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 Uganda: Moving beyond price to recruit international students
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Uganda: Moving beyond price to recruit international students

The Marketing Uganda HE project ran from October 2010 to March 2012. Its overall goal was to improve the export competitiveness of Uganda's higher education (HE) services. Phase 1 outlined recommended actions for universities to improve marketing capabilities. Phase 2 focused on building the HE sector's capability to attract international students. Priority themes for action included:

- Designing a blueprint for a 'Study in Uganda' web portal.
- Developing a 'Study in Uganda HE' guide for prospective international students.
- Improving university services to international students.
- Strengthening inter-university collaboration by establishing a Uganda HE Marketing Network.

Commissioned with a narrow brief, the project focused on assessing the capability of Ugandan higher education (HE) to recruit more international students from across the East Africa and COMESA regions. Notwithstanding this, the project team appointed by the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Uganda Export Promotion Board (UEPB) embraced a broader conceptualisation of internationalising HE in Uganda, recognising that the 'internationalisation agenda' in HE has become a strategic objective extending beyond attracting more international students.

The potential of the education sector to contribute to Uganda's economic growth and export development was previously highlighted in at least two studies, the USAID Baseline survey of the services sector in Uganda (2002) and EC-funded Assessment of Uganda's export potential for education services in the regional market (2005). More recently, education services were identified as a priority export sector in the country's National Export Strategy (NES) in 2007. The growing contribution of the education sector to Uganda's export revenues and the increasing number of international students from across the East Africa region prompted the research and consultancy support to assist Uganda HE.

A pioneer in African higher education

Uganda excels at providing a truly African university experience, grounded in addressing the development challenges of the continent and equipping graduates to work across a wide range of industry sectors and professions.

International students from across East Africa and the continent come to study in Uganda to experience Uganda's friendly people, to study at institutions old and new, and to visit the land that is the 'Pearl of Africa'. The history and heritage of Makerere University is as one of the pioneering learning institutions on the continent; it has trained Presidents, senior business executives, academics, scientists and community leaders from across Africa. Today this rich heritage has grown to 29 universities with academic excellence in the health sciences, HIV/AIDS and malaria research, and developing skilled graduates to tackle the region's development challenges.

Scale of international recruitment

Official information about the HE sector and data from 17 of the 29 universities in Uganda shows that there are currently about 16,000 international students at Uganda's universities from a total population of around 200,000 students. The data show a steady year-on-year increase in numbers, from around 3000 students in 2004 to the current levels.

In 2006 the number of foreign students in the higher education sector was 12,930 (9.4%). By 2010 this had increased to more than 16,000 students. Most foreign students were from Kenya; others came from Rwanda, Tanzania, Sudan, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The major attraction of foreign students is the low fees in Uganda's institutions of learning. Kampala International University (KIU) leads with 6,715 students, followed by the universities of Makerere (2,444), Bugema (862), Islamic University in Uganda (767), Makerere

University Business School (671) and Busoga (575). Many of the other universities surveyed had fewer than 100 international students.

The dominance of Kenyan students is driven by a range of factors, including (a) the higher cost of university education in Kenya; (b) the geographic closeness of Uganda to Kenya; and (c) the closeness of the education systems of the two countries in terms of standards and quality. International students are mostly found in private universities, with many public universities not having the capacity to take on international students at scale. In some cases, the international student market is a new market segment of growing interest.

Why Uganda

International students choose to study in Uganda for different reasons:

- Uganda's education is cheap in terms of tuition fees and cost of living,
- The country provides a safe environment for studying,
- There are a diverse range of academic programmes, types of university and quality of graduates.
- Ugandan universities are unique in the region in accommodating special-needs students, and in many cases these courses are the only ones offered in the region.



Key issues facing Ugandan HE

A survey of universities highlighted two problems that have had significant impacts on the number of international students at Ugandan universities.

- The lack of funding, pricing at below cost, lack of investment in teaching infrastructure, lack of resources to properly fund academic salaries, lack of compliance with the Quality Assurance regulations and poor data collection about the sector.
- The *ad hoc* approaches taken by universities in crafting the 'international student experience', from initial marketing, to recruiting, to admissions, to reception and support while at university.

The biggest issue is price and, by definition, resource. Restrictive pricing policies by Ugandan universities, especially those that are public-owned, have meant that the HE sector is persistently under-resourced. Perversely, in some case, Ugandan universities charge international students the same price as local students. Across the sector, prices are below-cost per student, meaning the sector is not able to improve the quality of the student experience and thereby improve their competitive position in the region. Low price is a key attraction for international students and has underpinned the growth of this segment of the student body.

Case study: KIU Medical School at Ishaka

The KIU university hospital and medical school in Ishaka highlights the attractiveness of Uganda's universities, with many of the medical students coming from across the East Africa region. The medical facilities, quality of teaching and lack of opportunities to study in their home country clearly make the KIU facility attractive. The low cost of living is another key factor – the university provides student accommodation at very low cost. Despite this success,

the financial viability of the school is at risk without additional support from government and the ability to raise prices.

A strategic marketing framework

In response to these issues, the marketing framework developed by the project team focused primarily on improving university marketing practices, but also suggested an approach that focused on:

- offering a quality student experience grounded in modern teaching methods;
- developing innovative approaches to recruiting students;
- being responsive student support services;
- developing practices that support the internationalisation of the university as a whole.

The outcomes from the project extended beyond producing a series of guidance notes about international marketing practices, a feasibility study for a web portal for Marketing Uganda HE and a study guide for International Students. It led to:

- the establishment of a national HE marketing managers' network;
- the development of an online blog to promote Uganda HE to prospective international students;
- the scoping of a collective marketing event by universities supported by the UEPB and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and hosted by one of Uganda's embassies in the East Africa region.

These outcomes will hopefully support greater coherence in the approach to internationalising higher education in Uganda. However, a fundamental question remains for Uganda HE: how to deliver an international student 'offer' that is compelling, competitive and sustainable?

Keith Herrmann
Director, Higher Ed Research
kherrmann@me.com

Keith was lead consultant to the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Uganda Export Promotion Board for the Marketing Uganda HE project.

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