

Showdown looms as varsities reject plan to phase out diploma courses

The proposal revives earlier debates, rejected by VCs, to have universities merged.

The proposals mean diploma and certificate programmes will exclusively be offered in technical and mid-level colleges.

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The government is headed for a major showdown with universities over a new plan to phase out diploma courses and scrap some degree courses to spur specialisation.

University managers on Friday rejected a proposal by Education CS Ezekiel Machogu to merge and close down non-viable institutions of learning.

The Vice Chancellors also rejected the proposal to collapse the University Funding Board, Higher Education Loans Board, and the placement body into one institution.

In their proposal, the university heads want the placement of students to remain separate from the funding agency. But in a firm stand, Machogu said it is time the universities stop teaching what he termed as “anything and everything” in reference to diploma and certificate courses.

“There was a time universities went into doing anything and everything, and we are saying now that a university does not really need to go that route”, Machogu said.

The CS said the government is ready to support universities financially to phase out the diploma courses.

Machogu also pitched a strong case for its drawing from the previous push mounted by the immediate education cabinet secretary Prof George Magoha.

The proposal revives earlier debates, rejected by VCs, to have universities merged to address recurring financial woes.

Strongly opposed

The 2018 proposal was strongly opposed by the university managers, and it died out due to a lack of guidelines and laws guiding the implementations.

On Friday, fresh friction points between Machogu and universities played out during a stakeholders’ forum at the Kenya Institute of Special Education (KISEE) to discuss proposals that form the University Bill 2024.

The proposal to slash diploma programmes will, however, lead to job cuts, dipped revenue, and reorganisation of university programmes.

“As I said, we have to phase them out (diploma courses) systematically and

progressively, from the universities so that TVETs and middle-level colleges... and Vice-Chancellors and Councils know that this was presented before Cabinet,” Machogu said.

The proposals, however, mean that diploma and certificate programmes will exclusively be offered in technical and mid-level colleges, while universities focus on offering degree and post-graduate qualifications.

The development may put pressure on universities, which are already struggling to stay afloat as revenue generated from privately-sponsored students dipped.

This now means that universities that rely on diploma courses to boost their revenue streams will be exposed, as millions of shillings they get from the programs will be slashed.

Presently, Universities Act Section 20 (1) (e) provides that universities offer degrees, diploma and certificates.

The new proposal however means that Section 20 (1) (e) (i) and (ii) would be deleted to bar universities from teaching diplomas, postgraduate diplomas and certificates.

Radical suggestion

The proposed amendments to allow for scrapping of diplomas was one of the radical suggestions of the Presidential Working Party on Education Reforms (PWPER).

The task force members argued that diplomas and certificates create cut-throat competition between universities and colleges, weakening the colleges’ ability to attract students.

However, Machogu expressed optimism about harmonising the proposals and noted that MPs will have the final say. In the proposed amendments, the Education CS would be granted the power to recommend mergers, conversions, or closures of universities, both public and private.

If adopted, job losses loom, particularly among non-teaching staff, as universities are expected to streamline operations to remain financially sustainable.

The CS will also have powers to recommend the conversion of a public university college to a campus of another public university or commence the acquisition of a university by another university and the closure of a university.

Vice Chancellor’s Committee Chairperson, Prof Daniel Mugendi, rejected the planned merger.

“These provisions of the University Bill 2024 should be expunged completely,” he said.

Mugendi said mergers will not put an end to troubles facing universities.

“The challenges facing universities will not be resolved by mergers. The root cause is the insufficient funding the universities are receiving from the exchequer.”



Education CS Ezekiel Machogu during the 1st Graduation Ceremony of the National Defence University - Kenya in Lanet, Nakuru, on November 17, 2023. (Kipsang Joseph, Standard)



Daniela Mugendi Kaga, Vice Chancellor's Committee Chairperson

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ner,” he said.

He said the creation of new universities has spiked the country’s economy.

“There is strong evidence that an increase in the number of universities in the country has a positive correlation with an increase in GDP... The reverse (de-establishment or mergers) will have a negative effect,” he said.

Mugendi further questions the logic of mergers when universities handling smaller numbers are struggling to operate.

“Younger universities chartered in 2013/2014 have about 10,000-20,000 students per institution, and those are already very large and difficult numbers to manage,” Mugendi said.

Mugendi said mergers will lead to even bigger student populations and make the institution overwhelming to manage.

Machogu also pushed for institutions to specialize, using the case study of Strathmore University - focusing on Finance and Accountancy yet attracting massive applications and admissions.

“People from all over Africa want to go there yet they charge high fees. That is why we are saying kindly our universities, we want you to be known for something, in any case, our colleges, our TVET institutions, and middle-level colleges, are now better placed to offer those courses,” he said.

Academic standard

Machogu’s new reforms are also expected to enforce stricter academic standards.

Under the new proposals, universities would be required to seek re-accreditation of their programs every six years, with a mandatory review to assess relevance and institutional ca-

capacity before the expiration of the accreditation period.

This aims to ensure that offered programs are current, relevant, and well-supported by the university, according to the ministry.

“At least six months before the expiry of the validity period, a review of the programme should be conducted to determine its relevance and the capacity of the university to continue offering the programme,” the draft bill reads.

The appointment of Vice-Chancellors for public universities would also revert to university councils as it was before 2016.

Presently, the process is carried out by the Public Service Commission.

The Ministry also proposes that the term limit for university VCs be reduced to three years.

However, the VCs want it maintained at five years.

Those seeking to be VCs will also be required to have attained the rank of a professor and have a doctorate degree from a recognized university.

Furthermore, the ministry proposes classifying universities based on specialisation, with categories ranging from research-focused to technical institutions.

In the bill, the ministry wants public universities classified into six categories.

They include Research universities, Science and Technology universities, Comprehensive universities, Technical Universities, Specialised, such as the Kenya Defence Forces University and Graduate Universities.

Under the proposal, universities will be prohibited from offering courses outside their purview unless they are issued accreditation.

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