



Uganda Humanist Schools Trust

Isaac Newton High School, Kateera, Masaka

February 2016



Isaac Newton High School: Computer Lab, Boys Hostel & Exam Hall from left to right

Outstanding O-Level Results

I arrived at the school with Peter Kisirinya, the Director, who had just downloaded Isaac Newton High School's 2015 O-level exam results from the Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB) website. Distributing results in Uganda is quite difficult. Postal services are slow and unreliable. In the previous two years UNEB sent out each student's result in a text message to the School Director's mobile. However, with a large number of students, this takes a long time and runs into problems when the phone memory becomes full. This year UNEB tried the Internet. It issued each school with a username and password so they could download a PDF file of the results, but many schools have no electricity and few have

access to the internet. They must, therefore, either send someone to the nearest internet café, perhaps 20km away, or, as in Peter's case, download to a laptop using a mobile internet dongle, as shown below.



Isaac Newton's teachers had already seen in the national newspapers that the school had done well. They were, in fact, outstanding! From an entry of 72 students, 10 gained a Division 1 aggregate – this is based on each student's total score over 7 core subjects (which, in Uganda, must include passes in English, Maths and Sciences). Fewer than 6% of students nationally gain a Division 1 but 14% of Isaac Newton students managed to do so. It is the first year that the school has been an Examination Centre and so the first year it has appeared in the national tables. Previously students had to go away to another school to take their exams, and the results were credited to the school they used for their exams.

Isaac Newton's high rankings were remarkable and unexpected. The school was officially placed 10th out of the 30 schools in its District (Kalungo). However, this statistic is misleading. The school agreed to help another very much poorer start-up school by allowing 27 of their students to take their O-level examinations at the Isaac Newton Centre. All students performed poorly and this lowered the ranking of the Isaac Newton High School. Without these visiting students Isaac Newton would have been 5th in the District. The school would also have ranked about 300 in the top 1800 schools in Uganda. This is a hugely creditable achievement for a rural school in a very impoverished area.

Peter is particularly pleased that students at Isaac Newton scored highly in science subjects. He has been determined, since the school's inception, to develop a reputation for excellence in the sciences. This reflects Peter's own background from his degree in Physics with Chemistry but also stems from the belief that a science emphasis is appropriate for a school espousing Humanist principles. From the beginning, with help from UHST, the school has bought good quality science textbooks, built and equipped a good science laboratory with large prep room (with substantial additional assistance from the International Humanist and Ethical Union,

IHEU) and he has personally sought to stimulate student excitement by conducting practical science investigations, which take place regularly at weekends.

The day the national results were published, a reporter visited the school from a national radio station. He was curious to understand the school's success. Peter had no hesitation in saying that having a large quantity of books and science materials had made the difference. The school was too small to provide full-time posts for specialist teachers and the pay they can offer is low. Therefore, in common with other rural start-up schools, he had been forced to rely heavily upon part-time and casual teachers. While necessary, such teachers only stay on site when they are giving lessons, so they are not available to help students outside lessons. The books make a huge difference in this setting. Ready access to books has created a learning culture, where students take responsibility for their own learning and study together in their free time, in the evenings and at weekends. Peter was asked about the Humanist Ethos of the school and the meaning of the school motto "*To Reason not to Believe*". He explained that the school emphasises science and applying its principles to daily life – this involves encouraging students to question prior beliefs and subject what they are told to reason and evidence. This he felt was the way for students to succeed in a modern society.

Former Students

We are always interested to learn what has happened to former students.

On this visit we met three former students, who happened to visit the school during our visit. Their stories indicate some of the variety of things that students do when they leave school.

Richard Kalyango left Isaac Newton School in 2010 after gaining A-levels in History (Grade B), Economics (C), Geography (E) and Divinity (C). He gained a place to read History and Education at Mutesa I University in Masaka. Unfortunately, Richard's grades were not

quite high enough to gain a government scholarship. From a poor family and with no external support he was forced to withdraw



from university after the first term. Although devastated he managed, after a while doing casual jobs, to save a deposit to buy a motorbike on hire purchase and has since been operating a boda-boda (motorbike taxi). He has already repaid three-quarters of the capital cost of the bike and he will have bought it outright by June this year. After that he intends to save the proceeds from his business until he can return to university. He will then hire out his motorbike while studying, and use the proceeds to pay his way through his course. He is an able young man, who has faced many difficulties, but he has a clear determination to succeed.

Ronald Lumu (pictured right with Peter) also left school in 2010 after gaining low O-level passes with an aggregate of Division 3. A local wholesale trader offered him a job and, after a while, took him to Dubai to meet buyers and suppliers, where he stayed on as the trader's agent. After a year or so he returned to Uganda after hearing that the local police were recruiting. He was interviewed and offered a job. After further training in Tanzania he joined the Uganda C.I.D. as a criminal investigator, working in the wider Masaka and Kulungu areas. His role as Assistant Operational Crimes Officer brings him into school to advise on security and also to give talks to students on how to avoid being drawn into crime. Ronald had a very poor primary education and feels he owes the school a lot for giving him a sound education in the basics. He regard Peter as a surrogate father.



I found **Nicholas Ssenkibirwa** lopping tree branches around the school. Peter had given him a vacation job to earn some money during his break from college. In 2013 he gained A-levels in Physics (Grade C), Mathematics (C) and Fine Art (C). Although these are respectable grades they were not good enough to gain a government



scholarship for university. However, he met the requirements for a funded place at a National Teachers' College in Kabale, South-West Uganda. In August 2016 he expects to qualify as a teacher of secondary Physics and Mathematics. These are shortage subjects so he will find it easy to get a teaching post. However, he is very grateful to Peter for nurturing him through school and, to show his gratitude, he intends to return to Isaac

Newton School as a full-time teacher – even though he knows he could earn much more in other schools.

Those of you who have read my earlier reports may remember that I talked in the Isaac Newton report of 2012 of two friends, Mike Mazinga and Joseph Kawuki, who gained excellent science A-levels at the school. They were both awarded government scholarships to study for a quasi-medical B.Sc. degree in Dietetics and Nutrition at Kyambogo University, near Kampala. During my visit the Kyambogo degree results were published and to everyone's delight they were both awarded First Class Honours degrees. I received an email from Mike to say they were hoping to proceed to Master's courses if they could find the necessary funding (unfortunately in Uganda, as in the UK, there are no statutory grants for postgraduate degrees). It is worth repeating what they each said after their success at A-levels...



Mike Mazinga:

"I was very happy about my results, although I could not share this moment with my beloved Dad who is deceased. My Mum is a peasant

farmer of 62. She is illiterate although she wants me to study and attain a high level of education. I paid for my own schooling by working in a restaurant as a waiter. A degree in Nutrition will enable me to help the enormous number of malnourished infants in my village and the country at large."



Joseph Kawuki:

"I am an orphan raised in my maternal family. I am the second born in the family. I have my little brother Henry who is the last-born. Dad died in 2000

when I was only 7 years old. Studying has been and still is a hard venture, most especially due to financial problems. I have had to finance myself by picking up work in the holidays."

Over 70 students complete their studies at Isaac Newton School each year. There can be little doubt that, without the financial help that UHST supporters have provided, many of these young people would have missed out on secondary education. The support we give to the Humanist schools in Uganda is helping to transform the prospects of all of many young people, giving each the chance of a rewarding future free from the poverty their parents experienced.

Current School Information

Isaac Newton School had 309 students at the end of 2015. This included 25 students who transferred as boarders from the Mbute school, which Isaac Newton had been managing up to its closure at the end of 2014. Recruitment is in progress for 2016, which starts later than usual on 22nd February, to allow for the participation of older 6th form students in the Presidential and national elections.

The number of teachers has increased as the school absorbed 6 staff from Mbute School. At the end of 2015, the school employed 31 teachers, but only 7 of them have full-time contracts. In 2016 the school hopes to shift the balance further from part-time to full-time teachers. This will save money, as the school will have less to pay in transporting teachers to and from school. The move towards more stable full-time staffing should also raise teachers' commitment to the school and students.

Since the school's exam results have improved it is experiencing an increase in the demand for places. This is making it possible to gradually raise fees from the very low levels at which they started out. In 2016 the basic termly fee for a day student in years S1-S4 will rise to 110,000 Uganda shillings (£25), A-level students in S5 and S6 will pay 140,000 U.Sh

(£30) per term. This covers tuition and school food. However, local day students must also pay a registration fee, buy their school uniform and pay examination entry fees. All such costs are paid for students on UHST scholarships. The school is finding that boarding students do better in exams. This is almost certainly because they have access to books, computers and study facilities in the evening and at weekends. In 2016, in order to keep the day students in school for longer, Isaac Newton plans to provide a free evening meal for them all at about 7.30pm. The school is hoping that this will encourage day students to stay at school and use the study facilities in the evenings.

Local boarding fees are rising in 2016 to 350,000 U.Sh (£70) per term. This covers tuition, accommodation in the school hostel and all school food. However, local fee-paying boarders must also pay a registration fee, buy all their off-duty clothes and uniform and pay their own examination fees. These extras are covered for students on UHST scholarships. Boarders have three sets of clothes – a day-school uniform, and two off duty sets of clothes. Scholarship holders, who tend to be particularly needy, have all of their school field trips paid for them.

All students, apart from scholarship holders, pay a termly insurance to cover the costs of health services provided by the school clinic. This amounts to 10,000 U.Sh (£2) per term, for day students, and 20,000 U.Sh (£4), for boarding students. These collective contributions can then be drawn upon to cover the costs of treatment of students, both within the school clinic and when they have to be transferred to the regional hospital.

In 2015 the school clinic treated 143 cases from the school community and 7 urgent cases from the local community. Those from the local community included snake bites – the school keeps anti-venom serum, and the treatment of wounds and fractures. Among the students and staff the main complaints are gastro-intestinal problems, including the occasional case of typhoid; malaria, especially in June and July after the main rainy

mosquito-breeding season, which is treated with the latest combine therapies including artemesinin; cuts and grazes; and headaches, fever and period pains for which analgesics are dispensed. The school nurse also offers health advice and organises health education in the school.

Due to the poverty of the area and the only income coming from the sale of produce at harvest time or when an animal is killed, the payment of school fees is erratic. Students and family members pop into school with small amounts of money when they have any spare. Many small payments are recorded in the school ledger and taken to the bank at frequent intervals. The school is having some success in persuading families to pay directly into the school account from a bank. 10% of fees now come in this way. There is also a growth in the use of mobile money. In this system, money is paid into a mobile phone account before being transferred to the designated school mobile phone from which it can be moved to the school bank account. The school texts families when they fall into arrears with school fees. Mobile money now accounts for 20% of school fee payments.



In 2016, Isaac Newton school held a very successful music, dance and drama competition. Each year a theme is chosen and students, with some guidance, write and act a play with music. The theme in 2015 was *“The role of culture in moulding discipline”*. Students acted out how the rules and customs of their local society influence behaviour and help to create a more orderly society. One group focused on hunting tradition in which the person who kills a hunted animal has the

right to decide how the meat is distributed among fellow hunters and nobody in the group would think of questioning the judgement he makes.



In July 2015 the school also hosted the District knock out football competition.



Infrastructure

The school has been using its own resources to undertake a number of building projects on the school site. UHST provided £15,000 to build a hostel for 50 students. However, the school came to an arrangement with the builder to construct a larger hostel that would accommodate 100 boys. The additional money is being paid in termly instalments from school local fee income. The main building work on the walls, roof and windows was finished before our last visit in June 2015, at which time the builders were working on internal plastering and painting. At the time of my visit joiners were fitting internal doors and solar panels have been purchased and, once fitted, they will provide interior and external

lighting and a number of power points.

Work is also well advanced on a gatehouse reception room which will serve as the bursar's office and a place for the day and night guards. The office will be used as a reception for visitors to the school and provide a place where parents and guardians can pay school fees.



I saw further work in progress on landscaping the school grounds to provide channels for storm water and retaining walls. This will prevent flooding of classrooms and the laboratory, which has been occurring from time to time. Additional funds are needed to complete this work and to make paths and flower gardens.



A few weeks before the end of term in November the water pump broke down and students had to go back to fetching water by hand from the well 30 minutes away at the bottom of the valley. Peter said it took them 3 days to get the pump repaired, enough time to remind everyone of the difference the

pumped water project had made to the life of the school. With over 300 students in the school, a chain of volunteers had to run backwards and forwards all day to make sure there was enough water for personal hygiene, washing clothes, food preparation and cooking, site cleaning and watering the school gardens. Peter said the students were very patient as they realised that the school was doing its best to rectify the problem. However, they were arriving late to lessons because they could not wash, they were absent when on water duty and school meals were late every day.

School Baby



One of the orphan girls, Brenda, became pregnant following a relationship with a boda-boda rider. As a result she missed her O-level exams. Brenda is kneeling left in the red top above. Her baby, Viola, is in the arms of Peter's 70-year-old mother, Gladys, who is going to look after the baby so Brenda can return to complete her schooling in 2016. Considering that there are large numbers of mature young men and women aged 15 to 20 in school, pregnancies are rare. It is good to see that when they happened the school does its best to help the girls to complete their schooling.

Priorities

Over the coming period resources need to be found for:

1. The classrooms flood during periods of heavy rain so urgent work needs to be completed on storm drainage, walls to

retain soil and on paths and roadways around the school site.

2. Work undertaken on the gatehouse needs to be completed. This will provide a place to welcome visitors and an office for the school's bursar and cashier, which will make it more convenient for parents and guardians coming to the school to pay school fees in small instalments.
3. Since Computer Studies has become a compulsory subsidiary subject for most A-level students, the school urgently needs another room of computers with open office software.
4. An opportunity is about to arise to connect the school to the power grid. A large new Hydro-electricity dam at Bujagali Falls on the River Nile has been commissioned and new power lines will come close to the school. The department of rural electrification has offered to pay 60% of the cost of building a feeder line to connect the school to the grid if the school can find the remaining 40%.
5. A school canteen where students can eat their meals in comfort is needed; especially as now 200 students (boys and girls) are living in hostel accommodation on the school site.
6. The school water pump will need to be replaced in the foreseeable future.

If you feel you or your group would like to contribute to meeting any of these needs then please contact stevehurd@uhst.org (01782 750338).

Donation and standing order forms can be found at:

<http://www.ugandahumanistschoolstrust.org/donate/>