



## Uganda Humanist Schools Trust

# Mustard Seed School, Busota, Kamuli February, 2015



Cleaning tables for the start of the new school year

### Return to school

My visit to Mustard Seed School coincided with the start of the school year. Uganda has a liberalised education system and schools compete with each other to attract students. Publication of the Primary Leaving Certificate results around the third week of January sets off a scramble as secondary schools compete to attract the brightest primary leavers.

Mustard Seed advertises UHST scholarships on local radio, and Moses and his senior staff speak at recruitment events held at local primary schools in the days after the results are published. Being able to offer scholarships from UHST supporters puts him in a strong position to attract some of the brightest primary leavers.

The school started to use the scholarships to attract needy but bright children 3 years ago. So the first bright intake from 3 years ago are starting in Senior 4, the O-level year, in 2015. While three students attained grade 1 aggregates at O-level in 2014, the majority of students achieved the very lowest level of pass, which is the typical outcome in rural schools. However, with improvements in the standard of student entry, Mustard Seed is hoping for a big improvement when their results are published next year. This should further enhance recent positive trends in annual recruitment.

This visit gave me an opportunity to interview, with the help of Annet, the Headteacher, nine

of the new UHST scholarship holders, and what a bright group they are! All except one had gained grade 1 in their Primary Leaving Certificate and the other girl gained a grade 2 after missing grade 1 by a single point.

There were a few notable features of the group of students we met. Well over a half had been required to repeat one of their primary school years. This meant they were entering Senior 1 of secondary school at the age of 15 or 16, instead of the expected 13 or 14. In Uganda, school years have to be repeated when students have low levels of attainment in end of year exams. In almost all cases this was due to the fact that they had missed a term or two of schooling in that year due to the inability of their families to find the money for fees.

All 9 children I spoke with had both parents living and both at home taking care of their families. This reflects the fact that the Kingdom of Busoga, where the Mustard Seed School is located, largely escaped the HIV/AIDS epidemic that struck areas of central Uganda along the lorry route between Kenya and Rwanda. As a result family sizes in Busoga are higher – with over half of the children I spoke with coming from families with 10 to 12 children. In fact, the financial strain of supporting a large family is one of the main social need factors which leads to these students being allocated scholarships.

In terms of occupations, most children had two parents who were peasant farmers. One or two grew cash crops such as coffee or sugar cane, others sold surplus maize, the staple food crop, to bring in cash. One father drove a lorry carrying sugar cane to the sugar refinery and another was a primary school teacher.



One of this new first year intake of scholarship holders is Phiona Mpaalo (above). Phiona is 15 years of age. She is one of a family of 2 girls and 3 boys. Her home is near Kamuli, the regional market town. As it is 10 km from the school she will board in the school hostel. Both her mother and father are peasant farmers who generate a cash income by growing salad vegetables, notably tomatoes and peppers, for the urban markets in Kamuli and Jinja. Despite having to repeat her Primary 3, Phiona gained a grade 1 aggregate in primary leaving and her ambition is to become a doctor.

## Students and teachers

Mustard Seed School has grown steadily in recent years. In November 2014 the distribution of students was as follows:

	Boys	Girls	Total
Senior 1	31	45	76
Senior 2	27	39	66
Senior 3	30	32	62
Senior 4	33	18	51
Senior 5	10	5	15
Senior 6	8	5	13
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>139</b>	<b>144</b>	<b>283</b>

There are 22 teachers in the school, all but three are male. Secondary schools in Uganda have a predominantly male staff. It is remarkable and very welcome that the

headteacher, Annet Kasuubo (below), is female.



Annet has been at the school since its inception. She entered as a two-year trained teacher with a Certificate in Education. The school is enabling her to have study leave (mainly in the holidays) and makes a financial contribution toward her fees for a course at Kampala University to upgrade her qualification to a Bachelors Degree in Education. Two other teachers are being helped by the school in a similar way.

At this stage in the development of the school salary levels are low. Mustard Seed concentrates on attracting bright young teachers who are still training. The school benefits from their enthusiasm, even though they lack experience, and the young teachers use the income they earn to work their way through their training – this works well for both parties. To compensate for the low pay the schools gives each teacher a housing allowance and one to cover transport to and from school.

The school employs only 5 full-time teachers though most of the rest are on extended part-time contracts. From 2014 all salaried teachers are enrolled in the National Social Security Fund (NSSF), a national pension scheme for private employers. Teachers contribute 5% of their pay and the school adds 10%.

With a small school there are always gaps that need to be filled. The school has a policy of not employing casual staff from local schools

because they feel the quality of teachers is too low. Instead they bring in trainees from the best universities to teach 2 or 3 days each week during term time. Five make the 4 hour journey from Makerere and Kyambogo Universities in Kampala to teach lessons in the school, and three casual staff are employed from nearby Busoga University.

## School governance

The person in overall charge at Mustard Seed School is Moses Kamyá, the school's Director. It was Moses's vision to start the school and he approached the Rationalist Association's "New Humanist" for initial funding to construct the first building. Below is a picture of Moses with his wife and young family.



Although Moses has the title of Director he behaves with his staff as a first among equals. He does his fair whack of teaching, 14 lessons of History each week. This is in addition to overseeing building programmes, liaising with the Ministry, school inspectors and examination board, ensuring the school is fully staffed, has sufficient food and resources. For his 14 hours of teaching he is paid at the same rate as other teachers. However, Moses feels that the school finances are too fragile at this stage to enable him to take even a small salary as Director.

To help over this difficult development period of the schools, UHST has started to pay a small termly honorarium to the Directors at the Humanist Schools. They cannot be expected to devote themselves fully to their schools if they cannot put bread on the table

for their families.

On this visit I spent some time talking to Moses about the greatest personal challenges for himself and his staff. There are a number. The first is their inability, on their current low incomes, to cover unexpected medical bills for themselves and their families. The second is concern about the security of their families should they have a serious accident resulting in disability or death. Finally, there is the issue of whether they will accumulate sufficient money in the national pension scheme (NSSF) to take care of themselves and their families in old age. These are all very serious concerns and without easy answers.

We have agreed as a first step to investigate with them the feasibility of introducing insurances which cover essential health care and compensation in the event of loss of livelihood. Whether this is going to be fundable within the school budgets will be the big question. However, staff are more likely to show a long-term commitment to the school if a solution can be found to these concerns.

Moses shares the administration of Mustard Seed School with other senior staff, notably his head teacher, deputy head and director of studies. Together they ensure that the school runs as well as possible given the limited resources available. Decision-making is remarkably democratic.



While Annet, the Headteacher was interviewing and inducting new teachers, the picture above shows Moses (right) discussing with senior teachers the arrangements for the

start of the new school year.

Representative democracy also permeates the student body. Every class in the school elects a Class Captain and a Class Spokesperson. The Captain has a variety of responsibilities which includes passing down messages, organising the class for lessons, ensuring text books are brought from the library and returned, that the chalk board is cleaned for the start of lesson and so forth.

The Spokesperson holds a weekly meeting to hear any concerns from students. The range of concerns is wide. In the past classes have raised concerns about the time they have to spend on cleaning chores around the school, including fetching water, they complain, like students across the world, about school food, if they feel a teacher is being unfair, too strict or too lenient, and they will even say if a teacher goes too fast, too slow or if they cannot hear or understand what a teacher is saying.

Concerns expressed in class are taken by their Spokesperson to a weekly Student Council meeting, which is held after school every Friday. The Student Council can propose remedies and the elected Head Boy and Girl take unresolved issues to a Staff Committee, which is empowered to respond and find solutions, wherever this is possible. These procedures are modelled on village democracy in Uganda and are a very good training for students in speaking in public and putting across their points of view on issues that affect them as individuals and the wider community.

## Infrastructure developments

Earlier in the year UHST launched an infrastructure appeal. This raised, with the help of a generous top-up donation, sufficient money to build much needed boys' hostels. We raised sufficient to build a small hostel for 48 boys. However, a sign of the steadily improving finances of the school, Mustard Seed was able to find its own matching funding which has enabled it to construct a hostel twice the size catering for 96 boys. This

was nearing completion. The windows were in and plastering completed. All that remained was for internal doors to be fitted and the building to be painted inside.



The new hostel is a fine looking building as can be seen from the picture above. The pictures below show the unfinished interior and the front of the hostel which has been named after one of the Princes of Busoga, who visited the school and will open the hostel.



The playing field, which was constructed last

year, is now almost ready for use (below). The growth of grass on the site has been disappointingly slow, but the school has decided to mark of the field for sports so they can start to use it for games lessons and inter-school fixtures in the very near future.



In recent years the boys football team has done well in the District league. At the moment, the girls play netball as well as football. The school has a pen pal link with a school in the United States. They hear a lot about basketball in the States and are hoping to be able mark out a basket-ball court alongside the football pitch, with the link school in the US providing funds for baskets and balls.

In common with other rural schools in Uganda water supply is a constant challenge. In 2013 we provided funds for a pumped water system on the lower school site and this is the year to sort out the problems on the upper schools site. The intention was to drill a similar borehole to the one on the lower school site, raise the water using an electric pump to an overhead tank from which it could be gravity fed around the site. However, the hydrologists determined that local water quality would be too low under the site itself.

As an interim measure, a borehole and lift pump have been installed across the playing field close to swampy land, where the water quality is very high (picture below).



As you can see from the picture the school bicycle, supplied by a UHST supporter, is being used as a work horse to transport the water back to the school site.

The next stage of the water project has already started. The local MP Ms Kadaga, who is Speaker in the National Parliament and after whom the girls' hostel is named, is arranging for the school to be connected to a new district piped water system. The water will be delivered to an underground concrete water tank in the school compound. The picture below shows the hole for the tank under construction.



Once constructed and connected to mains water supply, an electric immersion pump will transfer the water to a raised tank so that it can be fed by gravity around the site.

The final development on the school site since my last visit is the near completion of a small A-level Chemistry laboratory (above right), funded partly from UHST but mainly from school funds.



## Current priorities

Our aim is to help the school to reach the stage where it can become broadly self-sustaining by the end of 2016. School infrastructure has improved immensely in the past two or three years but there is still more to do.

Now that the school has large numbers of students boarding at the school it urgently needs a school clinic, at a rough cost of £9,000, where a nurse can work to take care of the day to day medical needs of students. These include treating minor ailments, diagnosing and treating malaria, dressing simple wounds as well as organising health education programmes in the school.

The other ongoing requirement, as the number of students in the school expands, is to meet the ever increasing demand for learning resources, including books, equipment, materials and e-resources.

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

Donation and standing order forms can be found at:

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