

MAKERERE UNIVERSITY



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Advancing the Research Agenda at Makerere University

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When I was invited to give this talk, I asked myself: What shall I talk about? I decided against talking about the Ph D program we inaugurated at Makerere Institute of Social Research six months ago. We are having an evaluation workshop in August and I do not want to preempt it. Besides, it may be too early to draw lessons from it.

When I began looking around for information on graduate education at Makerere, every finger pointed in the same direction: the program funded by Sida.

The Swedish International Development Agency is Makerere's largest donor. Over a little more than a decade, it has poured millions of dollars into graduate education at Makerere. In 2008, Sida commissioned a group of three Swedish researchers¹ to evaluate their assistance to Makerere. They worked with a Ugandan research assistant,² and published an evaluation in 2010. It is available on <http://www.sida.se/publications>.

I read the report a few weeks ago, soon after I was invited to give this talk. The most impressive thing about the report is that it asks the right questions, two in particular. First, how do you develop a research agenda? The second: why is it that money alone will not solve the problem? As the Americans say, throwing money at the problem will not solve it. At least, money by itself is not the answer.

The other thing that struck me about the report is that, though it asked the right questions, it was unable to answer any of the questions it posed. I looked for a clue and found it at the very beginning of the report. The study team begins by admitting its own limitations. Its main limitation, the report says, was lack of time. Because Sida brought forward the timing of their visit to Uganda at "short notice", which is really to say without notice, they had hardly any time to prepare for it. As a result, the study team "was not able to develop questionnaires, perform surveys, or collect data prior the site visit, nor to seek perceptions from Makerere participants about the survey and interview results from Sweden during the Makerere site visit." (p. 10). Among other things, the study thus suffered from a "lack of data about activities and outputs of Sida-funded graduate students and senior researchers/supervisors." (p. 10).

I am going to argue that even if the study team had been given more time and more data, it would not have been able to answer the questions it posed. For the simple reason that those questions cannot be answered by an external evaluation. They need an internal reflection.

1 Phyllis Freeman, Eva Johansson and Jerker Thorvaldsson

2 Nelson Kakande

I do not wish to detract from the value of the report. To repeat what I have just said, the study team was able to formulate the right questions. Ever since I returned to Makerere in May 2010, I have been saying endlessly to anyone who would listen that it is far more important to formulate the right questions than to give the right answers, for the simple reason that the answers you give depend on the questions you ask.

It is the questions the study team asked that can point the way forward for us. I would like to reflect on these questions, one by one.

How do you develop a research agenda?

Developing “research capacity” is the main objective of Sida assistance. As a small country surrounded by powerful neighbors in a rapidly globalizing world, Sweden understands the critical importance of independent research as indispensable to maintaining intellectual independence as the basis for social, economic and political independence. To put it differently, the Swedes understand that if you want to act independently, you have to develop the capacity to think on your own feet.

To realize this end, the report makes three recommendations: first, “indigenous development of research themes”; second, the formation of “research groups as foundations for continuing teamwork” and, third, “collaboration within and across disciplines and geographic boundaries.” (p. 38). The first is the most important: “indigenous development of research themes.” Why the emphasis on “indigenous” development of research themes? Why can we borrow research themes from elsewhere, import them from foreign universities, world reknown, or have them provided by foreign advisors? A research agenda can only be formulated on the basis of an understanding of one’s own reality. It is not a recipe that can be passed around. It has to be home grown. The first step to intellectual independence, to developing our own research agenda, is to develop our own research questions.

Individuals cannot develop research questions in the splendid isolation of their studies. To do so, they need the development of peer activities, from constituting research teams to holding seminars. All these function as so many sites for internal debate and brainstorming. “How can MAK play a stronger role in developing Uganda’s research agenda?” (p. 49). It is a question the study team asked, but did not answer.

What money alone cannot do

There is a conundrum, a puzzle, at the heart of the report. The report notes that Swedish aid has made possible a remarkable development of the material infrastructure of research. And yet, the authors are puzzled, this has not led to corresponding progress in the development of a sustainable research culture or community. Take one example. The library has expanded,

more journals are available than ever, both as hard copies and on line, but the culture of reading is on the decline. The problem is deeper. Even as we rightly celebrate the advances in material infrastructure, we can not ignore signs that the failure to address the human factor may result in perverse uses of these very material advances.

Let us turn to the report for more evidence. The report gives a comprehensive account of what has been achieved through increasing funding. The pride of place goes to the development of an elaborate research infrastructure: “The enormous enhancement in *research infrastructure* (ICT, library, laboratories, and the DSS) has transformed the research environment.” (p. 35). All artifacts are in place – from ICT, library, laboratories, and the DSS to networks, publications, promotions, external collaboration and support, journals, even research groups³ – only the live subject is not quite there!

The report identifies *three* big limitations when it comes to the human factor. The *first* was managerial: “... starting ‘big’ in a setting where resources are very limited and systems for managing grants and contracts across the university are very weak, increases risks of funds not being used for purposes intended and for inefficiency.” And so it warns against the temptation to start big: “bigger investments may hold promise for significant gain in research capacity, but at relatively high risk.” (p. 38) Needless to say, this is salutary advice.

The *second* human problem has to do with advisors: “Overwhelmingly the most frequent complaint,” reports the study, is “delay by overcommitted Ugandan supervisors.” (p. 22). But it was a complaint to which the evaluation team had no response except to note: “External funds have not and cannot resolve the ‘overload’ dilemma for researchers or those operating the research infrastructure, ...” (p. 8) Why can not money alone solve the “overload” problem? Because no matter how much you pay professorial advisors, it will not change the fact that their day, like everyone else’s, is made of 24 hours. The only way to solve the problem is to increase the pool of advisors.

Faced with this problem, both Swedish aid and the evaluation team looked for a short-term solution: Swedish university collaboration. “Collaboration with Swedish university colleagues,” the report claims, has “markedly enhanced supervision, publication in the science disciplines, and preparation of a new generation of research mentors for growing numbers of Ph D and Masters students, including increasing the proportion of women, ... from 25% in 1990 to 46% in 2008.” The result was also the introduction, some may say cloning, of Swedish practices at Makerere: “adoption of doctoral committees, the option of published papers to meet the thesis requirement, public thesis defenses, and exclusion of supervisors from examination committees” among others (p. 7). To get back to the main

3 “participation in *networks* ...” (p. 36), “... translating findings into *publications* ...” (p. 36), “*promotion* of Ph D completers and of senior scientists ...” (p. 36), increased “*initiatives to seek external collaborators and research support* ...” (p. 36) “several units now sponsor *journals*, ...” (p. 36), “translation of researchers into *research groups* ...” (p. 36).

point, the study hopes that greater dependence on Swedish supervisors in the short run will increase the supervisory capacity of Makerere in the medium run.

I believe it is too early to verify this claim. Even a tentative evaluation would have called for information on the work of those who were supported by the program, both in the past and now.⁴

What is clear, however, are some of the negative effects in the short term. If the student has both a Ugandan and a Swedish supervisor, how should each be remunerated? Equally or in line with remuneration practices in each country? There is no easy answer. To reconcile two unequal standards of remuneration, Swedish and Ugandan, would not be easy. Sida decided to remunerate Swedish supervisors using Swedish standards and Ugandan supervisors using Ugandan standards. The result was resentment from Ugandan supervisors, who felt discriminated against because they were paid less for the same work. This is how the report put it: “Supervisors were very concerned about disparities in rewards for supervision between Swedish supervisors and themselves.” A Swedish supervisor is paid “about USD \$22,000 per student, about twice the entire salary of a senior Ugandan supervisor.” (p. 23). The temptation to look for a short-term solution generated a problem with no easy solution, but with unintended long run effects.

The *third* human problem was the students themselves. We can glimpse two dimensions of this problem in throwaway comments by the study team. Supervisors note that students tend to acquire information from generic web sources rather than from reading, making light of it as evidence of a generational divide rather than evidence of serious corrosion of research culture: “Supervisor’s highlighted differences in today’s students, many of whom they say read few books and articles, instead taking content from more generic web sources, ‘regurgitating’, cutting and pasting to assemble papers, rather than engaging in more rigorous analysis preferable to the ‘old timers’ – unless guided, and pushed, by supervisors.” (p. 23)

4 It is worth reading this report alongside another by Uganda National Council for Science and Technology, titled *Research in Uganda: Status and Implications for Public Policy*, and done in collaboration with the Embassy of Sweden in Uganda and Sida, 12/12/2008. This report brings out three salient facts about the larger environment of research in Uganda. *First*, In 2007/08, government contributed 42% and donors 51% of the country’s research budget. (p. 16). As a %age of GDP, Uganda’s contribution in the past 5 years was low, between 0.2% and 0.5% (p. 17).

Second, “The number of new research projects registered at UNCST almost tripled, from 109 in 1997/1998 to 335 in 2006/2007.” (p. 9) The report notes that “much of the research in Uganda is undertaken through international collaborations and sponsorship.” (p. 3). How many of these are research projects *in* Uganda by Uganda-based researchers, and how many are research projects *on* Uganda by externally based researchers? What can this tell us about how and where the research agenda is set?

Third, the largest proportion of research projects were in the fields of Social Sciences and Humanities (36%), Medical and Health Sciences (31%), and Natural Sciences (21%). (p. 10). And further, “In the field of Social Sciences and Humanities, most research projects were in the area of anthropology (40%) and Governance (18%). (p. 12ff).

One wishes that the Sida study team of 2010 had read this report and provided us more detail, not only on how many Ph Ds were completed with Sida support, but the subject matter of the thesis, and what these Ph D-holders are doing today.

The report then gives supporting evidence comes from students themselves: "... some [Ph D students] expressed serious reservations about presenting their work [in Ph D seminars], out of concern that colleagues could appropriate their ideas ...⁵ (p. 22)

What do you do when received solutions tend to turn on their heads? When some students fear their ideas may be stolen in seminars, and others use the internet as an alternative to reading books and as an easy way of stealing ideas, otherwise called plagiarism?

When I finished reading the report, I had no doubt about its overriding conclusion, that the key obstacle to developing research capacity at Makerere, and in Uganda, is not financial, but human. Yet, this conclusion is never stated forthrightly in the report – which is why it is worth repeating here. *Lack of money is a problem, but it is not the most important problem. More important than how much money you have is how you use that money.* If we fail to recognize this, throwing money at the problem is more likely to worsen our problem than to solve it.

Sustainability

The greatest shortcoming of the Sida evaluation is that it fails to place Swedish assistance to the graduate program at Makerere in the larger context of Makerere's own development. As a result, it ends with recommendations that are mainly managerial – confined to oversight and implementation – and timid. To implement these recommendations would be to increase bureaucracy without addressing the heart of the problem.

To begin with, the problem of a lack of research capacity needs to be located historically. The heart of the problem lies in how the university has been conceptualized through the two main phases of its history, colonial and post-colonial. In the colonial period, it was assumed that Makerere's teaching and research faculty would be trained elsewhere, preferably in the U.K. The cash-strapped post-colonial university was the entry point for the World Bank, which put Makerere through the grinder of a market-oriented reform, a euphemism for another set of conditionalities, whose main consequence was to destroy the quality of teaching in the undergraduate program and undermine existing research capacity. Some parts of the university, like the Faculty of Arts, participated in the initiative enthusiastically, and were wrecked by it; the Science Faculty, which resisted the reform, came out the least damaged. I have written about this elsewhere.⁶

But we cannot just blame the problem on history. If history is important as a guide to understanding the basis of the problem, it is perhaps even more important to understand why

5 Here is the full quote: "Most [Ph D students] expressed enthusiasm about Ph D seminars at Makerere and in Sweden, but some expressed serious reservations about presenting their work, out of concern that colleagues could appropriate their ideas, citing little tradition of protection for intellectual property at Makerere." (p. 22)

6 Mahmood Mamdani, *Scholars in the Marketplace: The Dilemmas of Neo-liberal Reforms at Makerere University, 1989-2005*, Kampala: Fountain Press; Dakar: Codesria, 2007

the problem keeps on being reproduced. What is it that we are doing which fails to address this history? How, indeed, do we turn things around?

Here, I would like to offer two reflections based on my past research. I believe the prerequisite to developing Makerere's research capacity is two-fold. First, we need to face up to the fact that the only sure way to a sustainable future is to develop the human resource for teaching and research at home. i.e., to grow our own timber. I do not rule out foreign assistance for this purpose, but I do insist the need to identify a partner who shares our priorities. Given that the Swedes and Sida have historically been driven by a conviction to create "indigenous research capacity" – to cite the language of the Sida report – we could not ask for a better partner in this enterprise.

Second, rather than wish away the consequences of the World Bank introduced reform, we have no choice but to open our eyes to its negative consequences - so as to address these. The reform was predicated first of all on producing numbers: student admissions were increased recklessly, without any thought to the need for a corresponding expansion of the material infrastructure or human capacities. As enrollment ballooned, classes exploded, tutorials ended, and the quality of teaching reached an all-time low.

How do we undo the worst effects of the reform? This means first and foremost to rethink policy. I have two suggestions. *First*, we need to radically decrease enrollment rather than to increase it. This is to recognize today's reality. We are no longer the country's only university; unlike in the past, we share the responsibility for undergraduate education with a growing number of universities in the country. At the same time, our first responsibility as the country's leading public university is to provide *quality* undergraduate education.

Second, graduate education has to be thought of as integral to the overall university process, and not as a standalone facility requiring endless doses of external injections. In practice, every Ph D student should be required to teach tutorials as part of his or her overall training. Post-doctoral fellows too should be required to combine teaching with research and writing. These reforms will allow us to restore tutorials to support large lectures at the undergraduate level, making possible closer supervision of students while reducing the problem of "overload" for senior academics.

To strategize an effective way forward, we need to bring many heads together for a *deeper* reflection that would place the crisis of graduate education at Makerere in a double context: on the one hand historical, and on the other as part of a comprehensive evaluation of the overall process of learning and research at the university.

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