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EXPANDING ACCESS AND QUALITY IN UGANDA: THE CHALLENGES OF BUILDING A PLANE WHILE FLYING IT

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ABSTRACT

Uganda is among many nations in sub-Saharan Africa that are trying simultaneously to expand higher education opportunities and to enhance the quality of higher-education offerings. These are particularly challenging goals in resource-rich environments and are even more difficult in environments of more limited resources to include funding, administrative expertise, and exhausted institutional capacity for students. This paper summarizes the challenges faced and the goals articulated by Ugandan entities, and some sample strategies for address of the challenges.

INTRODUCTION

In August 2009, I was driving in Dallas, Texas, with a colleague from Uganda, a senior university administrator there. We were returning from a visit to a large and programmatically diverse community college in the area. He was part of an eight-person delegation of higher-education leaders from East Africa, mostly Ugandan but some Tanzanian, whom we had invited to the University of North Texas to explore possibilities of partnership and some models of American higher education that might benefit our mutual objectives of increasing enrollment in higher education in the East African Community (Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, Rwanda, and Burundi) and means of enhancing the quality thereof.

The topic of Mbarara, Uganda, came up. Mbarara is a city of about 100,000 people in the far southwest of the country, at the border with Tanzania west of Lake Victoria. I mentioned that I was surprised, when coming through the main road of the town, to still see a few ruins from the retaliatory invasion of Tanzanian troops and fighter aircraft in the in the late 1970s. Other buildings, while functioning, were heavily pockmarked from high-caliber ammunition. The Tanzanian in-

vasion, retaliation for a land-grab by Idi Amin, would soon lead to that murderous dictator being deposed and exiled. It was not to be the end of Uganda's problems, but it was at least the beginning of the end.

My friend, who had lived through all of this, was more focused on the progress of rebuilding the city, rather than the scars of its destruction. "But you know what?" he said. "It wasn't the university-educated [people] who led the rebuilding of Mbarara. It was common people without any education. Why do you think that was?"

I hesitated in answering. Was diplomacy or honesty the guiding value here? I trusted my instincts and went with honesty.

"Do you really want to know what I think?" I asked. It seemed only polite to allow for deferral. When encouraged, I said, "I think it's another legacy of colonialism. Your higher education system doesn't encourage graduates to be... entrepreneurial."

My colleague readily agreed. I thought he might; his own small crusade at his institution—and in his teaching—was critical thinking, or the related concept of engaged learning. Without carrying that away, he believed, the facts and figures that graduates had memorized wouldn't really be of much help to them or others.

Our ensuing discussion of the colonial legacy—the colonial hangover—highlighted what we mutually believed to its limitations. Very few university positions were opened by the colonialists, in this case British, for citizens of the country. The primary and almost exclusive purpose of university education for a very few was preparation for mid-level bureaucratic administration of the colony. Rote memorization of designated text was the basic structure, to the exclusion of critical thinking, much less contesting of the intended indoctrination. Encouraging critical thinking was not consistent with the aims of colonialist education. University graduation was regarded as promotion to the elite, and typically the perquisites of that position, with its servants and presumption of greater leisure, were valued over any capacity to undertake social or economic transformation. There are, of course, exceptions and legitimate challenges to these broad assertions, but they find some support in the literature on the topic, which will be touched upon later in this article.

The relevance of this background to quality enhancement of higher education in Uganda is this: There is little point in enhancing quality in Uganda higher education unless it is done in the simultaneous contexts of expanding access and the reorientation of curricula and pedagogy, which still exhibit the colonial legacy of status allocation. These are the challenges and contexts to which this article is addressed.

While the tasks are daunting—the analogy of building a plane while flying it comes to mind—it is possible, due to the commitments of the government, the World Bank and other international entities, key scholars and administrators in higher education, and the involvement of both private and public universities. That context and promise is the focus of this essay.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The colonial legacies for higher education in Uganda are similar to those in other colonial settings in sub-Saharan Africa, whether British or not. The higher education sector was substantially underdeveloped, intentionally kept small, and open to a very small percentage of the population. The basic goal of the British that could be achieved through higher education was the training of those required for the internal administration of the colony and the colony's essential role, the delivery of raw materials for the colonial power's industry and markets (Lulat, 2005). When the colonial era ended in the mid-20th century, it left behind a paucity of advanced education systems, and shortages of professionals such as doctors, lawyers, scientists, and teachers. When the British left Uganda in 1962, the only established institution of any size was the University of East Africa (later Makerere University), which had operated as a college of the University of London (Makerere University, 2010).

The decades immediately following independence were inhibitive of growth in higher education, for reasons that included substantial national instability, particularly the dictatorship of Amin in the 1970s and the later, repressive administration of Milton Obote in the 1980s. Further, the policies of the World Bank and other international entities favored investment in primary education above all other sectors, and the AIDS pandemic hit particularly hard in Uganda (e.g., World Bank Independent Evaluation Group, 2006). But the last decade of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st saw substantial growth in the establishment of universities, particularly public universities of substance outside the capital, Kampala, as well as the rapid expansion of universities associated with religious bodies and faiths (National Council for Higher Education, 2010). Notable examples of this latter sector of religiously affiliated universities include The Islamic University in Uganda, Uganda Christian University (Anglican), and Uganda Martyrs University (Catholic). The Ugandan National Council for Higher Education now recognizes more than 50 post-secondary institutions and more than 30 universities, but the general expectation in Uganda is that the number of tertiary institutions in the nation will continue to expand rather substantially (Cutright, Fossey, & Niwagaba, 2008).

The issues involved in the enhancement of quality in higher education in Uganda, while at the same time greatly expanding participation in higher education leads to the reasonable suppositions that many basic resources—institutional administrative capacity, the availability of capable faculty, and living and learning space for students—are insufficient to meet projected needs.

National Council for Higher Education

An act of the Ugandan Parliament in 2001 established the National Council for Higher Education. The mission of the NCHE is

to set standards and regulations to ensure that all public and private tertiary education institutions in Uganda will create, sustain and improve the relevance and quality of higher education for all qualified Ugandans and to meet the local, national, and global higher education challenges of the 21st century. (National Council for Higher Education, 2010)

Accreditation has been among the earliest priorities of the NCHE, but much of this early focus appears to be on components and not on institutions as a whole. The NCHE position is that “Like other statutory agencies in neighboring countries, Council’s method of fulfilling these requirements [of accreditation] is to accredit all courses taught in institutions of higher learning” (National Council for Higher Education, 2010).

However, goals and fulfilled objectives of the NCHE suggest that it is moving aggressively, even with limited resources, toward more holistic examination and standard-setting at institutional levels, and indeed at the effectiveness of relationships among institutions. In December 2009, for example, the NCHE published, with counterpart agencies in Kenya and Tanzania, four volumes on Credits Accumulation and Transfer System in East Africa, in the undergraduate curriculum areas of Medicine, Basic Sciences, Engineering, and Agriculture (National Council for Higher Education, 2009a, b, c, & d). The project was funded by a 2007 grant from the Rockefeller foundation (National Council for Higher Education, 2009a).

Questions remain, however, about the NCHE’s capacity to examine and address issues of quality at deep levels within institutions. My visit to the NCHE offices in 2008 led me to conclude that the staff is quite lean and that fiscal resources are severely stretched, or at least irregular. Irregular and relatively low appropriations had led to pay cuts and the need for the staff to accept non-education research contracts in order to make ends meet. Toward the end of our visit, we were asked if we would be kind enough to hand-carry a business letter to Kampala. The government’s current allocation of funds was late, and nothing remained in the postage budget.

The Uganda National Development Plan

Spring 2010 saw the issuance of the Uganda *National Development Plan 2010/11-2014/15* under the auspices of the Ministry of Finance, Planning, and Economic Development. It is envisioned as the first of six consecutive plans, stretching 30 years into the future, to 2040. The report, the product of a broadly consultative process in the country, and more than 400 pages in length, draws a statistical picture of Uganda that shows great progress in recent years, with annual GDP rate increases of 6-8%, and a reduction in basic poverty to about 30% of the population. Yet the overall impression drawn by the statistics contrasts unfavorably with citation of parallel conditions in Kenya and Tanzania.

The report identifies what are called primary growth sectors (agriculture, forestry, tourism, mining, oil and gas, manufacturing, information and communication technology, and housing development), a series of complementary sectors

(e.g., transportation, energy, and trade), a series of social sectors (e.g., population, HIV/AIDS, and water and sanitation), and enabling sectors (e.g., public sector management, climate change, and disaster management). It is not until the third layer of this hierarchy (the social sectors) that education is discussed explicitly, and that is in a section called “Education and Sports” (pp. 208-236). However, the challenge put forward is clear: to triple higher education participation from 5% to 15% of the traditionally aged college population, and that within the five-year span of this plan.

While the report encourages further establishment of both public and private universities, the challenges of meeting the goal of trebling participation are not addressed in much detail. There will be enormous challenges to reaching 15% participation, including the fact that the 5% estimate of current participation seems high, and may be based in assumptions of higher participation in less-regulated institutions than is the case. Second, current facilities and human resources are simply inadequate to support growth objectives suggested by the plan. Third, 15% itself will be moving target, given Uganda’s quite youthful population (the average age in the country is 15) and the disproportionate number of citizens who will be swelling the ranks of college-aged individuals in coming years (Lirri, 2010). The reality is that reaching 15% participation might well mean that the capacity to serve students in higher education settings will have to expand at far more dramatically than the three-fold rate suggested by the simple percentages. At the same time, the report issues challenges to the enhancement of quality and its measurement by institutions of higher education. The report is laced throughout with the issues of skill development to support key economic sectors, but this is rarely tied explicitly to the support and development of higher education.

Despite this occasional lack of explicit charge to the higher education sector, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that, to accomplish ambitious economic and social goals, higher education opportunity will need to be ramped up quickly, while still giving attention not only to standards of quality, but their enhancement.

The University of North Texas/East Africa Project

This section concerns the current and anticipated relationships between a single American university and higher education entities in East Africa. The listing of initiatives is not exhaustive, nor will these initiatives alone significantly advance access and quality issues in East Africa. Rather, they are meant to illustrate some current approaches to these challenges.

The University of North Texas/East Africa Initiative is a set of cooperative projects and goals involving UNT and a number of universities and other official entities within the East African Community nations of Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, Rwanda, and Burundi, listed in order of most-developed partnership to least. The project was initiated by UNT beginning in early 2008; developments and projects’ status described below reflect developments through summer 2010.

The broad purposes of the partnership, as mutually developed by the institu-

tions involved, are dedicated to the expansion of access to higher education in East Africa, and the enhancement of quality in higher education. This special issue of *International Education* is largely devoted to issues of quality and quality enhancement, but it is difficult to consider those factors in isolation from overwhelming pressures on simultaneous expansion. While many of the initiatives have been suggested by UNT principals, none have been pursued that did not have international support.

Many of the projects are based in the field of higher education, and indeed the core of UNT involvement has been within the Center for Higher Education (CHE, directed by the author) within the Department of Counseling and Higher Education at UNT. The projects are not restricted to that department, but involve other entities within the College of Education and the larger university academic community. These projects are additionally based in Counseling, Political Science, and other areas. This design and philosophy of inclusion are intentional, and a conscious response to the criticisms of the World Bank-sponsored Task Force on Higher Education in Developing Countries (2009), to wit, that Western university efforts in developing nations regarding higher education development have been marked by single projects of short commitment and with little demonstrable impact. An explicit purpose of the UNT/EA Initiative has been to create complex, long-term, broad “entanglements,” so that the larger project can persist, regardless of personnel turnover or variations in funding prospects at one juncture or another.

While the partnerships have certainly been facilitated by distance communication, face-to-face interaction has been critical. These visits have occurred in both directions. In the summer of 2008, two UNT faculty members and a doctoral candidate (a native of Uganda) visited Uganda and Tanzania for the purpose of relationship-building (Cutright, Fossey, & Niwagaba, 2008). This was followed by a visit to East Africa by several university faculty and representatives in January 2009, during which meetings were held in Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, and Rwanda—only Burundi was not visited.

Perhaps most significantly in this exchange, summer 2009 saw the visit by eight higher education leaders from Uganda and Tanzania to UNT, including vice-chancellors (presidents), chief academic officers, and deans. The visit was financially supported in its entirety by various entities of UNT. In addition to visits with a variety of UNT academic and administration departments, the visitors were hosted at two very different community colleges, and traveled to the College of the Ozarks, a work college in Missouri.

Summer 2010 has featured two visits by UNT teams to East Africa, the first primarily to pursue funding opportunities, the second to commence planning for a professional development conference in Summer 2011.

Following are some of the major components of the UNT/EA Initiative as they stand in September 2010.

The establishment of a master's degree program in higher education administration and leadership.

The number of universities in East Africa has expanded rapidly, particularly in the past two decades. At this writing, however, in all of East Africa, only Makerere University in Uganda offers a graduate-level program in university administration. While Makerere's program is highly regarded, it necessarily has limited capacity and is largely delivered by traditional methods in a residential context. There is reason to conclude that the need for talented and skillful administrators far outstrips their availability.

UNT has proposed to offer a cohort-based, blended delivery master's degree program in higher education management and leadership, which would be based in East Africa. This proposal has been warmly endorsed by all the East African higher education leaders who attended the 2009 conference at UNT. The curriculum would be generalist in nature, intended to impart the knowledge, skills, and values important to higher education administration, and to support the rapid expansion of higher education in East Africa. However, students would be able to specialize in a particular aspect of higher education management in class project work and in the thesis/capstone project.

This East African-based program would feature week-long, intensive residencies at the beginning of each semester, when two courses would begin. Subsequent semester work would be completed by asynchronous distance education. (Synchronous delivery—e.g., simultaneous chat sessions—would be impeded currently by irregular and slow Internet capacities.) UNT faculty or African academics would teach the residency on the East African campus that hosts the program, and continue through semester's end via distance delivery.

Each cohort's 30 or so students would be selected competitively by application, and it is expected that most students would both hold current positions in higher education and have demonstrated potential for administrative advancement. Upon completion of the week-long residencies each semester, students would return to their university positions and would complete the coursework by distance education. Three cohorts of 30 each could be completed in 4-6 years, depending on whether they are overlapped. Assuming an attrition rate of about 15%, 75 or so graduates would come from the program over a three-cycle commitment.

The goal is to fully fund participating students, so that admission and enrollment would be based on academic merit and administrative potential rather than on the ability to pay American-level tuitions. The cost of a student's participation, through graduation, would be around \$25,000, with these funds covering tuition and fees, and the more extraordinary expenses of the program, such as faculty travel. While this is a substantial investment (more than U.S. \$2 million total)—and a high cost by African university standards—it is a small fraction of the costs associated with conventional approaches to this kind of education, in which East Africans would take extensive leaves of absence from professional positions for two or more years, traveling to Europe or the U.S. for comparable degree pro-

grams, incurring not only tuition charges in those locales but substantial housing and other living costs. When the likelihood of higher attrition is added, the costs of providing this education per graduate returning to in-country university service could easily be four times as high by conventional means as through the cohort program.

At the end of the three cohorts (our position is that a three-cycle commitment is necessary to justify the personnel and other investments in program development), the program could be discontinued, renewed, or transitioned by design to the host university or another in-region entity as a regularly offered degree program.

The Uganda Management Institute, a partner in the UNT/East Africa Project, intends to launch a master's degree program in higher education management and leadership along the lines of the model described here, open to all of East Africa. UNT has been invited to participate in the design and delivery of this program. It is not seen as competitive to any program that UNT might establish in East Africa, given the depth of the need and anticipated demand.

Professional development in East Africa for administrators and faculty.

Professional development has been identified as a key need in the rapidly expanding tertiary sector of East African education. Meetings with African higher-education leaders have helped to define areas of greatest priority for East Africa to which UNT could bring particular expertise.

These areas include large class—but engaged—pedagogies (such is the UNT Quality Enhancement Project for continued accreditation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools); distance education technologies and techniques (UNT is the largest provider of distance education among Texas universities); and quality assurance in fiscal and educational service delivery.

UNT is host campus to the National Institute for the Study of Transfer Students. In August 2010, Bonita Jacobs, executive director of the institute, traveled to Kampala to meet with representatives of the Inter-University Council for East Africa. The purpose of the trip was to develop a summer 2011 conference in Kampala on issues pertaining to transfer students and their success and institutional articulation. The World Bank and other sources have identified the general lack of student mobility in Uganda as an impediment to more degree completions.

The development of work colleges in East Africa.

UNT partners have recommended that East African higher education leaders consider founding work colleges as a means of expanding access to higher education. In 19th-century America, work colleges were relatively common. These were places where impoverished students, in exchange for campus labor, received the benefit of low or even no tuition charges. Only seven such institutions recognized by the U.S. federal government exist today, but they continue to operate on a model whereby every student works at a part-time job on campus, for which

the student receives the financial benefit of lower or no tuition (Work Colleges Consortium, 2010). This model is also typically supported by student eligibility for federal aid or other assistance, and by the attractiveness of the model to philanthropists.

As noted above, the visit in August 2009 of eight East African higher educators to UNT included a two-day visit to one of these colleges, College of the Ozarks in Missouri, where visitors had the opportunity to see the model in action and consult with administrators. Before the visitors left Texas, Dr. Charles Olwey, the vice chancellor of Uganda Martyrs University, declared that he would pursue the establishment of such a college in the strife-torn Gulu region of Uganda, with support from the Catholic Church and other agencies. Financial support from the Ugandan government, through reconstruction programs for the Gulu region, has also been pledged.

The World Bank office in Kampala has expressed interest not only in the feasibility of the work college model for East Africa for their direct financial support, but for research on models that would blend that concept with a model for community colleges more like those in operation in North America than is currently the case with smaller technical institutes in Uganda and East Africa.

The establishment of true community colleges in East Africa.

Uganda does have a number of technical colleges recognized by the National Council for Higher Education. However, these institutions do not typically have any degree-granting authority (providing, rather, certificates and the like), and there is typically no articulation structure for credits to be applied toward bachelor degrees at universities.

Scholars of higher education in East Africa have been particularly keen on the development of “true” community colleges there, whether these institutions were essentially independent or established as distributed affiliates of existing universities, which would have terminal programs in high-need skill areas, but also offer lower-level coursework that could be applied toward a four-year degree at a university. Such an approach would bring a substantial portion of university work to local areas without the need for relocation to urban centers, at lower costs, and allowing greater possibility of part-time enrollment. Scholars and community college practitioners from the US could work with African higher education specialists to design Uganda-appropriate modifications in the model for implementation.

The expansion of counseling education capacity.

East Africa has or has recently experienced social conditions that are emotionally traumatizing, including the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and losses of life and security due to guerrilla movements that target civilian populations such as The Lord’s Resistance Army in northern Uganda. UNT’s well-ranked Counseling Education program has proposed taking teams of counselor educators and advanced

graduate students to East Africa, to work with counselor educators there on advanced techniques such as video monitoring and review of practice. Through concentration on counselor educators rather than practicing counselors exclusively, the expectation is that by training more counselor educators, theory and technique could be more systematically imparted to new practitioners.

Peace studies professional development.

The field of peace studies, typically under or affiliated with Political Science programs, is well developed at several U.S. universities, including UNT. Experts from the UNT faculty and from East Africa have consulted and have developed proposals on an extended summer workshop to educate newer political scientists on the research methods of peace studies. Expected to come out of this collaboration in addition are ongoing research associations and new means of disseminating research findings.

LIMITATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES

A colleague who has taught in Tanzania mentioned one of his first impressions of the higher education environment there: classrooms had no wastebaskets. The reason is that nothing was considered waste; even used paper was re-used until it was exhausted.

There is no shortage of involvement by U.S. universities in international higher-education development. But much of this effort appears to be concentrated where “customers” can pay for such development, as is the case in much of Asia and among the oil-rich Persian Gulf states. (See, for example, the case studies featured in the American Council on Education report *International Partnerships: Guidelines for Colleges and Universities, 2008*.) Substantially less effort appears to be taking place in world locales where the needs are greatest.

The substantial challenge to US and European higher educators, coming from relatively resource-rich environments, is to share and collaborate with colleagues in less-developed nations of great mutual interest, including the expansion of higher education opportunity, and the enhancement of its quality. To do so will likely take identification of third-party funders who see the benefits of collaboration, the creativity that comes from sharing, and the humbling of Western experts who will work with colleagues in developing nations without the mindset that all the answers are here. In this context, quality is not a “value-added” proposition; it is crucial at the most basic level of human and material resources, and the success of the enterprise is critical to the lives and well-being of millions.

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