

UGANDA

Academic oncologist brings altruistic dynamism to Catholic university

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Dr Charles Olweny, a globe-trotting oncologist who trained and worked on four continents, decided seven years ago to leave Canada and return home to lead Uganda Martyrs University, a private Catholic institution. His leadership strategy is guided by five core principles, he said in the latest of a series on African university leaders. Dr Charles Olweny, a globe-trotting oncologist who trained and worked on four continents – including as a professor of medicine in Winnipeg – decided seven years ago to leave Canada and return home to lead Uganda Martyrs University, a private Catholic institution. His leadership strategy is guided by five core principles, he told *University World News*.

Uganda is undergoing a higher education boom. The result of introducing universal primary education in 1997 and universal secondary education a decade later is a surplus of students looking for a university placement.

Uganda's 30 public and private universities offer 50,000 spots for qualified secondary school graduates. More than 102,000 secondary school students sat for qualifying exams this year. But the demand for higher education is tempered by harsh economic reality, and even as students graduate many are unable to find jobs.

No less a presence than Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni has laid the blame for the country's high youth unemployment squarely at the feet of the higher education system.

The World Bank estimates that young people between 15 and 24 make up as much as 83% of the unemployed population. On a tour of the country last year, Museveni accused universities of not focusing on marketable skills, such as information technology and the sciences.

Since 2006 Dr Charles Olweny (72) has been trying to navigate this landscape.

As vice-chancellor of Uganda Martyrs University ([UMU](#)), he is responsible for strategically expanding his institution while maintaining a range of courses – some that meet the president's definition of marketable, such as agriculture and science, and some, for instance development studies, that do not. Olweny said they are no less important, though.

Even as UMU is looking to develop two new campuses, he is also eager to experiment with new education models to ensure all of the university's graduates are immediately employable.

It is a challenge Olweny relishes.

A trained oncologist, he built a career across four continents – Africa, Australasia, Europe and North America – as an administrator, researcher and academic. He took an 80% pay cut to return to his native Uganda from Canada and help establish UMU as “the benchmark of all institutions of higher learning, not just in Uganda, but in the entire Great Lakes region”. Click [here](#) for the video link.

The main campus of the 19-year-old Catholic university is Nkozi, west of the capital Kampala, just south of the equator. It also has a newer campus in the eastern town of Mbale.

There are more than 2,000 students, nearly 500 of them resident on the main campus, and the others on distance learning and part-time postgraduate courses around the country. Among a growing number of private higher education institutions, UMU is well established, respected, outward looking and focused on quality.

Olweny's transition has come with some challenges. There were the expected ones – he is quick to highlight the constant search for funds – and those that he did not anticipate, including a battle to overcome institutional aversion to change.

In a wide-ranging and frequently funny discussion, Olweny spoke to *University World News* about the challenges for higher education in Uganda and how he is helping his institution to overcome them.

You trained as an oncologist and have spent your life all over the world in various positions. How did you end up in academia in Uganda?

As he describes it, Olweny's first love was medicine, not academia. Growing up in the 1940s and 1950s when Uganda was still a British protectorate, he was responsible for keeping his family's medical box – dispensing aspirin when people had headaches, or quinine when they developed fevers.

He went on to join the country's first postgraduate programme in medicine at Kampala's premier Makerere University. That was after he had already published four papers – two in peer-reviewed journals – during his undergraduate years at the institution. (He later got his MD from Makerere.)

Those articles “were in the area of oncology. And I didn't quite know that was an area that would attract me. But it was soon after I had done my masters degree that the dean of the faculty of medicine called me to his office and said: ‘We all believe you have a lot of talent.’”

Olweny was offered a scholarship to study under Georg Klein – a cancer researcher and a member of the Nobel Committee – in Stockholm, Sweden.

That was the beginning of Olweny's globe-trotting career. He worked and trained in the US, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Australia. He also served as director of Uganda's Cancer Institute for more than a decade.

Before joining UMU, he had worked in Winnipeg, Canada, for 16 years, where he was a professor of medicine and head of the oncology department at St Boniface General Hospital.

It is a career that has consistently included work in academia, though Olweny is jokingly hard-pressed to explain why. “It's almost like people are asking me, ‘Why did you ever leave Australia to go to Canada in that cold weather?’ My reaction, very often was, ‘I think I need my head examined.’”

But he said teaching had always attracted him, even as an undergraduate. So when an unexpected letter from UMU arrived in 2005, offering the deeply religious Olweny the vice-chancellorship of Uganda's flagship Catholic university, he decided – after months of soul-searching and a heated family discussion – to move into academia fulltime.

What is your leadership strategy?

What Olweny calls his “guiding principles” are the stuff of legend at UMU. Carefully rationalised and easily presented, they have been widely adopted by the staff, alongside the university motto – ‘In virtue and wisdom lead the world’. Print-outs of his five-point list are hung on walls around the university.

- Transparency
- Accountability
- Reliability
- Action based on institutional ethos
- Quality

“I think that essentially guides my way of doing things. I brought those five [principles to UMU] and they have remained.” Click [here](#) for the video link. Quality, Olweny, is a major preoccupation of the university, not the least because it relies heavily on student fees for its financial survival.

The other quality he espouses is hard work. It is evident in how he structures his day – starting at 08h00 every morning and not ending until at least 19h30 every night. And those days are filled with meetings. Meetings with students, faculty or one of the five national and international boards he sits on.

“One of my kids, when they were growing up, he used to say they thought their dad was always eating meat, because I said, ‘I’m going for this meeting. I’m going for that meeting.’ They thought dad is always eating meat.”

He adopted his work habits while at university. A mentor at medical school once told Olweny that his day should only really begin when everyone else was going home.

“Usually, that’s the most productive two to three hours. Nobody knows you are in the office. No telephones ring. What I’m able to achieve between 16h30 and 19h30 is enormous. Very often it is much more than what I’ve achieved through the rest of the day.” Click [here](#) for the video link.

What major change have you brought to the university?

Immediately on arrival, Olweny upended UMU’s educational philosophy. From his years at universities around the world, he said he had learned that most universities have a standard set of priorities: teaching, research and, then, community service.

“We have rearranged that. We have put research and scholarship first. And our No. 2 is community engagement. Not service, engagement. And we put teaching at the bottom.

“The reason is, we believe anybody can teach. You don’t need to be a professor to be able to teach. But you need to be a researcher to be at a university and we need to engage the community.” Click [here](#) for the video link.

Less than a month into his tenure, Olweny established a community relations committee, which meets regularly to decide how the community and UMU can work together. The key product of that relationship has been an effort to lift a nearby village, Nindye, out of poverty.

“What we have done is every faculty has been told they must mainstream outreach into their curriculum.” Departments like health sciences and education consult with the community and brainstorm ideas to help improve the lives of people living in Nindye.

The faculty of agriculture, for instance, is helping farmers improve yields and market their goods. The endeavour is modelled on the Millennium Villages Project, but draws on research conducted by UMU.

If the effort, which is being run in partnership with the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, is successful, Olweny plans to export it to other communities. Click [here](#) for the video link.

How have you positioned the university both for international recognition and to prepare students for Uganda's job market?

Nearly 25% of UMU's students are international. Most are drawn from East Africa, but a handful comes from the United States, Canada and Belgium.

The international strategy capitalises on Olweny's own experiences working abroad. At UMU, he has forged partnerships with universities like Notre Dame, and also recruits staff from around the world.

"That's part of our strategy, just to be as international as we possibly can. We also take pride in forging strategic alliances...That gives us a fairly broad perspective."

As UMU seeks to expand its international presence, though, it also has to tailor its educational experience to preparing Ugandan students to find positions in a difficult job market. That can require two very different kinds of courses.

Olweny is using planned university expansion – introducing new campuses in northern and western Uganda – to deploy an unusual strategy addressing just that problem. "Every campus must be unique in character and not merely a replica of what takes place at our main campus," he said.

The plan is for the new eastern campus in Mbale to spearhead education. Gulu in the north will be a "hard work campus. In addition to regular academics, they will be doing hard work." The western campus will be a polytechnic. "We're thinking of motor vehicle mechanical engineering, medical equipment repair engineering, petroleum engineering and agricultural engineering." Click [here](#) for the video link.

With campuses tailored to specific skills, UMU can continue to attract local and international students to its varied programmes at the main Nkozi campus, while also offering the kind of vocational training that will allow entrepreneurial students to take advantage of gaps in regional markets.

In that vein, UMU also launched the Student Training Entrepreneurial Promotion (STEP) programme to teach students how to start their own businesses.

The increase in vocational offerings is critical in Uganda's current economic environment but, despite recent urgings from the president and others, it is not the only solution to graduating students who will be able to find jobs in Uganda.

Olweny keeps returning to another advantage that UMU graduates have over other university-educated job applicants. It starts with what he describes as a mythical radio station that everyone in Uganda listens to, calling it WIII FM – the What Is In It For Me station.

"That's what is killing Uganda today. Everybody will [ask], what do I get out of this? That's the first question... Until that radio station is closed, this country is doomed."

He continued: "I've been singing to everybody, to the students, to the staff, and hopefully if the change can start there, it will spread in concentric circles and eventually it will catch up with everyone."

"At least I now know that most of my students, when they graduate, they will be grabbed. Especially by

banks and other financial institutions. They'll say, 'Yes, those are guys with integrity.'" Click [here](#) for the video link.

What other challenges have you encountered as leader of UMU?

Like most private universities in Uganda, UMU has a constant struggle to raise enough money to cover its costs, while still offering an affordable education. The mantra Olweny shares with his staff is that "it's not business as usual".

That means more dialogue between different departments to guide financial decisions. He just finished hosting a conference that pulled together UMU's deans, associate deans and department heads to instil this message.

The other major hurdle, he said, is an attitude of complacency. "People don't want to change. They are happy with the *status quo*. You bring in a new idea, they think you are crazy."

Each innovation he introduces – from outsourcing campus security to creating an advancement office that would build greater alumni support – has been greeted with resistance, he said.

"They are beginning to accept [change], but we just have to keep reminding them." Click [here](#) for the video link.

What advice do you have for future academic leaders?

As with most of his answers, Olweny has a readymade list of advice for his successors. In essence, it boils down to three critical points:

"Do what you like to do. Do not do it because other people want you to do it. You would not succeed. You have to do what you want, what you like doing."

He also emphasised the importance of working within a group of people who support the same vision and adhere to the same value.

And finally, "not to lose sight that, in fact, we're training leaders of tomorrow". He added, somewhat implausibly given his groundbreaking work at UMU: "Our time is gone. My time is gone."

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