

Will the new system improve quality?

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By Vision Reporter

DR. Alex Mugisha Kajuma, the deputy vice-chancellor in charge of academics at Uganda Christian University, says hiking the grades does not necessarily bring about quality.

"Quality cannot be achieved when issues to do with course content and the curriculum are not looked into. The new standardised grading system needs to be revised and made appropriate only to particular courses," Dr. Mugisha stresses.

James Okello, the deputy registrar, head of senate division at Makerere University, says the curriculum of the programmes offered by the different universities needs to be standardised if they are to produce graduates of the same calibre.

Wilson Muyinda, the academic registrar of Nkumba University, however, believes that with the new system, graduates from different universities who get the same class of degree will be equally good. "When it comes to ensuring authenticity of marks awarded, external examiners come in as checks to ensure quality. At Nkumba, we hire external examiners to do moderation. They look at examination questions, course content, and cross-check the awarding of marks," Muyinda explains.

Even with quality assurance mechanisms in place by NCHE, the graduates from the private universities have had a fair share of reservations from the public and other universities.

"Graduates from the unchartered universities are not eligible for admission for master's programmes at Makerere University regardless of their class of degree," Okello notes.

Only six private universities are chartered. They are Uganda Martyrs Nkozi, Ndejje, Nkumba, Kampala International University, Bugema, and Uganda Christian University (UCU).

Okello emphasises that for the new grading system to be effective, the qualifications of the examiners should be critically examined.

"At Makerere University for example, to be an examiner, one must be at the level of a lecturer and hold a PhD. The chief examiner is the head of department at the rank of a senior lecturer. If an assistant lecturer is involved in the examination process, he must be supervised by a lecturer," he adds.

Okello says the level of qualification of the teaching staff at the university also affects the quality of education provided by a particular university. So, if the teaching staff do not meet the required qualifications, the new system will be of no help.

Lessons from foreign universities

The world over, achieving the same standards by different universities has been considered impossible. In the UK, Members of Parliament recently accused the education sector of "defensive complacency" over standards. They criticised vice chancellors for dodging the question of whether a 2:1 in history

from Oxford Brookes University was "equivalent" to a 2:1 in the same subject from the University of Oxford.

A report of the Higher Education Policy Institute, published on June 3, says the higher the level of attainment achieved by students attending Oxford or Cambridge University, the more the resources devoted to them which means it would be "a surprise" if the outcome of their students were no higher than those in less facilitated universities where students had far lower entry grades regardless of whether they scored the same grades.

Prof Roger Brown, the former head of the Higher Education Quality Council, writes in the report that whilst the desire for some degree of comparability has remained, the ability to achieve it has diminished. He states that instead of aiming for an "unrealistic" level of comparability, minimum standards must be maintained and the current system of degree classifications phased out.

In Canada, universities do not have a standardised grading system. Some use grade points which are not necessarily measured on the same scale.

In South America, a standardised grading system does not exist. In Peru for example, grading is not standardised among universities.

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