



Community-University Engagement for a Transformative Higher Education in Africa: Experience from Gulu University



The need for a transformative approach to higher education.

The cardinal role of higher education in generating knowledge, building human capital and translating knowledge into technological innovations is key to sustainable development and fostering the socio-economic well-being of a sustainable society. The societal benefit from higher education investment is largely realised when human capital translates knowledge and innovations into products and services that provide solutions to societal needs. Ultimately, this development trajectory should lead to vibrant business development concomitant



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with employment creation. The global youth population is expected to reach 1.3 billion by 2030, with the majority projected to be concentrated in Africa. Theoretically, such a vast youth population should be a driver for social well-being, wealth creation and economic growth and prosperity in Africa. Unfortunately, the reality is that youths in Africa are mainly redundant and lack decent employment, with educated graduates worst affected. This redundant youth population is a potential recipe for instigation and propagation of instability and conflict. It has become a key factor contributing to the African migrant crisis on the European high seas! This situation raises a question about how higher education institutions in Africa should be transformed to contribute to sustainable society and wellbeing. This thought piece presents Gulu University's experience of strategic institutional transformation that African higher





education institutions may undertake to position themselves as drivers of community socio-economic transformation.

The historical context underpinning Gulu University's choice of transformative education. Northern Uganda, the location of Gulu University, experienced a protracted 30-years of armed conflict between the Government of Uganda and the Lord's Resistance Army from the mid-80s to mid-2000. The conflict caused colossal loss of property and life, destruction of people's livelihoods, and immense social disorder. This situation called for a pragmatic approach to restoring socio-economic order to enable community development. At its inception in 2002, Gulu University took cognisance of the dire socio-economic conditions of post-conflict communities in Northern Uganda and deliberately modelled itself as an engaged higher education institution. This orientation was "cemented" by strategically directing the university's motto, "For Community Transformation", to explicitly reflect an outward look toward community needs.

In order to live up to its motto, the university deliberately adopted two strategic pillars to constitute its transformation pathway. First, the university embraced community engagement instead of the 'ivory tower' approach in delivering its mandates. In the context of Gulu University, "community" refers to all stakeholders outside the university that contribute to development. In this formative stage of the university's development, it was envisioned that catalysing the development of an enterprising society would be essential for employment creation and poverty reduction. Thus, the university adopted a practical enterprise development strategy to train students and non-university community members for its second pillar.

Gulu University transformation journey. Keeping hindsight on the challenges of the post-conflict environment of its location, Gulu University strategically selected academic programmes in disciplines that touch directly on the socio-economic fabric of the society. The disciplines include agriculture and environment, business and development, education, medicine, applied sciences, law, and peace and conflict management. In order to enhance the relevance of the institution to society, Gulu University integrated community engagement in the delivery of student training and the conduct of research. This orientation has been concretised by institutionalising community engagement at the policy level and establishing





functional relationships with outside stakeholders. A few examples will help illustrate the outcomes of our community engagement approach to higher education.

Through curriculum design, guided by the “Student-Centred-Outreach” engagement model, agricultural students’ training occurs directly in the community. It enables them to learn the intricacies of agriculture from a practical field perspective while at the same time sharing new knowledge and practices with farmers. A tracer study has shown that employers and farmers highly prefer the graduates from Gulu University because they have a strong will to work in rural areas and exhibit a strong sense of social responsibility. This engagement approach has been diffused to other academic units of the university. For instance, in the domain of medical education, in addition to the classical hospital-based practice, students are routinely involved in supervised community clerkships. This approach has resulted in “all-around” doctors due to exposure in dealing with medical conditions both under rudimentary rural set-ups and in classical modern hospital settings. Whereas classically trained doctors prefer to work in urban centres, feedback from the community indicates that our doctors have taken up the responsibility of providing medical services in economically disadvantaged locations.

On the other hand, it is essential to highlight that peace and tranquillity are essential for sustained development and prosperity. Therefore, with backstopping from academic staff, students from our Institute of Peace and Strategic Studies have been instrumental in building and promoting peace in the community and have contributed significantly to creating a culture of harmonious co-existence among and between local and refugee communities. As part of its strategic development, the university has moved to streamline peace-building across all academic disciplines to produce tranquillity-minded and peace-loving future leaders.

Prioritising community engagement has enabled Gulu University to link with other actors to commercialise innovations. For instance, scientists from Biosystems Engineering Department worked with a local entrepreneur to develop valuable products from plastic wastes. This collaboration has led to a plastic recycling company helping clean Gulu City of plastic waste.

Pioneered by our Faculty of Agriculture and Environment, Gulu University moved away from the classical theoretical approach of teaching about entrepreneurship to building capacity for entrepreneurship by adopting practical enterprise development training. As part of the curriculum requirement and guided by the innovative “Agribusiness Innovation Model”, the faculty implements a revolving fund for a supervised students’ enterprise scheme that





practically builds the business and entrepreneurship acumen of the students. In practice, students in groups develop business ideas that they translate into business plans. With seasoned business leaders and financial institutions providing mentorship, the business plans are vetted, refined and funded. Students run the businesses and later pay back the advanced funds with modest interest to cater to the enterprise scheme's continuity. In order to fulfil our institutional community-connectedness philosophy, this mode of entrepreneurship capacity building has been extended to TVET (Technical, Vocational Education and Training) institutions, community women groups, out of school youths, and refugees in northern Uganda.

Efforts invested in entrepreneurship capacity building yield interesting outcomes and can be illustrated with a few examples. In terms of graduate competency, a group of students who experimented with wine business registered a wine production business in Gulu City and are currently employing 12 youths. At the community level, an out-of-school youth group that experimented with seed production has registered a profitable seed trading cooperative of over 30 members in the Amuru district in northern Uganda. A group of South Sudanese refugees in the West Nile Sub-region were trained on the technology for producing weaning food from local food resources. Following capacity building in enterprise development, the group established a weaning food business exploiting the market provided by host communities and refugees while exporting the surplus to South Sudan. Building on these outcomes, the university has moved to streamline practical enterprise capacity building across all faculties. Therefore, a business incubation hub has been established to scale our business development efforts.

Due credit goes to the TAGDEV programme and the Mastercard Foundation. TAGDEV has provided the impetus for Gulu University to expose students from across the African continent to this transformative education.

About the Author

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RUFORUM Triennial Thought Pieces: ISSUE 23

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