

**Opiyo Oloya, Letter from Toronto**

# Makerere: Employ constructive engagement

**U**pfront, Makerere University students' angst about the 15% tuition fees increase for first year students is not supported by numbers from other universities in and outside Uganda.

Generally, Makerere University students pay much lower tuition fees than students in other institutions of higher learning in Uganda. Students attending private universities contend with much higher fees than what Makerereans are upset and protesting about. If anything, worldwide, the cost of university education has shot through the roof. Post-secondary education has grown expensive, saddling students with massive student debts at the end of their education. Essentially, it is unrealistic for Makerere University students to expect fees structure to remain frozen in time, unchanged year after year.

With inflation and rising cost-of-living, operating a university on a shoe-string budget is a non-starter. Here in Canada, for example, the cost of university education has grown by 40 percent over time. The average tuition fees for an undergraduate is the equivalent of sh18m per year. Adding the cost of food, transportation, accommodation and textbooks, Canadian students fork over the equivalent of sh57m per year, to acquire university knowledge.

In fact, according to Statistics Canada, a student graduating from a Canadian university on average owes as much as \$26,000 in debt. The grass is greener on the other

side of the valley until you take your cows to graze that patch. That said, it's very easy to reduce the Makerere University incident to a few idle hooligans who are out to cause trouble. Or that student troublemakers are on drugs. Such simple observations ignore some of the issues eating at the core of students' confidence in the university.

Simply cavalierly dismissing the grievances from students ignores systemic problems that have eroded confidence in Makerere University as one of Africa's renowned institutions of learning. From the students' vantage points as scholars pursuing knowledge, the fees increase could seem draconian, a black hole that swallows everything without giving anything in return. The simple question students have a right to ask is this: What does 15% increase in tuition fees provides me as a learner? By paying the new fees, how will my life and experience as a student be different tomorrow, than it was yesterday and today? Will classrooms remain crowded, lecturers absent from work, main library empty of learning resources and technology non-existent?

After all, the bloated university structure remains oblivious of tough times. Specifically, just over three years ago, Auditor General John F.S. Muwanga audited Makerere University finances for the Financial Year ending June 30, 2016 and found many problems.

Among other financial shenanigans, he discovered retired staff still on the university payroll to the tunes



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of millions in salaries, millions in salary overpayments, and as much sh1.1b in what he termed "unreconciled variance" between the cashbook and financial report. Flabbergasted, the Auditor General wrote: "I was not provided with a

satisfactory explanation regarding this discrepancy." In simple English, Makerere University was bleeding shillings, none of which was available to improve learning for students.

To date, apparently nothing has been publicly released by the university to say that the mess was cleaned up and that, in fact, the institution is running lean and mean. If anything, an audit a year later found Makerere University Business School in complete financial meltdown with "inadequate controls over domestic arrears", unable to adequately meet its financial obligations. What's more, on the payrolls were 68 staff – teaching assistants, administrative staff and support staff – who got their jobs without competition. Any wonder why the young people are unhappy about their university!

That's why students can seem to rebel against tuition hikes which at times feel like pouring millet grain in a basket with a hole in the bottom – it never fills up. The remedy, of course, is not to go on strike, cause general mayhem and chaos and destruction to property.

That is a stupid solution that only hurts students. The smarter approach is to organise and learn to demand accountability from the university administration. Working within the structure of the university, student leaders should demand (as they did at the emergency meeting of October 29, 2019) more accountability and transparency. At the table on the University Council, both the guild president and vice-president must learn to navigate the niceties of bureaucracy by asking tough

questions – where does all the money go? How is the university renewing learning resources? How much money is spent on student welfare? Who is on the university payroll, down to the cleaner who cleans the toilet?

Constructive engagement is the answer. As happens with student leaders in Canada and in the US, peacefully and respectfully but firmly taking simmering issues to the corridors of power, lobbying assiduously for change, convincing lawmakers why certain things must go and others brought back. Just two months ago, for example, university students across the province of Ontario organised to lobby the conservative government of Premier Doug Ford.

The students wanted to continue to pay fees (yes students wanted the fees) for student-controlled activities like counselling, foodbank, student newspapers, radio stations and so forth. Thinking he was helping to lighten the tuition burden on students, Premier Ford did away with these mandatory fees. But students wanted the fees restored. Similarly, by applauding what Makerere University does right and highlighting failures, students can begin to influence positive change, opening window ever so wider for fresh air and rays of sunshine to blow and shine on learning at Makerere again.

There is hope, and it is about turning what you learn in class into constructive change in the learning environment itself.

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