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## Examining the Successes of Universal Primary Education and Universal Secondary Education Policies in Uganda

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### **Abstract**

**Purpose:** The mission statement of the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) in Uganda is to provide for, support, guide and co-ordinate, regulate, and promote quality education and sports to all persons in Uganda for national integration, individual and national development. It is in these lenses that the Ugandan government adopted the UPE and USE programs to educate her children.

**Methodology:** This paper uses document review methodology to assess successes achieved by both the Universal Primary Education and Universal Secondary Education programs adopted by the Uganda government in 1997 and 2006 respectively.

**Findings:** Assessment results show that both programs have had a positive impact on access and equity of previously vulnerable children who could not afford self-educational sponsorship. However, the issue of quality education provision is yet to be achieved.

**Recommendations:** The study therefore recommends further research into examination of the relationship between UPE pupils' low performance levels in literacy and numeracy and their somewhat good performance at Primary Leaving Examinations. All stakeholders should desist from politicizing educational issues and instead concentrate on formulating evidence-based policies based on developmental needs for joint ownership and implementation of the respective Free Education Policies.

**Keywords:** *Universal Primary Education, Universal Secondary Education, Successes, Education*

## Introduction

The world over, education has been identified as a key component of human capital development. The major purpose of education is to empower all citizens and give everyone adequate opportunity to succeed in life. To this note, governments globally are struggling not only to increase access to schools but also to improve the quality and relevance of their curricula in order to keep children in school longer and raise their levels of academic achievement (Najjuma *et al.*, 2013). An investment in education not only benefits the individual and society but also the world as a whole.

In Uganda, formal education dates as far back as the 1880s and was initially provided by the Christian missionaries (Syngellakis & Arudo, 2006). Since then, Ugandan education policy has evolved from elitism to total inclusiveness. Besides poverty and disease as problems at Uganda independence, there was ignorance requiring government redress through provision of education programmes. Although it is said that by the 1962 independence, Uganda had not yet clearly defined its education system, the then governments strived through this situation by establishing the Professor Edgar Castle's 1963 education commission. This commission eventually came up with a report that produced the 1964 Education Act (Sekamwa, 2000; Essama-Nssah, Leite & Simler, 2008). This Act showed that government was to take over all the schools and this gave birth to the public school management system in Uganda.

However, due to the effects of the civil war and the political instability that came with it in era of darkness in the 1970s, the policy was not implemented (Syngellakis & Arudo, 2006). This situation did not come to normal until 1986 when the National Resistance Army captured power and ushered in the current National Resistance Movement into power. A comparative analysis indicates that due to the Ujaama Philosophy and political reform, Tanzania had introduced universal basic education in 1984. But due to lack of philosophy of addressing economy challenges, Ugandan government took long to find a functional and fundamental approach of addressing the economy challenges (as it employed a mixture of *the move to the left* and the *common man's charter*) through education. For any country to pride in a strong economy, education is key and it is also a prerequisite for social and economic growth (Ozturk, 2001) particularly enhanced productivity as advanced by the proponents of human capital development theory. Education critically provides individuals and society with skills and knowledge to maintain and improve their standard of living (Essama-Nssah *et al.*, 2008).

## The Inception of Universal Primary Education

President Museveni's government quickly realized the need for educational reforms in this country and hence appointed the education policy review commission under Professor Senteza Kajubi in 1987. This commission was charged with fulfilling the following terms: (i) recommending policies at all levels including primary, secondary and tertiary, (ii) making policies about aims and objectives of education, (iii) coming up with policies about the structure of the education system and (iv) integrating the role of the private sector in education Essama-Nssah, *et al.*, (2008). The commission came up with some good recommendations that if well implemented would foster achievement of literacy and numeracy skills acquisition among all Uganda children aged 6 to 10 years by 2000. They included; (i) Universal Primary Education (UPE) for children of age group 6-10 should be achieved by the year 2000, (ii) by the year 2000, it should be ensured that children enter school at the right age of 6 years and that (iii) Universalization of primary education for children aged 6-13 should be achieved soon after 2000 and not later than 2010. The spirit of the

framers of the Education Review Policy Commission Report was that the goal for UPE should be that all children aged 6-10 years are enrolled and complete at least five years of schooling in order to be equipped with essential literacy, numeracy and other skills envisaged in the package of basic education. The report of the education policy review commission was debated by parliament which consolidated the latter into the Education White Paper (MoES, 1992).

The White Paper of 1992, agreed to the fact that universal primary education (UPE) would lead to a fundamental positive transformation of Ugandan society. This would translate into the vital economic, health, social, political, cultural and other sectors of society since the country faced challenges of limited financial, material and manpower resources, as well as low student recruitment and high wastage rates among others. The 1992 Education White paper thus recommended the introduction of free compulsory primary education in three phases. These phases were 1992-93 in which case, fees would be eliminated in phases through the following manner; in 1992/93 was abolishing fees for primary four (P4) in all schools in Uganda. In 1993/94, it was abolishing fees for primary five (P5) in all schools and continuing to add one class upwards per year until primary eight (P8) would be reached in 1996/7. In 1997/8 was abolishing fees for Primary three (P3) in all schools and continuing to add one class downwards per year until the whole primary cycle would be covered (P1-P8) in 1999/2000.

Surprisingly, they did not wait for the phased manner implementation of UPE, as recommended by the commission. In December 1996, the president of the Republic of Uganda, Mr. Yoweri Kaguta Museveni during presidential political campaigns, announced that four children of school going age per family would benefit from free primary education. Starting from January 1997 (Bategeka & Okurut, 2006) which later became universal primary education (UPE). However, when the implementation of UPE started in January 1997, the registration limit of four children per family proved problematic, particularly regarding the exact definition of a family. Eventually, NRM government removed this restriction, and allowed all people that wanted primary education under the UPE programme to do so. This policy became known as universal primary education (UPE).

In the same line, the Ugandan launched a 20-year Poverty Eradication Action Plan (PEAP) and Poverty Action Fund (PAF) 1997 where primary education was a vital factor of the strategies to get rid of poverty by 2020 (MFPED, 1997). Emphasizing the position of primary education in poverty eradication, they recognized UPE as one of the key sectors to gain from the PAF. UPE was seen as the main tool for achieving the economic, social and political objectives and would therefore lead to a fundamental positive transformation of society (Government White Paper, 1992). This strategy was reinforced by the Uganda Government Commitments to the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) No. 2 of achieving universal primary education by 2005. In the course of capitation grant, PAF enabled and enables UPE children to get better equitable access to basic education. This was achieved by removing the trouble of paying school fees, and improve on the quality of primary education on condition that schools have resources necessary to run them (MoES 2002) as quoted in (Mutabaruka & Kazooba, 2017).

Under the UPE program, all tuition fees and Parents and Teachers Association (PTA) charges for primary education were abolished by the Government as parents would contribute pens, note books, clothing (Uniform), and even bricks and labour for classroom constructions (Bategeka & Okurut, 2006). However during the implementation stage, parents were not willing to contribute

their obligation partly because of the many pressing household needs, and, on the other hand, the dependence attitude/free rider syndrome had already trickled into majority of families.

As a result, complementary funding from government in form of grants namely; capitation (fees) grants and school facilities grants (SFG) was a strategy to address the parental laxity. This witnessed the share of the education sector in the national budget jump from 13.7% in 1990 to 24.7% in 1998 (Bategeka & Okurut, 2006). The purpose of the capitation grant was to shift some of the burden of school fees from the parents to the Government, and to provide schools with resources necessary to run the school and support teaching and learning. The capitation grant was meant to cover tuition fees only (Essama-Nssah, et al., 2008). Schools facilities grant was a development grant managed at district level meant for construction of more classrooms, pit latrines, staff houses and provision of furniture. The government has also since provided cash for recruitment of more teachers, and purchase of the requisite scholastic materials, especially textbooks.

On realization of the good intentions of government, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in around 1993, worked closely with it on a series of initiatives to increase school enrolment in Uganda. Among these was the primary education and teacher development project that begun in 1993. It comprised the following major goals: (i) to reform the education of primary teachers, (ii) to prepare for reforms in the primary school curriculum, (iii) to reform the pupil examination system, (iv) to improve the provision of textbooks and reading materials in classrooms, (v) to introduce a system of assessing the quality of education provided and (vi) to introduce a framework for country-wide assessments of the overall progress in education (Grogan, 2008). Uganda's adoption of the universal primary education policy in 1997, five years later than its finalization in the White Paper of 1992 anchored on five objectives categorized by Mutabaruka and Kazooba (2017), as to;

- i) Establish, provide and maintain quality education as the basis for promoting human resource development;
- ii) Provide the facilities and resources to enable every child to enter and remain in school until the primary cycle of education is complete;
- iii) Make basic education accessible to the learner and relevant to his or her needs, as well as meeting national goals;
- iv) Make education equitable in order to eliminate disparities and inequalities;
- v) Ensure that education is affordable by the majority of Ugandans; and
- vi) Meet the objective of poverty reduction by equipping every individual with basic skills and knowledge.

### **The Inception of Universal Secondary Education**

Due to the UPE anti-fees policy, there was massification of the secondary education yet little could be done by both (the already freebees-ridden) parents and the existing (facilities-and space-limited) secondary schools to absorb the primary seven leavers. By 1999, despite the low retention rate, completion rate and inaccessibility to scholastic materials challenges, the enrollment in UPE had risen to 6.3m (World Bank, 2004) up from 2.1m in 1996. This required that Government designs a semblance (to UPE) strategy for other post primary education levels to match with the pressures of primary leaving examination leavers (and prospective secondary education students), brought about by UPE.

In follow-up to universal primary education (UPE), the Uganda government introduced in 2006 its universal secondary education (USE) policy from a presidential political campaign pronouncement, in order to increase access to quality secondary education for economically vulnerable families (Lisa & Kristof, 2015; MOES, 2007). This policy is also part of other Universal Post Primary Education and Training (UPPET) programs based on a partnership with the private sector and targeting able primary school graduates who cannot afford the fees charged at the post primary level. The formula was that one school in every sub-county was chosen to become a USE school, thus creating a parallel system of schools in which one was free and all other schools remained under a fee based structure. In Mukono Central Division for example, Mukono High School was chosen to be a USE school as Mukono Bishops Secondary remained a fees paying school. Since planning for implementation of this policy focused on extending educational access for students, little planning attention was paid to how such a policy would impact on other stakeholders like teachers (Molyneaux, 2011). In particular, user fees were abolished (through a scholarship or bursary program) for the targeted socioeconomic groups and conditional grants are made to participating institutions to help with their operational costs. There is also engaged in a program of facility expansion.

The adoption and implementation of both the UPE and USE policies put Uganda in limelight as being one of the few African countries to implement universal primary education (UPE) in the 1990s (next to Tanzania in 1984) and at the same time the first country in sub-Saharan Africa to embark on Universal Secondary Education (Lisa & Kristof, 2015; Essama-Nssah, et al., 2008). What seems to be unpleasant in their adoption by Uganda however, is the fact that they are all somehow outcomes of political interest groups (parents and the growing business community that needed highly educated labor force). But also the fact that they were all political comments by the president of Uganda in a bid the get vote right from 1996 and 2006 election periods. All this said the question that is left unanswered concerns the successes registered by the two education policies since their adoption in 1997 and 2007 and it was the concern of this current paper that sought to examine the successes of both the UPE and USE policies in Uganda.

## **Methodology**

This study adopted an interpretivist approach where a document analysis was employed as a data collection tool. Books and articles related to the history, implementation strategies/challenges and achievements of UPE and USE which were the most pertinent variables in this study were extracted using ‘Google Scholar’. Selection of these documents was primarily based on the validity and reliability of the information they held. The search was customized to a range of 25 years from 1997 when UPE was first implemented to 2022. To summarize the information from documents reviewed, we created a data collection form to summarize data gleaned from documents that were reviewed. The same form was also used to develop themes and analyze the data from documents for conclusions.

## **Findings**

### **Successes of the Universal Primary Education (UPE) in Uganda (1996 to date)**

In examining the successes of UPE, this study adopted Mutabaruka and Kazooba (2017) indicators of student enrollment per year and new infrastructural development for access, boys’ and girls’ chance given to access education taken for equality, the literacy and numeracy rates, teacher

development and pupils' pass rate at primary leaving examinations for quality of education. All these priority areas best fit within the UPE objectives.

### **Enrollment and Infrastructural Development (Access)**

#### **Increased Enrollment**

One of the major achievements of UPE is that Uganda has registered some significant successes in increasing access to free and compulsory education. In relation to increasing access, the intention was to have every child of school going age into the school system. Indeed, Uganda's primary school enrollment rates have risen remarkably since 1996, when they eliminated fees in a bold attempt to achieve Universal Primary Education (World Bank, 2002). Following the introduction of UPE in 1997, gross enrolment in primary schools increased from a total of 3.1 million in 1996 to 5.3 million in 1997, an increase of 73% in one year (Bategeka & Okurut, 2006). The World Bank 2004 report puts the gross enrolment figure at 6.3million in 1999. Bategeka and Okurut (2006) quote the figure at 7.6 million in 2003 while Okwarea and Omagor (2014), document 8 million in 2012. By 2017, 88 percent of the school-going age children were in school (National Planning Authority, 2018). The reports however do not indicate the contribution of the private sector, the donors and the civil society organizations in enriching the net primary education enrollment.

Evidence from Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB) statement of release of the 2019 primary leaving examination results indicate that a total of 695,804 candidates from 13,475 sitting centers (schools) registered for PLE in 2019. Of which 473,893 (68.2%) were universal primary education (UPE) beneficiaries, and 221,912 (31.8%) of the candidates were Non-UPE. Just imagine if the UPE policy was not in place all these students would not access basic education. However, neither Ministry of Education and Sports nor UNEB reports are able to explain the whereabouts of those pupils in original cohort as at 2012 primary one enrollment who did not make it to the primary seven cycle. This calls for improvement in the data collection and repository technologies to ensure a follow up of all children who join the universal education programmes to the end of the cycle.

Okwarea and Omagor (2014), also observed that the adoption of UPE increased awareness of the population about the importance of educating their children, in particular the education of a girl child which was previously a nightmare for many families. While the relationship between education and early marriage is bidirectional, it has been argued by gender experts that the retention of girls into the entire primary education cycle increases their chances of completion and also reduced their risk of early exposure to sexual harassment, early pregnancy, and early marriage and family formation. Educational attainment increases economic self-sufficiency among women and girls, and is associated with less reliance on male partners, as well as increased self-efficacy (Raj et al., 2019). The increases awareness champions have however, been countered by champions of quality of the primary education. The latter argue that the quality of the UPE graduates is low in literacy and numeracy. Factors supporting this claim relate to poor teach motivation, high pupil teacher ratio, less time of teach-on-task and the automatic ("social") promotion Policy that was introduced in 2005 (Okurut, 2015).

This is affirmed by the NAPE (2019) report where P3 learners' rated proficient in numeracy by school ownership and gender showed that the proportion of learners rated proficient in Numeracy (85.1%) in private schools was significantly ( $P=0.000$ ) higher than that of learners in UPE schools

(50.1%) and the proportion of learners rated proficient in literacy in English (83.3%) in private schools was significantly ( $p=0.000$ ) higher than that of learners in schools (44.2%). This is an indicator that UPE schools which are also government aided are badly off in both literacy and numeracy. However the story is not the same with both rural and urban UPE schools since it is indicated in the same NAPE Report that the proportion of learners rated proficient in Literacy in English (66.3%) in schools in urban areas was significantly ( $p=0.000$ ) higher than that of learners in schools in rural areas (44.9%) including UPE schools. This just means that rural UPE schools need to engage different strategies to meet the literacy and numeracy required levels. Other scholars still insist that there is need to examine the extent to which the UPE policy is contributing to Vision 2040 in terms of creating access to education for children 6-12 years and especially in the marginalized communities since the target is having 100% school enrollment for such children.

### **Infrastructural Development**

The Ministry of Education and Sports also embarked on building of more primary schools. For example, by end of 2008, there were 114,441 classrooms for primary school children while by the end of 2012, a total of 144,513 classrooms were in use. The increase in the stock of class rooms of about 26% could be attributed to the UPE program. A vivid example is the emergency construction of primary schools phase II project which started on 1st July 2015 and ended on 30th June 2020 which show a revised budget for FY 2019/20. This budget was Ugx 8.89bn, of which Ugx 3.24bn (36%) was already released to the respective school construction projects in the country by 30th December 2019 (MoES, 2020): Education and Sports Sector (2020). In some instances, parents and administrations have creatively worked with parents to improvise and construct additional facilities and/or open space learning (Okwarea & Omagor, 2014).

The period 1996 to 2003 also witnessed a large increase in the number of primary schools, from 8,531 in 1996 to 13,353 in 2003, an increase of just under 5,000 schools in a period of only seven years (Bategeka & Okurut, 2006). This compares with an increase in the ten years preceding the introduction of UPE of just over 1,000 schools (from 7,351 in 1986). The number of primary school teachers also increased rapidly, from 81,564 in 1996 to 145,587 in 2003, an increase of 78%. This compares with an increase in the decade preceding the introduction of UPE of just 12%.

### **Equity in Education**

Equity is about ensuring that the education system is structured to ensure that every child, irrespective of their personal, social and economic circumstances can achieve their educational potential. Vulnerable populations such as girl children, disabled children, children from hard to reach areas, and children with special needs are especially targeted when ensuring equity (Kavuma, *et al.*, 2017). To promote equity in education and eliminate disparities, additional facilities have been created to facilitate easy access to schools by the children with disabilities and in reducing gender disparities especially at the primary school level. It is evidently clear that UPE has contributed to improved equity in education under UPE programme. For example in 2015, enrolment of girls in primary schools was 50 % of the total, compared to 45% in 1993. This implies that by the year 2015, both boys and girls were accessing education at an equal average of 50% each (EMIS, 2015) quoted in Mutabaruka & Kazooba (2017). Much as we may think that girls always drop out before completion, results from UNEB, 2020 results report show that in 2019, analysis by gender indicated that 336,040 (48.3%) boys were registered as compared to 359,764 (51.7%) girls. This indicated that more girls than boys completed the Primary Education cycle, yet



they report that this has been the trend in the last five years. This may be explained by the fact that girls are always more than boys yet poor families could previously before the introduction of UPE concentrate on paying fees for boys and hence on the advent of UPE, more girls got chance to enroll in schools. This was also realized by Musika (2019) who observed that gender inequalities and access to schooling drastically improve right after the implementation of free basic education. The high completion rate of girls getting higher than that of boys however is not a good indicator which may need urgent redress.

### **Quality Improvement**

Results concerning the quality successes for the UPE policy are inconsistent with some scholars insisting that the education quality in Uganda with UPE is promising while others show huge gaps within this policy implementation. According to Okwara and Omagor (2014) for example, the MoES has all along has promoted quality education by promoting the necessary human resource development, through implementation of the primary education and teacher development project. This project has deliberately supported efforts to restructure primary teacher education and to increase the number of teachers trained/retrained/upgraded. As a result, between 2008 and 2012 the number of teachers on the pay role increased from about 125,000 to 132,000 representing a 5% increase by 2012. These results however are confusing since people like Mutabaruka and Kazooba (2017) and Musika (2019) have continuously questioned their efficiency in facilitating the teaching and learning process.

The same authors still insist that there is a gradual increase over years between 2008 and 2012 in both literacy and numeracy. This implies that the literacy rates of the future adult population would increase the quality of stock of the human capital intended to enhance productivity and technology adoption. However this contradicts with Mutabaruka and Kazooba (2017)'s results from their study where they quoted the national assessment of progress in education performance results taken between 2010 and 2015 that showed that education performance in terms of pupils' numeracy and literacy reading skills is not improving with the average numeracy and literacy rates for primary six class which was at 51:50% respectively. They asserted that NAPE report 2015 also indicated primary six literacy and numeracy rates at 50% and 51% respectively which justified that the quality of UPE in Uganda still deserved a lot.

Consequently, Mutabaruka and Kazooba (2017)'s criticism of UPE's literacy and numeracy levels conquers with the UNEB, (2020) report which indicates that in 2019, a total of 617,150 candidates passed the PLE. Compared to 599,593 the previous year however the same report specifies that in both English and Mathematics performance was poor in questions where candidates were required to apply knowledge in problem solving situations or express themselves freely. Candidates were more comfortable with questions that are direct and based on recall yet they affirm that this situation has persisted over the years.

### **Successes of the Universal Secondary Education (USE) in Uganda (2007 to date)**

As already noted, Uganda's universal secondary education policy was and is still aimed at opening access and creating opportunities for poor students to attend secondary schools and particularly for the increased number of children graduating from primary school as a result of universal primary education, launched in 1997.

## **Enrollment**

Since 2007, the USE program was also implemented through the public private partnership (PPP), it is reported that by 2018 the program had grown substantially from the start that had 363 schools in 2007 enrolling approximately 40,000 students, to over 800 schools enrolling nearly half a million students, or nearly one-third of all students enrolled in all types of secondary schools in Uganda (O'Donoghue, Crawford, Makaaru, Otieno & Perakis, 2018; Asankha & Takashi, 2014). Despite this progress in enrolment however, Uganda still has low enrolment overall in secondary education, with the Ministry of Education and Sports estimating net enrolment to be 24 percent in 2016 for example. This is partially attributed to the fact that students must score 28 or better on their primary leaving exam (PLE) in order to be eligible for a funded place in a PPP school, meaning that nearly one-fifth of students eligible for secondary school are not eligible for a subsidized secondary school place and hence, drop out.

## **Attendance**

Essama-Nssah, et al. (2008) report a significant increment in attendance rates for secondary school age children (13-18 years old) between 1992 and 2005 especially for girls. There is a bias in favor of urban residents both for the 6-12-year and the 13-18- year age groups. There seems to be a difference between enrolment rate for urban children and that of rural children. Looking at the regional distribution of attendance Essama-Nssah, et al note that for both years, the Central Region has the highest attendance rates for all age groups while the Northern Region has the lowest. Asankha, & Takashi, (2014) point out what might be the cause of this saying that although students are free of paying tuition fees in USE schools, they still have to pay boarding fees, scholastic materials, medical care, transportation and any other school needs. This coupled with low interest rates for education among both students and parents, have negatively impacted on the expected high and school enrollments. Although the USE program was designed with co-responsibility of parents, schools and in mind, it was implemented without sufficient attention to local school realities. Consequently, the intention of increasing access to quality education through USE has not been achieved to date.

## **Conclusion**

As far as the primary and secondary education sub-sectors are concerned, the current two free education policies (UPE and USE) seek to increase in a sustainable manner equitable access to quality and relevant education. This is portrayed in the fact that ten years after the abolition of school fees at the primary level in 1997 under the UPE program, the Government of Uganda launched the Universal Secondary Education Policy (USE) designed to address inequity in the distribution of post primary education and training opportunities. The current paper therefore presents assessment results discourse for the successes registered by these two policies since their inception and finds minimal positive change in quality but significant improvements in enrollment and infrastructure.

Despite the above registered successes for the USE and UPE policies in Uganda, their impact to date sends mixed feelings, as some scholars report that the increase in educational attainment has remained slow and educational performance declined after the implementation of USE. Yet we observe that the quality of UPE and USE despite all efforts to train teachers is still lacking. This is attributed to the way USE and UPE play a primarily political role (A platform for political campaigns) for which the actual improvement of service delivery is secondary. This leads to a

situation in which low inputs are reflected by congested classrooms and reduced teacher compensation as key-elements yet they should have been priorities, negatively affecting motivation of the key-actors involved, and quality of the education. We also discover a controversy between UPE pupils' low performance levels in literacy and numeracy and their somewhat good performance at primary leaving examinations.

### Recommendations

From the above discussion, the researchers do recommend that further research should concentrate at examining this correlation. We also recommend that all stakeholders desist from politicizing educational issues and instead concentrate on formulating evidence based policies based on developmental needs and using the rightful channels. In this way, all stakeholders will own the respective free education policies and implement them together as a team.

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