



GEA apprentices pose for a photo with MKU staff.

MKU'S GRADUATE ENTERPRISE ACADEMY: EQUIPPING STUDENTS BEYOND ACADEMIC FRONTIERS

By Caroline Mwendwa

“The public sector is not creating enough jobs to match the numbers of youths completing university education and entering the job market every year. In the past, the government was the biggest employer. But with the freeze on employment in the public sector, except for a few critical areas, young people are graduating into unemployment. Even the private sector is not creating jobs at the desired rate.” These are the words of Prof. Simon Gicharu, the founder and chairman of Mount Kenya University.

To help solve this problem, Graduate Enterprise Academy (GEA) was launched in 2013 as a vehicle to inculcate an entrepreneurial culture in young graduates in order to prepare them for self-employment. GEA focuses on graduates who have start-ups. These are creative young people with the potential to have an impact in their areas of interest.

In 2014, nine graduates who were the first cohort of the programme joined a residential entrepreneurship training programme between February and May which they successfully completed. They were given seed capital and are currently

in the world of business creating jobs and growing our economy.

Two years later, in April 2016, some 15 others enrolled in the programme. They have undergone practical training and mentorship in business through a well-planned mix of three weekend boot-camps as well as digital incubation through mentoring and networking spread over six months. They recently graduated in a pomp and colour event graced by Family Bank's CEO David Thuku as the chief guest. Among those present at the event were the board of directors' representative, Mr. John Ruigu, the vice-chairman, MKU's university council, Dr. Vincent Gaitho, the vice chancellor, Prof. Stanley W. Waudu as well as members the university's Senate.

This group was the second cohort of the academy since its launch in 2013. “Mount Kenya University has prepared you beyond academic fronts to be competitive graduates,” said Mr. Thuku while congratulating them for having made the choice to join the university. The fifteen graduates of the academy are MKU's alumni.

Partners of GEA

Graduates Enterprise Academy is a culmination of many hands. Various

organisations have been sending professionals to mentor the trainees during the boot camps. Some of these organisations include: Family Bank, Stima Sacco, Wadhvani Foundation and Equip Africa. Some of the alumni of the academy also played a great role in influencing and inspiring the recently graduated cohort.

Expansion

Speaking during the event, Prof. Peter Wanderi, MKU's director of quality assurance, linkages and partnerships said that there are plans to expand the academy. “There is capacity to hold up to a hundred trainees but we have had a challenge of bringing them on board,” he observed. “We shall commit about 50% of the space to the MKU graduates and the other 50% can go to graduates from other institutions,” he added.

With the realisation that not all entrepreneurs are university graduates, the academy is also opening doors to other institutions and plans are underway to have them enrolled.

Among the partners who have come on board include the Makerere University, an institution that is already studying what MKU is doing so that it can follow suit in expanding its entrepreneurship programme.



Apprentices showcasing their businesses to the chief guest.

Makerere has already established an entrepreneurship incubator that will serve not only the people of Uganda, but the entire East African region.

Apprentice exhibitions

The apprentices had the opportunity to exhibit their businesses during the event which ranged from: real estate, pastry, medical services and information communication technology (ICT).

They began these businesses as early as their university days and with the insights from the academy, they have nothing but appreciation and anticipation to grow to the next level.

THE 2017 COHORT

The 2017 cohort consisted of fifteen apprentices all of whom are running different kinds of business. The group symbolises the unifying power of the initiative as the apprentices hail from various parts of the country: Rift Valley, Central, Eastern and Western regions.

Joseph Musembi who hails from Kitui, runs a water bottling firm alongside bio-diesel production. He is an alumni of MKU and a graduate of medical laboratory services. His undergraduate course comes in handy in his water bottling business, as it touches deeply on water analysis.

His business venture BenPlast investment

is a solution to the water crisis experienced in some parts of Ukambani and Embu. “I started this business in 2015 and registered it in 2016,” says Musembi. “The main reason why I ventured in this business was because during the dry season, people don’t get fresh water and they have to fetch the same from boreholes,” he adds.

Musembi started this business from his small savings and a loan of Kshs. 300, 000 from Stima Sacco. He used the said money to purchase the requisite machine worth Kshs350, 000. From this capital, he has been able to maximise profits to the tune of Kshs1 million in terms of income and assets.

“In a day we produce 300 crates of water depending on demand which we supply to parts of Mbeere, Kitui and Machakos.”

Musembi has expanded his venture and employed seven employees four of whom serve inside the facility. He has one driver and a marketer. Whenever need arises, he employs casual workers.

Apart from water bottling, Musembi also runs a bio-diesel production business. “I have a farm where I grow sunflower from which I produce oil that we process further to produce bio-diesel.” This bio-diesel goes a long way in cutting costs as it is used in transport and distribution of the bottled water.

Despite the fact that his business is a



Joseph Musembi demonstrates how a hand held machine works.



Winnie Wanja.

start up, Musembi uses technology to cap the bottles. "I went searching the internet for a machine that can save me the time and labour of capping the bottles, and I found this," he says demonstrating a hand held capping machine that can cap 900 bottles in a minute with minimum effort. Thanks to this technology which he imported from China, Musembi has cut on the cost of engaging five employees and he can now finish up the process much faster.

Hurdles

This kind of business requires heavy investment for it to give ample returns. "We do the filling of water bottles manually which is expensive given the labour required." To sort this out, Musembi requires a lot of money to purchase machines that facilitate lively filling.

Another challenge facing this business is the need for more trucks to distribute the products. "We are currently using one truck to distribute to all our customers."

Future plans

Having made the first steps in water bottling, Musembi now aspires to start processing honey and packaging it. "Honey is in plenty but in most cases, it is not purely processed and so to fill this gap, our processing will be pure." He also plans to run an awareness programme which will sensitize people to use honey in place of sugar for a healthy lifestyle.

"In addition, we are planning to start producing fresh juice without additives and sugar and we have already procured juice processing machines to that end," he concludes.

Other apprentices

Gibson the proprietor of Gibson's Africa Ltd started by hawking chapati in Campus



Dismus Kiplagat.

while still a student. His business idea has expanded since and is now registered as a limited company dealing in: outside catering, events management, cakes and cocktails, all thanks to Graduate Enterprise Academy from where he has gained highly enriching ideas on how to grow it. Gibson's Africa Ltd is based at Mwiki, Kasarini in Nairobi.

Dismus Kiplagat, the entrepreneur behind ShambaPro app that helps farmers understand profits and losses while providing an analysis that allows for informed budgeting, says GEA has been highly educative in helping him expand his market base. As a result of the insights he gained from the academy, Kiplagat plans



Esther Ndiga



Jeremiah Chirchir.

to create more applications to serve his customers.

Jeremiah Chirchir from Nandi County has been running his car wash business since 2013. "I have paid for my university education from this business and GEA has been an eye opener," says a grateful Chirchir citing the marketing skills he has learned from the academy that he hopes will help boost his business. He plans to expand his working space and establish technological systems to do the washing which will help cut the cost of employees. He currently works with twelve employees.

Kandells is the founder and director of Cruise International which offers home building solutions using interlocks. "I realised that there is inadequate housing solutions in Kenya and thought I could fill this gap using hydroform technologies which is cost effective and ecofriendly because it uses soil and cement to make building blocks," he explains. He however laments of Kenyans' poor adaptability to new technologies and hopes this situation will improve with time. He attests that the Graduate Enterprise Academy is a spinner and with the skills gained during the boot camps, he is now better prepared to face the challenges that come in his way.

Esther Nthige from Kirinyaga county is counting her blessings after going through the GEA training. Her rabbit keeping business is set for greater heights. "I have learnt so much from GEA right from how to manage my business, to record keeping and financial management."

Naomi Mwendwa from Meru county runs a grocery distribution business. "I buy and distribute cereals to companies, NGOs and millers. I also import some cereals such as black beans from Tanzania and sell them to local markets." Mwendwa has partnered with millers such as Unga



Huron Mobegi.



Gibson Mwangi.



Naomi Mwendwa.

Limited and Capwell. Her advice to aspiring entrepreneurs is that they should pursue their passion and the returns will be rewarding.

Winnie Wanja's business is purely handiwork. She specializes in jewellery. "When I visited Uganda on a school trip, I saw these beads which my friends said are used to make beautiful necklaces," she recalls. That simple discovery has turned out to be the best thing she learnt during the trip as from it grew an enterprise that earns her a living up to date. From GEA, Wanja has learnt a lot about marketing and

Mount Kenya University has prepared you beyond academic fronts to be competitive graduates

hopes to expand her business even further.

Other benefits

During the launch, Family Bank's CEO David Thuku, promised the apprentices a one year membership of the bank's business club which serves to help young entrepreneurial minds by critiquing their business ideas and helping them develop well thought enterprises. "Plans are underway to start an exchange programme of the business club members with a US based company starting next year," he promised.



Jane Nyuttu, MKU co-founder cuts a cake during the graduation as other guests cheer on.