


Our youth need vocational skills, not misplaced pomp

Tuesday, 09 April 2013 22:14
Written by Dr CHRYSOSTOM MUYINGO
[5 Comments](#)

 My attention has been drawn to the article published in the issue of your esteemed newspaper of March 28, 2013 under the headline, “MUASA blasts Muyingo.” In the article, the chairman of the Makerere University Academic Staff Association (MUASA), Dr Muhammad Kiggundu, was quoted as having demanded an apology from me over comments I reportedly made while at King’s College Budo where I attended the Founders’ day.

The article also quotes Dr Kiggundu accusing me of “inappropriately using professors as toys” (whatever he wanted to mean)! When I read the article, two things came to my mind: One, it’s unlikely that the author and Dr Kiggundu attended the said function at Budo.

Secondly, I thought the unfounded allegations didn’t merit a response and should be left to pass like any other trifling event: Perhaps, I thought, I should invite my old friend Dr Kiggundu for a cup of tea or a chat up at my office, and life goes on.

However, after serious consideration, I found it necessary to correct the record. Disregarding it would make my colleagues, the lecturers and professors in the sector (Higher Education) where I am the political head, live hounded under the wrong impression that I despise their valuable work or that I look at them perhaps with contempt.

So, this response is addressed to stakeholders in the education sector and not particularly, the MUASA boss and his membership. It’s true I attended a thanksgiving for the Founders’ day at King’s College Budo on the Sunday of March 24, 2013 at the invitation of the head teacher, Mr Bakka Male.

I must confess that I enjoyed my visit, interaction and sharing with the old Budonians, the Bishop of Namirembe, parents, guests and dignitaries. King’s College Budo is a school of pedigree.

This is not only because it was among the first schools in the country (it opened on March 29, 1906), not for the royalty associated with it (as the kingly name reveals), and not for its strong foundation in the Church. It is, rather, because of the galactic contribution of human resource to the civil service and strategic professions in this Pearl of Africa.

So, when you see Budonians walking with their heads high, it’s not because they are snobbish or arrogant; it is a combination of the attributes I mentioned above and of course the thrust inspired by the school vision, “To be the hub of globally enlightened and dignified men and women, rooted in Christian values.”

So, while at Budo, like I have done in the recent past and will continue to do for a while (as member of the executive and even after), I marketed government’s new programme; “Skilling Uganda.” This programme, directly under my docket, calls for a paradigm shift in our thinking towards business, technical and vocational education.

The impetus of ‘Skilling Uganda’ is the desire by the government to tackle the alarming rate of unemployment and spur development of the country. Statistics from the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) reveal that Uganda’s unemployment rate was 4.2 per cent in 2009/2010, compared to 1.9 per cent observed in 2005/2006.

A 2012 World Bank report on Africa Development Indicators puts youth unemployment at 32 per cent (36 per cent among degree holders). This is not a good commentary.

Statistics from UBOS also indicate that out of the more than 400,000 youth who graduate and join the labour market each year, only about 113,000 find formal employment. This picture blights the government’s achievements in other areas, the reason the speaker of Parliament recently described youth unemployment as a threat to national stability.

‘Skilling Uganda’ intends, like some developed nations such as Germany have done, to equip the nation’s youth with the necessary practical skills and to reverse the predominance of theoretical courses which churn out “job seekers.”

We need a generation of job-creators; ingenious youth, who understand the bigger picture of why we go to school – to get qualifications (skills) and earn (money) through work (employed or self-employed).

Business, technical and vocational education will empower our sons and daughters to start up their businesses and workshops: I have asked before why a student of Food and Nutrition should job-hunt with the hope of being employed by some grand-standing hotel? Why wouldn’t such a student/graduate open up a bakery, restaurant or a foods and beverages shop?

The answer is one and simple; the mindset. We are beginning to fight a fixation among our children that makes them empty-handed highfliers! The misguided perception that managing a restaurant along one of the city streets or a bakery in one of the Kampala suburbs lowers their status in society or swagg as they say these days! Hogwash!

I hear someone whispering, ‘where is the capital?’ The spontaneous answer would be: How much money is spent on graduation parties where villages, relatives and friends are fed to their fill only to leave the graduate yawning and wallowing in poverty? We need to copy some good aspects from the developed nations: avoiding lavish expenditure is one such a thing.

The ‘I must have a degree syndrome’ is partly to blame for this problem of unemployment. You see, it had been implanted in parents and children’s brains that “education ends at university and short of that, you you are a failure.”

In the earlier years of post-colonial Uganda, the “college” (read business, technical and vocational education) was respected and liked. In fact the hundreds of aging technicians you find turning nuts and bolts in our industries, the fulcrum of the economy, are graduates of technical colleges like Kisubi, Kichwamba and the then Uganda Polytechnic Kyambogo, to mention a few.

When competition among schools (at A-level) and boastful parents came onto the scene, it became a do-or-die thing to enter university. Less and

less students applied to join business, technical and vocational education institutions. In fact the ministry of Education is stuck with government scholarships for these institutions.

So, when I was at Budo, I asked the school authorities and old students to stop for a moment and review their local syllabus (hidden curriculum). As we shared the dynamics in the job market I challenged them with several examples.

I told them that Budo had produced so many lawyers for the last century of existence but how many are in line to replace the retiring Chief Justice of Uganda? I told them that Budo had equally produced many accountants and managers but how many Budonians own any of the towering and sprouting buildings in the capital city of Kampala?

How many LC V bosses or at minimum LC I chairmen are Budonians? I said, Budo had strong roots in the Church but how many bishops or clergy are Budonians? I told the Budonians these bitter truths candidly and they took in all this in good stride, cheered and applauded, the reality apparently sinking in!

It was then that I hinted on the definition of success: the so-called batasoma (school dropouts) owning the city) and some well-qualified citizens floundering in poverty. Motivational speaker Robert Kiyosaki, the author of the classic book, "Rich Dad, Poor Dad" has explained this phenomenon better in his latest book "Why "A" Students work for "C" Students and why "B" students work for Government."

At Budo, I noted that many of our children aspire to become professors or lecturers but there are many people with less qualifications, but with business acumen, and are doing well, or even better than lecturers. It's a statement of fact. Not meant to ridicule professors or lecturers as the outburst by Dr Kiggundu might imply.

Suffice it to say and let it be known by colleagues at Makerere University and in MUASA, that I am also a teacher of some standing. Consequently, I will be the last to deride people in the profession.

I cannot even forget for a moment to salute them for the wonderful work they do amidst hardships and challenge to educate the nation. My remarks were aimed at drawing parallels as honestly as possible other than bury our heads in the sand like the proverbial ostrich.

It's true there are professors who are rich and those who are poor just like it's true that there are graduates who are rich and those who are poor and illiterate people who are rich and poor. Business, technical and vocational skills are a shortcut to profitable employment and wealth creation.

The importance of practical skills cannot be overemphasized. The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) has written a whole report on the importance of vocational and technical education, but at the same time wondering why the less developed countries treat it as second option or Plan B.

Skilling Uganda is the vehicle which we should use to redeem our nation from the abyss of unemployment we are sinking in. Albert Einstein, one of the respected brains in the education sector and a central pillar in the field of Physics, stated: "Insanity (is) doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results."

The government has started Skilling Uganda with conviction that it can tackle the high levels of unemployment. To the pessimists and cynics, it sounds like an unattainable ideal, but it's possible. It's possible especially when we change our attitudes as parents, students, teachers and lecturers, my brother Dr Kiggundu inclusive.

The author is minister of state for Higher Education.