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# **Neoliberalism and Theatre Training in Zimbabwean Higher Education: The case of Midlands State University**

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## **Abstract**

*In this account, I engage how Midlands State University through its Film and Theatre Arts Studies programme responded and continues to respond to the neoliberalisation of higher and tertiary education in Zimbabwe. I argue that while the splicing of Film and Theatre Arts into a single programme was beneficial to the institution, the packaging of the actual programme created challenges for the industry and negatively affected the exit profile and ‘expected’ skill set of the graduates. I submit that within the Zimbabwean context, specifically at MSU, the neoliberalisation of higher and tertiary education affects teaching and learning thereby complicating the integration of graduates into the industry. I conclude and argue that while MSU’s Film and Theatre Arts Studies programme is marketable and appealing, it does not serve the interests of the student in as far as their training, learning, and development is concerned, but fulfils the neoliberal university mandate: revenue generation, efficiency and competition.*

**Keywords:** *MSU, Film and Theatre Arts Studies, teaching, learning, neoliberalism, industry*

## **Introduction**

For any way of thought to become dominant, a conceptual apparatus has to be advanced that appeals to our intuitions and instincts, to our values and our desires, as well as to the possibilities inherent in the social world we inhabit. (Harvey 2005: 5)

The above epigraph overtly characterises the processes through which neoliberalism has become entrenched in the post millennium Zimbabwean education system. Neoliberalism has become a conceptual stratagem that has positioned formal education as key to the social and political ills bedevilling the country by packaging it as a ‘purchasable good’ which opens doors to a good life and well-paying jobs. As a result, attaining a certified qualification has become a pass into employability and achieving the promise of good life. In short, education has become a product that the sector (and industry) sell to prospective students and parents. The value system attached to higher and tertiary education is thus, transformed from a service to a purchasable good, with students offered and ‘allowed’ to choose from a basket of industry ‘certified’ and supported programmes. Because of this ability to ‘choose’, higher and tertiary education is transformed into a product which prospective students can ‘purchase’ with a promise of a better life after joining the industry, upon graduation. The desire(s) to offer (by institutions of higher and tertiary education) and to have a certificate (by students and prospective students) sits at base of the neoliberalisation of Zimbabwean education system, which I seek to engage with, through this account.

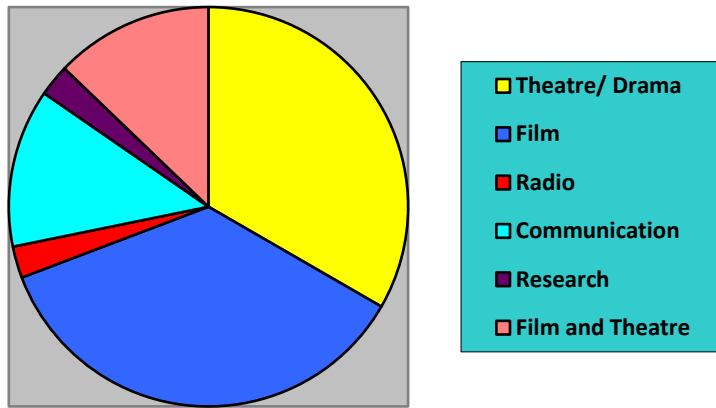
Methodologically, I adopt a case study approach together with an ‘insider’ approach. I have chosen Midlands State University (MSU) as my key case study because it is one of the biggest graduate producing university in the visual and performing arts sector. On average, there are more than 50 graduates each year from MSU’s Department of Film and Theatre Arts Studies. I have also worked

with MSU's Department of Film and Theatre Arts Studies as a focal person during the affiliate status accreditation of The College of Creative Arts - Africa (CCA-A). My role was to review the Film and Theatre Arts Studies degree programme and help CCA-A align with the teaching, learning and administration of this programme. The analysis and review of the Film and Theatre Arts Studies programme that follows in succeeding sections of this paper references to my earlier critical engagement with it at CCA-A. Building on my earlier engagement with the University of Zimbabwe's (UZ) Department of Theatre Arts and Great Zimbabwe's (GZU) Performing Arts degree programmes rolled out in a similar neoliberal context (Sibanda 2019), I deploy a theoretical method of self-consciousness and invested localised analysis (Knowles 2004) to isolate, enunciate and critique MSU's role(s), decisions and their effect thereof, on teaching, learning and administration of Film and Theatre Arts Studies at LSU. As a Theatre Arts/ Performing Arts and/ or Film and Television curriculum development specialist in Zimbabwe, I am interested in how some of the programmes I have developed and those developed by my colleagues have transformed and continue to transform the creative sector and related sectors at a local level. Secondly, as a product of the UZ's Theatre programme, which birthed the MSU's Film and Theatre Arts Studies programme, directly through the university's oversight of administrative and programme establishment processes and staff training, and, indirectly through peer-review mechanism and informal discussions, I am heavily invested in understanding how the MSU programme is responding to the Zimbabwean neoliberal higher and tertiary education model. As Apple (2001: 415) annotates; "We need to ask constantly what [neoliberal] reforms do to schools as a whole and to each of their participants including teachers, administrators, community members, local activists and so on", I critically review the extent to which the neoliberal approach has transformed student recruitment, teaching and learning of Film and Theatre Arts Studies at MSU.

This paper is divided into four broad sections. The first section profiles MSU's Bachelor of Arts Honours in Film and Theatre Arts Studies. The second section traces and examines the introduction of neoliberal fundamentalism in higher and tertiary education in Zimbabwe and specifically, the effect it has had on visual and performing arts subject teaching departments. The third section details MSU's Department of Film and Theatre Arts Studies' strategical responses to the neoliberalisation of higher and tertiary education. The fourth and final section is a detailed discussion of the challenges that emerge as a result of the full-scale implementation of these strategies by MSU as it endeavoured to remain competitive in terms of student recruitment and numbers.

### **MSU's Bachelor of Arts (Hons) Film and Theatre Arts Studies**

MSU's Bachelor of Arts Honours in Film and Theatre Arts Studies programme has forty (40) modules. This programme has thirteen (13) modules that specifically focus on Theatre/ Drama; fourteen (14) modules on Film (which encompasses Film Theory, Television and Advertising); one (1) radio module; five (5) communication modules; two (2) Gender focussed modules; one (1) research and five (5) modules that simultaneously engage film and theatre. The exit profile of a graduate of this programme is therefore premised on a thorough theoretical, critical and creative appreciation of performance and screen studies (see the pie chart below).



The distribution of courses/ modules in the B.A (Hons) Film and Theatre Arts Studies.

This kind of exit profile was envisaged to open opportunities for graduates both in the industry; as actors, directors, scenic designers, lighting and stage managers, producers, video editors, media practitioners, human resource and public relations personnel, teachers and lecturers as well in the civic and entrepreneurial sectors (B A Hons Film and Theatre Arts Studies). Within the tertiary institutions in particular and Zimbabwe in general, it is this first promise of a fulfilling job in the creative sector that draws prospective students to register and study a programme. Although MSU adopted a flexible packaging style that enabled students to register limited modules from other programmes within the same faculty, together with the listed modules in the Film and Theatre Arts Studies programme, it would be very difficult for an ‘ordinary’ graduate to practice, for example as human resource officers, media practitioners (in the journalistic sense), public relations officers, as well as some of the creative positions such as scenographers, stage managers and editors as there are no modules covering these areas in depth. This observation is premised on the demand by Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE) that university programmes must allow students to graduate as specialists in their areas of interest. The institution lists professions such as

human resource management, public relations and journalism as some of the key opportunities graduates of the Film and Theatre Arts Studies could and can exploit. At best I can argue that beyond a few entrepreneurial graduates that are identified as ‘talented’ in a neoliberal university, as I have argued elsewhere regarding the UZ programme that this kind of approach produced ‘half-baked’ but certified graduates who practice ‘kiya-kiya’ or ‘makeshift’ approaches once employed (Sibanda 2013).

As I critically appraised of the Film and Theatre Arts Studies programme on behalf of CCA-A, I observed that unless there was a paradigm shift in terms of the teaching and learning approach graduates from this programme were likely to have challenges integrating into film and theatre industries. This was in light of MSU’s overbearing oversight role that delved into the minute details of teaching and learning such as determining personnel to teach in the programme under CCA-A. This was in line of my observation emerging from informal discussions with former MSU’s Film and Theatre Arts Studies students who submitted that there was a legion of unemployed graduates due to the fact that they did not have the required skillset although they had a certificate. Although some entrepreneurial graduates have bridged into the social sciences and/ or education through studying specialised post-graduate diplomas and degrees, the majority have remained formally unemployed. In worst case scenarios, these graduates have turned to informal business and trade where they undertake activities that are at tangent with what they studied. As a result, Zimbabwe has seen numerous protests by graduates who dress up in their gowns to sell fruits and vegetables or play soccer by the streets. Yet, programmes such as the Film and Theatre Arts Studies could be the springboard towards unlocking the social and economic capital of Zimbabwean education beyond formal employment.

## **Neoliberalism in Zimbabwean tertiary education**

Neoliberalism broadly means “the agenda of economic and social transformation under the sign of the free market” (Connell 2013: 100). To David Harvey (2005: 2):

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade.

A strong sentiment that underlines Connell and Harvey’s characterisation of neoliberalism is the transformation of institutions from being dependent on the state fiscus into entrepreneurial and competitive bodies, within the parameters set by the state through policies. This entrepreneurial agenda is envisaged to attend to the “natural condition of civilised humanity” (Jeremy 2013: 9), pivoted on three principles; the benevolence of the free market, minimal state intervention and regulation of the economy, and the individual as a rational economic actor (Saunders 2010: 45). Radice (2013: 408) highlights four major processes that characterise neoliberal thinking in the Third world higher and tertiary education: privatisation, deregulation, financialisation and globalisation. These processes transform the purpose of the university from the education of elites in politics, business, and culture to the provision of marketable skills and research output in the ‘knowledge economy’ (Harvey 2005; Radice 2013). Gilbert Jeremy aptly captures the effect of these processes;

One of the most characteristic tropes [of the neoliberal discourses] is the repeated use of the term ‘modernisation’ to describe a specific programme of labour-market deregulation, tax cutting, privatisation and union repression which any objective view must recognise as in fact only one possible way of reforming and updating social and economic institutions in the twenty-first century. (2013: 11)



Within the Zimbabwean higher and tertiary education sector, neoliberalism was introduced as a modernising process targeted at transforming universities into globally recognised teaching and learning spaces. Although the neoliberal sentiment has lingered on the periphery for quite some time in the Zimbabwean education sector, it was overtly acknowledged and deployed as an overarching philosophy guiding and governing the education landscape, especially higher and tertiary education. In 2005, government scrapped university student grants and demanded that students pay tuition, which was determined by the programme in which the student is registered. This meant that prospective students needed to choose a programme that would guarantee a promise of employment once they graduated so as to relieve the financial burden on their parents and guardians. Academically, it also meant that university students would then register and specialise in a degree programme, a drastic change from the pre-2005 era where students could ‘shop’ modules from a variety of ‘baskets’ of degree programmes, although limited within the same faculty. This was necessitated by the universities’ desire to derive maximum financial benefit from tuition by charging module calculated fees. Consequently, any extra module registered by a student demanded a separate payment. The system thus favoured, restored and consolidated a capitalist class power, as students from families with financial power were able to ‘shop’ competitive modules from other programmes. As Gilbert Jeremy (2013: 16) observes that the neoliberal context has opened space for consolidation of class-based power and its constitutive privileges. He submits that

[l]ess powerful social groups – most notably managers of both commercial and public sector organisations - have been able to acquire power and obtain privileges to the extent that they have been willing and able to reproduce the culture of that elite while serving its interests. (2013: 16).

Within the Zimbabwean higher and tertiary education sector, this manifested as programmes “valorise[s] a hierarchical and highly unequal set of social relations while claiming to offer all individuals from all backgrounds an equal chance to compete for elite status” thereby creating “a new social elite” (Jeremy 2013: 16) group of graduates.

Another key characteristic of the neoliberalisation of higher and tertiary education in Zimbabwe was the emergence and introduction of evening and/ or weekend short courses. These courses became fundraising cash-cows for universities as they were tailor-made to up-skill graduates already employed in the industry. The introduction of short courses had implications relating to structure and content of the undergraduate conventional programmes as they now needed to be aligned to industry needs. While students registered in the conventional programme were a major market for these short courses as they set out to better position themselves for the job market, conventional undergraduate programmes ceased from being programmes that prepared graduates for a better life of employment to market oriented packages meant to retain them within the institution. These programmes produced huge numbers of graduates who flooded the industry, creating room for more new short courses that would make them unique. Students studying performing and visual arts took modules in modern (foreign) languages, print and digital media as well as design and graphics to achieve the uniqueness the industry demanded.

Critical to the transformation of university management systems was maintaining a creative competitive edge over newly established and emerging institutions of higher learning. During the first decade of the millennium, the Government of Zimbabwe (GoZ) through Parliament granted charters for the establishment of new universities. There emerged Midlands State University (Gweru) in 2002, Great Zimbabwe University (Masvingo) in 2004, Chinhoyi

University of Technology (Chinhoyi) in 2001, and Lupane State University (Bulawayo / Lupane) (2005), while National University of Science and Technology (NUST), established in 1991, sought to consolidate its position as a specialised training institution for science and technology. Key to this process was the development of market oriented, supported and competitive degree programmes. Emerging within these new universities, except NUST, were Departments that were solely focussed on performing arts, theatre, film and / or other visual arts. This meant that there was now competition for prospective students for performing arts programmes and universities and their departments needed to transform as a response to the new landscape.

### **Splicing Film and Theatre: MSU's response to the neoliberal context**

Due to the liberalisation and marketisation of higher and tertiary education, Zimbabwean universities were forced to review, develop and redevelop new programmes that aligned with market needs. The key principles guiding this review and / development process of new programmes are aptly captured by Connell (2013: 110) in his observation that “[u]nder neoliberal rule, education is displaced by competitive training, competition for privilege, social conformity, fear and corruption, while protest and rational alternatives are marginalised.” These programmes are marketed by creating an illusion of a successful career through colourful exit profiles or use of former graduates who are constantly producing evidence that they are making an enterprise of themselves (Olsen 1996: 340). Whitty *et al* (1998) in Apple (2001: 416) submit that “... under these conditions not only does education become a marketable commodity like bread and cars in which values, procedures and metaphors of business dominate, but its results must be reducible to standardized ‘performance indicators.’” The attachment of ‘performance indicators’ to the exit profiles of graduates or entrepreneurial work being undertaken by former students to the

marketing of degree programmes completes the packaging of higher and tertiary education as a commodity in the market.

At MSU, the Department of Film and Theatre Arts developed a new programme, Film and Theatre Arts Studies, which spliced together Film and Theatre Arts. This was a new approach to training and development of film or theatre practitioners in Zimbabwe. Whereas this was an innovative idea to counter other universities' competitive strategies, this approach created an illusion for prospective students that they will be better qualified than their competitors graduating from the UZ or any other institution. The splicing of film and theatre made the Film and Theatre Arts Studies programme more appealing to a prospective student resulting in very big classes. In other words, the programme became a course of choice at MSU after Social Science degree programmes such as Development Studies. However, it had deep-seated structural and resource challenges, which I will turn to in the following section.

The lack of a forceful impact by graduates of MSU and other universities' film and theatre arts/ creative arts/ performing arts to positively influence or transform the industry with innovative entrepreneurial ideas, skill and effort packages higher and tertiary education as civic engagement and learning for its own sake (Saunders 2010). Whereas students expected this programme to enable them to achieve set extrinsic goals such as being gainfully employed and very well-off financially upon graduation, the reality is that they were sold a 'hot-air-pie'. This disconnect between the expected outcome and the actual consequence from the purchased good (education) creates a new challenge with neoliberalism, especially in Third world countries. It is important to provide a Zimbabwean specific context here. While the Zimbabwean education model has been praised world over for its impact in terms of its high literacy levels, it remains stuck in colonial framing. Colonial education was packaged in such a

manner that it trained and prepared blacks to read, write and works in government departments, public and private companies (see Shiza and Kariwo 2011). As a result, specialisation became a foundational component of the education sector. It is this kind of tuition, which I have called for its decolonisation and re-contextualisation (Sibanda 2013), that still subsists in the three tiers of education in Zimbabwe. A challenge that emerges out of this situation, which I problematise in this paper, is a dichotomous relationship between a transforming entrepreneurial industry and a rigid educational framework that conditions its graduates into a 'worker' complex conundrum. Additionally, within the African geopolitics, specifically Zimbabwean higher and tertiary education, universities focus on economic rationality and the advantages it brings to the institutional image and finances before attending to the needs of the student, and by extension the market.

Mahmoud Mamdani examines a similar challenge at Makerere University and observes that first and foremost this challenge lies with the political leadership and university management. He questions:

Who is responsible for the Makerere crisis and what is the way forward? The responsibility, I believe, lies first and foremost with the political leadership in government and the top management at Makerere: if the former was determined to push the admission of more and more privately sponsored students down the university's academic throat even when Senate expressed doubts about whether a large scale entry of privately sponsored students was possible without lowering of standards, the latter failed to blow the whistle on the reforms even when its negative consequences were amply documented by several Senate committees. (2007: viii)

This squarely applies to the Zimbabwean and specifically MSU context. When the then Minister of Tertiary and Higher Education, now Ministry of Higher and Tertiary, Education, Science and Technology Development (MHTESTD),

Honourable Herbert Murerwa announced, in 2005, that university and college students were now expected to pay tuition fees to cover their studies, there was little or no engagement with and by university management at all. This political decision forced on university and college administrators by government left them to deal with the consequences, which were unfortunately passed on to students and staff. While government-support for students continued at Makerere, the Zimbabwean government totally pulled out its financial support for students. As a result, Zimbabwean higher and tertiary education became expensive in the sense that parents and students now needed to budget for a complete financial package covering tuition, accommodation, food and upkeep while at university.

Because this directive came couched in a political jacket – university committees and their oversight roles were thus usurped. While at Makerere advice was solicited and given but overlooked, at Zimbabwean universities, specifically MSU and UZ, there is no evidence that university committees ever tried to engage or advise the central government or university management of the implications of this decision on teaching, learning and administration of universities and colleges. The privatisation of higher and tertiary education positioned students as rational economic actors and packaged university education as a private good to be purchased by a student (Saunders 2010). Zimbabwean higher and tertiary education became

bound up not merely with a restoration of capitalist class power, but with a re-balancing of the relative power of industrial and financial capital within that class and to some extent a re-composition of capital itself and its constitutive practices. (Jeremy 2013: 16)

This restoration of the capitalist class power created new patterns of uneven and combined development in which unparalleled prosperity coexisted with new patterns of poverty (Fine and Saad-Filho 2017: 688). Further, Fine and Saad-Filho (2017: 692) observe that this kind of neoliberal practice “triggered macro-economic crises that penalise[d] the poor disproportionately.”

### **The effect of neoliberalism on the recruitment process at MSU**

The Zimbabwean education system has, since political independence in 1980, largely been considered of high standard and quality. Within the higher and tertiary sector, this was enforced through high university entry points<sup>1</sup>. The tradition was that the Faculties of Law, Arts and Social Studies demanded higher points for prospective students to be admitted into the various degree programmes on offer. As a result of a long history and established programmes, this continued even after the introduction of tuition fees. This meant that upcoming universities such as MSU and Bulawayo based National University of Science and Technology (NUST) had to fight for those students that had been rejected or did not qualify for their programme of choice at the established UZ. This, coupled with an administrative decision by MSU management to admit every student, especially from the South-western provinces, who applies as long as they have basic Advanced Level qualification had multiple ramifications on the recruitment of prospective students for the Film and Theatre Arts Studies programme.

First, the recruitment of any but all prospective students that applied to be admitted into the Film and Theatre Arts Studies programme resulted in very big classes. The Film and Theatre Arts Studies classes were (and are still) characterised by big numbers that strain the technical and human resources allocated to the Department. In most cases resources are allocated using the threshold limit, in which case Faculty of Arts classes at MSU had an initial

threshold of 30. Yet, MSU's Film and Theatre Arts Studies classes ranged between 55 and 70 every year. Secondly, it raises Mamdani's fear regarding the lowering of standards if the large-scale recruitment of students is not managed properly. Although these emerge as critical misgivings coming out of a neoliberalist managerial approach, to university management and academic staff, this was an attestation that the Film and Theatre Arts Studies programme was successful. To management, the fact that this class exceeded set-down viability thresholds meant that they were able to make profit from tuition. To the academic staff, who were now teaching more modules as part-time/ contract lecturers, the bigger the class meant that they will be paid better.

Yet, there is a contradistinction and contradiction between what the universities intended to achieve and what the semi-professional industry offered. The envisaged exit profile provides for a graduate that needs a conducive environment to creatively contribute through innovative content creation processes, yet the semi-professional industry lacked (and still lacks) the needed infrastructure, organisational, and human, and financial capital. To this end, while the graduates have been left marooned and unemployed in disciplines related to their areas of their specialisation, it is also due to the fact that the industry is still not yet fully developed to a level where it can sponge-in everyone. This further raises critical and fundamental questions regarding the value of higher and tertiary education in Zimbabwe. While in the global North, higher and tertiary education has for a long time adopted liberal arts as a foundation for the Arts and Humanities programmes, Zimbabwe's higher and tertiary education programmes are largely specialised. This liberal approach foregrounds, in addition to the area specialisation, life skills such as critical skills, negotiating skills necessary for negotiating a complex employment industry. Consequently, while on the one hand, the university trained and developed graduates that were expected to be an asset to the industry, on the



other hand the industry was not at a level to formerly employ these graduates full-time.

The second instance where structural changes introduced by neoliberal practice into higher and tertiary institutions is the dependence on part-time contract staff (Harvey 2005; Mamdani 2007). While at other universities such as the UZ, lecturers are engaged on one year temporary-full-time contracts, which are renewed upon their expiration, at MSU and other upcoming universities such as NUST, LSU and GZU, permanent full-time lecturers are offered separate short-term contracts to teach semester modules in addition to their standardised semester teaching load of three (3) modules. MSU and other universities see this approach as a strategy of saving the central government money through managing their wage bill. In most cases, these short-term contracts are honoured from tuition paid by students.

Herein lays another explanation of MSU's graduate students' failure to make any positive or meaningful contribution to the film and theatre industries. Because the student's tuition must pay the 'part-time contract' yet fully employed lecturer his/ her dues for taking an extra class, university management always makes sure that these classes are always big. Noting as well that this move is not meant to save the central government money but aims at improving the local university financial resources. For the reason that the part-time teaching contract for extra classes is very competitive, MSU lecturers would rather take as many as eight (8) to ten (10) full modules cutting across all the levels per semester. As a result, one former student observed that sometimes it felt like they were there to pass time and get certificates for a programme they were never fully immersed in. This approach to teaching and learning has resulted in some students applying for admission at UZ and LSU for a similar or different programme all together after a full year of study at MSU. While on the

one hand, this is an indictment of the neoliberal approach to training and development at MSU's Department of Film and Theatre Arts Studies, on the other hand, it exposes the lack of depth and appreciation of the demands of training, teaching and learning film and theatre arts needed by MSU administration and staff. This is one of the many challenges that a former student raised in relation to the theory-practical continuum. At face value, the Film and Theatre Arts Studies programme highlights a balance between theory and practical modules yet former students highlighted that they were taught theory in all the courses. Rutendo\*, a former student from the class that graduated 2017 observed that,

[w]hen the programme was introduced to us in 2013, we were so excited that we will leave the institution as theatre and film specialists. However, as time went on, we discovered that we had to go that extra mile and do the practical on our own if we had to graduate with any basic knowledge of, for example using the camera, editing or aftereffects. Most of my colleagues were happy with getting distinctions in practical modules that they did not know any technical substance of. The truth of the matter is that only a few creative and entrepreneurial students have made it into the film and theatre industry. The majority of us have either joined the public service as teachers, teaching what we were not trained for.

This further affirms that the Film and Theatre Arts Studies programme was created to make the neoliberal MSU competitive towards "revenue generation, efficiency and competition" (Saunders 2010: 56). Saunders (2010: 63) further observes that in this kind of scenario such as obtaining at MSU, "students increasingly view themselves as purchasers of a product and demand a certain level of satisfaction, most fundamentally of which is the marketability of their education and challenge institutional and faculty practices based on consumer identity." Yet, students in Zimbabwean universities have been lulled into an

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\*This is not her original name.

individualist ethic handing university management carte-blanche powers to determine what is good and bad for them. This has been complicated by the further deteriorating economic and political conditions which force students to focus on ‘going/ passing through the system’ at the expense of the quality of education offered, conditions underpinning the teaching and learning process as well as the social lecturer-student contract. As another former student observed, in this context it became difficult to mobilise students to hold lectures, not only in the Department of Film and Theatre Studies but the general university, to account because every one of the students was focussed on just going through the four-year cycle and get their certificates. Saunders’ (2010: 63-64) observation that in a neoliberal context the certificate is considered more important than the quality education received holds true;

The consumerist approach has meaningful implications in their academic lives as student-consumer are less focussed on learning, challenging themselves and their beliefs, and exploring different areas of knowledge, more interested in obtaining the credential that enable them to achieve the economic success they desire.

While the first part of this statement holds true on the international landscape and MSU, at MSU’s Department of Film and Theatre Arts Studies, the opposite is true about the second part dealing with economic success due to one holding a certificate. Whereas students go through the four-year cycle and attain the credential expected to enable them to be competitive and attain economic success, they are shunned by the industry because they lack the expected requisite technical/ practical and theoretical understanding. We can safely conclude, thus, that the neoliberal approach at MSU “penalises the poor disproportionately” (Fine and Saad-Filho 2017: 692).

### **Teaching and learning environment: infrastructure and personnel**

For a practically oriented programme such as the Film and Theatre Arts Studies programme, there is need for a balance in terms of the characteristics of the personnel running it. This is key because it enables the development of a rounded student who is technically and theoretically sound, critically engaging and able to conceptualise, develop and transform an idea into a marketable product. This must be ably supported by a teaching and learning environment which should provide the best/ optimum space for learning, reflection, experimentation and nurturing. The learning environment should also expose the student to the near perfect environment similar to that which they will have to operate in when they graduate and join the professional stream. I have argued elsewhere that the challenges of theatre and by extension film training and development in Zimbabwe are tied to teaching and learning spaces within educational institutions (Sibanda 2013). I extend this argument and submit that the lack of qualified and specialist trained personnel in theatre and film is also a more damaging challenge as well. In this section, I engage with the challenges of teaching and learning space as well as qualified personnel to teach the Film and Theatre Arts Studies programme at MSU.

The UZ is the only institution in Zimbabwe that offers postgraduate training through their Master of Philosophy in Theatre Arts, Theatre and Performance and Film Studies. Most of the lecturers that taught (and still teach) Theatre Arts in Zimbabwe from the turn of the millennium were products of the UZ's Department of Theatre Arts. This meant that beyond those that undertook their postgraduate development in foreign countries, most of the Theatre Arts and/ Film lecturers had to train at the UZ. Most of the lecturers in the Department of Film and Theatre Arts Studies are undergraduate graduates from the UZ's much famed Bachelor of Arts General Degree. Students undertaking the Bachelor of Arts General Degree chose three subjects from a bucket of Arts subjects<sup>ii</sup>,

inclusive of Theatre Arts. During the first and second year, students studied three subjects while at third year, they were allowed to choose two out of the three subjects and ‘specialise.’ Most students that took Theatre Arts at first year either took Ndebele/ Shona, History and/ or Literature in English as dictated by their timetable. Due to the similarities in courses and critical analysis approaches between Theatre Arts, Literature in English and Ndebele/ Shona, most students dropped History at third level. As such, most lecturers that teach Theatre Arts at MSU either graduated with Theatre Arts and Ndebele/ Shona or Theatre Arts and English Literature.

Within an inter-disciplinary context, these lecturers would be the most relevant and qualified personnel needed to effectively run this programme, however, as noted earlier, the majority of courses that make up this programme are Theatre Arts and Film specific. Out of the 40 courses, 32 are Film and / Theatre specific. This therefore demands teaching personnel that is competent, grounded and experienced in these focus areas, which are in most cases very practical and technical. A glance at the profiles of the lecturers in the Department of Film and Theatre Arts Studies highlight a worrying inadequacy of the technical and/ or practical needs of the department. For example, two of the senior lecturers have post-graduate qualifications in Language, Linguistics and Literature from the University of South Africa. The film section is staffed with personnel that has a media and journalism background. Media and journalism programmes in Zimbabwe largely focus on print media and publishing. Yet, the Film and Theatre Arts Studies has a digital content development approach. This disconnect between what the lecturers can offer and the practical demands of the programme manifest on the exit profile of a Film and Theatre Arts Studies graduate. While there is a possibility that the lecturers could have re-tooled and got specialised training which could make them indispensable in the teaching and learning of this programme, the ZIMCHE has over time raised a red flag

upon assessing the qualifications of the Departmental staff. This is a colonial residual challenge that has filtered through the education system for the past forty years where ability is measured through certificates and qualifications. It is this same attitude that permeates through higher and tertiary processes of teaching and learning which foreground the certificate over and above the skill gained.

Apple (2001: 417) submits that within a neoliberal context, institutions give more emphasis to the ‘gifted’ students and ‘fast track’ classes, while students who were seen as less academically able were considered less attractive. Within the Zimbabwean higher and tertiary education landscape, universities set admission Advanced Level point cut-off system or thresholds. Prospective students who fail to meet these minimum thresholds are not admitted into their programme of choice. The UZ’s Bachelor of Arts General Degree had a cut-off point of ten (10) points for males and nine (9) points for females. However, it is important to note that most of the students that were admitted into the B. A General programme would have initially applied for Social Science programmes such as Development Studies, Social Work or Sociology, that had tangible and practical promises of employment<sup>iii</sup> and a higher cut-off point. For example, Social Work demanded fourteen (14) points for males and thirteen (13) points for females.

It is within this big class of the B.A General programme that Departments at UZ would choose a few very gifted and intelligent students and admit them to the Honours class. Those with general to moderate passes remained with the B. A General programme and were usually not given much attention by the lecturers as they were considered not attractive (Apple 2001). Most of the lecturers that have taught or teach at the UZ were in the Bachelor of Arts Honours in Theatre Arts programme (B.A (Hons) Theatre Arts). The B.A (Hons) Theatre Arts

programme provided an opportunity for students to deeply interrogate, appreciate and understand the practical and theoretical intricacies of theatre performance, more and better than the B.A General programme. As such B.A (Hons) Theatre Arts graduates had a better and clearer grounding and appreciation of Theatre Arts as a subject and theatre as a practice. Yet, as submitted earlier in this section this conclusion is arrived at using the ZIMCHE certificate and grading approach that permeates through the higher and education system. ZIMCHE assesses the suitability, qualification and relevance of lecturers using certificates submitted through the respective university Quality Assurance Departments. This does not take away the creative and entrepreneurial undertakings by the lecturers to improve their skillset, which ZIMCHE only seems to consider when academics apply for promotions only. I submit that, within a specialised programme such as MSU's Film and Theatre Arts Studies programme, the grounding these students get in theory and practice makes them a better option for further development for lectureship positions than to be integrated into the industry. Yet, without the requisite technical and practical grounding needed by these students further perpetuates the technical skills challenge affecting both the academy and industry.

### **Where are the promised jobs? The challenges facing new graduates**

Mamdani (2007: 43), quoting Dr Beyaraza, reports on efforts to transform and create opportunities for the Arts Faculty graduates at Makerere University: "The issue was what one would do after getting a degree in Geography, History, Languages, Literature, MDD [Music, Dance and Drama], Philosophy, Religious Studies, among other areas of the Arts Faculty." This introspection was anchored on the reform agenda driven by two key pillars: relevance and professionalisation of programmes. The reform agenda targeted changing the curriculum towards offering and developing skills that were in demand in the marketplace and gave a definite promise of employment (Mamdani 2007). The

MSU agenda with the Bachelor of Arts Degree in Film and Theatre Arts Studies is similar to the Mamdani's Makerere University case study in many respects.

I have argued elsewhere for the diffusion of the cold war between the academy and industry in Zimbabwe which is a result the industry's scepticism of the skillset that students gain at universities besides the certificate on one hand and the academy's view that theatre and film industries are semi-professional and therefore in need of training and further development to a professional level (Sibanda 2013). The academy has positioned itself as the agent to professionalise these industries while the industry is very sceptical of the contribution of these 'theoretically' trained graduates. Consequently, film and theatre graduates are conditioned to think that when they graduate, they must go into the industry, transform and 'professionalise' it. This is also made difficult by the absence of creative works by academics hosted in different spaces available in the 'professional' set-up. MSU lecturers were complicit in this regard even making their product to be considered major players after graduation. Thus, industry considers these students and by extension their lecturers, technically ill-equipped to work or play a major role in transforming the industry. There are exceptions though to this group. There are some students that were already active in the industry and enrolled for these performing and/creative arts programmes to further develop their skills and knowledge.

Film and performing arts students registered at Zimbabwean universities are also caught in this kind of conundrum and become pawns in 'undeclared' academy-industry and regional / ethnic politics. Because the UZ is located in Harare, which is central to the Zezuru populated provinces such as Harare, Mashonaland West and East, it has been argued that the institution has mainly serviced and developed 'its own people', the Zezuru (Kapungu 2007; Mlambo 2005). The emerging universities have adopted, through their recruitment



exercise and teaching approach, a counter-Zezuru strategy that seeks to flood graduates with first class undergraduate and postgraduate degrees of Ndebele, Karanga, Manyika, and other disadvantaged ethnic groups. There is an agreed position, but hush-hushed in the corridors of power at MSU and GZU, that any prospective student from Manicaland, Midlands, Masvingo and Matabeleland Provinces should be admitted without questions asked. Although this political strategy neutralises the competitive advantage of mostly graduating Zezuru students from the UZ, it has backfired over the years. The compromised teaching and learning standards at MSU have resulted in a lack of in-depth expertise and technical acumen by MSU graduates further compounding their employment opportunities, specifically, in companies within the provinces.

Further, most competitive industries have relocated to Harare since the turn of the millennium, leaving shells in Bulawayo, Gweru and Masvingo. The net effect of the de-industrialisation on the creative industry is that Harare becomes Zimbabwe's advertising, promotions and funding nerve centre. For example, Harare International Festival of Arts (HIFA), Jacaranda Music Festival, Harare International Film Festival remain the most funded festivals in Zimbabwe, specifically due to their location (Harare), while Intwasa Arts Festival koBulawayo (Bulawayo), Beitbridge Arts Festival (Beit Bridge) and Dzimbahwe Arts Festival (Masvingo) have perennial funding challenges due to their location. This means that financially rewarding opportunities for MSU's Film and Theatre Studies graduates are limited due to further competition for few openings. Although not linked to the neoliberalisation of universities, the de-industrialisation of Bulawayo, Gweru and Masvingo creates challenges for the marketised programmes offered by MSU as there is no market to respond to its needs or outputs.

The Zimbabwean film and theatre industries, as I have submitted, are semi-professional. This means that these industries do not offer full-time employment, a contrast to what the students who graduate from Zimbabwean universities are prepared for. This disconnect between what university students are prepared for and what the industry offers/ can offer complicates their integration into the film and/ or theatre job industry. The semi-professional film and theatre industries demand innovative and entrepreneurial graduates while the university produces job-seeking graduates. As a consequence, graduates are left in a challenging position where after ‘buying’ a product with a promise of economic returns, fail to reap these returns from the product. Ingleby (2015) submits that this disconnect between the teaching and learning context and focus and the exit profile of the graduates is a result of the social, political, cultural and educational institutions such as MSU. These are a result of a failure to appreciate that “the markets are a metaphor rather than an explicit guide for action” (Apple 2001: 412). The negative outcomes and implications of the Film and Theatre Arts programme on a graduate are a result MSU failure to understand that the market is not denotative, but not connotative, as such “it must be ‘marketed’ to those who will exist in it and live with its effects” (Apple 2001: 412). While the Film and Theatre Arts Studies programme is marketable and appealing to the prospective and targeted consumers, I submit that it is not expertly marketed and integrated with the industry in which the graduates would exist and operate.

While all these challenges subsist, MSU’s Department of Film and Theatre Arts can take advantage of the ZIMCHE guided programme review process either to align its programme to the technical and practical demands of the regional and international film and theatre industries or adopt a liberal artistic approach. In terms of alignment, a key issue that needs to be addressed is the theory-practical continuum both at learning and human capital level. At a learning level, there is

a need to determine a specific teaching and learning philosophy that will foreground and amplify the educational value of the programme to both the student, institution and industry. At a skills level, MSU can, through the various posts that it is advertising, specifically target areas that need specialised skills such as technical and practical modules like cinematography, design and editing. In so doing, MSU's Film and Theatre Arts department will affirm its role as a leader in higher and tertiary creative arts education in Zimbabwe and sub-saharan Africa.

## **Conclusion**

While I have engaged and examined the effect of neoliberal approaches on managing universities in Zimbabwe, specifically at MSU, I submit that the higher and tertiary education environment has become highly regulated through the Education 5.0 policy. This policy aims at consolidating and navigating higher and tertiary education towards scientific innovation and development and standardised curriculum nationalised and notionalised standards and systems of assessment. The standardisation and scientification of Theatre Arts and Film curriculums has far reaching implications on Departments such as MSU's Film and Theatre Arts Studies that are already struggling meeting the current personnel and infrastructure needs.

The extent to which neoliberalism has affected and transformed teaching and learning as well as the exit profiles of MSU's Department of Film and Theatre Arts Studies graduates is a microcosm of the challenges bedevilling higher and tertiary education in Zimbabwe. The deep-seated structural challenges that emerge as a result of the financialisation and marketization of university education at the expense of critical pedagogy and traditionalism has, as I have submitted, resulted in high numbers of unemployable graduates in Zimbabwe. It is time for the Zimbabwean universities, especially the Departments housing

performing and visual arts to re-think their approach to teaching, learning and infrastructure development in light of the neoliberal turn. Further, comparative quantitative tracer studies could be undertaken to ascertain the direct impact of graduates trained and nurtured under neoliberal conditions within the Zimbabwean, in particular, and African context in general. For instance, comparative studies of departments that teach theatre and film that determine the extent of the successes of their graduate students or their employability specifically within the specific departments in the creative industry will be critical to understanding the industry-academy compendium. The non-availability of this quantitative and comparative data from both institutions and research publications highlight this need especially for the Humanities and Arts Faculties which have largely relied on critical theory analysis and reflection on phenomena.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Advanced Level, which is entry level into university, an A has 5 points; B has 4 points, C has 3 points; D has 2 points; E has 1 point and F is O points or fail.

<sup>ii</sup> This bucket included Literature in English, Ndebele, Shona, Theatre Arts, History, Philosophy, Modern languages, Linguistics, Economic History, War Studies, Chinese Language, Korean Language, Philosophy, Religious Studies, and Classics.

<sup>iii</sup> Initially I had applied for Social Work but because I did not have enough points to reach the threshold of 13 points, I was then seconded to the Faculty of Arts and was admitted to the B. A. General programme. This applied to most of my classmates. While a few, who knew someone with knowledge of manipulating the system, managed to change programmes from the B.A General to their initial choices, the majority remained ‘stuck’ with the programme university management, through the Departments had allocated to them.

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