

Makerere University vice-chancellor Barnabas Nawangwe said the institution has, since 2010, embraced competence-based education through student projects and continuous assessment.

He noted that transitioning from traditional teaching models was initially challenging, but the university senate and council approved sweeping curriculum reforms to incorporate both coursework and final examinations. This shift required extensive retraining of lecturers to align with the new approach.

Prof. Nawangwe said the emphasis on practical learning, internships and projects makes graduates more marketable, with many creating their own jobs. He urged parents to prioritise institutions that equip students with employable skills and entrepreneurial capacity.

However, Nawangwe acknowledged that implementing competence-based learning requires significant investment in laboratories, workshops and teaching materials, supported by both the Government and development partners.

INNOVATION DRIVE IN UNIVERSITIES FRUSTRATED BY FUNDING GAPS

PHOTO BY LAWRENCE MULONDO



Okwakol (left) with Mao (centre) and NCHE's director of quality assurance and accreditation, Dr Vincent Ssembatya (right), during the seventh annual higher education conference at Acholi Inn, Gulu city yesterday

Prof. Kwesiga also proposed the creation of a dedicated fund to support exceptionally talented innovators.

NCHE executive director Prof. Mary Okwakol said open, distance and e-Learning systems played a key role in ensuring continuity of education during the COVID-19 lockdowns and have since expanded access to higher education.

MAO CALLS FOR COLLABORATION

The Minister of Justice and Constitutional Affairs, Norbert Mao, who officiated as guest of honour, said the strength of Uganda's higher education system is closely linked to its national development agenda.

He emphasised the need for universities to produce graduates who are not only knowledgeable but also innovative, ethical and responsive to societal needs.

Mao called for stronger collaboration between academia, the Government, industry and communities.

"Every year we hear about the number of graduates produced, but we now want to hear about innovators, researchers and industrial leaders," the justice minister said.

He stressed that innovation in higher education is no longer optional but essential in a rapidly changing world shaped by technological advancement, shifting labour markets and global challenges.

By Lawrence Mulondo

Limited funding for research and innovation is increasingly frustrating efforts by institutions of higher learning to drive economic transformation, the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) has revealed.

Despite growing recognition of the importance of innovation, many universities remain constrained by inadequate financial support, leaving promising ideas undeveloped and uncommercialised.

Speaking at the opening of the seventh annual higher education conference at Acholi Inn in Gulu city yesterday, NCHE chairperson Prof. Joy Constance Kwesiga said universities were striving to promote innovation among students but were being hindered by insufficient investment in research and development.

LACK OF RESOURCES

She explained that many institutions lack the resources needed to establish and maintain laboratories, incubation centres and prototyping facilities, as well as to support intellectual property protection and commercialisation processes.

As a result, innovation ecosystems within universities remain underdeveloped.

"In many higher education institutions, funding is still largely allocated to teaching and administration, leaving little for research and innovation," she said, noting that this imbalance contributes to a mismatch between skills acquired in universities and the demands of the labour market.

However, she pointed out that a weak link between academia and industry continues to

limit the impact of research. Much of the work produced in universities, she said, remains theoretical and disconnected from market needs.

EMPLOYABILITY INNOVATIONS

"We must ensure that innovation translates into employability, productivity and wealth creation," she said, calling for stronger partnerships between academia, industry, the Government and international collaborators.

She also observed that donors increasingly prefer working with consortiums, enabling institutions to benefit from economies of scale. At the same

time, she assured stakeholders that the NCHE is committed to strengthening quality assurance frameworks that support, rather than stifle, innovation.

Prof. Kwesiga added that the council is promoting curriculum reforms that emphasise practical skills, entrepreneurship and problem-solving, in line with competence-based education.

Prof. Kwesiga underscored the importance of applied research in addressing Uganda's development challenges and revealed that the council is working to improve institutional governance systems to enhance accountability and

performance.

Despite these efforts, she acknowledged that financial constraints remains the biggest barrier.

"The key to addressing these challenges is finance," she said, calling for increased investment in laboratories, well-equipped incubation centres and support systems for innovators.

She urged the Government to address what she described as gross underfunding of the higher education sector, particularly public universities, while also developing strategies such as competitive innovation funds to support private institutions.