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LEARNING AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION IN ZIMBABWE.

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Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to aver that learning encompasses the acquisition of knowledge and skills through some form of instruction and/or study in either formal or informal environments. Learning or education is therefore critical in today's knowledge economies. It creates a knowledge society that is highly skilled and flexible to work in today's dynamic global markets. A learned society it is increasingly being reaffirmed, contributes significantly to a nation's comparative advantage. Thus primary education, secondary education, tertiary education, lifelong learning, science, technology, innovation and the increased use of information technologies all contribute towards the creation of a well trained and skilled workforce that is capable of managing a knowledge-driven economic growth. This paper shall attempt to explain issues relating to the role of learning in the Zimbabwean economy, the challenges that affect access to information as well as suggest possible solutions to some of these challenges and how libraries can contribute towards accessing information.

Learning provides the gateway to the many opportunities and advantages of economic and social transformation and development. Emphasis on the need for access to higher levels of education is growing every day as countries all over the world strive to achieve universal primary education (UPE). Furthermore the global effort to achieve Education for All (EFA) is adding momentum to the development of learning strategies. The effects of globalization are necessitating this and the related increasing demand for more sophisticated, highly skilled and innovative labour force in the knowledge-based economies.

The Millennium Development Goal of Universal Primary Education (UPE) is being implemented throughout the world to ensure that all children attain primary education. In Zimbabwe primary education is mandatory. A massive expansion of the primary education sector was quite evident after independence. Primary education is critical in setting up the foundation for the development of a learned/knowledge society. Primary Education, according to the World Bank, provides the basis upon which "…a strong human capital base" can be built. Secondary education necessarily grew in sync with the expansion of primary education. Secondary education also contributes to laying the foundation for a competent and highly skilled and flexible workforce. An increase in secondary education also guarantees the need for increased enrolment at University levels. A few statistics gathered during the first term of 2005 would help at this juncture to show the number of beneficiaries of the primary education and secondary education system as illustrated in Table1 and 2 respectively:

Table 1: First Term 2005 Primary Enrolment Figures for Grades 1-7 and Staff

Girls	Boys	Female Teachers	Male Teachers
1 251 763	1 279 745	33 043	33 143

The statistics show the learning process producing at the time a total of 2 531 508 pupils in Zimbabwe that would readily form a basic foundation for creating a highly skilled human resource base that would drive the knowledge economy of the country. Table 2 shows the statistics for secondary education:

Table 2: First Term 2005 Secondary Enrolment and Staff Figures for From I-VI

Girls	Boys	Female Teachers	Male Teachers
420 191	441 152	14 740	21 154

Source: Summary Table of Education Statistics First Term Statistics of 2005. Compiled by the Statistics Unit Education Management Information Systems (EMIS), Ministry of Education Sport and Culture.

Again as mentioned in the preceding section, secondary education contributes towards the creation of a solid foundation for a highly skilled and flexible workforce that is required for the comparative development of the knowledge society. Secondary education also prepares the learning community for further learning at university level.
Thus today the country boasts ten universities, and more are still to come, compared to only one that existed in pre-independence era in the then Rhodesia. An estimate total student enrolment at the country's universities both private and public by the end of 2005 would easily reach the 50 000 mark, if not more. The World Bank (2006:1) aptly reaffirms that "Tertiary education (creates) the intellectual capacity to produce and utilize knowledge". Efforts are also being made in Zimbabwe to sustain lifelong learning that

promotes continuous learning in the life cycle of an individual. Lifelong learning allows the continuous renewal of skills and knowledge of persons in order to meet the new demands of a growing market economy. Today's knowledge economies require that the workforce is regularly retrained and retooled to enable them to cope with the pressures and demands of a knowledge economy. As emphasized by the Minister of Science and Technology, Zimbabwe is involved in developing its scientific, technological and innovative capacity that would enable the country to assess, adapt and apply these technologies in the development process.

An area that still demands attention is the growth of the information and communication technologies in the country. The ICTs in the global market economies today enhance the quality of teaching and learning by reaching out easily to the remote rural areas, to disadvantaged communities and to children with disabilities thus providing a much wider access to learning opportunities.

In all of the above-stated levels of learning, the provision of information or facts from persons, books, journals, the Internet and the worldwide web, and even from observations is necessary for effective learning to take place. Libraries provide learner support in partnership with schools, colleges and universities. Thus access to information becomes critical if the learning objectives are to be accomplished. Access to information is therefore generally taken to mean the ability of users to reach, retrieve and use a particularly required piece of information from wherever it may be located. Access to information includes the opportunity availed to use a library or libraries for locating and obtaining literature.

Libraries support and promote informal and formal education curriculum. They provide learning opportunities for people at every stage of life thus enabling such people to widen their learning horizons. In today's knowledge era, the role of learning and education in the knowledge society is being reaffirmed. The knowledge era is demanding more innovative learning environments for today's knowledge workers as well as for the wider communities. Such innovations include inter-alia open access initiatives that are being introduced globally, particularly in the developing and transition countries to provide wider access to a lot of information and knowledge that is being generated. If the learning statistics presented earlier are anything to go by, access to a lot of information is urgently needed in Zimbabwe. The following Table 3 shows the distribution of schools by region.

Table 3: Number of Primary and Secondary Schools by Regions in Zimbabwe

Region	Primary Schools	Secondary Schools	Totals
Harare	208	80	288
Manicaland	788	254	1042
Mashonaland East	595	249	844
Mashonaland Central	381	126	507
Mashonaland West	494	169	663
Masvingo	684	240	924
Matebeleland North	576	149	725
Matebeleland South	446	105	551
Midlands	658	234	892
Total	4830	1606	6436

Source: Summary Table of Education Statistics First Term Statistics of 2005. Compiled by the Statistics Unit Education Management Information Systems (EMIS), Ministry of Education Sport and Culture.

Yet from the total number of primary and secondary schools in Zimbabwe, i.e. 6 436 schools both primary and secondary, only 108 have libraries and the majority of these are in the former whites only schools. Ladies and Gentlemen, this statistic reveals a most telling imbalance in the provision of information resources that support learning. It reveals the limited thrust in the creation of a knowledge society that is made up of an adequate human resource base with the requisite knowledge, skills, innovation and inventiveness that is needed to drive the country to sustained development and to comparative advantage in the global knowledge economy. If we agree that libraries in most developing countries, with particular

reference to Zimbabwe, are the major sources that provide open access to a lot of information that supports learning, then a lot of our schools are severely affected by the lack of such libraries.

Even in cases where such libraries do exist, in the 108 schools mentioned above, the size of the schools budgets allocated for the acquisition of reading materials is very limited, if any at all. Donations have often filled the gap and have provided the much-needed reading materials in most of the disadvantaged communities throughout all the provinces. Significant in this regard are the efforts being made by Mr. Obediah Moyo and his mobile libraries, the popular donkey driven book carts as well as the efforts of the Book Aid International (BAI) Zimbabwe Programme. Both are filling the information gap in most schools in Zimbabwe by providing practical and cost-effective solutions through the principle of open access and resource sharing. Makotsi (n.d.: 2) noted "In sub-Saharan Africa, the problems of illiteracy and the scarcity of learning resources gravely limit the opportunities people have to learn and to transform their circumstances. Policy change is needed to ensure people of all ages have access to relevant information. This in turn will support literacy, quality education, and underpin the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals."

The knowledge era is also witnessing the use of information and communication technologies to link up learning centers such as schools and universities with the communities that are remotely located. Learning initiatives such as lifelong learning programmes and distance education mode of learning are now more possible through the use of various ICT strategies such as electronic learning (OECD 2006:2) Associated with these strategies is the need for increased access to information resources that are now largely available in digital format. It has been pointed out elsewhere that today's knowledge era is characterized by an unprecedented and exponential growth of information resources in what is largely regarded as an information explosion on the global market place. Access to and use of this information and knowledge is giving most countries the competitive advantage over those without. Yet to most developing and transition countries, access to this global information resource base is difficult. This is because of the under-developed ICT infrastructure and equipment and the over protective intellectual property regulations and laws in the form of copyright, patens and trademarks. Learning under these circumstances becomes equally challenged for without access to the information and knowledge that abounds elsewhere, from other people, in other books, etc, meaningful learning is hampered.

CONCLUSION

A good learning experience comes with the improved and increased access to information and knowledge from elsewhere other than your own. For proper learning to take place, it must be accompanied by good literacy skills and access to reading materials. Textbooks alone cannot suffice even given a situation where these are available in large quantities. A wide selection of reading materials is very necessary in order to enable people to learn and think for themselves and to develop their own capabilities. Libraries play a critical role here as agents for development, offering the information literacy skills and providing the necessary information seeking and accessing tools as well as a wide selection of information resources. In developing and transition countries, libraries are almost always the only source for a varied and wider selection of information materials, especially in the disadvantaged poorer sections of rural communities.

Yet even libraries do face a number of challenges in gaining access to the wealth of information available on the global market place. Some of these challenges hinge on the internationally instituted intellectual property rights (IP) that has been highlighted by other speakers. Intellectual Property Rights, according to Woker (2004:1) "…is about protecting the rights of artists and the law prevents people from copying the creations of others whether this is by actually making a photocopy of the protected work or by stealing the essential idea contained in them". Woker further argues that while it is generally accepted that learning takes place from copying or from watching others, especially when it is considered that much of the industrial development that we know today actually occurred because other nations copied from prototypes designed elsewhere (an example that is often cited is the learning curve in the Japanese motor industry which is said to have been essentially copied from the Americas). Woker (2004:1) proffers that "…there comes a time when the learning process oversteps the mark and the imitator attempts to 'reap where she has not sown'…." This then justifies the need for IP to protect the rights of the creators. It seems inevitable

therefore that some form of balance becomes necessary in order to allow the wider learning community to 'copy' whilst at the same time assuring the rights of the rightful owners are safely protected.

Previously in the 1990s any discussions on IP were regarded as some boring legal jargon and were often dismissed and thrown out the window with contempt. In Africa this is hardly surprising given the situation poignantly outlined by Nicholson (2006:1) that issues to do with "…illiteracy, unemployment, lack of infrastructure and resources, famine, disease, conflict, crippling debt, and merely the day to day survival are far more pressing issues than copyright" The situation is very different today because IP is now part of global trade and is being used to gain competitive advantage in the knowledge economies. IP is now part of the global discussions on economic development, globalization, the acquisition and distribution or communication of information and the use and exploitation of endogenous knowledge systems.

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