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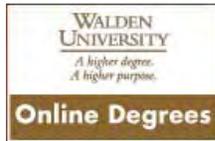
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EDUCATION

Have the country's great schools gone to sleep?



Many schools built at independence or a little later have fallen in academic standards. PHOTO BY Edgar R. Batte

By EMMANUEL GYEZAHO (email the author)
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IN SUMMARY

Even though several thousands have been able to go to school, as a result of UPE and USE, a big percentage of the current products do not seem relevant to the current job market leaders.

Chief Justice Benjamin Odoki admits he was fortunate to have gone to Kings College Budo, where he spent six “glorious” years from humble beginnings in present day Bukedea. This historic school predates Makerere University as one of the first centres of higher learning in Uganda, But while he expressed a nostalgia for his college days, the head of the Judiciary admitted that “there was no accident” about his admission to a school that marked its 106th anniversary last month.

“I was bright,” he said. “It wasn’t because I was rich or anything but I passed highly at Senior One. You had to be among the best brains to get to Budo. Imagine I came from Bukedea.”

Sheer brightness alone may not have been enough to take you to the finest of schools. The little known Odoki required a bursary to find his way to the “school of kings” as he put it, and embarked on a journey of learning at a place he says “molded you into something different.”

Budo was built on Christian values, Justice Odoki told this newspaper, and paid a lot of attention to discipline, aspiration for excellence, exposure to the world,

leadership training, interpersonal skills and sport. Several decades later, Kings College Budo maintains the same reputation of offering an all-round education just as it did back then. That, however, is not a story shared by several secondary schools premised upon the same foundations and built shortly before or after Uganda attained independence.

Losing the shine

For a while now, it has been known that a number of secondary schools, especially those in the countryside built previously by missionaries or Uganda's first post-colonial government led by Milton Obote have since lost their shine.

Each of these schools has got a unique story that is reflective of this country's checkered history and offers insight into what sort of future awaits this nation. After all, it is at the level of secondary school that the minds of a country's future leaders are shaped but the minds can only be tutored and nurtured if schools function well and offer an all-round education.

From Kigezi College Butore in Kabale to St Joseph's College Layibi in Gulu, to Nyakasura School in Kabarole to Teso College and Tororo Girls School, the storyline is the same: their best years are clearly behind them. A similar predicament has befallen many of the hospitals around the country, built about the same time.

A stroll through the gates of many of these schools will leave you feeling pitiful and tormented while those that have maintained or improved the quality of their teaching will draw feelings of pride and contentment.

These government-aided schools are not only structurally decayed, they have been producing poor or average results in national examinations for many years now, while a hive of private schools, which have since sprung up to accommodate children of the rich, are not churning out any spectacular products either despite posting thousands of candidates above pass mark grade.

Education specialist, Fagil Mandy, who went to the Buganda Kingdom-founded Lubiri Secondary School during its inspiring times, is certain Uganda has a "big, big" problem with regards to the caliber of human resource schools are producing today.

Institutional incompetence by both government and school administrators, he said, inform the inefficiency that continues to downgrade the quality of education in the country.

"Maybe partly that is why we are third world," he said. "The first world has concentrated on developing its human resource; we haven't."

Mr Mandy said matters are compounded because "a lot" of the teachers today are not authorities in their subjects, are narrow minded, not well travelled and are continuously "mourning" over welfare. "During my school time, I never ever heard teachers mourning," he said.

Education Minister Jesica Alupo, a product of Kamuli Girls Secondary in the far-flung Moroto District, said government "is trying to address all these challenges" but admitted: "It isn't something you can do overnight."

It is more than five years, however, since government attempted to revamp ailing traditional schools by placing a \$70m (Shs168billion) loan facility from the African Development Bank. These schools, unfortunately, may have to wait much longer, Ms Alupo said, and cited government red-tape, including "procurement procedures" for the apparent inaction.

UPE intervention

The contradiction today, however, may be more illuminated in the numbers with access to education higher than it has ever been. Even though several thousands have been able to go to school, in part a result of the government universal primary and secondary education programs unlike the past where it appeared privilege to go to secondary school, it isn't in doubt that a big percentage of the current products do not seem relevant to the current job market.

"I have no reason to feel that the generation after us is daft," said Serere Woman MP Alice Alaso, who went to the unknown Kamode Secondary School in Serere. "We are condemning hundreds of thousands to half-baked education and in the years to come, this country is going to suffer dearly."

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