

Research Application Summary

My Journey to Makerere University and Experiences as a Beneficiary of Academic Mobility Scholarship

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Prologue

I was born in the later years of the 20th century and when I was growing up in the rural areas of the western parts of Kenya, I would often hear people talking about great universities in the region then. Names like the University of Nairobi, Makerere University, and the University of Dar es Salaam would often be mentioned. Many of the nationalists, especially economists, back then, had gone through Makerere University. I would get some booklets my older siblings had with pictorial representations of the different universities in Africa, and would enjoy seeing the beautiful sceneries and admire how one day I would get a chance to be physically present in body and soul in those universities. My mother would often talk of me being a great man (I still harbor the ambitions to become a great man someday, though what defines being a great man is subject to discussion), and my father, though himself not formally well educated, would talk big about Makerere University, but it never crossed my mind that one day I would find myself in this university that has produced great people in the region, including the third President of the Republic of Kenya, His Excellence, retired President Mwai Kibaki. So, when the results of the scholarship for Mobility for Training, Engineering and Technology Graduates in Africa (METEGA) came through my email address, I was eager and enthusiastic to follow the footsteps of some of these great personalities. In this paper I share the story of my journey to and experience at Makerere University.

Prologue

Je suis né dans les dernières années du 20ème siècle et quand je grandissais dans les régions rurales de la partie occidentale du Kenya, j'entendais souvent des gens parler des grandes universités dans la région alors. Des noms comme l'Université de Nairobi, l'Université Makerere et l'Université de Dar es-Salaam seraient souvent mentionnés. Beaucoup de nationalistes, surtout les économistes, à l'époque, avaient passé par l'Université Makerere. Je recevais des brochures que mes frères et sœurs plus âgés avaient avec des représentations picturales des différentes universités en Afrique et j'aimerais bien voir les beaux paysages et admirer comment un jour j'aurais une chance d'être physiquement présent dans le corps et l'âme dans ces universités. Ma mère parlait souvent de moi comme un grand homme (je garde toujours l'ambition de devenir un grand homme un jour, même si ce qui définit être un grand homme fait l'objet de discussions), et aussi mon père, bien que non formellement bien éduqué, Mais je n'ai jamais cru à l'idée qu'un jour je me trouverais dans cette université qui a produit de grandes personnes dans la région, y compris le troisième président de la République du Kenya; Son Excellence, le président à la retraite Mwai Kibaki. Ainsi,

lorsque les résultats de la bourse de recherche Mobilité pour les diplômés en ingénierie et technologie en Afrique (METEGA) sont venus à travers mon adresse e-mail, j'ai été impatient et enthousiaste de suivre les traces de certaines de ces grandes personnalités.

Preparation and journey from Nairobi

The year 2014 marked the beginning of my mobility to Uganda and I remember very well, it was Monday, the 25th day in the eighth month of the year 2014 when the journey to Entebbe from Nairobi, began. If I told you that I had been to Uganda before, I would be telling a white lie! So, as usual, the excitement of being the first time to cross over the border to Uganda filled the air. All along I didn't want to show that it was my first time. I had traveled to other countries before, but this time, it was the first journey to Uganda. I woke up early that day and tried to make everything ready for the journey. I was later to be joined by one Mr. Godfrey Omulo with whom we had arranged that we meet along the way to the airport in Nairobi. We arrived at the Jomo Kenyatta International Airport (Nairobi) in time for the flight at 13h00, though we later learnt that there was a delay; and had to wait for more than one hour, before the announcement came through the speakers that it was boarding time. At 14h15, we were aboard Kenya Airways flight vessel number KQ412 on our way to Entebbe international airport, Uganda. We sat side by side with Omulo; he occupied seat number 14A, while myself I occupied seat number 14B. It took only 35 minutes to Entebbe; the flight duration was just long enough to enjoy a glass of juice, thanks to the all smiling air hostesses aboard the flight vessel. Entebbe airport is situated on the shores of Lake Victoria; though fairly small in size, it serves its purpose to the sovereign Republic of Uganda – “the Pearl of Africa” as they call it.

The Welcome at Entebbe and Meeting with the Ghana Trio

At Entebbe, we were welcomed by Ms. Kevin Nabiryo and Mr. Emmanuel Odame. I and Godfrey had not anticipated the welcome; we had our own plans and private arrangements to find our way to Makerere University. However, on coming out of the airport lobby, we found Emmanuel at the waiting bay with our names on a placard and we smiled happily introducing ourselves as the real owners of those names. I bet you know how important you feel when you go to a foreign land and you find someone already knows about you; you feel so much on top of the world. We spent a few more hours waiting for the candidates from Ghana to be cleared at the airport; we had used the same flight and even sat next to each other at the flight waiting lobby back in Nairobi; but as always is the first time for everything, we didn't know that we were together in our mission to this new land. Uganda, is a really nice country, but just like many countries in Africa, their processes can sometimes be slow.

First night in Uganda

We spent the first night in Uganda at Makerere University guest house. We ate fish and potato chips and retired to bed. We woke up early the following day, had breakfast, and off we went to have our own experience with the city of Kampala before the actual schedule for the day commenced. You know, this Omulo guy, is one person who wants to know so

many things at one go; it is one quality I have always wanted to have, but am still trying to reach his level. After making a round in the outskirts of Kampala, we went back to the guest house to meet Kevin and Emmanuel; they were our very good hosts and together with the trio from Ghana we went to pick our cheques at the college of agriculture. They took us to Barclays Bank, Kampala road where we cashed the cheques; we got Euros! Everything has a first time; it was my first time to hold a Euro, and I bet was the same experience for the rest in the group. We then proceeded to the forex bureau to exchange the foreign currency with the local one.

Search for accommodation

The same day we moved out of the Makerere University guest house and went to MZ guest house whose rates were fair basing on the status we were holding at the time; we were students in a foreign country. MZ guest house for your information is located on the western side of Makerere, about 600 meters from Makerere main gate. As soon as we settled at the guest house, we rested for a few hours and commenced searching for accommodation the very same day. Good enough, Godfrey had a few contacts who took us round in the evening to possible places where we could find accommodation. We didn't find any that was good enough! We retired for the night and spent the next couple of days searching for accommodation. Most of us finally settled for hostels and the one single room we found, was taken up by Godfrey. The room I took at the hostel (Muhika Hostel), was incomplete and so I had to wait for a few days for them to complete the carpentry work and make it conducive for living. I just took it because of lacking an alternative, but ended up staying in the same hostel for the entire period I was studying. The hostel has one of the ideal management team, led by Madam Irene; she is very understanding and later we became good family friends.

Meeting with Faculty at Biomechanical Engineering Department

The third day after arrival (that was on 27 August the year 2014), we converged at the School of Food Science and Technology, which houses the department of Biomechanical Engineering. For your information, our main host, Professor Banadda, was the chair of the Department and had given some instructions for induction on our arrival. We met with Dr. Nicholas Kiggundu, a smiling professor with so many words of encouragement. We met the faculty members in the department and I remember well Prof. Kasisira (often shortened to "Kasisi"). He is a man with a fatherly figure, the kind you would run to every time things hit a hard rock and there was no way out. We also met the graduate students at the department and formed our first contacts who would later show us the way around Makerere University.

Meeting with Linda Wandira and Engineer Bainomugisha

The first person I met in my college, which I later learnt was called "CoCIS", short name for College of Computing and Information Sciences, was Ms. Linda Wandira. She was very welcoming and made me feel so much at home. I later came to know that she is the assistant registrar at the School of Computing and Informatics Technology (SCIT) in

charge of postgraduate research. Ms. Linda is one of these nice persons who is very open and ready to assist anytime. She introduced me to Dr. Engineer Bainomugisha, who later became my advisor for my research work. Something interesting about Engineer or Bano as he is commonly referred to, is that he is small in physique and speaks with a loud tone that contrasts with his physical size. He became an associate professor at a tender age of 30 and he is basically excellent at what he does.

Commencement of Lectures

I must note the total absence of the induction session at CoCIS for the new graduate students in 2014. Since I had come to pursue academic excellence, I took it upon myself to get the class schedule and find my way around the college. The first person I contacted almost made me become judgmental and stereotype; it was this short and plump guy with a mean face. And true to it, he was mean; I requested for direction to some office and the response I got from him was kind of rude; telling me off, students don't mingle that easily with staff. I no longer see him in the college; hope he is well wherever he is. I then knocked on another office, where I met a gentleman by the name Maxwell Omwenga, who was more welcoming than the first. We did some short introductions and I learnt that he was supposed to be modulating one of my courses in the program. He introduced me to the head of the department, and showed me where to find the course schedule and my life became a bit simpler. Lectures commenced the following week; I met with colleagues in the program and together started building the family of the 2014 data communications and software engineering class; the class size was fairly small including the ladies Barbra Elizabeth Sayuni, Sharon Musiimenta (Agogo), Racheal Mukhisa and Michael Terhemba Ahile, and the lads Amos Otee, Ezra Kalema, Wilson Abigaba, Samuel Kakuba, Bob Wamala, Francis, Dickens, Kimera Rodgers and truly yours, I, myself. Something interesting was that the course lectures were conducted in the evening. In my whole life before then, I had always attended day classes, and so it was my first time to attend lectures in the evening, though I was enrolled as a day student; I was actually the only student enrolled as a day student.

Welcome by Prof. Noble Banadda

If you have never met Prof. Noble Banadda, then I think in one way or another, you will meet him at some point. He is this young looking professor; a chemical engineer by training with a big heart to help others reach his level and standards. So, just like his name suggests, as a noble gentleman he took us for a welcome dinner in one of the best hotels (Faze 2) in Uganda. We enjoyed the dinner and were at liberty to order for anything we felt like. One other thing, you should know about him, is that he is this kind of a free spirit; a person who speaks his mind bluntly. I actually learnt from him that I should never call a spade a big spoon. He gave us his experiences while studying at Sokoine University, Tanzania and Katholieke University, Belgium. I cannot forget his famous quotes; "money is not bad, after all it printed the Quran and the Bible" and that "in life, you only need to know the people who matter". He, himself, a well-established scholar in his field, would often use his personal examples on how he has progressed through life. The examples were real given the person going through them was physically present.

Application for the Student Visa

There are things that never crossed my mind and line of duty like having a student visa. You know studying back home, I don't remember anywhere I was required by law to have an authentication to show my studentship. I only needed a student identification to show where I went to school. Anyway, as they say, when you go Rome, do as the Romans do. Here I was in a foreign country, and Ms. Kevin informed us that we needed to apply for the student visa. We found our way to the Ministry of Immigration and Internal Affairs at Bugolobi, and made the application. For us citizens of Eastern Africa, our student visas were free of charge, but for the Ghanaians, they had to part with USD 100. I remember, discussing the efforts the African Union was making to unite the entire African continent, and supposedly, visa requirements is one of those issues that needed or just needs urgent revision.

Research Work

My anticipation was to do my research work parallel with my coursework. I later learnt that it was not possible. So I put my research plans on hold till the end of the first year of study. I had teething problems at the beginning of the research work in identifying and selecting my advisor; I finally landed in the hands of Assoc. Prof. Engineer Bainomugisha, a fine man. The story on how I landed in his hands for supervision will be left for another day. Throughout the research period, I would consult with Dr. Tonny Bulega, who is well experienced in cellular networks. Dr. Bulega, moderated a number of the course works I was doing under the program and we became very good friends in the long run. I remember his first day in class, he asked me a question on something I didn't know, and I just told him I didn't know but requested him to give me time; he laughed, smiled, and asked me to research on it. I completed my research work well in time and was assigned to write manuscripts on the METEGA project, and in the process came to meet new people like Prof. Paul Nampala, Dr. Antony Egeru, and Mr. Henry Massa.

My Experiences with Different Cultures

Uganda: Makerere is situated in the city of Kampala, which is at the heart of the land of the Baganda people with the Kabaka as their king. It is in Uganda where I found men being called "Grace and Mercy"; where I come from those names are purely reserved for the female folk. The pronunciation is rather interesting for some words like the ones with "ki" and "ky" sounds. Interestingly enough, I was always mistaken to be a Munyankole; reason being that I never knew any Luganda. Now, the Banyankole are from the western part of Uganda and most of them are light in skin complexion. Every time I would use public transport, I would be spoken to in Luganda, and always, being new in Uganda, I would fail to respond, and so they would assume I am from the western part of Uganda. After a few months, I learnt a few words in Luganda; greetings, and just some basics to avoid being embarrassed when buying stuff and while using public transport. During most evenings I would take a walk to Kasubi market to buy some groceries. The market is situated next to the Kasubi tombs, which is the official burial ground for the Baganda kings. There are other kingdoms in Uganda with their kings as well e.g., the Busoga Kingdom, Bunyoro

Kingdom, Rwenzururu Kingdom, and the Ankole Kingdom (though their kingdom is almost non-existent now). There are also other tribes like the Bahima, Bahororo, Teso, Bagisu, Acholi, Japadhola, Karamojong and many others.

Ghana: We would meet from time to time as the METEGA team at Makerere and share stories on our backgrounds. Until, you step outside your comfort zone, appreciating other people's culture is almost an uphill task. Can you imagine taking some things for granted and then you find them being highly upheld in another cultures? Some delicacies like consuming dog meat is just unthinkable, for example, where I come from, but in other cultures, they are reserved only for the royals. Learning about the Ashanti kingdom was very interesting, especially when it was done on a Sunday afternoon. It would mesmerize someone how the ancient priests in the kingdom had such immense supernatural power that would influence generations in the future.

Zambia: There was one of us from Lusaka, the capital city of Zambia. His name, Ndlovu, pronounced "njovu" means an elephant both in his culture and where I come from. Though himself, small in physique, did not reflect the image of the name he possessed, but was full of very interesting stories from Zambia. For example, though from geography I knew Zambia was larger than Kenya, but meeting this man made me understand how much larger Zambia was than my motherland. I came to know that the Nyanja language which is widely spoken in Zambia actually spreads across different countries in the Southern Africa region; the language is closely related to the Swahili language that is widely spoken in the coastal parts of Kenya.

Rwanda: There were these three candidates from Rwanda; Omar, Masabo and the lady Munezero. Through them I learnt that there is actually one tribe in Rwanda; and all of them speak Kinyarwanda. So I kept asking myself of the memories I had of what happened back in 1994. If I can remember well, back then we were told that the whole Rwanda genocide issue was tribal. How they came to be divided into tribes and yet they are just one people, I do not know. They are friendly people; we could meet often in their respective rooms of residence, share a meal, and tell each other stories. I learnt a few words in their language and some basic French.

Other Countries: We met with some colleagues from Somalia, Ethiopia, the United Republic Tanzania, Nigeria, South Sudan, and Congo - Kinsasha. They were not in the project, but were part of the larger Makerere University fraternity. It was interesting to learn the way of life for Somalis and Tanzanians. The Tanzanians are remarkably peace loving people and very gentle. My colleague from Nigeria had roots in Ibo and Yoruba; very interesting tribes from Nigeria and reminded me of the books written by Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka that we used to read in high school. The way the Nigerian culture dictated people to break the Kola nut as a way of making peace! My neighbor at the hostel was from Congo – Kinsasha; one remarkable point I picked about the size of Congo being so large in geographical size is that I can take more than 8 hours in a flight to

cross from the east to the west of that country. The amount of minerals the country has, is just enormous. The weather in South Sudan is so hot that it takes only a few days for one to turn into pitch dark in skin complexion; though some areas are relatively so cold. The oil reservoirs in that country are so immense that if exploited can serve Africa for the next couple of generations.

Meeting with the Doctoral Candidates and the METEGA Family at Makerere

The day the Doctoral candidates were arriving in Uganda was communicated to us well in advance by Ms. Kevin and we were excited and ready to welcome them to Uganda. They arrived in the night and were directed to the guest house where they spent their first night; we met early the following morning. As you can already imagine, the excitement of being the sole respondents to all sorts of questions. Many were mesmerized by the way food is served in Uganda. Not to say, it was my first time to be served with “posho”, rice, cassava, yams, sweet potatoes, pumpkin, just in one serving; in Uganda, they say, the sauce is the key component in any meal.

We began the fraternity as 5 (Omulo, Aboagye, Anaba, Arhin, and I - Isaac), but later we were joined by others from Rwanda (Omar, Masabo, and Munezero), Zambia (Ndlovu), and additional ones from Ghana (Achaw), and Kenya (Ochieng, Mugambi, Nicholas, Jael, and Anne Kebeney); and formed a solid family of 14 members. Anne Kebeney was on the staff mobility programme under the same project. She stayed with us for only six months and returned to her home university (Moi University in Eldoret).

Summing it up

Cross border graduate has many dimensions that it brings into an individual; for once I appreciated the different cultural diversities that we have. I learnt to be very patient with every single individual and have the capacity to listen well. You see, for Africa to grow and develop, it is important that we Africans understand our situation in terms of the different geographical locations that we come from. The graduate training at Makerere is research oriented; which means that the bulk of the study work is done by the student. And, of course, typical in many parts, some excuses that some instructors would give for not attending lectures were interesting. For example, Kampala city experiences a warm and humid climate. So, at some point it would be so hot and then rain would sporadically start falling. And so there was this one evening the weather decided to behave like such and the instructor was quick to postpone the lecture basing it on the fact that not many students would make it to class. Africa has an immense pool of talent that needs harnessing, with a healthy competition and the world would see the wonderful things coming out of this continent. However, it is important for us to learn when to let things pass and when to stand up (tactfully and politely, but firmly) for an issue. Otherwise, we are likely to find ourselves winning the battles and losing the war.

By and large, though with some challenges here and there on coordination and a few hitches that were encountered, I met great contacts and with some of whom we are now crafting great things for the future of Africa (including the idea of the Futuristic Africa Network

Lab - FANLab) and the rest of the world. Overall, the experiences were far more enriching! So, if you have chance to study in a foreign country, just grab it; everyone has their own destiny, and not everyone makes the choice to follow it! And you can complete your study in time, so long as you plan and work hard (see Afutu, 2016).

Bravo to Makerere University, my fellow METEGA students and to RUFORUM (see www.ruforum.org for details) for brokering and facilitating inter-university collaboration in the field of higher education in Africa.

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