

Experts say the model should be adopted even in universities to produce professionals with more practical skills.

BY TONNY ABET

Every morning at 6am, while most students across Uganda's higher institutions of learning are still asleep, a different rhythm unfolds at Bukalasa Agricultural College (BAC).

Students are already out on the land – they water, weed, mulch and tend their thriving vegetable plots in the lush expanse they proudly call “Paradise Garden.”

Ms Patience Jazmine Nankinga, a final year student, quickly explains that this daily ritual is not punishment; it is preparation.

“We are in paradise, the garden, where we are planting various crops – different types of vegetables,” Ms Nankinga, a certificate student, explains, pointing to flourishing cabbages under her care. “Some students are focusing on carrots, cabbage, sukumawiki, nakatti and others. Everyone is having a plot.”

These are some of the crops with a ready market, and they are consumed both within the government-owned institution, which has over 2,000 students, and also outside. The college, which offers both certificate and diploma courses, is located in Luweero, about 50 kilometres from Kampala, Uganda's capital city.

Another student, George William Ntulumbe, sheds more light by unveiling his daily routine.

“We grow vegetables and take care of them until maturity. We come here early in the morning and in the evening to do all the management practices for these plants,” he says.

“We do watering, weeding, pruning and mulching, so as to have a vibrant culture of agriculture, as well as getting the skills we need in future for economic and knowledge purposes,” he adds.

Mr Ntulumbe says each student does all the practices individually.

He says they do the garden work between 6am and 8am.

“After that, we go and prepare (clean up), then we have breakfast within the same hour before we go for lectures at 9am. Then we come back at around 5.30pm when lectures are done. I plan to do a diploma after this, and afterwards, I will also pursue a degree,” he says.

# How Bukalasa is sowing seeds of new farming era



Ms Patience Jazmine Nankinga, a student at Bukalasa Agricultural College, shows farm visitors crops in a garden on May 27. PHOTO/TONNY ABET

Ms Nankinga, on her part, appears to be more interested in becoming an entrepreneur.

“We have enough skills to start our projects, out there,” she says.

“We should focus more on the practical aspect while training as students; that is what will help us. Some other institutions largely focus on theory,” she adds.

Information from the BAC Crop Science Department indicates that students are assessed on real performance in areas such as the quality of mulching, which must be weed-free, pest-free and effective at conserving soil moisture.

BAC is one of the key partners in the Proliferation of Local Expertise in Development of Green-growth Economy (PLEDGE) project, which seeks to transform training in higher institutions of learning to support green growth, practical skills development and sustainable economic transformation.

The project is being implemented by Mountains of the Moon University, along the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE), which has introduced competence-based training for institutions of higher learning.

Associate Prof Joshua Wesana, the dean

## FUNDAMENTAL SHIFT

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of the Faculty of Agriculture at Mountains of the Moon University, says the PLEDGE initiative seeks to change both student and trainer mindsets.

“In other institutions, if you tell a student to appear on the farm at 5am to prepare cows for milking, some take it as punishment,” Prof Wesana says. “That kind of attitude is what PLEDGE is here to transform.”

He adds that the project will develop national strategies, policies and guidelines for green transition-focused agricultural training, while also building capacity among lecturers and strengthening uni-

versity-industry linkages through professional councils.

### A living model

Mr Gelvan Kisolo Lule, the principal of BAC for the last eight years and a staff member for nearly 30 years, has witnessed the evolution first-hand.

“I came from university with a lot of theory. When I started training students here, I had to learn practical skills from the farm workers themselves. That experience was very valuable,” he recalls.

Mr Lule says the BAC curriculum has always been rich with hands-on skills because it was primarily established in 1920 to train farmers. But he says along the way, things started changing as more trainers recruited after university education started introducing more theory than practical skills.

“So, by the time we reached 1980-1990, we were now coming to about 70 percent theory and 20 percent practical skills,” he reveals.

“We were reviewing our curriculum in 2008-2009 and had a farmer stakeholder engagement. The participants were telling us that our students have a negative attitude towards work. They want to be

on the farm only to supervise. They don't want to get dirty,” he says.

After the curriculum review, the institution returned to the first principles.

“So, we said, we have to make them (students) be on the farm. So that's when we reintroduced the farm practices culture,” Mr Lule explains.

“Here, whether you are doing human nutrition or agribusiness, you must be early on the farm every day. You must be on the farm at 6am. By 7am, they are done and starting to prepare for lectures,” he adds.

Mr Lule also notes that the new curriculum for secondary education is already producing more confident and engaging students who are easier to train in higher institutions of learning. The competence-based curriculum is designed to shift education away from rote memorisation towards practical skills, critical thinking, and real-world problem-solving.

### Adopting BAC culture

Prof Pius Coxwell Achanga, the vice chancellor of Mountains of the Moon University, after touring BAC and interacting with learners and tutors, says the model should be adopted even in universities to produce professionals with more practical skills.

“If you want somebody to learn, you talk to them. If you want them to memorise, you show them. And if you want them to do something, you let them do it,” he says, adding that universities have much to learn from Bukalasa's model.

Prof Achanga says they will have deeper collaboration with BAC, including direct staff exchanges.

The NCHE says practical skills, competences and attitudes will, in the 2027-2028 academic year, account for at least 50 percent of students' marks nationwide, up from the current 40 percent. The plan is to reduce assessments that are largely based on written exams.

Prof Mary Okwakol, the executive director of the NCHE, explains further:

“The competence-based curriculum, an approach which is supposed to equate the students with knowledge, competences, skills and attitudes that can enable them to perform their duties more effectively than they are doing now,” she says.