

Where have all the PhD dons gone?

'Ugandan universities are struggling to attract the right staffing levels in terms of PhD holders'

By Billy Rwothungeyo

The inadequate number of holders of Doctorate of Philosophy (PhD) degrees in East African universities is worrying. PhD is the highest academic qualification and is awarded after intensive study and broad research by a candidate.

Obtaining a PhD is a prerequisite for one getting the title "doctor" conferred upon them. A PhD also leads one to the positions of professor and associate professor at universities.

The shortage of PhD holders in universities was one of the salient themes at the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) organised Academia-Public-Private Partnership Forum held at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA) in the Kenya capital Nairobi.

Speaking to *New Vision* on the sidelines of the forum, Prof. Alexandre Lyambabaje, the executive secretary of IUCEA, said Ugandan universities are struggling to attract the right numbers of PhD holders.

"If you look at Uganda closely, you will find that there are departments in some universities that do not have a single PhD



Frontline: Some of the people who graduated with PhDs from Makerere University recently. NCHE stipulates that university students be taught by PhD holders

holder. There are even courses at master's level that are taught by master's graduates," he said.

The standards

The international standard for one to be a university lecturer is that one should be a PhD holder. Indeed, one cannot claim to be a university lecturer in many parts of the world until one has achieved this qualification.

Uganda is keen on following through with the international standards. As per the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) standards, for one to be a senior lecturer in a university in Uganda, one should have a PhD, which also applies to a senior research fellow. For one to be a lecturer, they must have a master's degree, but on track to get a PhD. The same requirement applies to research fellows. For you to be an

"Low pay for professors and doctors at universities is part of the under appreciation of PhD holders in society."

Prof. John Opuda

assistant lecturer, you must have a master's degree. This applies to assistant research fellows.

As a benchmark, NCHE says 50% to 60 % of the academic staff in

any university in Uganda should be PhD holders and academic staff should have 10 contact hours, while devoting the remainder of their time to research, publishing and mentorship of young scholars.

Without the right qualifications, Lyambabaje says lecturers are ill-equipped to train students, which ultimately affects the quality of graduates being churned out of institutions of higher learning.

"If we do not have qualified PhD holders, we cannot train master's students, who will start as lecturers in universities, but also those who can work for industry and other sectors of the economy," he reasons.

In many universities across Uganda, it is common to find lecturers with Bachelor's degrees as their highest academic qualification instructing undergraduate students. Many of them have 'first class

degrees' as their qualification to lecturing in a university. Lyambabaje says this is wrong. "If you are at the same level with the people you are teaching, unless you have long experience, you are likely not to deliver to the expectations (of students). That is why it is important that a PhD holder teaches master's students, even those at undergraduate level. A master's graduate can still teach undergraduate students as long as they demonstrate extensive experience in the field of specialisation."

Private universities worst affected

Perhaps befittingly, Uganda's oldest and most prestigious institution of higher learning, Makerere University has the most number of PhD holders. Out of the over 1,300 academic staff at Makerere, 600 of them have PhDs, which translates to 45% of the academic staff. At Makerere University Business School, 47 staff members have doctorates.

The history of the university, coupled with the strategic partnerships built with foreign partners like donors and foreign universities means that Makerere always has the upper hand over other universities. And because Makerere has more PhD holders than other universities, it is in a position to train compared to other institutions.

On the other hand, the over two dozen private universities in Uganda are woefully short of PhD holders. In fact, most of the few professors, associate professors and doctors in private universities were originally at Makerere. In these universities, it is common knowledge that the big number of teaching staff only have bachelor's degrees and are teaching undergraduate students and many masters' degree holders, without the prerequisite standards set by NCHE.

Estimates indicate that Uganda produces about 200 PhD holders every year. Prof. Abdu Kasozi, the former executive director for NCHE, reckons that to bridge the deficit, Uganda needs to produce about 1,000 PhD holders annually for the next 10 years.

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