



**MOSES KHISA > MAJORITY REPORT**

# The power of a university campus

**M**akerere University is my *alma mater*. It is a great institution that has produced many influential individuals. I don't count myself among its luminaries, but I am exceedingly proud to have gone through that institution.

Entering Makerere used to be priceless, a source of pride and empowerment. It didn't matter that one came from a poor background; at any rate, most who went to Makerere were from decidedly poor backgrounds. Today, the university is caught up in the maze and collective mess that we face as a country.

Last week, social media had a flurry of commentary about a young man, a fresher or call him first year student, reporting to his hall of residence with a metallic box that contained his belongings.

The initial posting of his picture was intended to mock and chide him for going to Uganda's premier university with such an ostensibly cheap, backward and unbecoming carrier rather than something fancier and supposedly appropriate.

The subsequent reaction was a swift pushback that sought to show solidarity with the young folk and let him know that what mattered was not what he was carrying, but what

was in his mind and what he aspired to be in life. This latter outpouring was deeply humbling and brought out the brighter side of our humanity.

It has been long since I first arrived at Makerere, so I don't quite recall what I had. It's very likely I too carried a metallic box. But I am sure I didn't enter Makerere as a child of rich parents, who had all the nice and luxurious things to boot. The bottom-line was that I had entered a critical institution that would, in due course, propel me to wherever I ended up going.

The fact that a lot of time went towards ridiculing and defending the new student bespeaks of the poverty of mind and the dearth of imagination that pervades Ugandan society.

It highlights the total lack of appreciation of what a university campus is supposed to mean in the life of a young person at the cusp of their social life. There is no other social institution that compares to a university in terms of shaping and structuring one's world view and persona.

It has become the case that many people look at the university with a simplistic yardstick as the place from where to collect 'practical skills' us-

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## **Metallic box is not the issue.**

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able for the job market.

To that, it appears now someone has added the bit of going to Makerere being the time to show that you are not poor!

Well, the rich in Uganda who are the rulers and their acquaintances or cronies in business do not take their children to Makerere. The rest of us who have gone through Makerere or are currently parents/guardians are a poor lot, financially though not necessarily intellectually.

The real power in a university experience, especially from a premier research university like Makerere, cannot be reduced to equipping students with 'relevant and usable skills.' Vocational schools and technical institutes are better suited to do what.

The mentality that sees skills as

what a university supplies is what leads to Makerere being run more along the lines of a herded secondary school than a truly university campus - the place for expression and experimentation, innovative thought and ground-breaking inventions.

More generally, the university is the place for intellectual emancipation by individuals in the formative stages of their adult lives looking ahead to careers and changing the world.

It is the time to learn to think deep and critically, form independent thoughts, question received wisdom and challenge orthodoxy, appreciate the value of the public good and demand better from those in authority.

The power of the university is not so much in what is taught as how the campus experience changes and impacts one's mindset and thought pattern. Whether one goes to Makerere barefoot or wearing super expensive designer shoes, whether it's a metallic box versus a leather suitcase - all count for nothing.

Does the person entering the university understand what a university is supposed to do in his or her life and what they should gain at the end of their many years as students?

**Dr Khisa is assistant professor at North Carolina State University (USA).  
moses.khisa@gmail.com**