher education institutions over the years 2017 to 2021.

Aim of study

The research sought to assess how the operational strategies adopted by private higher education institutions in Botswana from 2017 to 2021 could have contributed to the decline in student enrolments.

Research objectives

The specific objectives of the research were to:

- Determine the trends of student enrolments in Botswana's private higher education institutions over the years 2017 to 2021.
- Analyse the impact of operational strategies of private higher education institutions on student enrolments over the years 2017 to 2021.
- Propose strategies to be adopted by private higher education institutions to boost student enrolments.

Literature Review

The decline in student enrolment in an institution of higher learning is caused by several factors some which are directly controllable by the institution itself and some which are in the broader macro environment. According to the University of Virginia (2019), universities and colleges that effectively manage their operations can create and sustain competitive advantage over others. Students consider several factors when they choose a university or college for their tertiary education. It is therefore important for institutions to fully understand the university selection criteria used by students. A study by Ramudhumbu, Tirumalai & Kumari (2017) found out that university characteristics such as the quality of infrastructure and academic staff, the mix of academic programmes, the location of the institution and employability of graduates of a university are key variables used in the university selection criteria by students in Botswana.

A study by Setume,(2021) on the factors influencing students' choice of university in Botswana found that, marketing and promotion strategies used by institutions are key factor in influencing student's choice of university. Sia,(2013) asserts that, advertising is one promotional tool which plays a significant role in influencing student's choice of university. It is commonly used to enhance their institutional reputation which is a key factor when students choose a university. A study by Gaspar & Soares (2021) on the factors influencing the choice of higher education institutions in Angola concluded that, good educational experience from an institution with high quality infrastructure, exceptional teaching and good administrative systems, and institutional reputation are some of the key factors that give students confidence in their qualifications. Further, the perceived employability of graduates of a university was found to be a

function of the university's public image and reputation with which society ranks institutions in respect of producing graduates with requisite skills (Gaspar & Soares, 2021).

Baliyan (2016) investigated the factors influencing students' choice to enroll at private higher education institutions in Botswana and found that, tertiary education students prefer to enroll in higher education institutions that are near to their homes to avoid cost of accommodation, food and transport. Further, students select institutions which are in their vicinity to maintain the family support system which they are used to. Some students are afraid to migrate to major towns and stay alone while undertaking tertiary education. A review of the tertiary education statistics reports shows that in 2016 most of the private higher education institutions had their second campuses in Francistown (the second city of Botswana) as well as other smaller towns like Lobatse, Maun, Masunga and Kanye (Tertiary Education Statistics, 2017). However, by 2021 most of the private higher education institutions had closed their satellite campuses in those smaller towns, some had already remained with single campuses in Gaborone only. Ramalu, Abu Bakar & Nijar (2013) investigated the factors that determine students' preferences in selecting higher learning institutions in Malaysia and found the main factors as the quality of education, campus facilities and atmosphere, external and financial factors, and advertisement and publicity of the institution.

According to Hanover Research (2019), a strong institutional portfolio of programmes creates a competitive advantage for an institution in attracting students. It is therefore imperative for higher education institutions to continually enhance their faculties and departments through developing new programmes in line with the changing needs of the labour market. New programme development involves investing in research and development and relevant resources for the delivery of the programmes (Koks & Kilika, 2016). The benefits of new programme development to an institution include increased opportunity for students, increased student retention, increased enrolment, enhanced employability of graduates, and alignment of demand and supply of skills in the economy (May & Beach,2018). Adopting the new programme development strategy leads to increased student retention as the diverse programmes accommodate different preferences of learners. It also leads to stability of student enrolments as new programs replace those facing a decline in their life cycle. The process of accreditation of new learning programmes in Botswana involves compiling a document that aligns the content, learning activities and assessment activities to the exit learning outcomes depicted in a Qualification registered on the National Credit and Qualifications Framework (NCQF). New programme development is one of the strategies that could be used by private higher education institutions to stabilize enrolments, however, the cost of accreditation and resourcing of programs is very high.

Institutions of higher learning also use strategic partnerships and collaborations to boost their images and provide diverse programmes to learners. According to the European Association for International Education -EAIE (2014), strategic partnerships in higher education are durable collaborations between institutions across borders that are concluded with the view of building sustainable academic networks which seek to strengthen program exchanges, student, and staff exchanges to enhanced learning experiences and educational practices. Strategic alliances can be instituted between universities and the industry, such alliances will bring benefits to the university through research funding,

technology transfer, and opening opportunities for graduates of the universities (Ahmad, Ismail & Siraj, 2019). Therefore, students' desire to identify with universities that have international partnerships is a resemblance of their satisfaction with the educational services provided by such institutions (Su, Swanson, Chinchanchokchai, Hsu & Chen, 2016). A study conducted by Heffernan, Wilkins & Butt in (2018) on 'the importance of institutional reputation, trust and student-university identification in international partnerships' found that university reputation and student trust are significant predictors of student identification with partner institutions and that student university identification is a significant predictor of student satisfaction and loyalty. Thus, where a student is registered in a local institution to study a programme whose qualification is awarded by a foreign university, the student will identify with both the local institution delivering the programme as well as the partner university awarding the qualification. It can therefore be observed that some of the private institutions lost the reputation they had by relinquishing the strategic partnership they had with international universities.

Research methodology

The paper adopted content analysis methodology which is enshrined in the interpretive research philosophy (Given, 2008). Interpretive research approach analytically discloses the meaning of practices in institutions to show how such practices affect society. This study focused on enrolment trends in five out of the twenty registered private higher education institutions. Of the five, two were universities and three were colleges. Data relating to these five institutions was collected from the Tertiary Education Statistics Reports of 2017 up to 2021 which were available on the HRDC website. The BQA website, institutional websites and institutional marketing publications were also reviewed. The study analysed the trends of student enrolments in the five institutions over the years 2017 to 2021 against trends in institution operational aspects which are key in boosting student enrolments. The key institutional operational aspects were; the availability of satellite campuses in smaller towns, the number of degree, diploma and certificate learning programmes offered by institutions over the period 2017 to 2021 and the strategic partnerships maintained with international universities over the period 2017 to 2021. The collected information was consolidated and presented in tables and graphs. A year by year comparison was undertaken to see how student enrolments were responding to the changes in the institutional operation aspects. The tables and graphs clearly depicted the trends in the student enrolments as well as the changes in some operational strategies of private higher education institutions. The five institutions were named A to E for purposes of anonymity. The aim was to assess how the changes in these operational strategies of private higher education institutions could have contributed to the decline in student enrolments over the five years being studied.

Findings

Enrolment trends

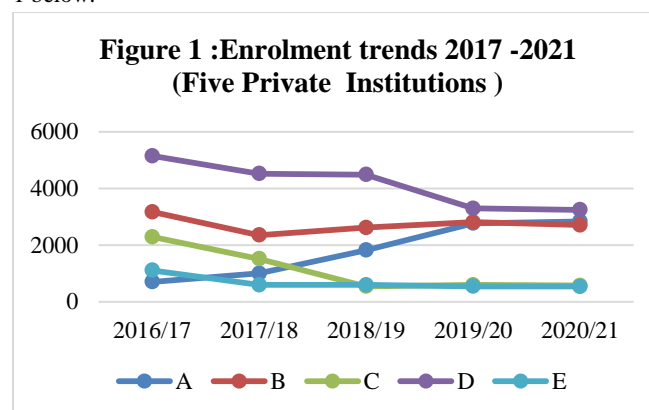
Enrolment has been generally declining over the past five years. The enrolment trends from Academic Years 2016/17 to 2020/21 in the five selected institutions were as depicted in table 1 below.

Table 1: Student enrolments from 2017 to 2021

Name of institution	Student Enrolment 2016/17	Student Enrolment 2017/18	Student Enrolment 2018/19	Student Enrolment 2019/20	Student Enrolment 2020/21
A	698	1000	1819	2770	2834
B	3167	2352	2615	2806	2706
C	2290	1514	542	595	573
D	5148	4517	4488	3293	3244
E	1110	592	596	542	537

Source: Tertiary education statistics report 2018 to 2021

Table 1 shows the student enrolments in the five institutions from 2017 to 2021. Institution A experienced a rapid increase in student numbers over the five years. The student numbers increased from 698 in 2017 to 2834 in 2021 which represents a 306% increase. Enrolment in institution B declined from 3167 students in 2017 to 2706 students in 2021, a decline of -14.5% in five years. The institution managed to maintain its enrolment within the same range from 2019 to 2021. There was a rapid decline in student enrolment in institution C, from 2290 students in 2017 to 573 in 2021. This represents a -74.9% over five years. The same trend occurred in institution E, where student enrolment declined from 1110 in 2017 to 537 students in 2021, which represents a -48.4% decline in student enrolment over five years. Enrolments in institution D also decreased from 5148 in 2017 to 3244 in 2021, which represented a -36.9% decline over five years. Out of the five institutions, only one experienced an increase in the student's enrolments over the period 2017 to 2021. The trends of student enrolments in the five institutions is shown on the graph in Figure 1 below.



Source: Tertiary education statistics report 2017 to 2021

Figure 1 shows the graphical presentation of enrolment trends in the five institutions over the years 2017 to 2021. As shown in the graph, institution A alone had a positive growth in student enrolments whilst other four institutions experienced decline in student enrolments.

Number of learning programmes

The number of programmes offered by an institution is a key determinant of student enrolment. Given that the preferences of students are diverse, the more the number of learning programmes

offered, the greater the possibility of enrolling more students. The number of certificate, diploma and bachelor's degree learning

programmes offered in the five institutions for the years 2017 and 2021 were as depicted in Table 2

Table 2: Number of programmes offered in institutions according to levels in 2017 and 2021.

Name of institution	Certificate programs		Diploma Programs		Bachelors' Degree Programs		Master's Degree level programs	
	2017	2021	2017	2021	2017	2021	2017	2021
A	01	16	22	25	9	12	00	03
B	08	07	15	11	37	15	00	00
C	03	00	22	07	17	13	00	00
D	14	04	44	40	14	15	00	00
E	13	05	18	13	11	05	00	00

Source: Tertiary education statistics report 2017 & 2021

Table 2 shows the number of programmes offered in the five institutions from in 2017 and in 2021. Only institution A had its increased the learning programmes it offered from 2017 to 2021, in the other institutions, there was a decline in the number of learning programmes offered. Given that the government of Botswana was sponsoring students to study diploma and bachelor's degree programmes over the period, institution D was at an advantage because it had the highest number of diploma and degree programs in both in 2017 and in 2021.

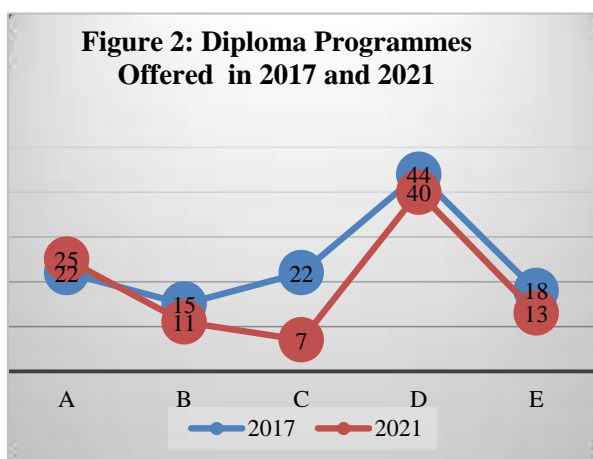
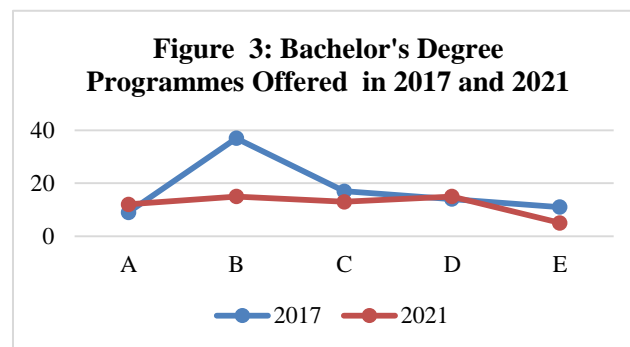


Figure 2 is a graphical comparison of diploma programmes offered in the five private higher education institutions in 2017 and 2021. Generally, there were more diploma learning programmes offered by private higher education institutions in 2017 than in 2021. Only institution A increased the diploma learning programmes from twenty two in 2017 to twenty five in 2021. Institution B decreased the number of diploma programmes it offered from fifteen in 2017 to eleven in 2021, in institution C, diploma programmes offered decreased from twenty two in 2017 to seven in 2021, the same trend was in institution D where diploma programmes offered decreased from forty four in 2017 to forty in 2021, as well in institution E, the diploma programmes offered decreased from eighteen in 2017 to thirteen in 2021.

Figure 3 shows the comparison of degree programmes offered in the five institutions between 2017 and 2021



Source: Tertiary education statistics report 2017 & 2021

The graph depicts that in institutions B, C and E the number of degree programmes offered in 2021 were lower than those offered in 2017 except in institution A where the number of degree programmes increased from nine in 2017 to twelve in 2021. As well, there was an increase of degree programmes offered by institution D from 2017 to 2021.

Satellite campuses

Before the introduction of the new system of registration of Education and Training Providers (ETPs) in Botswana, institutions had the liberty to open satellite campuses and offer the same portfolio of learning programmes that they had accredited at their main campuses. The current BQA regulations requires each satellite campus to be registered and accredited separately from the main campus. As well the scope of accreditation of satellite campuses is determined in consideration of the available resources (BQA, 2021). Table 3 shows a comparison of number of registered active campuses for the five institutions in 2017 and 2021.

Table 3: Number of registered active campuses as of 2021

Name of institution	Number of campuses 2017	Number of campuses 2021
A	7	7
B	3	3
C	6	3
D	1	1
E	7	4

Source: Institutional Websites & BQA list of registered Education and Training Providers.

Table 3 shows that institution A and B maintained the number of campuses they had over the period 2017 to 2021, however institution C reduced its campuses from 6 campuses in 2017 to 3 campuses in 2021, institution D maintained its single campus over the period, whilst institution E reduced its campuses from 7 in 2017 to 4 in 2021.

Strategic Partnerships

According to the HRDC (2018), several UK universities were present in Botswana through collaborative arrangements with local private and public institutions, examples of such universities, include Teesside University, University of Greenwich, University of Derby, Anglia Ruskin University and Leeds Beckett University. Regional universities like University of South Africa (UNISA), National University Science and Technology (NUST) from Zimbabwe, Midlands State University (MSU) from Zimbabwe and Zambian Open University had partnerships with local private institutions. This dual branding of educational qualifications and services by local private institutions improved their reputation and capacity to attract students for enrolment. Table 5 compares the number of strategic partnerships which the five institutions had with regional and international universities between 2017 and 2021.

Table 5: Strategic partnerships with regional and international universities

Name of institution	Number of campuses 2017	Number of campuses 2021
A	3	4
B	2	1
C	1	0
D	0	0
E	1	0

Source: Institutional publications & websites

As depicted in table 4 above, most of the strategic partnerships which existed between private higher education institutions and regional and international universities in the year 2017 were no longer in existence as of the year 2021. Only institution A increased the number of partners it had from three in 2017 to four in 2021.

Discussion

In relation to the variables considered in this study (number of learning programmes, number of campuses, and number of strategic partners), institution A had a positive trend in all of them. Figure 2 shows that institution A increased the diploma programmes from twenty-two in 2017 to twenty-five in 2021. As well, it increased the number of bachelor's degree programmes from nine in 2017 to twelve in 2021 (Figure 3). Further, the institution maintained the seven campuses it had from 2017 until 2021. Table 4 shows that institution A increased the number of strategic partners from three in 2017 to four in 2021. Consequently, institution A had a positive trend of student enrolments over the period.

Institution B experienced a decline of student's enrolment from 2017 to 2018. Although there was a huge reduction in the number of bachelor's degree programmes offered by institution B from

2017, the institution managed to sustain its enrolment within the same range between from 2019 to 2021. In the year 2017, institution B offered fifteen diploma programmes and thirty-seven bachelor's degree programmes but as of 2021, the number of programmes had reduced to eleven diplomas and fifteen bachelor's degree programmes. By the year 2021, institution B was no longer having strategic relationship with some regional and international universities it used to partner with in 2017. A common feature between institution A and B is that the two managed to maintain the number of satellite campuses they had from 2017 to 2021. Enrolment in institution B declined by -14.5% from 2017 to 2021.

The trend of declining student enrolments in institution C could be attributed to the decline in the number of programmes it offered. Institution C had twenty two diplomas and seventeen bachelor's degrees in 2017 which reduced to seven diploma and thirteen bachelor's degree in 2021. In institution D and E, there has been a notable decline in student enrolments over the period which could also be attributed to the reduction in the number of diploma and degree programmes which the institutions were offering from 2017 to 2021. Further, institution E had seven campuses in 2017 but as of 2021 it had only 4 campuses. Decreasing the number of programmes offered by an institution limits the choices of students when they enrol, thus negatively affecting the enrolment.

Running multiple campuses increase the operating overheads of an institution, but it boosts access and visibility of the institution. Locating the institution in different towns has proved to be a viable strategy to allow broad access to the programmes and services offered by the institution. The decline in student enrolments in institutions C and E can be attributed to the reduction in the number of campuses from 2017 to 2021. Institutions A and B managed to maintain the number of campuses they had from 2017 to 2021, consequently institution A experienced increase in student enrolments over the period. As well the decline in enrolment in institution B was not as sharp as it was in institution C and E. Some learners prefer to study in towns where their parents are residing because of the high cost of living in Gaborone. The closure of satellite campuses by institutions can also be attributed to the requirements for reregistration of Education and Training Providers (ETPs) under the new BQA regulations. Some institutions did not reregister their satellite campuses, hence, they had to close them down.

Strategic partnerships are costly to maintain especially with international universities where fixed annual partnership fees are paid in foreign currencies. Further, the need to localise the content of the learning programmes also influenced the decisions by institutions to discontinue the partnerships. As well, the transition which took place in the tertiary education sector of Botswana from 2015 to 2020 required all international institutions which award qualifications locally to be registered as Awarding Bodies. Some international universities were not willing to go through that process hence, many international universities which were present in Botswana through partnerships with private institutions discontinued their relationships.

Conclusion

There has been a negative trend of student enrolment in Botswana's Private Higher Education Institutions from 2017 to 2021. Although there has been some external factors behind the negative trend, this study has established a number of operational

factors within the control of the institutions which contributed to the decline in student enrolments over the period. The study found that from year 2017 to 2021, most of the Private Higher Education Institutions reduced the number of diploma and degree learning programmes they offered. Some Private Higher Education Institutions closed satellite campuses and remained with their main campuses in Gaborone only. Further the some Private Higher Education Institutions relinquished strategic partnerships they had with international universities.

Recommendations

To boost enrolments, private higher education institutions can adopt the following recommendations:

- Develop programmes and diversify their programme portfolios so that students get a wide range to choose from when enrolling.
- Re-engage their regional and international partner universities and revive the strategic partnership arrangements.
- Research on the demand for their learning programmes in other towns and open satellite campuses across the country to improve accessibility.

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