The action research is about how youths in Uganda transit through agricultural education into agricultural careers; with Bukalasa Agricultural College (BAC) being the main case study. The research methodology lends itself effectively to a broad range of beliefs and relationships. It requires collaborative efforts of several stakeholders including educators, administrators, parents, alumni, students, policy makers, governing council members, and employers who influence the transition. These stakeholders engage in cycles of planning and implementation in pursuit of their responsibilities to prepare students for careers in agriculture.

Owing to the increasingly complex and challenging nature of the agricultural sector, the need for all stakeholders to be involved in agriculture professional development is ever present. It’s against this background that I call upon all readers of this issue of the research news update to actively associate with the research. This research shall provide us with a systematic, reflective approach to address areas of need.

I invite you to read and engage with the stories in this newsletter. Critical comments and feedback are highly welcome. We seek to include many more individuals to take an active role in the research process.
The research journey began with an orientation study of 7 agric-based youth employment interventions between Feb and April 2016. The orientation provided insights which influenced the research focus on an institutionalised approach to enhancing young people’s transition to agricultural education and work worlds thus the choice of BAC.

Communicative space

Creating the required communicative space began with a one-on-one conversation with one of top leaders of the college who in turn suggested a meeting with the department heads. On 31 Aug 2016, a brief presentation by the lead researcher during the heads of department regular Wednesday briefings yielded a collective no-objection from this important layer of the college’s decision making machinery. It was agreed that further discussion of the research purpose and procedures be undertaken in a workshop which took place on 16th September 2016.

Students in a visioning session about current and dream life

The Ugandan youth transition and agricultural productivity research aims at an in-depth examination of personal and contextual influences on young people’s education and employment choices with respect to agriculture. Connectedly, the study is exploring how agriculture-based youth employment interventions can optimize young people’s labour market transition into the sector across its rich value chain. The research is within a framework of a 3-4 year PhD programme at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands; and supported by NUFFIC (The Dutch organisation for internationalisation in education). Bukalasa

The research aims at an in-depth examination of personal and contextual influences on young people’s education and employment choices with respect to agriculture. Connectedly, the study is exploring how agriculture-based youth employment interventions can optimize young people’s labour market transition into the sector across its rich value chain.

Agricultural College (BAC) is the main case study, selected on the strength of it central place in building Uganda’s agricultural professional workforce.

The second workshop which attracted more educators was held on 19th October and dwelt on the challenge of limited agricultural students’ education-work transition. Taxonomy of influences was developed to frame the discussion of the factors and circumstances that either engender or constrain Uganda’s young people’s agricultural education and employment choices. The workshop was attended by the study’s main Academic Promoter, Prof. Dr. Jacques Zeelen, a professor of lifelong learning and social intervention in context of globalisation at the University of Groningen. The professor gave a context to the PhD research and explained that the study at Bukalasa is not an isolated engagement but it is within a network of academics and practitioners engaged in the fields of youth, work and lifelong learning.

Generate more evidence

At the end of the workshop, it was resolved that the research engages more stakeholders to further uncover the real local issues and concerns; and thereafter interventions could be explored. Consequently the next course of action was to engage with past and current students as well as educators to examine and document their experiences and perceptions in regard to college’s current practice. This resolution culminated into a series of workshops and one-on-one interviews with students, graduates and educators. The different stakeholders are sharing their experiences and perceptions on a range of themes including internships, career guidance, educators’ conduct, policy and governance, students’ behaviour, and college image.

The research team has engaged in a number of conversations, meetings and related informal fora to deepen and widen participation of key stakeholders. We acknowledge the challenges on the way and very optimistic that the research will not only contribute to a better understanding of the issues and concerns but will go a long way in strengthening the current practise, because so far so good!
ACTION RESEARCH GOOD FOR BUKALASA: PRINCIPAL

The Ag Principal, Mr. Gelvan Kisolo Lule is explicit on the usefulness of the research, and its relevance to the founding aims of the College. Read his unedited statement: Bukalasa Agricultural College (BAC) is founded on a research background. It is actually a research centre that was transformed into a training institute. The college supports knowledge development and dissemination for improvement of the welfare of mankind. It is within this context that BAC fully embraces the action research for two reasons: (i) It helps BAC understand itself better and work on our strengths and weaknesses for improvement, and (ii) We treasure contribution to academic progress especially due to the fact that this action research benefits the principal investigator in his academic progress.

OUTGOING PRINCIPAL ENDORSES ‘RESEARCH NEWS UPDATE’

The research will miss the great enthusiasm of the out-going principal. It emerged during a meeting with research team on 30th May 2017 that the outgoing principal, Ms Anyait Christine had only missed out on the key aspects of the research process but she was indeed a great supporter of the research project. Against the drop of a logistical hiccup in our communication strategy, Ms Anyait made a technical objection to the plans to conduct the validation workshop on 24th May 2017.

In response and after a series of interactions, a monumental and productive meeting which was also attended by Prof Jacques Zeelen was held in the principal’s office. Actually, it is this meeting that gave birth to the ‘Research News Update’. In one of the emails after the meeting, the out-going principal said ‘it was honestly nice bringing me on board. I even liked the idea of Prof. Zeelen to involve the college into further engagements beyond the research. Developing the news leaf (newsletter) will enhance communication and knowledge sharing among the members. I encourage it…and as our colleague said and presented the book Bowling Together is good’

Evolving Nature & Role of Research Team

One of the many unique features of action research is the flexibility in its structural, organisational and logistical formation. The action research team at Bukalasa Agricultural College has come to be in a voluntary process through which a group of enthusiastic academics has gradually but steadily transformed itself into the driving machine of the research. Its composition, role and leadership evolve as it responds to emerging opportunities and challenges. The rules are equally developing and being respected organically. Research News Update brings you some of the team members and a bit of their thoughts about the research.
Ms. WINNIE OCULI
The Research is a good challenge and very involving. It’s a teaching-learning experience. I love the Action Research because I am having it for the first time. The research has taught me to be humble but open minded (think outside the box), because people have different views and reactions towards different issues and ideas. Action research has humbled me and taught me to listen and analyse issues as they come. It is a good experience to carry on and get involved. Action Research, Action thinking, Action participation, action listening, and Action-Action!

Ms. SHARON APIO
Dear Reader, Welcome aboard the Action Research Journey. This research comes at a time when our country leaders, learners, parents, want to see a transformed youthful work force that is productive and prosperous in a sustainable way.

In order to achieve this desire; AR is a good tool that can be used for a number of reasons; it brings on board the ideologies of many stakeholders concerning education, it spells out the challenges and successes of each stakeholder while creating a linkage of these challenges and successes to all the stakeholders. As a result this informs better the education environment hence better strategies can be laid and adopted so as to achieve transformed and professional youth of this great country.

This action research journey is good for reasons that learning takes place at all levels and at any time. An inclusion of all stakeholders becomes very necessary for its success. Unless a learner is available, a teacher cannot come his way and the policy makers as well as interested parties cannot front their opinions. It is therefore necessary that the learner is understood holistically and given the necessary support in order to transform our youths.

The appeal to the readers is that “two cannot walk together unless they have agreed” so let us join hands in transforming today’s youth so that we can save the next generations to come.

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Mr. WILSON KIGGUNDU
Action research is the hardest activity I thought of until when this chance came to college. It is a pleasure that I and my colleagues have individually participated in this activity because we are to say the same words in days to come.

This research has tickled us all (college, tutors, trainees and other stakeholders) about the SWOT (Strength, Weakness, Opportunities, and Threats) for our system of training. It is giving us a chance to check ourselves and improve where necessary. Personally I have got an opportunity to compare and contrast the different research methodologies. God is good all the time, and all the time God is good as it’s His way.

DR. MARGARET NAMUSOKE
The youth constitute the biggest percentage of Uganda’s population and this is so for the rest of the world. Even though this is the case many of them are not employed although they have finished school either formally or informally. This means that there is a missing link between the training and the world of work.

The action research that has been undertaken by the participants and is still on-going has revealed many issues which could have led to the current unemployment even from youth who have specific careers. There is a lot more that can be discovered if we carried on with this research. The research team has also gained skills in research because its methodology is unique. Bukalasa Agricultural College being a centre of excellence in Agriculture envisages having all its graduates fitted for the labour market. They should also be well equipped with skills to initiate own jobs.
Often times, we express our perceptions or understandings and feelings in different ways. Have you ever wondered that you can ask people to express their feelings through shapes? Well, in one of our research sharing sessions we used a number of shapes to express our feelings, and our individual understanding of the research. We used 12 different shapes including diamond, rectangle, circle, triangle, oval, square and heart to draw and share in a pair before we could subject the same to the entire team members. Let me use two of the shapes to give you a sense of our feelings and understandings at the time.

The diamond

We all picture or visualize expensive ornaments when we hear of diamond, Yes, because diamond is a very precious mineral and items made out of it are pretty much expensive. But coming back to our discussion, this shape was chosen by 3 participants to express their thoughts and feelings about the research. One participant explained that like the diamond shape, the research started narrow and unclear especially in terms of themes and areas to address. But, that later it widened to cover so many areas but it is again reshaped to cover a few themes with detail. Another participant said of the shape that the research started narrow and unclear (started with educators, had unclear variables) but later widened to cover so many areas (embraced all stakeholders – educators, administrators, current students and alumnus).

The third participant noted that his choice of diamond implied that the research is valuable (like diamond) in addressing college issues as it brings all stakeholders on board.

The heart shape was also used by a number of participants and their thoughts and feelings as represented by the heart were that, first, the research calls for passions for one to be involved.

Second, the research brings excitement, anxiety, panic and worry (sometimes the research anxiety widens and narrows the heart. Third, young people ought to love agriculture if they are to reap big and become successful in the agricultural sector, and Forth, the research team is falling in love with research.

Ms. EVE NNABBANJA SSERUNJOGI

“As this research is being carried out it can help us to check ourselves. We can get to know how people think about us as educators. Let us support the research process”

Fellow members of staff, Bukalasa Agricultural College this research is vital and it reminds me of Mahatma Gandhi, when one mother brought him her son to be taught not to eat sugar because it was bad for the boy’s developing teeth and not good for the boy’s diet. Gandhi replied that I cannot tell him, but bring him next month; the mother went sad because she had travelled a long distance and expected this mighty leader to support her parenting; but after one month she returned. Great Gandhi took small the child’s hand into his own and tenderly communicated “Don’t eat sugar my son. It is not good for you” the mother was grateful but perplexed, queried why he could not say that a month ago!

The answer was a month ago I was still eating sugar! What a power in example! This is a research that aids the student and but first we the educators.

Shapes Communicating Feelings and Understanding

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RELATE-COMMUNICATE-BUILD: THE LIFEBLOOD OF ACTION RESEARCH!

Mr. Robert Jjuuko – Lead Researcher

No magic formulae - nothing else- but ‘correct chemistry’ is the mainstay of action research. Our interactions: talking to each other, openly and candidly sharing what we think, imagine and feel about the research process and outcomes is critical. It is core to the flourishing of our participatory inquiry and change of the ‘field’ of preparing young talents for agricultural productivity in Uganda.

Correct chemistry between and among all ‘research participants’ is the lifeblood of action research, and it hinges on the blending of actions created by three verbs: relate, communicate and build. So far, one of our greatest lessons at Bukalasa Agricultural College is the centrality of the required duty, skill and attribute of action researchers to communicate and relate effectively to build productive relationships. Not different from love or marriage chemistry, action research chemistry comes at a cost and more so the investment to deal with tensions of interest. The pain of accepting and facing the truth that for instance, two or more members of the ‘research family’ do not feel connected or interested. The emotional pain to wait or even postpone moments to taste and experience aspects of the core pleasures of the relationship. Our participatory action research enterprise has reminded us of the values of patience, openness, trust and humility; and their influence on correct chemistry. Often, we need to go slow to know and trust each other.

Power of correct chemistry

But why is this emphasis on correct chemistry or productive interactions and relationships? As action researchers, we are not detached from what we want to understand and change. To sound academic: our ontological and epistemological frame of reference is clear! To us, reality is socially constructed and to know it better we must deeply interact with those who have a ‘creational’ connection with the reality under scrutiny or study.

Actually our research project is inspired by Action Research authors who pronounce the construct of ‘social space’ in understanding and guiding organisational and social change processes. Authors who pull out the notions of interactions and relationships-building from Kurt Lewin’s (father of action research) work inspire our resilience to learn to manage the dynamics involved in creating action research chemistry. The chemistry and nurturing the correct chemistry for a successful participatory action research enterprise at Bukalasa Agricultural College.

At Bukalasa Agricultural College, we have had to delay our ambitions to deliver on targets and deadlines. For instance, our ‘validation workshop’ has had to wait for over six months to allow us more time to nurture the chemistry. We have had to think of non-conventional ways of reaching out to seemingly less enthusiastic members of the wider research family. At some point we organised a ‘research lunch hour’ to informally tickle but without nagging the entire teaching and non-teaching work force. This newsletter is a product of an informal meal time which we had after a productive conversation with a prominent member of the wider research family who had expressed reservations about the research team’s plans for the validation workshop. In both engagements, we further realised the power of communication and relationship building in action research - we cracked jokes, took selfies, gave feedback to each other, and walked out of the meeting in solidarity. But of course this was after 3-weeks of painful but useful tension. I am very positive and optimistic that we are capable of building
The Northern Uganda Research Stream is a complementary strategy to strengthen the credibility of the research process and outcome. It involves a series of research interactions and conversations with agricultural tutors and students in the sub regions of Acholi and Lango. The first face-to-face interaction was a reflective workshop with nine tutors from seven agricultural institutes (names to be revealed on attainment of informed consent to do so). The workshop ran from 24th to 25th April 2017 and was hosted at Ave Maria Vocational Training and Youth Development Centre, Lira district.

We concentrated on the tutors’ perspectives in regard to young people’s education and employment transition with a focus on agriculture. In one of the sessions, a case study was used to reflect on an agric student’s school-to-work life journey. The tutors were enthusiastic and affirmed continued engagement in the research and pledged to do whatever is in their means to take necessary as part of their routine work. One of the tutors, Mr. Jasper Olwa, takes the liberty to share what he is already doing differently.

Mr. Olwa Jasper
Dear colleagues, warm regards to you all.
After the workshop of 24th-25th of April 2017, I had an opportunity to share with my students and we realised the impact of the following on the teaching-learning practice at my case study institute:

- No career guidance,
- Limited motivation & encouragement,
- Low levels of practical skills offered during training,
- No support to help build capacity after the training at the institute,
- No capital to get started.
- Inadequate field practice materials
- Limited time for field work against the tight institute programmes
- Limited extension skills.

Basing on the above, I took the initiative to conduct a dialogue with the students on how to help them overcome these challenges and get involved in the most and best, simple and better ways. After a guidance session on later date, some accepted to form small groups to contribute money to purchase start up kits such as pesticides and insecticides, drugs and vaccines and other equipment to help them get started. Currently, they are already offering ‘technical services’ to the farming communities in the school neighbourhood at subsidized rates, and the farmers’ response to these services is overwhelming.

I think it is possible to make a difference no matter how small it may be. Because I know there are far many obstacles in our work as agricultural education tutors. But with this ‘tickle’ of the students, their response has been quite encouraging with 3 student field groups of 6 members each already formed and actively engaging. We all know the hardships facing our institutes but cant fold our hands.

HELLO FROM FRIEND OF THE RESEARCH: MARJON NIessen

Only a year ago I met Robert Jjuuko in the Netherlands (Groningen) and he told me about his PhD plans. I recognized directly what his research was about, because I’ve visited a few agricultural training institutions in the Northern part of Uganda. I experienced that the devotion of the teachers I met was wonderful, but not all the students were interested in agriculture.

How is that possible? Why are those students following a course when they are not interested? What can a teacher do to improve the motivation of those students? These are just a few questions that cross my mind when I think of the agricultural institutions in Uganda. For this research, it is important to get in contact with agricultural teachers.

I met a few of them already, I started to connect them to Robert. In the meantime he has met a few of ‘my’ colleagues and had some fruitful discussions with them. I really hope that the outcome of this research will provide advice and tools to teachers and institutions in Uganda, that help them to deal with not-yet-motivated agricultural students.

Ms. Marjon Niessen is a teacher of mathematics, and a Student Counselor at Terra MBO College at Elde in the Netherlands. It might be interesting to get a bit of a sense of how the Dutch professional/vocational education system operates because it offers important insights for our debate on the quality of teaching-learning in our diverse contexts.
Bukalasa Agricultural College started in 1920 as a research centre for cotton. On 27 September 1967, Sir Andrew Cohen laid the foundation stone for Bukalasa Agricultural College offering a two-year certificate course in Agriculture. A diploma course in the same discipline was introduced in 1980. In 1991, Entebbe Veterinary Training Institute was transferred to and merged with Bukalasa Agricultural College. The College started graduating cadres both in Agriculture and Veterinary. Located some 50km on Kampala-Gulu road, the College now offers 10 diploma and certificate study courses serving over 1600 students every single year by 2016.

UPCOMING EVENTS: VALIDATION WORKSHOP

Our next big event will be a Validation workshop on 27 September 2017 from 9.00 am to 3.30 pm at the College Main Library.

The workshop is intended to share with key stakeholders the exploratory re-search findings generated through a series of interactions in form of open interview sessions, case study, workshops and reflective conversations with educators, graduates and current students.

27 September 2017

By the end of the workshop, participants will have generated consensus on the key issues and concerns that characterize the College’s governance and teaching-learning practice. They will also identify key themes and actions for shaping the next phase of the research process.

What is validation? Of course, no attempt can be made here to discuss the concept or construct of validation or validity in research. But just to share that our conception of validation in action research is more of ‘a participatory data checking, analysis and interpretation of what we hear, read, feel and observe about the current situation’. It is also an opportunity for collective reflection on our feelings and perceptions of the current reality. It is intended to improve the quality, credibility and trustworthiness of our research process and outcome.

About Bukalasa Agricultural College

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UGANDA YOUTH TRANSITION AND AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTIVITY-RESEARCH PROJECT

About the Lead Researcher

Robert Jjuuko is a PhD Candidate at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands. He is a Ugandan adult educator with more than 15 years of experience in the theory and practice of education and training for youths and adults. He is author of a monograph titled ‘Developing vocational skills of youths with incomplete schooling – a case study of private provision in Uganda’
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