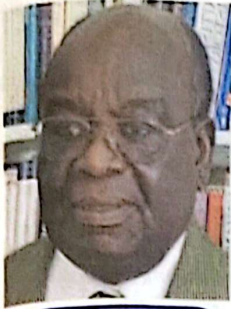


Why universities should be under innovation ministry



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Since the publication of my summary of the critique of the Rwendeire Report in the *New Vision* of March 14 numerous concerned people 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 education ministry to that of science, technology and innovation.

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.

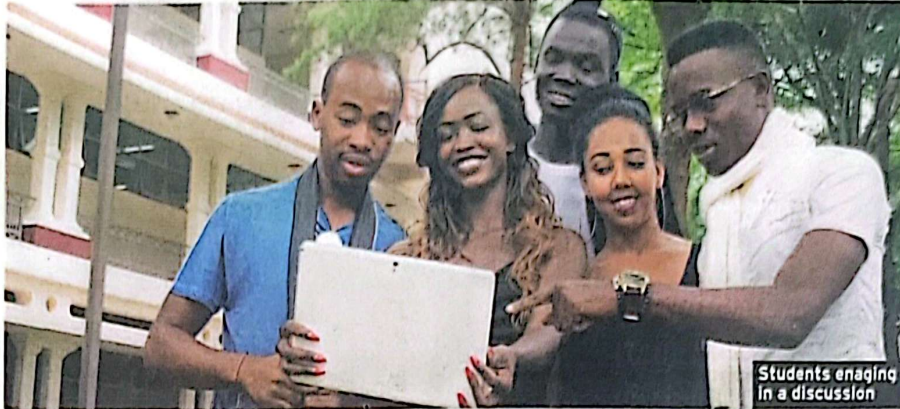
First, the role of the university has changed and cannot be accommodated by current ministry of education.

The role of the education ministry is training and skilling Ugandans. Almost all non-university tertiary institutions belong to the latter ministry.

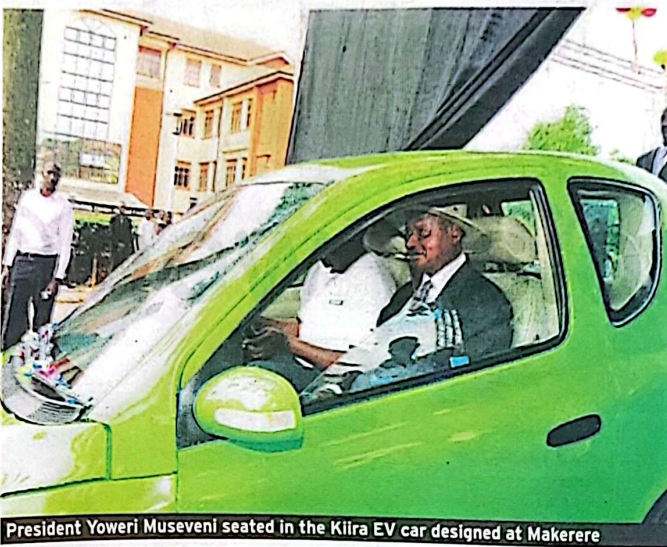
So you cannot transfer all higher education affairs 'bag and baggage' from the education ministry to that of science, technology and innovation. But for universities, the issues are different. With the increasing influence of the digital revolution, the world economy is progressively becoming knowledge 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 have 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



Students engaging in a discussion



President Yoweri Museveni seated in the Kiira EV car designed at Makerere

innovation system. For fast developing countries, knowledge production has replaced training (or teaching) as the first of the four major functions of a university. The other three, which are linked and dovetail with 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 and Technology and various private sector innovators.

The university is the core of such a system because it has the highest number

of qualified persons, the sophisticated research facilities, the libraries and the training facilities and traditions to pass discovered knowledge to future generations. 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 education ministry funding behaviour has shown that it does not appreciate the multiple functions of a university.

The education ministry has only focused on the training function of the university.

Since 1993, the education ministry has not only had low budgets for universities, it has

not been funding research, knowledge production and the training of the next generation of academics, the PhD holders.

The average funding of Ugandan public universities has averaged 0.035% as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product compared to about 1.0% and 0.9% for Tanzania and Kenya respectively for almost thirty years.

Research in universities, which needs billions, was not funded until 2009/10 when an average of sh400m to sh500m was annually allocated for a few subsequent years.

For the year 2017/18 only sh420m has been earmarked for research in universities. Although some sh222.6m shillings for Masters training has been allocated for 2017/18, no money has been reserved for doctoral studies for years.

As a result, based on the

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National Council for Higher Education standards, a deficit of some 15,000 PhD holders has been created in the university system.

PhD holders constitute the core of researchers, professors and innovators and their absence translates into slow economic development.

With only a training capacity of two hundred PhD holders a year, our universities cannot fill the PhD deficit in the next ten years.

The shortage of qualified staff in universities is a national emergency the education ministry has not addressed. Hence the low quality of our graduates as revealed by the 2014 report of the Inter-University Council for East Africa, which found Ugandan graduates to be the least performers in the region.

With the neglect of the research and knowledge production functions of the university and focusing only on the training one, Ugandan universities have expanded in numbers of students and institutions without becoming engines of development as their counterparts in the Asian and North America countries have done. The interest of the education ministry 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.

To revitalise Ugandan universities to South African or Ghanaian levels, the education ministry would need to spend over 40% of its budget on higher education instead of the average 10% to 15% it has been annually allocating to higher education for the last three decades. This, it cannot do because of demands at lower levels of education.

The education ministry should willingly part with universities as these are mainly knowledge producers, and training is a secondary function.

On the other hand the science and technology ministry has innovation funds that can only be effectively used when universities are located in that ministry.

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 and technology ministry for simple, and I think, pedestrian, reasoning that such a move "would create problems of lack of harmonization 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.

Moreover, primary and secondary syllabuses are designed to lead students to universities. Therefore universities do not need to 'harmonise' with lower levels of the education system. Nay, the reverse is the case.

It is not also true that "the world over" universities are in the docket of ministries of education. I know many countries where universities are in different ministries.

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