

Race and Ethnicity hub:

Strengthening racial equity using international partnerships

Prof Jessica Aguti and Dr Charles Mbalyohere:

JESSICA AGUTI: We're going to be talking about breaking racial barriers and improving racial equality using an international high education partnership. And this is how we have set up this conversation this afternoon. We will start by looking at our quest as Makerere University for racial equality, and then we'll be talking about configuring and framing a racially balanced North and South partnership. And then, we'll talk about visualizing the future, and we will have some concluding remarks. So, Charles and I will share this presentation, and I hope we will get somewhere.

First of all, as we share Makerere's quest for racial equality, one of the things that I would like to highlight is that Makerere University, depending on how you look at it, could be said to be an old institution in the African setting. Because we began in 1922 as a Technical College, and then we became part of the University of London as a college, and then eventually part of the University in East Africa, and finally, we became East African University. Or am I mixing them up? And then finally, we became Makerere University.

So, one could say that even the transitions themselves are a reflection of that journey because when we were in technical school, it was deemed, at that time, that what we needed as Blacks in Uganda, were technical skills. So, a technical skill made sense. But eventually, as more and more people were needed in the public sector and in the private sector, then the courses became more and more. And I think that growth or that history is a reflection of that journey.

And that in itself is an issue because Africanising there for Makerere University, when it's deeply rooted in the European culture, in the University of London culture, with the culture then and the values, the traditions, the programs, and everything else, becomes quite a challenge. And I don't think this is unique to Makerere University. It is something that has always been happening across the continent. And whether the colonizer was Great Britain, or it was France, or Germany, it was the same thing.

And so, we ended up with what some authors have called universities in Africa. They were located and situated in Africa, but in terms of the values, in terms of the culture, in terms of the traditions, in terms of the programs, in terms of even staffing, there was very little Africa in it. But by and by, we have gotten out of that, and we are now more into what one could call an African university, an African university meaning it is rooted in many ways in the culture of, in our case, Ugandan culture, and it is attempting to meet Ugandan needs as solving Ugandan problems and addressing, therefore, the population, the citizens in the country.

And this has been a growing, growing journey for us. One could say now, for example, that we do have students coming into study at Makerere University from across the nation, and they are studying a whole cross-section of programs. Of course, there are other inequalities that peep in, which make it difficult for one to say, oh yes, this is truly Ugandan. Because then, other issues come in. For example, poverty implies that those that do not have the resources maybe get locked out. Some regions may be much more advantaged than others. And so, there's those inequalities. But our discussion today is more focused on issues of racial equality.

But I think in the discussions, particularly when we are addressing the growth and development of universities in Africa, we should be going underneath that. Because the racial equality may no longer be a major issue. But now, there are regional, or tribal, or class, or financial capacity inequalities. And those are things which I believe should also be unpacked.

Now the other issue, of course, is that right now, we are part and parcel of a global village. If we were not part and parcel of a global village, the whole world would not have been closed down by COVID-19. But because we are part of a global village, the entire world has been closed down by COVID-19. And so it becomes difficult for any institution to pretend or a country to pretend that they can be independent of the rest of the world, and therefore have programs or activities that are rooted only in the local culture without taking on the global context into account.

And that's why I think it's very tough for us, therefore, to walk that very thin line, to walk that very thin rope. Because you're balancing between training students, taking into account the local context to solve local problems, and yet operate in a global market. I think Charles understands that kind of conflict much more easily because he's from the business world. But the truth is that the global context has dictates upon how we run programs, how we train students, how we mount, and what programs we mount, and that can be a bit of a challenge.

Now I have somewhat touched on this with regard to issues of developing curricula that is locally relevant. The emphasis today in Makerere University is that if you're designing a curriculum, you must look at the national priorities. You must look at the national context. You

must look at the local stakeholder body, even though you are designing that curriculum and taking into account the community of practice outside Makerere University and within a globally competitive market.

So that is an issue that we are grappling with. And yes, so the curriculum may be changing to meet the local needs, but what we are trying to keep the global picture in mind. Many of you know that Makerere has had a lot of-- Uganda has had a lot of turbulence in terms of our political history. We had the initial struggle-- we didn't struggle much for independence unlike, for example, Kenya, where they had the Mau Mau, and there was a lot of turbulence in the country to gain independence. We did go through a very turbulent struggle for independence, but post-independence, there have been a host of other political dynamics that have created challenges for us.

Of course, we do remember Idi Amin Dada, who chased away the Indians, and sent away the Europeans, and sent away the Americans, and shut down the economy. And one could tell a lot of stories about that turbulent history. And that has an impact on the education sector. At that time, Makerere University suffered a lot because Uganda was isolated in terms of partnerships. It was difficult in terms of staffing. It was difficult because some people went away. And so those dynamics, political turbulence, has its own impacts on the education sector, and we suffered that.

I remember when I was in school, we had some teachers from America. We had some teachers from the UK. And then, they all had to leave. And suddenly, there was a huge gap in terms of the teaching staff. So, we have had that. And at that time, the sending away of the Asians and the Europeans had a lot of racial overtones in it, because these were seen as the intruders. They don't belong here. What are they doing here? They've taken charge of our business.

We need to recapture that power, and that was not a very nice experience for those that were expelled, and neither was it a good experience for us. We learned some lessons, yes, which have impacted, particularly from the economic angle, but there were a lot of losses that were made.

Professor Mahmood Mamdani writes a lot about Makerere's journey in terms of the evolving nature of Makerere University. Let me just give an example. Makerere University is a public institution. Therefore, most of the programs that we run from the very beginning were fully funded by government. And then, a time came when government could no longer fund all the programs, and therefore fee payment-- tuition payment came into play.

And because of that and because of the volume of finances that could potentially be generated by units, there were so many programs that came up. And Mamdani talks about that a lot in his writings when he talks about the commodification or commercialisation of education in Makerere University.

But I think it was mainly because of cost. Makerere University had to take a decision. Do we continue to depend on government for whatever little that government is able to give us, then we don't have teaching materials, we can't support research, we can't do anything else? Or do we go to the population and say, let's cost share? And so that became an issue. And Mamdani writes about that.

And then, we had an unfortunate incident in 2007. For those of you that have visited Uganda, when you drive from Kampala, which is the city, to Jinja where the source of the Nile is, one of the iconic sites along that route is the Mabira forest. Previously, it was a very big and dense forest. It's become a little bit thinner because people have been attacking it from different angles, and felling trees, and so forth.

So, in 2007, government wanted to give away part of that land to a sugar factory. Unfortunately, the sugar factory was owned or is owned by Asians. And suddenly, the battle took on racial overtones. And Asians were attacked on the road and wherever it was. And I think, if I remember correctly, I think one Asian dying, unfortunately.

And it was a very, very ugly episode in our lives because it brought to surface that tension, that fight, and the struggle. It wasn't driven by Makerere University, but we are not an island. We are affected by the context in which we operate. So yes, Makerere University or Uganda is walking the journey of seeking racial equality, but there's been those ugly instances.

However, now, at Macquarie University, we actually do have a lot of students that are coming in as occasional students. They are spending maybe one semester, and they're taking up courses in the social sciences. They're taking up courses in the humanities. And we have some of them taking up courses in the medical field. And they stay for maybe three months, or one month, or six months.

In our own college of education and external studies, we've had different groups of students coming from Western Europe, although none of the groups is coming from the UK. But we've had students coming from Sweden, coming from Norway, and I think a few coming from Belgium, and then they spend some time here taking up some of our courses, being supported by local academia, and then, we have that kind of partnership.

Yesterday, we had an interesting PhD defence. One of my colleagues here at IODEl (Institute of Open, Distance and eLearning) was registered as PhD student at the University of Agder in Norway, and he defended his thesis yesterday using Zoom. And at the end of the talk, we had a nice, little party, and cake cutting, and we had a beautiful time. He had two supervisors from the University of Agder and one supervisor from Makerere University. That's the kind of partnership that we are now beginning to work with. And I think it's a beautiful thing.

There is, of course, this whole issue of breaking racial barriers and stereotypes, which I alluded to at the beginning when I said, for example, that at Makerere University when we started, we started as a technical college because it was deemed that what we needed, the skills that we needed were technical skills to be carpenters, to be-- I don't know, maybe builders, or masons, and so forth. But then that has grown.

When I was a student at Makerere University, which was a long time ago-- I'm not going to tell you because you will guess my age. And women, and wine, and music are not dated, so I'm not going to tell you when. But when I was at the university, we had so many languages, largely European languages that were being taught, that were being introduced to students. And we did have to pay any tuition fee for that. We had German, we had Russian, we had English of course is the medium of instruction. And then the only African language was Lingala, strangely enough, and Kiswahili. But there were a number of European languages-- French, and Spanish, and German, and Russian. And they were all being taught.

Now, those languages are there, and the Chinese have come in, and now we have Chinese being taught. But the great development is that now we have local languages that are being taught from primary school right through to university level. And we have people that have PhDs in Luganda, they have a PhD in Kiswahili, they have PhDs in Runyakitara. My own mother tongue, unfortunately, there's no PhD, but it is being promoted. And so that is the whole shift in the mindset, to see that there is value in promoting even local languages because they have depth. They have plenty to share with us.

So, this is a new configuration. This is a new framing, where we are seeing greater depth and greater value in the indigenous languages, in the indigenous culture. And there is a lot of interest in that. The partnerships that are growing where we have the West coming in-- rather the North coming in and having interest in the indigenous knowledge, and I think that is a shift now where there is an understanding, there is an appreciation that there is power, there is value, there is great depth in knowledge, and culture, and values in the North and in the South. And there should be a symbiotic relationship that promotes the growth and the development of all this.

I don't know how I'm doing with the time. I tend to talk too much. This is now slide number eight. I think this is the last one, and then Charles, you come in or not yet?

CHARLES MBALYOHERE: You're right. You're right. Go ahead.

JESSICA AGUTI: So the reason I have talked about this and I think the building of bridges to a more global and yet keeping that localized view, as Ramakrishna says, is something that I have alluded to because we cannot isolate ourselves. We have to recognize that we are working in the global market, we are working within a global context. There is value in the North. There is value in the South. And the challenge is, how do you then determine that?

And I think the whole quest of opening up is very interesting. Maybe let me just bring in some two other points here, and then perhaps I'll be done, and Charles will be coming in. There is the idea that we should address the local contexts and the local problems. The government of Uganda has, for now two financial years, given Makerere University 30 billion Ugandan shillings. I don't know how much that is in pounds, but each year, we've had that grant coming in.

And the themes that have been determined as research themes and research areas have been negotiated between Makerere University and government, and they are rooted in the national plan. They are rooted in the vision of 2040, which is the vision for that country. And I think that is the quest to bring in the higher education to address local problems.

Because our research at Makerere University has, for many years, been largely funded by external partners. And the question is-- there is that saying that, he who pays the piper calls the tune. If the North is funding and the North is determining the research themes or the priorities, how far does that go to meet the national needs and solve the local problems? And I think that's why now there is a shift in understanding and negotiating partnerships to say whatever support we receive, whatever support we give, it should be rooted within our local context and meeting local priorities and local needs.

So, I thought I would just bring that in here as we continue this conversation. Yes, I have talked about the research, and I think Charles can pick up from here and talk about some of his own work and how that continues to frame this conversation around attaining a racially balanced North-South partnership. Thank you.

CHARLES MBALYOHERE: Thank you so much, Jessica, for that presentation, very, very interesting. The terminology that you've used, a "shift in what is happening," "symbiosis," those are all very, very interesting constructs. Let me just pick up from there with a few more examples still and trying to configure and frame a racially balanced North-South partnership.

In some of the work I've been doing in Uganda, there's a small dam project in the West of the country, which is a subsidiary of Norway-based multinational. So this multinational has made the specific decision that they will not bring expatriates from Norway to manage the project and to take up all the positions, so they have, from the outset said, we would rather take as much time as possible to train local talent, to develop local talent. And so, from the lowest levels of management to the highest levels, the CEO, it's fully locally occupied. And in fact, the CEO is female, which is also quite an element of what is happening in the area.

And so, there are ways these things that are happening, even beyond institutions, beyond higher education institutions, but which we as researchers can capture as part of our research.

We feel that the partnership we have between us at the OU and Makerere is also effectively an incremental exposure to alternate epistemologies, to alternative theories, and methodologies. Because there's been an assumption on many of these grounds that what was originally introduced in some of these universities like Makerere is still valid. And of course, in many ways, it's still valid. And we, as researchers of course, do a lot of work which extends many of these theories.

But there's also the thinking that there's the need to look for alternatives. There's a need to study effectively with a clean sheet in some ways and ask ourselves out there different ways of understanding African context. And so, we believe that part of our objective in our partnership is to test some of these things, to question and see what contribution we can make in coming up with new epistemologies, with new theories, and new methodologies of doing things.

And of course, one key thing in relationship between the global North and global South as expressed in the high education sector that you may agree with is that, yes, there's been a power imbalance, especially if we remain on the aspect of knowledge. That knowledge is only created in the North, and the South are only recipients. This is something that is increasingly being questioned. There's a need to disrupt, to reinterpret, and reconfigure the way we approach knowledge and to understand that, even here in the global North, there are some things we can learn from the global South.

Effectively, for the partnership, we think one of the things we're doing is to contribute to identifying gaps in the relationship between an institution in the global North and one in the global South. Like we've indicated before, there are gaps in theory. That's a major aspect of our work as researchers, but there are also other aspects of other gaps, cultural constructs. There are some things which have been assumed for many, many years. That's how they're done.

But there's a need to continue with this. We believe that the partnership we are setting up will make a contribution to exploring in the different faculties what can be done differently, and what can be questioned, and also to remember that Makerere University and us are part of the greater Commonwealth.

We had a conference in Uganda last December, which was attended by the Association of Commonwealth universities, who were also interested in exploring this theme. There's a broader space in which all this is happening. And so, we feel that our partnership will make a contribution to this broader agenda that is happening all over the Commonwealth as we go along. And something, of course, which is going to become even more interesting as the UK exits the European Union and looks elsewhere for-- to revive new partnerships, to revive old partnerships, so we think it's going to become even more relevant.

And because we work a lot with open and distance learning as Open University and as the Institute in which Jessica is director, we, of course, have the opportunity to use ODL as a technological tool that can help in addressing racial inequalities. As an example, historically, many students in the global South have had challenges with access to higher education. This is something we addressed at the conference in December. But it's not only access. It's also accessing content that has been deracialized. We believe that, in our partnership, we shall be making contributions to models of ODL that offer learners an opportunity to access content.

Let me give an example of a great tool that has proved its worth through the pandemic --the Open Learn website which has been accessed multiple times. There's been tens of thousands of people trying to access content, even from Africa. And I certainly know people from Uganda who have been using it as a way of managing. Some students have been at home, and that's the only resource they had that they could access.

But then, we have a challenge. We have a responsibility to make sure that the content that is there is relevant for them. So even as we have that great forum, we have to keep asking ourselves, what else can we do to make it relevant, not only for students in the global North but also those in the global South?

And so, through our projects like TESSA, like OpenLearn, an Open Impact Conference that we had in December, we have an opportunity in the partnership to address some of these issues. TESSA, of course, has been there for much longer and has done very, very excellent work, and they continue doing excellent work in Uganda through Kyambogo University. And we had a presentation by them at the conference in December.

There are opportunities to study how these projects have been working, how racial equalities have been addressed, are being addressed, what else we can do. The aspect of bottom up that is used by TESSA, for example, is I think one of the key lessons that we can pick up that people like this idea that, you can take control of the resources. You can build things yourself. This is something we are certainly going to use along the way.

In working with Makerere, we are conscious of the fact that, of course, Makerere has a very special position in sub-Saharan Africa. If you ever have a chance to look at their rankings by the Times Higher Education system, Makerere is ranked very, very highly, in the region. It is ranked as the highest university for research, for example, in sub-Saharan Africa, only outdone by universities in South Africa.

If you link that with our ranking in terms of international leadership, we feel that our partnership can act as a hub for good work in the region and is something that we continue engaging with, how else can we view this partnership to not only be relevant for us as partners but also for the country at large and also the region? There's a lot of work to do, picking up on some of the things that Jessica was talking about in terms of curriculum and so on. And contributing to that very important issue she raised of developing a university in Africa rather than-- going away from a university in Africa to an African University finally, some work has been done already, but there's a lot still to be done.

If we visualize the future, if we look into the future of our partnership, we believe that there's work to do in consolidating the projects that have already been established. High up there, of course, is the TESSA project, but also this new project that was started in December, The Open Impact Conference, that we can work with consolidating the outposts from those projects-- but also think of developing new ones, remembering that there are a number of activities happening across all faculties at the Open University. There's opportunity to consolidate, to develop new things. So yeah, there's room for exploration as part of the project and in terms of the things that we can do to finally, finally break down racial inequalities in the higher education sector.

But also, as we do this to know that there's an element of mutual reciprocity so to know that it's not only things moving from the North to the South, but there are also elements of things moving from the South to the North, that there's a lot we can learn from them in terms of teaching, in terms of learning experiences so our students, for example, can have an opportunity to know more about what is happening in emerging markets like Uganda. And we dream of an opportunity to start having some common classes. It would be very interesting, for example, to have-- occasionally, a class where you have students from the Open University but also students from Makerere being in one virtual class and addressing issues together as part of this aspect of developing things together.

And of course, it's important to remember that we have 10 years to the end of the UN sustainable development goals. So effectively what we are talking about is a decade in which we can pursue these objectives in which we can try out things as part of meeting these sustainable development goals. So, we think the partnership can be a contribution to all of this. There's work to be done around collaborative scholarship.

In FBL, we are setting up some work with our SCiLaB Center to collaborate with Makerere on some things that we identified during the conference in December. But I'm also aware that other faculties are pursuing some other projects. That is quite a lot of space we can use for this. But also, to remember that, if we go back to the issue of racial equality, that the situation in African countries is getting more complex.

It's no longer having an Asian community that came in colonial times and has been having some challenges like Jessica was pointing out, but you have some other communities. For example, the population of Chinese in Africa is growing, and there's a whole mode of scholarship called China in Africa. In a country like Uganda, the situation is getting more complex, and these countries have their own issues to deal with in accommodating various communities and dealing with new elements of racial challenges.

Ladies and gentlemen, those are the remarks that we wanted to share with you, and we are happy to just have a few comments, a few questions, if any. Thank you very much indeed.