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BY MONITOR TEAM

Traditional academic powerhouses in the country are set to raise cut-off points for students joining Senior Five this year due to a better performance in last year's O-Level examinations.

According to the Senior Four examinations released by Uganda National Examinations Board (Uneb) on Friday, the second cohort of competence-based curriculum candidates exhibited a high degree of critical thinking in all subjects.

Observers say this will definitely create a stiffer competition for bright students from the top academic giants like King's College, Budo, St Mary's College, Kisubi, Nabisunsa Girls and Gayaza High School.

The overall results show that 428,628 candidates (99.61 percent) out of 429,949 who sat for the 2025 UCE examination passed and qualified to join Senior Five, compared to 350,146 candidates (98.1 percent) who passed in 2024.

"Higher exceptional levels of achievements are noted in Christian Religious Education, Geography and English Language compared to 2024. More candidates have achieved higher levels of C and above in 2025 compared to 2024. This is quite encouraging in the sciences where percentages of candidates who have not achieved at least the D level have dropped very significantly," Mr Dan Odongo, Uneb's executive director, said on Friday.

He said female candidates demonstrated higher achievement levels in English Language and Christian Religious Education.

"In the other subjects—History and Political Education, Geography, Mathematics, Agriculture, Physics, Chemistry and Biology—the proportions of females in the exceptional and outstanding levels are slightly lower than that of males," he added.

The percentage of candidates who don't qualify for UCE certificates also dropped very significantly from 1.9 percent to only 0.31 percent.

Under the new grading system rolled out last year, all candidates who attain grades A to D in the nine subjects qualify for the UCE certificate. However, top schools will admit only candidates with As and possibly some Bs based on the subject combination.

Improved performance set to trigger S5 cut-off points' hike



Joshua Ajuna celebrates with his mother after scoring 5As and 4Bs from St Klaus Secondary School, Bufunjo in Kyenjojo District. PHOTO/ALEX ASHABA

Exception to the rule

On the other hand, some schools in rural areas that, on the whole, performed worse than those in urban areas, are primed to lower the bar, admitting candidates with Cs, Ds as they seek to attract more students.

Candidates who scored only Es in all the subjects offered don't qualify to join S5 and these account for 1,321 of the total number of candidates who sat the exams compared to 6,974 who failed in 2024.

Last year, top schools like Mt St Mary's

Namagunga, Ntare School, Kings College Budo admitted only candidates who scored A and B grades in the nine subjects. But to qualify for a Science combination in S5, one could have scored only As in all three subjects they opted for at A-Level.

However, some academic giants slightly relaxed the criteria to absorb those with grades up to C in selected subjects. Schools such as Nabisunsa Girls, Elite High School, Entebbe, Sacred Heart SS Mushanga, Tororo Girls, Mengo SS, Mary Hill High School, Mbarara, Gombe SS,

HOW SELECTION WILL BE DONE

Computerised placement is based on the original choices made by a candidate and his or her performance in the best subjects.

This is the second cohort of S4 candidates who sat the new competency-based curriculum (CBC). Under the CBC, students are not graded using the traditional distinctions as it was in past years.

However, learners' achievements in each subject are assessed using letter grades A to E.

"A" means exceptional performance, followed by "B" for outstanding, "C" for satisfactory, and "D" for basic performance, with "E" as the lowest grade and representing elementary achievement. A candidate is eligible for placement in S5 if he or she has obtained a competence level grade or D in at least one subject.

For instance, if a student wants to study History, Economics and Geography, then he or she should have A, B, C or D in any of those three subjects for him to be given the combination.

The letter grades, according to Uneb, were arrived at through systematic and technical processes (statistical and psychometric), which combine the learner's score based on Continuous Assessment done at school and accounted for 20 percent, with end-of-cycle examination score accounting for the remaining 80 percent.

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Mr Leonard Ssali, the head teacher of St Noa Mawagali Secondary School, said as was the case last year, student admission and subject placement will depend on individual academic performance.

"Learners will be guided to select appropriate subject combinations that match their strengths, enabling them to pursue relevant courses and career paths in the future," he told Sunday Monitor.

Mr Erasmus Kanyerezi, a veteran career guidance expert and head teacher of Kinuuka Seed School, Lyantonde District, said urban schools often attract more applicants due to better infrastructure, electricity, water supply, and accessibility, while some rural schools struggle to fill capacity.

"It is the demand and limited space that drive cut-off points, not necessarily the grading system. When demand increases, fees may rise. That is where the Ministry comes in as a regulator during selection to guard against exploitation," he said.

Decolonising education

The former director of studies at Kings College Budo added that this year's UCE results reflect Uganda's shift from a colonial-style education system to a more inclusive, competency-based curriculum.

"The previous system would subject a learner to a two-hour examination after studying for years. Depending on your mental state that day, you would either pass with distinctions or be labelled a failure," he said.

"The assessment has shifted to a broader and more continuous approach that evaluates learners across multiple competencies, including cognitive ability, affective skills (attitudes and values), and psychomotor skill," he added.

Bro Martin Wanambwa, the head teacher of St Henry's College, Kitovu, explained that the improved performance would not affect their cut-off points since the primary goal of the selection exercise is to ensure that all students who qualify are admitted.

"The purpose of the selection exercise is to place all students who qualify at the next level. The most important thing is to ensure that learners are placed and continue with their academics," he said.

Selection for S5 entrants shall run from February 18 to February 19 and their first term will commence on March 5.

Compiled by Al Mahdi Ssenkibirwa, David Sekanyinga & Denis Edema