

Final report of 'Grants for teaching sabbatical'

in Zimbabwe December 1st to February 15th

Karin Steen, Lund University, Sweden

Home institution:

LUCSUS (Lund University Centre for Sustainability Studies), Lund University, Lund, Sweden

Host institution:

Department of Economic History, University of Zimbabwe, Harare, Zimbabwe

Duration: Two and a half month 2019-2020

Preparation and planning

I conduct my research on Zimbabwe and I was affiliated to the Department of Economic History at University of Zimbabwe when I did my fieldworks for my PhD thesis in the first decade of 2020. Even if a decade has passed I was quite familiar with what kind of work they do and the environment at the department. In 2018 the department hosted the Africa Convening of Young Scholars Initiative (YSI) (an initiative by Institute for New Economic Thinking) and I was invited as a mentor. During the convening the first contacts were made and the first small discussions were held concerning a potential teaching sabbatical. I learned that the Department of Economic History had a few courses in environmental history and had decided to develop a sustainability approach and both a Bachelor and a Masters programme in economic history with a focus on environment and/or sustainability. Since I have my education in Economic History and my research in Sustainability Science, instantly both I and personnel at the Department of Economic History in Harare thought it was a good idea for me to do a teaching sabbatical at their department and contribute to teaching and pedagogical development of new programmes and courses.

In December 2018 I reached out to the sustainability teacher and the head of department at Economic History in Harare and asked if they were interested in hosting me for a short teaching sabbatical during 2019. As they were positive to my suggestion we started to develop ideas on what I could contribute to during a sabbatical as well as what administrative formalities needed to be solved. Since the two universities of Lund and of Zimbabwe have signed a memorandum of understanding we were assured administration would be a rather smooth process. The head of department wrote a welcome letter. Visas, other permits and vaccines etc. were checked and the application was submitted to STINT in the beginning of 2019.

As I have been conducting research in Zimbabwe for decades I was very aware of the many administrative and practical obstacles one does best to assume will appear during a visit to the country.

Tasks and responsibilities

Before arriving in Harare for the teaching sabbatical, my host department, the Economic History Department at University of Zimbabwe and I had agreed upon the following tasks:

- I should join their curriculum review committee and assist in programming given my expertise in the area of sustainability. The University of Zimbabwe had a new Strategic Plan and a new educational strategy called 'Education 5.0'. The new strategies in combination with the ambition at the department to introduce a Masters in Environmental History and Sustainable Livelihoods and a Bachelor in Economic History and Sustainability Studies was a perfect time to host me to assist, the department argued.
- I should also hold a workshop with post-graduate students speaking to qualitative research methods for sustainability and environmental studies.
- Assist with supervision of some students who are doing researches on sustainability and environmental issues.
- I should present some of my works to the departmental seminar series.
- We should explore potential areas for collaborative research.

Activities during the stay abroad

I have learned from prior stays in Zimbabwe that there is only so much which is possible to prepare in advance. Many people do not expect that the visitor will come until s/he actually is there in the country and at the institution. This was true also this time. Therefore some preparations had just started when I was in Sweden and needed me to be there in person to kick-start again. This is true for example with the housing situation. It was not possible to secure campus housing before arriving at the University. Due to the economic chaos in Zimbabwe and political administrative obstacles a house was only available and livable just before it was time for me to leave for Sweden again. Thus my family's housing expenses came to exceed the budget severely. There were other political administrative obstacles which forced me and my family to postpone our travel some weeks, but finally we decided to travel anyway and sort out things when in Harare. The political governance of the University of Zimbabwe put several obstacles in the way for my teaching sabbatical and some activities has to be postponed while others were cancelled. In addition, the economic and political situation in the country forced me and my family to spend a lot of time every day on searching for petrol, mending water pumps, waiting for electricity to come back, and visiting ministries with papers for permits.

As described in the last section, I had a number of teaching tasks and responsibilities planned during the stay. However, the economic and political difficult situation in Zimbabwe which worsened by the day affected both staff and students both privately and professionally. Naturally the activities during the sabbatical were also affected. The department staff worked in a turmoil environment. To give an example of how severe the economic situation was, I can mention that when I graded students exams students were not any longer given any written feedback as the university could not afford to buy writing paper any longer.

I participated in the department's curriculum review committee. I gave feedback on current plans, suggested ideas and changes, mainly in terms of pedagogical development, streamlining the programme (in terms of literature, focus areas, variety of exams), course alignment, amount of teaching in relation of students' own work, etc.

I participated in master student teaching in seminars, gave feedback to theses drafts, and graded exams.

I participated in staff meetings. These meetings included faculty teachers and master students who worked as teaching assistants. Teachers meetings involved discussions of course and program development, staffing issues, discussions of administrative tasks, as well as discussion of individual students' performance. During my stay we learned that the university was considering closing down some departments and organising new ones. Offering competitive innovative programmes thus became even more relevant.

I also participated in research seminars. The seminars provided the opportunity to talk about each person's research and writing projects and served as a space in which to discuss shared research interests. In this context I presented my research.

I and the department organised a half day seminar on sustainability in my name 'Frontiers of Sustainability Studies Workshop'. This was an excellent opportunity to show the students as well as the University administration what the ambition to include more sustainability in the curriculum would entail. Environment and/or sustainability researchers at the department presented their research and I gave a talk on 'Trends in Sustainability Science'. I also financed the workshop by myself.

During the sabbatical I tried to take part in as many activities outside the classroom as possible. I networked with other teachers and researchers at the university and at research institutes in Harare and in the country side. I had interesting discussions with colleagues over a number of lunches, coffees, and dinners. Being informal these occasions added significantly to my visiting semester, increasing my understanding of the university culture. I also took the opportunity to inform myself about interesting and relevant research and organisational initiatives which had spread since last time I was in the country as this is rather difficult to do from abroad given the limited internet accessibility. These initiatives were in the area of sustainability, gender equality, poverty reduction, and agricultural development. Some of these meetings led to concrete initiatives for research collaboration.

During Christmas break I also had the opportunity to revisit people and officials in my old research areas as well as the National archives to look for sources.

Important lessons

The teaching sabbatical was a fantastic experience, giving me a lot of new impulses, impressions and ideas. Some of the valuable knowledge I gained as a teacher and researcher during my stay were:

- I once again experienced that there is always an opportunity to learn something relevant – even if it ends up not being the thing you had hoped or planned for. Thus stay open and prepared to learn/join/engage in the opportunities which appear. This lesson I have learned from doing research in Zimbabwe and I try to live by it as well as to teach students to use that approach when studying.
- In my scholarship of teaching and learning philosophy is the 'democratic classroom'. That is, that teaching and engaging with students is about democracy in action. Thus it is important that the teacher strive to make the classroom a safe space for all students independent of their background to participate. The teacher must be sensitive to privilege and power in the classroom, and about the emotional and affective dimensions of interpersonal relationships between students and between students and teachers. It is my strong belief that 'the best' knowledge is produced under these circumstances. Engaging with students in this way, it was extremely interesting to engage with the Zimbabwean students trained in a more hierarchical educational system. I will bring this experience to the international programmes I teach at Lund.

- My sabbatical was very much influenced by the social, political and economic situation in Zimbabwe during my stay. Both teachers and students were effected. For example, the enrollment fee were increased drastically making the economic difficulties of studying even more burdensome. There were student protests. This made me even more thankful of working in a democratic society as Sweden.

Comparison between the host and the home institutions

Even if the programmes I teach in Lund and what they offer in Harare are quite different and difficult to compare it is possible to make some general level comparisons.

The status of pedagogical merits compared to research merits. In both countries research is valued more for your carrier than teaching is, but there are also differences between the two countries. In Zimbabwe researchers have very limited time to conduct research and publish. They start teaching already at masters' level and several researchers do not even finish their Ph.D.'s. In Lund you have to be a Ph.D. students and in some of the programmes I teach you even need to be a Ph.D. in order to be allowed to teach. On the other hand, in Harare the research time is included in your position while in Lund, for many researchers, you need to get external financing in order to be allowed to do research. When it comes to the status of pedagogy itself in both countries it follows from the lower status of teaching that pedagogical expertise is not valued as much as research. It is thus positive in Lund that there is a pedagogical academy at several faculties where you can ask to get your pedagogical merits acknowledged and receive benefits. This is initiated in order to increase the status of teaching in relation to research and also to improve the quality of students' learning environment. Any such initiatives do not exist in Harare as far as I know.

Competence development for teachers. While teachers' pedagogical development for the sake of their own professional development as well as for development of the teaching quality is much discussed in Lund and Sweden, I am not aware of any such initiatives at University of Zimbabwe. Teaching at my host department in Harare is comprised of a skilled teacher spending time with students and discussing the literature. What students often ask for in Sweden is to spend more time with the teachers. On a different note, gaining pedagogical training can be a safety for teachers to build on/trust. As part of a lifelong learning and quality assurance for students it is beneficial that teachers in Sweden get more and more professional in their teaching.

In the teacher teams where I teach at Lund University we use a variety of written, oral visual, individual and group, and in- and out of classroom **forms of examination**. At my host department the examination forms were more uniform and traditional relying mostly on written classroom exams. That was one reason to why I suggested that the department

include more types of forms of examination in order to let students practice different skills and in order to meet the different types of learning styles student may have.

The **use of technology and IT** in teaching and teaching administration is limited at University of Zimbabwe. In ordinary lectures technology such as PowerPoint is seldom used. Rather the whiteboard is used. In special lecture halls PowerPoints can be used. In situations when we – both in Zimbabwe and Sweden – are governed to use and trust technology too much it can be an obstacle. In Sweden I have noticed it in my capacity of being director of studies when a new programme or platform forces us to think in a new way rather than supporting us when we already think in a way useful for teaching. An example from university of Zimbabwe, where old school technology of paper and pen would have been better than relying on IT technology, occurred at the end of the semester when grades were reported and registered. The grade register programme did not work for several days causing all personnel to spend large amounts of time on it.

In both Harare and Lund making educational programmes conform **to labour market needs** is a thing which those who develop programmes and courses are reminded of and/or forced to consider. The educational strategy Education 5.0 which University of Zimbabwe has adopted is all about considering labour market needs.

The teaching and learning environments at the two departments differ in important ways. At my host institution in Harare I noticed a closer academic connection between master students and faculty than what I am used to at Lund. One part of it was in the form of mentorship between supervisor and master student and another part was in the form of master students working as teaching assistants. At my home department we have been reluctant to employ students as teaching assistants for the sake of not paying students to carry out the boring administrative work which falls on a teacher. There can be several reasons for the difference in practices besides tradition. It may be that at my host institution the student batches are smaller than at my home institution. In Harare, where not all researchers finalise their Ph.D., the value of a masters' degree may increase. The dividing line between a student and a researcher may not be as dramatic as it is considered in Lund. Regardless of the origin of the praxis, I now believe in the value of taking the master students more seriously. It is beneficial to both faculty and students, independent of if they stay at the University or not. I am still hesitant to teaching assistants, but master students presenting theses to group of teachers, inviting thesis writing students into research teams, and holding joint seminars and other activities may be worth introducing.

At my host department the teachers spend much more time on lecturing while at my home department students spend more time on individual reading and group work. There can be economic reasons for it in Sweden.

I noticed in my host department's programmes that much of the areas under study was Europe and the western world. Naturally in Economic History there is a focus on Europe and the western world as this is the region where the industrial revolution took place. However, several other courses had the same regional focus and the reason probably being a colonial legacy. I suggested that the teachers having expertise in African economic

history from their research would include that focus also in the curriculum. In this way they would also move away from – what I considered to be – too many western authors in the course reading and towards African authors.

The Zimbabwean society is quite patriarchal – compared to Sweden – making the study environment different for young men and women. If staying at their parents, young women have house chores and thus have less time to study. The department has a strategy to promote young women to continue their studies and has sometimes had to contact parents about the studies the girl has to spend time on.

The harsh economic condition in Zimbabwe affects everyone. The university chock increased the tuition fees making it impossible for some and difficult for other students to continue studying. This is a very different studying environment compared to Sweden where, for Swedes, studying is free and you can even get an allowance to do it.

Recommendations

My recommendations for future sabbaticals would be the following:

- As ‘Grants for teaching sabbatical’ is a smaller version of a teaching sabbatical it has both benefits and shortcomings. The ‘Grant for teaching sabbatical’ is a short teaching period so if things go wrong it is not much time to correct things during the stay. Prepare alternative activities to make the visit worthwhile if things do not follow the plan.
- Establish contact with your host department as early as possible in order to provide you and the host department/program with enough time to get the necessary recommendations, research/teaching permits, immigration documents, working permits, visas, vaccines etc. You will also need a lot of time to work out activities for you which are useful both for you and the host department.
- Say yes to as much activities as possible and take the opportunity for example to engage with colleagues socially as it will teach you a lot about the social context you work in. It may also lead to future teaching and research cooperation.
- There is always an opportunity to learn something relevant – even if it ends up not being the thing you had hoped or planned for. Thus stay open and prepared to learn/join/engage in the opportunities which appear. This lesson I have learned from doing research in Zimbabwe and I try to live by it both when abroad and at home.
- Be prepared to be viewed and treated by others as white and Western European. Reflect on your (probably) privileged situation at your home university.

- Expect to sponsor arrangements (material, premises, lunches, etc.) from your own pocket if you are in a very poor country. Or you may consider including those expenses in the application to STINT.
- As I have spent time at University of Zimbabwe and in Zimbabwe before I was aware of differences in terms of a more traditional academic environment as well as economic constraints. However, be aware of those and think of which ones you will accept and which ones you will try to question.
- Read up on the host department's programme offerings and the research of individual researchers in order to make the most out of the time as well as a polite gesture towards the staff at the host institution.
- Give housing an early priority. The University of Zimbabwe holds campus houses for visiting scholars to rent. Try to set everything in ample time before arriving. I thought I did prepare, but still the house was only available and livable just before it was time for me to leave for Sweden again.

Action plan:

Topics to address and, if possible, introduce in Sweden

Many of the lessons learned are not possible to turn into new practices right away. Instead they are new attitudes which may or may not be turned into a new practice. Even if a challenge will be to turn lessons into something actionable here are some things I know I will try to do.

For me as an individual

For me as an individual doing research and teaching that often relates to Zimbabwe, it is nice that the audience in Harare is interested in the examples I give and are often more knowledgeable with practical examples and questions. Thus it has become clear to me that I will try to get the opportunity to teach in Zimbabwe again and maybe also in other parts of Africa.

For me as a teacher, my action plan is to apply and implement those lessons I have already mentioned above for example when teaching in the international bachelor and masters programmes at Lund.

For me as a researcher, I will be working on several joint research applications with colleagues from University of Zimbabwe.

For my host department

As I was involved in developing programmes and courses at the host department they consider my input in their development of new programmes and courses. I think they will especially consider my contribution in terms of scholarship of teaching and learning. That is for example applying concepts as 'alignment' (align course content between courses and throughout programmes) and the use of syllabi as a contract between teacher and student and as a tool to improve the institutional memory when teachers change.

Another concrete change I suggested was to let students' take more responsibility for their learning by limiting the number of lectures and increase the time students spend on reading, group work, and in classroom presentations. Both teachers and students thought that would be an improvement.

As described before, I also suggested introducing a larger variety of examination forms for the benefit of meeting students' different learning styles.

The last change I suggested was to reconsider the general focus in the programmes and courses. I noticed that much of the areas under study was Europe and the western world. As written above, naturally in Economic History there is a focus on Europe and the western world as this is the region where the industrial revolution took place. However, several other courses had the same regional focus. I suggested they move away from what I considered to be a colonial legacy to focus much on Zimbabwe and Africa. The teachers having expertise in African economic history from their research would include that focus in more courses. This would also mean more Zimbabwean and African authors on the courses' reading lists.

For my home institution and the Swedish research and education system

I will strive to make a closer connection between master students and teachers as mentioned above. I need to identify situations where master students can be involved in the faculty community for the benefit of both education and research. Possibly master students' theses can be closer to researchers' research. Seminars, workshops and some social gatherings can also bridge the divide.

Continued relationship with the host institution

My colleagues at University of Zimbabwe have made it clear that I am welcome back in any capacity, such as for another teaching sabbatical or as a researcher. I continue to stay in contact, both professional and personally, with several faculty members. I am also developing new projects with a few of them.