**George Openjuru**
Professor of Education and First Deputy Vice Chancellor
Gulu University, Uganda

**Interview 2/16/18 with Carla Hills**
Linda Chapel Jackson, recorder

CH: We are talking to Dr. George Openjuru of northern Uganda, Gulu University. Welcome. We’re glad that you’re here.

GO: Thank you.

CH: Tell us a little bit about yourself and how your experiences early on led to where you are today.

GO: [00:26] Thank you very much for having me today for this interview. As I was saying yesterday, my initial experience growing up as a child, I thought I should do the work my father was doing, that is, family police officer. He grew up in a policed setting. That’s what you grow up in, my area. All your friends are police parents, they think police is the job.

But then as I was growing up and reaching higher level, I had an interaction with my father—my father is still alive—and then he asked me as I was going to the advanced level, which is the last level to join the university, what job would you like to do? Of course the police issue, he had already removed it out of my head. Said don’t come into a police job…So I said OK, if I’m not going to do police work, then I should become a pilot. Every child admires being a pilot. So I said Dad, I’m going to be a pilot. Geography is one of my subjects and I’m going to learn about maps and learn how to fly the world. Then he asked me how many planes do you think Uganda has? I don’t know but I see a lot of planes in the air and there are pretty many. He said do you know who owns those planes? They are flying over Uganda, so they must be Ugandan planes. He said no. Those planes belong to the Queen of England. So I said what about the jet fighters? It was during a [??] …Dad said I think you have about 30 of them and the pilots are still young. By the time you finish university they will still be in service. Then from there I acquired a concept of, if you want to be a pilot then there must be planes for you to pilot. So I said OK, if there are not enough planes, what am I going to do? He said you are going to sweep the place (laughs). I said no. No sweeping place. A country’s planes or a country’s airports, what work do you think I can do? He said be a teacher. I said what? He said—we were going to my school—how many schools have we passed? [3:04]

So let us start from here. Start counting the number of schools, plus the one you are going to. How many schools? So I said OK, I think Dad is right. Job opportunities as a schoolteacher are available as compared to as a pilot. So from that moment I changed my thinking and said I will be a teacher. When it came time to join the university I applied for teaching. I had no problem making this choice. So I went in for a teaching job, a teaching course program at the university, and qualified as a teacher. [3:44]

But then when I went into the master’s program…When you have higher qualifications, my ambition was to join the university, work as a lecturer. That’s the highest level of teaching. [4:03]

CH: A lecturer?

GO: [4:04] Being a lecturer. So let me be a lecturer, because that is the highest level of teaching. But then in our class, history, there were two, and there was only one vacancy and that vacancy was taken by my colleague. One day the lady was a district education officer, so for us she went back. The two of us who didn’t have specific work permits decided to join the university. We took the only position left in the department and said George, you go to the distance education unit, Institute for Art and Continuing Education. So I say no problem. I’m still within the university. I went and joined the university after the master’s program. Now, instead of going to the distance education unit, they posted me to community education and extramural studies. You can see how that is coming. [5:02]

CH: Yes.

GO: [5:03] Then the head of the department said what are you doing in this unit? I expected to come in to teach you. I want to have students and I teach them. That’s what I’m trained for. He says yes you’re going to do teaching—but you’re going to do teaching in the villages. You go what kind of school is that? Of course I started remembering that my mother was doing adult literacy classes within the subcounty. So those are the kinds of things you are going to do. So I go OK. I get the point. I am not going to work here, say no no. We are going to post you out of the university. So they posted me back to Gulu to reestablish a community learning center. Organizing programs, organizing workshops, I started to enjoy it. It was in my opinion better than being in the classrooms. You got to look for students, you got to look for teachers, you got to write your programs. And that’s what we are now doing. Then you got to do this learning assessment in the community, find out what people want to learn, then organize programs, organize facilitators. And I did that. I did that for four years. Then I became the head of department. When I became the head of department I had to move back to the campus. [6:27]

CH: Yes.

GO: [6:29] Now that is the one that now brings me into issues of university-community relationship. Now I could see that very clearly. By then, my qualifications [??] a formal school education. Teaching schools. So what do I do. I need to go back to school. So I went to—at that time it was the University of Natal. It was in Natal I went to do a master’s in adult education. I tried to apply for a PhD in adult education. They were rejected. They said my qualification, adult education, I did a certificate. It’s not sufficient to be a PhD. So I went to do another master’s degree. I finished the master’s degree and continued to the PhD. I finished and then came back to the university and continued that agenda and the promotions of the University. And started now…As we were promoting that, because you go into the scholarship of university social responsibility…Now with that you begin to move with the idea of the university not doing community outreach. The community must bring in its own [??] to contribute to the university. The university then has to contribute to the community so there is a cross-fertilization. Then that takes me into issues of the university must work for the community where it is set. In other words the curriculum that goes on at the university must be informed by the community needs, not extracted from some countries or some textbooks that has no immediate relevance. The textbook should only come from us whatever need the community is serving and that is our end in these discussions related to community-university engagement. [8:35]

CH: I had a question. We each attended your talk yesterday and one of the questions that I thought about later was who supported you, colleague-wise, as you were pursuing your master’s and your PhD. Does the Ugandan government look for promising academics and scholars and support you financially? What is the intersection between academia and the government? Do they value scholars?

GO: [9:18] Again, back to what I’ve been doing at the university, the work that I’ve been doing over the years in the university, the government does support higher education. It funds—for example, I didn’t have to pay for the university education. [9:44]

CH: But they look for scholars such as yourself to sort of elevate you along the way? Is that—Do they seek out leaders?

GO: No, they don’t.

CH: OK.

GO: No, they support the university as part of a government responsibility.

CH: I see.

GO: [10:05] And with being the university, each and every individual promotes his own scholarship. For my master’s, it was financed by the German government, German adult education through a scholarship, because the university said you have a master’s degree, we can’t pay for that, we don’t want to duplicate. I had to look for another scholarship, which I got, I’m thankful for that. For the PhD, the university paid for it, and that is government money. The university paid for it. [10:37]

CH: But you were still your own independent person. You made your choices and you were able to select what path you were on.

GO: Yes. Exactly.

CH: OK. That was sort of where I was going with that, because all along the way you have made these choices.

GO: [11:00] I made my choices and I pursued my interests. I fell in love with what I was doing. I thought that—then you have a passion for it. If you don’t have the passion for it, then it becomes a joke. So I pursued that. But before me, there were already other people engaged in this university-community field. At that time it was community-wide and it was university-wide. So, there are people [names several people]…And then you get other senior colleagues, because this is a unit that was established in 1953. So there were people before me, doing that work already and I guess those are the ones that retired and left us there. But I also combined that with interacting with international colleagues in the area of what was extramural work and literacy work, lifelong learning work. And then, because we are trying to promote access for mature people in universities, that takes you into higher education work. So you get scholars, either in Europe, which includes Britain, or from South Africa. I had a colleague [names some names]…Through that interaction you begin to…Then recently I met Hiram Fitzgerald in GUNI. [13:09]

CH: Yes.

GO: Then he begins to put you into a serious [??]…Then…

CH: Yes, we’re familiar with that (laughs).

GO: [13:20] So that now, you are in the mainstream. As I say mostly it’s because we invited some of the speakers. I know them, whether they’re in Latin America or they’re in Europe, because you’ll find yourself that oh, there is a group of scholars pursuing this. And that is how I ended up with this, what I am doing. So your publications are driven by that, you are talking about access to education, challenging a university to modify its own policy. You are talking about nontraditional students—you are just championing an agenda which is basically adult education. So if you are not insisting about providing access to higher education, then you are in the community, trying to solve problems, getting their learning needs, identifying their problems, seeing which problems you can address through learning, problems you can identify through advocacy. Government, duty bearers, holding them responsible in Parliament. I thought that is a very worthy cause. [14:32]

CH: Is that how you came to accept the position at Gulu University then?

GO: [14:37] Yes. Now, accepting the position at Gulu University…After realizing that—because we sit. We try to talk lifelong learning in this huge senate I can’t say I was not in the higher level in the University administration. You are insisting on something which people do not understand, and you are at the senior level, all right, a dean, that there are a level of principles and VC’s and DVC’s and you don’t reach there. You try to argue and people don’t make sense. You try and then what understanding…I must say, they look at you with some inferiority complex. They think you are not academic enough. We are like inferior department. [15:35]

LCJ: The same thing happens here to some extent.

GO: [15:38] It does…We are like an inferior department. So getting you to be heard is very difficult. You are not a scholar. You are talking about these petty issues, not scientific investigations. [??] We must solve problems. So you are not heard [??] This place is already pretty well set. There is an opportunity for a higher position, to move higher. So I move to Gulu University and Bingo! This is it. The university fiddling with addressing the problem in the community. I say ah. This is where I come. [16:23]

CH: You know, it seems—only because I’m an American—it seems very nontraditional for an academic institution. And I think to an American like me, it might appear to be a role that the university is taking that has typically been left to another government organization or religious organization or even a United Nations organization. Is that true? Explain to me—I know Gulu was founded in 2002.

GO: Yes.

CH: Explain to me how it came to be that this mission is housed at an institution of higher education.

GO: [17:12] The establishment of Gulu was a political decision, yes? By the President. And in doing that, they are trying to say look we are offering you service, we are giving you access, here is a university, please send your children to school. Then the university is confronted with issues of difficulties around them, and that is what the findings are responding to. Now. Yes, this work should be done by government units, civil society organizations, international bodies, I agree. So why should universities come in? That’s the question. [18:09]

CH: Right. That’s the question.

GO: [18:13] Yes. These organizations, apart from some nongovernment organizations, they are in it to do some kind of relief activities. Let us say WFP are giving food. I don’t think you can even say the university is not giving food. Some NGOs are training youth, OK? They bring the skills, they train youth. Some may work, some may not work. The government’s extension department for culture, for health, for work—Theirs is a service-driven agenda of helping people create roads, build a hospital…[19:22]

CH: Right.

GO: [19:28] But the university comes in with what is happening, why is it happening like that, could it not happen better. Which government extension faces [??] You get the point. So we go together. They collect statistics, maybe informational statistics, but for us, we call it analytical statistics, analytical information. So if it is a hospital, medical information. This kind of disease is located here. Why is this one located here? Where is malaria? Where is nodding disease appearing? Why is river blindness here and not here? What is causing it? Government [??] let us go and treat the people, treat the people. They are not bothered about why it is there. You get the point. So the university [??] this thing is happening because this river passes through this forest. Government [??]. You get the point. [20:39]

CH: Yes, I do.

GO: [20:42] The university does more than…We are not going there to offer service. We are going there to improve the service. [20:52]

CH: And—not analyze, but gather information in a holistic manner.

GO: [20:59] Yes. And try to understand things in a much broader perspective, see the relationships within these problems. If a particular intervention is not working, government extension workers…“These people are stupid.” The university will not say they are stupid. Why do you say they are stupid? What strategy are you using? How can we overcome that? That is the responsibility of the university. So yes, we are not there to provide service. Service is not our responsibility. It is the responsibility of government, the responsibility of international organizations and I think civil society as well. Ours is going deeper than that and I think that’s what we should do. [21:55]

CH: Then that leads me to ask you who is most resistant to your efforts? Because while you are trying to establish these university-community collaborations and do the work that you’ve described, who isn’t supportive of these efforts? Anybody? Or are people willing to be open and to listen, and to learn, and to take the time to let you do your work?

GO: [22:39] There is no resistance [??]

CH: That’s good.

GO: [22:44] But there is…The participation dynamics is the one that is problematic. I blame that on NGO’s. Why is the participation dynamics problematic? I pick the case of cervical cancer screening to determine whether the rate is going up or going down, to determine what is not yet known, existing in the community. So you’ve got to recruit participants. They come with some expectations of financial support because NGO’s do that. Our resources, including the grants we get, sometimes that is not provided. For one of the activities which—one of the programs which I am working on, youth [??] coordinator [??]. Because in the budget line, transport facilitation, water is not provided for. That is not there. I am not going to work [??]. They’ve got to give us [??]. They’ve got to pay for us [??]. And we argue on that a lot. Sometimes we succeed in getting someplace. Stipends can be given out, sometimes we don’t. I can’t qualify that as resistance. [24:28]

CH: No, the reality is that there are financial impacts for everything that happens. Tell me then what are the current global challenges to your work? You’ve just identified NGOs, but the follow-up question would be to this—the global challenges, the follow-up—would be how does an institution like MSU work with your university? How do we instruct our faculty? Is there a role for an American institution to play in your work? You’ve already identified meeting Hiram at GUNI, and that sort of collaboration that you build with peers. Are there other roles that MSU and their faculty could play—and I’m talking conceptually here, not specifically—Is there a role that other institutions can play in working with you?

GO: [25:51] A lot, and needed. Our university [??] but particularly Gulu University, we need this energy in order to be able to do what we are doing better. And we need this energy in order to be able to see what is not apparently visible to you. I give a typical example. I am working in an area I grew up in. And when you grew up in an environment, you may not be able to see all the problems. You may not be able to see alternatives easily because it’s *your* environment. What could be a problem may appear to you as normal. Just like I mentioned yesterday, that land could be sold as a new development. I wouldn’t be conscious of that norm. People should be [??]. So not until you get another exposure will that become apparent. So we need this collaboration to broaden our perspective and perception.

Secondly, in Gulu University we have young scholars. Young in all aspects. The university is 15 years old and it recruited its own scholars, who did not have seniors before them. What does that mean? Unlike Makerere—I’ve already told you, before—as I go into Makerere University the Thelma Awori’s had already put some history [??] just go and copy. And that is scholars’ work. And there is not even history. No story to follow, nothing to even imitate. So how do you develop these scholars into being a scholar, an academic? You must get this scholar questions, get colleagues. So it is through this collaboration and partnership do we get our young scholars to work with senior colleagues in Denmark, colleagues in the UK, colleagues in the Netherlands, which I also grew up with. You go and do presentations with [name]. You go and interact with [name]. You do publications together [??] coming from a different perspective of NGOs, interaction, publication, you do research, you do interventions together [??] You get Professor [name]. He comes to Uganda, you are working together. So that’s a big role.

Second role of capacity building and capability development, which you just can’t get easily. So these partnerships are important. The partnerships are also important in that if we pair a very old university, like Michigan State University, 1855, with ours, 2002, somebody can believe in you. Donors will say OK— [29:57]

CH: True. I never thought of it that way. That’s really interesting.

GO: [30:05] So they can say OK, our money is not going to waste. This is a good combination. So while I can go on and on…In addition to [??] you get somebody coming for a whole semester, a visiting professor, he will go and teach for a semester or even for a week our semester’s about five. So you give them about five hours per day and they can teach a whole semester program in a few days. Then they come back. So we have those opportunities. Then our site portfolio goes on increasing, including journals. Journals, we want to see names. Now I can say I’m there. You put it with a junior colleague [??] So I can say this is George. You get the point. [31:00]

CH: I do. Actually that’s a really great sort of illumination, because always in reality you have to think about—talk about—thinking holistically about the realities of running an institution. [31:20]

GO: Yes. So it really helps us a lot. It helps us to develop our university as an institution. Helps us develop our human resource as individuals. It gives us more opportunities, more access, more acceptability, everything. [31:38]

CH: What are your immediate future goals? Is there something you want to accomplish that you haven’t started because of current commitments?

GO: [31:51] I am two months in the office of vice chancellor right now. I entered into this position deliberately because I want to construct Gulu University as an engaged university as opposed to a traditional university. We can do international scholarship but in the agenda for which engagement should be assured. That is what I want to do now. To achieve this I want to create something significant, a Department of Community Engagement that can coordinate all engagement activities on campus and get all the engagement scholarship so that we can get used to a way of working, a way of teaching, a way of researching that promotes Gulu University as an engaged university. And make sure because of the asking can we subscribe… give it on a paper [??] What’s it doing? But now [??] take a position say [??] can you get the faculties to do this and that? Redirect the university into that agenda and completely be separate [??] in each, in Uganda and in Africa. At the moment the engagement scholarship is concentrated om South Africa. Coming from their applied background they wanted their university to do even more in Uganda.

That is what I want to do, starting with the creation of a physical unit, the Department of Engagement. In addition to creating that department, the first thing I am going to do is create a policy, the community university engagement policy for the university. I was working on the policy…Unfortunately a colleague was working with a passed on and he also ran into problems with the administration so I had to shelve it because with him, we could understand one another and he was also key. So now I’m going to bring back, I’m going to push that policy and possibly push it to our national council for higher education and ensure also that they create a policy that should go to the other universities.

We have, most universities, by virtue of the three principles—service, research, and teaching—they do that. But they don’t do it in a way that recognizes the importance of community. They go with a service mentality. My problem with the service mentality…The service mentality creates dependency. That’s what I want to overcome. And then the service mentality does not bring back experience from the community to fit into university curriculum and I thought that is important, at least for universities in Africa. I’m surprised that MSU is also doing that. As I said, sometimes we think American universities or American society don’t need these things, because they are already there. For us, we are struggling to be there. But they tell me there are pockets of problems. [35:37]

[35:43] So I think it’s a new drive for universities. One of my colleagues who was also talking this engagement language went to the Gulu University to present. He avoided mentioning certain words. When I came up and then I started talking as the vice chancellor and I said Gulu is a rural university he almost jumped. He say I didn’t want to say that because I thought it was offensive. I said no, it’s not offensive. Actually it is ahead. Universities that are not pursuing that agenda are inferior, in my opinion. Because for me, this is a step ahead of the traditional scholarship. So I said don’t fear to say it. Then the discussion now became [??] My colleagues who seemed to not know said how can you describe us as a rural university? Rural places are backward. I said that is why we must be a rural university, for the advancement of the rural community. If we are not doing that, then we are useless. We are studying [??] combine and study [??] They are not yet here. Let us see our farmers still using hand-held hoes. How can we make the hoes dig better? That is what we should be doing. And I think that is a philosophy, thinking and perceptions that can create change. [37:23]

LCJ: That’s certainly where MSU got its start.

GO: Yes.

[end recording]