



Uganda Humanist Schools Trust

Report on Visit to the Mustard Seed School, Busota

Wednesday, November 10th, 2010

Annual examinations

I had already spent three hours with Moses Kamy, the Director of the Mustard Seed School, in Kampala the previous Sunday. This had given us time for a relaxed discussion of the progress of the school and funding priorities for the next year. My actual school visit took place on the last day of the annual school examinations.

Senior 4 students were away at another school 24 km away taking their O-level examinations. Examination entry fees had been paid to Uganda National Examination Board some months earlier by parents and guardians and, in the case of UHST sponsored students, by the school. The Mustard Seed, with help where possible from families, also pay a fee to the examination centre school to cover board and lodging for the students over the weeks of the examinations.

Students from Senior 1 to Senior 3 remain to take end of year school examinations. S1 and S2 had already finished theirs and been sent home. S3 took their last exam on the morning of my visit and left for their homes at lunchtime. Teachers have 10 days free for marking before the S1, S2 and S3 students return for their results and for a final two weeks of teaching before the end of term. The photograph show Annette, the headteacher, marking end of year examinations. During this period, the school holds meetings with parents and guardians to discuss the progress of each child and to present end of year reports. This allows staff to explain directly to family members what the school expects of students during the coming year and affords families an opportunity to ask questions and express any concerns they may have.



Towards registration

The school had been visited the previous day by a Local Education Department Inspector. He

explained what the school still had to do to meet the standards required for registration as an officially recognised school. The list includes:

- completion of the science lab, which exists with walls and a roof but needs flooring, windows, doors, furniture and wiring for electricity.
- glazing windows and fitting doors in the main teaching block, which doubles as an examination hall once classroom dividing screens have been removed. The glazing is needed to keep out wind and rain and prevent disturbance during lessons and examinations.
- creation of an administration block for the headteacher, senior staff and school bursar.
- finally the school must find money to recruit four more fully qualified and registered teachers. At the moment the school has 4 full-time and 4 part-time teachers. However, only 4 are fully qualified and registered, whereas the authorities require a minimum of 8 if the school is to qualify for registration.

Part-time teachers work either two or three days a week for the school, and usually work in one or two other schools at the same time. Due to low pay levels the school is experiencing substantial staff turnover.

Hiatus in funding

The Mustard Seed School was set up in 2005 using funds from the Rationalist Association and readers of the New Humanist. However, it became clear in 2009 that transmitted funds were no longer reaching the school. An RA investigation revealed that it had been the victim of an internet scam which resulted in school and RA emails being diverted to a third party. The fraudster persuaded the RA that the school bank account had been changed. Consequently funds



intended for the school were sent to a false account. The scam was a huge setback. Receipts of money by the school were halted, which completely curtailed school progress through 2009 and well into 2010. The RA worked hard with the Charity Commission to rectify the problem: (a) it conducted a painstakingly thorough investigation of how the scam went unnoticed by the RA and the school, (b) it secured permission to replace all lost donor money from RA reserves, (c) it transferred management of the new funds to Uganda Humanist Schools Trust. UHST, in collaboration with the RA, has now started a phased allocation of the recently released funds to projects in the Mustard Seed School.

To the great credit of the school's staff they weathered the crisis. Teachers accepted reductions and postponements in salary payments and all internal spending was pared to the barest minimum. By maintaining the standard of teaching the school was able to appeal to the parents and guardians of students to keep the school going by paying their fees on time at the start of each term.

The situation improved from the beginning of 2010 when UHST stepped in, at the request of the RA, to provide assistance to the school. As outlined in our previous report, we allocated £1,200 to Mustard Seed in January 2010 to provide scholarship places for 10 needy children, and £1,700 for books and science equipment. UHST is confident that loopholes identified by the RA enquiry have been closed. All money sent to schools is carefully tracked and we ensure that it is used



for the purpose for which it was given. The school opened a new email account and is being vigilant about keeping its username and password secure. There is also a new school bank account with Barclays. With help from the UHST lawyer, the school has been incorporated as a formal charity, with articles based on the UK Charity Commission model. This creates a solid framework for effective governance and financial control.

New science lab and consequences

The loss of external money during 2009-2010 has had other knock on effects. A school inspection in December 2009 demanded that, for the school to be allowed to stay open, it must build a science laboratory before the end of 2010. Moses felt he had to respond quickly to this urgent requirement so he took out a loan from a Micro-Finance Company to build the laboratory and an extra classroom, mortgaging land owned by a family member to secure the loan. Unfortunately, with no money coming from the RA and low incomes from poor local harvests depressing fee income, the school was unable to keep up with the loan repayments. At the point when the outer shell of the building was finished the bank recalled the loan and took possession of his uncle's land, which had been the basis for the mortgage. The school has gained an essential, if incomplete, new building but at great cost to the family member, who is now without land to grow food. In the customary way in Africa his wider extended family are trying to help out the uncle and



his family during this time of personal crisis. Both the RA and UHST would like to help the family but it is very difficult to justify the use of donor money for this purpose.

There was one more problem. During the process of constructing the laboratory the school fell behind with the rent it pays on one quarter of the land it uses. As a result, the landlord served an order for the school to be evicted from this land in September. After appeal to the local police, the eviction date was extended to the end of term in December. The potential loss was devastating as the land contains two substantial buildings that are used by the school. One building has six small rooms – 4 used by girl boarding students, 1 used by a supervising teacher and the other used as a washroom. The other building has 4 rooms – 1 used by boy boarders, 1 by a supervising teacher, 1 as the bookstore and lending library and the fourth as a school office.

The landowner informed the school that he intended to buy a new house in town and needed to sell the land as soon as possible. In order to circumvent this, Uganda Humanist Schools Trust worked quickly to make arrangements to negotiate down the price and buy the land for the school, sharing the cost with the International Humanist and Ethical Union. Earlier this year IHEU had bought for the school three-quarters of the site, this final purchase secured the future of the whole site and of the school. It also relieves the school of future rental costs.

Immediate prospects

We feel that the school has come through what we hope will have been its most challenging period and that it has a good future. The school is well managed and there is a clear sense of direction. Moses is not only the school Director, he also teaches History at the school. This means that he is on hand to work with Annette, his headteacher, to deal with problems as they arise. When we visited the school during International Friendship Week in July we were impressed by the positive spirit among both staff and students. The educational progress being made by the students was evident in the standard of their spoken English and in the lessons we observed. Recruitment to the school will be helped by the recent closure of a nearby Moslem secondary school. The senior 1 intake in 2010 was 45 students and they are hoping to enrol 50 first year students for the February start in 2011.

School requirements and prospects for 2011

The immediate priority UHST and the RA is to help the school to meet the government standards for registration. If they fail to achieve these by the end of 2011 there is a danger that the school could be closed. The key priorities are:

1. Water supply: Lining the previously constructed borehole and adding a lift-pump so the school has on-site access to water. The photograph shows Moses Kamyá standing on the site of the capped off borehole for water.
2. Science lab and additional classroom: concreting floors, fitting windows and doors, plastering and painting walls and



constructing furniture.

3. Textbooks for Senior 2 and Senior 3 students (UHST has already bought books for Senior 1 and Senior 4 classes)
4. Refurbishing rooms on the newly acquired land so they can be used by the school administration – re-flooring, plastering and painting.
5. Finishing the main classroom block/exam hall: glazing windows, fitting secure doors, making repairs and painting.
6. Teachers: appointing an additional four fully qualified and registered teachers.

The school needs to meet these requirements by April 2011, so it can apply for registration and be inspected before the end of the year.

Once registered the school will be official and it will be able to concentrate on other improvements in the learning environment of students. A first priority will be to refurbish the space used currently for school administration to turn it into a computer network room. This will allow the school to realise the gains observed by the Isaac Newton High School since it opened its computer lab: parents queuing up to pay their fees, an increase in daily school attendance, a substantial improvement in the resources for learning and the opportunity to teach computer studies as an optional subject.

If you feel you or your group would like to contribute to meeting any of these needs then please contact us at uhstinfo@gmail.com or download a supporter form from our website: www.ugandahumanistschools.org.

Steve Hurd

23 November 2010