

National News

Experts say universities must play a bigger role in boosting research output across the country.

BY JANE NAFULA

The National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) has pledged to support both public and private universities to develop their innovations into viable products, in a move aimed at preventing promising ideas from being shelved despite their potential to solve societal challenges.

The commitment comes at a time several institutions of higher learning are struggling to move beyond the prototype stage to full commercialisation.

Speaking at the close of the three-day 16th Annual Higher Education Exhibition in Gulu City on March 28, the Director of ICT, Research and Innovation at NCHE, Dr Nora Kasirye Mulira, said universities must play a bigger role in boosting research output across the country.

She revealed that Makerere University currently contributes about 84 per cent of all research output from higher education institutions, highlighting a significant imbalance in the Education sector.

"Funding is always a challenge, but NCHE is going to support institutions to advance their innovations in a number of ways. We shall support students to test their prototypes and move them into production," Dr Kasirye said.

She added that the Council would work with the Uganda Registration Services Bureau (URSB) to help innovators register their intellectual property, a key step in protecting and commercialising their ideas.

Dr Kasirye further noted that NCHE will advocate for the full operationalisation of the National Research and Innovation Fund to ensure that both public and private institutions benefit.

Inside NCHE plan to bail out universities

"It has been a concern that private institutions are sometimes left out, yet they are part and parcel of the higher education landscape. They must be supported if higher education is to have a meaningful impact," she said.

To strengthen collaboration between academia and industry, NCHE has also signed a memorandum of understanding with the Private Sector Foundation Uganda. The partnership is expected to ease linkages between universities and the private sector, enabling innovations to transition from research to real-world application.

"If projects need progression from prototypes to actual production, they must link up with industry. We shall also encourage institutions with similar innovations to collaborate by sharing infrastructure and technical expertise," she added.

Stakeholders at the exhibition also recommended increasing Uganda's gross expenditure on research and development from the current 0.4 per cent to at least 1 per cent within the next five years to spur innovation.

However, the NCHE Executive Director, Dr Mary Okwakol, acknowledged that limited funding and weak linkages between universities and the industry continue to hinder the translation of academic research into practical solutions.

Gulu West Member of Parliament Martin Mapenduzi, who also chairs the Parliamentary Public Service Committee, said the government is committed to increasing investment in research and innovation.

He revealed that during a recent ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) party caucus meeting at State House Entebbe, President Museveni



UCU students Jolly Joshua Lumbuye and Rebekah Mugenyi display a Hexapod rescue box at the NCHE exhibition in Gulu City last week. The device helps locate disaster victims trapped under mudslides. PHOTO/JANE NAFULA

pledged additional funding for the sector in the next financial year.

"The world is moving very fast and becoming more competitive. We can only keep pace by supporting innova-

tion and encouraging young people to think creatively and work hard," Mr Mapenduzi said.

More than 50 universities and tertiary institutions participated in the exhibi-

KEY INITIATIVES

Support for Innovators: NCHE will help students and universities test prototypes, register intellectual property (IP) with URSB, and link with industry for commercialisation.

Funding Push: NCHE advocates for operationalising the National Research and Innovation Fund and increasing gross expenditure on research and development (GERD) from 0.4% to 1% within five years.

tion, held under the theme "Harnessing innovation in higher education for socio-economic transformation."

Earlier, the State minister for Higher Education, Mr John Chrysostom Muyingo, expressed concern over the slow pace of commercialising university research.

"To achieve accelerated economic transformation, research must not remain on library shelves but must move into factories, farms, hospitals and markets," Dr Muyingo said, urging institutions to strengthen incubation centres, innovation hubs and technology transfer offices.

The NCHE chairperson, Dr Joy Constance Kwesiga, said innovation remains central to making higher education relevant and impactful.

"Without innovation, institutions risk becoming outdated and disconnected from societal needs," she said, citing weak regulatory enforcement, slow adaptation to emerging technologies and limited research capacity as key challenges.

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