



Our education system is broken: How can we fix it?

Samuel Sejjaaka > Bodanomics

This week I was privileged to give a keynote address at a function of the Uganda Bankers' Association. The topic was 'skills development for private sector competitiveness'. The CEO of Barclays Bank and several academics graced the occasion. The former, in his opening remarks, noted that Uganda had been identified as one of the six fastest growing economies. Or rather that it was one of the countries with a high potential for growth.

However, for Uganda to claim its position among these fastest growing economies, it had to ensure that the high population growth was made up of productive people. Secondly, to benefit from this advantageous 'sweet spot', it was important that there was an increasing rate of productivity amongst the working population.

This was a good launch pad for me to talk about the skills that we needed to propel us into the 21st Century. In my presentation I noted that the illiterate of the 21st Century would not be people who could not read and write. Rather, they would be those who could not learn, unlearn and relearn the skills required to survive in the 4th generation of human advancement. This 4th generation is one, which is characterised by disruptive technologies, mainly driven by artificial intelligence and robotics. Thus it is no longer good enough to be an accountant, doctor, engineer or lawyer or any other of the traditional professions, as we know them.

The winners in the 21st Century will be countries that can create thinking person(s). That is a person who can reason, analyse, evaluate, make decisions and solve problems. Such a person would have to possess soft skills in the form of curiosity, creativity, ability to communicate, network and also remain sceptical and emotionally balanced in the face of the volatile world we live in.

In terms of hard skills, the winners of the 21st Century will need to train their labour force in digital competences, which include data management skills, skills that computers can never learn, and entrepreneurship. However, the emphasis was slowly shifting away from hard skills, and we would be soon talking of 'timeless skills' which are a function of social values, empathy and leadership.

Judging by the discussion that followed, I seem to have asked more questions than I had answered. Two questions stood out from the discussion that ensued. One was whether our education system was creating the right people for tomorrow's jobs that may not even exist as yet. Two was whether African Universities were creating any new knowledge, as they are 'wont' to claim.

On the first question we all agreed that our education system was more or less broken because we were not resourcing it properly. The way it worked is that passing exams was the only criteria on which we were measuring our children. To be required to score a 95

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per cent to be deemed to have 'passed' was the wrong metric by any standard. As a result, those who 'passed' highly (the stars) became accountants, doctors, engineers and the like. Those who 'failed' (the laggards) became teachers while those who never got a chance became businessmen! The businessmen employed the stars. The stars married other stars and produced more stars, whom they drove to 'school' every morning to be taught to 'pass' using a method known as regurgitation by the laggards! In a rational world, this would be described as an absurdity.

On the second question, it was obvious that if university professors were not 'professors of practice', how could we expect them to create knowledge? Maybe they knew about types of financial statements, but if they had never prepared them, how could they profess knowledge about that which they had never done? Basing on the events of this week in the Legislature, one need not guess much about the state of our education system. The question is how do we fix it?

Prof Sejjaaka is country team leader at Abacus Business School. sejjaaka@gmail.com
[@samuelsejjaaka](https://www.facebook.com/samuelsejjaaka)

29/35 8th Street, P.O. Box 12141
Kampala, Uganda

Phones 0312301100/101
Fax 041232369

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