
Honours and Honorary Degrees

An Unsuccessful Attempt at Honorary Degrees Awards

One of the many good things universities frequently do is to recognise individuals in public and private sectors of life, who they have reason to believe deserve recognition. The recognition is based on all sorts of reasons, but in the majority of cases, universities honour individuals whom they think have excelled in their respective fields of work, or those who have made significant contributions to the universities or have been exceptional achievers, or have performed outstanding and heroic deeds in the service of humanity. Usually, the recognition is in the form of various degrees awarded *honoris causa* – the honorary doctorates being the most coveted of such awards. The person on whom an honorary degree is conferred is not required to take any examination. The award is based solely on outstanding achievements, which the universities take a lot of care to evaluate. The criterion under which one is judged as qualified for the honour is evidence adduced by a body, usually a committee within the university which has the responsibility to receive, screen and rigorously assess whether the nominee so presented merits the award.

Universities regard their honorary degrees as very prestigious and exceptional awards. For this reason, the awards are jealously safeguarded, ensuring that the persons on whom they are bestowed really deserve them. However, from time to time, this simple rule of the thumb breaks down and the award becomes controversial. Incidentally, Makerere University is no exception. At Makerere, the tradition of conferring honorary degrees on exceptional individuals dates back to the days of the University of East Africa. In its short existence, the defunct University of East Africa honoured many people: politicians, its former Vice Chancellors and Principals of Makerere College and a few individuals in public and private life. When the University of East Africa folded up in 1970, the tradition seemed to have died with it. At Makerere of the early 1970s, honorary degrees had become rare until one was awarded to Idi Amin.

In 1977, the university decided to honour Field Marshal and Life President of Uganda, Idi Amin Dada, with an honorary Doctor of Laws. The international academic community was stunned by Makerere's judgement. There was real concern at the time that perhaps Makerere University had made a big error in honouring a person with such an appalling human rights record and in so doing had dented whatever reputation it had left. Many also suspected that, in fact, Idi Amin had pressured and possibly bullied the university into giving him one. Others thought he was honoured because some individuals canvassing for favours had put his name forward for the award and had lobbied hard on his behalf. Whatever was the truth behind late Idi Amin's honorary Doctor of Laws, in the aftermath of that controversial award, the university decided to tighten up the honorary degree requirements. As far as I recall, until the novelist, the late Michael Nsimbi and one other person were honoured in the late 1980s, no other person had received an honorary degree from Makerere. Shortly before I took over from Professor Senteza Kajubi, the late Alhaji Moshood Abiola of Nigeria and the late Julius Kambarage Nyerere were the last people to be honoured with honorary doctorates.

In 2001, just as we thought that the dust storm of the 1970s had long settled and therefore the time was once again opportune for the university to honour a few people for their outstanding achievements, we ran into serious and, to say the least, unexpectedly difficult challenges. Through the local press, we had asked the public to submit to the Academic Registrar names of people they believed had done or achieved something that Makerere University could recognise with honorary degrees. The public had responded very positively and the list of nominees was quite impressive. As Vice Chancellor, I was the designated chairperson of the Honorary Awards Committee, one of the few and unusual standing Committees of Senate that had representation from both the Senate and the University Council. In fact, the chairperson of the University Council was one of Council's representatives on the Committee. The Committee had not met for several years and worse still, none of us had ever participated in the exercise before.

Fortunately, there were regulations and guidelines contained in an old document, written in the 1970s. The Academic Registrar had kept a copy stamped "secret" in red ink in his office for years. The guidelines were sufficiently clear to enable us identify and shortlist candidates who met the requirements. According to the regulations, the PhD is not supposed to be awarded as a *honoris causa* degree. It is strictly an academic degree, which is studied for and awarded on the basis of a thesis embodying original and scholarly work, internally and externally examined and orally defended in a *viva vocae*. Only the Doctor of Science (DSc) for excellence in any scientific field, the Doctor of Letters (DLit) for outstanding contribution to the Arts and Humanities and the Doctor of Laws (LLD) for the lawyers, statesmen and people who have excelled or have

distinguished themselves in the walk of public and private life, were the doctorate degrees Makerere University could award *honoris causa*.

The selection of the successful candidates for the awards, as stated in the regulations, was an elaborate four-stage process which involved the participation of both Senate and the University Council. The first stage was for the Honorary Awards Committee to solicit names of worthy candidates through public announcements. The second stage was for the Committee to receive nominations and shortlist possibly one or two nominees for each degree category. The third stage was postal balloting by the Senators. Every member of Senate was given a ballot paper containing a list of names of all shortlisted candidates by the Academic Registrar, who was Secretary to the Committee. The list of names also contained a short, but concise write-up on each candidate, giving a candidate's brief bio data and why he or she merits the award. The Senators had to state unequivocally whether or not they approved the nominations and signed their ballot papers before returning them to the Academic Registrar. Each shortlisted nominee had to poll a minimum of fifty one per cent of the Senate membership to qualify for the fourth and final stage. At the time, Senate had a total of 110 members, which meant that to qualify for the next stage, a candidate had to pull a minimum of fifty six votes. Any nominee receiving less than this number was automatically disqualified and could only be considered again five years later.

The final stage was the submission of the names of all candidates who had scored fifty one per cent and over to the University Council. Through another postal balloting exercise, the University Council came up with the final list of qualified candidates. The Academic Registrar would then initiate the process of informing the successful candidates and identifying an orator for each of them. An orator is a member of staff who, before the Chancellor confers the honorary degree upon the successful awardee, reads a citation which contains a brief statement about the person on whom the degree is to be conferred and why the university had decided to honour him or her with that particular honorary doctorate.

One evening in May 2001, shortly after we had closed nominations, I received instruction to add a special nominee who happened to be one of Africa's prominent and long serving heads of state. As if the nomination was a fate accompli, the directive was for the university to arrange to confer an honorary PhD on him at a specially arranged congregation. As I have said before, this was one of the toughest challenges I had to deal with in my long tour as Makerere's Vice Chancellor. First, I was at pains to explain to the authorities that the PhD was not among the degrees Makerere University awards *honoris causa*. I had to point out that if the candidate qualified for an honorary degree, he would be awarded an LLD. As a statesman, that was the only honorary degree he qualified for. The second challenge was the candidate himself: this particular nominee

was no ordinary person; he was one of Africa's charismatic leaders, so whatever concerned him had to be handled with care.

Fortunately for me, by the time the nomination was received, the Committee's work was in its preliminary stage and therefore, possible to accommodate a late submission, after all the nomination had come from more than the ordinary public. In the event, I decided to forward the candidate's name to the Honorary Degrees Committee for consideration and action. However, there was one serious problem with this nomination; it was submitted without the requisite supporting documents. The candidate's biodata and a write-up justifying the nomination for the award were both missing. These documents were a critical prerequisite for the Committee to make an informed decision on the candidate. Without this information, the Committee's hands were tied. While waiting for the critical documents, the Committee decided to postpone decisions on all other nominees whose documents were complete. In spite of the assurance that the candidate's papers would be submitted soon, and despite our constant reminders to all concerned, the documents never came.

What finally came was a brief statement authored by the candidate's local nominator. After several weeks of waiting, we decided to move on to the next stage with the only document available about this special candidate. In the usual Makerere style where the ears of the walls are constantly wide open to the faintest sound, information about this special nomination had already leaked out and the local press had picked it and made it an over-kill. They started bombarding me with all sorts of questions about the candidate, why he had been nominated, who had nominated him, what had he done for Makerere University to deserve an honorary degree award and so on and so on. The press was also interested in knowing how we were handling this special nomination and why the delays in coming out with an announcement. I feared that if we did not handle it properly, there was a real danger of the whole thing turning into a press saga, to the embarrassment of all concerned.

After the Honorary Awards Committee had completed its task of compiling the names of the shortlisted candidates, including the specially nominated candidate, the list was sent to all Senators for postal balloting. When the tally came in, only two candidates had qualified for the next round; one was a former and long serving senior administrator of the university, for the LL.D. The other was a prominent Ugandan woman plant breeder, for the DSc. Both had polled over fifty one percent of the votes. Sadly, the specially nominated candidate was not one of them. He had polled fewer than the fifty six votes he needed to qualify for the next round. From then on, he was technically out of the race. The Academic Registrar and I had the unenviable duty of informing the nominator that his candidate was unsuccessful; we had no choice but to convey Senate's decision to the concerned that the bid had failed.

We expected an angry reaction from the local nominator and feared the worst. To our pleasant surprise, the local nominator took the news very calmly and in a very dignified way. Instead of yelling at us and issuing directives and ultimatums, he only wondered why Makerere University Senate rejected his nomination. However, many of his officers took a more confrontational approach, alleging that what Makerere Senate had done amounted to a slap in his face. Some were quite abusive and insulting in their spoken and written remarks. I recall receiving a message hand-delivered by a Permanent Secretary, who had close ties with the university, demanding to know who among the Senators had voted against this nominee or who had abstained. I had to explain that this was a secret ballot and as such I was duty-bound not to divulge information to any unauthorised person or persons who are not members of Senate, adding that if they continued to insist on being given this privileged information, I would immediately pave the way for the appointment of a new Vice Chancellor, who in their opinion would give them the information. I was ready for the confrontation rather than be intimidated into submission. I told the Permanent Secretary that Senate was at liberty to choose who it believed merited such honours without undue coercion. For various reasons, but more so on the basis of the only evidence presented by the local nominator and the absence of any personal and public details about the nominee, Senate had found this specially nominated candidate not worthy of the university's honorary award for that year.

After conveying Senate's decision to the local nominator and receiving his reaction, we believed that was the end of the matter. We had been naïve to think so. Just as we prepared to submit the names of the successful candidates to the University Council, we received instructions in a rather long monologue from some high-ranking officials of Ministry of Education and Sports to the effect that we should stop the entire honorary degree award process at once and wait for further instructions. Under the 1970 Act, senior officials of the Ministry of Education had a lot of say in the affairs of the university. We had no choice, but to oblige with the directive. The whole exercise was put on hold indefinitely and was not to be revived until I left. Unfortunately, one of the promising nominees who had qualified for the DSc degree died before the exercise could resume. Interestingly, some local FM radios took gibes at the whole thing and made fun of the candidate and his failed attempt to get an honorary doctorate of Makerere University. To me and my colleagues however, the jokes were not funny at all. In fact, had this incident happened in the days of the likes of Idi Amin, it could have turned out to be a matter of life or death for me. Fortunately, under the NRM administration, we could get away with it and I lived to tell the tale. Without exaggeration, it was a harrowing experience, one of the hottest potatoes I ever handled in my long years as Makerere's Vice Chancellor.

My Contribution Outside the University and My Unexpected Rolls of Honour

As I have said before, I am not overly superstitious and never a strong believer in things seemingly unnatural; yet I cannot stop wondering why so many unexpected things have happened to me over the years. I have kept wondering if there could be some truth in what some call fate – that power which is believed to decide and control everything that happens to us and which we as ordinary mortals are incapable of predicting, stopping or changing. Or is what has kept happening to us just chance favouring a supposedly prepared mind? It's all hard to tell! To begin with, I was born prematurely, almost two months before time, with a birth weight of 2.6 pounds or just over one kilogramme. I had to be kept in an incubator at Nsambya Hospital and kept warm by rubber-hot water bottles until I had matured enough for my mother to take over. I survived, but lived a very fragile early childhood. On several occasions, I was at the brink, but always managed to hang on by a thread. I guess that my experience is not a unique one. I know that many children are born prematurely every day and many survive. However, what makes my experience slightly different is that I was born almost sixty years ago when modern health care was very much in its infancy in Uganda. Moreover, by the time I was born, my mother was thirty six years old and had had no child before – a fairly advanced age for an African woman. My father was approaching forty five and had one child. I was the first child of my mother and the second of my father. I came into the world when my only sister was over fifteen years old.

After surviving all the odds in my early childhood, I wondered how I managed to scrape through my education, becoming the first member of my family to go to university and to receive a PhD, moreover, on a scholarship provided not by the usual scholarship awarding bodies, but by the very university where I studied for my PhD – Queen's University Belfast. That too was something close to a miracle. I had never expected that someday my maternal uncle – Kojja – would pay the hefty school fees for my secondary school education at Namilyango College and, while there, I would be dogged by constant headaches. But somehow, I managed to scrape through and soldiered on. In my wildest dreams, I had never imagined I would teach at the revered Makerere University. Above all, I never once dreamed that one day I would be its Vice Chancellor, serve longer than any of my predecessors and not be sacked over the radio, as was the norm. I therefore think that I have every reason to consider myself a lucky man, if there is such a thing as luck. That is how fate moulded my life.

My long years as Makerere's Vice Chancellor came with many unexpected honours. There were also a couple of firsts and I have already alluded to some of them. Suffice it to say that some of them were quite significant to me personally, and I believe for Makerere too. Here, I will just highlight in passing a few of

what I consider as my modest service and contributions, which cascaded over to the wider society and organisations in and outside Uganda. I served as the first elected Chairperson of the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology for over ten years, with my friend Zurubaben Nyiira as its Executive Secretary, and we saw the Council make real progress, including acquisition of a plot for its own headquarters. I was an elected Chairperson of the Board of Directors of the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) for six long years, with my former student at Makerere, Henry Aryamanya Mugisha as its Executive Director, and during those six years, NEMA acquired a big plot of land in the prime area of Kampala, built and moved into its own house – the NEMA House along Jinja Road. I served as Chairperson of the Board of Directors of the Uganda Management Institute (UMI), with James Kalebo as Executive Director, for nine good years. During that period, UMI started awarding Masters degrees for the first time and a Global Distance Learning facility was built there. I was its Chairperson when the Inter-University Council for East Africa was revitalised and became an integral part of the new East African Community. I served as a member of the Governing Council of the Association of Commonwealth Universities, based in London, for many years. I was one of the external members of the first governing Council of the newly founded Copperbelt University in Zambia. Together with the Vice Chancellors of the public universities in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, I founded the Institute for Capacity Development in Africa (ICAD) based at the Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology at Juja near Nairobi. We established ICAD in collaboration with the Government of Japan through the Japanese Agency for International Development (JICA).

In the majority of cases, I served in my personal capacity, not by virtue of being the Vice Chancellor of Makerere University; and for that, I am most grateful to those who saw some worth in me and believed they could put it to good use. In so doing, I did not realise that a few people in the international academic community were keenly following my work, and deeds too. To my surprise, they recognised my little and perhaps not so significant contributions with awards and top honours. I am a recipient of the Order of Merit bestowed on me by my alma mater, Namilyango College in 1997, during the celebrations to mark the college's 95th anniversary, since its founding in 1902. It is the highest honour the college can bestow on their alumnae in recognition of their outstanding achievement in public or private life. As an alumnus of that great school, I was deeply touched by this recognition.

I am also tempted to believe that I might have been the first Vice Chancellor at Makerere to be honoured with two honorary doctoral degrees while still in office. It was a rare honour for me, and I suppose for my university too. The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio, USA led the way when, at a colourful commencement ceremony in 1997, attended among others, by my friend Professor

Elly Sabiiti, my wife Alice and my long serving personal assistant Euphemia Kalema-Kiwuwa, the Dean of the College of Education presented me to the President of the university, Gordon Gee for the conferment of the degree of Doctor of Education (EdD) *honoris causa*. The conferment ceremony was preceded by a citation, giving reasons why Ohio State University had decided to bestow an honorary degree on me, read by a member of the university's Board of Trustees. According to the citation, I was being honoured in recognition of my outstanding leadership role at Makerere University and contribution to African higher education, among other things. It was a moving ceremony. My second honorary doctorate, which I received in 2000, was from the University of Bergen in Norway. This time, it was a PhD. Unlike Makerere, the University of Bergen awards the PhD *honoris causa* as well. At this colourful ceremony, I was accorded the privilege to deliver the acceptance speech on behalf of my fellow graduands, who came from all over the world. I received my honorary degree at the same graduation ceremony at which Venasiuss Baryamureeba received his PhD in Computer Science and Informatics. To paraphrase the citation, the award was in recognition of my contribution to the productive relationship between Makerere and the University of Bergen, as well as my good leadership. Besides the scroll, the award included a beautiful golden ring. I was due to receive a third from Tufts University in Boston USA, but for some reason and to my regret, I failed to submit the requisite documentation, so I missed it; but I am grateful to Tufts University for considering me for this prestigious honour. My alma mater, Queen's University, Belfast added to my growing list of honours in summer 2004. During the Congress of the Association of Commonwealth Universities held here in 2003, Dr Michael Gibbons, who was then Secretary General of the Association, asked me to address the Congress on behalf of the African universities at the opening ceremony, which was well received. At the end of the week-long Congress, the Vice Chancellor of Queen's, Professor Sir George Bain looked me out, apparently eager to find out how as a Queens man I had fared since I graduated from there with a PhD in December 1977. It was quite an interesting chat. I did not realise that Sir George Bain had other ideas for me on his mind. A year later, I learnt what he had in mind for me during that brief encounter. Had I been a good mind reader, perhaps I would have guessed what the Queen's knight had in store for me. Alas, I was not, so I never guessed. Therefore, it came as a surprise, and a pleasant one for that matter, to receive a letter from him informing me that my alma mater had decided to honour me as an outstanding alumnus with a degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*.

Queen's University, Belfast has a way of making the graduation ceremony really colourful and dignified. The graduation ceremony there is held over several days, faculty by faculty. Each honorary degree recipient has a whole session to himself or herself each day. You stand on a podium as the Orator and the Vice Chancellor says all the nicest things about you before an attentive audience of parents and important guests. It was an experience of a life time and the crowning moment

of my long career in academic leadership and administration. Like at Bergen, the Vice Chancellor asked me to deliver an after-dinner speech on behalf of all honorary degree graduates the night before. What a privilege it was for me and my family as I recounted my experience, as one of a handful of black people in the Belfast of the 1970s, to an audience of dignitaries from near and far.

I wished my beloved mother and uncle were alive and there to share the joy with me. Alas, both had long departed. My wife Alice, our eldest daughter Caroline who had spent the first three years of her life in Belfast when I was a student there, and our younger son Martin took their place. Above all, I owed all these honours and recognition to good old Makerere, which gave me the opportunity to serve in the best way I could and to the many good colleagues I had worked with over the years, some alive, some long departed.

As I conclude what you might call an exercise in self-indulgence, I should perhaps attempt to answer the question which so many people have asked me again and again. What made us succeed? Frankly, this is a question I have always had a great deal of difficulty answering. I am not even sure I am capable of answering it at all. I am no expert on leadership; nevertheless, let me make an attempt because, from experience, I have learnt a few things that work. No doubt, my answer is bound to be biased; nevertheless, I shall attempt to answer the question. It is an answer based on personal experience and empirical observations. Did we succeed? I guess the answer depends on who you talk to. I want to begin with a proviso that success is relative and hasten to point out that I am the last person to believe that we succeeded any more than any of our predecessors. But that said and done, I strongly believe and indeed experience has taught me this over the years, that as a leader, having a clear vision you strongly believe in and being able to articulate it, is one of the key ingredients for success. Vision gives you a sense of direction; it acts as your compass. Secondly, I believe that successful leadership has a lot to do with your own personality and how you relate to the people you lead. I suppose these are the personality traits all of us inherit from the higher powers. Based on these personality traits, scholars of leadership describe leaders in terms of their leadership styles, which I will not go into here. From a personal experience, I learnt that one of the best ways to get results out of people and to earn their loyalty was to make them know that you know they are just as human as you are, and like you they suffer from the same human imperfections and weaknesses, and that perfection is something we have to constantly strive for. Hence, you know that whatever they do will not always result in the ultimate perfection you are looking for. I also learnt that it pays a lot to let the people you lead know that you have confidence in them; and with your good guidance, they can give off their best. Making them know and feel that they all matter, regardless of their positions or rank in the organisation or the kind of jobs they do, is equally important in getting the best out of people. This, in my experience, is one of the best ways to build a good and strong team. If you have a strong and supportive management team, half of your work is done.

Avoiding being the dominant figure is equally useful. This is so because no one individual has the monopoly of good ideas or the best brains. In my opinion, a good leader or manager is one who capitalises on the strength of the people he or she leads, instead of over-dwelling on their weaknesses. Admittedly, in every organisation there are people who are simply incapable of pulling hard. In such a situation, use the carrot as best as you can first. But when the carrot fails, the stick should come out, as a last resort. I guess this is what some refer to as fair and firm. Experience taught me that, given the right opportunity and the proper means (some call this mentoring), most people are capable of overcoming their weaknesses, and eventually making it, even in an excellent manner.

Secondly, if you must lead, lead by example. You cannot expect people to be punctual at work when you are perpetually late for no good reason. I also know from first-hand experience that hard work is another critical and key factor that contributes to success in leadership. Some people have also argued that you cannot divorce intellectual smartness from leadership success. I guess there is some truth in that. In short, the list of ingredients that can make one an effective leader is long, but there is one thing I know for sure; there is no short cut to success except through hard work and constant knowledge and skills improvement.

Good supervision of your subordinates helps too. People, and I am one of them, hate to be lambasted and harangued all the time. Correct if you must but do not over-swear. You must demonstrate that you are smart and capable of inspiring confidence, instead of being the one who shoots down your subordinates' ideas all the time. You should also humbly admit that you can be challenged and won over by a good argument. In fact, you must be well prepared to take constant fair and unfair criticism, which at times can be extremely harsh. To your surprise, some of it would come in the form of anonymous mail, write-up in the press or reports to your bosses; which teaches another important lesson. In every organisation, there are employees who always think that they can do your job better than you, so they always concentrate on amplifying the negatives, however trivial they may be. I learnt to accept fair criticism. I have also learnt not to take unfair criticism lying down. I learnt that the best way to silence critics is to fight back with figures and facts.

As organisations become more complex, the leader's personal touch can get lost in the maze of things. However, from a personal experience, a leader must ensure that, in spite of the complexity of the organisation and the many competing demands on his or her time, he or she keeps in constant touch with the rank and file. I have heard some experts on organisations call this kind of interaction vertical and horizontal communication. It is critically important to keep channels of communication open all the time. In an organisation, no problem is too trivial not to be attended to. In a big organisation like Makerere University, there are many things which are likely to, and indeed do escape the Vice Chancellor's

attention. However, if you have well-established channels of communication, people freely feed you with good information without you consciously encouraging the practice of “spying for the boss in return for a favour”, which is so common in many organisations. No doubt, you need information about the formal and informal goings on in your organisation and you need to be kept in the know, but it should not come at any cost. As I learnt, on many an occasion, whistle blowing can be a double-edged sword for a leader. Here, good judgement comes in handy. It enables you to discern the grain from the chaff and to extricate yourself from potentially nasty situations in time. As we have seen elsewhere in this account, failing to keep in touch can lead to disastrous consequences. Simple problems, which could have been contained through simple dialogue, can easily spiral out of control. This is what I call keeping the ear on the ground. As they say, it is better to nip the problems in the bud before they spin out of Control, because when things start getting out of control and going terribly wrong, you may never know what has hit you.

Lastly, I am one of those people who are never satisfied with the status quo. I always want to see something new happening. If I see nothing new happening for too long, I become bored and restless. Above all, I like good and beautiful things, things of high quality. I am terribly irked by filth and shoddy work. This trait is almost an obsession in me and I guess it is what drives my zeal to keep experimenting with new things. I believe that, for one to be a progressive leader or manager, one must have zeal for innovation and perhaps a streak of perfectionism. I hate people who are inflexible and tend to be dogmatic in their thinking and acting. I prefer open-minded people. More often than not, open-minded people are quite successful because they tend to be more perceptive and receptive to new ideas. Finally, as a leader, whatever you do, do it efficiently and effectively, because often what you do and how you do it is a statement on your leadership. Problems should always be seen as challenges to be tackled, and there is nothing as fascinating as facing a serious challenge and innovating an elegant solution. I do not think it is bad ego to strive to leave a positive legacy behind you, that can last long after you have gone. As a leader, failure should never be an option.

