

The Evolving Higher Education Landscape in Uganda – Issues, Challenges, and Propositions

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Abstract

The higher education (HE) sector in Uganda is in a state of a perfect storm. As Uganda tends towards lower middle-income status and as it envisions upper middle-income status by 2040, it is beyond dispute that HE is a panacea to achieving this ambition. In order to bolster the significance of HE in the country's socio-economic transformation process, higher education institutions (HEIs) in Uganda have attempted to embrace global imperatives within the broader HE discourse namely: internationalization of HE, international collaborations and knowledge transfer partnerships; revitalizing the relationship between the academic oligarchy, industry and the state; as well as strengthening the core function of HE: research, teaching and community engagement. However, an interplay of systemic deficiencies, unclear institutional philosophies, and epistemological tensions have thwarted the full reformation of the country's HE sector. By means of literature search and desk study, this paper sought to highlight the critical issues and challenges facing the country's HE sector upon which the paper draws actionable recommendations. The article reveals that the capacity of HEIs to significantly contribute to the country's development agenda is curtailed by geopolitical dynamics, autocratic rule, acute funding shortages and inadequacy of qualified academic staff. The paper recommends that HEIs should reconstruct internationalization of HE, and explore new and reliable sources of funding. Also, the paper recommends that Government should create a special loan fund for financing doctoral studies and also scale up university funding for research and innovations.

Key words: higher education, perfect storm, socioeconomic transformation, internationalization of higher education.

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Résumé: Le secteur de l'enseignement supérieur (ES) en Ouganda traverse une période particulièrement difficile. Alors que l'Ouganda tend vers le statut de pays à revenu intermédiaire inférieur et envisage d'atteindre le statut de pays à revenu intermédiaire supérieur d'ici 2040, il ne fait aucun doute que l'ES est la solution miracle pour réaliser cette ambition. Afin de renforcer l'importance de l'ES dans le processus de transformation socio-économique du pays, les établissements d'enseignement supérieur (EES) en Ouganda ont tenté d'intégrer les impératifs mondiaux dans le discours plus large sur l'ES, à savoir : l'internationalisation de l'ES, les collaborations internationales et les partenariats de transfert de connaissances ; la revitalisation des relations entre l'oligarchie universitaire, l'industrie et l'État ; ainsi que le renforcement de la fonction essentielle de l'HE : la recherche, l'enseignement et l'engagement communautaire. Cependant, l'interaction entre les déficiences systémiques, les philosophies institutionnelles floues et les tensions épistémologiques a empêché la réforme complète du secteur de l'enseignement supérieur du pays. À l'aide d'une recherche documentaire et d'une étude théorique, cet article vise à mettre en évidence les problèmes et les défis critiques auxquels est confronté le secteur de l'enseignement supérieur en Ouganda; il formule dans la foulée des recommandations concrètes. L'article révèle que la capacité des établissements d'enseignement supérieur à contribuer de manière significative au programme de développement du pays est limitée par la dynamique géopolitique, le régime autocratique, le manque criant de financement et l'insuffisance de personnel universitaire qualifié. L'article recommande aux établissements d'enseignement supérieur de reconstruire l'internationalisation de l'enseignement supérieur et d'explorer de nouvelles sources de financement fiables. Il recommande également au gouvernement de créer un fonds de prêt spécial pour financer les études doctorales et d'augmenter le financement de la recherche et de l'innovation dans les universités.

Mots clés: enseignement supérieur, tempête parfaite, transformation socio-économique, internationalisation de l'enseignement supérieur.

Introduction

The current trends in the global HE community offer optimism yet pose a serious challenge to HEIs particularly in developing countries like Uganda. As the global landscape within which HEIs operate takes a new shape, the construct of internationalization of HE is taking a new paradigm shift from internationalization abroad to localized internationalization, student mobility, marketization of HE, equitable access to HE, integration of emerging technologies in teaching-learning processes in HEIs including

a careful use of artificial intelligence (AI) in research by academics and students (Marinoni and Cardona, 2024). Further, as the global higher education reform agenda gains momentum, HEIs in developing countries like Uganda seem to be left in a state of bewilderment.

The objective of this article is to discuss major critical issues that have generated debates within Uganda's HE reform processes, the challenges that have incapacitated its HE from significantly contributing to national socio-economic transformation and offer practical proposals to offset those challenges. Further, the chapter intends to demonstrate how an interplay of systemic deficiencies, lack of ideological clarity and epistemological tensions have clogged the country's HE sector.

Conceptualizing Higher Education

Philosophically, two critical questions about HE need to be interrogated: 1) What is higher education? and 2) What is higher education for? The misunderstanding about what HE is comes into light when Probert (2016) poses a philosophical question, "what is higher about higher education?" (p.12); and when Parker (2008) semantically posits that "higher education, in truth, is a mix of higher, happier, harder and further education" (p.4). In many cases HE and university are used interchangeably. To Assié-Lumumba (2005), HE refers to "organized tertiary learning and training activities and institutions that include conventional universities such as arts, humanities, and science faculties and more specialized university institutions in agriculture, engineering, science, and technology, and all post-secondary institutions like polytechnics, colleges of education" (p.2). Broadly, HE comprises all post-secondary education, training and research guidance at education institutions such as universities that are authorized as institutions of HE by state authorities (UNESCO, 2004). Contextually HE in this article is conceptualised to mean post-secondary school institutions namely universities and other tertiary institutions (Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act, 2001 [As amended, 2006]), though it focuses on the university sub-sector of the broader HE sector.

The second question that needs to be interrogated is, what is HE for? Makoe and Olcott (2021) argue that HE as a system is expected to equip students with the necessary knowledge, skills and attitude "to address social and political ills such as poverty, ill-health, climate change, slow job-creation, slow economic development, threats to peace and fragmenting social cohesion" (p.1). Castells (2008) posits that HEIs exist to fulfil four main obligations: "produce values and social legitimation, select the dominant

elites, train the [country's] labour force, and generate scientific knowledge and support its application in society" (p.3).

Thus, the basic purpose of HE is the "preservation, transmission, and enrichment of the important elements of culture – the product of scholarship, research, creative imagination, and human experience" (American Council on Education Studies [ACES], 1937, p.3; Williamson, et al., 1949, p.2). This implies that HE should enable students to develop a versatile mind that is able to meaningfully and productively adjust to the ever-changing situations, create or identify opportunities, possess the acumen to harness and pursue those opportunities for the benefit of self (private benefits) and the larger community (public or social benefits).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Role of Higher Education in Socio-Economic Transformation

The emergence of knowledge-based economies for sustainable development has implored HEIs across the globe to rethink their role in the socio-economic transformation efforts (Ayisi, 2018), which broadly lends credence to progress in terms of social and economic factors within a given locality (Okoro, 2020). This explains why many countries around the globe have in the recent past undertaken tremendous HE reforms (Volchik, et al., 2018) and increased investments in training highly knowledgeable and skilled workforce (McCowan, et al., 2014).

It is well-established in the literature that HE produces both private and public returns (Dary and James, 2018). For example, HE increases productivity and the well-being of individuals (Chien and Huebler, 2018; Fleming, et al., 2009); it leads to higher salaries, better employment opportunities, and increased savings (Kezar, et al., 2005; Lewis and Hearn, 2003; Tilak, 2016). At the individual level, HE raises earning potential by improving a person's skills and probability of employment. It also offers opportunities for personal development and fulfillment through social networks and allows individuals to exercise a higher level of independence and creativity at work (Oreopoulos and Petronijevic, 2013). This implies that HEIs have to equip students with knowledge, skills, competences, attributes and inculcate attitudes to develop as a whole.

According to Gayardon and Brajkovic (2019), HE creates and bolsters social mobility of individuals which in the end creates new opportunities even for those students from underprivileged socioeconomic backgrounds. Consequently, HE "allows us to access a pool of knowledge and develop skills which, in turn, help us to cultivate the essential qualities that make

us human: our personality, our sociability and our capacity to act as moral agents" (p.1).

Further, HE promotes community engagement, which is fundamental for sustainable socio-economic transformation, and strengthens "a sense of belonging to a community, in promoting and safeguarding a collective identity and culture and in raising shared living standards" (Gayardon and Brajkovic, 2019, p.1). This means that HEIs act as centres for educating, analyzing data, creating information through research, and imparting knowledge for the sustainable development of nations (Alufohai, 2012; Olusola, et al., 2014). Thus, HE is a potential vehicle for communities to thrive and individuals to pursue and achieve seemingly unattainable goals (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020). This explains why many countries are embracing the doctrine of universal access to HE because this universalism is configured as one of the fundamentals of ensuring the right to education guaranteed by international law (UNESCO-IESALC, 2020).

Given the vast benefits of HE, interventions such as affirmative financial policies (Gayardon, & Brajkovic, 2019) such as student loan schemes (Dachi, 2021; Prodan, et al, 2015) and quota systems in admitting students in HEIs (Galafa, 2019) are justified. This is also true for Uganda as the government has since the early 1990s undertaken several affirmative action interventions to increase access to HE (Arinaitwe, et. al., 2015; Kaahwa, et. al., 2019; Kagoda, 2011; Kimoga, et. al, 2015; Odaga, 2020; Tibenderana, 2013). These include the 1.5 extra points awarded to all female students who consider joining public universities (Odaga, 2020), the district quota system (Arinaitwe, et al, 2015), the disability scheme (Kagoda, 2011), and the student loan scheme which was introduced in 2012 (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2019), among others.

In interrogating the concept of socio-economic transformation, Brennan and Lebeau (2004) noted:

Social transformation lies at the radical end of conceptions of social change. It implies at the very least some fundamental changes in society's core institution, the polity and the economy, with major implications for relationships between social groups or classes, and for the means of the creation and distribution of wealth, power and status (Brennan and Lebeau, 2004, p.2).

Similarly, Okoro (2020) draws a distinction between social development

and economic development, where economic development focuses on “raising the level of prosperity through increased production, distribution and consumption of goods and services” (p.5). On the other hand, social development concerns itself with the “complexity of social dynamics (the interplay of social structures, processes and relationships) and focuses on (1) the social concerns of the people as objectives of development and (2) people-centred, participatory approaches to development” (Okoro, 2020, p.5). Thus, social transformation focuses on epistemological equity, inclusiveness, social justice and the common good.

As a community of scholars, HE “cannot be separated from a larger society which is its environment or which is its parent” (Widanti et al., 2023, p.3). In the case of Uganda, as the social demographics continue to transform, HEIs need to revitalize their core functions and engage in research and create knowledge that is more responsive to the socioeconomic needs of the country. The call for HEIs to contribute to socio-economic transformation is not a recent phenomenon. As argued by Castells (2001), universities as sub-sectors within the larger HE sector have traditionally played four basic functions namely, the formation of ideologies, generation of knowledge, selection and formation of elites, as well as the training of a skilled labour force. In the case of Uganda, this implies that HEIs should positively respond to the needs of the local, regional, continental and global community.

Higher Education, State and the Market

HEIs in Uganda do not operate in isolation and thus cannot fully contribute to sustainable socio-economic transformation of the country, on their own. This calls for a deliberate, meaningful and focused collaboration among the three stakeholders within the HE ecology namely, the “academic oligarchy, State and market” (Clark, 1983, p.143). In consideration of this position, Ayisi, (2018) argued that there should be a “strong collaboration between the academic core, the government, and other stakeholders” (p.7) for HEIs to design and implement curricula that best serve the social, economic, political, and technological needs of a country. To realize this, the state must adopt a pro-participatory political approach and embrace democratic norms that allow universities to enjoy institutional autonomy and faculty to exercise academic freedom without intimidation by or fear of state or institutional leaders.

Similarly, Government needs to undertake policies and legislations that allow the market to flourish to ensure that the industry survives and thrives and can gainfully utilize the research output from universities, which then

provides impetus for faculty to engage in knowledge production. Therefore, the state needs to formulate and implement fiscal and monetary policies that support and promote the industry, ensure transparency and accountability within its operations, and enact patent and copyright laws that protect academics from unscrupulous players in the market. Atuhaire et al. (2022) argue that apart from responding to local needs and imperatives, HEIs should “develop the capacity to take advantage of the new opportunities that globalization [has] engendered” (p.3). Accordingly, research in HEIs should induce “high order thinking, innovation and open-mindedness” (Atuhaire et al. 2022, p.3) which are fundamental for creating a robust and resilient economy within a free market system.

Thus, in their admission protocols, universities should aim to attract highly talented young people who together with the faculty can engage in research and educational works which directly link with the industry, or private sector in general and promote international cooperation “to introduce innovative ideas and technologies based on innovative SMART technologies in the education process and to improve training in the new environment” (Khodzhaevich, et al. 2019, p.1). However, within the Ugandan context, it is worth noting that the existing political belligerence and governance problems have tempered the potential of HEIs from significantly contributing to the country’s development agenda.

METHODOLOGY

The research methods used in this article included a literature search and desk study. Because the aim was to interrogate the HE sector (issues, challenges, and suggestions) in Uganda, literature review (Synder, 2019) and desk study (Gottfredsen, 2023) were considered appropriate. In this regard, the study systematically searched for, identified, selected, critically reviewed and synthesized previous studies about the HE discourse. Further, credible documents particularly reports by Uganda National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) and Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) about the state of HE in Uganda were consulted, upon which actionable recommendations were drawn. Specifically, what Chigbu et al. (2023) refer to as “theme-centric literature search” which is a “search based on broad themes instead of specific or narrowed concepts” (p.7) was conducted.

Critical Issues in the Higher Education Sector

The Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act, 2001 (UOTIA, 2001) as amended, categorizes HEIs in Uganda into three broad categories. These are Universities, Other Degree Awarding Institutions (ODAs) and Other Tertiary Institutions (OTIs). The ODAs are HEIs that are not universities

but accredited to offer degree programmes in specialized areas as mandated by the Uganda National Council for Higher Education (NCHE). The OTIs are HEIs which largely award diploma mainly in business, management and social development, technical, agriculture, and teacher training, among others (NCHE, 2022). Uganda's HE sector is peculiarly characterized by a multiplicity of features, but this article focuses on a few of these issues regarded as critical and generated debate within the HE discourse.

The Paradox of Higher Education Expansion and Limited Access to HE

Since the mid-1980s, Uganda's HE sector has continued to register considerable growth in terms of institutions (Mukwanason, 2017) distinguished by type and ownership (Bisaso, 2017). Uganda currently has over 227 accredited HEIs which include 54 universities, of which 10 are government owned, 20 ODAIs, and the rest OTIs (NCHE, 2022), though universities account about 72 percent of the entire HEIs enrolment (Uganda Bureau of Statistics [UBOS], 2023). It is generally agreed that widening access to HE is considered a linchpin to ensuring the right to education (UNESCO-IESALC, 2020). Due to this view, the Government of Uganda has embraced democratisation of HE where it adopted a distributive justice approach in the distribution of HEIs.

Distributive justice concerns itself with fairness of the distribution of the conditions, goods, services, resources and opportunities that affect individual, group, or community well-being within society (Deutsch, 1985). Deutsch (1985) identifies three principles that can clarify distributive justice: 1) Need (how the outcome is distributed when one expects or needs something); 2) Equity (how the outcome is distributed according to one's perseverance, contribution, and performance); and 3) Equality (how outcomes among people are equally distributed). Basing on this classification, individuals either perceive the distribution of resources and opportunities as fair or unfair (Jasso et al., 2016).

In rationalisation of HE, the government adopted a sociotropic distributive justice evaluation, which aims to benefit society and societal conditions as a whole (Schnaudt et al., 2021). In this regard, the government of Uganda crafted a policy of rationalizing HE (NCHE, 2022) by establishing new universities and other HEIs in the country on a regional basis (Eton et al., 2020). This is because given its locational merit, the Central region continues to dominate the largest share of HEIs (about 56%) with the "majority of HEIs located in the greater Kampala region and the neighbouring districts of Mukono, Mpigi, Wakiso and Masaka" (NCHE, 2022, p.x). Universities established under this rationalisation policy include; Kabale University

in Kigezi, Mountains of the Moon University in Tooro, Muni University in Arua, Soroti University in Soroti, Lira University in Lira; the on-going transition of Busoga University in Busoga into a public university as well as the establishment of Bunyoro University in Bunyoro (NCHE, 2022). However, this regionalisation and growth have not necessarily translated into equitable access to HE in Uganda. For that matter, Uganda still has one of the lowest Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of 5.3%, which is far below the Sub-Saharan Africa average of 9.4% and the global average of 38% (NCHE, 2022). Worse still, the low GER is coupled with a high dropout rate (UBOS, 2023) averaging around 30% (UNESCO-IESALC, 2020) due to inability to raise study funds by majority of students (UBOS, 2023).

These realities pose a major challenge to Uganda's aspiration of increasing stock of human capital needed to facilitate sustainable development and achieve a middle-income status envisioned in the Uganda Vision 2040. The argument is that equitable access to HE in Uganda has to be cherished, promoted, and facilitated if Uganda is to harness a higher demographic dividend of its young population and achieve a fairer society.

The State of Credential Inflation in HE Sector

Traditionally, HE was viewed as a public good that yields outcomes for the benefit of the entire society as a whole (Ehrenberg, 2006). This commodification of HE as a public good for the benefit of all perhaps justifies why for all the years preceding to 1990s, HE in Uganda was free covering tuition fees, functional fees, accommodation and living allowances for students (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2012; Tibenderana, 2013). Globally, as the difference in earnings between highly educated and less educated individuals kept widening, and as the private socio-economic returns to investment in HE have kept growing, many educationists and policymakers arrived at a conclusion that "students and their families should pay a greater share of the cost of higher education" (Ehrenberg, 2006, p.2).

Within the Ugandan context, cost-sharing was introduced particularly at Makerere University in 1992 (Kyaligonza, 2017; Onen et al., 2015) on the recommendation of the Education Policy Review Commission (EPRC) of 1989 (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2012). As a result of this cost-sharing, a slump in demand for HE was predicted. Instead, and with the introduction of free universal primary education (UPE) in 1996 and free universal secondary education (USE) in 2007, an upsurge in student numbers qualifying to join HEIs in Uganda transpired (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2012). This growth in HE has led to what

Collins (2002, p.23) refers to as “credential inflation” to imply an inverse relationship between the number of people with academic degrees and the jobs for which they qualify. He observes that:

as the number of persons with academic degrees goes up, the occupational level for which they have provided qualifications declines. Under these circumstances, the occupational value of the degree declines. Accordingly, higher-level occupations require increasingly higher and more specialized academic credentials (Collins, 2002, pp. 23–24).

HEIs, particularly universities, are producing more graduates with degrees coinciding with a high level of graduate unemployment in the country, what this author refers to as academicflation to describe a situation of co-existence of high university graduation levels and high levels of graduate unemployment. Academicflation is different from credential inflation which refers to a situation where most jobs that graduates trained for and anticipating transition to the labour market have been taken over by robots and GenAI (Chiacchio, et al., 2018; European Union, 2024; Fiesolana, 2024; International Labour Organization [ILO], 2018; The Guild, 2024; Wisskirchen, et al., 2017) necessitating more advanced or specialized academic qualifications to widen their chances of employment.

On the other hand, Uganda, a country with one of the youngest population in the world where 50% is under the age of 18 years, faces serious employment, education or training opportunities for its 42.6% population, aged between 18 and 30 years (UBOS, 2024). Worse still, only a small percentage, 6%, of the total population of 45.9 million possess a tertiary or university degree qualification (UBOS, 2024). Thus, with a large proportion, 33%, of the population engaged in non-commercial production (UBOS, 2024), the size of its economy cannot adequately absorb HE graduates. Therefore, academicflation within the Ugandan context is not necessarily the possession of college degree qualifications by a large number of young people. It is further exacerbated by nascent economic activities to absorb even those few graduates. Already, in 2024, over 500,000 university graduates were riding boda-bodas (taxis) as their source of income, as they failed to secure jobs for which they obtained degree qualifications (New Vision, 2024).

The State of a ‘Perfect Storm’ in the HE Sector

The term ‘perfect storm’ was coined by Ronald G. Ehrenberg in 2006 intrigued by a situation of declining state funding of public HE during

which period private colleges and universities raised “tuition fees at a rate of 3 percent over and above inflation” (Ehrenberg, 2006, p.2). As funding to public HEIs dwindled significantly, they too were compelled to raise tuition fees at the same rate as private HEIs. As enrolment in both private and public HEIs was expected to fall sharply due to tuition fees increases, instead there was an upsurge in demand for HE based on the premise that after graduation, these students would reap the returns to investment in their college education, although this turned out to be the opposite as most of those graduates with bachelor’s degrees found it so hard to secure jobs (Ehrenberg, 2006).

The construct of a perfect storm propagated by Ehrenberg (2006) fits into the Ugandan context. Following the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPS) of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), the government liberalized the education sector including the HE subsector, which has led to the proliferation of private HEIs (Muganga et al., 2024) and accordingly, the rise in the cost of HE. Despite the high cost of HE (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2020), there has been a significant increase in demand for HE in Uganda (NCHE, 2023) from over 60,000 students qualifying to join universities in 2011 (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2012) to 140,000 students qualifying to join universities in 2023 (Parliament of Uganda, 2024). This upsurge is largely due to UPE and USE programmes which were introduced by the government in 1996 and 2007 respectively (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2012).

With technological developments and the increasing tendency of FDI to target large-scale investments, many of the bachelor’s degree holders find it hard to secure gainful employment in the MNCs due to knowledge and skills deficiency. In this case many bachelor’s degree holders would seek postgraduate education in the hope that higher academic qualifications enhance their employable skills and competences to secure productive and high-paying jobs (Kakooza, et al. 2019). Moreover, with the usually low (Pyne and Grodsky, 2020) and stagnating returns to investment in bachelor’s degrees (Ashworth and Ransom, 2019; Valletta, 2016), graduate and postgraduate studies have become commonplace and a platform for gaining elite status (Posselt and Grodsky, 2017).

Similarly, Pyne and Grodsky (2020) posit that as the payoffs to college credentials are usually higher in most enterprises and MNCs, those with lower academic credentials “become more willing to bear higher costs to earn higher academic credentials” (p.3) including taking more student loans in anticipation of higher returns on investment in graduate and

postgraduate degrees that may enable students to pay off such loans with ease (Woo and Shaw 2015). This optimism is also apparent in Uganda as the economy expands and envisions a knowledge-based economy, “higher degrees are given more preference than other lower qualifications” (NCHE, 2022, p.36) since MNCs and large enterprises “pay higher wages” (Kappel, 2021, p.28) to highly knowledgeable, skilled and specialized workers, which explains why more people in Uganda with lower academic qualifications are enrolling for further studies particularly masters degrees (NCHE, 2022). In agreement, Molokova (2021) argues that as individuals enroll for graduate and postgraduate studies and “master in the academic programme” (p.5) of their specialisation, the quality of such graduates significantly improves which enables them either to secure better employment (Higgs, et al, 2019) or consolidate their current employment (O’Shea, 2019).

However, Gwala, et al. (2023) argue that beyond academic credentials, the problem of graduate unemployment is a reflection of “deep-seated economic challenges in a country” (p.3). In light of this argument, the high rate of graduate unemployment in Uganda can be attributed to a number of factors which include but not limited to: a) a small size of the economy which cannot absorb all the graduates; b) labour market imperfections such as corruption; c) scanty democracy and lack of accountability which inhibit job creation; d) poor policy and ineffective regulatory frameworks that incapacitate young graduates from nurturing and developing their talents and utilizing opportunities, among others. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that amidst the skyrocketing cost of HE, the government introduced the Uganda Students’ Higher Education Financing Policy in 2012, which culminated into the Uganda Students’ Loan scheme with the aim of promoting equitable access to HE by providing loans to financially needy students to access HE (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2012). However, the implementation of the loan scheme has been hampered by budgetary deficits, corruption, tribalism, and nepotism (Kibuuka, 2022) which compelled the government to suspend the scheme for the 2023/2024 academic year and initiated investigations into the mismanagement of the scheme (The Daily Monitor, 2023; The New Vision, 2023). Moreover, all the various government sponsorship schemes for HE put together, including the loan scheme, the government is able to fund only 10,000 students (7%) in the various HEIs out of the 140,000 students that qualify for HE annually (Parliament of Uganda, 2024b). Thus, in this article the construct of a ‘perfect storm’ is construed as a situation in Uganda’s HE system whereby a high cost of HE is coinciding with increasing demand for HE and characterized by high levels of graduate unemployment.

Academic Staff Shortages

The liberalisation of HE in Uganda and its rapid expansion both “horizontally and vertically” (Nawangwe, et al., 2021, p.3) has increasingly set off complex and significant challenges to the sector, including the acute shortage of academic staff (Kabunga, 2020). Although HEIs in the country have significantly grown, the number of qualified faculty has not grown in tandem. For instance, by 2022, there were 1,817 academic staff with PhDs in all the 54 universities in Uganda (NCHE, 2022). Table 1 shows the profile of academic staff in the various HEIs in 2021.

Table 1: Respondents’ Distribution and Sampling Techniques

Category	PhDs			Masters			Others*	Grand
	Male	Fem	Total	Male	Fem	Total	Total	Total
University	1,390	427	1,817	2,880	1,348	4,228	1,709	7,754
ODAs	65	21	86	158	64	222	140	448
Agriculture/ Fisheries/ Forestry	1	0	1	21	6	27	62	90
Health	5	1	6	76	31	107	713	826
Technical Colleges/ Survey & Land Mgt.	1	0	1	20	2	22	406	429
National Teachers’ Colleges	1	1	2	60	28	88	351	441
Theology	23	2	25	110	30	140	114	279
Business/ Management/ Social Dev’t & Co-ops	20	1	21	180	71	251	1,316	1,588
ICT & Media	1	1	2	13	4	17	131	150
Hotel & Tourism	0	0	0	7	2	9	51	60
Art & Design	3	0	3	12	7	19	29	51
Others	0	1	1	7	1	8	39	48
Grand Total	1,510	455	1,965	3,544	1,594	5,138	5,061*	12,164

* includes Postgraduate diplomas, bachelors, diplomas and some unspecified qualifications

Source: National Council for Higher Education (2022).

Over 70 percent of the academic staff holding PhDs are found in the 10 public universities and accordingly “over 80 percent of academic

staff at the ranks of Associate professors and above are found in public universities” (Nawangwe et al., 2021, p.7). The country’s oldest and flagship university, Makerere university alone accounts the highest number of academic staff (about 75%) holding PhDs (MAK-RIF, 2020) and over “80 percent of the country’s full professors and senior researchers” (Nawangwe et al., 2021, p.8). In total, there were 1,965 academic staff holding PhDs and 5,161 holding master’s degree reported in the entire HE sector. Of these, 1,817 representing 92.5% were in the university sub-category while 4.4% were under ODAs while other sub sectors had negligible proportions (NCHE, 2022).

The shortage of academic staff with PhDs explains why at the end of 2021, NCHE had accredited only 361 programmes in the 54 universities. Out of these programmes, while 28 (7.8%) were at the PhD level, the masters, bachelors and diplomas were 18%, 42.7% and 17.2% respectively (NCHE, 2022). Further, the shortage of academic staff holding PhDs creates another alarming situation in the HE sector where “there are 107 students to one PhD holder irrespective of the professional area of specialisation and the overall availability of PhD holders to overall student population in HE is 135 students to one PhD holder” (NCHE, 2022, p.34). Thus given the limited number of professors, associate professors, and senior academic staff at the level of PhDs, mentorship and supervision of students particularly doctoral students remain cumbersome and draining (Edoru and Adebayo, 2022).

Current Challenges of the Higher Education Sector

Challenges facing Uganda’s HE sector are multidimensional and mutually reinforcing and include low research output and publications, limited lecture room space, small and ill-equipped libraries particularly in private HEIs, inadequate and ill-equipped laboratories with mostly outdated facilities and equipment, few and small office space shared by academic staff (NCHE, 2022). This section delves into these challenges highlighting some promising policy interventions.

The Financial Conundrum

The discussion on financing HE in Uganda is vacillating. On one hand, HEIs, especially public ones, consistently bemoan limited government funding and subsidies, poor staff remuneration (Kibaliwandu and Mwesigye, 2022; Kimoga, 2021; Lam-Lagoro and Okello, 2023; NCHE, 2022; Tibendarana, 2013) and deficient facilities and equipment (Edoru and Adebayo, 2022). On the other hand, government has frequently blamed public HEIs of financial mismanagement, underutilisation

and misappropriation of funds, and lack of transparency (Parliament of Uganda, 2024). This funding scenario have thwarted the ability of universities to effectively execute their mandate, “hardened accessibility to public institutions by many qualifying students” (Kimoga, 2021, p.2) and prompted public HEIs to regularly raise tuition and other fees to fill the diminishing government funding. Consequently, many qualifying students find it difficult to access HE which may also explain the high dropout rates in Ugandan universities (Kasozi, 2020; UNESCO, 2020).

Moreover, the limited funding incapacitates the ability of universities to deliver on their mission as recruitment and retention of qualified staff becomes a big challenge, triggering brain-drain (Nakijoba, and Ayodeji, 2022). It is worth noting that the budgetary deficits put these institutions in a feeble position and thus subservient to major funding agencies and donors who usually dictate the research agenda creating a threat to academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Similarly, HEIs also face challenges of integrating technologies in the teaching and learning processes (Bwire et al. 2020); unclear institutional philosophies, vision and mission (Kaguhangire-Barifaijo et al. 2021; NCHE, 2022); limited interaction between industry and business; and a disconnect with their communities (Mugisha, 2022) thus risking the provision of curricular untailored to societal needs.

Notwithstanding, some promising strides have been made by the government to promote research and innovation mainly in public universities. For instance, in 2019 the government introduced the Research and Innovation Fund (RIF), whose major aim is to advance research and innovations that address key development agenda, particularly those unfunded priorities critical to accelerating development across different sectors of the economy (Adong, et. al, 2023). This fund has seen the establishment of institutionalized research funds in the ten public universities which include the Makerere University Research and Innovation Fund (Mak-RIF), Busitema University Research and Innovation Fund (BU-RIF), Mountains of the Moon University Research and Innovation Fund (MMU-RIF), Kyambogo University Research and Innovation Fund (KyU-RIF), among others. Through the support of RIF, a number of projects and research breakthroughs have been realized in the various public universities particularly in the fields of science, technology, engineering, agriculture, and education. Although funding to RIF remains meagre, the fund creates optimism and indicates the importance and support that government attaches to HE research and innovations to contribute to national transformation.

Resilience Amidst Autocracy

HEIs must operate in an environment that respects academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Following frequent student unrest and staff industrial action, the government established military camps in some public universities, including Kyambogo and Makerere (Uganda Radio Network, 2017), which still exist to date, ostensibly to help support the regular police posts in these institutions. Moreover, overt and covert state intelligence and security operatives masquerading as students attend lectures creating fear and tension on campus which undermines academic dialogues (Makara and Wang, 2023).

It should be noted that in a country like Uganda where the political history has been characterized by military coups, guerrilla warfare and autocratic regimes (Karugire, 1980; Museveni 2016; Mutibwa, 2008; Muwanga, 2005; Nsibambi, 2014; Seftel, 1994), it is not surprising that HEIs remain subservient to their governments. For instance, in 2013 when academics at Makerere University demanded the improvement of their working conditions and salary increases and subsequently went into a strike, the Ministry of Public Service was directed not to pay salaries until they returned to work—a stand-off that lasted close to three months.

Further, both private and public HEIs often find themselves operating in an environment where government and politicians interfere in their decision-making as well as the mandate and decisions of the National Council for Higher Education (Ssentamu, 2018), which makes licensing, and external monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of institutions, and accreditation of programmes challenging. This is partly because some of the HEIs are owned by prominent politicians or those close to the political establishment and thus use their power and influence to dictate the decision-making processes in these HEIs, oftentimes contrary to the established policy and legal frameworks that are meant to regulate and direct these institutions. Thus, it is not surprising that whenever the NCHC exerts its authority and enforces laws and regulations on non-compliant HEIs or even close them, some of these HEIs involve the political elites or even “Courts of law to stop Council from closing non-compliant HEIs” (Ssentamu, 2018, p.6).

Geopolitical Dynamics

As the new era of geopolitics takes shape (Trilokekar, 2022), HEIs are particularly prone to these geopolitical dynamics (Moscovitz and Sabzalieva, 2023). Whilst geopolitics is often discussed in terms of

nation states, its theatrics are also played by multinational corporations (MNCs); Non-Government Organisations (NGOs); HEIs; international organisations and research funders (Hartmann, 2021).

Marginson (2025) submits that geopolitical relations in HE are often more collaborative than are political, military, and economic relations between states. However, this article argues that given the nature of HE and its cardinal mandate, philosophy and values of academic freedom and institutional autonomy, using outright uncouth geopolitical approaches would certainly not be effective in meeting the intended objectives of the geopolitical players. Thus such cooperative geopolitics is aimed (at least in a subtle manner) to cajole and woo HEIs and probably national governments to the side of the global power where such research funders or organisations originate from, thereby maintaining and consolidating the hegemony of global geopolitical players. This is usually international funders and donors using soft power in form of so-called experts and research-grant organisations to fund certain researches in selected HEIs thereby indirectly setting the research agenda.

In Uganda, the Confucius Institute was established in 2014 at Makerere university and programmes such as Bachelors of Chinese Language and Asian Studies are being offered. Similarly, Russia providing funding to some Ugandan primary, and secondary schools as well as tertiary institutions to teach the Russian language and Russian culture (Kosyanova, et al., 2023).

Following the fallout from the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) sanctions on North Korea, a number of universities, including Kyambogo and Kampala International, lost a significant number of North Korean professors and consultants (New Vision, 2017). As a result, Kyambogo university had to prematurely terminate all the contracts with North Koreans which then prompted the university leadership to seek substitutes from Cuba (Katunguka, 2018).

Conclusion and Propositions

There has been a general apathy for education in general and HE in particular due to leadership and governance deficiency. However, the government attempts to revitalize the sector largely driven by regional, continental and global pressures to put it at the forefront of development agenda. Such regional and continental regimes include African Union’s Agenda 2063; East African Vision 2050; United Nations Sustainable

Development Goals (SDGs) particularly SDG4, which have also been domesticated in the development policy imperatives such as Uganda Vision 2040; the Third National Development Plan (NDP III) and now the Fourth National Development Plan (NDP IV).

Uganda's HE landscape could be described as being affected by internal and external networks. The internal relates to leadership and governance dysfunctionality characterized by corruption; limited state funding; and lacking political ideologies. Within the HEIs themselves, the internal network relates to unclear institutional philosophies, vision and mission; limited interaction between HEIs and industry/labour market, coupled with disengagement with their communities. On the other hand, the external network relates to geopolitical tensions; skewed and hegemonic international dynamics.

It is thus important to call the country's political elites to develop a nuanced understanding with its own noblesse oblige, and an appreciation of HE as both the fulcrum and pivot without which all other sectors cannot stand. More specifically, the government should scale up funding for research and consolidate the training of PhDs to bolster research productivity in HEIs. Further, there is need for HEIs to rethink their construct of internationalisation of HE to establish robust international collaborations and partnerships developed on the basis of reciprocity and mutuality.

The article further recommends that the academic community initiate and become more engaged in the political debate and policy-making processes regarding HE. Therefore, academics in HEIs should increase their visibility not only in academic works in peer-reviewed journals but also in national matters specifically those that relate to education in general and higher education in particular.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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