

Makerere University in the Twenty-first Century: Some Reflections and Concluding Remarks

Makerere is one of the world's most enduring and ancient African educational institutions called the university (or *universitas*, which in Latin means corporation, guild or society). I suppose it is so called because it is essentially a community of scholars made up of teachers – the professors – and learners; the students and tutors both united in the pursuit of knowledge and the truth. The university is indeed an enduring institution. Few universities in the world and over the centuries have closed down because they were insolvent or became totally dysfunctional for one reason or another. That says a lot about the university as an institution. Universities are perceived as centres of intellectual discourse, knowledge creation, storage and transmission. Amazingly, universities are extraordinarily adaptive to change and, more often than not, they are pace setters and initiators of change. At the same time, they are viewed as the most conservative institutions the human being has ever created. What a contradiction! But perhaps it is from such contradictions universities derive their strength to continue doing what they have done for centuries and millennia.

As centres of the highest concentration of intellectual power, universities are never far from controversy. For centuries, the community has debated the usefulness of the university in their midst and in the process the university has earned the uncanny name of the Ivory Tower, which emphasises the fact that the community has always viewed the university as an institution totally detached from the realities of the everyday life. Yet the university has been, and continues to be the most prolific contributor to human progress in all fields of endeavour, a fact so often lost to many a critic. To me, a university is to scientific and technological innovation and advancement as oxygen is to life. Take the university

away and you would have killed the scientific and technological advancement. Without exaggeration technology, much of which is innovated and incubated in universities' research laboratories, has made an immense contribution to modern civilisation. Interestingly, we now take for granted the many inventions and innovations, which have made life more comfortable, not thinking for a moment that they are the results of research, much of it done in universities. For example, the breakthroughs in the medical sciences have helped society reduce the disease burden in many parts of the world. In turn we live longer and healthier. Although mother nature keeps throwing up new challenges like the HIV/AIDS pandemic, modern medicine has indeed ridded mankind of many dreaded diseases that used to claim millions of lives in the past. No doubt a lot more needs to be done, particularly in Africa, nevertheless university medical schools have made, and continue to make, their contribution.

Advances in telecommunication engineering have spanned vast distances and turned the world into a truly global village. You can now reach any corner of the world instantly by a touch of a button on your commonplace mobile phone. Consumer electronics and computers that make our modern world tick have their origins in universities or have been invented by people who have been at university. The first human being to walk on the moon at the close of the 1960s could not have done so without the enormous contribution of the American universities. This human feat was undoubtedly one of the world's mind boggling undertakings in modern times. Engineers, scientists, mathematicians, computer experts, to name a few, contributed to the success of Neil Armstrong, Edwin Buz Boldrin and Mike Collin's epoch journey to the moon, and incidentally the three Astronauts were university graduates. Although sometimes harshly criticised for being out of touch with reality, universities are critically important to society and, for that reason alone, I strongly believe that universities are here to stay. In the same vein, I believe Makerere is also here to stay and I predict it will survive many more centuries to come. No doubt, there will be many changes that will come with the future but this institution, cherished by many, will certainly be part of the future as it has been part of the past.

Makerere, as one of the oldest centres of higher learning in Africa has seen better days and bitter days in its relatively short life. In 2022, it will celebrate its centenary and I am sure majority of us alive today will be there to blow the candles. One hundred years is a relatively short time when there are universities like Al Azhar in Cairo, founded in 960 AD, which have been in continuous existence for over a thousand years, nevertheless it will be a landmark worth celebrating. Makerere is a University which has innovatively bootstrapped itself out of a turbulent political and financial pit, and has limped on and survived to become part of the modern global information society. It is often said that Makerere's resilience is its people and its strong institutional traditions, coupled

with the goodwill it enjoys from its alumni and well-wishers at home and abroad. I have yet to come across a Makerere old student who is not proud to be a Makererian. Makererians are many, are everywhere and in every walk of life all over the world. Even in small island nations like Mauritius in the Indian Ocean, one would be sure to find a proud Makererian.

It is one of the institutions whose impact extends far beyond the borders of Uganda and Africa. It has been tested and survived the most tempestuous time. The road to recovery has been long, slow, hard and painful and I want to believe that the Makerere I left in 2004 was a little better than the Makerere I found in 1993. As I have pointed out before, every Principal and every Vice Chancellor has made his contribution to the development and survival of Makerere in an incremental way. But as Professor Senteza Kajubi said as he handed over the mantle to me, “Mere survival is not enough”. In his opinion, many people had continued to regard Makerere as a monastic elitist and ivory tower institution which did not respond to public concerns. Makerere had to heed those voices and change this image and the negative perception of the kind of institution the public thought it was and, as we have seen in the preceding chapters, at the time of my departure, Makerere had embraced change. We had made the first steps in taking the gown to the town. Some thought it was too much a change in a relatively short time; but perhaps after many years in some sort of abeyance, that was the kind of jolt the sleeping academic giant needed.

My management team and I left many teething problems unsolved, but I also want to believe that we solved as many in our ten-year tenure. For one, with so many students admitted, many had started voicing concern whether big enrolments had not come at the cost of the quality education Makerere was known for in the past. We attempted to heed those concerns too. But there were also many who saw the opening up, in more positive terms, as an opportunity rather than a problem of quality erosion. Some argued that, faced with the growing numbers of school leavers who were qualifying to enter university every year, Makerere had no convincing reason to keep locking out thousands of deserving students when at the time it was the only university in the country, flagging the excuse that the available resources and facilities could accommodate only a tiny number of qualified candidates among the many who were knocking at its doors every year. For example, in the 1983/84 academic year, Makerere admitted sixty one per cent of the eligible candidates under Government sponsorship. In 1990/91, the number had dropped to thirty five per cent and in 1999/2000 it was down to 10.8 per cent. Those in favour of expanding access argued that all Makerere needed was a little more imagination without waiting for Government to increase its annual subvention, which was unlikely in the foreseeable future. Indeed, imagination and innovation were not feats beyond Makerere’s intellectual prowess. We co-initiated and expanded the private students’ scheme, evening and

distance education programmes which, besides affording opportunity to many who might have been locked out to study for a university qualification, brought in billions of shillings. Also through these efforts, we attracted development partners and reduced the university's near-total dependence on the Uganda Government's coffers. The experiment worked but also created additional problems – big classes and overcrowded lecture halls. But that too was not beyond Makerere's ability to solve. As we have noted earlier, new structures were built in a bid to expand space, while others like the expansion to the Faculty of Technology with NORAD and Sida support which we had negotiated but were timed out to implement, were on the drawing board by the time I left. All this was additional stock to the badly needed space for teaching, offices and research, and was slowly but surely easing congestion in the lecture rooms. We learnt to use space optimally, something we had never thought about before.

As we tried to maintain the momentum for change, we engaged everyone in some serious strategic thinking and planning, using a bottom-up approach, which produced the first truly strategic plan for the university. Armed with the strategic plan, we went about implementing its strategic objectives. We revived the recruitment drive for additional staff to handle the large numbers. The enrolment started to level off and began to stabilise around 30,000. We had entered the period of consolidation. New and more appealing academic programmes, and many demand-driven programmes, came on stream. Staff development was given a big shot in the arm from our own resources. Many members of staff who had lost hope of progressing beyond a Masters degree were busy pursuing their PhDs at Makerere and abroad at the University's expense. For the first time, Makerere staff could look forward to retirement with hope, because we had created an in-house pension scheme for them. We ushered in the era of ICT with a high quality and high speed optical fibre wide area network (MakNet) of eighteen kilometres, covering the entire main campus, with the satellite campuses connected to the main backbone through wireless transmission. Most Faculties responded by building their own local area networks (LAN). We started developing the critical management information systems (MIS) – ARIS, HURIS, FINIS AND MakLIBIS and improved the university's website on the World Wide Web – the Internet. Communication by electronic mail (e-mail) was slowly becoming the norm. In a nutshell, we refused to succumb to usual despondence and be drawn into lamentations which have characterised the African higher education scene for decades. We chose pragmatic action and in the process reversed most of the decay that had gone on for decades. The result – Makerere was slowly, but surely on the mend. I should like to think that at the end of our time, we did not hand over a sinking ship to our successors. True, the ship we were handing over was still leaking, but was afloat and the water line rising. We had more or less pushed the university beyond the major rehabilitation phase and launched it for the development phase, although most staff houses were still in a sorry state and

as I have noted elsewhere, that was one of my regrets. I had hoped that at the end of my time, members of staff would not be earning only a living wage, but a development wage. Unfortunately, that was one of the goals I never scored, it eluded me, though we were not earning the pittance we used to earn when I started as a lecturer in 1979.

What about the future, Makerere in the twenty-first century? This is what my wish-bone tells me. I want to see Makerere continue building on its many successes and its worldwide reputation, on its colossal local and international goodwill. This way, it will truly be “building for the future” as its motto states. As more universities open in Uganda to absorb the thousands of undergraduate students who would otherwise be knocking at its doors seeking admission, Makerere should strategically admit more postgraduate students and focus on cutting-edge and strategic high level research, which can lead to major breakthroughs. However, owing to its reputation and the fact that many young people still feel good about studying at Makerere, it could be tricky to reduce the undergraduate numbers in a relatively short time, but this should be the long-term strategic goal.

Makerere has done enough good undergraduate teaching and produced graduates we can be proud of, but for the future, it should be the university to lead Uganda’s technological advancement, which has the potential to give Uganda a competitive edge. Makerere should continue to be a centre of innovation and academic excellence in all forms of scholarship. We cannot go back to the glorious days of the sixties, but we can create a new dawn of academic vibrancy. By the time I left, I was beginning to see members of staff do some serious research that resulted in patent applications and, by the time I left, some members of staff had actually received their patents, while others were waiting for them. That was a sure sign that with sufficient facilitation, Makerere had the capacity to engage in original and innovative research, which had the potential to generate wealth and in so doing contribute to poverty reduction and the socio-economic development of the country – Uganda – and beyond.

Given its reputation and international standing, Makerere is well positioned to play that role. Future generations will have every reason to judge Makerere kindly if it failed to produce the badly needed scientific and technological breakthroughs. As we have seen, the foundation has been laid. Makerere has done it before and can do it again. However, for Makerere to attract and retain its top-notch professors, the problem of remuneration and staff terms and conditions of service must take centre stage and be addressed. These are the cutting-edge research leaders the university can ill-afford to lose. We shall not be able to stem brain drain and “brains in drain” if this fundamental issue is not squarely addressed. How it is done will have to be a conscious choice and will require a lot of imagination and the goodwill of all Makerere’s stakeholders, with the Government taking the lead. We have lost too many of our brightest students to the developed world

and the few left have had to spend their valuable time trying to supplement their meagre salaries in order to survive, time which they should be spending more productively in the libraries and laboratories. This is a big investment in human capital we are ill-advised to misuse. Even if I failed to achieve a decent wage for the professors in my time, I have no reason to doubt future Vice Chancellors will be able to achieve this. Like they say, development comes at a cost. The choice is for all Ugandans to make a choice in which Makerere will have a decisive part to play.

Additionally, Makerere should continue to capitalise on its network of international partners. There is value in collaborating with the international academic community. It should continue to nurture and strengthen the numerous linkages it has forged with universities in the North, as well as in the South, and bring on board new ones as and when the need arises. Academic linkages are important, not only because they help minimise inbreeding and parochialism, but also because Makerere needs to remain a vibrant member of the international academia. It should also continue to engage with the wider community on either the I@mak.com model or some other more refined models. The gown should not relent in its quest to go to town and help society solve its myriad of teething problems. The outreach programmes would have to be strengthened further for the simple reason that the society needs Makerere's enormous intellectual capacity to find everlasting solutions to abject poverty and technological backwardness. I see this as both a duty and a crusade, a critical responsibility for Makerere. That way, Makerere will have truly earned its keep.

There is an urgent need for Makerere to counter, perhaps in a more pragmatic way than we could ever do, the excessive negative publicity, which not only tarnishes its image and academic reputation, but is equally disruptive and demoralising to the upcoming generations of students who would wish to study there. While it is natural for a university, and for Makerere for that matter, to constantly be on the look out for things that can impact negatively on the quality and academic standards and even engage with the public on ways the quality of academic programmes can be enhanced, I find some of the excessive negative criticism we so often read about unjustified. Sometimes, I get the impression that for some reason unknown to me, some section of the public has deliberately decided to over-focus on Makerere's woes at the expense of the many good things taking place there. It is as if it is an island unto itself, a closed system. Unfortunately, Makerere is part of Uganda and its problems. That is not to say all is well, but simply to point out that the university is truly on the mend. I believe we have a duty to the young generations regarding why we keep referring to our universities as institutions of low standards. If indeed that is the case, are we incapable of doing something about it? To many Ugandan students, these are the only institutions of higher learning they will ever join. Therefore, instead of

indulging in lamentations about lost glory, our first responsibility should be to fix what went wrong without dwelling too much on why it went wrong, because that much we know. The problem of massification is real and has to be addressed more imaginatively. It is a problem not likely to go away any time soon. That said and done, I strongly believe that the solution is not out of reach. As I have noted elsewhere in this account, the next few years will see an avalanche of the output of the universal primary and secondary education. These youngsters will be knocking hard at the doors of Makerere which, for majority of East African and particularly Ugandan students, is still their university of first choice. When that time comes, if it has not already come, it will be another ball game altogether. Traditional ways of curriculum delivery will have to give way to increased use of new ICT-based methodologies, such as e-learning. Already, Makerere has taken a step towards increased use of ICT in teaching, learning and research. It will have to champion this change much in the same way as it has championed curriculum change, innovation and difficult institutional reforms in the recent past. Decongesting the main campus by opening up satellite campuses upcountry could also be considered as part of the solution to massification and improving the quality of instruction. For a university of Makerere's stature, thinking in the box is not an option. Makerere must continue to innovate, embrace and champion new ideas and emerging technological advances. I do not like to sound like a devil's advocate, but I strongly believe that nanotechnology is one of the emerging technologies which Makerere can ill-afford to ignore.

Finally, I have no doubt that funding will continue to be a serious handicap for the university in the foreseeable future. Without reliable and adequate funding, little can be achieved, yet the sad part of the story is that there are no quick fixes to the problem. However, when we visited some South African universities in 2003, I picked up an idea which I thought could go some way in providing some answers to our perpetually cash-strapped university. There, some universities have set up a University Foundation whose sole role is to fundraise. Unfortunately, I did not have time to look into the feasibility of setting up one at Makerere, but it is something that can be given some serious thought. Such a magnificent institution cannot continue just to survive, moreover on a shoe-string budget, forever. That would be sentencing it to a slow and agonising death.

Makerere University has a long future, but it will have to continue to change with the changing times. It should never turn back to the bad old days; never again!

We Makererians have a good reason to be proud of our alma mater as it continues to "build for the future".

