

# ACADEMIA URGED TO WORK WITH INFORMAL SECTOR INNOVATORS

PHOTO BY LAWRENCE MULONDO

By Lawrence Mulondo

University leaders have been urged to strengthen partnerships with industry as a critical step toward building vibrant innovation ecosystems and accelerating economic transformation.

Speaking during the second day of the seventh Higher Education Conference at Acholi Inn, in Gulu city on Tuesday, Dr Medard Twinamatsiko, Director of the Centre for Innovations and Technology Transfer at Mbarara University of Science and Technology, said collaboration between academia and industry is essential to ensure research addresses real-world challenges.

## KEY COLLABORATION

Twinamatsiko noted that while universities are increasingly viewed as engines of innovation, their partnerships with industry remain underdeveloped.

He said the private sector is often not sufficiently incentivised to participate in



(L-R) Prof. John Kitayimbwa the deputy vice Chancellor of academics at Uganda Christian University (UCU) with Twinamatsiko and David Mugabe the deputy vice chancellor finance at (UCU) during the conference

university programmes, yet such collaboration is key to enhancing the relevance of research and innovation.

“These partnerships drive technology transfer, promote knowledge exchange and create opportunities for joint research, internships, student placements and support for technology transfer offices,” Twinamatsiko said.

He also called for strategic public-private partnerships,

including joint ventures and collaborative financing models, to support innovation and commercialisation.

## HANDS-ON LEARNING

Twinamatsiko cited the example of quarterly engagement forums, or barazas, at Mbarara University, where industry players are invited to share innovation challenges. “At present, students spend considerable

time developing innovations through these programmes, yet their efforts are not recognised within formal curricula. This must change,” he said, adding that the model has proven successful in Europe and North America.

At Mbarara University, he revealed, five micro-credential courses are undergoing accreditation by the Uganda Vocational and Technical Assessment Board, with plans to roll them out to enhance graduates’ employability.

## MARKET-RELEVANT SKILLS

David Okello Owiny, the deputy vice chancellor of Gulu University, stressed the need for increased and dedicated public investment in research.

He noted that universities rely heavily on external funding and called for ring-fenced government support to strengthen research capacity and enable evidence-based national development.

Meanwhile, the executive director of the National Council for Higher Education, Prof. Mary Okwakol, described

innovation as the cornerstone of sustainable development. She said countries that achieve rapid transformation invest in knowledge creation, creativity, and the practical application of ideas. “Innovation drives industrialisation, enhances competitiveness and creates opportunities for inclusive growth,” she said.

Okwakol revealed that in December 2025, the council signed a memorandum of understanding with the Private Sector Foundation Uganda to promote market-relevant skills, research commercialisation and private sector collaboration.

Stephen Asiimwe, the executive director of the Private Sector Foundation Uganda, echoed concerns about weak linkages between academia and industry, citing information gaps and limited co-ordination.

He said the private sector, which contributes the bulk of government tax revenue, is ready to support universities through funding linkages and collaborative projects.

## INFORMAL SECTOR

Dr Ezra Muhumuza, the executive director of Uganda Manufacturers Association, emphasised the need to reorient education towards industrial competence. He noted that industry prioritises efficiency, productivity and practical skills over academic credentials alone. “Give us people who can deliver results, not just large numbers of graduates,” he said, urging universities to work more closely with informal sector innovators, particularly those in hubs, such as Katwe.

He observed that many grassroots innovators are developing practical solutions, but lack support from academic institutions to refine and commercialise their ideas.