

Quality of Research in Graduate Schools of Ugandan Universities: An Authoritative Opinion.

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INTRODUCTION:

This paper is based on analyzed literature on the appraisal of the quality of research and innovations in Ugandan universities. Its purpose is to reflect on the factors that impact Uganda's ranking globally. It focuses on graduate schools where the component of research and innovation is a requirement in many programs of study. The paper is partly an appraisal of the performances of university education that revolves around the traditional functions: teaching-learning, carrying out research, and engagement in community outreach services. It attempts to articulate major challenges which Ugandan graduate students face and to propose some strategies for a way forward.

Keywords: graduate school, graduate students, quality research, challenges, strategies, innovations, community outreach, and publications, Submitted: 29th/11/2022 Accepted: 12th/12/2022

1. THE EVALUATIONS OF THE TRIPARTITE MISSION OF A UNIVERSITY:

It could be argued that the quality of university education is embedded in how faithfully it fulfills its mission, such knowledge can be obtained through assessments of universities. Atibuni et al. (2017), Atwebembeire et al. (2018) and Fosci et al. (2019) all suggest a need for constant appraisal of the graduate studies in Uganda and particularly the components of research and innovations. One of the mandates of the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) is to ensure that there is quality in higher education, meaning that it is 'fit for purpose or that it is good (NCHE, 2014, p.1). The tripartite purpose of university education is broken down into its three traditional missions. They are categorized in this order: the

first mission is teaching, the second is research and the third is applications and exploitation of university knowledge outside academic environments, and the interaction between universities and society (Rinaldia & Cavicchia, cited in Mugizi, 2018, p. 49831).

In the same vein, regarding the third mission, a study by Mugizi concluded that Ugandan Universities have some role to play in the achievement of the Uganda Vision 2040. This is because, as he argued, universities have some influence on the development of improved technology, knowledge transfer, promotion of national unity and democracy, support of innovation, and increase in productivity (Mugizi, 2018, p. 49836). A study on the European Universities revealed other indicators that are crucial in upholding the three functions.

Palomares acknowledged as complex indicators for evaluating universities, but crucial in the process are: publications in refereed journals, revenue from the European Union, national, regional, and local research projects, licenses for research, and

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research contracts between university and industry (Palomares-Montero et al. 2011, p. 361). Other crucial ones include patent applications, the ratio of academic staff to students, the number of graduate students, and the number of post-graduate students participating in activities for research and development. It means that evaluating a university's performance comprises factors other than the traditional three missions. The evaluation of the three, however, lays a valid foundation for the needed analysis of the life of institutions of higher learning, since as (Ghannam (2007) concluded, they are interrelated.

According to (Ghannam (2007) functions of teaching and research inform and energize each other, and their outcomes are incorporated into community services. He, however, identified the benefits and challenges associated with incorporating them into community services (Ghannam (2007). There are challenges that impede the smooth advancement of the universities in Uganda, which are examined in greater depth. Critical research into Ugandan universities has revealed a number of challenges in the implementation of their tripartite mission.

2. CHALLENGES IN UGANDAN UNIVERSITIES

Atibuni et al. (2017) who investigated the challenges of graduate students of the Master of Education in Ugandan universities listed their challenges which included: the requirement of a mandatory master's degree certificate for retaining a job or getting a promotion and a higher salary. They also noted as significant the weak academic backgrounds of some graduate students, financial constraints, tensions between full-time employment and graduate studies, challenges of balancing family needs, academic engagements, the quality of delivery of the course of research methodology and preparations for field research (Atibuni, 2017, p.25). The study proposed strategies for effective management of the Master of Education studies, and called upon various stakeholders to focus on professional engagements with graduate students to enable them to generate in-

novative research outcomes that will shape better Ugandan communities (Atibuni et al., 2017, pp. 26-27). Likewise, Atwebembeire et al (2018, pp. 1-2) called for constant assessment so as to measure the quality of university performance and recommend strategies for improvement. In the same vein, Foschi et al. (2019, p.i) attributed poor research production to a severe lack of funding. They observe that published papers are produced as a result of international collaborations, an indicator of the low financial investment into research by national organizations (Foschi et al. 2019, p.i).

What these authors are saying could be summarized by Kasule whose study concluded the state of affairs of Ugandan Universities as follows:

...it is fair to infer that this is unhealthy to Uganda's higher education sector in its quest to foster the socio-economic development of the country and must be mitigated. This is based on the assumption that relevant and high-quality education is crucial for the progress of individuals, organizations, and society as a whole. However, it is vital to recognize that without the education system having innovation-oriented teachers, national development and improvement of people's quality of life can hardly be realized (Kasule, et al. 2015.)

IV. Appraisal of university education enables us to objectively consider its status. The multiplication of universities in Uganda is a clear indicator that knowledge intensification is recognized as critical to addressing development challenges (Kruss (2012). Uganda has witnessed an increase in the number of private and state-sponsored universities. Foschi (2019) confirming other open sources stated that higher education has drastically grown in Uganda from one public university in 1992 to over 53 universities, 11 are public and the rest are private (Foschi et al. (2019).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The evaluation of how research methodology is taught is critical to the quality of a university's performance. It could be argued that the study of Research Methodology is central to university education whose tripartite mission is to teach, carry out research (for innovations), and engage

in community services. Indeed, similar to international practice, Ugandan universities teach research methodology as a prelude to field research. It is taught as a supporting subject in several ways in many academic disciplines (Mishra and Alok, 2017, p. 1). For example, for one to qualify for the award of a master's degree in any program of study one must carry out field research and present a dissertation (UniK, 2019, p. 8). Some undergraduate programs also require students to carry out empirical research and also present a dissertation; those too undertake the study of research methodologies (University of Kisubi, Sept. 2020, no. 2.4).

Overall, the University of Kisubi defines itself as

‘A research-driven institution, whose goal is to make a distinctive contribution to knowledge both locally and globally, a community of researchers and scholars who contribute to the generation of new knowledge for the realization of Uganda's Vision 2040’ (UniK Strategic Plan, 2020-2024, no. 3.5.3).

By definition, research methodology is acknowledged by many scholars as the science of carrying out a systematic investigation that involves preparation (by writing a research proposal), collecting data, analyzing and interpreting data, and drawing out new theories, conclusions, and recommendations. Creswell (2014) while discussing research design highlighted the different research approaches that include mixed methods research, and qualitative and quantitative approaches (p. 32).

The study of research methodology introduces students to an independent process of inquiry in which they analyze data and come up with new interpretations or understanding that is part of what characterizes ‘innovation’ which serves to address the tensions and dilemmas in the real world of a community. Knowledge is understood as a dynamic reality because it is grounded in ever-changing realities, and where human agents are involved it is understood that social realities will always amaze us with even new changes that always call for new understanding and so necessitate investigations. This view is supported by

Allen (2001, p.24) who said:

Essentially . . . knowledge is something of an illusion. If knowledge is used, then it changes behavior. If behavior changes, then the system may respond creatively, and we will have “used up” our knowledge. This is the meaning of co-evolution. Anything that has to interact with an environment, and with other living things, to survive, will find that the value of any piece of knowledge is ephemeral. What matters is the capacity to generate new knowledge and to forget the old. This is where non-average behavior and internal diversity are crucial.

Carrying out research in the ever-changing world entails a need for critical thinking, creativity, and a mindset that is turned towards the innovation of ideas and applications of knowledge to suitably be up-to-date and relevant.

A university student is, therefore, introduced to a study of social-research methods to prepare them to critically observe the ever-changing realities about them and to have minds that are open to seeing research opportunities and further studies of their social world. This means that research methodology is a very relevant science for university students, as a way of critiquing some and making a contribution to new knowledge within the ever-changing world. This view was affirmed by Llamas whose study concluded thus:

Research methodology courses can improve general skills of inquiry and student understanding of research encountered in other courses and outside of the university context. There needs to be a shift in the way research methods are taught, and also in the way methodology texts are structured, to provide our students with the best training and education (Llamas et al. 2009).

The scholars of research methodologies implicitly point to the connections between research methodologies and the aspects of innovations that are crucial in defining a clear way forward to national development. Gifford in analyzing the Swedish application of knowledge to innovation in ecosystems of maritime settings called for a multi-stakeholders approach that included:

. . . universities judicial branch of government, universities, research facilities, multinational cor-

porations, innovation authorities, tax authorities, and research and development, . . . larger funding bodies of government and other types of funding agencies to set up a better infrastructure of support that meets the needs of the entrepreneurs in the system (Gifford, et al., 2020).

Ugandan universities in the global networks have a lot to aspire for in common with those in other contexts in Africa and overseas. They, however, have to be aware of their local challenges that include systems of pre-university education that have not sufficiently equipped university students with the necessary aptitudes.

3.1. Pre-University education in Uganda

The history of education in Uganda reveals a system of teaching–learning that did not equip students with the required life skills, it instead focused on knowledge and mastery of subject content and did not equip learners with critical skills to analyze and apply such content to practical use, to meet the demands of the labor market (Ministry of Education, 2020). The system of education disempowered students as they lacked the initiative to creatively think and apply the acquired knowledge to their social environment as a way to improve society and be job creators.

It was only in 2020, that the Ministry of Education launched the Competence Based Curriculum (CBC) to empower learners with communication, critical- thinking, critical analysis, care for their natural environment, entrepreneurial skills, patriotism, civic and moral/religious-spiritual skills, and competencies. The new lower secondary school curriculum, while considering the content to be taught, has new approaches to teaching methods and ways to evaluate that will integrate outcomes of formative and summative assessment.

This is summarized in the key statements to launch the curriculum:

The new pedagogy aims at providing the learners 21st Century skills which include; critical thinking, creativity, collaboration or teamwork, communication, information literacy, ICT, and flexibility. This is good news to the nation, however, the perturbing question is whether this will be implemented amidst the facility inadequacies

in most of the Ugandan schools. For the learners to become creative especially in ICT and the natural sciences, there must be necessary equipment such as well-furnished laboratories, effective internet, and knowledgeable trainers. These are not present in most of the rural schools in Uganda which are predominantly knowledge hubs for most young people.

Conclusive studies have not been carried out about the extent to which the old knowledge-based curriculum has impacted the current generation of university students and their approach to empirical research. There is a general guess that there are some correlations between the two. Similarly, no study has been carried out about the contribution that the general state of corruption in Uganda has had on University students' attitudes to research.

4. A Way Forward

Recommendations for a way forward are drawn from the available studies that are meant to address the challenges that we have so far identified, the way forward is given treatment. These are strategies that universities may adopt to make research by university students an exciting experience. Some challenges are general and have to be adopted by the University and others are for groups and individuals. These proposals are meant to encourage neophyte researchers or research students to undertake and present original research works for their examinations. I am proposing that as part of the research project there should be an aim for innovativeness that will necessitate the publication of new knowledge in research journals and public conferences or lectures.

5. Originality in research:

As already indicated elsewhere in this paper, there is an extent to which neophyte researchers are not guided about the meaning of the research process; and the meaning of originality in research.

Simply said, originality is not about reinventing the wheel so that one comes up with a new

idea. Originality in social research is about expressing a new perspective on a point of interest. This comes from the fact that each researcher has a unique way of looking at the world. He/she will have a unique perspective on a subject matter that will make them formulate a specific argument on a topic and so present a way of discussion that is specifically distinct: this in research is what is termed originality. Instructors of Research Methodologies should give the confidence to their students that they can be original even when a few of them are researching the same research area. In this case, having stated a certain position on a subject matter one may draw arguments from other research works to back up one's argument (Google- on originality).

Connected with the aspect of originality is the need to encourage research students to carry out their projects because of publication and conferencing. It is good enough to have an award of a degree, but more importantly, research is carried out as a ministry to improve the lives of people in society. Formats for research proposals always include a subsection on the significance of the study. This is how the study is expected to benefit the world, namely the various stakeholders that include a research population. For research to do its functions it has to be disseminated via publications and conferences. Some universities require that some chapters of the dissertation be published as a way of bringing the findings and recommendations to a wide audience that will find a use for them. Quite often students require affirmation about the worth of their studying and how they make a contribution to the development of knowledge and improving our world; again instructors in research methodologies need to play roles of mentoring as they teach research methods.

The component of skills for scholarly writing and publication has to be integrated into the instruction for research methodologies, this is because it empowers the neophyte researchers to structure and purchase their research works into publishable formats of scholarly articles that may be published in academic journals.

6. Research Supervision:

Crucial to the research process is the element of research supervision. This has a lot of implications regarding the roles of the research supervisors and the roles they have to play as they relate to their students. There are four key points to consider by a research supervisor as follows:

First, understanding that research is a process and the research supervisors have to accompany the students throughout that process. Supervision is not only editing a student's proposal and dissertation; it is guiding the entire research process from the conception of research ideas to the submission of research reports.

Field research requires practical skills in interacting with the real work because of collecting data and also analyzing and reporting the findings, it requires determination and stamina on the part of the researcher.

Second, the supervisor has to develop several attitudes and skills to enable healthy working with the neophyte researcher. They include compassion, patience and perseverance, and humanity (Bukenya, 2022, p. 3). These four attitudes are only basic, it is on them that others will build a healthy professional relationship with the supervisor to set aside time and critically read the student's manuscript, be open to learning from the research student, bear with weaknesses that the student may display for example, when a student presents a write up with unsolicited chapters that refer to highly technical guidance because there is a lot of that being provided by other experts who are not usually acknowledged.

Third, there are implications here too, the research supervisors have to periodically undertake refresher courses that are organized by the University.

It entails monitoring and guiding the student's research process: hence the student's questionnaires with view guidelines, the filled questionnaires, and support during the process of the analysis of raw data.

The supervisor has to be engaged in other research projects so that he/she can keep at least research skills.

Fourth, there are many concerns today about the moral integrity of the process or matters of research ethics. These concerns cover the entire research process from identifying the research area to the final report –dissertation, and publication of the research results. It is of prime importance that at every stage the researcher applies ethical values such as beneficence, non-maleficence, justice/fairness, truthfulness, friendship, and charity. All these points explain why at the University of Kisubi, we are calling on weekly research supervision.

7. Time Management:

Important to the research process for both the supervisor and student is the element of time management. The researchers are the main actors, and so when they procrastinate on their assignments, their entire work stagnates; all this happens because time keeps ticking, the dynamics of the social and scientific world keep progressing, and if one is not careful, their projects may soon become obsolete. The students and their supervisors have to be aware of the need to strictly manage time. Considering that many graduate students in Uganda are full-time workers makes time management of prime importance. This has implications for budgeting time which means prioritizing activities that matter to one's family, work, and study/ research; maximizing the use of ICT- and so do a lot of communication by electronic communication, the sending and receiving of documents, and organization of face-to-face meetings as required. Certain social events and celebrations have to be placed in the correct moments and if not necessary the researcher may have to sacrifice them and find a different way to manifest support for social bonding.

8. CONCLUSION

This paper, an analysis of literature on research work by our graduate schools, has attempted to expound aspects of quality of university performances from the view point of their tripartite mission: teaching-learning, research and in-

novations and the university-community engagements. Both internal and external assessment organs can gauge its quality of performance by how effectively the Graduate Schools are providing effective leadership in ground breaking research projects. It means that the research departments become increasingly aware of the emerging challenges that students and supervisors face which may lead to compromising the integrity of research processes and outputs. The paper has presented some solutions. The major concerns of the reflection are the moral integrity of research work which in many instances is gravely compromised. The University authorities will be building on sand if those integrity issues are not addressed and handled head-on. Research for innovations is an ethical issue that requires guidance by values of truthfulness, beneficence, non-maleficence, sacrificial charity, and friendship. The entire buttress of social economic and political development relies on well-done research. I hope that these points of reflection will be embraced by our University and lead to better delivery of our progress.

9. Publisher details:

Publisher: Student's Journal of Health Research (SJHR)
(ISSN 2709-9997) Online
Category: Non-Governmental & Non-profit Organization
Email: studentsjournal2020@gmail.com
WhatsApp: +256775434261
Location: Wisdom Centre, P.O.BOX. 148, Uganda, East Africa.



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