

# Transfer universities to science ministry

## OPINION



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Since the publication of my summary of the critique of the Rwendeire Report in the New Vision on March 14, a number of concerned citizens have contacted me with both appreciation and anger over my views.

One area that most people are probing and would like a national debate on is the proposed transfer of higher education affairs from the Ministry of Education and Sports, to that of Science and Technology Ministry. My position is that university affairs should be transferred, but all other tertiary institutions should remain in the Ministry of Education and Sports for the following reasons. First, the role of the university has changed and cannot be accommodated by the Ministry of Education. The role of the Ministry of Education and Sports is training and skilling Ugandans.

Almost all non-university tertiary institutions belong to the latter. So one cannot transfer all higher education affairs "bag and baggage" from the Ministry of Education and Sports to the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation.

However, for universities, the issues are different. With the increasing influence of the digital revolution, the world economy is progressively becoming knowledge-based. The university is at the centre of research and knowledge production and, therefore, the heart-beat of economic progress. Due to this digital revolution, the roles of the university has changed from just being the apex of a training and teaching system managed as other teaching institutions to a major driver of economic development at the head of a country's research and innovation system.

For fast developing countries, knowledge production has replaced training as the first of the four major functions of a university. The other three, which are linked to knowledge production, are training (or the dissemination of researched knowledge), the selection of dominant elites and the diffusion of ideology. A university that does not fulfil all the four functions is a glorified high school.

Secondly, every nation needs a research and innovation system, which includes universities, research centres like NARO, URI, IDI, National Council of Science



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and Technology and various private sector innovators. To be compact and to quickly respond to national innovation needs, all these institutions should be located in the same ministry. If universities are not part of the country's innovation system, then the latter will be as defective as is Uganda's case now.

Thirdly, for the last 30 years, the Ministry of Education and Sports funding behaviour has shown that it does not appreciate the multiple functions of a university. It has only focused on the training function of the university.

With the neglect of the research and knowledge production functions of

becoming engines of development as their counterparts in Asia and North America have done. The interest of the Ministry of Education and Sports has been in increasing student access by funding more public universities, increasing space for more students and their welfare rather than research and knowledge production.

Lastly, we should all appreciate that universities are the leaders of any education system and, therefore, define the path other levels of education should take. Makerere University Council did not appreciate this point. It did not recommend the shift to the science ministry for simple reasoning that such a move, "Would create problems of lack of harmonisation with basic education" as if the role of higher education is to serve the primary basic education level.

What Makerere council should understand is that higher education, particularly universities, is the heart of any education system. Universities condition what goes on in the lower levels of education. Universities train curriculum designers; they train most of the teachers and create the knowledge that is taught at lower levels of the education system.

I know many countries where universities are in different ministries, and we can follow suit.

The writer is a researcher and former executive director of the National Council for Higher Education

## TIP

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