Education for Thriving: Becoming the Musizi of Our Local Communities

Takako Mino
Musizi University

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Takako Mino, Co-Founder, Musizi University, Uganda

I selected Stuart Haw's piece (2023), "Sustainable Cities Depend on Supporting First-Generation Students," because the brain drain he describes in the UK is also a major challenge in Uganda, where I am based as an educator. Haw's piece emphasizes the importance of providing support to students from disadvantaged communities, so that they can contribute to the improvement of their home areas rather than only remaining in the city where they studied. We have the same challenge in Uganda, where many students go abroad for their university education in pursuit of a higher quality learning experience and greater international exposure. These young people become adults in a foreign setting with its own particular set of structures and norms. Many of these youth look for job opportunities where they have studied abroad rather than returning home, contributing to the brain drain. If or when they return home, graduates find challenges readjusting to Uganda and understanding how to navigate its contrasting setup. In Uganda, a fairly new, low-income country, systems and infrastructure are not as well-established as they are in developed countries; work and life move at a slower pace, and corruption is a common practice in business dealings.

It can be overwhelming for someone who has been disconnected from this complex environment and prepared for a career abroad to settle back in and find their footing in Uganda. Furthermore, this disengagement does not only arise for those who study abroad: students within the predominantly theory-based Ugandan higher education system can also become separated from the realities of Ugandan society and industry. Unemployment rates are high, with some estimating that 87% of graduates are not able to find jobs in Uganda (Daily Monitor, 2021). Similar to the challenges of first-generation students that Haw (2023) outlines in his article, first-generation graduates in Uganda are under a tremendous amount of pressure to find well-paying jobs in order to support their families. There is also a tendency to seek employment in the capital city of Kampala, where economic development is highly concentrated, and smaller cities and rural communities lose their most brilliant young people to the rural-urban migration.

While it may not be possible for universities to educate students to succeed in every kind of context, universities can equip students so that they are able to flexibly apply what they have learned across diverse settings and to have the resilience required to thrive in more difficult, low-resource, and less-structured environments. This is the same for peripheral cities in the UK and for developing countries like Uganda. My reflection centers on inclusion: how do educators create inclusive learning experiences for students coming from diverse backgrounds so that they are able to thrive in a variety of contexts and help their home areas thrive? Haw's recommendations for creating brain gain also resonate with our context in Uganda. I explain how we have approached the challenges of brain gain and promoting sustainable development within Musizi University, an upcoming liberal arts and sciences university in Uganda.

Seedlings growing into trees

Haw (2023) writes about the importance of fostering entrepreneurs who can start new businesses in their home areas with support. While many students want to contribute their skills and resources to their communities, they may be at a loss as to how they would be able to do so. We try to address this gap at Musizi by empowering students with the empathy, skills, and confidence to make a positive impact on their communities. The university is named after the indigenous Musizi tree, which is known to be the sower; wherever this tall tree is planted, birds perch on it and drop seeds around it. These seeds sprout up as various life forms around the tree. The Musizi tree symbolizes our hopes for our students—that they will not only prosper by themselves but enable others around them to prosper as well. To help them think about the kind of impact they will make, we invite students to ask themselves essential questions as they navigate their educational experience: Where do I come from? Who am I? Where am I going?

We conceptualize learning outcomes as a tree with the foundations as the roots (Mino & Alowo, 2022). At the roots level, students embark on a process to develop self-awareness, take actions for their self-transformation, draw inspiration from indigenous knowledges, and explore their life's purpose. This understanding of oneself becomes the foundation for building other competencies required to become a changemaker.

At the trunk level, students analyze the world around them through communication, collaboration, research, and interdisciplinary thinking. This gives them the tools to analyze and appreciate the unique context of Uganda and the wider region and to grasp the multi-faceted nature of every challenge to be solved. In addition, students learn how to work with diverse peers to unpack complicated problems. In this manner, challenges no longer remain as unsolvable puzzles but become opportunities for teams to create innovative solutions to uplift communities.

At the branches stage, students focus on how they will impact the world: they begin new initiatives, solve problems, lead with empathy, and take action for a better world as global citizens. The Musizi curriculum is designed to help students develop the confidence to catalyze change through various experiential learning opportunities. Students experience how to solve problems in the real world and recognize how difficult it is to make a difference through design challenges, internships, industry consulting, and capstone projects. For instance, our entrepreneurship students start businesses during their time at university so that they can begin to experience the realities of making a business work in their community. Throughout their journey, Musizi students reflect upon the essential questions and think about their life's purpose as they become more self-aware, more analytical, and more action-oriented.

Including students in the learning process

Haw (2023) writes about the problem of curricula that limit students to knowing a few pathways to success. One of the best ways to create an inclusive educational experience is to include students in the learning process: when students are active learners, differentiation occurs naturally because students personalize their education and engage in a process of self-learning and discovery. Musizi's project-based approach tasks students to bring their own personal

experiences and cultural heritages to the classroom in order to help them explore the richness of who they are and where they come from. For instance, our Art of Storytelling course guides students through the process of writing their own personal narrative and sharing it with others through orature. Our African indigenous philosophy course engages students as co-creators of indigenous knowledges as they interview elders in their communities and collect oral histories; students analyze these stories and collaborate in groups to articulate what they believe to be the core values underpinning their communities. Each Musizi course pushes students to bring their whole selves to the classroom and to apply their learnings to self-led and team projects.

Japanese educator Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (1903) explains that students can learn about global issues by studying the dynamics within their local community, which is a world in miniature. While taking a deep dive into the local community may appear to be limited, skillful faculty can help students draw connections between their local observations and larger international issues in order to recognize universal patterns and themes. Students can develop the versatility necessary for working within diverse settings by adapting global best practices to local cases or crafting local solutions to global challenges. The more that students are able to practice skills of symphony, the ability to see the connection between seemingly disparate things, and empathy, the ability to put oneself in someone else's position, the more that they will be prepared to adapt to diverse situations in a rapidly changing and uncertain world (Pink, 2005), rather than feeling that the challenges in their community are impossible to address. In other words, an inclusive learning experience prepares students to become inclusive and flexible in their own work.

Students emerge from the Musizi experience with a portfolio of projects that they completed in their local communities during their time as students, bolstering their confidence that they can do even more after they have graduated. Our hope is that, rather than seeing Uganda as a place that is too difficult to do business in, graduates will understand the nuances of the environment and know what it takes to thrive and help others around them thrive based on their previous experience with smaller projects. These graduates can support sustainable development and make the cities and towns around them more "desirable for young people" (Haw, 2023, p. 2). It is envisioned that Musizi graduates will go on to become excellent entrepreneurs who create new jobs or stellar employees who propel the growth of other businesses; their contributions will help build the local business ecosystem and create a more resilient and vibrant society, creating sustainable opportunities for future generations.

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