

Commencement Lecture

University of Makerere

13 February 2023

Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, honoured guests, principals, Deans, families, and graduands

I am honoured to join you on this special occasion. Thank you for the invitation to address this the 73rd graduation ceremony of Makerere University.

Allow me to add my congratulations to all of the graduands here today. It is a very important milestone in your life, an amazing achievement at any time but particularly given the challenges placed on study and health care services during the pandemic. I would also like to express my recognition and respect to your family and friends who have supported you through your studies to reach this joyful moment.

I have a daughter who has just begun university in England, and I appreciate the financial and emotional calls that are made on parents and families during a university education.

This is my first visit to Uganda which makes this a special pleasure for me personally and a welcome opportunity to renew the historical ties between the University of London and the University of Makerere. Though my accent suggests I ought to be in Canada, like many international students I was fortunate in having the opportunity to study by PhD in England. After some years returning to Montreal at McGill University, I have had the pleasure of coming back to London to be the Vice-chancellor of the University of London since 2019.

Granted a royal charter in 1836, I have much to learn about the university's long history. Today, the University of London is a federal university of 17 world class higher education institutions, with over 200,000 students studying in London and 45,000 studying distance and digital education in their home country.

Our federal members include UCL, LSHTM, SOAS, LSE, QMUL, RHUL. Senate House is home to the national centre for the arts and the humanities, based in Bloomsbury which is the neighbourhood where the British Museum, the British Library, the Wellcome Foundation, The Crick and the Turin institute are all located. It is a knowledge quarter which attracts visitors and students from around the world. It attracted me as a doctoral student, excited to access the reading room of the British Library many years ago. Higher education changed my life.

Inspired by this visit to Makerere, I have investigated some of the history between Uganda and the University of London. As Marcus Garvey has said 'A People without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots'.

So looking back, clearly, it was a very different time in 1920 when the governor of Uganda obtained approval to establish a technical school in Kampala to respond to the rising demand for Africans to be educated in law, medicine and the sciences. Construction began in 1921 and as you know from your centenary celebrations, classes began in 1922. It expanded and was soon offering an increasing breadth of curriculum to students from a large area of east Africa.

In 1936 a commission of the colonies was appointed to study the possibilities for transforming Makerere college into an institution of higher education in East Africa as a whole.

The first 150 years of London's External system has been researched and published in a book entitled 'The People's University: 1858-2008'. It records the university's own account of this relationship. Today we recognise that recorded history in colonial times is incomplete until it includes many more perspectives. I am not confident that our account is complete and it would be fascinating to include a Uganda perspective in this record.

But our account details the first inspection of the College by the University of London in 1946 – it includes in enormous detail, the

number and nationalities of the students, the programmes they were studying, and the nationality and qualifications of the faculty. The report highlighted the danger of separating 'education' from 'life'; a gap that the social studies course was designed to bridge. I wonder whether even today this gap is experienced by many students entering higher education for the first time. I recognise such a gap in my experience as the first member of my family to enter higher education.

A modified application for affiliation with the university of London was accepted in November 1949 and Makerere became a University College affiliated to the University of London and offered London degrees.

The Queen Mother, chancellor of the University of London, opened the then new library at Makerere in 1959.

Of course, Uganda became independent in 1962 and the following year Makerere's special relationship with the University of London ended when it became part of the University of East Africa. What was the University of East Africa offered University of London degrees until 1970, before becoming the three leading universities of today: alongside Makerere University, the University of Nairobi and the University of Dar es Salaam.

So, at a time when Makerere has reached its centenary, this is a splendid opportunity for both institutions to reflect upon our special relationship and look to a future collaboration.

UoL in Africa

Today there are some 4,000 UoL students in 48 of Africa's 54 countries, including here in Uganda (70).

We are scoping deeper engagement with ARUA in its mission to expand doctoral education and build research capacity to address key challenges including health, education, climate, natural resources and deep social and economic questions of equality and sustainability.

We know that graduates of ARUA institutions – including of course all of you – as well as our own graduates across Africa are key to long-term sustainable development.

Alumni

The University of London is proud of our alumni, including as they do towering figures like Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Gandhi; pioneering leaders such as Luisa Diogo, Mozambique's first female Prime Minister; and renowned authors including HG Wells, Chinua Achebe, Derek Walcott and Wole Soyinka.

Makerere's alumni are no less noteworthy: Paul Kagame, Julius Nyerere, Milton Obote, to name but a few. Bishop John Sentamu, former Archbishop of York; and the author and journalist Yasmin Alibhai-

Brown, both leading figures in the UK who have Makerere as their alma mater.

All are striking examples of the role of higher education in shaping individuals and societies; and we know that both Makerere University and the University of London have tens of thousands of talented graduates now contributing to social and economic development and tackling global challenges both at home and around the world, in areas that include education, health, law, business, technology and a range of fields critical to sustainable development.

Makerere was not the only higher education institution in Africa which the University of London helped to set up. In Sudan, what was the Gordon Memorial College is now the University of Khartoum.

In Ghana, where what was the University College Gold Coast is now the University of Ghana.

In Nigeria, where what was the University College of Ibadan is now Nigeria's oldest university, the University of Ibadan.

The University of Zimbabwe began life as a partnership between the University of London and Rhodesia and Nyasaland University.

UoL and the Commonwealth

University of London's historical engagement in building higher education opportunities goes across the Commonwealth, where you can see parallel examples in the Caribbean and in South Asia.

Our Institute of Commonwealth Studies is the only PG academic institution in the UK devoted to the study of the Commonwealth. Alongside research, the Institute focuses on current challenges faced by nations in the Commonwealth, providing evidence-based policy recommendations to address contemporary issues.

To renew the university's involvement with the commonwealth, I was pleased to be elected to the Board of the Association of Commonwealth Universities. Your vice-chancellor is also a Director of this association and I was pleased to see him at the recent meeting of the Board in London. The next meeting of the ACU will be in Toronto, my native Canada, where I look forward to learning more about universities across the Commonwealth and the contribution they will make to education.

HE and SDGs

The UN Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 proclaimed the right to education, directed to the full development of the human personality, the strengthening of respect for human rights, the promotion of global citizenship, and sustenance of the global commons. The role of higher education in particular has never been more to the fore in helping to advance health and prosperity and achieve the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. The education and health of women is particularly powerful, when you reflect on what has driven the major

improvements in populations health and well-being which is evident over the past 200 years.

The university of London was the first university in the UK to admit women for degree qualifications. Over the years we have continued to advance women's education around the world, offering employment oriented programmes that lead to promotion and secure jobs.

UoL has had access at the heart of its mission since its founding in 1836. We were the first university in the UK to admit students regardless of gender, race or creed; and in 1858 we received a new Royal Charter that allowed us to offer examinations anywhere in the world. Since then, successive generations of young people around the globe have had the opportunity to study for a world-class degree; and many occupy senior positions in the economic, legal, education and health fields among others. Alongside this, the University's world-leading research in the humanities and social sciences underpins a range of international partnerships that advance critical understanding of the human aspects of today's global challenges.

The interconnectedness arising from increased globalisation means that challenges such as access to education, health and wellbeing, climate change, conflict and forced migration can only be addressed through global collaboration; and we know that higher education is integral to this.

This is why we long-term engagement in Africa; and why we are now broadening and deepening our relationship with ARUA, including Makerere, which is so important to these endeavours.

Global health matters

Amongst the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals, we often argue that SDG4, Quality Education, is the one that fundamentally underpins all the others. But equally, without SDG3, Good Health and Wellbeing, it's hard to benefit from education (or indeed any of the other SDGs) even where provision for this is near-universal. At the same time, of course, achievement of the other SDGs contributes directly or indirectly to better health. They are interdependent.

There are huge challenges. Covid-19 has infected more than 500m worldwide and led to some 15m deaths; and claiming the lives of 115,000 front-line healthcare workers. This has disrupted essential health services in 92% of countries and all but halted progress on universal health coverage. Nearly 23m children missed basic vaccines in 2020, 3.7m more than the previous year.¹

The UN's latest report on progress towards the SDGs has some sobering conclusions on SDG3:²

¹ <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal3>

² <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2022/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2022.pdf>

The pandemic has triggered a significant rise in anxiety and depression, particularly among young people

Progress has been made in maternal and child health, but glaring regional disparities must be addressed

The health and economic impacts of COVID-19 have likely worsened uneven progress towards universal health coverage

Widespread disruptions have derailed progress against HIV, tuberculosis and malaria

More children are missing out on essential vaccines due to the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a heavy toll on health and care workers, who are already stretched thin in most region

Despite these challenges, it is good to know that targeted and sustained efforts are being made to make up for lost ground. It is excellent to note that Makerere is a partner in the ARUA centre for excellence on non-communicable diseases, along with the Universities of Nairobi, Ghana, Ibadan and Witwatersrand.

We understand from ARUA that the Centre of Excellence aims to strengthen NCD training and research capacity-building of early generation scholars from the medical and health sciences, public health, engineering, basic sciences, social sciences and humanities. In addition, the Centre mounts short courses, both face-to-face and

online, focusing on broad NCD thematic areas; supports research teams to secure funding to enable them undertake research and dissemination; and leverages the unique and collective strengths of its partners to become the focal point for NCD research in Africa.

For our part, we are proud to have in our federation the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, which provides the academic direction for our postgraduate online programmes in Clinical Trials, Epidemiology, Global Health Policy, Infectious Diseases, and Public Health. LSHTM also of course spearheads research around the world, including here in Entebbe where we have the joint Medical Research Council/Uganda Virus Research Unit/LSHTM operation.

Another of our member institutions, University College London (UCL) has an Institute of Health Equity, led by Sir Michael Marmot, that is part of a major new initiative by the World Health Organisation. The world has seen considerable health gains over the last century, largely attributed to educating women, but their distribution is vastly unequal. This has led to inequities in health – avoidable and unfair differences in health status between groups of people or communities. COVID-19 has magnified and exposed those health inequities at the same time as providing a stark reminder to everyone, everywhere, that without our health, we have nothing.

The impacts of the pandemic have fallen so unequally that the Member States of WHO, in [resolution 74.16 of the 2021 World Health](#)

[Assembly](#), requested the Director-General “*to prepare, building on the report of the WHO Commission on Social Determinants of Health (2008) and subsequent work, an updated report based on scientific evidence, knowledge and best practices on social determinants of health, their impact on health and health equity, progress made so far in addressing them, and recommendations on future actions...*”

The [‘World Report’](#) provides the opportunity to set the agenda for the next ten years for action on the social determinants of health.

Contributions of new generation of graduates

So there are major multinational and regional initiatives under way to help redress the balance and provide solutions to some of the toughest global health challenges of our time. But to succeed, these initiatives will need new generations of committed and talented professionals to maintain momentum.

But you don’t need me to tell you that you are graduating into a challenging world. Tensions are growing between countries and within countries, between people, between the haves and the have nots, between those living in secure homes with secure jobs and those that have neither.

The belief that war in Europe would not be seen again in our lifetime has been shattered with the invasion of Ukraine. Hopes for peaceful development in many parts of the world are blighted by civil wars and

failed governance – the Central African Republic, Somalia, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Yemen – similarly dashed.

At the same time, the fundamental forces of our earth are changing, and changing our way of life with them. In a world of climate change, we see floods across the world, the very existence of small island nations are at risk, and dangerous temperature rises in India, Pakistan, and most recently the earthquake in Turkey and Syria taking over 33,000 lives, with the death toll feared to increase.

Personally, I find it sometimes overwhelming when you list it all out like that. I can start dreading the future, rather than being excited by it. But then, I have a day like today.

Over the next few days, hundreds of you are graduating. I have the pleasure of extending my congratulations to graduands in the UK, Hong Kong, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Singapore. In a world that is often frightening and unpredictable, you represent a global wave of positive change. The skills that you have learned here and the values that you have demonstrated by choosing to study the subjects that you have, have left you incredibly well equipped to navigate the social and cultural shifts we're facing, and forge a brighter future for us all.

Yes, you are graduating into a complicated world, in one of the world's poorer nations, but you are the people who, through your social and technical contribution, can reshape it into something more

human, more prosperous, something more equitable, something better for us all.

This is why it is so exciting to be standing before you all today. Individually, I know you will make significant contributions in your chosen fields. Collectively, along with several million across the continent also graduating this year, you represent a formidable force for good whether at the community, city, national, regional or multinational level; and whether this is to tackle today's and tomorrow's global health challenges; or to work towards any of the other SDGs that so heavily depend on, and contribute to, progress with Good Health and Wellbeing.

Thank you for listening. Congratulations on your achievements.

Be critical. Be kind. And stay curious.