National News

High entry, high dropout: Uganda's education paradox

Officials from Mwagalo Foundation engage learners and teachers of Nakichelet Primary School in Napak District, in Karamoja Sub-region last week. The Unesco report reveals that low funding has crippled Uganda's education sector, where schools depend on well-wishers and parents for survival. PHOTO/UNESCO

While enrolment briefly shot up from 3.1 million in 1996 to 7.6 million in 2003, completion rates did not rise in line with enrolment because many dropped out.

BY BUSEIN SAMILU

Uganda's school completion rates are not in tandem with the high enrolment numbers, with many falling through the cracks, according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco) 2026 Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report released yesterday.

The study, which analysed data from government ministries, departments, agencies, NGOs, and civil society organisations from January 2015 to-date, revealed that the introduction of Universal Primary Education (UPE) in 1997, apart from offering a short-lived boost, did not tackle the root of the problem.

Although enrolment briefly shot up from 3.1 million in 1996 to 5.3 million in 1997 and 7.6 million in 2003 after school fees were abolished, the study notes that the gains were a flash in the pan. Completion rates did not rise in line with enrolment because many dropped out.

The findings suggest Uganda's education development has hit a brick wall. For instance, adolescent (13–18 years) and youth (19–24 years) attendance rates captured in the 2016/2017 and 2019/2020 national household surveys showed no progress in three years.

Quoting the 2022 Demographic and Health Survey, the study reveals that while the percentage of girls completing primary school rose from 53 percent to 59 percent, boys' completion dropped from 61 percent to 58 percent.

"The primary completion rate had, in fact, begun to grow before the UPE policy, because between 1990 and 2000, the ultimate primary completion rate (which includes very late completers) increased by 1.2 percentage points per year; from 39 percent to 51 percent, but progress slowed down in the 2000s to 0.9 percentage points per year, reaching 60 percent in 2010," reads part of the report.

Uganda, the report says, entered a stagnation period after 2020 as completion rates continued to decline.

Overall, the primary net enrolment rate fell from 78 percent in 2015 to 73 percent in 2021. Worse still, the proportion of 6 to 12-year-olds who had never been to school rose from eight percent to 15 percent. The percentage of 14-year-olds who had reached Grade 7 dropped from 13 percent in 2020 to 10 percent in 2024.

"Most of the initial studies looked at short-term effects. For instance, they highlighted the drastic narrowing of primary school attendance gaps by sex, region, and income in the late 1990s, a three percent increase in the likelihood that children would begin primary school by age nine and an increase in attainment for girls by about 1.4 years," the report reads.

Officials from the education ministry did not respond to repeated calls for comment. Educationists, however, said the findings ring true and mirror the current state of affairs.

Although pupils are expected to reach Primary Seven by age 12, the Unesco report shows that in Uganda, many sit for their Primary Leaving Examination between 15 and 17 years.

> **STARTLING FINDINGS**
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"... In fact, this phenomenon has been worsening. The repetition rate in Uganda averaged 11 percent between 2000 and 2017, despite a policy of automatic promotion, which the government abolished in March 2026," it reads.

Unesco noted difficulty in analysing enrollment data because the education ministry last published the Education Abstract in 2017. As a result, researchers relied on other surveys, whose microdata could not be fully analysed.

A multi-pronged issue

Even when the report lists a litany of problems, it shows that no single policy can solve the problem of exclusion. Instead, policies must be tailored to local realities, address challenges from multiple angles, and be grounded in evidence.

Successful policies also need to look beyond the classroom. For example, electrification alone has been linked to nearly an extra year of schooling in Cambodia, while school feeding programmes have been shown to add up to half a year of learning for every $100 (about Shs370,000) spent in low- and middle-income countries. Cash transfers tied to school attendance have also proven effective, making children 36 percent more likely to be enrolled.

Private institutions under the National Private Education Institutions Association (NPEIA) told this publication that commissioned an independent study, whose plan will be unveiled next week.

The association's chairperson, Mr Hasadu Kirabira, said it encompasses finding out why the dropout rates are high, why several candidates continue to snub the final examinations, and other general challenges, with a view of addressing them.

Financing challenges

The study also points to governance challenges.

"Around the time of the UPE policy rollout in 1998, Uganda implemented an extensive decentralisation programme, transferring primary education management for service delivery to district councils, while the Ministry of Education and Sports handled policy, standards, teacher training, curriculum and examinations. This devolution approach, with relatively little autonomy in financial management has been seen as ineffective in the sense that it prevented consistent reform implementation," the study pointed out.

1997
UPE STARTED

Financing remains the elephant in the room. "Arguably, one of the biggest impediments to improving education in Uganda is with respect to financing..." the report adds, noting that public education expenditure fell well below international benchmarks.

The secretary general of Uganda National Teachers Union (Unatu), Mr Filbert Baguma, agreed, saying underfunding is the root cause of the sector's woes.

"Countries agreed to fund education with 20 percent of their budgets, but in Uganda, we are at nine percent. That's why we have challenges of salary disparities causing unrest among teachers, making it difficult for us to operate effectively," he said.

The problem is not unique to Uganda. Across sub-Saharan Africa, public education expenditure as a share of GDP between 2011 and 2022 increased only slightly from 2.3 percent to 2.6 percent, while spending as a share of total public expenditure fell from 13.6 percent to 8.5 percent.

Uganda's National Planning Authority in 2018 estimated that to achieve quality education under UPE, funding per learner needed to rise from Shs20,000 to at least Shs59,000 for rural schools and Shs63,000 for urban schools, a proposal that has never seen the light of day.

President Museveni, Education Minister Janet Museveni, and other officials have repeatedly condemned schools that charge fees. Yet the report notes that most schools survive on fees because government capitation grants are insufficient.

"The cost of schooling has been named as the main reason for dropout by 60 percent of households..." the report reads.

Low spending has led to poor education quality, fuelling dropout rates. Infrastructure challenges remain glaring, with pupil/classroom ratios far above targets: Central (65:1), Eastern (76:1), and Northern/West Nile (107:1). Teacher numbers rose by 80 percent between 1997 and 2003, but stu[dent num]bers ballooned by 150 percen[t] ... the system stretched to breaki[ng] ... By 2024, the pupil/teacher rati[o] ... [pub]lic primary schools stood at ... 37 out of 177 districts averaging ... 80:1.

Unesco general findings

The report, which covered ... worldwide, indicates that the ... of children and young people ... school has risen for the seventh ... utive year, reaching 273 million ... crease has been driven by popula[tion] growth, crises, and shrinking ...

The study showed that one ... school-age children globally is ... from education, and only two ... students complete secondary ... Yet, many countries are making ... cant progress, underscoring the ... tance of national context when ... targets and designing policies.

The report shows that progress ... keeping children in school has ... across almost every region since ... with a sharp deceleration in sub-Saha[ran] Africa, largely due to popula[tion] growth. Several crises, including ... flict, have also derailed progress ... one in six children live in conflict-affect[ed] areas, representing millions ... out of school beyond those captur[ed in] the statistics.

This reality is particularly urgent ... the Middle East, where ongoing ... al tensions have forced many schools ... close, leaving millions of children ... the classroom and at risk of falling be[hind].

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Hope

Despite these challenges, the 2026 GEM report documents significant achievements in global education in recent years.

Reacting to the report, Unesco Director-General Khaled El-Enany said: "The report confirms an alarming trend with more and more young people deprived of education around the world each year. However, there is hope. Since 2000, enrolment in primary and secondary education has increased overall by 30 percent, and many countries are making meaningful progress. Unesco remains fully mobilised to collaborate with governments and partners to expand learning opportunities for all in ways that respond to local realities and give every learner a fair chance to build their future."

With 1.4 billion students enrolled in school in 2024, global enrolment had increased by 327 million (30 percent) in primary and secondary education since 2000. It also rose by 45 percent in pre-primary and by 161 percent in post-secondary education. This is equivalent to more than 25 additional children accessing school every minute.

For example, Ethiopia's primary enrolment rate climbed from 18 percent in 1974 to 84 percent in 2024, while China's expansion in access to tertiary education grew at an unprecedented pace, from 7 percent in 1999 to over 60 percent in 2024.