



IMMANUEL BEN MISAGGA > MAKERERE

Makerere tuition increment: What would student Ssuubi do?

By the time of penning this down, there was still a cloud of uncertainty hovering around Makerere University after more than two weeks of students protests over 15 per cent tuition increment. A section of student leaders have maintained that the protest is still on while the university administration continues to assure everyone that everything is back to normal.

Beyond both narratives, I believe the best way to understand the impasse at the university is to put oneself in the shoes of Henry Ssuubi Kiyimba, the less-privileged fresh student whose well-documented plight caught the attention of the country and beyond. Ssuubi's dream was to study Engineering, but that hope had gone out through the window when he didn't attain the required points at A-Level to study on government sponsorship.

Raised by a single mother who serviced loans to keep him in school, Ssuubi could not afford to do the course as a self-sponsored (private) student. Instead, he was offered Education course. Then picture of him carrying a metallic suitcase to campus went viral on social media. It attracted empathy from well-wishers, who poured support to him. One eventually gave him a full scholarship to study Engineering.

Ssuubi's story is not unique and so is his plight as there are thousands of Ugandan

students that share similar predicament. What makes him different is that someone posted his photo on social media to ridicule him, but that turned into his stroke of luck to attract public sympathy. If it wasn't for that photo, Ssuubi would be studying Education.

At rural St Bruno SS Ggoli in Kammengo where Ssuubi did his A-Level, he defaulted on paying fees for two years, raising the debt to Shs2m (about Shs350,000 per term). He was only allowed to continue with his studies because he was a star performer. Indeed, Ssuubi was the best performer with 17 points and was the only one to get admission to Makerere, meaning the rest were left to apply for private admission. Imagine where Ssuubi would be had he not excelled in the first place. Those who may still be on course are the embodiment of the thousands of private students at Makerere University, whose parents toil to raise tuition every semester. Many of these never even complete their course.

These are the products of Universal Primary Education (UPE) and Universal Secondary Education (USE), whose dreams will be shattered by the increment. These are the students who will feel the pinch of the 15 per cent fees increment in the next five years. I pay for a law student whose annual tuition structure is roughly Shs3m. So, to imagine that this will be raised to Shs5.25m in five years, means many more Ssuubis will be

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locked out of university education. Truth be told, Makerere University's tuition is one of the least in the region. This is in spite of the fact that the university offers quality education. However, Makerere has the noble duty of ensuring that even students from poor backgrounds should have equal chance of studying at the university. Last year, about 98,000 students sat for A-Level, but only about half make it to the university, leaving the rest with shattered dreams.

Nevertheless, I believe that Makerere University has outlived its original structural blueprint. Whereas it was designed to accommodate 8,000 students, it now has in excess of 50,000, but with minimal structural improvements since the 1960s. The increased number of students every year has had im-

pact on the student halls, library and lecture rooms as well as the neighbourhood where student hostels are spiralling. All this has turned the university, once a quiet campus for learning, into a commercial hub of sorts. Added to the fact that the biggest demographic are firebrand youths between 18 years and 25 years, it has become a hotbed for demonstrations. At this age, a person tends to risk everything.

That's why demonstrations are becoming a way of life. Today it is tuition increment but tomorrow the students may demonstrate over poor quality food or bad administration. Against this background, there will come a time when the university administration cannot control anything. Therefore, it is high time the administration and government considers starting a new public university for undergraduates outside the city and leave Makerere for post-graduate studies and research.

The boys wing should be clearly separated from the girls' hall. For instance, the distance between Mary Stuart and Lumumba halls is less 100 metres and this has the effect of raising emotions arising from the girl power. Undergraduates should not mix accommodation with post and mature entrance students. Lecturers should not sleep at campus unless the lecturer accommodation wing is fenced off.

University safety and security shouldn't be a domain of the elected university students system. This would not only reduce the numbers but also reduce the risk of regular demonstrations.

**Mr Misagga is a concerned citizen.
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