

Reviving the grappling Education Sector: What can be done?

Executive Summary

This brief looks at the academic landscape in Uganda which is largely characterized by declining attainment and increasing dropout rates despite the government's increased investment in the education sector. Statistics show that, Uganda attained its highest primary school completion rate of 63 percent in 2002, after which primary school completion rates have steadily fallen to about 56 percent in 2013. The brief points out that high levels of teacher absenteeism, insufficient funding, lack of infrastructure like class rooms, poor supervision and inspection as some of the leading causes of the falling completion rates. We make three recommends, one, reversing the policy that was passed in 2005 compelling schools to promote pupils irrespective of their performance. Two, rethinking the UPE funding that puts the responsibility of financing UPE squarely on the government. This has proved not to be economically viable given other competing priorities like infrastructure development, health, agriculture investment etc. A cost sharing model in which both parents and the government contribute to the funding of primary school education will reduce the funding constraint. With parents contributing to UPE, teachers can be paid a decent salary, more class rooms and other infrastructure can be built which will lead to improvement school outcomes. Three, increasing supervision and inspection will go a long in curbing teacher absenteeism leading to increased teacher pupil interaction and thus improving learning outcomes.

Background

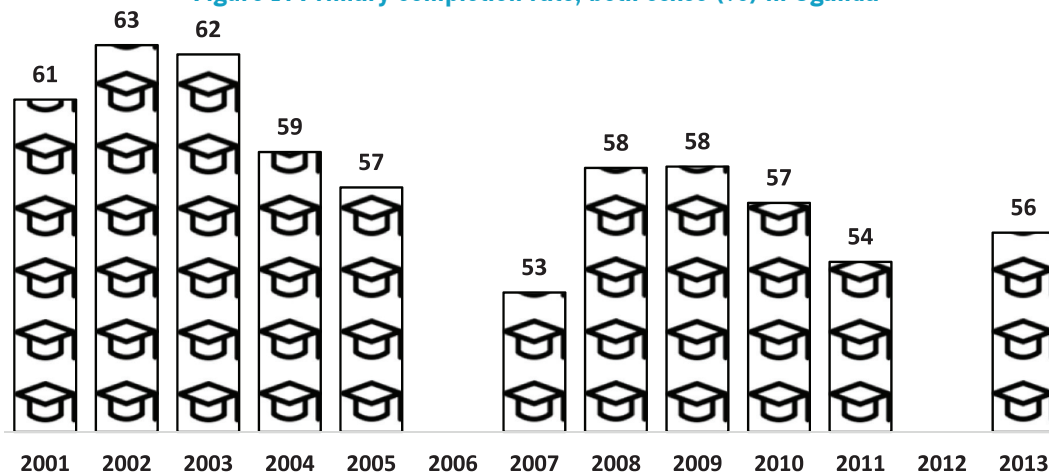
The 1997 introduction of the Universal Primary Education (UPE) scheme aimed to increase access to education especially for the poor and under privileged households. The scheme had a number of policy interventions including the abolition of school fees in public primary schools, increases in the government expenditure on primary education, abolition of the Parent Teacher Associations (PTA) (replaced by School Management Committees) and PTA fees ((MoES), 2013)¹. Under the scheme, parental responsibilities were to cover the provision of lunch, school uniforms and shelter while the government was to cater for school fees, textbooks, teachers, and infrastructure (Nishimura, et al., 2009)². The introduction of UPE saw a remarkable increase in access to primary school education. Net Primary school enrolment increased from 71 percent in 1996 to about 110 percent in 2013, adjusted net primary enrolment rate increased from 57 percent to 94 while the percentage of

children out of school (% of primary school age) dropped from 43 percent to 6 percent over the same period.

Despite all these achievements, progress has proved hard to sustain and UPE has faced a number of challenges which are epitomised by the growing number of dropouts and faltering primary school completion rates. In 2002, Uganda attained its highest primary school completion rate of 63 percent, after which primary school completion rates started falling (figure 1).

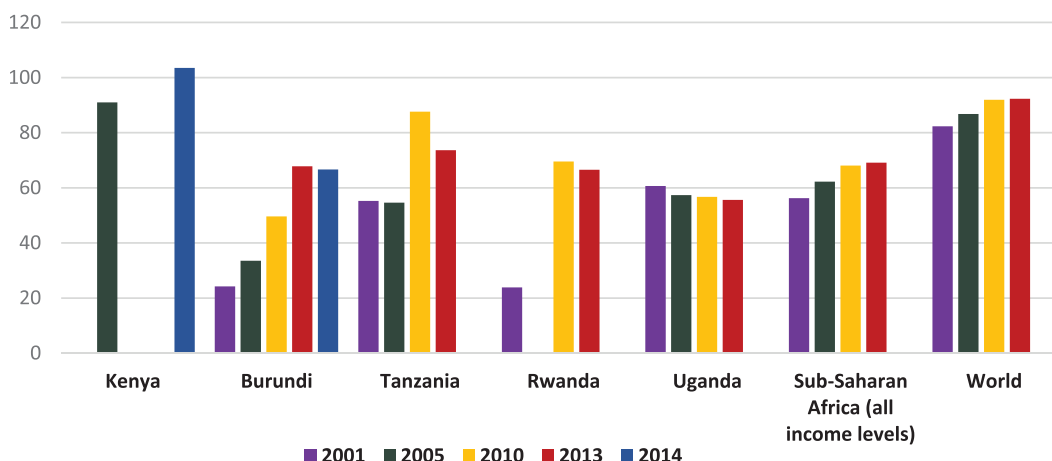
These falling primary school completion rates pose serious development challenges and are likely to impede Uganda from attaining structural transformation. These trends have concerning implications not only on the quality of Uganda's current and future labour force but also on her competitiveness in the region. A comparison with her neighbours shows that in 2001 Uganda's primary school completion rates were above

Figure 1: Primary completion rate, both sexes (%) in Uganda



Source: World Development Indicators, 2016

Figure 2: Primary completion rate, both sexes (%) in Country Comparison



Source: World Development Indicators, 2016

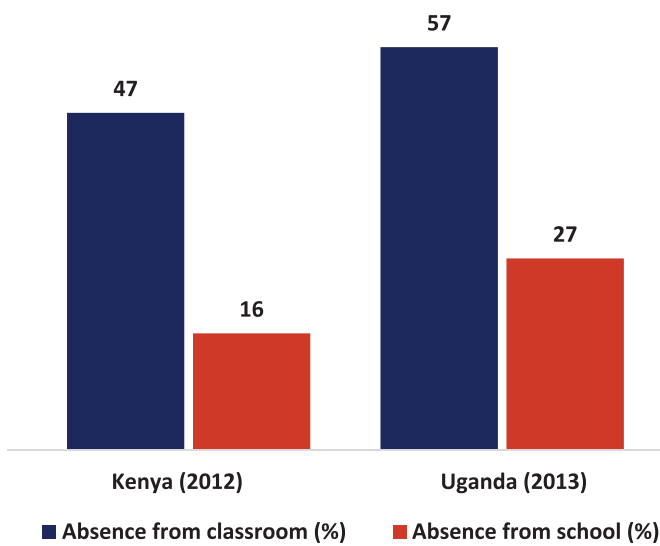
the Sub-Saharan average level and above her EAC neighbours except Kenya (Figure 2). However, since then all other EAC countries have been improving in primary school completion rates while Uganda has been deteriorating.

Understanding the Falling Primary School Completion Rates

There are a number of factors responsible for the observed trends in the primary completion rates. These include but are not limited to, high levels of teacher absenteeism, lack of infrastructure like classrooms and text books, poor supervision and inspection.

Teacher Absenteeism - Findings from the 2013 Service Delivery Indicators survey for Uganda reveal that 27 percent of teachers were absent in public schools compared to 16 percent for Kenya. The survey results further revealed that while 57 percent of the teachers in public schools were actually present at school, they were not actually in their designated classrooms teaching compared to 47 percent for the same in Kenya. According to the report, the decay in service delivery is more amplified in rural areas and poorer regions of the country (Wane & Martin, 2013)³. Research elsewhere has also shown that teacher absenteeism although not a problem in Uganda alone but also in many other developing countries, stems from a number of factors including pay structure, management, working conditions, community conditions, and social and cultural responsibilities (Lee, Goodman, Dandapani, & Kekahio, 2015)⁴.

Figure 3: Teacher Absenteeism in Public Schools



Source: Constructed from SDI data, 2013

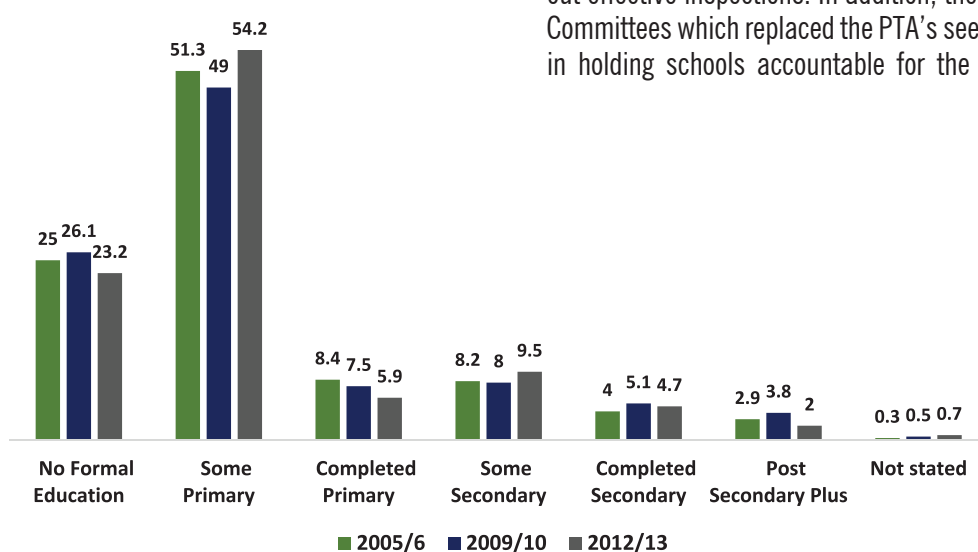
In Uganda, insufficient pay and poor working conditions have been identified as one of the leading causes of absenteeism. Primary school teacher salaries despite recent increases, are still too low to meet the expenses of a decent living. A primary school teacher earns on average between 100 and 150 US\$ per month putting him/her just a little above the poverty line if we take the 2 US\$ per day measure. As such a number of teachers find themselves engaging in other economic activities such as farming, tailoring, shopping, “boda boda” riding etc. to supplement their meagre earnings; thereby detracting from their teaching commitments and responsibilities. Low pay has implications on the morale and motivation level of existing teachers and those that aspire to join the field. Low

pay in addition to increasing teacher absenteeism, makes the teaching profession very un-attractive and thus attracts not the best and brightest but those that have failed to get into other “better” professions. This in turn affects the quality of knowledge provided to the pupils and therein the overall quality of the labour force.

Insufficient funding: Although UPE takes up a huge chunk of the Uganda’s recurrent expenditure, statistics show that actual expenditure on education as a percentage of total government expenditure is the lowest in the five East African Community countries excluding South Sudan. Uganda spent 11.8 percent in 2013 compared 16.6 percent and 17.2 percent spent by Rwanda and Burundi respectively. In 2010, Uganda spent 9.4 percent compared to 19.6, 20.6, 17.4 and 16.6 percent for Tanzania, Kenya, Rwanda and Burundi respectively. Across the East African Community Uganda also records the lowest figure for education expenditure as a percentage of Gross National Income. The low expenditure on education has had implications on the quality of service provided. A number of schools lack basic infrastructure like adequate classrooms, laboratory equipment and toilets, causing a number of pupils to drop out.

Limited School Inspection and accountability- School inspection is an important avenue through which to ensure quality and accountability for the public funds invested in the education system. In this way both teacher attendance and the quality of teaching can be assessed. [A study in Wakiso district Uganda](#) revealed that school inspection did little in advancing staff capacity in secondary schools because the process had no evaluation and feedback components and the inspectors themselves would require further training to carry out effective inspections. In addition, the School Management Committees which replaced the PTA’s seem to be less effective in holding schools accountable for the quality of education

Figure 4: Education Levels in Uganda



Source: UBOS, 2014

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provided. [Research by the EPRC](#) assessing the PEAS¹ network shows that PTA’s and strong community involvement in monitoring the attendance of both teachers and pupils is one of the key drivers of high student attainment.

Champions of UPE rightly argue that the scheme has opened up education access to thousands of children who would otherwise have never got the opportunity to go to school. Criticisms of declining quality have often been met with retorts that some education (whatever the quality) is better than none at all. However as we continue to struggle to get the masses to complete education, quality is fast becoming a critical issue. If the current trends continue the Ugandan labour force will primarily be composed of poorly AND partly educated persons, and the effects of this are slowly starting to show within the education sector itself. In July 2016, it was revealed that about half the teachers who took the previous year’s Primary Teachers’ College exam would have to repeat the exams with English and Mathematics being the worst done subjects. Most damning for UPE is that many of these student teachers would have been products of the UPE system itself.

What needs to be done?

With so many leaks to be plugged what next for education in Uganda? Firstly, from a human capital perspective, quality cannot continue to come second to quantity. In a bid to improve completion rates, the government

of Uganda has come up with a number of policy interventions some of which have indeed undermined the quality of education. For example, in 2005 the MoES compelled schools to promote pupils irrespective of their performance. As we struggle to maintain attendance and strive to improve completion rates, it’s even more important that quality and attainment improve. This thus calls for a policy reversal to ensure that only pupils with a passing mark are promoted, and those who have not obtained the minimum requirements receive the necessary assistance to do so in the next year/term.

Secondly, the current UPE model that puts the duty of accountability squarely on the government is proving untenable given the state’s other competing priorities. Government’s contribution to UPE is not enough to move the sector to the desired level. It is time to rethink this model and adopt a cost sharing in model in which both parents and the government contribute to the funding and monitoring of primary school education. With parents making some contribution to UPE, teachers can be paid a decent salary and parents would themselves have added incentives to hold the teachers and students to account. In addition, more class rooms and other infrastructure can be built which will lead to improvement in school outcomes. Thirdly, increasing and improving supervision and inspection will go a long way in curbing teacher absenteeism leading to increased teacher pupil interaction and thus improving learning outcomes.

1 Promoting Equality in African Schools (PEAS)

Endnotes

1 (MoES), M. o. (2013). Teacher Issues in Uganda: A Diagnosis for a Shared Vision on Issues and the Designing of a Feasible, Indigenous and Effective Teachers’ Policy. Kampala: Government of Uganda.
2 Nishimura, M., Ogawa, K., Sifuna, D. N., Chimombo, J., Kunje, D., Ampiah, J. G., Yamada, S. (2009). A Comparative Analysis of Universal Primary Education Policy in Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, and Uganda. Journal of International Cooperation in Education, Vol.12 No.1 (2009), 143 - 158.

3 Wane, W., & Martin, G. H. (2013). Education and Health Services in Uganda, Service Delivery Indicators. Washington DC: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank.
4 Lee, M., Goodman, C., Dandapani, N., & Kekahio, W. (2015). Review of international research on factors underlying teacher absenteeism. Washington, DC: U.S.: Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Pacific. Retrieved from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs>.

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