UCC hands over state-of-the-art ICT computer laboratory to Adjumani school

By Arnest Tumwesige

The handover of a state-of-the-art solar-powered Information and Computer Technology (ICT) computer laboratory comprising of 41 computers and accessories to Bezza Al Hijji Secondary School is expected to boost the study of sciences in the school. The laboratory, which was installed at sh90m by the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) under the Rural Communications Development Fund (RCDF) gives an opportunity to children of less privileged to have a chance to become a doctor, a scientist or an engineer. General Moses Ali, the First Deputy Prime Minister, said technological skills are necessary for one to participate in the global economy, and the use of ICT in education can also improve the quality of teaching and learning. Gen. Ali, who is also the school's director, noted that the Government realises the need for Uganda to embrace the fourth industrial digital revolution without forgetting children from rural areas.

"Through this laboratory, students at this school will no longer struggle to search for information because they will get it from the Internet. This is an excellent step in the right direction," Gen. Ali said.

The director, who is also the Member of Parliament for Adjumani West County, went on explain that the use of technology is at the centre of the industrial revolution, thus creating room for new forms of delivery of educational content.

Combined with technologies that continue to develop at breakneck speed, the result is a world that has the means to learn at large scale. The global challenge for education is not just about providing access to it, but also ensuring its progress.

"It is no secret that good education has the power to change a life. What is new is the demand for that change. It is always fulfilling to acquire a new skill, especially computer skills, which have become an essential tool because the world is rapidly transforming into a digital era," he explained.

He said since 2003, the Government of Uganda, through the RCDF, has implemented several ICT projects for rural areas such as setting up Internet cafes, ICT training centres, postal service expansion and GSM towers throughout the country.

The multipurpose computer laboratory

Emmanuel Draparaku a computer teacher at Bezza said all the computers have a virtual laboratory software that enables learners to have science lessons, but also go through their desired experiments. The software, which only caters for biology, physics, chemistry and mathematics provides for all topics in each subject where one can read, but also ask questions and feedback is immediately given.

"Students are now finding it easy to study because they can use the centre to get clarification on whatever they don't understand in class," Draparaku said.

After the school encouraging members of the public to enrol, the Adjumani district chairman, James Leku Pili, has now promised to be part of the first community members who are going to enrol for computer lessons despite his busy schedule.

Chairman Pili appealed to UCC to provide guidance on how other private schools can benefit from such a programme. Pili noted that the district is committed to supporting private schools, adding that under the Development Response to Displacement Impact project, sh500m had been allocated to Bezza for the construction of a multi-purpose hall.

Bezza Secondary School students in a computer lesson with their teacher. The computers were donated by UCC

UCC hailed

Josephine Keliki, the head teacher of Bezza applauded UCC in general for the computers donated to the school since 2013, but also for keeping the pledge it made in 2017, by adding more computers. Keliki noted that

The project, which only targets refugee-hosting districts, is geared towards improving the learning environment of selected schools.

in 2013, Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB) advised the school to close the Advanced Level section because they did not have a good science laboratory and computers for students to get subsidiary computer skills. However, with UCC's donation, the head teacher was happy to note that Advanced Level will re-open in 2020. She noted that the computers are beneficial to both the students and teachers of the school where teachers are able to search for information, prepare notes and print set examinations.

Equally, the teachers without computer skills are able to train. Indeed, all the teachers in Beza are computer literate. The head teacher added that the advantages brought by the computers are enormous, adding that the school had

challenges in running internal examinations, printing and photocopying official work.

Not only has is translated into the increase in student enrolment in the school, but has also increased the number of candidates sitting computer examination in the Uganda Certificate of Education.

Keliki thanked the Government under and President Yoweri Museveni for not ignoring their school even though there are other government-aided schools.

While giving her remarks, she said: "This move has clearly indicated to us that whether private or government-aided, we all belong to the Government in terms of development. Therefore, I asked God to bless the work of this government for not discriminating against her people."

General Moses Ali, the first Deputy Prime Minister and Bezza Al Hijji Secondary School's director gives his speech at the commissioning of the newly-installed computer lab

UCC's Nyombi Tembo (centre), General Moses Ali, and James Leku Pili, Adjumani district chairman cut tape to mark the opening of the school's computer lab

We are learning more with less supervision – students

Concy Kareo Aneno an S4 student is now computer literate

Concy Kareo Anena, a student in S4 who confessed to getting exposed to a computer for the first time two years ago, said in case she does not understand some procedures during science practical lessons, she can easily understand better through the software. Anena, who plans to do accounting as her profession, says since she began interacting with the software, her performance has improved. "If there were no teachers and this computer is all I had, I could still learn on my own and pass," she said.

Similarly, Nelson Ochan also a student in S4 spoke proudly of having attained skills that have enabled him to get self-employed during holidays.

Sahaban Obote, the chairman of Abirichaku village described the handover of the laboratory as a golden opportunity for the learners,

but also the community since the school has opened its gates to members of the public. Comparing his daughter's performance in science subjects, Obote said there is big improvement, especially in the learning of practical subjects.

Nelson Odoch Ochan who is in S4 and also the head boy at the school has learnt how to use the computer

Students in the computer lab

Nyombi Tembo (third left) stressing a point to Gen. Ali in the laboratory

Programme targets both govt and private schools — UCC director

While handing over the newly installed computer laboratory at Bezza Al Hijji Secondary School, Nyombi Thembo, the director of the Rural Communications Development Fund (RCDF) at UCC said the programme is not just for government-aided schools as others think, but also meant for private institutions. The only requirement they need is that the districts should have students under the Universal Secondary Education programme.

In reference to Adjumani, Tembo noted that of all government-aided schools in the district, 90% have already been given the programme and the next target is going to be private schools. "As long as a school makes a formal request and our team makes an assessment of whether it has enough space and the structure, we can support it," Tembo said.

To ensure that the laboratory that was handed over to Bezza is fully functional, the director promised to see to it that it's connected to the Internet, at least before the end of June this year. Over 1,000 schools in Uganda have benefited from the programme with 1,300 ICT laboratories installed, of which 90% are government-owned. He also advised schools that have benefited to draw a proper time table so that each student can have one hour of using the computer everyday, which is the standard time.

Tembo, who was the guest of honour during the hand over ceremony said: "For one to have basic computer skills, it only requires 90 hours of exposure. The issue is not about the number of computers, but rather, having a good time tabling and programming."

He noted that in every parish in Uganda, there is a place where one can make a voice call, and that the Internet signal has upgraded from 2G to 3G which stands at 75%.

"The problem today is not about connectivity, but how to effectively use digital skills. That is why UCC has enhanced its uptake on the training of

> **TEMBO CAUTIONED THE STUDENTS AGAINST MISUSING THE COMPUTERS TO SEARCH FOR CONTENT THAT WILL NOT BENEFIT THEM**

specific groups of people like the mechanics and salon owners on how they can boost their businesses digitally," Tembo said.

Curbing cybercrime and pornography no easy task

Tembo cautioned the students against misusing the computers to search for content that will not benefit them. "A computer has both good and bad things on it. And since technology is developing day and night, it's also hard to block bad sites which keep popping up."

Meanwhile, UCC plans to link rural schools to first world schools in Kampala where students can learn through video conferences.

"If rural schools can afford it, the students can attend lessons simultaneously with the partner schools we are going to identify. But this will require a lot of band width. We are thinking of having the lesson recorded and sent on a CD," Tembo said.

UCC's achievements

Since the inception of the RCDF programme in 2003, the Government, through the UCC/RCDF programme, has so far supplied computers to over 1,000 secondary schools. Internet connectivity, adoption and usage for socio-economic

transformation has notably increased in business, education, health and agriculture aspects which have improved the standards of living of the community.

The ICT sector is one of the fastest growing in Uganda and elsewhere in Africa. It employs over one million people. The growth of services such as mobile money, selling of airtime and community ICT centres has tremendously contributed to job creation. The number of users of telephony services (fixed and mobile) is over 20 million, which is close to 68% accessibility.

In the broadcasting sub-sector, Uganda has achieved 100% radio signal coverage with over 200 operational FM stations. Every district in Uganda has more than two radio stations broadcasting in local languages.

On ICT infrastructure development, both the government and the private sector have continued to invest heavily in its deployment. The provision of quality services is mostly dependent on the availability of the ICT infrastructure. UCC has equally been able to bridge the rural-urban divide in the teaching, learning and health services through these ICT laboratories and content. A secondary school like Bezza has the same ICT laboratory and content like those in city schools, thus enabling fair competition.

"While a lot more needs to be done, we should use these ICT facilities and equipment to create our niche; to seek information, to present ourselves to the world through content creation, to market our cultures, to market our tourism potential and to improve efficiency in service delivery. We have also put appropriate measures in place, to protect the country and people on the challenges affecting the ICT sector such as cyber crime, online child trafficking and pornography, by establishing laws as well as the Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT), which will help us use ICT responsibly," Tembo said.