

Uganda tackling school bottlenecks

After rapid primary growth, focus shifts to quality and to secondary education

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Kampala



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Uganda's tremendous success in expanding primary education — with a tripling in the number of primary students since President Yoweri Museveni came to power in 1986 — is highlighting a new set of problems. How can educational standards be improved? What will happen to all these pupils when they complete primary school? The first problem already is preoccupying government planners. The second, acknowledges Commissioner for Secondary Education Yusuf K. Nsubuga, is a challenge that soon will face the second tier of Uganda's education system.

That the questions now arise at all is a sign of how far Uganda has come. "Everything had virtually collapsed under [former president] Idi Amin and because of the 1979 war" with Tanzania, recalls Acting Commissioner for Education Sam Onek. "So in the

it declared a policy of Universal Primary Education (UPE), which entitles up to four children per family to receive free education in government and government-aided primary schools.

Enrolments skyrocket

Between 1986 and 1996, primary school enrolment rose modestly, from 2.2 million to 3.1 million. But with the introduction of UPE in 1997, it jumped to 5.3 million, an increase of 70 per cent in just one year. By 1999, the number had risen to 6.6 million, and the Ministry of Education expects it to reach 6.8 million by 2003.

The enrolments under UPE exceeded even the most optimistic projections. The gross enrolment ratio (the total population in school as a percentage of the population of 6-12 years), which stood at 69 per cent in 1990 and 80 per cent in 1996, jumped to 124 per cent in 1997. "Many parents who had more than four children simply allocated them to relatives or pleaded with the local

[programme] implementors to register them. Even men and women who were above primary school-going age enrolled for UPE," explains Mr. Onek.

Stretched to the limit

One result was that available facilities were stretched to the limit. The average number of pupils per school jumped from 363 to 616 between 1996 and 1997. Although the number of teachers rose from 81,564 to 89,247, it did not keep pace with the rapid increase in pupils, so that the pupil-to-teacher ratio jumped from 38:1 to 60:1. The picture was even worse in the two lowest primary classes, where the ratio of students to teachers exceeded 100.

The reality of a teacher trying to teach a class of over 100 pupils under a mango tree is all too common, and has raised concerns about academic standards. Although no research has been done to assess the impact of UPE on the quality of education, many observers are convinced that standards have dropped. The Kitante Primary School in Kampala "used to be among the 10 best schools in the country," says Ms. Jane Nakityo, who has a son in the school. "Today, it is not even among the top 50. There are just too many pupils for the teachers to pay attention to each of them."

The Ministry of Education and Sports stopped ranking schools' performance in national examinations in 1997, but independent rankings by the media show a predominance of private schools among those judged high in academic excellence. In the

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Ugandan
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early 1980s, emphasis was placed on the rehabilitation and expansion of schools without, however, proper planning." Between 1980 and 1985, education accounted for an average of only 15.6 per cent of recurrent government expenditure, reflecting its continued low priority under the government of Mr. Milton Obote.

That, however, began to change after President Museveni took power. Education's share of recurrent spending rose somewhat to 17.8 per cent between 1986 and 1990, and over the subsequent decade increased much more significantly, to 30 per cent.

In 1989, a commission appointed by the government to review the entire education system recommended making primary education free and compulsory, among other proposals. The government accepted the recommendations in 1992. Five years later, in 1997,

1999 Primary Leaving Examinations (PLE) for example, the best five schools were all private, according to a list compiled in February by *The Monitor* newspaper. Because of concerns over standards, many well-to-do parents have moved their children to private schools.

Mr. Onek, however, does not believe that there has been such a drastic decline in standards. The introduction of UPE, he points out, mostly affected the lower grades. Until those pupils finish all seven years of primary school, "we shall not have a complete picture of the impact of UPE on the quality of education."

Nevertheless, the government is not sitting back. It is taking measures to ensure that standards are progressively improved. In the short term, the government is aiming to reduce the student-to-teacher ratio in the first two grades to 80:1, and in the remaining grades to an average of 50:1. Some of the money saved through debt forgiveness under the heavily indebted poor countries initiative of the IMF and World Bank will be spent on recruiting more teachers. In addition, between the 2000/01 and 2002/03 academic years, a further 13,000 classrooms are to be built, at a cost of \$180 mn.

On to secondary education

The problem of the transition from primary to secondary school already is being posed, even before the first intake of UPE pupils completes the seventh level. The transition rates are very low. Out of the 211,749 candidates who sat for the PLE in 1997, for example, only 87,231 or 41.3 per cent went on to a secondary school the following year, even though 70 per cent passed.

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Fortunately, the government still has some time, as the number of those completing primary school will not rise dramatically until 2003. But then the number of PLE candidates will jump to about 800,000, compared to 300,000 who sat for the exam in 1998.

To prepare for such challenges, the Ministry of Education and Sports is finalizing a "strategic plan" for secondary education. Under the plan, enrolment in the first four years of secondary school should rise from 149,840 in 1999 to 262,074 students by 2003. "This will be done through building more schools, rehabilitating and expanding existing schools and utilizing the available schools more efficiently," says Mr. Nsubuga.

Currently there are about 1,200 secondary schools, of which 621 are government-aided and the rest private. Investment in private secondary schools is being encouraged through provision of technical support, guidance and financial incentives such as loans, grants and tax holidays.

The problem, however, is not just the limited number of schools but also access to secondary education by various sections of society. People living in and around Kampala, the capital, and other urban centres have much easier access to secondary education than those in the countryside. Only 6 per cent of children of the poorest 25 per cent of families complete secondary education, compared with 22 per cent from the

richest 25 per cent.

The government is seeking to address such geographical and social imbalances. "We are aiming to have at least one government-aided secondary school in each sub-county," says Mr. Nsubuga. Out of about 900 sub-counties, 428 currently

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are without government-aided schools. Of Uganda's 45 districts, 15 have been identified as the most "educationally disadvantaged," accounting for less than a fifth of gross national enrolment. They will receive special attention, with a greater share of educational resources channeled to them and private funders given more incentives to invest.

In 1994, a government committee found that secondary school fees were escalating due to the growing cost of education, and that most parents were too poor to afford them. The committee recommended a new fee structure that would impose a ceiling on school charges, with the government contributing between one-third and one-half of student costs. Any school wanting to charge more than the recommended maximum would first have to get the backing of the parents and the permission of the ministry.

The burden on parents — who in the past have heavily supported teachers' salaries — also will be reduced by improving government pay for teachers.

Improving female access

Girls' access to education, not only at secondary school level but throughout the education system, is also receiving government attention. Despite the introduction of UPE, "the percentage of females enrolled in primary schools is still lower than that of boys," Vice-President Specioza Wandira Kazibwe noted in June 2000, at the launching of the National Strategy for Girls' Education in Uganda.

Females account for 47 per cent of total enrolment in primary school, 32 per cent at the secondary level, 35 per cent in the universities and 13 per cent in the polytechnics. In some rural districts, such as Kitgum and Kotido, girls account for only 35 per cent of total primary school enrolment. Partly, this is because girls drop out at a much higher rate than boys. While the gender gap in enrolment between boys and girls is only 1.1 per cent in the first grade, by the seventh it reaches 15.7 per cent.

Many schools are designing programmes not only to attract girls, but to also keep them until they complete their studies. At Taibah Primary and Secondary School, "We have a personal development curriculum which teaches self-awareness and communication skills and covers matters of sex, AIDS, infatuation and use of contraceptives," says Education Director Mariam Luyombo. "As a result, we hardly have any girl who doesn't complete school." ■

