Geraldine Namirembe Bitamazire's legacy: Expanding access to higher education

I had two Geraldine Bitamizire moments in 2025. The first in October 2025, when the Vice Chancellor of Kabale University, Prof Joy Kwesiga, at short notice, invited me to give a graduation day speech.

Kabale High Court sits on the university land. The only High Court located at the heart of a university.

In her brief pitch, she told me it wouldn't be much of a challenge, as I often describe Kabale in positive and glowing terms. When the university top management paid me a courtesy call in July in my chambers, we capped the memorable visit when I served my guests with a strong local beverage, *entuulire*.

While writing and delivering my remarks, I paid tribute to Geraldine Namirembe Bitamazire, the first woman Cabinet minister in Uganda.

Bitamazire was appointed by Godfrey Lukongwa Binaisa as the first woman full Cabinet minister in 1979 in the Ministry of Education. She later served for many years as the deputy chairperson of the Teaching Service Commission, chaired by Prof Asavia Wandera, himself a former vice chancellor of Makerere University.

Bitamazire retired into politics and was later elected Woman Member of Parliament representing first, Mpigi District, and later Butambala District. She re-entered Cabinet as Minister of State for Primary Education after the censure of Jim Katugugu Muhwezi and elevated to full Cabinet minister, where she served for five years from 2006 to 2011.

In her second Cabinet tour, she is associated with the formalisation of the education infrastructure we have in Uganda today. The biggest policy change was the pivot from one national university and four specialised support entities, Mbarara University of Science and Technology, which served as the country's second medical school; Kyambogo that hosted

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Karoli Ssemogerere
Tribute

a Teacher's College and Engineering College, and Nakawa College of Business School; to a multi-polar, multi-centred public-private sector higher education franchise.

On the private side, many universities have thrived to the point of competing or even outshining Makerere. Uganda Christian University is one whose Law school has attained that fame. But the biggest reform in higher education has been the investment by government in establishment of regional universities; Muni University in Arua, Mountains of the Moon in Fort Portal, Lira, Soroti, Busitema and Busoga universities.

Kabale, in the main grounds, where I sat next to the vice chancellor on a raised platform as Prof Kwesiga awarded degrees and diplomas to 1,676 students in just one morning, a number that used to be associated with the whole of Makerere, the national university I attended at the end of the last century.

These new public universities are drivers in their local areas and have kept the cost of higher education affordable in Uganda compared to our neighbours.

The National Council of Higher Education, headquartered at Kyambogo, has spurred a vibrant sub-sector. As universities grow and mature, their central role in the national economy will be felt. Kabale in a short time is both the largest employer and biggest taxpayer in town.

The universities are also solving some transitional problems. It is sometimes comedy when persons seeking office have to subject themselves to verification of their papers.

Below the universities is a legal framework that regulates pre-primary, primary and secondary education. Subjecting schools to licence is not an automatic panacea to systemic and historical problems but education is a big equalizer.

Bitamazire's legacy is expanding access to higher education. That is the net outcome of all the legislative reforms in the sector. She oversaw enactment of new laws for basic education; reforms to legacy institutions like Makerere University to improve governance and regulation of tertiary institutions whose courses of study terminate with award of a degree or a diploma with the name of a university attached to it.

International students are part of this fabric. Uganda hosts many students from as far as Nigeria to attend university in Uganda. Some suburbs of Kampala like Lubowa, Muyenga, Kansanga, Ggaba are both cosmopolitan and international due to this university effect.

For public universities, a new social fabric is growing within their eco-systems. Bitamazire served in a difficult time, of limited resources. Its'a tribute to her contribution that in her retirement, Uganda Management Institute, the elite public service management college, appointed her as Chancellor, another output of the reforms she engineered as minister of Education.

Justice Karoli Ssemogerere is an acting Judge of the High Court of Uganda.