Introduction
The Zimbabwe education system underwent tremendous changes after independence. In the pre-independence era and the post-independence era up to 1993 Ordinary level (O level) and Advanced level (A level) examinations were run by the Cambridge International Examinations Board, through the Examinations Branch, a department of the Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture (Makhurane 2001: 2). With the advent of a new socioeconomic order after independence a need was felt to localize examinations in order to address local needs. There was also a need to reduce costs and improve the affordability of examinations, and localization meant that examination fees would be charged in local currency. This would alleviate the problem of dropouts, which is caused, in part, by high examination fees, which rural parents cannot afford (IIEP 2001: 216).

The process of localizing examinations began in 1984 through the Examinations Branch (Makhurane 2001: 2). The Examinations Branch worked with the Cambridge International Examinations Board to train local examiners and localize the setting and marking of examinations in phases. The Cambridge Examinations Board played a monitoring and supervisory role. The aim was gradually to wean the Examinations Branch from the Cambridge International Examinations Board. This aim was finally achieved in 1994 when the Zimbabwe School Examination Council (ZIMSEC) was established (to replace the Examinations Branch) as a body corporate with sole responsibility for managing all school examinations in the country (ZIMSEC ACT No. 17 of 1994: 67).

Abstract
The study assessed the effectiveness of the Zimbabwe School Examination Council (ZIMSEC) in managing examinations in rural day secondary schools. Quantitative and qualitative techniques were used in the study. Examination results from a purposive sample of 97 rural day secondary schools, focus groups with 30 purposively selected heads of departments, and personal interviews with five purposively selected heads of departments were analysed. The analysis pays attention to the achievements of ZIMSEC, the challenges facing ZIMSEC and the way forward. In conclusion, the article focuses on the positive and negative elements of the examination system.
ZIMSEC's vision is to be the centre of excellence within the subregion and beyond in quality assessment in education (ZIMSEC 2001: 1). The mission of ZIMSEC is spelt out as the quality assessment of candidates' learning/performance and the awarding of nationally recognized certificates at different levels of the school education system, while optimally utilizing the human and material resources it has available to it. The core values underlying the business of ZIMSEC include integrity, commitment, valid assessments, customer satisfaction and continuous improvement. Commitment, customer satisfaction and continuous improvement are key aspects of total quality management (TQM) (Deming 1986: 24-86). ZIMSEC can therefore be said to be effective if it lives up to these values. The main function of ZIMSEC according to the ZIMSEC ACT No. 17 (1994: 67) is to organize and conduct assessment and examinations for the education system.

Some of the most critical components of an education system are its assessment and examination procedures, and Colby (2003: 2) says assessment helps students to demonstrate their educational attainment and is therefore important in any education system. For assessment to be effective it must be qualitative. Quality in assessment is not a unitary concept. Instead, there are various attributes that must be present in the assessment processes if there is to be quality in the assessment (Ashcroft & Palacio 1996: 33-39; Zabulionis 1999: 2). Assessment ought to be both valid and reliable. To increase validity and reliability, assessment must include essays, examinations, practical work presentation and project work, since written examinations per se force students to learn things merely for examination purposes (Ashcroft & Palacio 1996: 57-59). The Independent Panel of Experts (2002: 2) posits that the quality of an assessment can be enhanced by the use of inter-board comparability studies and statistical comparisons with other trends. The importance of an external input into the assessment tools is also emphasized by Zabulionis (1999: 3), who maintains that it is necessary to use an external referee to judge the assessment items.

Ashcroft and Palacio (1996: 33-34) argue that a system of assessment is likely to be of a high quality if those who operate it believe in it and are committed to it because they are the people who have to maintain its standards and safeguards. For a council like ZIMSEC to be successful, it is therefore critical for teachers to have confidence in its processes, as they are the ones who operate it. The assessment system must have rigorous standards that compare favourably with other systems at the same level. Ashcroft and Palacio (1996: 34) further point out that quality of examination systems focuses on security of the systems and comparability between markers. This comparability between markers can be achieved through rigorous moderation by chief examiners, who must be appointed on the grounds of their educational qualifications and teaching and marking experience (Zabulionis 1999: 2).

It is also necessary for examination questions to be error-free. On this point Zabulionis (1999: 3) says the usual issues of printing, checking, proofreading and rechecking have to be done to the very highest standards if the fragile nerves of candidates are not to be tested by getting a paper containing a printing error. Colby (2003: 3) also points out that to ensure quality in assessment it is important to use clear, precise, intelligible language throughout the question paper and to get the right papers to the candidates at the right time.
Intensive training of those who operate the assessment system also enhances the quality of the system. Cangelosi (1991: 100) argues that well-planned, rigorous and continuous training enhances the capacity of teachers to be more effective and efficient in their execution of examination duties. The Independent Panel of Experts (2002: 2) points out that successful training for GCSE examiners in Britain was accomplished through the use of subject panels led by experienced and highly qualified teachers. Training is likely to increase teachers’ awareness of what examining entails and improve working relationships between teachers and the assessment board (Colby 2003: 2).

Colby (2003: 2) argues that one indicator of the quality of an education system is the credibility of its examination and certification processes. If ZIMSEC is to be effective in discharging its duties, it must ensure that its assessments and examinations are conducted in a manner that reflects quality. However, there have been concerns about the way ZIMSEC conducts its business, and reports of inefficiency abound (Sibanda 1999: 2; Sibanda 2001: 5; Chronicle 15 November 2002). It is important that the performance of the examination council is appraised regularly to ensure good service to the customer and value for money.

The effectiveness of the Zimbabwe School Examination Council 61

The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary explains that effectiveness refers to the degree to which a thing produces the intended result. In a similar vein Cheng (1996:13-24) alludes to three models that can be used to measure effectiveness. Cheng (1996:13) says according to the goal model the formally stated goals of an organization should be used to assess the effectiveness of that organization. An organization is effective to the extent that it achieves its stated goals with given resources. Cheng (1996:18) says furthermore that the effectiveness of an organization can be assessed using the satisfaction model. This model approximates organizational effectiveness to the satisfaction of its powerful and strategic constituencies. The third model that can be applied to organizational effectiveness is the ineffectiveness model (Cheng 1996:24). This model entails analysing those issues with which clients are not satisfied. In this study the effectiveness of ZIMSEC was assessed using the goal model, wherein the goals of ZIMSEC as enshrined in their mission and values would provide the yardstick for measuring effectiveness. The satisfaction model was also used by analyzing the views of heads of departments and school principals who are clients of ZIMSEC. The ineffectiveness model was also applied by soliciting data on those aspects that school personnel feel are not being dealt with effectively by the examination council.

Statement of the problem
The localization of examinations through the introduction of ZIMSEC was a major change in the administration of public examinations in Zimbabwe. Change is normally accompanied by apprehension, and in this case there have been some fears that the newly established examination council may fail to perform the task satisfactorily. There have also been concerns that ZIMSEC may lower the standard of examinations and in the process compromise the quality of education. Given the backdrop of this uncertainty, it is critical that the effectiveness of ZIMSEC should be analysed.

The problem in this study was: How effective has ZIMSEC been in managing examinations in rural day schools? The study focused on rural day secondary schools because they are the worst resourced and if ZIMSEC’s performance is significantly
effective in relation to them, it is likely to have an even more significant impact on other school types. ZIMSEC (2003b: 2) points out that one of the most frequently asked questions is whether the localization of examinations has led to a decline in standards, so this study also sought to assess the views of heads of departments and principals in this regard.

Research design
The main function of ZIMSEC according to the ZIMSEC ACT (1994: 67) is to organize and conduct assessment and examinations for the education system. The examinations are administered by the schools, to school pupils, so the effectiveness of ZIMSEC can be assessed using the performance of the pupils in the examinations and the views of school personnel on the operations of ZIMSEC, among other data sources. This study therefore combined quantitative and qualitative strategies so that it would yield rich and complete results (Borland 2001: 5; Meadows 2003: 371). Literature sources on the operation of ZIMSEC were also analysed to augment data from the empirical study. The data collection schedule was pilot-tested in ten schools that were not part of the sample to check whether it captured the desired information. The quantitative phase yielded numerical data relating to O level examination pass rates, while the qualitative phase yielded data on the perceptions of school managers and principals of the impact of ZIMSEC.

To assess examination pass rates the study used a descriptive survey, which is deemed appropriate for quantitative analysis (Meadows 2003: 400; McMillan & Schumacher 1997: 37). Purposive sampling was used in selecting 97 rural day secondary schools from one education region (McMillan & Schumacher 1997: 37; Leedy 1997: 210). A purposive sample was deemed appropriate because the study focused on the effectiveness of ZIMSEC in managing examinations in rural day secondary schools rather than over the entire gamut of school types. Cohorts that were in Form 4 and had been together from 1999 to 2003 were chosen to ensure that recent and more meaningful and relevant data were used (Lucey 2002: 181-184; Wegner 2000: 333). Document analysis, which yields accurate data, was used to collect data on O level pass rates from records of O level examination results (Leedy 1997: 191). Data were aggregated and presented using arithmetic means and percentages.

In the qualitative phase data was collected on how heads of departments and school principals perceived the impact of ZIMSEC. Meadows (2003: 398) says that qualitative research helps us to understand a social phenomenon in a natural setting, with emphasis on the views and experiences of the participants. A purposive sample of five schools was selected. In each of the five schools, six heads of departments were purposively selected to ensure that information-rich participants were included in the study (Parton in McMillan & Schumacher 1998: 397; Marshall 1998: 60). To facilitate the simultaneous collection of a large amount of data, focus groups were used to collect data from the heads of departments. Focus groups may increase the quality and richness of the data, as group members are stimulated by the perceptions and ideas of others within the social environment in which the group is situated (Daymon & Holloway 2002: 186; McMillan & Schumacher 1997: 453). Six members per group was deemed an appropriate sample size (Daymon & Holloway 2002: 192). Each focus group session lasted approximately one hour and 15 minutes.
Purposive strategic informant sampling was also the rationale for including the principals of the five selected schools in the sample (Marshall 1998: 60). The principals are in charge of administering the ZIMSEC examinations and they are assisted by heads of departments, so it was felt that they were information-rich participants (Parton in McMillan & Schumacher 1997: 397).

Data was collected from the principals using personal interviews. The interviews were semi-structured to avoid imposing 'the researcher’s frame of reference on the data to be generated' (Marshall 1998: 38) and to ensure comprehensive coverage of all critical issues.

Interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim and then analysed. The researcher read through the transcribed data thoroughly to get an overall picture of the information so as to be able to segment it into coherent themes (Daymon & Holloway 2002: 234). The main data segments that emerged were programme achievements, programme challenges and the way forward.

The criteria for trustworthiness applied to the study are credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Daymon & Holloway 2002: 93). To ensure trustworthiness the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim to give an accurate reflection of the respondents’ views. This simultaneously catered for dependability, which involves consistency and accuracy of findings. The use of focus groups as well as personal interviews also allowed for data triangulation, as data were collected from different groups and by different methods (Daymon & Holloway 2002: 99).

Permission was sought from the Secretary for Education, Sport and Culture to conduct the study in the schools (McMillan & Schumacher 1997: 195; Bell, McBridge and Wilson 1999: 52). The informed consent of the subjects was obtained by providing an explanation of the research and the implications of participating. Respondents were also guaranteed anonymity and were free to withdraw their services at any time (McMillan & Schumacher 1997: 194; Christians 2003: 139).

Discussion of findings

Achievements of ZIMSEC

From the data it was possible to identify a number of ZIMSEC’s achievements. These are described briefly in the next few sections.

Full localization

In all the focus groups respondents acknowledged that ZIMSEC had accomplished full localization. The localization of O level examinations was finalized in 1999, and on 23 August 1999 the Accreditation Agreement between CIE (Cambridge International Examinations Board) and ZIMSEC came to an end (Sibanda 1999: 1). This meant that ZIMSEC assumed full autonomy as an examinations board and was therefore put in a position to respond more appropriately to the needs of the community it serves. The fees for administering the examinations are now charged wholly in local currency and this makes examinations affordable even to the economically vulnerable groups in rural areas. Candidates pay Z$500 per subject.

Monitoring standards

Respondents observed that ZIMSEC has introduced a number of measures to safeguard standards, such as working with other examinations boards and providing training for markers. This development is confirmed by ZIMSEC (2003a: 2), through its affiliation to the Association of Educational Assess-
ment in Africa (AEAA) and the International Association of Educational Assessment (IAEA). It is monitored by the National Academic Recognition Information Centre (NARIC), which also monitors reputable examinations boards like CIE. This ensures that ZIMSEC adheres to internationally acclaimed standards of assessing student achievement, and thus ensures that localization of examinations has not necessarily led to a lowering of standards. The quality of assessment can be verified by the use of inter-board comparability (Harlen 1994: 20).

Training
All respondents agreed that the examination council makes an effort to train its markers as a way of improving the quality of marking of examinations, a move confirmed by available literature. Training has been used to ensure high standards of assessment. According to Examinations Circular No. 15 of 2003, applicants who wish to train as examiners must be certified graduates with not less than five years’ secondary school teaching experience in a particular subject. Applicants are drawn from schools, regional offices, colleges and universities, and are screened on such attributes as punctuality, reliability, initiative and orderliness. Supervisors of applicants also make appraisals of the potential examiners, who then undergo an initial five-day training programme (ZIMSEC 2003c: 2-6). External consultants are used for the training sessions. In 2001, for instance, 704 examiners were trained by consultants from the Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB), the National Examinations Council of Tanzania (NECTA) and the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC) (Thabethe 2001: 16). Before each examination marking session examiners undergo some marking standardization, and item writers are trained periodically. This trend is consistent with the views of Riding and Butterfield (1990: 85) and Cangelosi (1991:100), who argue that training is important for the sustainment of quality in assessment.

Decentralization
According to Sibanda (1999: 1–4), ZIMSEC has managed to decentralize to all regions in the country. The decentralization is similar to that of the GCSE in Britain, where communication with schools is the responsibility of geographically accessible centres (Riding & Butterfield 1990: 82). This has had the effect of enhancing an interface between the examination council and schools, parents and the community.

Growth in candidature
ZIMSEC has experienced significant growth in O level candidature, as reflected in Table 1 (Murira 2001: 9). Between June 2000 and November 2001 ZIMSEC candidature grew by 401%. In this regard ZIMSEC enhanced customer satisfaction by making the examinations accessible to more candidates. Access to a service or product is the first step towards customer satisfaction. The increase in candidature, from 58 095 in June 2000 to 291 069 in November 2001 may be due to affordable fees (Z$500 per subject) charged by ZIMSEC and easy access to examination venues. The growth in candidature was also

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Exam session</th>
<th>Number of centres</th>
<th>No. of candidates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>June</td>
<td>772</td>
<td>58 095</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>June</td>
<td>792</td>
<td>64 749</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>November</td>
<td>1 706</td>
<td>280 673</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>November</td>
<td>1 718</td>
<td>291 069</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
acknowledged by heads of departments and school principals. All the respondents said the most evident achievement of ZIMSEC was the improvement of access to the O level examinations. They argued that the examination fees are affordable and there are now more students registering for the examinations than before. This is a major shift away from the situation in the pre-independence era, where only 2% of students completing primary education finally accessed the O level examinations (Zvogbo 1986: 26). This growth in candidature is consistent with trends elsewhere. For instance, the GCSE in Britain tries to cater for at least 90% of secondary school students (Riding & Butterfield 1990: 22). If ZIMSEC is maintaining trends that are internationally comparable, it is proving itself effective.

Release of examination results
All the school principals agreed that examination results were being released in good time by ZIMSEC, which contributes to customer satisfaction. The results for the November 2001 examinations were dispatched to schools on 1 February 2002. This was earlier than in any other year in the previous 21 years (Murira 2001: 9) and was an indication of good time management and effectiveness.

Relevance of examination questions
The majority of the heads of departments deemed in all focus groups that examination questions had become more relevant to the rural set-up in which rural day secondary schools operate. This was supported by school principals as well, with one saying, ‘It has brought in a Zimbabwean outlook into the examinations, and the questions are now more relevant to the children.’ Another principal added, ‘I think it has been positive in the sense that the syllabi developed by ZIMSEC are now relevant to the situation of children in this country. Every child now has a better opportunity to write an examination that is related to his environment.’ Liston (1999: 4) says relevance is a key indicator of the impact of an educational programme. Relevance of the examinations has the potential to raise the pass rates, thereby contributing to the improvement of the internal efficiency of the school system (Natarajan 1993: 11). To this end ZIMSEC has been effective in managing examinations in rural day secondary schools.

Cost savings
The participants largely agreed that ZIMSEC has also instituted cost savings and made the examinations more affordable than before. ‘It makes a lot of financial sense and improves access to education, especially for the disadvantaged rural people,’ said a head of department. Participants pointed out that the examination fees are now charged in local currency, and so the cost per student has gone down. In support of this development Sibanda (1999: 1) states that ‘the fees to administer the examinations would now be wholly charged in local currency and this makes the examinations affordable even to the economically vulnerable groups in rural areas.’ Low cost per student is in keeping with the suggestion by the IIEP (2001: 7) that efficiency implies an optimal relationship between inputs and outputs, so ZIMSEC has been effective in its management of examinations in rural day secondary schools.

Publication of revision booklets
Respondents observed that ZIMSEC had improved its effectiveness by publishing revision booklets for use by teachers and students. According to a head of department
ZIMSEC is also producing revision booklets, which assist students to prepare for the examinations. This is good and it helps the students to pass. These booklets contribute to the learning resources and guide students on how to tackle examination questions, and can thus improve pass rates. Improved pass rates assist the students in entering the world of work or studying further (Natarajan 1993: 11), thus rendering ZIMSEC an effective examinations body.

Challenges facing ZIMSEC
It is clear from the data that ZIMSEC also faces many challenges in its functioning. These challenges are described briefly in the next few paragraphs.

Low pass rates
Pass rates at ZIMSEC have generally been low, especially for rural day secondary schools, as shown by the analysis in Table 2.

Not all students who initially enrolled in Form 4 finally wrote the O level examinations. For the five years under study an average of 83.7% of students who enrolled for Form 4 eventually wrote the examinations per year. This means that 16.28% dropped out for various reasons. Gatawa (1998: 10) argues that, while developing countries have done remarkably well in terms of extending education to an appreciably large percentage of their school-going population, ‘... school performance, as measured by dropouts and examination results ... has not been encouraging’. One of the main reasons for students failing to write the O level examinations has been failure to pay the examination fees (IIEP 2001: 216). It is possible that the high dropout rate is due to

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Initial Form 4 enrolment</th>
<th>Candidates who wrote the exam</th>
<th>Candidates who passed five or more subjects, including English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2 226</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>1 779</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2 514</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>1 727</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4 740</td>
<td>3 506</td>
<td>74.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2 487</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>2 119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2 835</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>2 438</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5 322</td>
<td>4 557</td>
<td>85.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2 614</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>2 362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2 639</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>2 215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5 253</td>
<td>4 577</td>
<td>87.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2 510</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>1 965</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2 694</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>2 094</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5 204</td>
<td>4 059</td>
<td>78.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2 256</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>2 144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2 488</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>2 309</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4 744</td>
<td>4 453</td>
<td>93.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
failure to pay examination fees, and if this is the case the effectiveness of ZIMSEC is being compromised.

The mean pass rate for male students was 11%, with a standard deviation of 2.2, and this was higher than the mean pass rate for females, which was 8.7%, with a standard deviation of 3.1. This means there was less variation in the pass rates for male students than in that for female students. In each of the five years the pass rate for males was higher than that for females, and it was concluded that males perform better than females in the O level examinations. The reason for this could be that girls do not get as much time to study at home as boys do, since girls may have the added responsibility of household chores. It is also possible that the effect of fatigue resulting from long distances walked by students to school is more pronounced among girls than among boys.

The overall mean pass rate for the five years was 9.8%, which is lower than the national mean pass rate of 14.6% (Maramba 2001: 19). Students from established schools are therefore more likely to pass ZIMSEC examinations than students from rural day secondary schools. This is also confirmed by the fact that in the O level examination ratings for 2000 there were no rural day secondary schools in the top 150 schools (Chronicle, 19 February 2001). Dorsey et al (1991: 25) and Mutumbuka (1986: 116) also show that rural schools have the poorest examination results. The picture painted seems to suggest that the quality of pass rates has to do more with the schools than with the examinations body. However, reasons for low pass rates cannot be completely divorced from the effectiveness of ZIMSEC, as achievement also reflects on such aspects as validity and reliability of examinations as well as the effectiveness of the marking process, all of which are responsibilities of ZIMSEC. Thus low pass rates would reflect a lack of effectiveness on the part of ZIMSEC. If ZIMSEC examination results are perennially low for a particular population, then the ZIMSEC values of administering valid assessments and satisfying their customers are heavily compromised.

Over the years the pass rates have not been improving. Rather, they have been on the decline, more evidently for female students. There was a significant drop in pass rates from 1999 to 2003, from a mean pass rate of 14.9% to a mean pass rate of 6.6% for female students. For male students the rate dropped from 15.0% to 8.3%. The overall drop was from 14.9% to 7.4%. It can therefore be concluded that low pass rates have to do with in-school processes rather than ZIMSEC, as argued by some of the respondents. It could also mean that teaching in schools is becoming poorer, or that ZIMSEC is becoming poorer at setting examinations that address the needs and potential of students in rural day secondary schools, which would compromise effectiveness.

**Funding**

In all focus groups and in all personal interviews it emerged that ZIMSEC has problems of adequate funding. Data from the respondents is corroborated by available literature on ZIMSEC. Funding problems characterize the operations of ZIMSEC and the trend is getting worse, to the extent that the council failed to mark the 1999 Zimbabwe Junior means and standard deviations of pass rates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard deviation</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Certificate Examinations (Makhurane 1999: 1). This sullied the name of the council. However, it should be noted that this shortage of funding is not peculiar to ZIMSEC, as Loboda (1999: 3) argues that examination boards face a severe crisis of resources. This tends to compromise the effectiveness of ZIMSEC, however, as without funding it becomes difficult to satisfy customers in terms of service provision.

Errors in examinations
The examination system is also beset by the repetition of questions and errors that compromise the quality of the examinations, the respondents observed. One head of department said, ‘I would like to comment on the standard of papers. You find they have errors here and there. Students and teachers have complained about errors in the results.’ Emphasizing that examination questions at times contain mistakes, a school principal observed that ‘some students get results for subjects they never sat examinations in. There are cases where wrong results have been sent, and that does not motivate anybody. I think at the end of the day confidence in that examination is lost.’ The concerns of the respondents about errors in the examinations are confirmed by Sibanda (1999: 2) when he says, ‘A more distressing development was the mismatch of O level examination papers for November 1999.’ Such a trend discredits the examination system, which is a major aspect of the quality of education (Natarajan 1993: 11). Errors in questions compromise the validity of the examinations and Desforges (1989: 65) says, ‘The usual issues of printing, checking, proofreading and rechecking have to be done to the very highest standards if the fragile nerves of some unfortunate candidates are not to be shattered by getting a paper containing a printing error.’ As far as having error-free examinations is concerned, ZIMSEC is deemed not to be effective, as these errors influence candidates’ answers and ultimately the pass rates.

Perceived inferior quality of ZIMSEC examinations
Heads of departments largely believed that ZIMSEC examinations were inferior to those offered by its predecessor, the Cambridge International Examinations Board (CIEB). They also argued that ZIMSEC certificates did not receive international recognition. ‘The pass rates have gone up numerically, but they are not of good quality. The examinations have become easy and are not marked properly. The results may not be recognized internationally,’ observed one school manager. In support of the same perception a school principal said, ‘The results are not good enough, as we have a lot of people with those passes who cannot get jobs. It means that those passes are useless. So I don’t think the results have gone up at all.’ If these assertions are taken as correct, in the view of Hoy, Bayne-Jardine and Wood (2000: 2), who quote Deming as saying ‘A product or service possesses quality if it helps somebody and enjoys a good and sustainable market’, ZIMSEC has had a negative impact on the education system.

However, according to ZIMSEC (2003a: 2), the council is affiliated to both the Association of Educational Assessment in Africa (AEAA) and the International Association of Educational Assessment (IAEA) and is monitored by the National Academic Recognition Information Centre (NARIC), so its certificates are recognized internationally. It could be that the participants are not aware of these arrangements. There could be other factors, such as the economic downturn, that result in the graduates failing to find employment. The perception of the inferior
status of certain examining boards is common among teachers and they tend to overestimate the superiority of some examinations boards over others (Harlen 1994: 10). They also believe that some examining boards set easier examinations than others.

Lack of transparency
The participants blamed ZIMSEC for a lack of transparency in the selection of people to set and mark examinations. A head of department alleged that ‘in most cases those who are experienced are not involved in setting examinations. It is not clear how those who set papers are selected.’ Another school manager added that ‘the criteria are not clear and often poorly qualified and inexperienced people are chosen ahead of better qualified and more experienced ones. There are cases where teachers mark subjects they neither teach, nor were trained for.’ The view that there is a lack of transparency was also supported by a school principal, who repeated the remarks by the head of department above, concluding by saying, ‘They need to be more transparent.’

The use of under-qualified and inappropriately qualified teachers to set and mark examinations compromises the quality of education (Moyo & Mubengegwi 1995: 62-74). Hence it could be argued that ZIMSEC has had a negative impact on the education system, as a lack of transparency shows a lack of integrity, which is one of the core values of ZIMSEC.

Leakage of examination papers
School principals alleged that at times examination papers are leaked. This observation was supported by a head of department, who said, ‘It is possible that some students who get these good passes will have seen leaked papers, so those results may not be genuine.’ This fear is confirmed by Sibanda (2001: 5), then Director of ZIMSEC, when he says, ‘There have also been reported cases of examination leakages.’ The Chronicle of 15 November 2002 also alludes to the leakage of examination papers. This shows the system is failing to secure its examinations and certification procedures, which are a key aspect of the quality of education (Natarajan 1993: 11; Ashcroft & Palacio 1996: 34). If examination results are based on leaked papers, the validity of the examination is suspect and so in this aspect ZIMSEC lacks effectiveness.

The way forward
Participants advocated that the procedures for selecting staff to set examinations should be overhauled. As one head of department said, ‘Only highly qualified people should be involved … not this situation where even people without degrees are used … They are not very different from the pupils for whom they are setting the papers and there is no quality here.’ The appointment of highly qualified staff would enhance the integrity of the examinations, one of the core values of ZIMSEC. Moyo and Mubengegwi (1995: 62-74) posit that teacher qualifications are a critical component of the quality of education. Gatiss (1996: 17) argues that quality depends on people, not things. The need to have examining done by highly qualified people to retain quality is also stressed by Riding and Butterfield (1990: 89) and Cangelosi (1991: 100). This would enhance the effectiveness of ZIMSEC.

Both school heads and school managers pointed out that there is a need for transparency in the appointment of people to do examination work. One head of department said, ‘I do not know the criteria they use to select people to set examinations, as some chief examiners are not sure of the subject content.’ The need for transparency was
echoed by a school principal, who said, ‘There is also need for transparency in the selection of markers and setters. It’s not clear how people are brought in. It is possible that there is favouritism, corruption and nepotism in the process.’ If there is transparency, the integrity of the examination council will be enhanced and the council can live up to its promised values and thus be effective.

The school principals advocated thorough supervision of the process of setting, printing and packaging of examination papers to avoid both errors and leaks. ZIMSEC also needs to manage its information base efficiently to avoid errors in the publication of results, so that the results retain credibility, the school principals argued.

Given the low pass rates, school principals said one strategy ZIMSEC could use was to restructure the curriculum and allow those students who do not have the academic potential to pass the O level examinations to pursue practical subjects that would develop enough skills to enable them to engage in life-sustaining activities even without entering formal employment that requires an O level certificate. In explaining the curriculum, one school principal said, ‘We need a joint curriculum to cater for students who can handle the academic type of examination that ZIMSEC is offering. We also need another system … with a vocational orientation.’

Even though ZIMSEC has made access to the examinations affordable, the school managers felt there is a need to hike examination fees to reasonable levels, for instance Z$2 000 per subject. As one observed, ‘They have tried to keep the examination fees affordable so quite a number of parents can pay for their children to do the examination … The money is not enough to pay markers. There is a need to revise the fees upwards.’ In support of this strategy other school managers said, ‘Maybe ZIMSEC needs to charge slightly higher fees for the examinations to improve on its efficiency’ and ‘They should hike examination fees’. Responding to a probe on whether increasing fees would not compromise access to the examination, one school manager said, ‘No! That would actually add value to the examination, as it would take an effort to afford the examination fees. Right now some students do not take the examination seriously because it is too easy to access.’

The fact that fees charged by ZIMSEC are too low is confirmed by Chigwedere (2004: 1) when he points out that current fees are Z$500 per subject when it costs Z$16 000 to produce a question paper. The examination is being offered at far below the cost of producing it. This puts a strain on the government fiscus, as it has to subsidize the examinations heavily.

**Conclusions**

From the discussion of the findings of the study, it is possible to indicate both positive and negative aspects relating to the effectiveness of ZIMSEC in managing examinations in rural day secondary schools. On a positive note, ZIMSEC has made the O level examinations accessible to more people. Access to education is one indicator of the quality of education, as it shows that the intended customers are receiving the service (Moyo & Mubengegwi 1995: 62-74). The increase in access to the O level examinations is a great improvement on the pre-independence era, when only 2% of the cohort of students entering primary school managed to reach the O level (Zvogbo 1986: 26; Chung 1991: 24). Improved access to the O level examinations has been achieved mainly through reduced cost per student in
the examination fees. This was achieved by charging examination fees in local currency and it has helped more people to access the O level examinations. Reducing the examination cost per student has enhanced the efficiency of the system, as efficiency is the optimal relationship between inputs and outputs (McMahon 1993: 22; IIEP 1989: 7).

Examination questions are now more relevant to the majority of the students who write the examinations. This has the potential to raise pass rates, as the questions students have to answer have a direct bearing on their life experiences. Natarajan (1993: 110) says relevance is a key component of the quality of education. Local examiners have been trained for all the subjects, and ZIMSEC is now a fully autonomous examining body. The examinations body has also managed to affiliate to international associations to ensure that its standards are monitored and its certificates are recognized internationally. This affiliation enables it to benchmark its performance against more experienced examination boards and thus adhere to best practice all the time.

However, there have also been some negative developments associated with ZIMSEC. ZIMSEC has failed to maintain thorough examination security, as is evidenced by the high incidence of leakage of examination papers. The fact that examination papers leak is a sign that ZIMSEC is failing to manage its examinations and accreditation processes, which compromises the quality of education (Natarajan 1993: 11). Examination papers and the publication of results are fraught with errors. Sibanda (1999: 2) acknowledges that there have been serious errors in the examinations, and both school heads and school managers said this was a serious problem. Errors in examinations tend to impact negatively on the quality of education (Natarajan 1993: 11; Moyo & Mubengegwi 1995: 62-74).

There is a lack of transparency in the appointment of personnel to do examination work. A lack of transparency, as pointed out by both school principals and school managers, tends to destroy confidence in the examination system. A lack of trust in the examination system may erode the motivation of teachers to work hard.

School managers and school principals still perceive ZIMSEC certificates to be inferior to CIEB examinations. As long as this perception prevails it will be difficult for teachers, school managers and school principals to commit themselves fully to a system they deem inferior. These are the people tasked with teaching and examining the ZIMSEC syllabus and it is important that they have faith in the system they are working for. Effective assessment in the education system helps to improve the quality of education delivery, and ZIMSEC has thus had both a positive and a negative impact on the education system. It seems to be a programme that has great potential for improving the quality of educational assessment, but there is a need for improvement in the implementation and management of the programme. Siciliano (2003: 3) argues that when it is embedded effectively within larger institutional systems, assessment can help us focus our collective attention, examine our assumptions and create a shared academic culture dedicated to assuring and improving the quality of education. Assessment helps the education system to take its mission to a new and higher plane and thus it is critical for all countries to embrace it to achieve global quality of education (Siciliano 2003: 3). Loboda (1999: 1) points out that worldwide the final leaving examination serves as an intermediary between secondary and higher education and/or a pathway to occupation and employment. Thus if any
country is to succeed in achieving the aims of its education system, or any other programme, there is a need for effective and efficient assessment.

References
The effectiveness of the Zimbabwe School Examination Council

Harare: ZIMSEC.

ZIMSEC (2003a) Localization Awareness. Harare: ZIMSEC.
ZIMSEC (2003b) Frequently asked questions. Harare: ZIMSEC.

Notes on the authors
Prof GM Steyn, Dr N Ncube
School of Education
University of South Africa
P O Box 392
Pretoria 0003
E mail: steyngm1@unisa.ac.za
Tel: 012 429 4598
Fax: 012 429 4922