

Free vocational education is timely intervention

THE announcement of the Government's plan to make vocational education free for all learners is a timely intervention to curb the high rate of youth unemployment. Commissioning the new Uganda Vocational and Technical Assessment Board headquarters on Friday, the First Lady and Minister of Education and Sports, Mrs Janet Museveni, said the Government has committed to roll out a free access programme at the Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) level for all Ugandans who wish to enrol. This is necessary for millions of young people locked out of meaningful work despite years spent in classrooms. For nearly three decades, Universal Primary Education has increased access to basic schooling and lifted literacy levels nationwide. Yet education without employable skills has produced a paradox of a youthful, educated population with limited opportunities. Each year, hundreds of thousands of young Ugandans join the labour market, but the formal economy cannot absorb many of them. The 2024 national populationa census revealed that over 51% of young people (15-29 years) were neither in employment nor



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in education or training, literally meaning that more than half are unemployed. The result is frustration and wasted potential. Therefore, free vocational education will offer a practical path out of this trap.

As a country, we do not suffer from a shortage of work; we suffer from a shortage of skilled hands. Skills training

directly addresses the mismatch between education and jobs. Construction, manufacturing, agriculture, oil and gas, transport, and small-scale industry all require artisans, technicians and technologists. By removing tuition and assessment costs in TVET, the Government will be removing the biggest barrier that has kept poor but capable youth out of skills training.

The success of the 19 presidential skilling hubs, which have graduated over 82,000 young people in three years, proves the point. These are not waiting for office jobs. Many are self-employed. Scaling this impact nationally through free TVET could transform livelihoods, especially in rural areas where unemployment and underemployment are most severe.

However, access alone is not enough. The Government must match free training with adequate investment in infrastructure, trainers, equipment and student welfare. It is obvious that demand will surge once fees are removed. Without careful planning, overcrowding and compromised quality could undermine the objective of free training.