Ministry to retool unemployed graduates

By Gloria Nakajubi

MAJORITY OF OUT-OF-SCHOOL YOUTH, ACCORDING TO THE REPORT, DO NOT CONSIDER THE EDUCATION THEY RECEIVED APPLICABLE TO IMPROVING THEIR LIVELIHOODS

Arguably one of the biggest highlights of the just concluded Education and Sports Sector Annual Performance Review is the Government's move to skill graduates with requisite vocational or market skills for easy employability.

With over 400,000 graduates released to the job market every year, statistics from the Uganda Investment Authority indicate that just about 150,000 jobs are created annually.

As highlighted in an Actionaid report on youth unemployment in Uganda titled 'Lost Opportunity? Gaps in Youth Policy and Programming in Uganda', the quality of education is, but lacking in equipping graduates with the necessary skills for the job market.

"The education system was said not to equip young people for the work place or for self-employment. Youth leave school lacking job search skills, an understanding of what employment opportunities are available, and the knowledge and skills to attain the job they want." Reads the report.

Majority of out-of-school youth, according to the report, do not consider the education they received applicable to improving their livelihoods. Many felt that they would be better off if at school they had learned agricultural education, technical skills, entrepreneurship and the creative arts.

According to the just launched Education and Sports Sector Strategic Plan for the next four years, the education ministry through the Business, Technical, Vocational Education and Training (BTVET) Unit, will be taking in a total of 10,000 graduates every year for the programme.

Improved funding

Funding towards BTVET is also projected to increase from the current sh138b to sh161b (2018/19) and sh165b (2019/20).

In an interview with the state minister in charge of higher education, John Muyingo, he explained that the biggest challenge with the current tertiary institutions is that they are churning out graduates with skills that are not relevant to the market demands.

He cites the case of teaching graduates where by the biggest percentage are arts-based, and, yet, considering the teacher gaps at the public schools, the demand is for the science-based category.

"The market is now crowded with teachers of History and Christian Religious Education. The arts-based teachers can hardly be absorbed in the system. That's why equipping them with other skills is necessary," Muyingo says.

Strategic plan

The short courses, according to Muyingo, will be executed by carefully selected BTVET institutions, which will be specialising in particular skills. Students will be able to determine particular skills they want to acquire. The skilling programme has been going on for the last five years. However, this was for the informal sector.

The move, however, according to the minister is a stop-gap measure. In the long run, universities are expected to integrate such key skill sets as entrepreneurship, computer literacy and other soft and people skills in every programme of study.

The new strategic plan highlights the ministry's strategic action points to achieve equitable access for all children at primary level and post-primary level, as well as, quality instructional programme through effective use

As quoted in an earlier *New Vision* story, the First Lady and Education Minister Janet Museveni, while launching the plan, stated that the new strategy is meant to address the systemic bottlenecks that have bogged down the sector for long.

"The plan will act as a compass to guide our planning and prioritisation over the next three years, as we endeavour to provide education that will give our children a foundation for quality life," the Minister stated.

Key objectives

The strategic objectives the ministry is benchmarking on is; achieving equitable access to relevant and quality education and training; ensuring delivery of relevant and quality education and training and enhancing efficiency and effectiveness of education and sports service delivery at all levels.

Achievements, so far

The sector registered a number of milestones in the year under review, with an increasing number of schools and learners. From a total of 8.2 million pupils in 2015/2016, the number of primary pupils increased to 8.6 million. At secondary level, the figures increased to 1.4 million (2016/17) from 1.2 million (2015/16). The increment is attributed to the universal primary and secondary education initiatives. It is also important to note that Uganda's population is predominately young with a high demand for basic education and training.

Just as the other levels of learning, the BTVET sub-sector also registered improvements in the total enrolment and the number of institutions set up. Feeding into the national strategy of skilling Ugandans, a growth in this sector is arguably a positive indicator towards achieving this particular objective. According to the sector report, the number of BTVET institutions increased by 8.4% from 119 in the past financial year to 129 in the year under review (2016/17).

Challenges

However, despite the milestones recorded in the past year, the ministry continues to struggle with funding shortfalls. The country's expenditure on education stands at 2.46% of the Gross Domestic Product, which is way below the recommended 4% required to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (2030).

Private players commended

Cognisant of the limited resources, the role of the private sector and public private partnerships cannot be underestimated. With an estimated funding gap of about sh10 trillions in the next four years, the different stakeholders remain an important piece in this strategy.

The other key strategies include; strengthening inspection system, learning assessment system, competence profiling, recruitment of teachers, talent identification and nurturing.

According to the plan, the ministry intends to recruit both primary and secondary teachers to meet the recommended teacher-pupil and teacher-student ratios. At the university level, the target is to improve the current staffing levels at public universities from 35% to at least 55%.

A well-laid out strategic plan covering the different sub-sectors, remains to be seen whether these wi be translated from paper to practice, as the country needs such human resource to achieve the middle income status.

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