At the Islamic University in Uganda's Arua Campus, teaching is being rewritten to match the realities of today's learners and the demands of the job market—placing science, practical skills and community engagement at the heart of higher education.

Arua varsity trains job-ready graduates

BY EDGAR R BATTE

At the Islamic University in Uganda (IUIU) Arua Campus, the traditional lecture is no longer the centre of learning. Classrooms are increasingly giving way to idea labs, community placements and hands-on experimentation as the university reshapes higher education to reflect how students learn, and how the world of work now functions.

With a strong focus on science, practical skills and community engagement, the campus is deliberately moving away from rote teaching towards an approach where students learn by doing, testing ideas and solving real-world problems.

Dynamic

Teaching and training at the campus are designed to be as dynamic as the job market itself. This has required an open-minded shift in how learning is approached, with constant rethinking of what it means to teach and a growing emphasis on practical engagement.

Dr Burani Aluonzi, the campus director, says the old methods are no longer sufficient.

"We can't teach the way we used to. The student sitting in front of you today is not the student we had years ago. They don't just want notes. They want to understand, test and try things for themselves."

That simple observation has reshaped how learning happens. While lectures still exist, they are no longer treated as the final word. Instead, they serve as starting points, with students expected to build knowledge through practice, discussion and experimentation.

"We tell them, 'Come with your idea. The lecturer is not there to give you everything. They are there to guide you, to correct you, to help you think further,'" Dr Aluonzi adds.

This approach is most visible in the campus' idea labs, supported by the university with funding from the Islamic Development Bank. The spaces are deliberately informal—less about rigid instruction and more about exploration. Students from different programmes work together, learning to collaborate across disciplines.

One student-led project continues to excite campus leadership: an automatic irrigation system developed by a team of education and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) students.
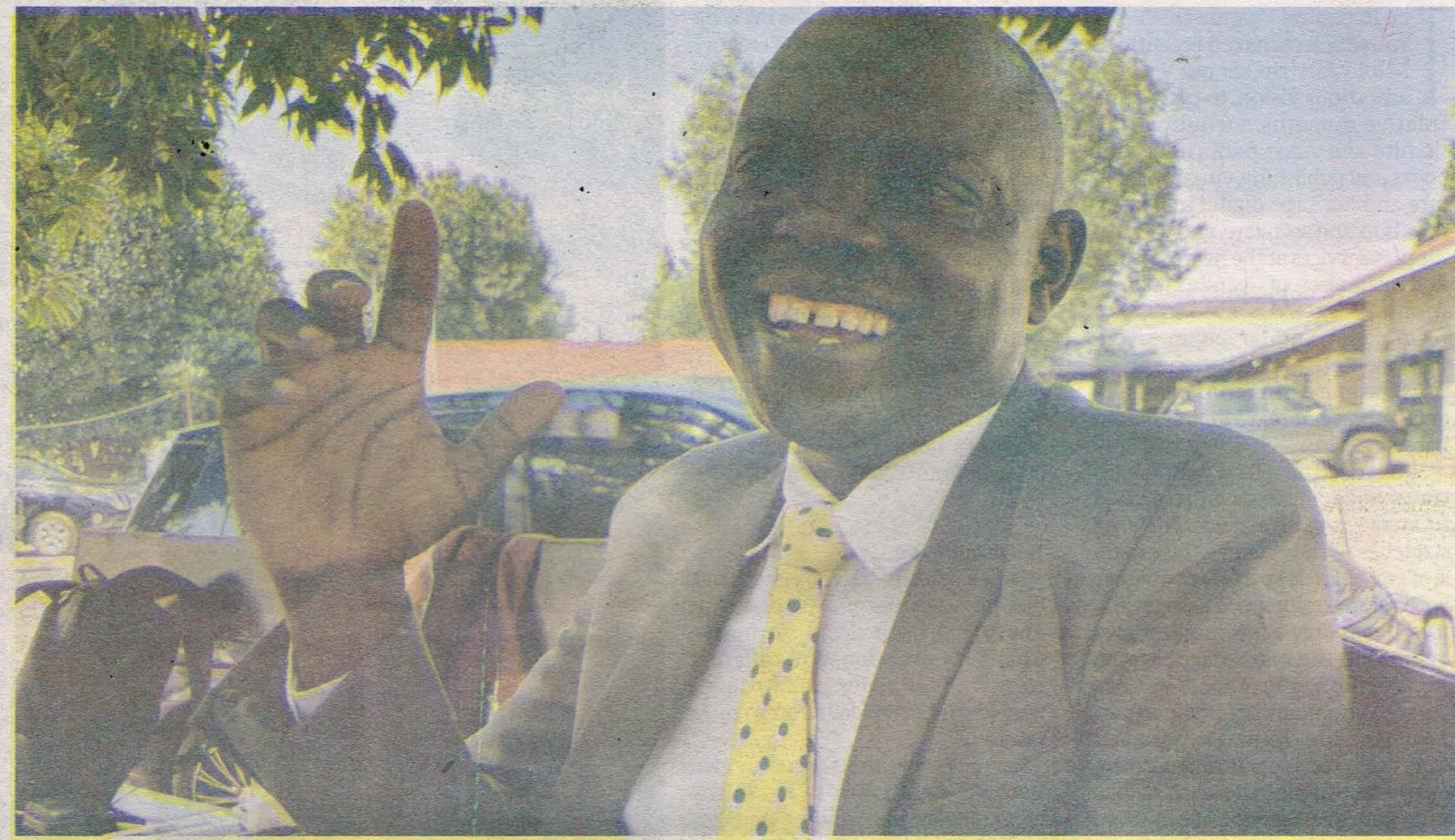
The system senses moisture levels in the soil and releases water only when needed. "That idea didn't come from a textbook," Dr Aluonzi notes. "It came from students looking at farming around them and asking, 'How can this be done better?'"

The project later earned recognition at an inter-university competition and, for the students involved, changed how they viewed learning.

"They realised they could build something useful," he says. "That confidence is important."

Across the campus, this practical approach is shaping how programmes are delivered. Social work students, for instance, are not confined to lecture rooms. They are attached to communities and development partners, learning how theory meets reality.

"When they go into communities, they see the issues first-hand. They learn how to listen, how to respond, how to work with people," Dr Aluonzi says.

Health-related programmes follow a similar path. Students train in hospitals and health facilities around Arua, gaining early exposure to environments they are likely to work in after graduation.

Business students are also encouraged to step beyond campus, attending trade fairs, conferences and local economic forums organised by the city and the Uganda Chamber of Commerce.

"Business is no longer something you only read about," he observes. "You learn business by being in business spaces."

For Dr Aluonzi, this insistence on hands-on learning is personal. He recalls an education that was heavily theoretical.

"I don't want an accountant to leave this campus without ever touching a cheque. I studied like that. I don't want our students to go through the same process," he shares.

Technology is further reshaping how teaching happens. With digital tools, smartphones and even artificial intelligence already part of secondary education, the campus is adjusting its methods to match how students learn today.

"These students use technology every day. So, the university must meet them where they are."

ICT facilities are being strengthened, and teaching is steadily shifting towards student-centred learning, blended classes and digital research tools. At postgraduate level, students are often taught across different campuses using e-learning platforms, allowing flexibility for working professionals.

Planned programmes in law and health sciences are also being designed with this blended approach in mind.

"We want programmes that allow students to learn, practise and apply at the same time," he says.

Part of the Islamic University in Uganda Arua Campus. PHOTOS/EDGAR R BATTE

Learning at Arua Campus is also shaped by its location. Situated near South Sudan, eastern DR Congo and the Central African Republic, many students arrive with lived experiences of conflict, displacement and rebuilding.

"When they study peacebuilding or social work, it is not abstract," Dr Aluonzi says. "They are studying their own realities."

That context transforms classroom conversations. Discussions are grounded in lived experience, questions are practical, and solutions are expected to work in real settings, not just on paper.

What is ahead

Looking ahead, the campus is deliberately aligning teaching with regional needs. Plans to expand into science-based programmes, particularly health sciences, are driven by a belief that training must respond to local gaps.

"We have two regional referral hospitals here," Dr Aluonzi notes. "Why should a student from West Nile go all the way to Kampala or Mbale to study nursing? We can train them here, where they will most likely work."

Behind this thinking lies a broader concern about the future of higher education in Uganda. Universities are expanding rapidly, but teaching methods, he argues, must keep pace with changing learners.

"The sector is growing very fast," he says. "But are we prepared for the students coming now? These students are different. They are using phones, AI and technology even at secondary school. They are not waiting to be spoon-fed. They want to build."

For Dr Aluonzi, the solution is not merely new infrastructure, but a shift in teaching culture, creating spaces where students are encouraged to think independently, test ideas and learn from mistakes.

"We are training people for this community and economy," he concludes.