

Quality education should evaluate practical skills needed in the job market

Go for quality higher education

OPINION



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As Nelson Mandela stated, "Education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world." Uganda, like many other African countries, faces many challenges with its education system.

According to a report from the Population Reference Bureau, a Washington DC-based research and advocacy group, Uganda's population is projected to explode to 130 million by 2050. Today, Uganda's population stands at 35 million of which the majority is under the age of 25.

With one of the youngest populations in the world, the way Uganda handles its education system will determine whether the country continues to be a vibrant, well-educated country with growing affluence or whether the country stagnates and becomes a tinderbox of unskilled and unemployed, volatile youngsters. The difference between a rosy outcome and a messy one hinges on whether the country is able to use education as the weapon to change its future.

As the world moves deeper into the digital age, which requires literacy – both in the ability to think and solve problems and in creating and manipulating technology, the role of education cannot be ignored. The better the education Uganda provides to its citizens, the higher the probability that they will be able to compete effectively in the East African Community and in the global sphere.

Without a solid educational foundation that targets its youth and the need to expand education at the higher level, the country cannot compete in a global economy and it cannot reduce its high youth unemployment rate.

To provide a better education system, Uganda must address the following:

FEW SECONDARY SCHOOLS

The country has been successful in enrolling more than 90% of children in primary school. However, only about a quarter of those who complete primary school finish secondary school. This is a big obstacle for any drive to expand enrolment in higher education and in creating job opportunities for people.

In addition to the insufficiency of secondary schools, the cost of education is an obstacle. According to the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), despite



A good education system should equip learners with skills in thinking, solving problems and creating and manipulating technology to prepare them for the job market

spending over \$302m annually on primary education, almost 70% of children in Uganda are likely to drop out. The reason for the high dropout rate is hidden costs which are too high for poor parents. A high dropout rate is not in the long-term interest of a young country.

LACK OF BASIC EQUIPMENT

In a report on Uganda's education system, the World Bank reports that many schools lack basic equipment such as textbooks. A school without books and science laboratories is like a farmer without seeds and land.

EMPHASIS ON ONLY MARKS

The current education system centres on marks – how well students score in tests and exams that are mainly theoretical. By emphasising only marks at the expense of skills, the current education system guarantees that graduates will not have the practical skills that the job market needs.

OUTDATED CURRICULA

Dead curricula means students are studying subjects that are irrelevant; are useless to them and the companies that seek to hire them. The programmes that were popular in the eighties are no longer relevant

in the age of the Internet.

WAY FORWARD

Uganda can improve its education system by addressing the issues mentioned. Removing the bottleneck that exists between primary and secondary education to allow more students the opportunity of higher education is important, given Uganda's young population.

A concerted effort between the Government and communities to build community high schools may increase the number of high schools in the country.

It is important to provide financial assistance to those in need through a combination of vouchers, loans and scholarships to students whose parents cannot afford an education. Financial assistance is critical given that most families cannot afford to pay for their children's education. The Government should look at educational financial assistance as an investment in the country.

INNOVATION AND READING

Innovative approaches to education should be encouraged. National regulators for education and higher education should encourage the introduction of innovative educational projects that will result in Ugandan graduates being job creators, not job seekers. This translates to focusing on producing more graduates

who have the practical skills necessary for employment and developing the country.

The Ugandan education system, due to shortage of books in schools, does not encourage a reading culture. To promote the culture, the government should encourage local publication of textbooks or remove the barriers to importing appropriate books.

GRADING SYSTEM

The grading system needs to be reformed so that rather than forcing students to memorise in order to pass exams, students should also be tested on practical skills.

A report released in 2014 by the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) shows that only 37% of the companies surveyed for a study were satisfied with Ugandan graduates. The companies complained that the students had not been adequately prepared by their pre-hire institutions.

The International University of East Africa in Kampala is addressing the problem by integrating practical lessons and theory with the aim of reaching a 50/50 evaluation basis.

With one of the youngest populations in the world, the way Uganda handles its education system will determine its future

CURRICULUM

For the future, the curriculum must be relevant, rigorous and current. In this regard, Makerere University has taken the lead by reviewing its undergraduate and postgraduate academic programmes to assess, among other things, the relevance of the courses.

Educational institutions and regulators must move towards a curriculum that can best prepare students to face the challenges of modern life.

True to Nelson Mandela's words, education is the key and secret to the success of countries like Singapore, Malaysia and South Korea. These countries leapt from third to first world status in only 40 years! Uganda can do it too and its weapon must be a revised, revamped and practical education system.

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