

Skilling should be at the centre of schools agenda

Monday May 27 2019



New Horizon Secondary Vocational School students of mechanics during a lecture. In addition to academic classes, the students choose a vocational class in which they wish to join. FILE PHOTO

In Summary

Some secondary schools have come to speed in as far as skilling students is concerned. A section of schools provide vocational studies in a unique attempt at providing both academic and real-world skills their students need to thrive in a rapidly evolving career landscape.

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By George Katongole & Desire Mbabaali

Gradually, the country has come to a realisation that having both academic papers in one hand and hands-on skills in the other is the way to go. Now, this is a thing some countries such as Finland, Norway, South Africa realised decades ago and made a deliberate move to put skilling at the centre of their education systems.

Although the Skilling Uganda initiative was launched in 2012 to create and revitalise spaces

within which Ugandans would get vocational, technical and business skills, it has largely remained at the tertiary level and less at the primary and high school levels.

However, the Education ministry together with the National Curriculum Development Centre are yet to roll out the new lower secondary curriculum that is both knowledge and skills/competence-based aimed at replacing the orthodox purely academic based curriculum, some schools have already started skilling their students with vocational skills.

As a popular saying goes, most people will miss an opportunity once it is dressed in overalls and looks like work. A visit to New Horizon Secondary Vocational School shows several students dressed in overalls, which gives the impression that there is a lot of work going on.

At the school located in Mukono off Kayunga Road, as students in candidate classes ready themselves for final exams, the other students in Senior Three also get ready for the upcoming competence level one certificate examinations; working on projects in automotive mechanical engineering, metal works, electrical installation, plumbing and carpentry.

Here, you find students as early as Senior Two able to build houses, do plumbing work, plan and install electricity, make school furniture, troubleshoot metal works problems for the school requirements, repair cars, play and compose music, make hair designs from the school salon, plan meals and look after fish, cattle and pigs.

A portion of the school's land has been earmarked for growing vegetables and other foodstuffs which students feed on.

At one of the workshops, the fish pellet machine, which is a project of an industrial training assignment, is ready to start work. Twelve enthusiastic students are putting final touches on the motor starter control circuit.

“We have to design the circuit for the pellet machine. The students have been practicing,” Charles Yiga, the electrical installation instructor, who obtained his certificate from the same school in 2014, states.



A student of St Kizito High School, Namugongo listens to one of their patrons while they prepared fish during the fish festival last year. The students are trained on how to rear the fish and harvest in a bid to equip students with farming skills. Photo by Shabibah Nakirigya

Preparing for the future

For three hours every week, students, clad in orange overalls head to the various workshops at school to work on class projects which are at the end of the term examinable.

Senior One and Two students are given general technical knowledge and attend all classes before they specialise in Senior Three.

New Horizon is among the 572 accredited examination centres by the Directorate of Industrial Training for the Business, Technical, Vocational Education and Training.

Sharifah Nakiyingi completed Senior Six from Crested Secondary School, Makindye in 2016 and sat for Physics, Economics, Mathematics and Information Technology. Instead of joining university, she joined New Horizon and is in the metal works class.

“Even if I had joined university, classes are usually about memorising things,” said Nakiyingi.

“My future is here. Here I get to do a lot in the workshop, gaining experience and skills that prepare me for practical things. I make windows, doors and roofing structures without supervision.”

Steven Katto, 16, is among the seven Senior Four students in the carpentry class. He practices from a friend’s workshop at Nsambwe, a nearby trading centre, during holidays. “The work in the workshop really puts things into perspective and makes them easier to understand when I am working on my own,” he says.

And at Horizon, parents do not have to worry about fees because it is subsidised with those in boarding school paying Shs450,000. The school enrollment is estimated at 270 students. All this aside, the school founder, Peter Buitendijk, says the biggest challenge is still perception.

Future in mind

St Kizito High School, Namugongo, also believes in using the available resources to skill their students.

For instance at only 16 years of age, Clifford Oyo, a Senior Four student, at the school can prepare a pond and rear fish. “We rear the fish... in the school pond. We are allowed to prepare the pond from the very first stage. I am now capable of starting a fish farm one day when I leave school,” he said.

The students feed the fish twice a day; in the morning before going to class and in the evening after class. “Those of us who are dedicated to the fishing group have been given a chance to buy our own fish species and after harvesting sell it for our own benefit,” Oyo, the chief of the fishing group, said.

Though skills taught at this school are not examined, learners walk away with something they can use to supplement their education and income in future. Students also grow vegetables, make briquettes, do cookery and are introduced to fish farming. In fact last year, the students held a Fish Festival to celebrate smart farming.

At the festival, students harvested more than 500 mud fish, which they had been rearing in the

school pond for more than six months, cleaned it, and fried it for their parents, teachers, guests and their fellow students for free.

Furthermore, Diana Mbakire, a Senior Six student at the school, agrees that skilling is the way to go. “When I joined the school in Senior Five from another school, I started learning fish farming and briquette making,” she says. This was a daily routine since it is part of the school timetable for students from Senior Three to Five. So, she specialised in briquette making.

Unique standards

Mbakire believes that away from academics, students should have a skill because you never know when they will need it. “Our parents bring us to school to learn and not just academics but also other skills, you just need to balance the two,” she says.

A tour around St Kizito exposes you to a plot of land dedicated to these activities. The gardens where smart/urban farming is done consists a fish pond, a garden where yams and green pepper are grown; on one side of the pond. On the other side of the pond is, another vegetable garden with onions and tomatoes.

Adjacent is a mushroom house built from plastic bottles and on top of it, more onions and strawberries are grown. Away from the garden is the store where briquettes are made and a solar drier on the next floor. This, is called the Greening Innovation at the school.

Moses Senfuma, the manager of the greening innovation who is also a former student of the school, says their hope is that students can acquire employable skills in future.

“I am pursuing a degree at Ndejje University but I do not ask my father for tuition. It comes from my work, but I got the skills here, while I was still in high school,” he explains.

To bridge the skills gap, major school competitions such as the Stanbic National Schools Championship are giving room to skills. In 2018 for instance, the competition tasked the four regional finalists; Bweranyangi Girls’ Senior Secondary School from western, Nakanyonyi Girls’ Secondary School from eastern, Muni Girls Secondary School from northern and Mengo Secondary School from central to come up with business ideas and execute them.

Petra Namuyiga, a Senior Four student from Mengo Senior School and a participant in the competitions described this as a whole new learning experience for her. “In class, you learn theory but the competition exposed us to new practical concepts. We even learnt soft skills such as confidence,” she says.

Together with her teammate, (Marvin Nicholas Kimbugwe) they came up with a business idea of recycling plastics, which also became the best business idea presented at the camp, according to the judges.

“Moving around Mengo Senior School, we could see plastic bottles littered around. Even in Kampala – you see all those plastic bottles, so we realised that this was a big problem that we could solve. That is how we came up with the idea of recycling plastic bottles,” Marvin Nicholas Kimbugwe, a former student at Mengo Secondary School, shares.

In their recycling project also named ‘Mengreen’ they collect plastic bottles in and around their school and put them to use.

“At first thought we thought we could collect them and sell them to plastic companies, but then

we wanted to add the value ourselves,” Namuyiga says. They use the plastics to make different products such as; jewellery, piggy banks, dust bins, lamp holders, flower vases, and other decorative items and for planting vegetables.

“There is a lot of pollution today yet there is little being done to save the environment. But it is the same environment that fed our forefathers, the same feeding us and will feed our children. So our business is not largely about the money but conserving the environment,” says Kimbugwe.



Reaping early

In addition, students of Nakanyonyi Girls’ Secondary School (Viviane Kifuko Senior Six and Lucy Namazzi), started a drinks and snacks business.

“We settled for that idea because we could produce products at a fairly low cost, but at the same time, have a variety of products from the same raw materials and at different prices because our target customers are students,” said Kifuko.

Equally, Able Martha and Viola Sitima of Muni Girls’ Secondary School started Tasty Delights, a snacks business producing and selling snacks such as hard corns, groundnuts, doughnuts, cupcakes, cookies, among others to the staff and their school community.

“We decided to reach our customers through direct distribution on weekends and through the school canteen as middlemen. We also reached our customers through posters, fliers in school especially during the assembly, but also created a social media platform to reach the staff. All these are strategies we learned from the camp,” Emma Angundaru, the patron, shares.

It is clear these students and many more out there acquiring such skills will always have a fall back if the job market turns out hostile after their studies. Therefore, all schools should embrace the skilling agenda if we are to promote versatility in students.

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