Private Universities in Uganda: Issues and Challenges

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Purpose of the Study

Private universities have long been a central element of higher educational systems in various regions and countries in the world. The phenomenon is, however, a recent development in Sub-Saharan Africa where it only emerged in the 1990s following the implementation of neo-liberal policies after the economic crisis of the 1980s, which led to major reductions in funding for public universities (Banya, 2001; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2001) The purpose of this study was to investigate private universities in Uganda. Pertinent questions to be addressed were:

1. How are issues such as accreditation, governance, curriculum, funding, equity, and access handled?
2. What challenges do the universities face?

Research Methodology

This study was based on a qualitative methodology, which consisted of oral interviews of key informants and focus group discussions. In addition, secondary documents such as prospectus, promotional brochures, mission statements, and strategic plans were collected.

This study was conducted at four private universities in the northern and central parts of Uganda. It began on May 1, 2012 and ended on June 16, 2012, with a follow-up session between May of 2013 and June of 2014. In order to protect the identity of the institutions, random coded initials were assigned as follows: UNIK, UNIN, UNIL and ASUL. The four universities were chosen because they are representative of the whole spectrum of private universities in Uganda in terms of ownership, size and fees charged. Both UNIN and ASUL are owned by religious organizations while UNIL and UNIK are owned by private individual investors (all private universities in Uganda are either owned by private individual investors or religious organizations). In terms of size, UNIK and UNIN are two of the largest in terms of student's enrollment. There were 5,700 students enrolled in the respective universities in 2012. Each university had a main campus located in Kampala, the capital city; and two other smaller campuses—one in the eastern region, and the other in the southern regions of the country. UNIL, on the other hand, falls in the middle in terms of size. It has a main campus and had about 2,000 students enrolled in 2012. ASUL is the smallest with a very small campus when compared to the other three and had 200 students enrolled in 2012. As far as fees charged per academic year, which consists of two terms, ASUL charged the least of about $800, while UNIN charged the highest of about $1,200 in 2012.

The participants for this study consisted of 14 groups/clusters, drawn from students, faculty and administrative staff from the four universities as well as officials from the Ugandan Ministry of Education and Sports' department of higher education. The inclusion and selection criteria of potential participants were based on purposeful sampling. The participants in this study qualified as an appropriate sample, given their knowledge and experiences with private universities in Uganda.

The first part of the data collection process was composed of focus group discussions, with four student groups— one from each of the four universities selected, and each group being made up of ten students, for a total of 40 students. The selection of students was purposefully done from a class timetable. The second part of data collection consisted of a series of qualitative interviews. The participants for the interviews were composed of four groups of top level administrators—two from each university, for a total of eight. Four groups of faculty, five from each university, for a total of 20 and lastly, two officials from the Uganda Ministry of Education and Sports' department of higher education. The follow-up study consisted of qualitative interviews with participants that took part during the second part of the data collection phase.

Background

While the focus of this study is on private universities, it is imperative to make a brief mention of the education system in Uganda in order to put the study into perspective. The Ugandan educational system follows a 7-4-2-4 pattern—seven years of primary education, followed by four years of lower secondary or "Ordinary" level, two years of upper secondary or "Advanced" level, and a further four to five years of tertiary education. Tertiary education programs are comprised of universities, national teachers' colleges, colleges of commerce and technology, and other tertiary institutions that continue to be established. Degree programs are only offered at universities where students complete a four to five-year program with minimum standards. Other tertiary institutions offer diplomas and their programs usually last two to three years.

From 1894, the year Uganda was colonized by Britain until 1988, only one university, Makerere, which is a public institution, existed in the country. And by 1988, there were 10,000 students enrolled at the institution. Meanwhile, the population of the country has continued to grow from 9.5 million in 1969 to 31.8 million in 2010. Thus, Makerere did not have the capacity to meet the needs of the increased population for university education (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2010).

Emergence of Private Universities

There is lack of a common definition or a universally accepted definition of what constitutes a private university. For instance, Geiger (1986a; 1986b), whose work is primarily focused on comparing private institutions in several countries and contrasting them to the United States' with a focus on universities, argues:

> In each country unique patterns of historical development, government powers, legal arrangements, cultural fault lines and more, contribute to different divisions of tasks between publically and privately controlled institutions (p. 3).

The implication being made is that definitions are different depending on the country. The term "private university" as used in this study refers to a university that is owned by an organization or person/s other than the government, and is funded by private rather than public funds.

Various authors have explained the emergence of private universities in different environments. Typically, the rationale for the existence of private universities is explained in terms of: a) the demand for more education, which operates when the state is not able to meet social demand for higher education, creating an opportunity for private universities to emerge in order to absorb the excess demand (De Mallo & Souza, 1991; Yee & Ghee, 1995); b) where there is a demand for better education especially by the elites who seek a social advantage and considers public universities a failure (Pike, 1991); c) where there is a demand for different education because what the state is providing is inadequate; and private universities would emerge to meet such specific demands. Groups that could demand this type of education are religious, cultural or those who require special courses (Levy, 1986a).

In the case of Uganda, private universities emerged in 1988 and were accelerated by a number of factors, namely an increase in population that was not matched by state expansion of new universities or the capacity of Makerere to absorb more students. Secondly, there was the requirement by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund that Sub-Saharan African countries such as Uganda should adopt certain policies called structural adjustments. Between 1987 and 2000, Uganda underwent seven major structural adjustment operations that called for among other things, the removal of subsidies from higher education, cost sharing in university education, private provision of schooling at all levels, and the diversification of funding from university education to primary education as a condition to borrow money, which led to a decline in government funds to support public universities (Ochwa-Echel, 2013).

Thirdly, the government's introduction of universal primary education (UPE) in 1997 doubled primary enrollment from three million in 1998 to six million in 1999. The high enrollment trend continued to increase—in 2005, the total enrollment was 7,224,000 and in 2009 it had increased to 8,297,000. The introduction of universal primary education was followed by the inception of universal secondary education in 2006, and this action further increased the number of potential applicants for university entrance. For instance, in 2005, there were 728,393 students enrolled in secondary schools; by 2009, the number had increased to 1,194,454 (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2010). The enactment of these two policies meant a substantial increase in the number of university applicants, by the time the beneficiaries of these programs reached university entrance. The public university system in Uganda could not accommodate this type of increased enrollment.

Thus, private universities in Uganda as in other parts of the developing countries emerged primarily to absorb the excess demand for higher education institutions that the state was not able to meet or provide. In addition, certain private universities in Uganda are providing specific-focused education as they provide special programs and specialized courses that are meant to target certain student populations.

National Council of Higher Education

To date, there are 30 private universities in Uganda; ten of which were established between 1988 and 2001, before the "Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act 2001" was passed by the Uganda parliament. These universities began operating without government authorization in terms of going through a legal framework of regulations and meeting the requirements that is necessary for operation as a university. The "Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act 2001" set up the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) as a regulatory agency, with a mission to set standards and regulations to ensure that all public and private tertiary education institutions in Uganda create, sustain, and provide relevant and quality higher education for all qualified Ugandans and to meet the local, national and global higher education challenges of the future.

Some of the major functions of the National Council for Higher Education are to advise the minister of education on higher education issues, to establish an accreditation system (as well as accrediting), to investigate complaints, to evaluate national human resources requirements, to set national admission standards, to ensure that institutions of higher learning have adequate physical structures and educational facilities, to publish information on higher education, to determine equivalences of academic and professional awards and credits between institutions as well as formulation of tertiary education policy. The regulatory component of the functions include: institutional accreditation, accreditation of individual programs, enforcing merit-based admissions into higher education institutions, setting minimum requirement for courses of study, ensuring the quality of teaching staff, ensuring that there are examination regulations and standards of academic awards, making sure that students assess academic staff, defining minimum institutional infrastructure, collaborating with professional bodies to ensure quality higher education, and regulating cross border higher education (New Vision, 2013; Uganda National Council of Higher Education, 2012).

Results and Analysis

Data collected from the qualitative interviews and focus group discussions were analyzed and used to answer the research questions stated above.

Accreditation

The term "accreditation" is used in several countries to refer to universities that are established by acts of parliament, by statue or by decree i.e., they are accredited by law (Hayward, 2006). However, the term as used in this study is taken from Lenns' (2003) definition:

> An evaluation of whether an institution qualifies for a certain status, and is the primary choice of governments for national systems of quality assurance. The status may have implications for the institution itself. For instance whether permission to operate or eligibility for external funding should be granted. Accreditation asks the question "are you good enough to be approved to confer degrees?" (p. 7)

Accreditation has a dual purpose—quality assessment as well as quality improvement. Generally, an institution of higher education or its program which is accredited have: educationally appropriate objectives as defined over time by the higher education unit/agency; financial, human and physical resources needed to achieve the objectives; demonstrated that it is achieving the objectives, and lastly provided sufficient evidence to support the belief that it will continue to achieve its objectives for some reasonable time into the future (Lenn, 2003). Accreditation is performed by units/agencies, which are part of the ministry of education in most countries. However, in some countries such as the United States, it is performed by autonomous quality assurance agencies that are non-governmental. In most instances, accreditation is expected to be carried out periodically such as every 5 to 10 years (Hayward, 2006).

The process of accreditation of a private university in Uganda is a three-stage process. In the first stage, a promoter of a private university applies to the National Council of Higher Education for a letter of Interim Authority to establish and operate a private university. If the National Council of Higher Education is satisfied that the requirements specified in its regulations are complied with, then it will issue a letter of interim authority.

A letter of interim authority is valid for a period of up to three years, during which time the holder is not allowed to admit students into the university, but to, mobilize funds, acquire requisite infrastructure and academic facilities, organize academic and administrative human infrastructure, and other related tasks that will further the development of the proposed university to maturity.

The second stage is to apply for a provisional license to establish and operate a private university. The National Council of Higher Education (NCHE), upon receipt of an application for a provisional license, organizes a series of meetings with the applicant/promoter to verify the resources and information given in the application. The National Council of Higher Education may issue a provisional license to the applicant to establish and operate the university when it is satisfied that the resources declared are available or are likely to be established, and the applicant is following realistic plans to achieve the objectives of the private university. The private university is likely to attain and maintain the academic standards prescribed by the National Council, and show that the establishment of the private university is in the interests of the public in relation to higher education. Once a provisional license is issued, the name and particulars of the private university is then published in the Gazette, and in print media or the newspaper. The provisional license is valid for at least three years from the date of the publication of the name of the university in the Gazette. During this time, the National Council monitors the university to establish its viability for accreditation. A private university that is issued a provisional license has to submit a report about its yearly operational activities to the National Council for evaluations.

In the third stage, a proprietor of a private university that is a holder of a provisional license for not less than three years may apply to the National Council for the grant of a charter and accreditation. If the National Council is satisfied with the evaluation of the yearly operational activities report, then the council appoints an inspection committee to ascertain the validity of the information submitted in the application for the charter. The inspection team then submits a report to the National Council six months after the date of its appointment. If the National Council is satisfied with the report of the inspection team, it then recommends to the Minister of Education that the university can be accredited. The Minister of Education then submits the application and recommendation to the president of Uganda, and the president grants a charter to the relevant university. After the charter is granted, the Minister then publishes the charter in the Gazette and public print media (Uganda National Council of Higher Education, 2012).

Two out of the four universities in this study, UNIN and UNIK, are chartered. The universities were established in 1992 and 2000, respectively, prior to the establishment of the National Council of Higher Education as the accreditation body. It is therefore not clear how they received accreditation. The administrators from the two universities declined to answer that question during the interview. UNIL and ASUL were established in 2007 and 2008, respectively, and have provisional licenses and are working towards getting a charter.

As stated earlier, Both UNIN and UNIK are chartered and accredited, and UNIL and ANSUL have provisional licenses; and yet they lacked necessary resources in terms of funds, facilities such as classrooms, library, faculty offices as well as full-time academic staff. During the course of this study, the author was informed by the administrators of all four universities that funding was a major challenge, and that their institutions were running on a shoe string budget. With regards to academic staff, UNIN, UNIL and UNIK were employing part-time faculty who were teaching at the public universities and were moonlighting to make ends meet. These types of faculty were not committed to the private institutions as their primary objectives were to earn some extra money to make ends meet. One student at UNIK shed some light on the issue saying, "These instructors do not have office hours or outside time for students since they have to go to other places where they also teach." This finding is supported by Erinosho's (2007) study, which found that due to erosions in income, benefits and living conditions, faculty have tended to concentrate on the struggle to keep body and soul together by all means available. The quest for alternative income through contract research and consultancies has become a desperate act, and the result is a decline in the dedication to scholarship and teaching.

Lack of facilities was exemplified by what the author saw at UNIK, where lectures were being held in a tent. And when he asked to see the library he was not shown one. Faculty at UNIK also complained that they had no offices where they could individually meet with students. The situation was the same at UNIN in regard to funds, library, faculty offices and academic staff. As far as classrooms were concerned although there were classrooms, they were very small compared to the number of students that were in them. One faculty member commented, "You cannot move freely as a lecturer in class because it's so compact."

Sawyer's (2004) study supports this finding that "faculty tended to be demoralized by bloated classes, inadequate teaching facilities and poor educational environment" (p. 32). The findings also compares with Musisi and Muwanga's (2003) study, which found that "increased enrollment that occurred as a result of privatization was not matched by corresponding increases in facilities such as lecture halls, seminar rooms, laboratories and equipment for science-based subjects; resulting in more than half the registered students in courses not being able to attend lectures due to lack of seats and poor audibility. Such insufficient facilities and a high student-lecturer ratio compromises academic quality (p. 43).

The situation was not very different at UNIL and ASUL, the two universities that had provisional licenses and were working towards a charter and accreditation. They also lacked resources in terms of funds, facilities such as classrooms, library, faculty offices and full-time academic staff with some variations. For example, UNIL had the best facilities in terms of classrooms and faculty offices when compared to the other three universities that were part of this study. ASUL was in the worst resource situation of all the four universities. It had no facilities. The administrative staff were running the university from an old hostel that the church of Uganda, Northern Diocese used for its guests. There are no offices for faculty, and classes were being held in tents. The faculty situation was worse because of the location of the university in the northern part of the country. Whilst the three universities that were part of the study could use the services of lecturers/faculty who were moonlighting from the public universities, ASUL did not have that privilege. Attracting faculty to the region is a big problem due to the remoteness of the place, transportation issues, and the low salary that was being offered when compared to what one could earn in a capital city where the other three universities were located. Thus, there were very few lecturers/faculty at ASUL, and they had a heavy work load as a result.

This study revealed that the rules and standards set by the National Council of Higher Education for the establishment of private universities in Uganda were not being followed. And this failure has led to an explosion in the number of private universities being set up, and some of them do not even qualify to be called "universities". Even though the rules specify that the successful completion of the requirements, as stated in the letter of interim authority, leads to the issuance of a provisional license. For instance, the accreditation process as stipulated by the NCHE is a three-stage process: letter of interim authority, provisional license, and charter leading to accreditation. The case of the four universities showed that institutions were being issued provisional licenses even though they had not fulfilled the resource requirements in terms of funding, infrastructure, faculty and academic facilities. The same situation applies for institutions that get granted a charter. It appears that the NCHE does not have the human and financial capacity to enforce the rules that it is supposed to enforce as a regulatory body. In some instances, accreditation seems to be granted because of political connections or based on political considerations. A case in point is that of Uganda Technology and Management University (UTAMU), which is owned by a former vice chancellor of Makerere University. It began operating as soon as it was established without going through the procedures as established by the NCHE (New Vision, 2013). Some of the universities, such as Kampala International University and Fairland University, have openly defied the NCHE and started granting degrees (PhDs) and offering courses for which they are not accredited (Daily Monitor, 2013; New Vision, 2013). If the current trend continues, the overall quality of higher education in Uganda will be lowered, not enhanced for future growth and global competition.

The findings of this study are similar to a Chronicle of Higher Education's (2012) report on India, which found that weak regulations in higher education has led to the mushrooming of private institutions: colleges and universities which are bare-bone operations not fit to offer degrees. The findings are further supported by a number of other reports/studies. For instance, a Chronicle of Higher Education (2009) report on Nigeria found that there were a proliferation of degree mills or "universities" operating in the country without the authorization of the National University Commission of Nigeria. The findings are also supported by an article authored by Havergal (2015) titled "Africa's 'teaching shops': The rise of private universities", which asks whether the continents for profit private universities are exploiting students or are helping to widen access? The article also cites a warning by the director of the United Nations African Institute for Economic Development and Planning that "the growth of the private universities was eroding universities role in the advancement of the continent since it was/is promoting private gain as opposed to public purposes. And argue for higher education to rediscover its mission so that it can reclaim its rightful role in the mobilization of the citizenship which is required for Africa's renaissance" (p.1).

Thus, it is crucial for Uganda's government to have better regulation, practices, and accountability measures of private universities in place. Regulations should protect the educational system and students from unscrupulous providers and assure higher educational quality. It is also important that an accrediting body such as the National Council of Higher Education and/or other professional associations and committees should be very rigorous in their regulatory duties before granting powers to run a university to an operator. There should be a task force to regularly check on the status of the universities in terms of funding, faculty, curriculum, facilities, and other required standards and agreements that the university leaders promised to uphold on a periodic/annual basis.

Governance

Governance generally means different things to different people. According to Kennedy (2003), "governance is about power and authority, who has it and who does not and in whose interests it is used. Governance essentially is the manner in which power and authority is exercised in organizations in the allocation and management of resources. It involves the enactment of policies" (p. 67). In the specific case of universities, governance refers to the structure and process of authoritative decision-making processes of various issues that are significant for external as well as internal stakeholders. It provides institutional purposes, clarifies strategic direction, identifies priorities, and exerts sufficient control to manage outcomes. With the foundation for effective governance being a clear understanding of the relationship between the assigned governance roles of faculty leaders, senior administrators and trustees regardless of whether those relationships are clear or blurred (Gayle, Tewari, & White, 2003). The importance of university governance is illustrated by Baldwin (2009), who observed that governance is "the glue that holds the university together" (p. 94).

There are various models of university governance, however, the discussion of the subject matter is beyond the scope of this current study (e.g., Ansari, 2004; Asimiran, 2009; Baird, 2007; Coaldrake, Stedman, & Little, 2003; Kezar & Eckel, 2004; Lapworth, 2004; Shattock, 2005).

While almost all private universities in Uganda are for-profit institutions, there is no indication that these universities follow a particular model of governance. The legal framework that provides for the administration of private universities is furnished under the "Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act 2001", which mandates a governing body for each private university. The composition, powers and duties of such a body are required to be specified in the charter of the specific university (Uganda National Council of Higher Education, 2012). The governance structures of the four private universities in this study are almost the same with variations being at the top depending on who owns the university. Two of the four universities, UNIN and ASUL, are owned by the church of Uganda dioceses in Buganda region and Lango sub-region respectively, while UNIK and UNIL are owned by individual private investors. At the top in all four universities are a board of trustees or directors (consortium in the case of UNIN and ASUL); a university council (which oversees the day-to-day running of the institution); a senate which looks at policies; university committees and the various departments/faculties. The boards of trustees and/or directors are responsible for making major decisions as well as the appointment of the top administrators such as chancellor, vice chancellor, chairperson of the council, and members of the council. There is thus a centralization of authority at the top echelon. Professional staff, administrators, faculty, and students are left out of the process since they are not represented.

A student at UNIK remarked on the lack of participation by stating that "lack of participation by students, faculty and administrators leads to misunderstandings and suspicions whenever a new policy is announced by the university. In most instances, information provided was limited to only a few notice boards and some of which went unnoticed". This sentiment was also shared by an administrator at the same university who stated that "we are not consulted on major decisions such as budget allocation, personnel recruitment and so on"; the same remarks were made at UNIN, ASUL and UNIN. In addition to lack of participation, several administrators were frustrated that there were no clear rules and regulations regarding the running of the universities. A faculty member at UNIN stated that "there is no clear line of communication between the various offices at the university that everyone knows about." A number of faculty members and administrators at UNIK, ASUL and UNIN also expressed the same frustration. Students at all four universities also stated that there was "poor record keeping where some records of examination results could not be found, and this was coupled with lack of confidentiality as examination results were pinned on public notice boards where everyone could see". The results of this current study resembles Chacha's (2001) and Nadeem's (2008) study, which found that lack of internal participation by employees within the universities leads to poor performance, while limited participation leads to a lack of commitment.

The findings also showed that although there are administrative structures in place at the four universities that would facilitate shared governance, it was not being utilized.

According to most scholars of governance, professional organizations such as universities with highly specialized knowledge workers, cannot be commanded from the top down but must be nurtured from the bottom up. They argue that there is little evidence that a top down management from a strong chief executive and a small and powerful governing body has been successful in the higher education context. They assert that university governance should move towards a model of shared governance, which requires open communications and trust predicated on mutual respect, agreed upon parameters for decentralization of authority, responsibility and broad understanding of leadership roles within an institution (Lapworth, 2004; Maister, 1993; Muntzberg, 1998; Shattock, 2012). Therefore, it is essential that these four universities move towards a system of shared governance if they are to involve all stakeholders and improve the administrative, management, and future performance of their institutions.

Curriculum

In terms of curriculum, the four universities in this study offer programs in the arts and humanities, social science, education, business administration and management, natural sciences, health science, and computer science. All programs and courses are submitted to the National Council of Higher Education for accreditation prior to being offered. However, the curriculum (curricula) offered depends on the philosophy, mission, and value of the university. For instance, courses offered at UNIL are responsive to the mission of the university, which is to produce academically excellent graduates, exemplary citizens, and pragmatic leaders capable of applying the acquired knowledge to enhance development. Hence, courses offered are all geared towards that goal, which according to the Academic Registrar, is "to groom a generation of practical and globally oriented job creators". A top administrator interviewed reiterated the point that:

> Our curriculum is market-oriented and we aim to train as many students as possible so that they can answer the question: 'after the university, what?' This is because most students after they finish the university are on the streets without jobs. So our attempt is to try to help them to start small businesses and to be gainfully self-employed when they leave the university.

In order to achieve its mission, the university requires all students to take two courses of entrepreneurship and development, information and communication technology, transformation modeling, empowerment, and a research project. The university authorities feel that taking these courses will provide the students with the knowledge and skills necessary to identify opportunities to create employment and to excel at the work place. The courses offered are under the faculties of business studies and management; education; humanity, computer science, and industrial art. Currently, only undergraduate degrees, diploma, and certificate courses are offered. This is because UNIL holds a provisional license. Courses offered at UNLS is in line with its mission as a church institution, which is dedicated to providing quality teaching, innovative research, and outreach missions to instill moral values for the development needs of the urban and rural communities. This is especially needed in northern Uganda, which has suffered for many years because of war. The curriculum, according to an administrator interviewed, is designed to address the needs that exist in the regional market. He explained:

> We offer courses that can help students from the region, who have been marginalized, disadvantaged and traumatized. For instance, we have a course like business management which aims at training and preparing students to gain business and entrepreneurial skills that can make them self-supportive.

He also stated that some of the courses were meant to prepare students to work with people who had been affected because of the war; he stated that:

> We offer a program such as social sciences which helps to prepare students to work with people who have been affected by the war to cope with the many issues and challenges they face. Other courses such as planning and management are customized and short-term, and target people who have low educational levels such as business men and women. These courses are meant to help them acquire skills to improve and manage their businesses. There are also short-term courses that are meant for administrators in the local governments within the region such as accountants.

The courses taught at UNLS are under the departments of business and management, social science and education. At the time of this study, only undergraduate degrees, diplomas and certificates were offered, reflecting the status of the institution as a holder of a provisional license.

Programs/courses offered at UNIK were also reflective of its mission to "strive for excellence in providing a holistic and cosmopolitan education that produces and empowers leaders with initiative and entrepreneurial abilities for positions in global business and responsible leadership within both the public and private sectors". The curriculum is also designed according to the needs of the market. One administrator interviewed explained that:

> We offer courses which are marketable, which will help students get employed when they leave the university. This is because there are a lot of educated people who are unemployed. We are looking at a situation where our students can be job creators, and that is why we offer courses like entrepreneurship as one of the core units at the university and it is compulsory for all students.

Courses offered are at the graduate, undergraduate, diploma and certificate levels, reflecting the status of the institution as a holder of a charter (it has also been accredited). UNIN is a church-run institution with a mission that reflects its Christian values and it aims to offer "excellent, innovative and cost effective university programs through sound scholarship, research and conducive study environment, preparing God-fearing students for their future careers, while promoting Christian principles and values". According to a top administrator interviewed, the curriculum is demand-driven by what the market wants. She noted:

> Our curriculum is demand-driven by the market. We look for where there are gaps and then we design a course to fill that gap. For instance, the government recently announced that oil has been discovered in Uganda, we have now instructed the engineering faculty to start designing courses that will lead to employment in that sector.

Although the four universities in this study claimed that their curriculum was market-driven, they do not offer programs/courses that are relevant to the current market needs. This is because the institutions do not liaison with the private sector. Assessing the needs of the private sector would require some research which these private universities do not have the wherewithal and capacity to carry out. One top administrator at UNLS acknowledged the problem; he noted that:

> When you are designing a curriculum that meets what the market demands, you need a lot of dialogue and interaction with the stakeholders involved as well as research. And some of these things cost money and require personnel which we lack at the moment. So we may not be meeting the demand of the market the way we would have if we were fully engaged with the stakeholders.

Some concerns were expressed in regard to the quality of the curriculum being offered. One student at UNIK stated that "graduates from private universities have not had recognition as those from public universities, so when you are in the workplace sometimes you get looked down upon by people who think you are not well qualified and cannot compete with people from the public universities." This finding is similar with Sawyer's (2004) review, which found that "public universities remain the destination of choice in all African countries because of their standing and prestige, and private universities not being competitive with the public universities for students, their role being mostly a supplementary one of absorbing the spillover from the pool of fully qualified but unsuccessful applicants to the public universities" (p. 38).

The quality concerns regarding the curriculum instruction is also due to who delivers it. Most of the faculty are people who teach at the public universities, and moonlight at the private universities as a way to earn additional income to meet their family's needs. However, sharing faculty comes at a cost to the private universities, since these faculty are rarely able to devote the attention and time required to create a learning environment of appropriate quality. In addition, most of the courses/programs offered at these universities are so theoretical, and are not necessarily relevant to the current job market. The curriculum is very much reflective of the pre/ post-independence curriculum, which were designed to produce civil servants, and yet the liberalization of the economy has meant that there are very few public service positions for civil servants. There are also very many similarities in courses/programs across universities both public and private, which makes for very stiff competition for students in a very small market. In addition, the curriculum being offered is not very relevant to the needs of the country, and are not skills driven to be able to compete for global participation. The problem with the curriculum is not only at private universities but it is a national problem. Uganda, as a country, needs to consider reforming the entire educational system. It needs to focus on knowledge, technology, and skill development that can lead to better paying jobs as well as solve the country's development problems in such areas as HIV/AIDS, food insecurity, natural resource management, animal husbandry, agriculture, and technological advancements.

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Funding

Funding is an important element in the survival and success of any academic institution. In the case of Uganda, university education has been publically funded until the mid-1980s when the government embraced neoliberal policies and privatized the education sector (Ochwa-Echel, 2013). The privatization of the educational sector led to two things, namely: the emergence of private universities (where students pay the entire cost of attending a university), and the introduction of cost-sharing (a hybrid system in which cost of paying for education is shared between parents and the government) at public universities.

Under the accreditation requirement of a private university in Uganda, a proprietor is supposed to mobilize funds, acquire requisite infrastructure, academic facilities, and organize academic and administrative infrastructure before a provisional license to operate is issued. Yet, although the four universities studied were either chartered or had provisional licenses, all of them had funding problems. An administrator at UNIK commented that "funding is a major challenge since our main source of funding is from student's fees". He also indicated that "initially the founder of the university and other board members who are shareholders in the university injected a lot of money which was used to put up the buildings." Although they are a private institution, he expected the government to help with funding. He stated that, "we have not gotten much assistance from the government apart from some subsidies for educational materials."

Another administrator at UNIL also reiterated that they had funding problems. "Our main source of funding is tuition paid by students and we also had to borrow money from the bank that we used to build." At UNIN, an administrator stated that, "our main source of funding is from tuition, and we also get money from hostels that we rent to students, and plant trees that we sell and also borrow money from the bank." At ASUL, an administrator also indicated that the source of their funds was from students' tuition, as well as loans from the bank. Inadequate funding is the hallmark of all the four universities studied. The top administrators indicated that this was/is a major challenge since their only source of funding is from tuition paid by students. This is also an area which exposes the incompetence of the National Council of Higher Education as a regulatory agency because it gives provisional licenses and charters to "universities" that do not meet the required criterion. The results of inadequate funding means that private universities are not able to offer quality higher education curriculum, recruit qualified permanent staff, provide appropriate instructional materials, and adequate physical facilities. The finding from this current study compares with Stella and Osakwe's (2012) study, which found that "private universities in Nigeria lacked funding, staffing and infrastructural development". They argued that "private universities in Nigeria must tackle these challenges if they are to make a difference and remain relevant in the higher education sector (p. 698).

Private universities in Uganda need to resolve the funding issues if they are to contribute to the sector. Since they are in essence private entities in a free market economy, one way they could find funding is to list their institutions on the Uganda Securities Exchange as public companies, and offer shares to the public/investors who would be willing to invest in the universities.

Equity and Access

Access and equity are intertwined, and one cannot be discussed without the other. Access assumes the availability of educational opportunities for all those who are eligible by embracing the principle of inclusiveness for all potential learners. Equity, on the other hand, focuses on the values of fairness and social justice in the way educational resources and opportunities are allocated. It advocates for the elimination of all forms of discrimination based on gender, socio-economic status, geography, ability, sexual orientation, religion, age, and so forth. Increased access means making education available to a greater number of students. According to Schuller (1991), "without access, it's impossible to achieve equity, because access by competition to a scarce resource always favors the privileged (p. 33). Since private universities are widely believed only to admit students based on their ability to pay, the question it raises is whether they can play the social role of promoting social mobility by allowing talented students to access university education irrespective of their background. Recruitment and admission policies are important for equity and access to universities because they provide procedures to be followed if one is to realize the goals of equitable access.

In regards to admission requirements, the four private universities studied uses the "Students Entry Requirement to Institutions" as stipulated in the "Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions (Quality Assurance) Regulations" statutory instruments No.34 of 2008. Under the regulations, entry requirement are stipulated as follows— minimum entry for a bachelor's degree can either be through: a).

Direct entry from schools by attaining a Uganda Certificate of Education (UCE) with at least 5 passes and at least two principal passes at the Ugandan Advanced Certificate of Education (UACE) obtained at the same sitting or its equivalent; b). Mature age entry by someone who is aged 25 years and above and has passed mature age entry examinations with 50% and above; c). Diploma entry, diploma obtained at credit/distinction level in the relevant field from a recognized institution. Bridging/access/remedial courses for students who have obtained their secondary education outside of Uganda, which shall be accredited by the National Council. Secondly, minimum entry requirement for Master's degree shall be a bachelor's degree. Thirdly, minimum entry requirements for a Doctoral degree shall be a Master's degree. Minimum course duration are as follows: 3 years for undergraduate degree with the exception of in-service courses that may last two years; at least 1 year for Masters, and at least 3 years for Ph.D.

Minimum entry requirements for an ordinary diploma is a Uganda Certificate of Education with at least 5 credits; a Uganda Advanced Certificate of Education with 1 principal pass and two subsidiaries obtained at the same sitting or its equivalent; Qualifications equivalent to Uganda Advanced Certificate of Education as shall be determined by the National Council in consultation with the Uganda National Examination Board. Minimum entry requirement for an advanced/higher diploma shall be an ordinary diploma. Minimum entry requirement for a post-graduate diploma shall be a bachelor's degree. Lastly, minimum entry requirement for a certificate is a Uganda Certificate of Education with at least 3 passes obtained at the same sitting (Uganda National Council of Higher Education, 2012).

The standard/criterion for admission to any university, private or public, is set by the NCHE as described above. However, even though the criterion appears to offer equitable access opportunities to all who qualify, in most instances, the students tend to be from high-income families. A New Vision (2014) study showed that between 60-80% percent of students who enter universities, private or public, were from privileged groups. These students were able to pay their way through competitive nursery, primary, and secondary education, which is the gateway to university entrance. Students from low socioeconomic status families face the problems of access from the onset since they lack the preparation needed to pass the required examinations to enter university.

The few who do qualify have a problem paying for their education. An administrator at UNIK while addressing the issue of equity stated that, "We offer few scholarships to a few low-income students from the Buganda region, but we do not have enough resources to support more students." An administrator at UNIN also indicated that they had "paid for students from the war-torn parts of northern Uganda to attend their university." Officials at ASUL and UNIL also indicated that they had limited support for students from low socioeconomic status families. The administrators from all the four universities studied were in agreement that the question of equity could only be solved with intervention from the national government. They suggested that the government needed to set up a loan scheme to help students attain university education. The findings of this study resembles Munene and Otieno's (2007) study, which found that due to high fees charged by private universities, access to the institutions was limited to students from the richer segments of society; with traditionally under-represented groups being excluded from private universities.

Although the government set up a loan scheme by 2014, very little funds was committed to it. The funds could only support 1,269 students out of a student population of 50,000 in both public and private universities throughout the country. The government claimed that the loans were to be awarded to ensure equity, gender balance and socio-economic balance; however, in reality, the awards were made based on political considerations and affiliations of the recipients' parents and sponsors i.e., allegiances to the ruling party in power (New Vision, 2014).

If the government is serious about access and equity, it needs to design student loans that caters to all students regardless of their political affiliations. The scheme can be modeled on the highly acclaimed Income Contingency Loan (ICL), which has been adopted by many countries (Woodhall, 2007). It gives opportunities to every young person to attend higher education regardless of his/her parents' income or social status provided that s/he is willing to pay for it out of the higher income that university education will enable him or her to earn. Funds for student loans can be generated from the presidential scholarship that is given to people based on political allegiance to the current president, and also by taxing businesses/companies with a higher education tax, since they reap profits from it through the graduates they employ without paying for it.

Challenges that Private Universities Face

The four universities in this current study, like most private universities in Uganda, face a number of problems, prominent among which are: funding, lack of permanent academic staff, irrelevant curriculum that does not address the needs of the economy or market as they claim, and poor infrastructure. These universities need to tackle these challenges if they are to make a contribution to the higher education sector in Uganda, and further their students' success.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study shows that the four universities do not meet the standards set by the National Council of Higher Education for operating as a university. Nonetheless, with the increased demand for university education, private universities have a role to play in the provision of higher education. The government needs to ensure that these institutions are providing quality education that can contribute to the national development goals and the overall public good. The current state of affairs in which private universities have mushroomed is not acceptable. If it is not regulated, it will lead to a situation in which the degree mills will continue to produce graduates that are not fully educated and consequently unemployable. In the end, such practices will lead to the decline in the quality of the education throughout the entire educational system in Uganda. In the opinion of the author, the government needs to take the following steps in order to rectify the situation.

1. The NCHE needs to reevaluate its accreditation process and should not tolerate institutions that fail to meet set standards. Evaluations should be conducted on an annual or periodic basis. It is better to have a few universities that are qualified to operate as universities instead of degree mills that are masquerading as "universities". Moreover, if quality of education is to be assured, political influences/considerations should not be a factor in the accreditation process.
2. The NCHE should be strengthened in its regulatory oversight role in terms of funding and qualified personnel, so that it has the necessary strength and power to carry out its mandate.
3. Detailed information about private universities should be made available to the public through the press and other mediums of communication. Such information will help the public to gain knowledge about the strengths and weakness of such universities, as well as help them to make decisions about which universities to send their children to.
4. The government should set up a student loan system that addresses the issue of equity in attaining higher education, and should not be based on political considerations.

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