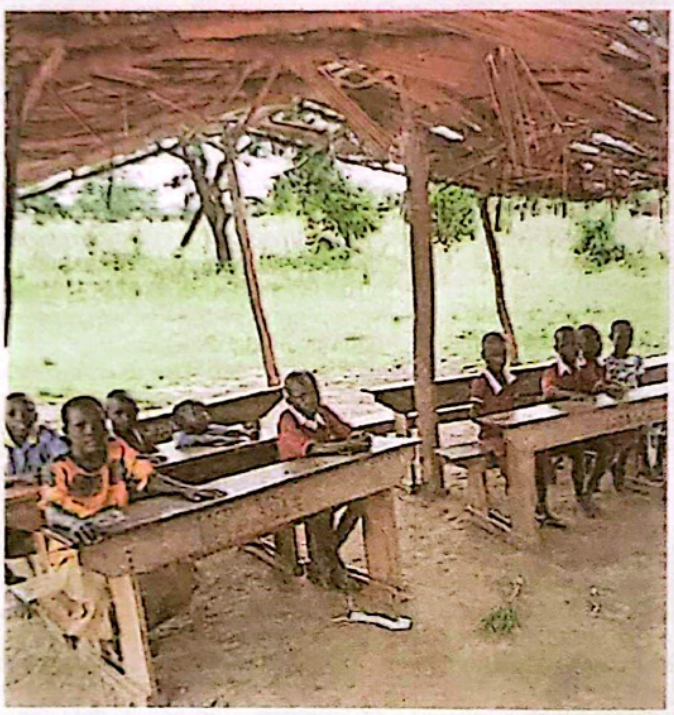
LETTER OF THE DAY

The learning gap behind Uganda's PLE results

As we congratulate those who aced the 2025 Primary Leaving Examinations (PLE) in the recently released results, we shouldn't miss the opportunity to use these results as a diagnostic tool of how efficiently Uganda's basic education system converts years of schooling into tangible learning outcomes.

From the 2025 PLE results, it is evident that the system continues to expand in scale, with 817,883 candidates registered in 2025, up from 797,444 in 2024, a 2.6 percent increase. For that, we must give government its flowers for increasing enrolment and completion levels at primary level through UPE. What is more revealing is that 63.8 percent or 522,036 of these candidates came from UPE schools. This confirms that even though private education is growing rapidly, public primary education remains the backbone of the Uganda's education system for the foreseeable future.



The real question, however, is not how many children reach PLE, but what level of competence they reach when they get there. Looking at the Uganda National Examinations Board (Uneb) results reveals critical constraints on learning quality and the systems ability to convert years of schools into tangible outcomes.

Across the subjects examined of Mathematics, English, Integrated Science and Social Studies, only 16.6 percent or 134,014 of the 817,883 candidates who sat for PLE have higher ability levels in the mastery of the subject knowledge and skills. This implies they could recall, understand and apply concepts to solve problems in new situations. While 16.4 percent or 132,399 of the candidates show low ability levels in the mastery of the subject knowledge and skills with limited understanding and persistent difficulties in comprehension and application according to the Uneb PLE Item Response Analysis of 2025. From a human capital perspective, this distribution implies that the system is producing a large mass of learners with partial mastery and a very thin pipeline of high performers. This shows a low learning-intensity outcome with many years of schooling yielding modest skill accumulation for the median learner.

Uneb also acknowledged that candidates exhibited difficulties with problems that require application, interpretation and problem-solving rather than recall.

An education system that trains recall better than reasoning produces graduates who are less adaptable less innovative and more costly to retrain in the workplace, increasing unemployment as well as lowering both the social and economic return to public spending on education. This raises critical curriculum concerns. We must note that the National Curriculum Development Centre has always been under funded and according to the FY 2026/27 Budget Framework Paper will likely have budget cuts from the current Shs38.14 billion to Shs 36.43 billion which might amplify these challenges.

The 2025 PLE also data exposes a structural failure in access and completion for learners with special needs. While Uneb registered 3,636 special needs candidates in 2025, up from 3,328 in 2024, an increase of 308 or 9.3 percent, this still represents only about 2percent of the Ministry of Education's own estimate of 165,511 learners with special needs in schools in FY2024/25, implying that roughly 98percent of SNE learners are lost before reaching the end of the primary cycle. This attrition is consistent with the financing constraints in the system. Only 99 of 12,511 UPE schools qualify for the SNE subvention grant. Taken together, these numbers show that the near exclusion of SNE learners from completion is not a coincidence but the predictable outcome of a system that underfunds access.

The 2025 PLE results point to a system that has largely succeeded in scaling access but is struggling to raise learning productivity. With fewer than one in five candidates reaching higher ability levels in any subject and nearly four in five clustered in Divisions 2 and 3, Uganda is effectively spreading learning over many years at low intensity. This increases the cost per unit of skill produced and weakens the country's future labour force quality, even as enrolment and completion continue to rise.

There is need to calibrate the system toward learning outcomes. The expansion of access to education is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for improved education outcomes. It must be accompanied by a good curriculum, and interventions to strengthen special needs educations.

The 2025 PLE numbers expose the limits of access-driven reform and remind that the next phase of education policy must be judged by how much learning each year of schooling actually produces.

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