

Ex-Students Urged to Save Leading University

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With no funds, no water and staff leaving in droves the University of Zimbabwe turns to its alumni for help.

Severe financial problems have forced the closure of the University of Zimbabwe, UZ, the country's largest institution of higher learning, which nurtured the bulk of the current crop of politicians.

Hopes are now centred on some of those former students to come to the rescue of their alma mater.

UZ vice-chancellor Levy Nyaguru announced that before the university can reopen it will require at least 3.2 million US dollars to provide for basic teaching and learning needs as well as vital infrastructure.

There is general consensus that Zimbabwe's new leaders who studied at UZ should help rescue the troubled institution. "Finance Minister Biti, who was secretary-general of the UZ SRC (Student Representative Council), should make a plan for his former university," said Phillip Pasirayi, a Harare-based political analyst and coordinator of the Centre for Community Development.

Biti, who, in addition to his role as finance minister is secretary-general of MDC-T, Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai's faction of the Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, cut his political teeth as a student at UZ, as did Deputy Prime Minister Arthur Mutambara, Industry and Commerce Minister Welshman Ncube and Minister of State in the Prime Minister's Office Gordan Moyo, among a host of former opposition and ZANU-PF politicians.

Mutambara, president of the university's SRC in the early 1990s, was later to share a prison cell with Tsvangirai, then leader of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions, ZCTU, which was to give birth to the MDC, after he participated in student demonstrations against the arrest of trade unionists.

Biti has been globetrotting since the formation of the coalition government in February, begging for funds to bankroll the new government. Zimbabwe needs about 8.3 billion dollars to revive its economy but thus far it does not appear that its appeals have met with much success.

Last week, Biti was in Washington DC lobbying for funding from the International Monetary Fund, IMF, and the World Bank.

Apart from its need for funding, the university's infrastructure is crumbling, making it a health hazard for the 12,500 students currently enrolled. Nyagura was quoted in the government mouthpiece *The Herald* recently as saying that the institution has had no running water since May last year.

The brain drain, which has, in the past decade, seen lecturers and support staff deserting UZ for greener pastures in neighbouring countries in the Southern African Development Community region, mainly because of poor working conditions, has not helped matters.

Nyagura said the exodus had forced him to close the departments of geology, metallurgy and surveying.

“In the last two years we lost a lot of academic staff, including some who were using university accommodation,” said the vice-chancellor.

Ruzivo Midzi, secretary-general of the Association of University Teachers, says the chaos at UZ and at other educational institutions in Zimbabwe would mean that the country would be unable to train accountants, doctors, lawyers and other professionals.

The staff exodus, he said, “is not about salaries alone. It is about the whole institution, UZ. The place looks abandoned, with long grass and shrubs growing all over the campus. There is scarcity of water – not a single toilet is functioning there. There is no sanitation whatsoever.”

Blessing Vava, spokesman for the militant Zimbabwe National Students Union, ZINASU, says the closure of the university would have a huge impact on students, who would be unable to complete their degrees and therefore would not be eligible for jobs which required a university education.

Many undergraduates were wallowing in poverty, Vava says, and had turned to crime and prostitution to provide an income.

“The level of crime and prostitution is shocking, to say the least. Some have also resorted to border jumping and cross-border trading,” he said.

ZINASU, he continued, was “deeply concerned about the current issue at UZ. We blame the government for failing to prioritise education. The state should take responsibility for funding higher education”.

Vava said the national budget and the Short Term Emergency Recovery Programme, STERP, adopted by the government, should include provision for education, since the country’s future depended on an educated generation.

Loans and grants, withdrawn by the government some years ago because of a lack of financial resources, should be reintroduced, while cadetship programmes should be effected.

ZINASU has launched a campaign against the privatisation of education in response to the announcement by the government of prohibitive fees for all state universities.

“We are holding peaceful protests and a series of meetings with the relevant stakeholders. Last week we met top officials from the MDC-T to discuss issues that are bedeviling students. They promised to take the issue to Cabinet so that the government can act quickly,” said Vava.

Jabu Shoko is the pseudonym of an IWPR-trained reporter in Zimbabwe.

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