

THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES IN RESPONDING TO AFRICA'S PROBLEMS AND DEVELOPMENT NEEDS

**COMMENTS BY PROFESSOR JOY C KWESIGA
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INTRODUCTION

Thank you for inviting me to be part of this important discussion. It is always a pleasure to return to Makerere University.

I wish to thank the keynote speaker for the enlightening address.

I will start with the affirmation that indeed, universities can, respond to Africa's problems and development needs – with the proviso – **“other things being equal”**. In many ways, universities have responded but one can say that real transformation is yet to occur.

Why is this so? Let me briefly focus on the existing road blocks and then suggest a few examples of how these bottlenecks can be eliminated thereby enhancing development.

(1) **Number One:** The core function of universities, that is, teaching; research and innovation; as well as community service have been viewed as different compartments of this role, rather than being executed within the concept of a whole system. **One component does not easily feed into the other, yet this should be the case.** Therefore, there is need to build a relationship within these components: teaching, research and innovation and community engagement at the same time. A lasting relationship. At some level, this has been addressed, using the methodology of problem-based approaches to teaching and finding solutions, but this approach has yet to become the norm. What I am advocating for is for us to take it beyond what has been achieved so far.

(2) **Number Two:** Community Service, in particular, has been viewed as instituting a project/programme here and there, rather than the actual involvement of the community, who can then own

whatever intervention is being propagated. The interventions have, in the main, NOT been derived from the communities. This creates gaps and reduces the impact. The emphasis here is therefore **community engagement, rather than community service.**

(3) Number Three: Universities and Policy Makers operate apart. You rarely find Government Ministries and other agencies approaching a university to research on and solve a particular issue. **Consultants from without, and occasionally from within are preferred.** At best, Government engages local academicians as individuals – and not academic units. This limits the parameters for discussion and the opportunities to work towards finding solutions to national problems. That is partly why one finds little of **longitudinal research**, covering a generation or two and which would study and solve developmental problems of a certain area, or of a peculiarity.

I am aware that one of the objectives of the Research Programme funded by the Rockefeller Foundation at Makerere – code named **I @ Mak**, some years back, was meant to realise this connection, because the researchers' work was focused on solving contemporary developmental problems as viewed from the varied academic disciplines. **I am not sure whether any impact assessment was carried out, but certainly, a reflection on this earlier intervention should inform Makerere in the implementation of the current Strategic Plan.**

(4) The gap between **the academia, the market place, and in particular, the industries**, is more talked about than tackled. For instance, I am aware that the Inter University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) in collaboration with the East African Business Council, organizes the annual **Academia-Public-Private-Partnership Forum (APPPF)**. Over 100 East African universities discuss and make recommendations about bridging these gaps. Indeed, a few good practices are demonstrated, but the impact on the region is not widespread. Successful engagements here would provide the needed entry into solving the worrying **“youth bulge”** that present high levels of **youth unemployment and other related contemporary challenges, not just in Uganda – but in Africa as a whole.**

(5) Point No 5: Issues of Equity, Inclusion and Social Development: Higher Education is a Public Good – or at least, it should be seen as a public good. Yes, universities and other tertiary institutions have multiplied in Uganda, but what is on ground?. Access to these institutions has expanded, and has been eased. That is a plus, if we focus on numbers only. However, the very poor are still excluded. **It has been observed that where you are born, in Uganda, determines whether you will go to university or not. This relates to available facilities and the ability to utilize them.**

Many students drop out of university education because of lack of fees. **The rural-urban divide is still real – one needs to analyse the UNEB examinations results at O and A Levels, where the former has consistently failed or not passed so well. Even when a higher education qualification is acquired, the rural/urban divide still plays a role in terms of employment.**

Example of a fourth-year medical student who was yelling around offices (26th March 2023) because he could not enter the examination room since he had not paid even a third of his Semester dues. Fellow students have been collecting fees Semester in, Semester out, but this is not sustainable. For his A-Levels, the student temporarily dropped out of school for a year, him and his father tendered someone's cattle flock for a year and he was able to complete and join University. I encounter many such desperate students each examination season. This is the reality.

Solutions are not in view, because even the Higher Education Students Financing Board instituted by Government, cannot serve a third of the applicants each year WITH LOANS. We see a lot of them go home once the list of successful applicants is published. In other words, such people cannot easily play their roles in the development processes

The case of people with disability is well known – inadequate facilities prevent them from fully accessing higher education.

The case of women and girls is equally well known – for this goes beyond funds, to culture and discrimination. Teenage pregnancies and early marriages have not been reduced, in this day and age. Suffice it to cite the well-known educationalist, Dr Aggrey of Ghana (as he is often referred to), who in the late 1920s urged Kings College, Budo, to admit girls – stating that educating half the population is tantamount to having one half your society free and the other half slaves. **Development is therefore curtailed by such deprivations to some sections of society.**

How about the location of the drivers of development – equitable development? Because of time, let me only focus on location of industries. As a nation, we are yet to reverse the colonial policy which, according to Government archives, demarcated some areas as a source of labour – such as the Kigezi region, while others were aided with industries and consequently, other resources. The findings of Uganda Statistics Bureau (UBOS) on poverty levels lays a clear picture. **Therefore, as we think of transformation, let us also think of EQUITABLE distribution of resources.**

(6) At national level, the planning of human resource development must be taken seriously. For example, as a country, we should be able to know how many engineers we need, their specialities and levels. **This would be the case in other professions too. In this way, we would avoid the current situation, where** national financial resources are being drained from Uganda by foreign companies that are working on roads, airports, public buildings, and other national assets. With targeted training by universities with the support of Government, such funds would be secured by Ugandans, who would in turn create jobs and keep the money in the Ugandan economy, for further development.

KENYA EXAMPLE OF THE JOINT ADMISSIONS BOARD TO HIGHER EDUCATION (BOTH PUBLIC AND PRIVATE), WHICH ENABLES THE COUNTRY TO KEEP TRACK OF THE HUMAN RESOURCES TRAINED IN PARTICULAR FIELDS, ALL THE TIME

PART TWO of my presentation provides a few examples of how a university can positively respond to Africa's problems and

development needs. I use local-ongoing examples to bring the message home, hopefully.

EXAMPLE 1:

Here, I refer to the Programme of Kabale University Faculty of Agriculture and Environmental Science. This has been code-named “Participatory Learning and Training for Improved Agricultural Production and Sustainable Land Management in the Lake Bunyonyi Catchment” - (Kigezi)

In the Kigezi highlands there is a persistent challenge of reduced productivity, declining natural vegetation and animal population that lead to reduced household incomes. Kabale University, working together with a few other partners have initiated a community program around Lake Bunyonyi catchment **to reverse land degradation and improve agricultural productivity.** Partly, this long-term research and development partnership with communities around the lake is intended to aid students with practical skills that integrates theoretical knowledge with indigenous and experiential knowledge from farmers. The program integrates modern e-learning techniques that help students document and upload processes, best practices and lessons learnt and to create an on- line platform. This approach blends proven methodologies and techniques developed and tested by credible research and development agencies such as FAO and ICRAF. These methodologies have therefore been customized.

A **farmer field school methodology** allows students to work with farmers to identify problems, conduct Agroecosystem analysis (AESA) using participatory methodologies. Researcher led and farmer managed experimentation and field demonstrations approaches are used. Joint selection of technological experimentation are conducted and criteria for selection developed jointly. The university students depending on the level of expertise continuously test and document

what works, and investigate issues of sustainability, socio-economics, agronomical and gender. This approach equips students and farmers with skills to facilitate the process and develop capacity to make informed decisions, seek relevant help when and where needed. In principle, the University lecturer takes the role of a facilitator rather than a position of an expert and teacher. This entire process shifts from the conventional pedagogical approach to adult learning approaches which is currently not so dominant in learning institutions. **The communities fully participate from the initiation to implementation of the program – referring to what I pointed out earlier – community engagement rather than community service.**

The Long-term Goal is to improve agricultural productivity for selected enterprises and catchments through use of ecologically sustainable land management practices.

Main objectives

- Increase student learning and farmer field school training through use of participatory processes, methods and approaches
- Improve partnerships between communities and KAB
- Integrate academic training, e-learning with indigenous experiential learning practices

Outcome.

- Strengthen agricultural training for increased catchment/agricultural productivity
- Improve methodology for participatory learning and training for students and farmers through use of online platforms
- Improved curriculum that deepens partnership between communities, private sector and government

Expected outputs

- Student's analytical and practical skills improved

- Increased number of facilitators for farmer field schools
- Increase in crop and animal yields
- Improved production in the selected watershed
- Documented lessons/best practices for increased productivity
- Increase in relevant and applied scientific publications

THIS IS A VERY YOUNG FACULTY BUT THE PROCESS, SO FAR has helped to tackled several developmental challenges through:

- (1) Mindset change
- (2) Environmental Issues as soil conservation methods and improved soil fertility are embraced.
- (3) Nutritional issues – balanced diets, etc. (fruits, vegetables added to the diet)
- (4) Increased income through crop and animal yields.
- (5) **Relevance and acceptability of the institutions involved.**
- (6) Collaboration of the various agencies that would have hitherto worked in isolation, including **agricultural extension workers at the District level, as well as Local Council leadership.**

It is very gratifying to hear testimonies of farmers as to what has changed in their lives, in terms of awareness, new knowledge and increased income. This is at a small scale but can be expanded as resources become available.

EXAMPLE NO 2:

Malnutrition - leading to wasting and stunting – is rampant in South West Uganda. In fact, South Western Uganda has the highest level of stunting in Uganda, despite the lush green environment; and being the food basket of the country. Kabale University multidisciplinary team of researchers (in health sciences, sociology, agriculture, economics etc.) are engaging communities to unravel the basic causes of undernutrition and address them. **I may point out that before this catastrophe, Kigezi people were competitively successful in marathons, ranging from Commonwealth games up to Olympics. Believe it or not! Now, this is history.**

The key issues here are poverty, household food insecurity, lack of a balanced diet, inappropriate weaning practices, all arising from rapid population growth and consequent land fragmentation.

Kabale University teams will leverage Government of Uganda Programmes such as the Parish Development Model to work with vulnerable households to sensitize them to use the increased household incomes for better child nutrition; and sensitize men and women about the importance of personal actions such as breastfeeding.

This is where we have to put efforts to collaborate across disciplines. The previous example of Farmer Schools will work very well with this project on malnutrition amongst the young.

There are many other areas where the University can help transform livelihoods, by being relevant to the needs of the people as faculty endeavour to create and disseminate knowledge. For instance, within Kabale Municipality environs, there are a few remnants of traditional “**black smiths**” who are making household implements from the local iron ore (**ABAHESI**). This skill is passed on from one generation to another. Unfortunately, because of the very cheap but not so durable equipment that enter the market, very few people opt for this locally made equipment. The Faculty of Engineering could easily work with the few who have this indigenous knowledge to improve the quality and quantity of the instruments/equipment being manufactured, with the ultimate goal of making this commercial.

SYNTHESIS

- Universities need to focus more on being relevant to community needs – local needs.
- Universities need to engage communities – not just take services. This calls for new approaches to teaching, and research and innovation.
- Universities have to be enabled to work with policy makers
- The link between industries and universities as well as employers is a must.

- Issues of equity, inclusion, and promoting higher education as a **public good** must be taken seriously.

Underlying all this is funding – beyond token funding. Many students are talented, but this talent has to be tapped and utilized in Innovation Hubs. These innovation hubs need funds in order to role out tools relevant for the development of the country. IITA Example – of supporting a researcher to focus on research.