Role of private universities: Ankole Western University making a positive difference

This Saturday August 24, education enthusiasts and well-wishers of Ankole Western University (AWU) will descend on the university’s grounds on Kabwohe Hill, 32Km along the Masaka–Fort-Portal road in Sheema district, to fundraise for the institution’s latest infrastructure target – a four storey facility that will advance the process of acquiring a charter for the university.

Initially founded as Ankole Western Technical Institute in 2005, the institution had by 2016 been upgraded to near university status and was the following year awarded a provisional licence to operate as a university by the National Council for Higher Education, pending the acquisition of a full university charter.

At a time when the country is grappling with the skills gap in its human resource that is exacerbating the problem of unemployment, especially in our young people, AWU’s particular focus on skills training for its graduates and community responsive programmes is commendable.

Agriculture is the main economic activity for Sheema and indeed the Greater Bushenyi area, and the university’s curriculum bears a strong agricultural imprint. Indeed, I was happy to learn that the President’s four-acre model which he has been championing around the country to get, especially subsistence households, into commercial production, is already being implemented at the university.

In addition to the various programmes it offers at bachelor’s, diploma and certificate level, including a Bachelor’s of Science in Agriculture and Entrepreneurship, the university runs a nearly five-acre demonstration farm, on which it rears cows, goats, pigs, rabbits and poultry. It also has fish ponds for fish farming and a big hive area where they do beekeeping.

On another section of the farm, the university has banana and coffee plantations, running side by side with a fruit farm bearing oranges, mangoes, pineapples and passion fruits.

In addition to providing practical training for students, these projects contribute to the university’s annual revenues and will over the years insulate the university from exclusively relying on student fees to finance its development programmes, consequently keeping education at the university affordable. Indeed, in its nearly 15 years of existence as both a tertiary institution and now as a university, AWU has not registered any student demonstration over tuition, like most of the other universities in the country.

On Saturday, the President will be the chief guest at the fundraiser. At the time when he has just concluded a countrywide campaign on wealth creation, this AWU approach that blends theoretical education with practical wealth-creation training will be a source of encouragement and validation for him.

Of course, AWU’s unique model can be traced back to the philosophical roots of its founding – it is the vision of the first Bishop of West Ankole Diocese, the Rt. Rev. Yoramu K. Bamunoba, who, together with other elders in the area-like the late Wilson Kanssime Ruhanga started seven secondary schools in the then Greater Bushenyi in the hope that they would in future serve as a foundation for skills-based tertiary institutions in the area and later a university. It is thus not surprising that the university continues to evolve along the same ethos it was dreamt and one must commend the generations of education leaders in the area for not losing the vision.

Nonetheless, it is a model that other schools and institutions of higher learning would do better to emulate. As Uganda marches towards attaining its middle-income vision of an industrialised and transformed society, the importance of a skilled human resource cannot be overemphasised. It is good news that AWU is fast reaching for all the requirements necessary for it to finally acquire a university charter. The four-storeyed block for which it will be fundraising on Saturday is expected to host a library, 10 lecture rooms, a computer laboratory and two science laboratories. Last year in December, the university opened a state-of-the-art resource centre in which they now offer a host of short courses.

The vice-chancellor, Dr Wilberforce Kamukama, a very brilliant and industrious academician, also told me that the university has signed a memorandum of understanding to build an institute of mineral science at the university, from which the university can produce additional skilled personnel for our mining sector. It is this deliberate capacity building not only in infrastructure, but also in technical competencies that make for a robust institution of higher learning. If AWU stays on course, which it certainly will, the sky is not even the limit.

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