

YEAR **1988**

Beginning. The Department of Journalism and Communication at Makerere University started as a programme in the Department of Literature in academic year 1988/1989.



"Thirty years is a long time when change should be visible. We aspire at this stage to become a School of Media, Journalism and Communication in the tradition of all our peers in the region." **WILLIAM TAYEEBWA, HEAD OF DEPARTMENT, DEPARTMENT OF JOURNALISM AND COMMUNICATION**



Tracing Makerere's journalism journey

Milestone. From a programme in the Department of Literature in 1988, the Department of Journalism and Communication at Makerere University has grown to be recognised as a centre of reference for journalism education in Africa, writes **Desire Mbabaali**.

Three decades after it started as a programme in the Department of Literature in academic year 1988/1989, the current Department of Journalism and Communication at Makerere University has grown to be recognised as a centre of reference for journalism education in Africa by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO).

Like many stories, this too, is one of humble beginnings.

"We started as a class of 20 students and only 17 graduated [in 1992.] We had about half a dozen core lecturers, with others in other departments and faculties where we had classes; in the arts and social sciences. There was no first class; just two upper seconds of the graduating class of 17," Dr George William Lugalambi, an alumni in the pioneer class, recalls.

At that time, lectures took place in the faculty of Arts, and other departments such as Economics and Political Science. There were only day classes.

In 1998/1999, the Department of Mass Communication was launched and Dr Goretti Nassanga, who had joined Makerere in 1993 and had been the first full-time coordinator of the mass communication programme became the first head of the independent department.

Dr Nassanga was also the first to graduate with a PhD in Mass Communication from Makerere University in 2003; and was the first professor in the department where she still serves, Dr William Tayeebwa, the current Head of Department (HoD), shares.

After graduation, Dr Lugalambi started teaching in the department from 1993 and was later promoted to senior lecturer in 2007 soon after attaining a doctorate in 2006.

"Combined with my years of service and academic record, I qualified to compete for the position of head of department. I was elected by my colleagues and confirmed in the position in 2007," says Dr Lugalambi. However, his four years



BACKGROUND

Different view. From rather small numbers averaging 25 per intake in the first 10 years of the programme, the introduction of the evening programme in 1995/1996 saw a doubling in admissions. By 2008/2009, the then department was graduating an average of 90 students. At 30 years, the number graduating per academic year has stabilised at an average of 110.

of steering the department were decked with several challenges.

"Building a department was challenging, especially because we had a very small staff. I was overstretched by academic and administrative responsibilities, not to mention pressure for personal academic growth through research and publishing. But we shared responsibilities, got donor resources to supplement the university budget, and launched new programmes... the department has since made impressive strides," Dr Lugalambi adds.

In 2010, the Bachelor of Arts in Mass Communication was changed from being a three-year course to four years and renamed BA in Journalism and Communication in hope of grasping the advent of new media technologies and to catch up with a sector that was growing exponentially as it cross-pollinated with the telecommunications sector.

Making strides

Dr Tayeebwa shares that the department has flourished mainly because it always attracted the best crop of students passionate about their role as journalists and communication

Structure. The building housing the Department of Journalism and Communication at Makerere University. PHOTO BY STEPHEN OTAGE

professionals. "Every graduating year, the department always retains the best who are willing to join teaching. Even those who didn't join full time provided invaluable time in nurturing a new generation of professionals. Not least, the support of industry partners as well as several donors has ensured that the department is resourced to continue training for the future," he says.

Additionally, he believes that the department has brought respectability to journalism and communications practice. He notes that the alumni are also a voice of those who cannot ably speak for themselves and continue to hold those in power to account as well as providing fora for people to debate issues that matter to them.

"For instance, Andrew Mwenda, together with our pioneer lecturer Charles Onyango-Obbo, lodged Constitutional Appeal No. 2 of 2002, challenging the Supreme Court Section 50 in the Penal Code that criminalised the publication of false news. Following their appeal, the Supreme Court quashed the section from our law books in a landmark 2004 ruling," Dr Tayeebwa notes.

Nurturing other universities

He says the department nurtured the Department of Mass Communication at Uganda Christian University that is now a faculty. Dr Tayeebwa adds that they developed curricula for the departments of mass communication and development communication at University of Juba, which have been turned into a school.

The mass communication programme started with a handful of professionals, who included Dr Francis Kidubuka (RIP), Mr Charles

Onyango-Obbo, Ms Mary Karooro Okurut, Mr David Ouma Balikowa, Mr Wafula Oguttu, David Musoke (RIP), Mr Fredrick Jjuuko, Mr Katebalirwe Amooti and a couple of American visiting professors such as Jim Scotton and Merinda Robins - mainly journalists and staff from the Literature Department, Dr Tayeebwa explains.

"At 30 years, we are proud to have nurtured Prof Goretti Nassanga, who remains at Makerere; Prof Monica Chibita, who moved to head the Department of Mass Communication (now Faculty of Media, Journalism and Communication) at Uganda Christian University; and Associate Professor Margaret Jjuuko at the University of Rwanda," he says.

"Currently, the department has in service 10 staff with PhDs and six Master's holders; three of whom are doing their doctoral studies while three are in the process of registering for their doctoral studies. In five years' time, all staff at the department will be PhD holders," Dr Tayeebwa explains.

"Thirty years is a long time when change should be visible. We aspire at this stage to become a School of Media, Journalism and Communication in the tradition of all our peers in the region," he says.

Dr Tayeebwa adds that the future also holds the launching of a revised curriculum with two undergraduate and two Master's programmes that are already developed and are before the University Senate. The programmes are BA in Journalism and Multimedia and MA in Journalism and Media Studies. For the communication track, there will be a BA in Public Relations and Communication with an MA in Strategic Communication.

"Our doctoral programme (PhD in Communication) has also grown with now 11 candidates enrolled. With support from the university, our alumni and donor friends, we continue to expand our infrastructure; with a multimedia resource centre planned to be completed within academic year 2019/2020 to house television, radio and online production studios," he says.

Challenges

The major challenge, Dr Tayeebwa explains, is that the media and communications sector evolve so fast thus calling for constant adapting through retooling. For trainers, that means regular revision of curricula in consultation with industry so as to respond best to new imperatives.

When asked what they could have done better as a department, the HoD says: "We could engage more often with media owners to improve the working conditions of journalists. The terms of employment for journalists and other media professionals remain quite poor. There are also issues to do with safety and security of our professionals that we could discuss more with media owners as well as security agencies. Government functionaries ought to be constantly reminded that journalists are partners in development and not enemies of the State."

Dr Tayeebwa says the department has reached several milestones that are characterised by a pool of alumni who are working in every sector (public and private) in the country and abroad. As they celebrate 30 years, the department is reaching out to all alumni, and well-wishers for support to be able to train better professionals for an ever-evolving sector.