

Why investment in education is critical in national transformation

Without investment in education, there can be no national transformation. It doesn't matter how many new jobs there are if some Ugandans lack the education needed for the jobs. Therefore, 2025 marked two equally important milestones for Uganda: First, we transitioned from a least developed economy to a lower-middle-income economy.

Second, Makerere University (once again) topped the prestigious Times Higher Education World University Rankings for the best University in East Africa. Why do I equate the ranking of our entire economy with that of our national university? The two are inextricably intertwined. Uganda's economic transition was projected by the United Nations (UN) a year before President Museveni announced it.

A UN report noted that we had met the requirements to be categorised as a lower-middle income economy – specifically, significant improvements in the population's health, income and – most importantly – education. Education is the most important of the three simply because without it, you can't have the other two.

Health has improved because education has improved. More Ugandans can become doctors than ever before and as a result, Ugandans are now living longer than ever before. We are less reliant on the trickle of foreign non-governmental organisations and aid workers than we used to be. Similarly, Ugandan incomes have improved because education has improved. The world is changing. We are now in what some call the digital age; others, the fourth industrial revolution. There are jobs and entire industries today that simply didn't exist in your parents' time and which require their own unique training and skillsets. More Ugandans are getting the requisite education in computer programming, building websites and developing apps and so incomes are going up.

Moreover, it is not just that today's Ugandans are facing an entirely new set of jobs. The traditional jobs are still there; they are just evolving in line with the times:



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Take farming, for example. Uganda is a primarily agriculture-based economy and most Ugandans are employed in the sector. But the world is changing and so are farming trends. You may well know how to cultivate cassava, rear chickens or grow coffee. But do you have the technical knowledge to industrialise your operations, so you can grow more efficiently, cost-effectively and at the scale required, if you are selling internationally? Do you know anything about global trade and new market entry? Uganda is currently seeking to industrialise its agriculture sector and grow its agricultural exports. From building to operating to maintaining the machines, this creates countless new jobs, but do you have the education to do them?

Today, thanks to our investments in education, more Ugandans than ever before can answer "yes." But there are still too many that are being left behind.

All too often, foreigners must come into our country to do the jobs Ugandans simply don't have the education or training to do, be it working in a factory, as an engineer

on our oil pipeline project, processing our coffee, or even being a doctor.

As a graduate of Makerere University, I know the benefits and opportunities a first-class education can bring. But education doesn't start at university.

To get into a good university, you need to get into a good secondary school and to get into a good secondary school you need a good primary education.

While Uganda's education gains are undeniable, it would be misleading to suggest that the work is complete.

Significant disparities in access and quality persist, especially in rural areas, where, despite Universal Primary Education and Universal Secondary Education, hidden costs still exclude vulnerable children, while skills mismatches at the post-secondary level leave some graduates ill-prepared for the demands of a modernising economy.

Confronting these weaknesses is necessary to protect – not weaken – the progress achieved. Greater emphasis is going to be placed on quality, relevance and equity: Improving teaching standards, continuing to prioritise technical and vocational education and aligning training more closely with Uganda's industrialisation and export ambitions. By matching investment with reforms, education will fully sustain the country's economic transition and deliver shared prosperity.

That is why we are investing trillions of shillings to promote science, technology and innovation at our universities; investing in building education infrastructure; investing in government sponsorships and scholarship programmes and why we are investing in other initiatives to help youths up-skill and start businesses.

This is why both government and private universities have increased and are quickly developing. And that is why our economy is moving up the rankings as well.

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