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THE MONITOR

Uganda: Counting the Cost of University Education

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Kampala — It seemed like an impossible dream to join a university but today, in his second year of study, he can't believe the hoops he has to jump through to get the money for his tuition.

Jessy Ssekitto (not real name because he wanted to express himself freely) claims lecturers dodge teaching and that there are few computers yet every semester Shs40, 000 is required for use of computers. When a student fails to beat payment deadline, there are fines.

University education can be expensive and the rate depends on the institution an individual wishes to join but it helps when one understands how much money is needed to fund higher education.

"I have to ensure I utilise every service I have paid for in the three years I will be here. I expect lecturers to teach, get medical attention when I need it, find

facilities in the computer laboratory and be able to have the skills that can assist me outcompete the rest in the job market when I complete my studies," Mr Ssekito, an education student at Kampala International University says in an interview.

"The university has a deadline for paying in their money but when you fail to comply, Shs60, 000 is charged and it keeps doubling every time another deadline approaches. But if parents fail to pay the initial tuition on time, adding on a fine is ironic; worse still when services paid for in some instances aren't provided," Ssekito continues.

Today, higher education is vital for a decent job and students have to find ways to pay for this higher level of education. Some students are lucky and get government scholarships because of their outstanding performance but there are those who have to pay for every service offered to them at the institution.

Eligible students

60, 370 students out of the 96, 741 who sat 2009 Uganda Advanced Certificate of Education passed with at least two principal passes, making them eligible for admission into university and other tertiary institutions.

However, the government only sponsors 4,000 students per year to the five public universities of Makerere, Mbarara, Gulu, Busitema and Kyambogo.

Of the 4,000 slots, 40 are reserved for top sportspersons while 64 are

filled by people with disabilities. 896 slots are competed for through the district quota system with preference given to students who sat for exams at schools located in their home districts.

The remaining 56,370 students who miss joining public-funded universities but qualify to join higher institutions of learning can only do so at their own cost. There are 22 private universities countrywide.

Because costs vary depending on where one wants to go, a student ought to look at whether the institution is private or public before applying. This is because private universities are usually considered more expensive than public ones

For example, Uganda Christian University, a private institution will charge a student who enrolls for a bachelor of education Shs666, 000 per semester in the 2010/11 academic year while Kyambogo University is charging Shs770, 000 for the same course. Makerere University charges Shs672, 000.

This is just the tuition fee minus accommodation and living expenses. Another area a student may wish to look at would be fees for student residents, transport for commuter students, meals, examination, registration, sports, guild, medical and student services.

At Makerere University, functional fees will add up to Shs39,300 without resident fee. Some of the money is paid per semester while the other is annual. UCU charges Shs410, 000, which is payable per semester plus Shs578, 000 for

accommodation including food.

But Makerere University Vice Chancellor Prof. Venansius Baryamureeba urges students to join campuses within their financial limit.

"We have opened two upcountry campuses; one in Jinja and the other in Kabarole where the cost of living for students may be cheaper than that at the main campus in Kampala. And students who may not afford the main campus can join the same institution upcountry but with the same services," Prof Baryamureeba says.

He adds that upcountry students are still better placed in the job market since some employing institutions in such places want university student services.

Rural allure

"When I was still a student, I would look forward to holidays because then I would go back home and start teaching in the neighbouring schools. The money I would get would assist me in many areas on returning to school," the acting Vice Chancellor of the 88-year-old institution says.

For the first time ever, the government has raised hopes of students from humble families by promising to start offering student loans this academic year.

Education Minister Geraldine Bitamazire last month told this newspaper that the loan scheme was a definite possibility.

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