

Research Application Summary

## **Education access trends in Uganda**

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### **Abstract**

This paper analyzes access trends to education in Uganda from the time universal primary education (UPE) was introduced in 1997, based on Articles 30 and 34 of the 1995 Ugandan Constitution. With UPE in place, reinforced by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) advocating for education in all societies globally and the Dakar Education for All (EFA) targets, there has been a dramatic increase in gross enrollment rates (GERs) right from pre-primary, primary, and secondary through to post-secondary levels both in government and privately owned schools. Even the girl-child-boy imbalance in GERs has to some extent been corrected. In fact, in a number of cases, studies indicate that recruitment of girls surpassed that of boys significantly. The Uganda Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) witnessed significant rise in enrollments that the Ministry is struggling to cope with. Along the way studies show the big numbers have plummeted throughout the education system, particularly affecting the girl-child whose numbers are steadily reducing. This is a wakeup call that must be addressed. First, the Government (the Ministry of Education and Sports in particular), needs to follow up and capture these trends to establish the most up to date figures. Secondly, the reasons behind falling numbers and intervention measures need to be established. Lastly there is a critical need and urgency to find long lasting solutions to these negative developments since education is a key sector that drives national development.

**Key words:** Education sector, Students enrolment, Uganda, Universal Primary Education, Universal Secondary Education

### **Résumé**

Cet article analyse les tendances d'accès à l'éducation en Ouganda depuis l'introduction de l'enseignement primaire universel (UPE) en 1997, sur la base des articles 30 et 34 de la Constitution ougandaise de 1995. Avec la mise en place de l'UPE, renforcée par les Objectifs du Millénaire pour le Développement (OMD) et les Objectifs de Développement Durable (ODD) prônant l'éducation dans toutes les sociétés du monde ainsi que les cibles de l'Éducation pour Tous (EPT) de Dakar, il y a eu une augmentation spectaculaire des taux bruts de scolarisation (TBS) dès la pré-primaire, primaire et secondaire jusqu'aux niveaux postsecondaires, tant dans les écoles publiques que privées. Même le déséquilibre fille-garçon dans les TBS a été en partie corrigé. En fait, dans plusieurs cas, des études indiquent que le recrutement des filles a dépassé de manière significative celui des

garçons. Le Ministère de l'Éducation et des Sports (MoES) de l'Ouganda a constaté une augmentation significative des inscriptions que le ministère peine à gérer. En cours de route, des études montrent que les grands nombres ont chuté dans l'ensemble du système éducatif, affectant particulièrement les filles dont les effectifs diminuent régulièrement. Il s'agit d'un signal d'alarme opportun qui doit être abordé. Premièrement, le gouvernement (et le Ministère de l'Éducation et des Sports en particulier) doit suivre et saisir ces tendances pour établir les chiffres les plus récents. Deuxièmement, il faut établir les raisons de la diminution des effectifs et les mesures d'intervention nécessaires. Enfin, il est crucial et urgent de trouver des solutions durables à ces développements négatifs, car l'éducation est un secteur clé qui stimule le développement national.

**Mots clés :** Secteur de l'éducation, Inscriptions des élèves, Ouganda, Enseignement primaire universel

## Background

Formal education in Uganda dates back to the 1880s when it was introduced by Christian missionaries (Syngellakis and Arudo, 2006). From that time to date, Uganda's education policy has evolved from elitism to total inclusiveness. By independence in 1962, Uganda had not yet clearly defined its education system prompting the new Government to constitute Prof Edgar Castle's 1964 Commission to come up with the 1964 Education Act (Sekamwa, 2000; Essama-Nssah *et al.*, 2008). This Act resulted in government takeover of all schools and gave birth to the public-school management system in Uganda.

Studies indicate that Uganda's development theory and practice are geared towards combating disease, ignorance and poverty. Thus, Mutabaruka and Kazooba (2017), argue that investment in human capital and provision of education have been central to transformation of lives of citizens. This approach is premised on the provision of education for all, because it is the cornerstone that leads to better quality of life, and national development.

Rolling out its development agenda, in 1997 the Uganda Government launched a 20-year Poverty Eradication Plan (PEAP) that was supported by the Poverty Action Fund (PAF), where primary education was a vital strategy to get rid of poverty by 2020 (Ministry of Planning and Economic Development, 1997, Mutabaruka and Kazooba, 2017). To recognize the critical role primary education plays in poverty eradication, the Government emphasized Universal Primary Education (UPE) as one of the key sectors to gain support from PAF. The UPE's main objectives are to:

- Establish, provide and maintain quality education as the basis for promoting human resource development;
- Provide facilities and resources to enable every child to enter and remain in school until the primary cycle of education is complete;
- Make basic education accessible to the learner and relevant to his or her needs, as well as meeting national goals;
- Make education equitable in order to eliminate disparities and inequalities;
- Ensure that education is affordable by the majority of Ugandans; and

- Meet the objectives of poverty eradication by equipping every individual with basic skills and knowledge. Ministry of Education and Sports, 1999.

Consequently, Mutabaruka and Kazooba (2017) observe that sustainable successes in universal primary education have been made in Uganda. The five-year running National Development Plans recognize the significance of education for continued cost-effective growth and social transformation.

Education has been identified as a key component of human capital development because its main purpose is to empower all citizens by providing everyone with adequate opportunities to succeed in life. Governments globally are struggling not only to increase access to schools but also to improve the quality and relevance of their curricula and to raise their levels of achievement (Najjuma *et al.*, 2013).

### **Education Reforms in Uganda**

**Prof Senteza Kajubi Education Review Commission.** The transformative developments we are witnessing in the Education Sector in Uganda today are a result of the Education Policy Review Commission led by Prof Senteza Kajubi, that was appointed in 1987. The Commission was tasked with fulfilling the following terms:

- i) Recommending policies (applicable) at all levels including primary, secondary and tertiary;
- ii) Making policies about aims and objectives of education; coming up with policies about the structure of the education system; and
- iii) Integrating the role of the private sector in education, Essama-Nssah, *et al.*, 2008.

At the end of the rigorous assignment, the Commission came up with key recommendations, which, if well implemented would foster the achievement of literacy and numeracy; and enable skills acquisition among all Ugandan children aged 6 to 10 years by 2000. The recommendation included: Universal primary education (UPE) for all children aged 6 to 10 by the year 2000; to ensure that by the year 2000, children enter school at the age of 6; and Universalization of primary education for children aged 6 to 13 to be achieved not later than 2010. This report of the Education Review Commission was debated by Uganda Parliament which consolidated it into the White Paper (MoES, 1992). The White Paper of 1992 agreed that UPE would lead to a fundamental and positive transformation of Ugandan society.

**Universal Primary Education.** In sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), Uganda was one of the first countries to introduce the implementation of Universal Primary Education (UPE) program. The UPE policy is also aligned to the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 2, which aims to ensure that every child in the world – boys and girls – complete a full cycle of primary schooling (Burnett and Felsman, 2012). In fact, UPE also concerned itself with economic justification to improve literacy as well as reduce poverty by increasing access to primary education in Uganda ( Bategeka *et al.*, 2004; Ngaka, 2006).

Following the launch of the Universal Primary Education (UPE) in 1997, and Universal Secondary Education (USE) in 2006, Uganda registered some significant success in increasing access to free compulsory education. The intention was to have every child of school going age into the school system (Otyola *et al.*, 2022). This saw the enrollment rates rise significantly to achieve the objectives of UPE (World Bank, 2002).

The World Bank report of 2004 put the gross enrollment figure at 6.3 million pupils in 1999. By 2017, 88% of school-going age children were in school (National Planning Authority, 2018).

### **Overview of Uganda's Education System**

The framework of Uganda's education system comprises of the 7-4-2-3 structure; where seven years are spent in the primary cycle; four in secondary; two in the advanced secondary level; and three in university education – the assumption being that the child started school at the right age and completed without repetition encumbrance (MoES, 2013).

**Pre-School Education.** Pre-primary education in Uganda is intended for children aged between two and five years spent in nursery or kindergarten to prepare kids to start primary schooling. The government is not obliged to participate in pre-primary schooling. Parents have to fully meet pre-schooling obligations.

**Primary Education.** The public primary school education in Uganda takes seven years to accomplish, for children of ages six to twelve, as enshrined in the UPE policy. The 2010 Uganda education school curriculum divides primary education into three distinct levels: a) The lower primary level covering primary one to three; b) followed by primary four in the middle; and c) the upper primary classes of primary five to seven.

Primary schooling is meant to equip pupils with basic education in English, Mathematics, Science and Social Studies – though there are other subjects like Art, Crafts, Local Languages, Physical Education and Music taught but not examined. To qualify for secondary education pupils must complete and pass the primary leaving examination (PLE) with a good grade ( *The Education; Pre-primary, Primary and Post-Primary Act No.13, 2008*).

**Secondary Education.** The secondary school education in Uganda is set into two sections: 1) the Uganda Certificate of Education (UCE) attainable after four years (sometimes also referred to as 'Ordinary' level); and 2) the Uganda Advanced Certificate of Education (UACE), also known as 'Advanced' level. After UACE students who pass well can proceed to join university education for degree courses. Those who do not qualify for university can join other tertiary institutions for diploma courses lasting two years.

### **Education Access and Trends in Uganda**

Access to education is not an event, rather, it is a process to avail learners with opportunities to pursue education that leads them to achieve knowledge and skills without undue encumbrances. Ekimwere and Adipala (2024) observe that the term "access" typically refers to the ways in which educational institutions and policies ensure – or at least strive to ensure – that students have equal and equitable opportunities to take full advantage of their education. And they argue that increasing access generally requires schools to provide additional services or remove any actual or potential barriers that might prevent some students from equitable opportunities in certain courses or academic programs. Lewin's (2015) access to education includes: on-schedule enrollment and progression at an appropriate age, regular attendance, learning consistent with national achievement norms, a learning environment that is safe to allow learning to take place, and opportunities to learn that are equitably distributed (p.29).

Farrell (1999) argues that access, survival, outputs and outcomes are the four essential types of equality or inequality in the school cycle, and explained that equality of access relates to the accessibility of becoming registered in an education system. Increasing access to primary schooling is one of the goals of UPE programs in Uganda. Access to primary schools is essential to the Uganda society because it reduces the number of citizens left out of the school systems. Equality of survival according Farrell entails regularly attending school, getting promoted and completing the school cycle, Burnett and Felsman (2012). Farrell's model of equality includes fairness and inclusion (Kranich, 2001).

The thrust of this paper is to analyse education access trends in Uganda, especially from the time UPE was launched in 1997, followed by USE in 2006. This will entail examining and analyzing UPE and USE performance based on access to education facilities.

### **Methodology**

An interpretivist approach for document analysis as a data collection tool was used. Articles collected related to the history of education, implementation, challenges and achievements of UPE and USE extracted using Google Scholar. The search was customized to cover the period from 1997 to 2023, and qualitative and quantitative data and information were extracted and analyzed.

### **Key Findings**

Key features of findings indicate variations, inconsistencies and inadequate data. There were differences in enrollment rates between urban and rural schools; and even between regions. Essama-Nssah *et al.* (2008) found that Central Region had higher enrollment rate than Northern Region. Asankha and Takashi (2014) attributed these differences in enrollment to income variations. They reasoned that whereas parents in Central Region could afford to fund their students' needs, those in impoverished Northern Region could not afford to do so for their children (Musika, 2019).

Although enrollment rates increased, the standard achievements seemed to go down. Mutabaruka and Kazooba (2017) and even UNEB (2020) criticized UPE's literacy and numeracy levels. Reports indicated that although 617, 150 candidates passed primary leaving examinations in 2019, compared to 599, 593 in the previous year, there was poor performance in English and Mathematics indicating that candidates failed to apply knowledge and reasoning in problem solving situations. Instead, candidates were found more comfortable with questions that were direct and required recall in answering, rather than reasoning.

Since the universal secondary education was implemented in 2006, by 2018 it had expanded significantly from 363 schools in 2007 with 40, 000 students to 800 schools with over a half a million students (Asankha and Takashi, 2014). Despite this expanded enrollment, according to the Ministry of Education and Sports, Uganda still has low secondary education enrollment, at only 24 percent in 2016. This is contradicted by Essama-Nssah *et al.* (2008) who report significant rise in secondary school attendance between 1992 and 2005, with girls' numbers higher. At the release of the 2019 primary leaving examination (PLE) results, the Uganda National Examination Board (UNEB) indicated that a total of 695, 804 candidates from 13, 475 schools (centers) registered for PLE. Out of that number, 473, 893 (68.2%) were UPE beneficiaries and 221,912 (31.8%) were not (Otyala *et al.*, 2022).

What is worth noting here is that 68.2% of the candidates benefited from UPE fee exemption. However, the study observed that neither the Ministry of Education and Sports, nor UNEB could explain the whereabouts of the cohorts who did not make it to the finish of the primary seven cycle. The researchers recommended improvement in data collection and repository technologies to ensure close follow up of all the pupils from the beginning to the end of the primary cycle. Alarming higher levels of students' dropout at Primary Education is reported by Adipala *et al.* (2023)

Studies also found increased awareness in parents about the importance of educating children, especially the girl-child with the reduced risk of early marriages. Educational achievements increase economic self-sufficiency among women and girls by making them less reliant on male partners (Okwarea and Omagor, 2014).

This paper finds that results about the quality and success of UPE performance are inconsistent. Some scholars contend that the education quality in Uganda under UPE is promising. Yet others disagree and cite shortcomings in UPE implementation and performance. For instance, Okwarea and Omagor (2014), argue that the Ministry of Education and Sports has delivered the needful by promoting quality education and the necessary human development in the sector. As a result, they claim that between 2008 and 2012 the number of teachers on the payroll increased from 125, 000 to 132, 000, an increase of 5%. But Mutabaruka and Kazooba (2017) as well as Musika (2019) question their competence and efficiency in facilitating the teaching and learning process to achieve better results.

The other alarming trend is the drop in students numbers after Primary School Education, to significantly low numbers in Secondary Schools and very few students in Post-Secondary School education (Tables 1 and 2). Moreover, there is very high drop out at Primary School Education level (Table 3). Therefore Uganda's effort to strengthen its human capital development remains weak which has negative impact on national development.

Table 1. Gross Students Enrolment for two comparative periods in Uganda

Level	2016/17	2019/20	Percentage
Early Childhood Education	<b>477,087</b> Male: 236,248 Female: 240,839	<b>2,029,451</b> Male: 1,008,500 Female: 1,020,951	<b>325%</b>
Primary	<b>8,264,317</b> Male: 4,122,663 Female: 4,141,654	<b>10,766,994</b> Male: 5,345,245 Female: 5,421,749	<b>30%</b>
Secondary	<b>1,452,287</b> Male: 762,987 Female: 689,300	<b>1,992,315</b> Male: 1,004,524 Female: 987,791	<b>36%</b>
Post-primary institutions	<b>126,878</b> Male: 68,250 Female: 58,628	<b>129,599</b> Male: 70,248 Female: 59,351	<b>2%</b>

Source Education fact sheet Uganda Ministry of Education and Sports

Table 2. Enrolment by School level in Ugandan Schools in 2019

## Pre Primary Enrolment

Ownership	Male	Female	Total
Private	997,035	1,009,469	2,006,504

## Primary School Enrolment

Ownership	Male	Female	Total
Government	3,601,107	3,616,480	7,217,587
Private	1,680,079	1,743,521	3,423,600
<b>Total</b>	<b>5,281,186</b>	<b>5,360,001</b>	<b>10,641,187</b>

## Secondary School Enrolment

Ownership	Male	Female	Total
Government	410,803	374,307	785,110
Private	584,932	605,511	1,190,443
<b>Total</b>	<b>995,735</b>	<b>979,818</b>	<b>1,975,553</b>

Table 3. Primary school dropout rates in Uganda

Years Enrolled in P.1	Year of Sitting PLE	Number of Pupils enrolled in P.1	No. of Pupils sat P.7	Dropped Out	% Dropout rate
2013	2020	1,875,553	736,942	1,138,611	60.7
2012	2019	1,876,565	683,302	1,193,262	63.6
2011	2018	1,839,714	659,663	1,180,081	64.1
2010	2017	1,943,552	631,282	1,312,270	67.5

Source: NTV

The pupils who joined P1 in 2016 were 1,880,000. Only 832,000 registered in 2022 for PLE, of these who registered 21,000 did not sit for the PLE. Out of the 811,000 who sat, 97,000 did not qualify under division 1 to 4, leaving over 1 million children who did not complete P7.

### Conclusion

Education Sector studies should contribute solid recommendations to the education policy and its program operations. Improving access to education in sub-Saharan Africa continues to be central in alleviating poverty and to the achievement of the MDGs and the Dakar education for all targets. Unfortunately measuring education quality in Africa is problematic. The difficulties stem from both divergent understanding of what education is and what it is to accomplish and from problems of measurement. The measures of education quality most commonly used emphasize achievement and information acquisition; and rely heavily on examination scores and degree, certificates and other credentials. Education should not be used as a laboratory for churning out candidates at the end of a cycle. Education should be a dynamic process engaging all stakeholders – parents, students, teachers, education officials and the general public as concerned stakeholders.

Findings of research in the education sector are intended to contribute to the improvement of the education

system, and the quality of lives of citizens; and enable development in the country generally. Therefore, proper data collection methods must be used, the correct information must be captured qualitatively and quantitatively. Numbers must be correctly captured and there should be consistency in data collection and prudent use of numbers. This can be achieved by making education sector analysis a continuous, reliable and efficient exercise.

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