
Challenges of Teaching and Research in a New Private University in Uganda

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Abstract

This article seeks to answer five pertinent questions: What is the role of a university? What capacities do new private universities have? What challenges do they face? What is the role of government in higher education? What could be done to improve the performance of these institutions? Therefore this article was inspired by the need to explore in-depth the challenges faced by new private universities with specific respect to teaching and research.

It was found that whereas the new private universities are playing a very important role in providing access to higher education, they are faced with tough challenges that need to be addressed immediately. These challenges are presented in five broad categories as: challenges of research-based learning, institutional research capacity, administration, academic research supervision, and inadequate government financial support.

This article concludes that new and private universities are clearly in need of a rapid change of approach to respond to the many social, economic, and technological challenges they face. It is also observed that new institutional strategies and decision-making must be created, articulated and adopted to enable these institutions to survive and prosper. Governments and other donors must also come in to support these institutions to provide higher education. Further still, continuous improvement of teaching and research infrastructure should be given priority by new and private universities.

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Introduction

As highest institutions of learning, universities are charged with producing human resource that is well equipped to deal with the social, economic, political and scientific challenges of society. Universities, whether public or private, old or new, all work and develop with and against challenges like any other institution.

Chacha Nyaigoti (2008) observes that key goals defined for university education in most countries include: the increase and broadening of participation to meet the human resource needs and advance social equity; the promotion of quality and maintenance of quality assurance through accreditation of programmes, evaluation of programmes, institutional audits; and the application of good governance and effective management as well as administration through cooperative governance of system and institutions. Universities also aspire to create partnerships and capacity-building initiatives and to develop good curriculums and programmes that are in an outcome-based format with the aim of adding knowledge that is responsive to societal interests and needs.

Historically in all societies in Africa, public universities are the oldest of universities. This is because it is only the state that was originally charged with handling social services such as these, and the demand for higher education was not so high, as it is today, as to foster the emergence of new players in the form of private universities. This is especially true of those African countries which were victims of colonisation. In traditional Africa, the education system was informal and the impartation of practical life skills to learners was the principal concern of informal learning. So, the class-based education system whose highest level of learning is the university was introduced only at the time when colonial powers were planning to give African nations independence. It is therefore very important to understand that university education in Africa, since independence, was an issue

of the state until the late 1990s when demand for university education outstripped the capacity of existing public institutions, hence private players came in to attempt to close this gap. In the face of increasing populations, more new universities have been created to match the increasing demand for higher education. Sir John Daniel, former Chancellor of the Open University, United Kingdom, quoted in Hanna (2003), observes that a key factor in the changing societal needs is demand. Demand for higher education is dramatically outstripping the capabilities of nations to expand access due to already existing shortages of space in traditional colleges and universities, a growing young population in many areas of the world, and limitations on resources, both financial and human. In order to sustain even the current level of participation in higher education globally, an average of one new major institution would need to be created somewhere in the world each week for the next thirty years.

Therefore, in analysing the challenges of new and private universities, this article tackles a question whose answers are critically needed at this time.

In Uganda, for example, the oldest University is Makerere, a public institution established during the colonial era. However, there are now other public universities that were established to deliver higher education from the late 1990s onwards (Kinengyere 2008). These are: Mbarara University of Science and Technology, Gulu University, Kyambogo University and Busitema University. Ugandans also have the services of several privately established universities at their disposal. Most of these private universities were also established from the mid-1990s onwards, including Bishop Stuart University which was established in 2002. Currently, there are over fifteen private universities in Uganda which are licensed by the National Council for Higher Education (NHCE). The most outstanding difference between public and private universities is that whereas public universities are funded by the state, private universities are funded through private sources.

This certainly poses a number of challenges as well as opportunities for both types of institutions. For the purposes of this article, we confine our focus on the challenges of teaching and research at new and private universities in Uganda. This is because teaching and research are the core functions of any university as the highest institution of learning charged with training competent minds that will transform society, as well as creating new knowledge to foster societal development through continuous research. In fact, if a university ceases to generate new and relevant knowledge, it has embarked on the highway to extinction.

These challenges are structured in five broad categories that are discussed in detail in the main body of this article, namely challenges of research-based learning, institutional research capacity, administration, academic research supervision and more importantly inadequate financial support by government.

Challenges of teaching and research

Research-based learning

This is a two-way challenge presenting itself in the form of lack of necessary resources and limited capacity for the teaching staff and students. To begin with, it should be noted that university academic staff (professors, lecturers, junior staff), unlike primary and secondary school teachers, are supposed to possess advanced skills and capacity for research. This is because the university, as the highest institution of learning, is a centre for knowledge generation and dissemination. However, new private universities exist without the financial support of government and this hinders their capacity to make short- and long-term investments in library and information technology infrastructure which has to be available to support research-based learning. For example, due to the very high cost of stocking libraries with up-to-date books and other literature, their libraries depend on donations of

books from well-wishers and most of these books are outdated and if they are current, they are in very small numbers. Kinengyere (2008) observes that the internet is an effective tool for access to knowledge for advancement of education. However, new universities normally lack internet connection systems which could meet student and staff needs. This compounds the problem because research-based learning is made possible by the adequate availability of at least one of these critical resources.

Secondly, the new private universities do not have sufficient sources of income to enable academic staff to engage in new research with the aim of generating new knowledge in specific fields for the benefit of the students (Chacha Nyaigoti 2008).

To make matters worse, internal and external research donor organisations tend to neglect calls for support from new universities, instead preferring either the government institutions or the older and more established institutions, whether private or public. With this scenario at play, it has remained a challenge for new and private universities to develop competence in research-based learning.

Institutional research capacity

One prominent feature of old and well established universities in the developed world is the vast institutional capacity to handle and manage research activities. This lies solely in the human resources that they have and in the capacity to absorb research funds for utilisation in achieving pre-set goals. This feature is not only limited to the universities in the developed world but is also observable in some old and well established public and private universities in the developing world. Unfortunately, this cannot be said of most of the new and private universities. This is because of two basic reasons:

1. The level of human resource training is very low. Most of the staff have only first degrees and very few have graduate qualifications. In fact, higher up the ladder, it becomes clear that the doctorate

holders and professors are a great rarity in these institutions. Since very highly qualified staff thin on the ground, this means that research capacity of the institution remains very limited since there are no well trained persons who can easily obtain the trust of research funding bodies to intervene. Okaka (2008) correctly observed that lowly qualified academic staff do not have the capacity to participate in research network activities in the form of collaborative research with other established institutions.

- b. Scientific research is very costly because of the high costs of research infrastructure like the research laboratories, farms and hospitals facilities (Arinaitwe, 2008). In fact, most new universities tend to concentrate on offering arts and humanities courses since these are not very costly to run. However, no nation on earth has been able to make good and sustained progress in development without concentrating on scientific research. Globally, Africa lies at the lowest level of development because of the low level of technological application. Despite this, the continent continues to produce more graduates in humanities who at the end of the day may not have practical skills to help them exploit the abundant natural resource potential but instead end up on the streets looking for blue- or white-collar employment. This is not to undermine the usefulness of the humanities and social sciences but to point out the need for training professionals in other fields as well.

Research supervision

As a core function of practical training for students and imparting research skills, all universities require both their undergraduate and graduate students to write research papers, dissertations and theses before finally being permitted to graduate. This requires a lot of time input from the lecturers and professors as well as ready access to knowledge and information in order to ensure that quality research

is produced. However, new universities hardly have enough research funding to subsidise supervisors so that they may be motivated to put in as much time and effort as possible into the student's research work. This, coupled with limited access to new information, limits the quality of research training for the students in comparison to the established institutions which have already built their capacity.

Administrative challenges

The administrative challenges are structured into three categories for easy analysis: Human resource management, finances and infrastructure.

From the very outset, we find that new and private universities do not always have enough human resources who are adequately trained in handling research. Hanna (2003) notes that universities need to develop dedicated and competent staff who can engage a diversity of learners with more complex learning needs. This is partly because the administration does not have the capacity to attract very highly qualified people by giving them attractive employment packages. It should be noted that no institution, particularly in the developing countries, including the old and well established ones, can have all the personnel with all the expertise in all required fields. Therefore, it is commonplace to advertise teaching positions with the aim of attracting people who may be interested in changing their work environment, exploring new opportunities or simply looking for pay that is better than their current pay. In this respect, when young institutions advertise, they end up receiving applications from young and lowly qualified people who are simply looking for a start rather than the older, well qualified and experienced people who may truly bring in a sizeable contribution.

Similarly, new and private universities may not be able to outsource highly trained personnel on a part-time basis. Outsourcing is a normal practice as noted before, since many universities may not always

be fully self-sufficient. Therefore, in cases where such a university has to bring in expertise to train students (especially in graduate programmes), these experts normally ignore the invitations because they value those invitations from the well established and reputable institutions since these will most probably give more weight to the experts' career development.

The second category of administrative challenges is financial. Finances are a crucial ingredient in the success of any institution. This is because when an institution has enough finances at its disposal, it can do all the necessary things that lead to institutional growth concurrently without worrying about shortfalls in the budget. However, new and private universities do not always have a healthy balance sheet since most funds are generated internally from student tuition fees and sometimes other related dues. Basheka (2008), notes that financial constraints are a major stumbling block to service delivery in institutions of higher learning. As a result of this, therefore these universities fail to:

- a. Motivate their staff to put in extra effort since the pay is always inadequate.
- b. Keep their staff from escaping to other institutions of higher learning that may in one way or another offer better pay or other related incentives.
- c. Build the research capacity of their staff through staff development or related research activities.
- d. Encourage recruitment of teaching assistants in a bid to facilitate staff development programmes.

In the light of the above, new and private institutions normally fail to obtain adequate results in teaching and research because they lack the necessary financial resources. It is common for university administrations to grapple with last-minute adjustments in budget processes as they attempt to capture the needs of key departments while ignoring others.

The third administrative challenge is inadequate infrastructure, particularly the physical and technological infrastructure. In terms of physical infrastructure, older institutions normally have enough lecture space and offices for teaching staff. On the contrary, the administrations of new and private universities are always grappling with the question of inadequate infrastructure where the number of students oftentimes outstrips the amount of space available for lecture rooms and offices. Chacha Nyaigoti (2008) asserts that lack of infrastructure or deterioration of infrastructure is a result of poor funding. In this case, quite often lectures are missed simply because there is a "clash" in timetables. The responses of the administration to infrastructure challenges normally result in undesirable circumstances, such as strikes by students. For example, it is common practice for students of a private university to stage strikes because the administration decided to increase tuition fees in order to improve/establish new structures.

Regarding technological infrastructure, globalisation has enabled the use of computers and the internet has taken over the world. This is called the information technology age. As such, it is crucial for any institution of higher learning to have internet connectivity and good coverage of computers for students as well as staff in order to facilitate better learning. On the contrary, new and private universities are not always adequately covered by these services which are of course expensive and therefore a strain to their budgets. This hampers the process of research and teaching since access to current and up-to-date information may be easily through the internet.

Lack of government support

This challenge is discussed by analysing two respects in which government has generally tended to neglect private institutions. These are in the areas of financing and capacity-building. It should be noted that although these are called private institutions, just because

they are started by individuals and private organisations other than the state, they train the nation's citizens and therefore rightly deserve government support under established criteria.

Government's financing to the public universities is sanctioned by parliament since these institutions exist to provide subsidised education services to the citizenry. However, it should be noted that it is the same parliament that recognised the inadequate capacity of public institutions against the rising population and the parallel demand for higher education services and sanctioned into law private universities.

Currently, though, all government universities charge private fees to subsidise their services to the nation due to ever-increasing costs of operation despite the government funding which they receive. The private institutions, however, have been neglected by the Executive despite the fact that they cannot always be fully self-sufficient. It is evident that the population of students in the nation outstrips the capacity of existing private institutions yet these students cannot be absorbed by public universities. According to Basheka (2008), inadequate infrastructure in an environment of increasing enrolments is a major challenge to institutions of higher learning in Uganda. It should therefore be fair for the nation and justified for the government to come in and help private institutions build the necessary physical infrastructures. Physical infrastructure is particularly crucial but requires huge amounts of money that these institutions may not be able to raise in the short run. Government support should be given under clear terms of reference so as to ensure that public funds are properly used to deliver the intended services. In Britain, for example, the government directly supports private institutions of higher learning in recognition of the fact that the challenges at this level are more sophisticated than those at lower levels on the education ladder (Hanna 2003).

Furthermore, the government has not supported capacity-building in the private and new universities, which includes the training of staff and the development of teaching and research. The government's primary obligation is to the public universities but when it comes to capacity-building in human resource development, the government's support for further training will not be an act of patronage, but rather of collective responsibility for the good of citizens that these institutions train for the collective good of the nation.

Conclusion

New and private universities are clearly in need of a rapid change of approach to respond to the existing social, economic and technological challenges discussed in this article. New institutional strategies and decision-making mechanisms must be created, articulated and adopted to enable these institutions to survive and prosper. Governments and other donors must come in to support these institutions to provide higher education and continuous improvement of teaching and research infrastructure should be given priority by new and private universities. This article only seeks to contribute to the ongoing debate on the performance of new private universities by trying to summarise a number of key challenges that have to be addressed in order for those universities to realise quality higher education. This article only answers a few questions but will hopefully stimulate further discussion and lead to further interrogation of many other relevant questions.

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