

POLICY OPTIONS FOR COMBATTING UNIVERSITY EDUCATION DROPOUT IN UGANDA

Mukisa Joshua William





Mukisa Joshua Wiliam

Abstract

This paper tackles the problem of high university dropout rates of students from low income earning backgrounds. It highlights the consensus on why this is the case. I also point out the fact that this phenomenon has not received adequate attention and from the analysis, most of the legal provisions and policies do not provide a strategy to counter student dropout rates as discovered from the findings which show that most of the survey participants do not know of any mechanism to counter this phenomenon. I follow up with recommendations to combat high dropout rates by suggesting that key stakeholders should abolish unfair tuition policies, increase district quota enrolment, revise how education loan schemes are allotted and develop a strategy to combat the dropout of students from the university.



Introduction

Over the past years, there has been a surge in the dropout rate of students from low income earning backgrounds in Uganda. This development is attributed mainly to the increase of university tuition fees, yet other factors may additionally contribute. According to the 2016 “Africa Higher Education Student Survey Project”, almost 30% of all students in Uganda, who join university education on various degree programmes drop out. In a survey carried out by Jessica N. Aguti et al., approximately 83.7% of student dropouts are attributed to poor family background as they come from low-income families. According to UBOS, a low-income earning background applies when “the average annual consumption expenditure per adult [...] is UGX 46,233.65, that is to say, the average amount of money a person spends on goods and services in a year”.

There is little data about the pathways of tertiary students from low-income families but conclusions can be drawn. For instance, UBOS (2017) notes that students (aged 22-25) from urban settings are characterised by tertiary

completion rates that are almost three times higher than for their rural counterparts who stand at 7%. The lowest tertiary completion rate with 6.2% was recorded in Karamoja, one of the poorest regions of the country. The above statistics suggest that students from low-income backgrounds are more likely to drop out.

If the plight of the students from low-income families is not addressed, we risk seeing rising social inequality in Uganda due to lack of access to formal employment by the university dropouts from low income earning families. Whilst a university degree is a not a guarantee to find employment, in a country where youth unemployment currently stands at 16.8% according to UBOS for those aged 15-24 years and 13.3% for those aged 18 – 30 years, it nevertheless is a contributor to social mobility and a possible engine for moving out of poverty. If the country does not succeed in including students from low-income earning backgrounds in tertiary education, poverty will manifest as a solid boundary to educational success and to opportunities for social mobility.

Existing policies and interventions addressing university dropout challenge

In Uganda, students from low-income backgrounds can and want to be productive members of society. In both developed and developing countries, promoting more inclusive societies and employment opportunities for students from low-income backgrounds requires improved access to funding, affirmative action and the pursuit of inclusive policies with adaptations as needed. Many societies also recognise the need to make education a basic right and not just a privilege accessible to only the elite. This necessitates the creation of financing opportunities and providing information on a variety of formats that can ease everyone’s access to university education. Further still, it challenges attitudes and mistaken assumptions about the propriety and relevance of university education in ensuring development.

Governmental support for students from low-income backgrounds

The Government of Uganda has adopted a number of laws and policies pertaining to education for all and the right to education. Under the National Objective XIV, XVIII and Article 30, Uganda acknowledges and ascribes to the right to education which includes access to education. This is complemented by The University and Other Tertiary Institutions Act, 2001, The Education and Sports Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP) 2017-2020 NRM Manifesto and NDP II and III National Planning Framework, and The Business, Technical, Vocational Education and Training (BTJET) Act, No. 12, 2008. It is imperative to note that these policy and legal frameworks have promoted access to higher education, for instance, through scholarships. However, their distribution is not equitable as all of them emphasise academic excellence as the prerequisite for benefitting from them leaving behind the needy, who often have low grades, un-catered for. Most of these laws and policies have a gap in as far as they do not offer any strategy towards ensuring equitable access to higher education. For example, NDP III recognises the fact that lack of fees is a problem faced by university students but does not provide a strategy.

Under the Higher Education Students Financing Act, 2014 which seeks to mitigate this problem by providing an avenue for prospective students to obtain fee support, eligibility for loans is determined on individual merit, i.e., with focus on represented need and the ability to repay the loan. Through this scheme, even students from low-income backgrounds can apply for the loan. However, Mondo Kagonyera (2019), argues that, 'Students from well-to-do families who can meet their tuition costs were acquiring student loans while needy Ugandans were being left out.' Under this policy it is observed that students in higher education can be financed through (i) government scholarships (ii) district quotas (iii) private sponsorship and (iv) the loan scheme. However, what is common to all schemes is the fact that they emphasise academic excellence as

The Goa prerequisite to benefit from them thus creating a greater barrier to access by persons from low-income backgrounds who may not have this due to lack of quality basic education that can sustain them to match the high standards of higher education.

Under the district quota system, government awards scholarships to only 11 students from districts that fail to send students to universities on the highly competitive national merit-based scholarships. This selection criterion is very low as some students who could qualify miss out due to the limited numbers selected. Hon. Moses Nagwomu from Bunyole East while urging government to extend the district quota system said that, 'In Butaleja district we are 88 percent poor, meaning our people cannot afford school fees to these tertiary institutions, or the good schools where they would qualify from government benefits.' Despite the fact that the district quota system was introduced to enable bright students from underprivileged schools in remote districts get university education, majority of beneficiaries are from the Central region. For example, in 2020/2021 district quota list, Kampala and Wakiso received 41 slots on district quota basis while remote areas like Yumbe, Moroto and Kween had six slots. In Makerere University, 4 students were admitted from Amudat District, 7 from Butaleja and yet 15 were admitted from Kampala on the district quota system. In Kyamboho University, majority of admissions on district quota in the 2019/2020 academic year were from Kampala. Furthermore, most students who get on the district quota schemes are usually from elite schools in these districts – e.g. Ntare School and Mary Hill High School which received the greatest portion of Mbarara district quota beneficiaries, and yet students from these schools are not necessarily from poor backgrounds. For example, all seven slots in Butaleja were given to students from only government aided schools like Mulagi Girls SS, Bukedi College Kachonga, and Butaleja Secondary School.

In 2014, the government introduced the education loan scheme to promote access to higher education. However, the Equal Opportunities Commission established that many marginalised students were not benefitting from these loans. For example, 20 – 30% of student loan beneficiaries were from good schools yet the government failed to provide for 50% of the applicants for these loans. Out of the over 1988 students that graduated from Ndejje University in April, 2014, only 101 were beneficiaries of the student loan scheme.

Whereas many legal and policy provisions have been provided to realise the right to education, most of these provisions have no obligation to reduce the dropout rate of students from low-income backgrounds from university education. Furthermore, the constitution only provides for free and compulsory basic education and it only takes appropriate

measures to afford every citizen equal opportunity to attain the highest educational standard possible since all its developmental efforts are directed at ensuring the minimum social and cultural well-being of the people.

Unless higher education is treated with the urgency it deserves, it will be observed as a luxury or non-essential pursuit in the interest of development. General Comment No. 13 on the right to education states that, 'If higher education is to respond to the needs of students in different social and cultural settings, it must have flexible curricular and varied delivery.' According to the World Bank Group, 'Higher education offers limitless avenues for social mobility and economic development and is instrumental in fostering growth, reducing poverty and boosting shared prosperity. It benefits not just the individual, but the entire educational system.'

Voices from the field: what students, lecturers and education policy makers say

Ramsey, a fourth year student of law says that, 'I know friends who passed the pre-entry and were admitted but failed to join because of high tuition. Personally, I couldn't have afforded [tuition] if we were paying the current tuition.' Mr David Ssendendo, the chairperson of Uganda Head Teachers Association, said the dropout issue is real and that concerted efforts should be made to address it. The Minister of Education and Sports, Ms. Janet Museveni also said that, 'Dropping out of school is a big problem they have noted over the years.' The former Ndejje University Chancellor, the late Dr Wilberforce Kisamba Mugerwa, called upon government and

the private sector to find a lasting solution to some of the demotivating factors that continued to plague the country's education. He recommended a revision of the University curriculum because it had increased the problem of unemployment because some of the skills acquired from higher education were unable to address the demands of the labour market. O. E. Bukabeeba, formerly, NRM Secretary for Mobilisation, Mbarara says that, 'The government should increase the district quota to 20 students to further enhance the benefits of UPE and USE.'

Voices from the field: Why do poor students drop out of University education?

The data was collected through (i) questionnaires (ii) key informant interviews and (iii) focus group discussions. Through "purposive" or "convenience" sampling, only members of the university community who would provide the best information were selected. For the questionnaires, random sampling was employed. To ensure diversity, the selection of participants for the focus group discussions was designed to ensure gender

balance, diversity by picking participants from different income backgrounds, colleges and regions of the country. The guiding questions were formulated to point towards how many scholarship schemes the participants were aware of and how effective they found them together with recommendations on what could be done to improve their effectiveness highlighting the reality of the public problem.

Main causes for dropping out

The participants gave a number of unique responses. 80% of the 20 participants identified the lack of tuition, unfavourable tuition policies, and government's deliberate withdrawal of incentives like meals and allowances, and poverty as a major reason for dropout. Five participants identified midlife crisis, change in paradigm shift and the pursuit of parallel ambitions. 60% identified the lack of access to alternative sources of tuition with seven participants citing walking long distances to school, prevalence of strikes, missing marks and retakes. Two participants cited poor performance in class which results into frustration and the choice to drop out. Five participants cited laziness of students and lack

of willingness to continue studying. 30% cited limited knowledge of scholarship opportunities, 40% cited discriminative study loan policies, increasing inflation and lack of dedicated revenue streams as reasons for the drop out of students from low-income earning backgrounds from University. There was unanimous agreement by the ten focus group discussion participants that coming from a low-income background definitely disadvantages you in many ways, as you cannot afford tuition however low it could be and even if you did, you would not be in a position to sustain the costs of living.

Measures taken to solve the drop out of students from low income earning backgrounds

70% of participants cited government scholarships, private scholarships, district quotas, sports scholarships, as measures that could prevent students from dropping out of university. 60% cited the efforts by the Ministry of Gender in creating initiatives and outreach programmes to address the issue of educating the girl child and that many of the girls that benefitted were not from well-to-do families. What could be done to eradicate the problem of dropout of students from low-income earning backgrounds in university?

70% recommended that the government should provide need-based scholarships on top of the existing ones. They recommended increasing the beneficiaries of government scholarships from 4000 per year of over the 700,000 students who leave secondary school per annum to a much more representative figure of at least 50,000.

70% recommended that student loans should be accessible to all. This was based on the current progress of the student loan scheme that has benefitted approximately 3,000 students since its formation in 2014 many of whom are from well-to-do families. The participants recommended an open door policy where all students could apply and receive a loan that was not based simply on their family background and their ability to repay the loan.

20% recommended the creation of a student employment bureau where students work for pay in the form of tuition waivers. Mr. Ezra Byakutanganza, the former Guild Speaker at Makerere University, was of the view that students would benefit from the establishment of an employment bureau as they would not only exercise their learned skills, but they would also receive some payment in turn which would be used to cater for their needs and tuition costs.

60% recommended supplementary exams. They recommended that a system should be put in place to enable students who miss exams due to illness, or justifiable reasons to sit for their exams and graduate in time with their cohort instead of waiting for the next academic year. Makerere University Business School is already leading the way in this regard. The rest of the universities should follow MUBS' lead.

80% recommended that the offer of incentives like meals and allowances should be resumed. In line with this, Mr. Herbert Ruhweza, the President of Mbarara University Government Students Association, recommended that the government should issue out allowances even during the pandemic to enable students access online lectures despite the fact that they are not physically at school. This is due to the fact that many are being left behind by their colleagues who are in position to cater for these data costs yet exams do not put these disparities into consideration which could discourage many to simply quit as they would have missed out on their lectures.

80% recommended that policies like the 15% tuition increment and late payment surcharges

should be abolished. Martin, a student from Kyambogo University, stated that, 'I want to simply quit as they would have missed out on their lectures.'

80% recommended that policies like the 15% tuition increment and late payment surcharges should be abolished. Martin, a student from Kyambogo University, stated that, 'I want to make a difference in my community; if you penalise me for not paying the high tuition rates which I cannot afford, you are in effect sending me out of school.'

40% recommended that university education should become accessible like Universal Primary Education (UPE). At the moment, university education has not received the same attention like UPE, which means that most of the students from these lower classes are denied the chance to attain a full education because no wide ranging government programme has been put in place to cater for them. They recommend that a government programme for higher education like its UPE counterparts should be developed to enable all access higher education.

50% recommended that the spectrum of scholarships should include marginalised groups i.e. the poor, disabled, sexual minorities, religious and need-based scholarships, and non-refundable grants. The participants recommended that a careful allocation of scholarships across the marginalised groups would result in an evenly spread model of development and empowerment in line with the UN SDGs of leaving no one behind to which Uganda is party.

40% recommended that the Ministry of Gender should engage all genders and not simply the girl child. Participants at Makerere School of Gender recommended that gender empowerment should be more inclusive of all genders to eliminate the one-sided empowerment which would only result in a circular game of playing catch up whenever one gender performed better than the other.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

In conclusion, the views for the dropout of students from low-income earning backgrounds are varied even to the people that classify themselves as members from low-income backgrounds. However, what they all agree upon is that the government should exercise more vigilance in the prevention of dropout of students from University. Clearly, the research also revealed that there was a lack of clear commitment towards the specific issue of the dropout of students from low-income backgrounds. This was observed from the

indications by participants that activism by various NGOs, politicians and students regarding the drop out of students from low-income backgrounds seemed to land on deaf ears which should not be the case if indeed we seek to bridge the social and income inequality gap.

Based on the research carried out and the findings that have arisen from this research, these are the key recommendations that ought to be considered by various stakeholders;

- Firstly, Members of Parliament, Ministry of Education and Sports and University Administrations of Public Institutions. The government should increase the number of students enrolled on the district quota system from the numerous districts that have been created. A flat figure should be selected that is representative of the people in those remote districts who are the target beneficiaries of the district quota system. Furthermore, the student loan scheme should be designed in a manner that targets individuals who cannot afford to pay tuition while factoring in the key element that they are from low-income earning backgrounds. When this is done based on affirmative action and not the ability of the applicant to repay the loan, many students from low-income earning backgrounds shall benefit from the loan scheme and it shall reach the target beneficiaries. Still, the government should provide need-based scholarships that are focused on students from low income earning backgrounds and are not based on academic merit but the level of need. Furthermore, in partnership with the private sector, the Ministry of Education and Sports and the National Council of Higher Education, non-refundable grants should be offered to students from low-income earning backgrounds. As the body governing university education, the national council should set a clear percentage of students enrolled into university to be from low-income earning backgrounds.
- Furthermore, student loans should be accessible to all and should not be based simply on the student's ability to repay based on family background, but rather, the potential for students to succeed. This shall create a strong incentive on the part of public institutions and government to modify and improve the university curriculum to better position students to succeed in life out of university as the incentive to lessen the potential for defaulting on the same and it will operate as a spark for improving on the relevancy of higher education. This shall ensure that all beneficiaries are weighted on a similar standard.
- The second recommendation is that the imposition of surcharges on students that make late tuition payments should be declared unlawful and abolished through a parliamentary resolution and council decision. Stakeholders need to keep in mind the fact that 41% of Ugandans live below the poverty line and imposing radical policies that increase the cost of higher education only eliminates many as they cannot afford to sustain it with the various living costs they have to deal with. In line with this, the offer of incentives like meals and allowances should be resumed in public universities including the revision of unfavourable tuition policies that impose surcharges on those that make late payments yet they are often from the low-income earning backgrounds.

- The second recommendation is that the imposition of surcharges on students that make late tuition payments should be declared unlawful and abolished through a parliamentary resolution and council decision. Stakeholders need to keep in mind the fact that 41% of Ugandans live below the poverty line and imposing radical policies that increase the cost of higher education only eliminates many as they cannot afford to sustain it with the various living costs they have to deal with. In line with this, the offer of incentives like meals and allowances should be resumed in public universities including the revision of unfavourable tuition policies that impose surcharges on those that make late payments yet they are often from the low-income earning backgrounds.
- The third recommendation is that the government should develop a strategy to be implemented in combating student dropout rates in universities. Great focus has been placed on primary and secondary education neglecting the importance of facilitating these learners to access a wholesome education by reaching the very top which is the university and completing it as well.

CIA The World Factbook–Uganda

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ug.html>; Conan Businge, Universities: Student drop-out rates alarming

<https://www.newvision.co.ug/news/1502587/universities-student-drop-rates-alarming>;

Funding Higher Education in Uganda in an Era of Growth. Pg 9. The fact that Uganda's tuition was 20% lower than Tanzania and Kenya.; The 2008/2009 Ministerial Policy Statement requiring 50% contribution by public universities towards their maintenance. Non-Tax revenue is principally revenue from tuition, but also includes sales of ancillary services. **excluding Busitema Source: 2008/09 Ministerial Policy Statement; State of Higher Education and Training in Uganda 2006;

Aguti, J. et al. "Determinants of Student Dropout from Two External Degree Programmes of Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda." (2009).; Universities: Student drop-out rates alarming;

<https://www.newvision.co.ug/news/1502587/universities-student-drop-rates-alarming>

World bank (2019), Poverty headcount ratio at national poverty lines (% of population) - Uganda, available on: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.NAHC?locations=UG> [08 November 2020].

KONRAD-ADENAUER-STIFTUNG
 UGANDA & SOUTH SUDAN OFFICE
 51 A, Prince Charles Drive, Kololo
 P.O.Box 647 Kampala, Uganda
 T: +256 312 26 20 11/2
www.kas.de/uganda
 E: info.kampala@kas.de