

**Paul Busharizi, journalist**

# Makerere running out of road to kick the can

**T**he events at Makerere University this last week were saddening, but not surprising. Students took to the streets to protest a planned 15% increment in their fees and came face to face with security agents, who were deployed to quell the fracas. It was never going to end well, if the army were unleashed – untrained in putting down civilian unrest, on the students. It was even more ominous when the press were kept off the campus.

It took the intervention of President Yoweri Museveni for some kind of settlement to be arrived at. The university authorities did a climb down, announcing the 15% increment would only be applied to tuition and not to the facilitation fees.

Strikes – protesting low pay by the teaching and non-teaching staff and increments in students' fees, have become a perennial affair. After a few days of disagreement, a band aid solution is arrived at and normalcy returns to the university, but just for a while.

The Government and leadership at Makerere have been content to kick the can down the road year after year, ensuring that the real challenges not the symptoms fester and boil over

every year. The challenge of Makerere and other public universities is one of leadership. Inadequate resources, the falling quality of the output and now the perennial strikes are all but symptoms of poor leadership.

How is it that the square mile with highest concentration of brain power in the country, maybe even in the region, has failed to solve the simple equation of admitting a youthful population, accommodating them in relative comfort, imparting knowledge and graduating useful members of society without drama?

In fact the market is becoming increasingly dubious of its graduates, which suggests the former Harvard of Africa is not keeping up with the times. You shall be judged by your fruit, they say. It starts with the way the university's chief executive officer is selected, an archaic process that rewards popularity rather than competence.

You can paper over the leadership inadequacies, when you have a student body of less 500, like at Independence – making it a privilege not a right, you have a monopoly on university education and you are operating in an analogue world, where change takes place at a glacial pace. But when you have a student body of 35,000-plus whose numbers have outstripped the



infrastructure, competing with several other institutions for government support and with added baggage of a reputation, the selection of the CEO has to go beyond academic cronyism.

Assuming a student body of 35,000 paying on average a million shillings a semester, for an annual revenue of at least sh70b annually, wouldn't you have a truly competitive process to select the best possible business manager for the job?

As it is now, the university's CEOs in recent memory have been doctors, computer scientists, chemists, biologists, lawyers, all upstanding gentlemen and a lady, but none a business manager.

That is what Makerere and other

public universities need, business managers, people who can take the raw input of youth, capital and the assets the university is endowed with and efficiently graduate productive members of society. It is a crying shame that Makerere still gets into fights about money with the staff and students, given the combination of the aforementioned brain power on the hill and the assets under their stewardship.

Nowhere in the world do university students pay the full cost of their education. A clever use of fundraising efforts, income from endowment funds and some state contribution manage to bridge the deficit between student fees and the real cost of education.

It was shocking to learn that student fees have not been increased at Makerere for the last 13 years! At the bare minimum there should be some allowance for inflation. This smacks of cheap populism ignoring good economic sense and digging a deeper hole.

The Government has a lot to answer for the chaos at the university. The popular move to open up university education to a wider public, while failing to increase investment in line with the increased enrolment is at the heart of the current crisis.

Makerere is a shadow of its former self, its crumbling halls of residence

are testament to this. And how is it that no new hall of residence has been added to its portfolio since CCE was made one in 1982. This continued failure will force the Government to make unwanted decision. A reality that increases with every day.

On the one hand, they may be forced to close the university all together because it can't continue to carry it. It may be cheaper to pay fees for students at other universities than pretend to run Makerere. Or to privatise the university, as a going concern, which may invariably lead to a cut back on student numbers, but of a better quality.

Neither of the two options are palatable.

Basic education is important for an industrial economy, but tertiary education is critical for the fourth Industrial Revolution, where better skilled workers than the automatons of the industrial age will be required.

The Government has to make some hard decisions. To divest itself of its universities or commit significantly more resources – financial and managerial, towards university education. Maintaining the status quo is just postponing a major crisis.

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