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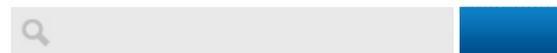
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Uganda: Rules, How Far Can Varsities Go?

BY ANGELA NDAGANO, 10 MAY 2012

OPINION

THEY have been dubbed the 'glorified' secondary schools. The name has nothing to do with the quality of education they offer, but rather the strict rules and regulations the universities put in place to monitor and regulate the students, which is typical of secondary schools.

Education at university is construed as a form of training for the work place. It is expected to train and prepare students to become self-disciplined, self-motivated and responsible individuals who can think, live and work independently after university. The regulations are expected to guide, but not to restrict or herd students because university students are regarded as adults, free to make choices and face their consequences. That is why many expect the university to be an environment free and relaxed, which is not the case with a number of universities.

"They are not designed to ignore your individuality, but to encourage you to exercise self-discipline and accept your social responsibility. These regulations, in most instances, are developed jointly by staff and students committees," remarks Prof. Augustus Nuwagaba, a lecturer at Makerere University.

However, some universities are overstepping this mandate. Some have gone as far as instituting strict policies to oversee the students' conduct and lifestyle, which critics say is not healthy for the future of the students.

From monitoring the dress-code, regulating movement, to herding the students for lectures, it is only the absence of the school uniform that distinguishes these universities from secondary schools.

But, do these strict regulations necessarily translate into better products in the world after university?

How far should universities stretch in regulating and monitoring students' conduct?

Although there is need for rules and regulations, experts agree that these rules should be applied in moderation and universities should desist from treating their students like secondary school students.

According to George William Semivule, an educationist, there is need to understand the purpose of university education.

"A university is supposed to create an atmosphere of free thinking so that new ideas are born. Once it does not do this, it becomes a glorified secondary school. Every university has a reason for putting in place rules, but once they interfere with free thinking, then there is a problem," Semivule explains.

He notes that there is a difference between imparting values and being conservative. Universities, he says, should be able to impart values, while also preparing students for the demands of the world.

Prof Nyeko Pen-Mogi, the Gulu university vice-chancellor echoes similar views, and calls on universities to exercise restraint.

"University students are adults, but in every institution there are rules. It is no doubt that universities need to protect their image or risk of being seen as a den of unserious individuals, but at the end of the day we need to turn-out independent graduates," Nyeko adds.

Others argue that universities should concentrate on academics.

"If students come from secondary schools with certain characteristics, imposing rules on them may not help much. Universities should focus on the curriculum; rules do not necessarily make better graduates," says Patrick Ssevume, a lecturer at Kyambogo University.

Bena Anena, a student at Makerere University Business School echoes similar sentiments.

"Some of the care and supervision is exaggerated. How do you expect students to face the world independently when they have been shielded away from reality all their lives?"

But, proponents of the close supervision believe this is the most appropriate approach. "We cannot apologise for succeeding where others have failed. We are keen on producing graduates that are different and we have employers who will testify to this," says Dr. Alex Kagume, the vice-chancellor in charge of academic affairs at Uganda Christian University (UCU).

"We don't allow alcohol in the university and I know there is no employer who wants a worker who is a drunkard. We are keen on decent dressing and in the job market dressing is a very important issue," Kagume adds.

Kagume argues that university education should be designed to last a lifetime, not just through a career.

UCU is one of the universities with strict rules on dress code.

Francis Peter Ojede, a human resource expert, concurs.

"In my experience until 2002, there was no question; the best graduates came from Makerere University, he says, but there is a tendency for employers to prefer students from faith-based universities because they are more focused due to the environment they live in. They are more aggressive than their counterparts that are used to the of laissez-faire kind of life.

Richard Byarugaba, the NSSF managing director adds that the graduates from the newer universities have better skills because they are taught using the newer methods, but quickly cautions that there is problem with the strict rules and regulations because they are more suited for the hierarchical kind of setting, which is slowly phasing out. Once the students get a good foundation; the university just gives them a bigger overview so it is the secondary schools that usually determine the quality.

"Today we are looking for more creative people and not the 'yes, sir' kind," Byarugaba notes.

Drawing the line

Prof. Venansius Baryamureeba, the Makerere University vice-chancellor, says universities should strike a balance.

"When the students are too shielded, it becomes difficult for them to think and act independently. Others resort to paying for the lost time as soon as they leave university."

However, Baryamureeba says the process through which university students are exposed to freedom should be gradual to avoid too much excitement and irrational decisions as a result of too much freedom.

"If we had all the resources, I would ensure all first year students reside within the university so that we can prepare them and by second year, they would be prepared to face the world on their own," Baryamureeba says.

Code of conduct in American universities

Despite the freedom that comes with universities, each university should have a students' code of conduct. Although it is generally believed that university students should be free, they should be trained to exercise this freedom with responsibility and restraint. A research done in the US universities indicates that the primary purpose for the call to observe discipline in the university setting is to protect the community and to maintain an environment conducive to learning.

Experts say universities should embrace and strive to uphold the freedoms of expression and speech guaranteed by the constitution.

But the universities too have a right, under appropriate circumstances, to regulate the time, place, and manner of exercising these and other constitutional rights.

All students have a duty to conduct themselves in a manner that enhances a conducive learning environment in which the rights, dignity, worth, and freedom of each member of the university are respected. Violation of university policies, rules or regulations, may result in a violation of the student code of conduct.

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