# Replicate Plan Uganda monitoring model

Editorial

Over the years, the inspection of schools, which is officially vested in the directorate of education standards, has failed to serve to the satisfaction of the Government and the general public.

But instead of lamenting, Plan Uganda has come up with an innovation to empower pupils and communities in Luwero district with a mobile device to enhance participatory school governance. It was introduced as a way of improving community participation, especially with greater involvement of parents, pupils, local leaders, teachers and local education authorities in school governance.

This is a great initiative that should be replicated across all schools in the country. With the engagement of development partners and other stakeholders in education, it is a project that can be implemented without great recourse to the public fund. Picking the lesson from Plan Uganda, the education ministry should spearhead the rolling out of this initiative as a long term solution to some of the ills affecting the quality of our education system like teacher absenteeism.

This should be followed by strengthening the directorate of inspectorate, giving it more autonomy to even monitor service delivery and policy implementation at the ministry headquarters. The directorate cannot effectively play such role if it subordinate to the ministry. Unless this is done, the public will continue losing billions with minimum return as far as the quality of our education is concerned.

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# If schools can raise fees, why not public universities?

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## If other producers can't sell products below production level, why should we expect universities to do so?

Although Uganda has many institutions calling themselves universities and many are proud to award certificates, diplomas, degrees and other terminal awards, few of them qualify to be called universities. Their best public show and performance often stops at elaborate graduation ceremonies. My view is that it will take many years for the 34 institutions we have licensed to become full universities.

In countries where the state has traditionally paid most of the costs of higher education, the introduction of, or changing the amount of fees or any other form of cost-sharing, is a politically contentious issue.

Students and parents (even those who are able to pay as evidenced by their sending children to "first world" kindergartens and schools) are opposed to upward changes in the amount of fees however high the cost of providing quality education by institutions escalates.

Lawmakers, sensitive to the political impact of fees on the wishes of voters, often block fees increases, although they may be aware that such an action often reduces the quality of education delivered and impinge on the institutional autonomy of universities.

But it is also true that the few students from poor families who make it to higher institutions of learning are disadvantaged, when the school fees are hiked. But many financially able students actually hide under the umbrella of the poor against raising fees. As a result, hiking fees has led to adverse political consequences in the past.

It is reported that one of the reasons the Labour Party in the UK was returned with a reduced majority in 2004 was its earlier decision to raise fees. In Uganda, in June 2005, Parliament reversed Makerere's proposed hike of fees to align it with a reasonable percentage of what it then cost the institution to educate a student (unit cost).

In November of the same year, students at the same institution went on strike when the institution hiked examinations fees from about sh3,000 to about sh100,000. Students were reportedly injured in the subsequent chaos.

Since the realistic cost of teaching a student in most Ugandan institutions of higher learning is far higher than the fees paid, it is those institutions that can freely sell their higher education products at market value that are likely to sustain the delivery of quality higher education.

Fees paid in most Ugandan higher education institutions are lower than unit costs.

In most universities, students pay about 40% of the annual cost of the programmes they are registered for. Government institutions, with decreasing budget allocations to education, coupled with aging infrastructure, decreasing inability to purchase inputs and increasing student numbers, are the most affected by the gap between the fees paid and what it costs them to graduate a student. In public and private institutions, fees paid are lower than the unit costs. A study by the National Council for Higher Education for the year 2008/9 for four public universities found the following costs.

**Survey**

**The money received as fees in the universities surveyed were far lower than the above costs, meaning that there was a gap between fees paid and unit costs, which could only be filled by delivering inferior education.**

**A number of high schools, the so-called "first world schools" charge fees which are higher, or equal to those paid to universities.**

The money received as fees in the universities surveyed were far lower than the costs, meaning there was a gap between fees paid and unit costs, which could only be filled by delivering inferior education. A subsequent study by the office of the Auditor General compared unit costs in Uganda and India.

That study did not find alarming differences in what it costs to educate a student in Uganda and India in a number of programmes except the science-based ones. For example, it costs more than four times to graduate a medical doctor in India as it does in Uganda.

It is true that fees are not the only sources of income for universities. Unfortunately, in Uganda, fees constitute the primary source of income for education institutions as they make up to 60% and over of annual institutional budgets.

Donations, endowments and business activities do not, for most higher education institutions in Uganda, constitute a significant component of annual budgets. Fees remain the financial lifeblood of institutions.

If universities are to deliver quality higher education, they need to receive the full payment of what it costs them to educate a student from fees or the Government. But this is not to say that this money should come from parents and students. Other sources must also contribute to the funding of higher education. What is required, are innovative ideas to raise money to fund higher education. A national dialogue on higher education is needed in order to debate this issue.

An extensive survey of institutions by the National Council for Higher Education conducted between May and July 2004 observed that "all higher education institutions do not have adequate financial resources to improve and expand the physical infrastructure, provide modern academic facilities, attract and retain the qualified academic staff needed to deliver quality higher education". Faced with lack of money, university administrators cut on educational inputs to balance budgets. In turn, this affects quality.

Many high schools, the so-called "first-world schools" charge fees which are higher or equal to those paid at universities.

The politics of fees that is contributing to the decay of Uganda's university system is apparently absent at the school level. Schools are able to charge fees at market value without undue pressure from the parents, public and the political system.

Universities need more expensive inputs in terms of skilled human resources, equipment and other facilities to deliver quality higher education as opposed to high schools. But this is not to imply that high schools do not need the money they charge.

All I am pointing out is that higher education institutions should charge what it costs them to deliver required products. It is up to society to devise innovative ways of finding the money needed instead of denying these institutions the resources for the proper delivery of quality education.

Stopping higher education institutions from setting appropriate fees is like asking a manufacturer to sell products below production costs. Such a manufacturer will either go out of business or supply inferior products so as to balance their books.

If we cannot ask other producers to sell products below production levels, why should we ask universities to do so?

**The writer is the former executive director of National Council for Higher Education**