

**Retrospect and Prospect of Private
Higher Education Provision in Africa**

**Proceedings of the 12th International
Conference on Private Higher Education in
Africa**

Organized By:

Research and Knowledge Management Office,

St. Mary's University

August 23, 2014

United Nations Conference Centre,

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

The dilemma of increasing tuition fee in the face of declining enrollment rates at private higher education institutions in Malawi

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Abstract:

Private higher education institutions (PHEIs) rely on tuition fees to meet their operational costs. This being the case, they tend to be more expensive than public ones that run on state taxes. Interestingly, in spite of the fact that PHEIs are generally expensive, they attract many students. This is the case because PHEIs are perceived to be offering better education system. However, due to inflation and other factors, private universities are forced to increase tuition fees often times. Engagement with key stake holders in the business has shown that each upward adjustment does not only result into the withdrawal of some continuing students, but also makes it difficult to recruit the desired numbers of new students. The purpose of this study was to explore possible interventions to the dilemma. The study has shown that there is correlation between upward adjustment of tuition and decline in student enrollment. This being the case PHEIs should, as much as possible, strive not to be adjusting tuition fees upwards. Instead, they should turn to cost efficiency and expenditure control mechanism as a way of saving money. In addition, PHEIs managers should be creative enough to identify other income generation strategies.

Keywords: tuition fees, quality, fundraising, efficiency, expenditure control

1. Introduction

Malawi is a small country in Central Africa ranked by the World Bank as one of the least developed countries in the world. The 2013 report of the Bank indicates a GDP per capita of 226.46 USD, gross domestic product of 3.705 billion USD, and an inflation rate of 27.3% (World Bank, 2013). Malawi was one of the British colonies in Africa and later adopted its education system. Before independence, Education was, jointly controlled by the colonial government and the western missionaries, who worked hard to give basic education to their early converts to Christianity. After the British colonial government had formed a Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland in 1953, it regarded the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, established in 1955, as being sufficient to cater for the educational needs of all the three countries of Zambia (Northern Rhodesia), Zimbabwe (Southern Rhodesia) and Malawi (Nyasaland). After independence, however, Malawi's founding President, Hastings Banda, resented the idea of sending Malawians to Zimbabwe for training and opted for a local solution (MacCracken, 2000).

At that time, the Livingstonia Mission, founded by the Scottish missionaries, had a Junior College which President Banda wanted to upgrade into a full secular university. Nonetheless, the demand by the missionaries that students selected to enroll in that university should conform to some particular religious practices, forced President Banda to opt for a neutral place in Blantyre, Malawi's main commercial city (Mlenga, 2009). What is today known as the University of Malawi was founded by an act of Parliament in 1965 at Chichiri Campus. Two years later, Mpemba Institute of Public Administration and Soche Hill College of Education became part of the University of Malawi. Some more developments happened in 1973 when the government brought together all programs to Zomba town under the umbrella of Chancellor College. Two faculties remained outside Zomba: Engineering at the Polytechnic in Blantyre and Agriculture at Bunda in Lilongwe. With passage of time, Kamuzu College of Nursing joined in 1979 while College of Medicine did likewise in 1991. The five constituent colleges of the University of

Malawi did not have enough space to accommodate all the students that qualified for university education. As a solution to this problem, Banda introduced the controversial system of selecting students according to where somebody comes from as opposed to the merit system. Many of those who were victimized by the system were from Northern Malawi. This is where the early western missionaries first introduced education. That decision triggered bitter enmity between the Church of Central African Presbyterian (CCAP) Livingstonia Synod, which is the dominant church in northern Malawi and the then government of Malawi.

When President Bakili Muluzi took over from Banda in 1994, he did not just abandon the quota system but also established another public institution, Mzuzu University, in 1997, located in northern Malawi. This decision did not solve the critical problem of space but managed to alleviate the political tension caused by quota system. Muluzi's successor, President Bingu wa Mutharika, similarly added another independent university in 2012, Malawi University of Science and Technology, in Thyolo and also upgraded Bunda College of Agriculture to become Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources (LUANAR) in the same year.

In spite of all these efforts, the enrollment in Malawian universities is still low. For instance, while the gross primary enrolment ratio was 119% in 2006 and that of secondary school was 32% in 2010; the gross enrolment ratio for tertiary was at 1% according to the 2010 statistics (Mahlaha, 2012). University selection is so centralized that the same office selects even self-sponsored students.¹ Aware of all these challenges, the

¹ **Title: PRESS RELEASE -2013/2014 University Of Malawi Admissions for Non-residential Government and Self Sponsored Posted on 06/07/2013.**

The University of Malawi is pleased to announce results of the 2013 University Entrance Examinations (UEE) and names of candidates who have been selected to pursue various programs for the 2013/2014 academic year on non-residential government and self-sponsored basis. This year, Government sponsored candidates were selected first using the equity system of admitting students into institutions of higher learning. Under this arrangement, the top ten candidates from each district were offered places first and the rest were selected based on both merit and the size of the population of their districts. Thereafter, self-sponsored candidates were selected based on merit and the selection process only considered candidates who did not qualify for government sponsored entry but had expressed willingness (on the 2013 UEE answer sheet) to be alternatively considered for self-sponsored entry. The public is informed that 11,539 candidates sat for the 2013 University Entrance Examinations (UEE) and of these, 3,805 were females and 7,734 were males representing 33% and 67% respectively. 10,328 candidates passed the 2013 UEE (i.e reached a combined aggregate of UEE and MSCE pass mark of 50% and above), representing 89.5% pass rate. Of the candidates that passed, 3,233 were

government of Malawi decided to invite the private sector to consider partnering with the government in investing into higher education (MoEST, 2008). Malawi has now eleven private universities and the government supports none financially. Instead, government has put in place a council responsible for policing both public and private institutions of higher learning. The Council's goal is to ensure conformity to standards in the areas of teaching, research and student's welfare.

2. Problem Statement

Financial resources for higher education are generally difficult to find because Malawi is a poor country. Many students who successfully complete their O-Level studies fail to enroll into public universities because of limited space and infrastructure. Yet, less than 40% of the qualified can afford to find a place in public universities where the fee is cheaper and affordable for people from a wide range of economic standing. The remaining 60% have to turn to private universities where fees are restrictive. Private universities are generally expensive because they do not get financial support from the government. Keeping fees low will not sustain the universities because they have to meet all operational costs that include a good package for highly skilled and specialized staff. Using low caliber staff is not an option because such people compromise quality and directly results into decrease in enrollment. This being the case, PHEIs administrators are forced to adjust fees frequently. The problem is compounded by the fact that Malawi's economy is fragile and inflation rates continue to increase. Worst still, the exchange rate of Malawi Kwacha is unstable and yet 80% of the valuable goods are imported. What is problematic is the tendency that each time tuition fee increases enrollment goes down in one way or another.

The purpose of this study is to explore possible creative ways that administrators of PHEIs can use to secure the additional funds required to top up fees instead of increasing. The study aimed at exploring possible

females and 7,095 males. A total of 1,909 candidates have been selected to continue their studies at the University of Malawi. Of these 1,143 (584 females and 559 male) are government sponsored and 766 (282 females and 484 male) are self-sponsored. The gender distribution of all the selected candidates is 866 females and 1043 males representing 45% and 55% respectively.

ways how PHEIs could invest in the intelligent poor so that they can in turn graduate into skilled, informed, motivated and responsible citizenry. It is anticipated that the poor who will benefit from this arrangement will be expected to go and be part of the solution to the current social-economic and political challenges.

3. Government's Missed Opportunity

The Malawian Government appears to have invested a lot of resources in infrastructure development of Higher learning during the first 15 years of independence. While the number of those qualifying for university education grew tremendously in the eighties, no serious investment was done to expand the higher education system so that it should match with the growing numbers. Overwhelmed by the numbers that could not be accommodated in the university because of limited space and economic challenges, the Malawi government opted for the controversial system of selecting students into a university based on one's district of origin. This move to abandon merit system in favor of a quota system received a lot of resistance from religious and academic leaders. The Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) Livingstonia Synod began to openly challenge the government, describing quota system as being evil. This explains why CCAP Synod of Livingstonia was the first to establish a private Christian university in 2003. The next decade has witnessed every big church denomination opening its own university. This is why nine out of the eleven private universities belong to the big churches in Malawi. Churches have decided to come back into the higher education sector after seeing the gap created by government's inability to expand. Although PHEIs are generally expensive to run, churches have still decided to invest into higher education because they are convinced that their followers need knowledge and understanding for them to become informed and responsible citizenry.

4. Historical development of PHEIs in Malawi

The history of private Higher Education Institutions dates back to 1953 when the Presbyterian Scottish Missionaries, who were in charge of the

education sector in those days, founded a Junior College at Kondowe. The early western missionaries found it difficult to import skilled human labor from Scotland to assist them to meet the three goals of Civilization, Commerce and Christianity (3Cs). Their desire to have not just skilled workforce but cohesive families and social organization, forced them to establish a Junior College. The College began by offering certificates but did not graduate into a full university. This was due to change of priorities by the then leadership, and the forces of nationalism. The Livingstonia Mission, which later became the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP), Synod of Livingstonia, used the infrastructure of the abandoned college to house Livingstonia Secondary School. The institution continued to run from that time as a secondary school until 2003 when the Synod converted the same, though much improved, infrastructure into the University of Livingstonia.

The founding President of Malawi, Hastings Banda, did not allow PHEIs to operate in the country during his peak days. However, in 1991, he allowed a group of American Presbyterians under the leadership of Rev. Jack Chichen and the family, to establish the first post-independence degree-granting private institution of higher learning, to operate as a College in Malawi. It was registered under the name of African Bible College (ABC). It started with a few students that expanded into a big campus with its own radio station, a clinic, an academy and state of the art gymnasium. It had capacity to house 320 students on their campus at the time of research. Although the institution does not use the term 'university' ABC was the first private institution to offer a liberal Arts Degree in Biblical Studies.

The third PHEI was the University of Livingstonia. It was founded by the CCAP, Synod of Livingstonia in 2003. The church is located in northern Malawi, a region which has traditionally been associated with valuing education due to the influence of the early missionaries. When the government noted that many northerners were filling more space in public universities in comparison to other two regions, it introduced a quota system of selecting students into public universities. Because of this and other factors, the church decided to turn Livingstonia Secondary

School into the University of Livingstonia. The university office is located in Mzuzu and has two campuses: Kondowe and Ekwendeni. It had a population of over one thousand during the time of research and offers Education, Environmental Studies, Public Health, Social Science and Theology.

The fourth institution is the Malawi Adventist University, an affiliate of the University of Eastern Africa, Baraton, Kenya. It was established in September, 2004 and is owned by the Seventh Day Adventist, Malawi Union. The university opted to run away from accreditation related challenges by affiliating itself to Baraton in Kenya. It has popular programs and strategically positioned with a student population of about 400. Being a Seventh Day Adventist institution, the university has adopted a special dietary menu for all students to follow, regardless of their beliefs. The menu does not have meat. Dietary restrictions have forced some students to leave the institution in favour of other universities. It offers Education, Business Studies, Agriculture, Theology and Religious Studies.

The fifth PHEI was the Catholic University of Malawi (CUNIMA). It was established in 2006 by the Episcopal Conference of Malawi (ECOM), an umbrella body of all Catholic Bishops from different dioceses of Malawi. The institution was founded on infrastructure that used to house Montfort Teacher Training College in Thyolo district. It offers Education, Social Science, Commerce, Law and Theology. It had a population of about one thousand. CUNIMA, just like all other Catholic educational institutions, is known for excellence. The sixth, but the first PHEI to be established by an individual without religious connotations, was the Shareworld Open University. It was established in 2007 and is owned by Prof. Jack Mankhaza. It has campuses in all the 3 cities of Blantyre, Lilongwe and Mzuzu with a total enrollment of about 800. It offers programs in Public Health, Community and Rural Development, Human Resource Management, Accountancy and Law. Unlike other PHEIs, it attracts many students who are sponsored by the Malawi Government. The seventh, and the second PHEI to be owned by an individual, was Blantyre International University (BIU). It was founded

in 2008 and is owned by Prof. Charles Chathunya. BIU had a total enrolment of 1500 students and was, at the time of research, the largest PHEI in Malawi. Its main office is located in Blantyre and offers various degree programs like Business Studies, Social Science, Law, Accountancy, just to mention a few. The eighth PHEI is Exploit University. The idea was conceived by Pentecostal Life Church International and started being operational in 2010. It offers diverse and attractive degree programs at Bachelor's, Master's and PhD levels. The university is located in Lilongwe. The other three PHEIs which are not accredited by the government of Malawi are Nkhoma University (2013), Pentecostal Life University (2013) and the Malawi Assemblies of God University (2003).

5. Impact of Fees Increase on Student Enrollment

The amount of fees that institutions charge forces students to drop out of colleges at two different levels: admission and enrollment levels. Below are three tables that attempt to show how students in post-secondary government-aided and private universities drop out of college due to inability to raise tuition and fees.

Table 1: Number of drop-outs in Government-Aided Technical Colleges in Malawi for the Year of 2011

Reasons for dropout	Number of Dropouts by Sex, Reason and Year							
	Year 1		Year 2		Year 3		Year 4	
	Male	Female	Male	female	Male	Female	Male	female
Death	1	3	1	3		1	1	1
Pregnancy		5		2		2		1
Marriage		1			1			1
Tuition fees (unable)	7	9	2	4	5	1	8	11
Employment			1			1		
Sickness			3	2	1	1	3	2
Family Responsibility				1				

Dismissed	4			2				
Other reasons	4		1	6	2	2	7	3
Total	16	18	8	19	10	8	19	20

Source: Department of Education Planning, Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, Education Statistics 2011, Education Management Information System (EMIS).

The first table shows the various factors that force students to drop out of Government-aided colleges and how inability to raise tuition tops up the ladder. The second and third tables show the two levels at which students in PHEIs drop from their studies due to fees. The first level is what I call in this paper ‘admission’ level. This is the stage when successful applicants who have been given acceptance letters fail to enroll due to inability to raise the required fees. The second level shows how students who are already in the system fail to continue because of their inability to pay the fees.

There are many reasons that force students to drop out of college. However, inability to pay tuition fees is the main reason for dropping out of colleges in Malawi even for government-aided tertiary institutions as the diagram above shows. Adjusting fees upwards only worsens the already bad situation.

Table 2: Number of drop-outs after selection but before joining PHEIs in Malawi for the year of 2013

Name of PHEI	No. Admitted	No. Registered	% drop out
	<i>Undergraduate</i>		
University of Livingstonia	550	282	49
Catholic University	265	238	10
Adventist University	95	71	25
Blantyre International University	-	-	-
Shareworld University	790	297	62

African Bible College	246	170	45
Total	2001		

Source: Registrars of the mentioned institutions

The figures above suggest that many of those who apply to PHEIs do so with the hope that they would secure a scholarship. Registrars receive many requests of the same before the actual day of registration. When their requests are turned down, they end up writing letters to reserve their places.

Table 3: Number of drop-outs after joining PHEIs in Malawi for the year of 2013

University	No. Registered	No. of dropouts	% drop out
University of Livingstonia	282	32	11
Catholic University	238	69	29
Adventist University	71	3	0.4
Blantyre International University			
Shareworld University	297	71	24
African Bible College	170	16	9
Total			

Source: Registrars of the mentioned institutions

6. Creative Ways of Managing Private Higher Education Institutions without Increasing Fees Frequently

It is imperative that education should be accessed by all deserving students regardless of their economic status. In the context of Malawi, PHEIs remain big breathers for the many qualified students who are not able to secure places in public Malawian universities. For children of the

low-paid parents to access university education, managers of PHEIs must strive to raise extra income to supplement fees income. Five strategies are discussed in this section.

6.1. Strict Adherence to Budget

If PHEIs are to operate professionally, they must be treated as business entities. The leadership of PHEIs must come up with a clear strategy of acquisition, accumulation and maintenance of funds. Since budgets assist in controlling income and expenditure, strict adherence to it is imperative. Should it become necessary to make some minor changes to the budget, such changes should only be done after the approval of senior officers in the hierarchy of the institution. It should be born in the minds of PHEIs Managers that business venture like higher education cannot function properly without adhering strictly to a budget, which is usually comprehensive. Strict adherence to the budget will not just prevent managers from over-spending, but may also aid in saving money. This being the case, managers must always link their good plans to the budget if the scarce resources are to be used prudently. It is also recommended that performance of each senior officer should be done in light of one's ability to effectively manage his or her budget.

6.2. Cost-efficiency tactics

Costs are amounts relinquished to obtain another human or physical resource in line with one's objective. On the other hand, costing refers to process of quantifying the utilization of resources in monetary terms (Knight, 1993). Efficiency connotes effectiveness and good organization in attaining specific objectives or standards. Cost-efficiency, therefore, means a deliberate effort to utilize monetary resources with the highest levels of competence, care and organization.

Cost-efficiency involves choosing the most economical option without necessarily compromising the laid down standards on quality. This type of efficiency involves making a deliberate choice to go for greater effectiveness at a lower cost. Considering that resources in PHEIs are

scarce, managers need to take advantage of month-end promotions to buy various items at a cheaper price. It is also imperative to opt for tightly controlled system of issuing stationery, cafeteria coupons, fuel to the drivers and other items as a way of reducing unnecessary waste.

Caution should be given on the other hand that using cheap things like cheapest paint is not cost-efficient. Managers' judgment on such issues should not just be quantitative. Any consideration of efficiency and effectiveness must also take into consideration the aspects of quality and standards.

6.3. Marketing the PHEIs

Marketing a university aids in boosting enrollment numbers. This being the case, it is sad that managers of PHEIs in Malawi have little or no budget for marketing. This is a sad development because marketing a university assists in giving accurate and positive information to the prospective students, donors, education officials and other key stake holders. The leadership of PHEIs must strive to meet the basic requirements put in place by the government, through the National Council of Higher Education. Quality is crucial because you cannot market the indefensible.

Private universities compete for students everywhere. When publicity is poor, the institution which is not very attractive is likely to suffer greatly. Universities need to provide hard information to the public in an appropriate style that will enable prospective students and donors develop a good image. Every university should conduct a client research before it can develop a product. The product should then be promoted while putting necessary steps to manage and control quality. A coherent marketing strategy requires a budget to pay for, among other things, brochures, advertisements, mailing expenses, printing and photocopying expenses. Considering that mistakes are bound to happen in any institution (Marland, 1991), managers of PHEIs should learn how to cope with a crisis. It is a marketing strategy to speak first. In the event that an occurrence has grossly damaged the reputation of the university, the

official spokesperson should be the one to speak first. This will demonstrate that the institution has the understanding and competence to handle the crisis. This is a good opportunity for the university to clarify and enforce a positive image of the institution by explaining the action taken to address the problem. On the other hand, there are times when silence becomes the best choice. Managers need to discern the best course of action which is likely going to positively maintain the image of the institution.

6.4. Fundraising activities

Financial needs of PHEIs cannot be met by school fees alone. Managers must work out options of getting extra revenue. Throughout the history of higher education, universities and colleges have developed because of fundraising activities. The oldest institutions of higher learning in the 13th Century which benefitted from funds raised in addition to fees collected were Bologna in Italy, and Oxford in the United Kingdom. The church, which used to control the education sector those days, came to recognize these institutions later by licensing them after seeing that they were organized and sustainable. The same pattern is seen in the development of the earliest and famous colleges that were founded by various churches in the United States of America. To begin with, the Puritans founded Harvard University in 1635. John Harvard donated a library of 1,600 volumes and a bequest of 500 British Pounds to start a project which is named after him. A little later came the Episcopalians who founded William and Mary in Virginia in 1693. The Presbyterians founded Princeton University in New Jersey in 1746.

The leadership of PHEIs must plan carefully fund raising activities, bearing in mind that such a campaign is not there as a quick solution to solve the problems of a failing university. The campaign is labor and capital intensive, requiring a comprehensive analysis of priorities, goals and costs. Potential donors will not just give without assessing the integrity of the university, its programs, donor relationship and how funds are accounted for in that institution. You cannot talk of fundraising

where there is no integrity. Universities are independent but accountable to the public as Harold Enarson said:

Universities are one of the glories of civilization. They are fragile as truth itself, existing by public sufferance, supported by public generosity, yet, 'independent, free-standing, openly critical of conventional wisdom, friendly to disputation, enchanted with controversy, and hospitable to those who think otherwise. Yet it is not perversity that persuades donors to support them; it is rather the recognition that this sturdy independence is essential seedbed for the growth of new knowledge, transforming insight, fresh discovery and creative invention (Rhodes, 1997, p. xxiv).

The fundraising principle is to befriend first before the activity of fundraising can start. For it to be done effectively, all officers beginning from the Vice-Chancellor downwards must be involved in this exercise. Fund raising activities are contextual and therefore, vary from one place to another. Possible sponsoring bodies that PHEIs may engage include Town/City development Associations, Religious bodies bearing in mind that formal schooling began with missionaries and are still supplemented by them in some institutions; Ethnic bodies interested in their ethnic places; Business Organizations like Rotary and Lion Clubs; Trustees; Alumni; individuals and many more (Bray, 1988). Most of these are contextual and the management of each PHEI needs to shortlist the possible sponsors in their areas.

6.5. Managing Quality

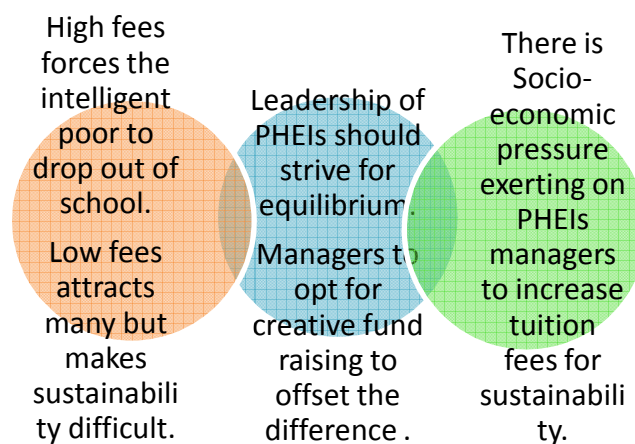
Managing quality is a good form of fund raising strategy because excellence naturally attracts customers. The superiority of the services offered tends to overshadow the cost. With the many financial, staffing and infrastructural challenges that characterize PHEIs in Malawi, attending to issues of quality may turn such universities to become more attractive.

Prospective students and donors appear to mind more about quality than cost. Choice of which institution to join is based on critical analysis of the effectiveness of the institution's management processes, credibility of the managers, appropriateness of personnel procedures and other related issues. PHEIs do not necessarily need to have more resources to demonstrate excellence because quality is free. It can, for instance, be seen in the ability to solve problems in meetings or the ability to prepare a lesson which is well understood. Managing quality is a process that requires managers to constantly add value, bearing in mind that prevention is better than inspection (West-Burnham, 1992). Should managers of PHEIs choose to manage quality in their institutions; the cost will with time be reduced.

7. Attempt to Resolve the Tension between Numbers and Quality

The leadership of PHEIs needs to strive to balance the equilibrium

There is tension that is difficult to resolve, between enrollment numbers and quality which is normally attached to high fee. I argue in this paper the need for the leadership of PHEIs to settle for the equilibrium. Leaders should find a common ground that takes the strong side of each divide by taking into consideration all major factors anchoring each option.



The first cycle in the right explains why managers of PHEIs increase tuition fees. The third circle explains the negative result of the increase in tuition fees on the part of the students. The middle circle attempts to explain a possible meeting point of circles one and three. It follows, therefore, that upward adjustment of tuition fees results into high student drop out.

Lobby the government to support in infrastructure development and research.

The leadership of PHEIs should, through the Association of Private Universities in Malawi (APUMA), persuade Members of Parliament with education background, to lobby the Parliamentary Committee on Education, to recommend a parliament Act on private universities. The National Education Sector Plan (NESP) mentions private institutions as complementary partners and this pressure group can begin from there. It should be noted that NESP's mission is to provide quality and relevant education to the nation of Malawi. It is mandated to ensure that Malawians access education regardless of one's race, gender, ethnicity or religion. (NESP 2008-2017).²

8. Conclusion

The major assignment for managers of PHEIs is to balance the equilibrium. The study has shown that there is correlation between upward adjustment of tuition and decline in student enrollment. Every credible Private Higher Education institution needs both the required numbers of students and income from fees to run efficiently. This being the case, university administrators should be making deliberate effort to strive to create that evenness by adjusting tuition fees upwards sparingly, bearing in mind that intelligent poor also need to benefit from higher education. PHEIs should use marketing and creative fund raising activities to balance up their budgets.

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²² Planipoli.iiep.unesco.org/upload/Malawi/Malawi_Nesp.pdf, accessed 22.07.2014.

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