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Universities need to communicate better



Makerere University main building

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By Maureen Agena

Universities generate a lot of knowledge through faculty and students' research, which is needed for society and national development. Further, due to the increasing demand, universities are also engaged in research for development and community outreach, both of which are beneficial for national development.

Universities also provide a lot of social services to society. However, the visibility of African universities' contribution to society development, and policy formulation in particular, is not that visible to the general public, especially in the area of policy. This is partly because university scientists and researchers have challenges in communicating the information they gather and the knowledge they generate for informing decision making and consequently national development.

Yet the knowledge based on independent, quality-assured information such as that from universities empowers people and helps them to develop ideas, engage in discussions, influence policy and make decisions that can improve the quality of life in general.

The demand for easy to understand, up-to-date information is growing. This demand comes from policy makers, researchers, students, media and from civil societies, who are increasingly urging for full transparency on information from both public and private Universities. Alongside this development, the rapid evolution in new information technologies provides tools to communicate more effectively. Because of the increasing need for information and the existing communication gap between what universities do and the

demand of the communities/countries they serve, universities continue to be labelled as “Ivory towers” or irrelevant to community or national development. The result has been the isolation of universities as institutions from national development framework consultation processes, decline in funding in some countries, lack of trust from governments and loss of prestige as “knowledge and innovation centres”.

Restoring the lost glory requires adaptation of universities to the current needs and aggressively communicating every action to adapt. At international level, African universities are competing to be world class, yet African universities continue to lag behind in global ranking. Information used for ranking is based on communicated information such as online publications, stories published, and electronic resources available, among others. While university top management is responsible for making strategic decisions on how the universities should operate, it is the role of public relations and communication officers to package their universities as successful institutions worth investing in. Information on graduate quality and employability, the research being done and its outputs and how the community and national economy will benefit among others, is a key role for communication and public relations officers to articulate and make widely visible.

Some universities have excelled in information packaging and communication and thus are perceived as excellent universities while many others in Africa have not promoted their visibility that well, and are seen as less performing. While the level of activity in the community and nationally is low for emerging universities, twining of such universities with the established ones will provide a platform for lesson sharing and learning from each other to enhance performance and visibility of African universities.

Through entities such as Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) a consortium of 85 universities in 36 African countries, skills sharing and mobility exchange could go a long way in bridging this communication and information gap and creating a community of practice of professionals that not only increases the visibility of universities, but also markets them better.

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