

The fallacy of irrelevant university courses

Last week, President Museveni returned to one of his predictable pet subjects – the courses universities teach.

In remarks delivered for him by Vice President Jessica Alupo at Lira University's graduation, the President yet again called out 'irrelevant' courses. He did not elaborate, but anyone who has followed the debate knows what he meant.

For avoidance of doubt, Mr Museveni's long-standing stance is that universities in Uganda, and arguably across Africa, given his avowed Pan-African inclinations, shouldn't waste time teaching humanities and social sciences or, more broadly, the arts. Instead, he wants higher education institutions to focus on sciences, again broadly conceived. This is an old debate I have written about here before, so there is an ad nauseam danger, but it's worth another take.

I must declare my conflict of interest, upfront. I teach at a university for a living, also as a matter of professional passion and deep interest. I work in the disciplines that Mr Museveni construes as 'irrelevant courses', ironically, what he too studied at the University of Dar es Salaam!

Admittedly, I am biased, though I believe I can address this matter objectively and constructively. The reader can then judge. I want to make three arguments to counter Mr Museveni's mistaken notion of 'irrelevant' courses. First, the binary divide between relevant (science) and irrelevant (arts) courses is false, utterly misleading. It's not either/or, it's both and beyond. A properly educated graduate should have knowledge transcending one narrow discipline.

In Euro-American colleges and universities, students in natural sciences are required to take arts classes. Many who ultimately specialise in arts or social sciences like economics, literature, politics, sociology, anthropology, etc., start out in their first year taking classes in math, Chemistry, Biology, etc. It's common to graduate with a double-major in Biology and Literature!

Second, the charge of irrelevance turns on employability and 'marketability'. The President

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Moses Khisa
Majority Report



is adamant we need scientists to power Uganda's prosperity. He also seems to suggest, albeit without evidence, that science courses guarantee employment, are in sync with market demand.

I say he makes this argument without evidence because we don't have any reliable and credible national jobs data showing trends in employment across disciplines/fields of education, and no monthly/annual job hiring data with systematic sectoral breakdown.

There is no empirical basis to claim, for example, that a graduate of Chemistry easily gets a job than one who earns a degree in Literature. My hunch is that unemployment and limited job openings is a problem for all university graduates across education backgrounds and disciplinary specialisations.

One common refrain repeated a million times about Uganda's education is that it produces job-seekers, not creators. In today's Uganda, however, there is little basis to conclude that math graduates create jobs while those of economics or sociology don't. Starting a small business or working in a company in ways that expand employment opportunities for others is less a function of one's degree/diploma course, more a result of Uganda's underlying economic fundamentals and the social environment.

We have a miniscule private sector whose employment capacity doesn't match the labour supply, regardless of the degree courses of graduates. Mr Museveni has not produced evidence, for example, showing high demand for

science graduates in any sector and little supply of the same from universities.

In the broader scheme of things, every society but especially an underdeveloped one like ours, no doubt, needs vocational and technical training in specific areas. But there is no shortage of vocational and technical colleges in Uganda, yet it is highly unlikely that their graduates easily get jobs or are meaningfully and productively self-employed.

Third, there is a fundamental misunderstanding of the value and meaning of university education. If attaining usable technical skills needed for accomplishing specific tasks was the primary or exclusive goal, we shouldn't have universities; instead, everyone attends vocational and technical colleges! Simple.

Better, a secondary education and graduating high school, at the very maximum, would be enough for anyone to get a job because, in nearly every profession, the so-called practical skills and technical knowledge are attained through apprenticeship and on-the-job training. Contrary to the hype and marketing gimmickry about 'practical training,' tertiary and university education does not mechanically confer ready-to-use skills from the classroom.

Rather than specific skills, regardless of what one studies, the crux of a university education is to attain intellectual liberation, to gain the independence of mind and ability to think for oneself, be perceptive in understanding problems, and creatively devising solutions even without having applicable technical knowledge.

The value of a university degree is not reducible to a job one gets or does not. Once out of the halls of a university and the hallowed site of campus space, what matters is not what someone studies, rather, whether the university experience equipped them to think and do. For evidence, a certain graduate of political science organised a fighting group that took him to State power in 1986, has since ruled Uganda uninterrupted for 40 years, and still counting!

moses.khisa@gmail.com