Varsities urged to lead digital development of football

By John Masaba

Universities and research institutions have been challenged to take a more active role in driving the digital transformation of Ugandan football, as the sport increasingly embraces data, technology and innovation.

The appeal was made by the Federation of Uganda Football Associations (FUFA) second deputy president, Dr Azah Taibu.

Taibu said stronger collaboration between academia and the sports sector is critical to bridging skills gaps and building a sustainable football economy.

"Football is a massive industry. Innovation will guide us in developing research-based, sustainable solutions that strengthen the game and the wider sports sector," she said.

She was speaking during the signing of a memorandum of understanding between FUFA and ISBAT University at the university's main campus in Lugogo, Kampala, on Friday.

Stakeholders said the partnership is expected to deepen the role of research, data analytics and artificial intelligence (AI) in transforming football in Uganda.



Taibu (left) hands over a Uganda Cranes shirt to Kalmatacal (centre) during the signing of the memorandum at ISBAT University in Kampala on Friday. On the left is Kumar

Taibu explained that the partnership will also strengthen local capacity and reduce reliance on foreign consultants, while creating context-specific solutions for the country's football sector.

"This allows us to build local expertise and create sustainable jobs for our youth along the football value chain," she said.

She added that the growing number of local teams requires specialised support in analytics and AI, underscoring the need for universities and research institutions to actively support clubs and the wider football ecosystem.

The partnership comes amid growing recognition that data-driven decision-making is now central to modern football – from player performance analysis to tactical planning.

Edgar Watson, the chief executive officer of FUFA, said AI is increasingly shaping how matches are analysed and managed.

"AI is crucial because it captures details that the human eye cannot easily track during a match," he said, citing examples such as tracking player movements, touches, and defensive actions that can influence match outcomes.

Watson said partnerships with academic institutions allow students to develop careers that combine sports and technology while maintaining academic and physical development.

The importance of data-driven performance analysis was echoed by Shawn Mubiru, the head of media services at FUFA, who said AI helps teams analyse small but decisive details that shape match results.

He said collaboration with academic institutions will help develop local expertise in sports technology and open career pathways that combine football, research, and innovation.

Pradeep Kumar, the director of studies at ISBAT, said administrators say the collaboration reflects a broader shift toward integrating education, technology, and sports development.

Kumar said football today involves strategy, marketing, and real-time decision-making – areas where AI can support analysis, forecasting and performance monitoring.

He said integrating AI, robotics and analytics into sports programmes will help students apply academic knowledge in real-world settings, stimulate job creation, and support local innovation while promoting holistic student development.

INVEST BIG

Prof. Matthew Kalmatacal, the vice-chancellor of ISBAT University, noted that building competitive football teams requires significant investment in training, coaching, physiotherapy and other support services.