

Governance Challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in the East African  
Universities

By

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## 1.0 Introduction

The purpose of my presentation today is two-fold. First, since you all come from the community of universities in this region and are regularly confronted by many of these challenges I wish to set the scene with a cursory review of the more typical or generic challenges. Second, I propose to bring a Makerere University and perhaps a personal, lay man's perspective derived from direct engagement with some of these critical challenges, to trigger critical reflection on them. I acknowledge and have had some glimpse of the outstanding progress that has been achieved by many of our universities in E. Africa in the area of governance. I see this presentation only as a trigger to reflect and draw on all your experiences to forge a common path into the future.

The definitions I apply to some of the terms and concepts in the topic at hand are not necessarily technical definitions. Governance, to borrow and adapt UNDP's definition is seen as "The exercise of economic, political, and administrative authority to manage an institution's affairs at all levels" (UNDP, 1997, p. 2). It is broadly used in this paper to refer to university governance especially from the perspective of University Councils. Challenges are presented as both positive and negative forces that spur the leaders forward to improve their systems of governance. The 21<sup>st</sup> century will be the focus of our discussions but there will be retreats into the 20<sup>th</sup> century where most of these challenges originate.

## 1.2 Governance structures and functions in E. African Universities

The "senior citizens" (Makerere, Dar es Salaam and Nairobi) and the younger public universities in the E. African community of universities share the governance structure characterized by the hierarchy of a Chancellor, Governing Council, and Senate. Councils tend to be the supreme organs of the university responsible for policy formulation and the direction of

administrative, financial and academic affairs of the university. Senates are typically responsible to Council for the organization, control and direction of academic affairs. (UOTIA, 2001; UDS 2008; Ngombe, 2003). While retaining the hierarchical structure inherited from the colonial period, the governance model in these universities is now predominantly corporate or managerial although a tinge of the political model is apparent in the student and staff mobilization activities in some of the universities. Many of our private universities have set up governance structures that are derivatives of this public university governance model. We are therefore sharing the 21<sup>st</sup> century governance challenges in a fairly homogeneous audience of universities.

## 2.0 Generic challenges

Before we review the challenges that most of us share at our universities in this region I would like to request you to take a moment to stretch your imagination over the remaining 91 years (or less) of this century in order to share in one man's synopsis of a vision of ***the future university*** in E. Africa. This is a vision set in a modern, globalized environment which he insists will require us to completely rethink our concept of higher education. This is his vision:

- ✚ *A university without walls, a virtual learning community, facilitated by technological developments;*
- ✚ *Students studying from Information Technology (IT) bases in or near their homes, which provide individualized learning programmes managed by elite groups of teachers at satellite education centres. The students enjoy a greater freedom of choice of interdisciplinary subjects or courses and flexible study calendars;*

✚ but isn't our c

*education. The university will be able to triple its intake using distance, on-line learning methods at a fraction of the cost of residential, full-time study. Overall, the consequence will be mass university education for citizens, including learning for non-degree purposes. (Omar Kalinge-Nnyago, 2009)*

You may notice that this synoptic vision, contextualized to E. Africa, is in line with more grandiose visions of the future international university which are fast becoming reality in America and Europe. (Harvey, 1998). So if we can see all or some aspects of Nnyago's vision as being possible or feasible components of the governance of our universities within the next 91 years, we can also begin to see the challenges our universities face as opportunities, stimulants, difficult tasks or tests, setbacks, needs and necessities – all on our journey to the future university in E. Africa.

The challenges reviewed below have been widely documented, some by scholars in this IUCEA community.

## 2.1 Governance

There is wide recognition that the needs of our learners and of the societies that our universities serve are constantly mutating. This calls for a transformation of the university governance structures and styles to make them more flexible, as well as efficient, accountable and transparent. University management also needs reform “to move [it] from highly centralized, standardized and command-driven forms of management to more decentralized and participatory decision-making, implementation and monitoring at the lower levels of accountability.” (Nyaigotti & Ouma, 2001). Also noted is the need to re-train current leaders and to systematically prepare new leaders for new emerging roles.

## 2.2 Financing

One challenge that all public universities in E. Africa have shared is the *financial crunch* long before the current global credit crunch emerged. National governments have historically been the primary funders of universities. However, the explosion of university student populations, governments' shifting fiscal priorities and donor-driven structural adjustment programmes have progressively

drained down the resources the universities need to deliver quality education. (Mohamedbhai, 2008) Universities routinely receive much less than their projected budgets especially given that the minimal budget amounts that are finally approved are often not fully remitted. In the worst case scenario the government grants do not cover the total staff wage bill. Such deprivation has forced universities to rely more heavily on donor support, to admit unprecedented numbers of privately-paying students and to start commercial income-generating projects. There are both positive and negative outcomes from these strategies, the latter being the donor dependency syndrome and the unplanned, unwieldy management of internally-generated funds (IGFs).

### 2.3 Unplanned growth

Our universities share challenges arising from the exponential growth of student populations. Student enrolment rose from 47,254 in 1999 to 93,341 in 2005 in Kenya, (Mohamedbhai, 2008), and from 5,597 in 1990/91 to 34,585 in 2008/09 in Uganda. (Mak. Univ., Academic Registrar's Office, 2009). Oketch's observation for the Kenyan phenomenon can be safely generalized to other universities in the region. He states: "public universities in Kenya continue to face enrolments beyond their capacities to plan and finance, fiscal challenges beyond their control, a decline in quality beyond their anticipation and weak management practices beyond their level of training. (Oketch, 2003). Mohamedbhai describes such unplanned growth as negative institutional massification where "an institution experiences a high rate of participation, but does not have sufficient resources to cater for the increased enrolment." (Mohamedbhai, 2008)

### 2.4 Staff welfare and training

In many universities staff welfare is the responsibility of the employer, i.e. Council. However, staff salaries are paid by government, leaving Councils powerless to change salary conditions if government does not act. Inadequate remuneration has cost universities the loss of outstanding brains and skills that have migrated abroad. The remaining staff have been forced into in-come generating activities to supplement their dwindling earnings. Inadequate remuneration has often been the cause of staff strikes. Also noted is the need for

systematic programmes to continually train and re-train academic staff in pedagogy and other relevant emerging areas.

## 2.5 Student welfare

Students' guilds have been a characteristic feature of student governance in E. Africa since the 1960s. Nevertheless, there is increasing recognition that the peripheral role students have played in the higher education process should be shifted more to the centre, turning them into "partners and responsible stakeholders" in this process and involving them in evaluation, renovation of teaching methods and curricula, policy formulation and institutional management. (Nyaigotti-Chacha, 2004)

## 2.6 The role of Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

ICT is a force and resource whose utility our university governors can no longer afford to ignore or even delay. Internationally, the overriding role of ICT in higher education was predicted in the 1990s and has been growing ever since. (Harvey, 1998, pg. 10). Nyaigotti proposes five functions that ICT should serve in E. African universities: data collection and analysis, strengthening of management systems, improving access to education by remote and disadvantaged communities, supporting initial and continuing professional development of teachers and providing opportunities to communities across classrooms and cultures. (Chacha-Nyaigotti, 2004). These functions are clearly in sync with Nnyago's vision of the future university.

## 2.7 Gender-related governance challenges

Historically the participation of women in higher education in E. Africa has been low. The usual culprits blamed for this are traditional, cultural beliefs that restrict women to domestic roles and social attitudes that stereotype women into "soft", traditional humanities professions. The blame should also go to university policy makers that have neglected to build into governance structures specific provisions that encourage women to access, participate, perform and advance in university careers.

### **3.0 21<sup>st</sup> Century governance challenges at Makerere University**

This section focuses on some of the most poignant 21<sup>st</sup> century governance challenges, putting some flesh on them so that you can view and experience them through the lenses of Makerere University.

#### **3.1 Institutional autonomy**

Let us begin by exploring Makerere's autonomy for it forms the core around which numerous governance issues revolve. Autonomy is simply defined here as "the freedom [of universities] to determine their goals and programmes" (at a substantive level) and as "the freedom [and means] to decide how best to achieve their ends" (at a procedural level). (qtd. Yahya-Othman, 2000). It is also best to keep in mind Idi Amin's sobering observation at his installation as Vice Chancellor in 1972 to the effect that "no institution deriving part or all of its financing from public funds can be fully autonomous" (Sicherman, 2005)

##### **Historical perspective**

Governance and its fluctuating levels of autonomy at Makerere and sister universities in E. Africa has its roots in the colonial era 1930s – 1963, and through the period of the University of E. Africa (UEA) 1963 – 1970. During the colonial era authority over Makerere college was vested in the colonial office and governance was dispensed through the College Council and Academic Board. Under the UEA these structures were transformed into the University Council, as the coordinating and examining body and the Senate, as the overseer of academic standards. The Visitor in the colonial structure was replaced by a ceremonial Chancellor.

1970 saw the UEA dissolved into three separate universities: Nairobi, Dar es Salaam and Makerere Universities. Obote's first government placed Makerere under the University Act of 1970, running it as a department of government and totally centralizing its governance. Between them, the President and his Minister of Education appointed every significant university official, the Vice Chancellor, Chairman of Council, Appointment Board and Senate members, Faculty Deans and Professors. The Minister of Education was authorized to "give directions to Council and Senate on any matter ... in the public interest." (qtd. Maxwell, 1980).

Amin's and Obote II governments (1971 – 1985) intensified control of Makerere's governance to totalitarian proportions. The NRM government (1986 to date) relieved Makerere from the 1970 University Act, replacing it with the Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act (UOTIA) 2001, which dramatically reduced government control over public universities in Uganda. The most significant reforms in governance included the appointment of the Vice Chancellor by the Chancellor on the recommendation of Council, the election of deans, directors and department heads, the approval by Council of Senate decisions and the wide representation of all stakeholder groups, including students, on relevant Council and Senate committees.

With regard to financing mechanisms, government shifted the bulk of its resources to funding universal primary education (UPE) practically starving the public universities of resources. Recurrent expenditure on primary education rose from 52% to 68% while that on tertiary education fell from 28% to 16% between 1995 and 1999. (Mamdani, 2007). Government encouraged the universities to explore multiple funding sources for their needs. One major outcome of this effort was the introduction of the privately-sponsored students into the university and the subsequent decentralization of authority to the academic units to generate and spend finances.

At the beginning of this 21<sup>st</sup> century, this state of affairs at Makerere and upcoming public universities represented the height of democratic governance – a near idyllic state in which numerous liberties were granted and exercised. It conformed to the corporate model of governance Prof. Nyaigotti advocated in 2001 - full decentralization that ensured participatory decision-making, implementation and monitoring at the lower levels, i.e. faculties and institutes. However, eight years of implementing the UOTIA have laid bare its many loopholes. Serious problems have arisen from the exploitation of these loopholes which now threaten to reverse some hard-won reforms. Three of the major problems are described below:

- 3.1.1 The private student scheme, initially intended to be an opportunity to extend access to students able to finance their own university education was not subjected to any regulatory structures. The management of the

admissions systems went out of hand as student numbers admitted soon outstripped the available teaching and research facilities and manpower. Admissions were driven by the search for more and more funds. Central Administration and Council lost their grip over the money-generating units, which claimed full ownership and authority over resources generated at unit level. Whereas in Kenya, as Sifuna discloses, the 1990s university planning debacles can be attributed to directives from above, (Sifuna, 1998) at Makerere they were bred at the decentralized units.

3.1.2 An anomaly in the government-controlled admission system continues to favour a few government-sponsored students (2,090 government-sponsored compared to 12,388 privately paying students admitted in to Makerere in 2008) (Mak Academic Registrar's office). The anomaly becomes an inequity when, as Prof. A. Kasozi has recently confirmed, the government-sponsored students typically come from families that can afford to pay university fees. (Kasozi, 2008). Without a mitigating mechanism like Kenya's student loan scheme in place, the poor, bright students get left out of the system. University Councils, although empowered by the 2001 Act to regulate admissions, cannot correct this anomaly on their own. Mohamedbhai has added his to Mamdani's and Nnyago's voices to suggest equity in the payment and treatment of all students admitted on merit. He further recommends in-depth study of this problem in sample, cash-trapped African universities. (Mohamedbhai, 2008).

3.1.3 The selection of the Vice Chancellor was subjected to a search process allowing his election by both Senate and Council. At faculty/unit level, staff elected the heads of their units. Over time, unfortunately, staff allegiances to their leaders, historically driven by qualitative academic and administrative considerations, have given way to pecuniary interests. Tragically also, partisan politics is creeping back through the electoral system.

### 3.2 University autonomy in jeopardy

Considering the negative outcomes exemplified by the problems described above, one is persuaded to pose the question: *Is this a case of an opportunity abused and lost or is it a signal or warning to clean up and consolidate our system and then move on ahead?* For in response to these negative developments there are increasing voices at both the university and in government calling for stiffer regulation of the systems. Within the university more voices are calling for a return to the appointment as opposed to the election of unit heads. Indeed government has recommended a discontinuation of the elective system. At government level, the most recent Visitation Committee report and ensuing White Paper (Government White Paper on the Visitation Committee Report, 2008) have recommended a re-centralization of financial controls, to be vested in Council. Government is also gradually pruning Council's autonomy. Two examples will suffice. The UOTIA was recently amended to empower the Minister of Education to make some pronouncements on university policy matters, formerly an exclusive function of Council. Then the Visitation Committee recommendation that "Councils should have the autonomy to charge fees based on unit cost" was amended by government, restricting such autonomy to charging fees "in consultation with the Ministry of Education, with the approval of Cabinet. (Visitation Committee Report, 2007)

Given the eventful historical journey in governance that we have so far travelled; from colonial control to some liberalism under the UEA, to near totalitarian control under two former governments and on to the precarious liberalized governance we have today, I would wish to pose another question for you to ponder:

*How can University Councils consolidate and responsibly exercise the partial autonomy that is coming to them in order to convince their stakeholders that the universities deserve more of this autonomy to evolve into functional universities of the future?*

### 3.2 Private enterprise within a public institutional framework

In 2008, Makerere had a total student population of 34,585 only 6,534 of whom were government-sponsored. On the one criterion of the apportionment of fees collection one might easily mistaken Makerere's status for a private institution. The university is, however, a public institution governed by the UOTIA of 2001. As is the case in other E. African universities, the recent trend has been to increase and diversify its private enterprise activities in order to fill the gap left by government's limited financing. The major challenge Makerere has to contend with in this strategy is to integrate these private enterprise functions into its public institutional framework.

Makerere University Council sanctioned three types of private enterprise: the private students' scheme, in-come generating commercial units and public/private partnership collaborations.

#### 3.2.1 The private students' scheme

This is the equivalent of the parallel degree programmes (PDP) or the privately-sponsored student programmes (PSSP) in Nairobi and Dar-es-salaam Universities. (Nyaigotti, 2002) The conditions leading to their establishment have been amply documented. Worthy of note here are the danger signals that have been sounded, cautioning against the increasing shift from the privatization to the commercialization of this scheme. Mamdani defines *privatization* as the "entry of privately-sponsored students [in a manner] compatible with a public university where priorities are publicly set", and *commercialization* as "financial and administrative autonomy for each faculty to design a market-responsive curriculum [that] inevitably leads to a market determination of priorities in a public university." (Mamdani, 2007). The caution is not so much against responding to the public demand for university education as against the temptation by staff to increase private revenues in disregard of the quality of the education offered. Commercialization also deprives the staff of the time they should otherwise apportion to research and professional growth. This sad trend confirms UNESCO's statistical evidence of the decline of participation by African Universities in research.

### 3.2.2 Income-generating commercial units

Makerere's income-generating commercial units are going through a mid-life crisis, struggling to emerge from *service* to *corporate* modes of management. The challenge some of them face is that as long as government insists on retaining non-pedagogical student services e.g. feeding and accommodation, without providing the commensurate funding, these otherwise commercial enterprises are forced to subsidize student services. Fortunately, progress is being signalled of recent in government willingness to sanction privatization of the management of residential and catering services, as is the case in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam.

### 3.2.3 Public/private partnerships

The University has of recent seized many opportunities to forge valuable partnerships with the private sector. In 2006, the Vice Chancellor, Prof. Livingstone Luboobi initiated and led the effort to establish the Makerere University Private Sector Forum (MUPSF) to promote collaboration between the university and strategic partners in the private sector with regard to research programs, product development, curriculum development, and the shaping and preparation of university students for the world of work. MUPSF has established formal links in development cooperation with twelve local and some international partners including Bank of Uganda, Capital Markets Authority, and Libyan universities working in petroleum and textile engineering programmes.

Some prominent voices in government have urged the university to seek further collaboration with international companies in order to benefit from more advanced technologies. Scholars in the Faculty of Computing and Information Technology (FCIT) are developing IT products in collaboration with regional and international companies – Nokia, Goggle, IBM, FedEx, HP Africa, among others.

One of Makerere's most outstanding public/private partnership ventures is the Infectious Diseases Institute (IDI). Established in 2004 to tackle the biggest 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries' health challenges, i.e. HIV/AIDS and other key

infectious diseases, the IDI partnership brought together Accordia Global Health Foundation, Pfizer Inc., the Academic Alliance and Makerere University, as host. IDI is the preeminent centre in sub-Saharan Africa for infectious diseases training, treatment and research. As you will note on pg. 37 of the *IDI Annual Report 2008*, all the countries covered by the IUCEA are participating in IDI's programmes.

### 3.3 Quality Assurance and Standards

The story is told of two Masters' graduates in the staff development programme in one of our universities who went abroad to Europe to pursue their PhDs. They reported their dismay at discovering that the content and skills they had covered in their Masters program back home was only equivalent to a Bachelors level programme at their host university. They had to do the Masters all over again to enable them cope with the stringencies of the PhD degree. In the process, they were patriotic enough to return home and advise that the Masters programme be upgraded.

This is probably not an isolated indicator of the quality of some of our academic courses and the effectiveness of programme accreditation procedures. One of the challenges we have had at Makerere, being the mother of most regional institutions, is the willingness to accept scrutiny and regulation of our academic programmes by an external authority. We have, however, made progress in the last few years. Council approved the Quality Assurance Policy in 2007 and established a unit, now the Directorate of Quality Assurance which has embraced the guidelines set by the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE). New courses are now thoroughly vetted before approval through Senate and Council and existing courses are being streamlined to eliminate wasteful duplication.

Oversight at both national (NCHE) and regional levels is going to be increasingly critical if our universities in the region are to measure up to the rigors of 21<sup>st</sup> century universities. It would also be useful to streamline the services that both the national Councils for Higher Education and IUCEA give to universities. This would clarify and energise a productive tripartite

relationship between the universities, the national Councils for Higher Education and IUCEA.

### 3.4 Tackling Gender challenges

Conscious of the university's obligation to bring gender issues to the centre of its operations, Council established the Gender Mainstreaming Programme in 2001/02. The Programme continues to mainstream gender strategies into teaching and learning, research and innovations, knowledge transfer partnership and networking, and support services. The Programme also provides oversight for the government's policy of affirmative action for girls which aims to increase access for them by awarding qualified female students preferential entry points into public universities. The Programme has primary responsibility for implementing the nine-year donor-funded Female Scholarship Initiative for girls from disadvantaged backgrounds. Donor funding is currently being phased out and the university has embarked on the major challenge of fundraising locally for replacement funding. In this respect we have a lesson to learn from Dar e Salaam University where the government has taken over the funding of its similar programme.

At policy level, Council has been active in providing for gender needs in university policies including enacting gender-specific policies e.g., the Sexual Harassment Policy. The combination of all these strategies has so far leveraged the doubling of the female student population from 22% in 1990 to 45% in 2008. At the recent graduation ceremony in January 2009, 46.2% of the graduants were female, up from 43.7% in 2008, although only 20% of the PhDs went to women. (VC's speech, Jan 2009). Council policies have so far brought forth a pioneer female Deputy Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs and a female Deputy Chairperson of Council. The university continues its efforts to equalize the admission and graduation of male and female students but still has an uphill task in increasing female participation in science and technology courses as well as promoting the advancement of female scholars and administrators into the top leadership ranks of the university.

### 3.5 Embracing Computing and Information Technology (CIT)

Training in CIT is one key area in which Makerere University can now claim the semblance of promising beginnings to a *future university* in E. Africa. The training facility is, in several respects, a service centre for universities in the region and beyond.

Constructed from exclusively internally-generated funds (including private student fees, donor and public/private partnership contributions), the CIT facility is one example of Council's successful privatization efforts. The facility, rated the largest in Africa, has made available 15,000sq metres of space for student learning activities as well as for national and regional IT development needs. It has brought down the computer to student ratio at university from 1:12 to 1:6. (VC's speech, Feb 2009)

The new building houses a range of specialized computer facilities including teaching labs, an Advanced Geographical Information Systems [GIS] lab, a Network and Systems lab, a Mobile Computing lab, a national software Incubation Centre, an Online networking lab, Cisco Academy Training labs, a Computer Engineering lab, an E-Learning lab and Pan African E-networks Tele-Education labs. The latter two facilities network with other countries in the region and beyond. The E-Learning lab project is a collaboration with several African universities in Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, Rwanda, Nigeria and S. Africa, forming the African Virtual Open Initiatives and Resources (AVOIR) network. The Pan African E-networks Tele-Education lab connects to India and the 53 countries in the African Union. It provides communication and connectivity among those countries for purposes of tele-education, tele-medicine and VVIP-connectivity.

With regard to computerizing management systems, Council is currently constrained to pay exorbitant fees for limited band width to maintain inter-linked systems that store the finance, human resources, academic registry and library records. It also maintains a local intranet mail service. Students' halls of residence are being fitted with wireless connectivity facilities to enable them access their lecturers and other learning resources on-line. We are therefore witnessing the beginnings of virtual learning sites. Makerere, like the rest of Uganda awaits the arrival of the underground optic cable from

Mombasa to benefit from affordable fees for broadband-supported online services.

Members of staff outside of the Faculty of CIT are gradually and sometimes grudgingly making use of the faculty's facilities to gain computer proficiency. Nevertheless the real challenge remains the slow pace of many of our staff, some in influential, high-ranking positions, to switch to the future-oriented paradigm of the information age. Harvey's conclusion to his address on the university of the 21<sup>st</sup> century accentuates the need to prepare for change: "Employing organisations do not need victims of change, they need people who can contribute to the transformation of the organisations in the face of rapid and continuous change. ... What is needed is that academics embrace the new paradigm of higher education and embrace transformation as a positive rather than a regrettable step away from the traditional values of the cloister." (Harvey, 1998 pg.19).

#### **4.0 Conclusion**

For my conclusion, I wish to give voice to a lingering question being asked by contemporary thinkers, including many of you. The question is:

***Where are our present-day Mazruis, Rubadiris, Yash Tandons, Ngugi wa Thiong'os, Okot p'Bitek, Wangari Maathais etc - those eloquent, visionary, challenging voices born and bred at our universities in the 20<sup>th</sup> century? Where are the eloquent voices of the 21<sup>st</sup> century?***

Putting this question in the context of this paper, I request you to reflect on the following ensuing questions:

- Are our governance systems stifling the potential of these voices, denying them the environment to grow?
- Are our prevailing national political systems muzzling these voices?
- Despite the massification of higher education, are our financing systems discriminating against and therefore excluding them from our universities?

- Are our student, staff and gender policies inspiring these visionary voices to surface, mature and grow in eloquence?
- Are our institutional and professional values – or their absence – deflating the resolve of these voices, denying them the opportunity to mature and blossom?
- Is it a case of *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born*?\* But even if it were the case, my concluding question for your reflection remains:

***What should we do, as universities, to breed and nurture the eloquent, visionary voices that will carry us into the 22<sup>nd</sup> century in E. Africa?***

\* *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born* is a novel by Ghanaian writer, Ayi Kwei Armah

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