

Makerere University, Uganda

Makerere University is one of the oldest and most prestigious universities in Africa. Established in 1922 as a technical school, its guiding principle for civic engagement today is to contribute to the devolution of power to local governments in Uganda, with the overall aim of improving service delivery in the country. This orientation is a new development for the institution and emerged out of a process five years ago that redefined its direction, putting information and the use of technology at the center of social and human resources development.

Like many other institutions of higher learning across the world, the university was perceived by ordinary people in Uganda as an elitist center of privilege, far removed from the national and local efforts being made to find solutions to the challenges of development. In response to this 'ivory tower' status, a planning process was launched to define a new direction for the institution, and the plan conceived in this process was instituted in 2000. With the support of the World Bank's International Development Association and the Rockefeller Foundation, the university was transformed from being an exclusive institution to a center of excellence that supports the ever-changing needs of society. Central to this 're-engineering' process was the Ugandan government's policy of decentralization.

Approach to civic engagement

Universities in Uganda are increasingly being called on to produce a well-trained, skilled and marketable pool of human resources for sustainable development. As a member of the National Council for Higher Education in Uganda, the university is legally obliged to develop a strategic framework outlining how it intends to introduce programs that are relevant to the myriad challenges facing Ugandan society. This is a requirement under the Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act of 2001.

Today, civic engagement at the university takes the form of mandatory as well as extra-curricular activities in communities. Graduate and undergraduate students are involved in community-based training and research programs in basic health and medicine, agriculture, governance, planning and management, engineering, and education. Internships are available through which students support governmental and non-governmental projects in these focus areas. The drive for civic engagement is also reflected in activities carried out by faculty members who constitute a critical mass of experts to undertake research and conduct short courses and evaluations that develop capacity for decision-making and service delivery at local level.

The institution has introduced a university-wide capacity building program focused on the decentralization of governance. It involves all stakeholders in the development arena including faculty and students, government departments at local and central levels, local government structures, nonprofit organizations, the donor community, and communities across the country who are the direct beneficiaries of the program.

Resources

Civic engagement at the university is financed primarily through external funding. Major players in this regard are the International Development Association, which is part of the World Bank group, and the Rockefeller Foundation. The Ugandan government also supports the university's efforts through its various departments and agencies, especially the decentralization initiative.

Challenges

The drive to establish university–community partnerships is a new development for the institution, and has gained momentum as part of the direction charted by the institution since 2000. Not all members of the university community have fully accepted civic engagement as an integral part of teaching and research, and the expansion of civic engagement is constrained by the lack of incentives for students and faculty to get more involved.

The Ugandan government has made some funding available through the Department of Local Government to facilitate collaboration between institutions of higher learning and local government structures. In most cases, however, civic engagement programs depend largely on foreign and/or private donations. Since these can be phased out at any time, the programs are vulnerable and the sustained growth of civic engagement remains at risk.

Conclusion

Makerere University recognizes the value of establishing a strategic fit between its core business (scholarship and research) and the needs of the society. Its position as an established university can give impetus to the integration of civic engagement as a public good within the higher education sector in the region.

Capacity Building Program for Decentralization

The university has been facilitating the implementation of the Capacity Building Program for Decentralization in Uganda since 2001. This came after a lengthy process of consultation between different stakeholders including central and local government, the donor community, the higher education sector, and community-based organizations. The program was used as a springboard for the university to cast off its 'ivory tower' status. It also served as an institutionalized support mechanism for the government's decentralization policy which was implemented in 1997.

The overall development objective of this program is to build the relevant capacity within central government, higher education institutions and local government councils for improved and sustainable service delivery that contributes to poverty reduction through innovation. The program is built on the premise of the creation of synergies at two levels: between higher education institutions at the national level, and between higher education institutions and local government.

Through this program, institutions of higher learning and local government structures have established reciprocal knowledge-sharing relationships that aid the transformation of the universities to make them more responsive to national and local development needs. Local governments have become major recipients of the university's graduates and technical expertise. The program operates in the fields of agriculture, primary health care, governance, engineering, education, planning, and management.

The Capacity Building Program for Decentralization in Uganda is part of the government's Poverty Eradication Action Plan and has four components:

- Enhanced Academic Institutional Capacity Building for Decentralization: this component aims to strengthen the resource base of participating universities to act as a critical mass for development at grassroots level.
- Pilot Support to Local Government Capacity Building by Universities: this component focuses on the development of new curricula responsive to the needs of local government, as well as short courses that are intended to meet the short-term skills development needs of local governments. Training is provided to full-time university students and short courses are provided for local government staff.
- Enhanced Decentralization Policy Research and Formulation Capacity: in this component local governments identify policy issues that then form the focus of research conducted by faculty and students. So far 120 research grants for master's level students and 20 full doctoral fellowships have been supported in the six priority areas.
- The Monitoring and Evaluation Program: this is funded under the learning and innovation loan provided by the International Development Association. It has set up a computerized system to track the progress of the program.

The program is overseen by the 'Innovations at Makerere Committee' which comprises university deans and directors, representatives from the ministries of Finance and Economic Development and Local Government, the National Council for Higher Education, the local government association, and one member who represents the partnering institutions. There is also representation from the University of Dar es Salaam who provides a regional and international perspective on the program.

At a glance

Name of institution	Makerere University
Country	Uganda
Type of institution	Public
Total number of undergraduate students in 2005	30,000
Total number of graduate students in 2005	2,000
Extent of student participating in civic engagement activities	10-25%
Extent of faculty participating in civic engagement activities	25-50%
National, regional and international affiliations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The National Council for Higher Education• The East African Inter-University Council• The Association of the Commonwealth Universities

