

## COLLAPSING UNDER THE WEIGHT OF BUREAUCRATIC RED TAPE: THE CHALLENGES OF COMBATING THE CRISIS OF LOW STUDENT NUMBERS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BOTSWANA?

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A nation without a past is a lost nation, and a people without a past is a people without a soul  
—President Sir Seretse Khama (May 1970)

“Motho le motho kgomo” is the founding culture of our University. The little you contribute can go a long way in making this University successful. Save water, Save power, Save paper, [*Save time, cut bureaucratic red tape*], cut unnecessary costs and MOVE the University forward.

—University of Botswana (January 2020)

It’s because being an American is more than a pride we inherit. It’s the past we step into and how we repair it.  
—Amanda Gorman (January 2021)

### **Abstract**

*As the second decade of the new millennium wore on the University of Botswana (UB) embarked on a massive drive reviewing its programmes to introduce new or streamlined course offerings and teaching strategies in line with government policy for the higher education sector, and new needs in the job market. This paper argues that departments adversely affected by decline in student numbers responded fairly well by proposing attractive new courses relevant to the job market. Unfortunately, UB’s customary slow, rigid and convoluted bureaucratic processes and procedures stalled progress sometimes leading to new government policy and new UB bureaucratic demands overtaking little progress made, and leading to demoralizing return to the drawing board for initiators of courses and programmes. We use experience of developments in the Department of History over the past few years to demonstrate how the above scenario and a bureaucratic one-size-fits-all approach make success of the process almost an exercise in futility.*

**Keywords:** History, youth unemployment, Bureaucratic red tape, course and programme, student numbers, accreditation, knowledge-based-economy, learner-centred teaching

### **Introduction**

This piece is on the predicament UB is faced with in the form of greatly reduced government funding and subsequent crisis of declining student numbers, with efforts to remedy the latter hampered by the institution’s rigid bureaucratic red tape. Since the establishment of the University in the mid-1970s History (and other Humanities disciplines) were offered primarily to provide the Ministry of Education or the education sector with teachers of History and sometimes Social Studies. However, a good number of History graduates successfully entered into other areas of the public service such as public administration, media, diplomatic service, police and military among others. Some ventured into the private sector and did well.

However, in recent years Botswana’s largely diamond driven-economy has not grown at a pace commensurate with big numbers of graduate produced by the country’s tertiary institutions. They include Botswana graduates from abroad who go on to roam the streets increasing the numbers

of unemployed citizens. Sluggish economic growth or stagnation has also led to retrenchments in state-owned enterprises and the private sector. The result has seen unemployment reaching crisis levels in Botswana although in some quarters questions are asked as to whether the country's youth unemployment crisis is 'Policy Failure Or Poor Research?' (Lesetedi, 2018). At any rate, the reality and staggering statistics of unemployment generally and youth unemployment in particular released in January 2020 makes for grim and worrying reading. Statistics Botswana noted in its Quarterly Multi-Topic Survey on Labour Force that in a population of some 2 million people about 200 000 Batswana were actively seeking employment while 68 000 had given up on getting a job. The breakdown of statistics showed that the:

Labour force increased 12.4 percent between 2015/16 and the third quarter of 2019. This was accompanied by increases of 8.1 percent and 32.5 percent of the employed and unemployed labour force, respectively. This resulted in an increase of 3.3 percentage increase in the employment to population ratio over the period, from 47.4 percent in 2015/16 to 50.7 percent in quarter three of 2019.

Unemployment rate went up by 3.1 percentage points between the two periods, from 17.6 to 20.7 percent. The youth labour force increased by 12.7 percent, from 427, 089 in 2015/16 to 481, 441 in the third quarter of 2019. This was accompanied by an increase of 1.6 percentage points increase in youth unemployment rate, from 25.1 to 26.7 percent (Statistics Botswana, 2020:8).

So serious and disturbing is this scenario that in some quarters it has been described as a "ticking time bomb" as emphasized by cartoonist Selefu Seisa in the *Mmegi* newspaper (Figure 1) depicting the President of Botswana, Mokgweetsi Masisi, three months after winning the general election held on 23 October 2019 with employment creation having been one of the major campaign issues.

**Figure 1: President Masisi faced with ticking unemployment time bomb. The pram symbolizes the youth**



Source: *Mmegi* (31 January 2020). Courtesy of Mr Simon Selefu Seisa

A narrative also emerged to the effect that the education provided by the country's tertiary institutions, among which is UB, is of low quality and does not match the skills needed in the local and global job market. One of the factors spelt out was that private universities mainly

hired poorly trained personnel, and also offered sub-standard programmes and courses hastily cobbled together for profiteering. UB lecturer Thapelo Otlogetswe is of the view that unscrupulous operators of these universities connive with the ruling political elite to disparage and malign UB as offering irrelevant programmes and courses while promoting privately-owned UB rivals for government funding of students (Otlogetswe, 2016). Some of these small for-profit institutions have made arrangements to offer programmes from Western universities. This does, presumably, keep up the standard. But it is a very retrograde step. Such arrangements were useful in the early days of independent development. But now, when Africa has its own independent universities which have spent years adapting to their societies, this recolonization of education is surely not the way forward.

Nevertheless, in fairness to UB and perhaps to other universities as well, for quite a long time the failure rate at the country's junior and senior secondary schools has been very high if not horrendous. Seemingly, for political reasons and expediency the Government has ensured that some of the students, who did not do so well at that level, are allowed to proceed to tertiary education institutions where lecturers, naturally, struggle with them while being expected to perform miracles. Critics often ignore this critical factor. However, UB and the Department of History in particular, has produced some high performing students some of whom have gone on to pursue Masters and PhD degrees overseas in recent years (Makgala, 2019).

In an effort to combat the crisis of poor student performance in higher education, the Government of Botswana enacted the Tertiary Education Act of 1999 for regulation of higher education institutions. The Act was also concerned with accreditation and quality assurance. Also in 1999 the Tertiary Education Council (TEC) was established to regulate higher education and be responsible for quality and relevance. In 2008 Parliament passed the Tertiary Education Policy driven by the theme of moving the country towards a "knowledge based" economy.

In 2013 TEC was renamed Human Resource Development Council (HRDC), and the Botswana Quality Authority (BQA) was established for managing tertiary education. Among these objectives was to ensure the ways and means by which higher education contributes to Botswana's human resource needs. The themes of knowledge-based economy and productivity were also emphasized quite strongly. In part they reflected the earlier concern that a skills-mismatch stood between what was imparted through the higher education system and the skills needed by the industry or economy. In other words, the higher education system was judged to have produced unemployable graduates instead of job/market ready products. The new development sought to rectify this gap. As a result BQA came up with what it called National Credit and Qualifications Framework (NCAF) for conformity with best international practices. The objective of this framework was to ensure quality by setting standards for provision of education and training. It is also tasked to oversee different disciplines and levels of qualifications. All tertiary education institutions in Botswana had to comply with the NCAF demands, including UB which already had its own robust quality assurance mechanisms in the form of regular externalized programme reviews at department and faculty levels. There has also been insistence that course and programme offerings at in the nation's school system reflect the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (MDG) which the government of Botswana has domesticated into its National Development Plan 11, 2017-2023 (Republic of Botswana, 2017). "Education for knowledge-based-economy" also became the mantra for provision of higher education.

At UB, quality assurance has been part of an elaborate bureaucratic system for a long time. In addition to departments having their own quality assurance committees or structures, there are departmental boards which evaluate proposals for new courses or programmes. According to official UB definition “a course is a basic building block of teaching and learning activities with content designed to meet particular aims and objectives” (UB, 2018/19). According to the same source, a programme is defined as ‘a plan of study made up of core, electives, and general education courses, lasting over a specified period, which leads to a Degree, or Diploma qualification’. One of the requirements for proposal of a new course is extensive consultation with stakeholders in the form of various departments or units at UB, some Government departments, the private sector, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and professional associations among others. There is even a demand that a meeting of all or most of these be convened for their comment and endorsement. The documents are then forwarded to a Faculty Executive where they are subjected to further scrutiny, and more often than not more demands are made. In most cases the documents are returned to a department for the originator of the proposal to revise further after which they are resubmitted to the Faculty Executive. In case the Faculty Executive is satisfied the documents can then be passed on to the Centre of Academic Development (CAD) whose Academic Programmes Review Unit (APRU) further scrutinizes the documents and almost always makes further demands not to mention delays.

Experience has been that lots of demands and prolonged delays are encountered with CAD often with documents returned to the forwarding department for further action. In recent times things have gotten worse as CAD sends to the departments new template from BQA or elsewhere of course outlines to be used in newly proposed or already existing courses. Even for proposed courses already with CAD they are sent back to the departments for compliance with the new demands. Several different templates have been sent which only serves to worsen the delay and frustrates departmental efforts. When CAD eventually gives the green light to the documents they are then passed on to Senate where more demands and delays can still be experienced as the documents can be returned to the departments for further revision. The process can take many years before a course is finally allowed to be mounted or offered by a concerned department. There is even a possibility of Senate rejecting a proposed course. From Senate the documents are then passed on to UB’s supreme body –Council, which means more delays. Needless to say, the inordinate delays in mounting newly proposed market-oriented courses undermine the very efforts being made to attract students into such courses.

Unlike UB, the business-oriented and aggressive private universities have much smaller bureaucratic processes whereby courses can be proposed and approved fairly quickly and mounted without delay. The approach of “strike while the iron is still hot” seems a characteristic of the private institutions but highly elusive at UB. Complaints have even been raised by the UB hierarchy that some courses proposed by UB staff end up being surreptitiously sold to rival private universities where they are quickly mounted in response to the needs of the market. It is likely that the extraordinarily lengthy bureaucratic process that proposed courses undergo at UB could lead to documents falling into wrong hands, and eventually finding their way to the University’s rivals.

Furthermore, in recent years the UB hierarchy emphasized the need to accommodate creativity and innovation in course offerings for purposes of raising student numbers in some of the courses. Unfortunately, the usual response to efforts at creativity and innovation has been a great

deal of suspicion with endless demands and delays which can lead to demoralization on the part of staff members proposing such courses. Presenting documents at Faculty Executive meetings sometimes resemble medieval inquisitions. Table 1 below is a demonstration of falling student numbers in the Faculty of Humanities for only a five year period from 2015 academic year to 2019. The table shows that the number for Bachelor of Arts (Humanities) students was 622 in the 2015/2016 academic year but plummeted to 197 in 2018/2019 academic year. This is a monumental drop of 68% (almost 70%)!

**Table 1: Falling Student numbers in the Faculty of Humanities, 2015-2019**

Faculty of Humanities Enrollment	No of Students								
		2015/2016	2015/2016	2016/2017	2016/2017	2017/2018	2017/2018	2018/2019	2018/2019
Academic Program	Academic Plan	SEM1	SEM2	SEM1	SEM2	SEM1	SEM2	SEM1	SEM2
Bachelor Information Systems	Information Management	122	114	110	110	79	80	73	78
Bachelor Library & Inform Stud	General	93	87	79	83	75	72	50	51
Bachelor of Arts	Chinese Studies	73	74	59	60	50	49	44	45
<b>Bachelor of Arts</b>	<b>Humanities</b>	<b>622</b>	<b>554</b>	<b>374</b>	<b>330</b>	<b>221</b>	<b>227</b>	<b>204</b>	<b>197</b>
Bachelor of Arts	Library + Information Studies	34	33	38	39	41	35	44	42
Bachelor of Arts	Media Studies	92	89	128	123	112	107	93	90
Bachelor of Arts	Pastoral Studies	7	7	4	4	4	2	5	4
Bachelor of Fine Arts	Theatre Arts	37	35	30	27	25	25	24	26
Bachelor of Inf & Knowledge Mg	General					8	8	67	66
Bachelor of Media Studies	General	169	167	196	192	165	161	173	170
Certificate Lib & Info Studies	General		1	1					
Diploma Archives & Records Mgmt	General	30	23	36	33	33	34	33	31
Diploma Library & Info Studies	General	14	13	9	7	15	15	10	6
Non-Degree Purpose/Short Cours	Non-Degree Purpose/Short Cours	38	37	27	39	19	37	15	21

Source: Courtesy of Humanities Faculty Office (16 January 2020)

The issue of bureaucratic red tape engendering inefficiency in service delivery at UB is not only limited to attempts at introducing new courses and programmes. The staff recruitment process has also for a long time been affected by the same scenario. For instance, when applicants respond to an advertised vacancy the process of considering the applications by the bureaucratic structures takes such a long time that sometimes when an applicant is finally sent an offer or appointment letter, they would have already secured employment elsewhere or lost interest in the UB job owing to the long delay.

### **The Need for Teaching of History and UB's Self-defeating Bureaucratic Demands**

The Department of History is among several departments at UB adversely affected by declining student numbers owing to drastically reduced funding for students by Government. Moreover, the non-teaching of History (at least History of Botswana) in the country's school system has

made matters worse. Efforts by prominent citizens that History of Botswana be taught as a compulsory course throughout the country's education system (Magang, 2018) have yet to bear fruit. The campaign for correcting the supposed "mismatch" between university graduates and skills needed in the job market and teaching for employment creation have also not helped the situation. The officialdom is fixated on this matter so much that it fails to appreciate that students are taught History in order to be conscious and appreciative of the country's nation-building exercise, for fostering national identity and pride, and citizenship. Entrepreneurship and self-employment can result from such endeavours as a bonus.

In South Africa, there is a movement for making the teaching of that country's history compulsory at some levels of its high school system (Bam, 16 November 2018). This brings to mind the immortal words of wisdom by Botswana's founding President, Sir Seretse Khama, on 19 May 1970 when he said "A nation without a past is a lost nation, and a people without a past is a people without a soul" (Magang, 2018). Unfortunately, over the years this rallying call by Sir Seretse Khama was distorted to read "A nation without a culture is a lost nation" even in Government circles. As a result Government gave the promotion of "culture" more attention and resources than to History.

However, the Department of History at UB foresaw its current predicament and realized that its survival lay in it being a service department providing courses for other programmes or departments at UB. The History Department has also undertaken a periodic review of its programmes and course offerings in a process assisted by renowned historians from outside the country. Their advice was that the courses offered by the department, particularly at the undergraduate level, were regionally-based instead of being thematic and more Botswana oriented. Efforts have since been made to provide new thematic courses such as Botswana's role in the liberation of Southern Africa, Work Ethic, Disease Processes and Health Interventions (Medical History of Botswana), Role of Science and Technology in Society, and Political Economy of Land, and Pre-colonial Tswana history. Unfortunately, the wheels of University bureaucracy grind so slowly that the day these courses will be offered is a long way away. At one point prior to the above mentioned courses, a proposed course on "Debates on Botswana History" was sent to CAD for comment and the latter sent it to some two committees where it got delayed for a while. It was only realized later that these were wrong committees to which such courses should not have been sent to them in the first place. Furthermore, when approached the Director of CAD said that s/he was still new in the post and needed time for familiarity with the document. This took another six months.

The bureaucratic red tape and its consequences on attempt to raise student numbers led to the new Vice Chancellor in 2018 trying to be pragmatic and promising a joint board meeting of Humanities and Education faculties that the process of course approval would be significantly reduced by eliminating the involvement of CAD in order to cut down the process to just six months. There were strong murmurs of disapproval as some staff members felt that even the suggested or proposed six months' period was still too long. The Vice Chancellor's promise was repeated strongly by the Dean of Humanities at a meeting of the Board of the History Department. Nevertheless, after the proposed courses mentioned above were approved by the Humanities Faculty Executive, they still had to be submitted to the same CAD where customary demands for largely cosmetic changes were made. This demonstrates the rigidity of the UB bureaucratic system that leaves no room for pragmatism in response to dire and urgent needs and

seems to elevate the judgement of non-academic bureaucrats above the staff who design and will be teaching these courses.

Another serious problem encountered in trying to attract students to the Department of History has been the UB's drive for departments to produce programmes and not just courses. Whereas, this approach may work for some departments, it will fail to rescue the History Department in the short to medium term. The challenge is that already students are not enrolling for many of the current courses offered, indicating the unlikely possibility that few if any would opt for a programme made up of numerous history courses. This one-size-fits-all approach insisting on production of programmes for offering to students instead of individual courses is impractical, unless the Ministry of Tertiary Education, Research, Science and Technology were to alter their position and see History-related programmes as worthy of funding students who might major in them. Whereas, we do not necessarily discourage production of new programmes for the History Department our view is that more emphasis should be on production of courses to service other departments at UB.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The crisis of low student numbers at UB has also compromised the University's international standing. For instance, recently the contracts of staff members, including internationally respected scholars, have been discontinued for reasons the administration claims is lack of funds and low student enrolments. Shrinking UB's academic staff in this manner reduces research and publishing and adversely affects UB's ranking internationally (Makgala, 2017). As for the discipline of History, there is a prospect that entire generations of Botswana students may complete their studies without any exposure to the rich history that defines the national character of this great country.

Few recommendations suffice here. The rigid bureaucracy at UB should be significantly reduced and also made flexible. For instance, proposed courses, which address a niche subject which is also a serious and well-documented crisis in the national economy such as the "poor work ethic", could be approved by the Deputy Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs (DVC-AA) upon the Faculty Executive's approval. Such a course would not have to go through the maw of CAD and Senate. Furthermore, such a course and others can then be mounted by a concerned department after which the process of involving CAD for fine tuning of the course outline and then Senate is undertaken. This may excuse CAD from the perception as one colleague in History Department sees it that it is an "obstructionist-in-chief". The demand for consultation of numerous stakeholders needs to be curtailed considerably. The department's experience in consulting stakeholders has been a frustrating undertaking. At times most of them do not respond or send junior staff members to meetings. In fairness they could have commented on the proposed course outline, rather than attend a meeting on the same matter. Such meetings are not likely to be made a priority in their everyday work. Consultation of just one stakeholder such as Botswana National Productivity Centre (BNPC) with a written endorsement in the case of a course on 'Work Ethic' should suffice.

Inasmuch as the UB authorities respond to this criticism at all, they do so by pointing to the possible advantages of the extra consultation. But this shows a failure to think in cost/benefit terms. The benefits of the extra time taken are in practice slight, typically amounting to cosmetic

changes to satisfy poorly-informed criticism. The costs are extreme in terms of lost opportunities.

Moreover, the UB hierarchy ought to consider the peculiarities of some individual disciplines or departments when coming up with initiatives such as new programmes instead of a one-size-fits-all approach. Additionally, UB's appearance in the world ranking, which includes being top of Education research in sub-Saharan Africa for 2019 (UB 2019), is a massive advantage over its smaller rivals. This competitive edge ought to be exploited heavily in marketing UB and in UB's conversations with Government for increased funding and student numbers at UB.

By early 2019, UB introduced the following tagline to official email communication: "‘Motho le motho kgomo’ is the founding culture of our University. The little you contribute can go a long way in making this University successful. Save water, Save power, Save paper, cut unnecessary costs and MOVE the University forward". This strongly speaks to UB history in which the University was founded through contributions of cows, cash and kind by the then overwhelmingly poor population of Botswana in 1976. In repeating this call UB seeks to evoke its history in imploring the UB community to be prudent in the use of limited resources. However, as far as this paper is concerned, in addition to the advice given for saving the resources at UB, there is also the need to "‘Save time and cut bureaucratic red tape and Move UB forward". Therefore, the tagline should read: "‘Motho le motho kgomo’ is the founding culture of our University. Save water, Save power, Save paper, *Save time, cut bureaucratic red tape*, cut unnecessary costs and MOVE the University forward".

The powerful and historically significant "‘motho le motho kgomo’" slogan can also be used in marketing UB to demonstrate how deeply rooted it is in the country's history and culture which competitors simply cannot match. The centrality of the history and role of UB in the development of Botswana dovetails with President Sir Seretse Kham's declaration that "‘A nation without a past is a lost nation, and a people without a past is a people without a soul’".

However, it should be cautioned that while UB can do better as advised above, more often than not the higher education system is singled out for scapegoating and victimization of what is essentially a problem that afflicts the entire national social fabric and is rampant in the family, church, politics, business, entertainment/sport industry, the civil service and the labour movement among others. Efforts by BQA and HRDC of learner-centred teaching for global competitiveness in a knowledge-based economy is likely to remain an elusive goal if these socio-economic, political, and even cultural challenges are not addressed holistically.

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