

NATIONAL

Makerere varsity aims at 100,000 students

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Plans are in advanced stages for Makerere University to double its intake in an effort to enable more Ugandans access university education.

The Vice Chancellor, Prof. Venansius Baryamureeba, told this newspaper in an interview this week that the institution will soon introduce online degree programmes where students are not required to come to campus physically. "I see Makerere enrolling about 100,000 students by 2014," he said. "The majority of these students will be on distance learning and as long as they have access to a computer, one can become our student," he added.

Prof. Baryamureeba said the online degree programme would start within the next two years. The National Council for Higher Education, the regulatory body for tertiary education, is also drawing up guidelines for offering online degrees.

Makerere, Uganda's oldest university currently, has a student population of about 40,000 students, while the total enrollment in more than 20 universities in the country does not exceed 100,000 students.

Internet set-up

While online degrees are popular worldwide, Ugandan universities have lagged behind due to inadequate internet facilities up- country. But Prof. Baryamureeba suggested that with the internet backbone project nearing completion, e-learning would become possible. He said colleges like Computing and Information Technology, Business and Management and Humanities would be able to more than double their intake per year.

Besides online courses, the university has embarked on a programme to establish satellite campuses countrywide. Facilities are still inadequate, but Prof. Baryamureeba suggested that in future, up- country tertiary institutions, secondary schools and even churches could open up their facilities for such academic purposes.

If adopted, the Vice Chancellor said, enrollment in all universities could soar beyond 300,000 in the next four years. He added that their online degrees will be of the same quality as others, but far more affordable and more convenient.

Funding

Up-country campuses, which would become constituent colleges of the university, are already operational in Jinja and Fort Portal. "The university of the future is not going to be physical buildings but a virtual university, where you just need a computer," he said. "This is cheaper and more affordable for most of our people."

With funding to public universities being a perennial problem, the University could use its prime land in the city to set up lucrative income generating ventures to reduce the burden on public coffers. "We have already stated that if we get a one- off grant of \$100 million(Shs200b), Makerere would within the next five years be able to support 50 per cent of its budget," he said. He added that a grant of \$5 million (Shs10b) would be sufficient to make the Food Science and Technology department a source of income.

"The President promised us a grant and I can promise you that within three years things will be different because we have the institutional capacity to do any kind of investment," he said.