

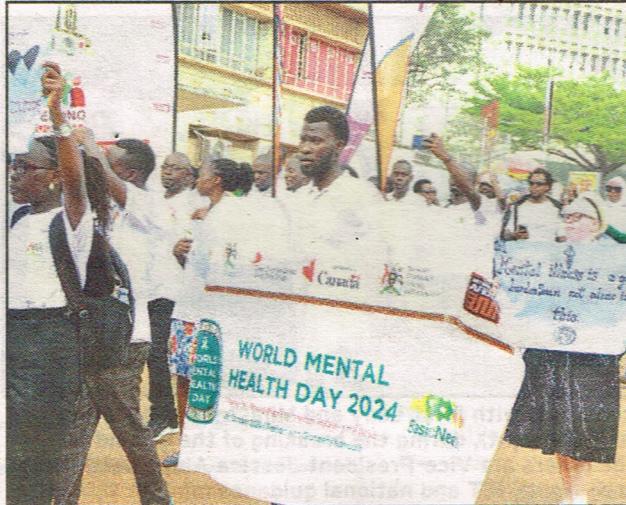
Prioritise mental health in higher education



OPINION ALLAN TURYASINGURA

As Uganda's universities grow, diversify, and take on increasingly larger student populations, the emotional and psychological pressures on learners have deepened. The mental well-being of students is directly tied to academic performance, employability, university retention rates, and the long-term productivity of the country. A higher education system cannot meaningfully contribute to development if the mental state of its learners is neglected.

For many young people, joining university marks their first significant step into



Youth marching for mental health awareness on World Mental Health Day in Kampala on October 25, 2024

adulthood. They must adjust to new learning environments, manage independence, handle increased responsibilities, and meet expectations from home and society.

The modern academic environment is fast-paced and competitive, leaving little room for rest. In addition, rising tuition fees, housing costs, and general living expenses add

a heavy financial burden that amplifies stress.

Social media, while useful for networking and learning, exposes students to cyberbullying, through comparison culture, and pressure to maintain a "perfect" image. These combined can lead to anxiety, depression, burnout, substance abuse, and in extreme cases, self-harm.

INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES

One significant challenge is the limited availability of mental health services. Some universities have counselling units, but many are understaffed, under-resourced, or not well-publicised. In other cases, counselling is treated as a one-time session rather than a continuous support system.

Also, many students suffer silently; stigma, lack of information, and fear of judgment prevent them from seeking help.

ROAD TO RECOVERY

Mental health must be treated as both an academic and administrative priority. Institutions need to adopt strategic, long-term measures that address well-being comprehensively.

First, universities should invest in well-resourced counselling departments staffed with trained mental health professionals. These units must be visible, confidential, and easily accessible to students.

Secondly, mental health education should be embedded

within the university experience. Orientation programmes should include awareness sessions, equipping students with knowledge on stress management, emotional intelligence, time management, and resilience.

Integrating life skills education within the curriculum can also help learners develop coping mechanisms that will serve them long after graduation.

Another key pillar is policy development. Universities should craft clear mental health policies aligned with national health guidelines. Such policies must outline prevention, intervention, and referral strategies. A structured policy framework ensures accountability and continuity, regardless of changes in leadership or staffing.

Peer support systems are equally important. Student guilds, clubs, and associations can play a major role by promoting awareness, organising wellness campaigns, and offering safe spaces for sharing experiences. Trained peer counsellors can help

identify early signs of distress and connect students to professional services.

Partnerships also present an opportunity for progress. Universities can collaborate with hospitals, community health organisations, and national agencies to strengthen support networks. These collaborations can help standardise mental health services across institutions and provide additional resources when needed.

As we re-imagine the future of higher education, mental health must move from the sidelines to the centre of institutional policy and practice. When students feel supported, valued, and understood, their potential flourishes not just academically, but in every aspect of life. A mentally healthy student population is not just a university concern, it is a national asset.

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