



Uganda Humanist Schools Trust

Report on Visit to the Humanist Academy, Kamengo

Monday, November 8th, 2010



The school visit

On this visit to the Humanist Academy I was accompanied by Dr Christopher Mugimu from Makerere University School of Education. Dr. Mugimu is the Head of the Department of Teaching and Curriculum at the University. He is also a trustee of the Uganda Humanist Schools Association and acts as an educational adviser to the Association. This was his first visit to any of the Humanist Schools and the aim was to acquaint him with one of the schools and give him an opportunity to talk with Deo Ssekitooleko, the school's Director, and offer advice on the basis of his extensive experience of Uganda schools.



Deo led Dr. Mugimu on a tour of the school and they shared their experiences of running secondary schools in Uganda. Dr. Mugimu is Director of Mukono Town Academy, which started from simple foundations in a rented room 17 years ago and has grown into a well-respected day and boarding school. Each year the school prepares its year 6 students to move on to university and further training.



Dr. Mugimu was impressed by the wonderful views from the school's hill top site and he felt that the main teaching block with three classrooms had been constructed to a good standard. Deo explained how he staffed the school. Annet Kisakye, the headteacher (pictured), is the only full-time member of staff. Her salary is being paid by the Italian Humanists up to the end of 2010. After that, alternative sources of funds will have to be found. Classes have been taught by a rota of 13 teachers employed on a casual basis. Most part-timers work 2 days for the school and teach six one and a half hour lessons per day. Pay levels are low with science and maths teachers earning 2,000 Uganda shillings (60p) per lesson, and other

teachers earning 1,500/= (45p). Teachers' travel costs by *boda boda* (motorbike taxi) to and from the school are reimbursed, and a few teachers are paid a lodging allowance.

Because the school is not yet registered, students have to take their O-level examinations in another school which is a recognised examination centre. At the time of our visit, 12 Senior 4 students were sitting their exams at Jirah High School, 3 km from the Humanist Academy in the village of Kyabadaza. The problem with this arrangement is that the school has to find money each year to pay Jirah for the students' board and lodging during the examination period.



65 students from Senior 1, 2 and 3 remained in school to take their end of year school examinations. The Head teacher, Annet, brought the remaining students together in one classroom so that we could talk to them as a group. I introduced Dr. Mugimu who gave an inspirational talk encouraging the students with four guiding principles:

1. *Personal responsibility*: If they wanted the Humanist Academy to become a good school then they should share the responsibility of making it so. He commented that the compound was untidy and the grass was long and suggested that students should take it upon themselves to ensure that the school looked good.
2. *Hard work*: Teachers and the school cannot be expected to make students succeed. Students themselves must work hard at all times if they are to achieve success.
3. *Self-discipline*: Through good behaviour and self respect students can improve the school and themselves. It is important that they dress smartly and walk purposefully to and from school. If local people see they are keen to get to school and are well organised then they will think well of the school and it will raise the standing of the school in the community.
4. *Vision*: Every student should have a clear vision of what they want to do with their lives. They should find out what qualifications are needed to achieve their ambition and work out a personal plan to ensure they achieve their goals.



At this point Dr Mugimu went around the class asking students to outline their personal visions. The vast majority wanted to be doctors, lawyers and accountants, a few wanted to be teachers or nurses but, as in the UK, very few wanted to work as farmers or artisans – and yet this was the realistic prospect for a majority.

School closure

Deo explained that the Humanist Academy had failed an inspection in December 2009 as the facilities were not up to government standards. The school should have closed immediately and not recruited the new intake of students in February. However, Deo persuaded the authorities to allow him to keep the school running a little longer to give the school's backers an opportunity to improve the facilities. Unfortunately, by the time the inspector returned in August, the school had made no further progress so he ordered the school to close. Deo did not want to let down his students in the middle of the school year so he ignored the closure order and kept the school open, without recognition, until the end of the school year in December. This enabled the first cohort of students to take their O-level examinations.

From the very beginning, when the Uganda Humanist Association (UHASSO), with financial support from the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU), opened the school to the first intake of students in February 2008, they were told by the authorities that the facilities were inadequate and the school was refused a license to operate. However, given the need for secondary schools in the area, the authorities agreed to allow the school a window of two years to construct additional buildings. In view of this, UHASSO and IHEU decided to press on with the school and raise the additional investment.

On the understanding that the required physical infrastructure would be forthcoming through IHEU, South Cheshire and North Staffordshire Humanists (SCANS) and, once established, the Uganda Humanist School Trust agreed to help UHASSO and IHEU by meeting the running costs of the school. We did this by providing 42 scholarships (guaranteeing the school an income of £5,040 a year) to bring local children from poor homes into the school, by raising money for educational resources, such as books and science materials, and by supplementing school funds to pay teachers' salaries. Since the school opened UHST supporters have met over 95% of the running costs of the school and also made significant contributions towards essential infrastructure improvements.

By the time of closure, IHEU had funded the purchase of the school's land and made substantial contributions towards the construction of the three-classroom and staffroom blocks. South Cheshire and North Staffordshire Humanists (SCANS) and UHST raised funds for the roof, windows, doors and flooring to complete the classroom block; for the roof, windows and doors to complete the small administration block, for the construction of a rudimentary kitchen and three separate multiple latrines for boys, girls and staff.

The school was able to function with these limited facilities and, through the commitment of its teachers, was beginning to provide a decent basic level of education to 75 children in this really impoverished area.

Unfortunately, by the end of the allotted two years, it had failed to reach the minimum infrastructure standards to gain official recognition. As a consequence the Humanist Academy is due to close for good in December 2010.



The implications of closure

The Humanist Academy was intended by IHEU to be a flagship school for Humanism in Uganda. The secondary school was meant to be just a beginning. The longer-term aim was to build on the site a residential training centre to promote Humanism in Africa, a primary school and a health centre for the local area. Unfortunately the funds to realise these ambitions were never forthcoming. Deo struggled to make the dream a reality and his hopes were raised in 2009, when IHEU produced a £150,000 development plan for the school. Unfortunately, no further money has been forthcoming. Since the school opened in February 2008 IHEU has only been able to raise £3,500 towards the construction of small administration block.

As well as the failure to realise the flagship project for Humanism there are other more immediate human concerns.

When the school closes 75 students will be without a school. At the time the school opened this would have been a disaster. However, in the last two years the Uganda government has started to introduce Universal Secondary Education (USE), which is free to local children. An existing government school, just 2.5 km from the Humanist Academy, has become a USE school and already a few students have been transferring to it from the Humanist Academy. This school would provide an alternative to all students at the Humanist Academy. The expansion of secondary schooling in Uganda has been such that there are now four secondary schools within 4km of the Humanist Academy.

Although two of the other schools are non-religious, what will be lost is a school with an explicitly humanist ethos. Deo had worked hard to develop a school with a uniquely Ugandan humanist philosophy.

There are also implications for the many supporters of UHST who are sponsoring student scholarships at the Humanist Academy. At the very least, the closure of the school will be a source of great disappointment to them.

International funds to support the Humanist schools in Uganda are limited. In the past five years we have all been trying to support three schools: the Isaac Newton High School, the Mustard Seed School and the Humanist Academy. Dividing the funds three ways has made it difficult to raise educational standards in the schools as fast as we would have liked. The Isaac Newton and Mustard Seed schools have made very good progress but they still do not meet the standards required to be formally registered, though they are very close. The closure of the Humanist Academy would allow the land and other assets to be sold and, under the terms of the Humanist School Trust Deed, shared between the remaining two schools. It would also mean that future funds would be shared two ways instead of three.

This poses a real conflict between head and heart. Those of us who have been involved with the Humanist Academy since the beginning feel a strong commitment to the staff, the students and the community. On the other hand, we also recognise the substantial costs involved in bringing the school up to standard and that this will be at the cost of improvement of the other two schools.

Proposal for a new school

The closure of the Humanist Academy is a *fait accompli*. However, Deo has obtained permission from the Ministry of Education to reopen the school in February 2011. The conditions are that it must be run by a new organisation, it must change its name and it must embark on a substantial building programme to get the facilities up to standard within the next 18 months. Deo proposes to call the new school Fair View Senior Secondary School and to transfer the land and other assets to a new charitable company that will run the school.

The challenge will be to raise the funds required to meet the standards for registration by the Ministry of Education. Inspections by the education and public health departments have identified the following list of essential requirements:

- A science lab and equipment to enable science to be sought in a practical way;
- A secure library and reading room so that books can be stored and used on site (although UHST has bought the school large numbers of books, the school site is not secure so the books are stored off site in a lock up in the nearest town);
- A fourth classroom, an examination hall and additional desks and chairs;
- A safe playing field for sports (although the school has land for this, the site has never been levelled to create a safe playing surface).
- On-site housing for at least two members of staff.
- Improvement to the access road and construction of safe paths to the latrines and the site in general.
- Provision of on-site water collection and storage and adequate drainage.
- A perimeter security fence.
- Finally, and most importantly, a secondary school can only be licensed if it employs at least 8 fully qualified and registered teachers. The Humanist Academy only employs two teachers with this level of training.

Deo is preparing a fully costed educational development plan setting out how the school might reach the necessary standards by June 2012. He will then need a firm commitment from IHEU and the international Humanist community before the school can be reopened.

Your views

UHST has to decide whether to support the proposed new school or whether to concentrate future resources on making a success of the other two Humanist schools. If you have opinions on what we should do please email us at uhstinfo@gmail.com.

Steve Hurd, 30 November 2010