

Several universities are implementing three-term academic calendars to address the urgent national challenge of preparing graduates for the workforce.

BY SYLVIA NAMAGEMBE

For many graduates in Uganda, holding a degree doesn't automatically translate to landing their ideal job. To enhance their chances of employment, they need to develop both hard and soft skills.

In light of the current crisis, several universities are implementing three-term academic calendars to address the urgent national challenge of preparing graduates for the workforce.

While the proposed trimester arrangement has previously surfaced in education policy discussions, it has gained renewed attention from institutions arguing that shorter, modular terms allow students to gain practical experience alongside academic study.

Private institutions have been quicker to adopt this three-term system. Victoria University, for instance, has operated a trimester calendar for three years, framing it as a solution to graduate unemployment and skills mismatch.

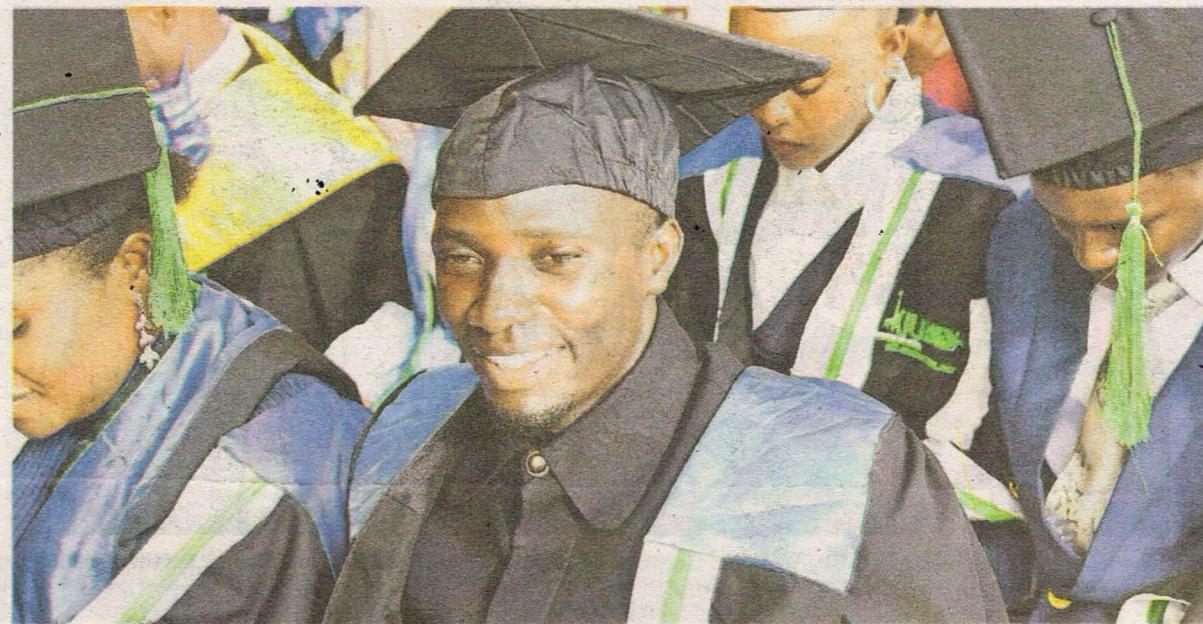
"We moved away from the two-semester system a year ago and adopted a three-term system with the aim not to overload students with many courses at once, but to allow them to study, work, and gain experience at the same time," Dr Lawrence Muganga, the vice chancellor of Victoria University, says.

Under the system, students take a maximum of two modules per month, attending about 15 hours of class per week before sitting examinations at the end of each unit. The remaining time is deliberately left open for students to work, volunteer or engage in experiential learning.

"By the time a student finishes three years, they have a degree and nearly three years of work experience. Students graduate with certificates, but employers want experience, yet the system keeps them in class Monday to Saturday for years," he adds.

He argues that the trimester model

Trimester shift: New push for work-ready graduates



Graduands attend KIU's graduation ceremony in Kampala in 2023. PHOTO/FILE

supports Uganda's shift toward competence-based education, which emphasises practical skills over content memorisation.

"In a trimester system, students study three times a year, and each module is completed within a few weeks, with exams at the end of each unit," Dr Muganga says, adding: "This is different from the traditional semester system, where students study six course units over 15 to 18 weeks and then take all exams at the end of the semester. The trimester allows students to focus on one or two modules intensively, complete them, and move on."

The Kampala International University (KIU) has also experimented with modular scheduling. The vice chancellor, Prof Muhammed Ngoma, says the system encourages punctuality.

"Students know that if they miss the first weeks, they risk missing the entire course unit. So, they report on time, which ensures steady coverage," he says.

While demanding, Prof Ngoma says it allows better learning outcomes

UNEMPLOYMENT RATE

With national unemployment hovering at 13 percent and graduate joblessness at 15.2 percent as pegged by the 2024 National Population and Housing Census, institutions are rethinking academic timetables to better equip students.

and lecturer productivity. "Lecturers teach a module, examine it, and then have space to focus on research or other courses. Students, meanwhile, gain a sense of completion as they finish each unit without having to retain everything for months," he says.

However, he acknowledges operational challenges remain a limitation.

"If a university has too many programmes or a large student population, designing a timetable that fits within a trimester-modular system can be difficult. It requires careful planning to

ensure lecturers and students are not overburdened," Prof Ngoma explains.

Mary Atim, a second-year student at Kyambogo University says: "Three terms a year sounds intense where you would have to focus on one or two courses at a time, which is good for understanding the material. But having exams so frequently and paying fees three times a year could be stressful if you don't have money on time."

In contrast, Peter Lule, a first-year engineering student at Kyambogo University, welcomed the system.

"I actually find it easier to grasp one course unit at a time. Studying fewer modules each month means you can focus, complete the exams, and move on without having to remember everything for months. It's intense, but it makes learning manageable," he says.

Despite these changes, educationists warn that calendar changes alone will not address higher education challenges. Mr Fagil Mandy, an education expert, says the focus should instead be on curriculum content and relevance.

"I think what we should be spending time on now is content. It is not about the timing of the university calendar but rather what students are being taught and how that content prepares them for the world of work," he says, adding that industrial training and university attachments remain poorly evaluated and implemented.

He also warns that automation and artificial intelligence could worsen the skills gap. "Machines are taking over many tasks. So what will a graduate with little skill and little innovation do? That is a crisis," Mr Mandy adds.

He advises that universities should invest more in developing students' natural intelligence through critical thinking, creativity and adaptability rather than relying on structural changes.

At the policy level, the Education ministry says universities have autonomy to adopt different academic calendars, provided they meet quality standards.

"Before you implement a programme, you submit it for accreditation to the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE), indicating how it will be delivered. What is critical is that by the end of the course, students have completed all the units approved under that programme. Whether it is two semesters or three, the total learning outcomes must be the same," Ms Kedrace Turyagayenda, the PS of the Education ministry, says.

Ms Turyagayenda confirms that the flexibility of the trimester arrangement has expanded access to higher education.

Makerere University, however, has not adopted this, citing infrastructure and financial constraints. The academic registrar, Prof Buyinza Mukadasi, says although adopting trimesters offers faster completion of coverage, admissions can occur multiple times a year, and learning can become intensive.

"Makerere wanted to adopt it but we haven't. Universities must evaluate infrastructure, staffing, and curriculum distribution to ensure students are adequately challenged without redundancy, and that staff workloads are balanced," he says.