

Uganda's education sector in the last 40 years

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BY MIKE SEBALU

Over the past 40 years (1986 to 2026), Uganda's education sector has evolved from a post-conflict recovery phase to a mass-access system.

This is anchored in Universal Primary Education (UPE), Universal Secondary Education (USE), liberalisation of education provision, and expansion of tertiary and higher education.

The progress has been substantial. Schools and institutions of learning have multiplied, enrolment has grown sharply, and more girls, learners with disabilities, and children from poorer households have entered the education system.

At the same time, the sector continues to face major challenges in learning outcomes, retention, overcrowding, financing, teacher deployment, school infrastructure, and the hidden costs that keep some children out of school.

When the National Resistance Movement (NRM) government came to power in 1986, Uganda was emerging from years of civil strife and political instability.

The education sector had been weakened by collapsed infrastructure, limited learning materials, and severe teacher shortages. The 1989 Education Policy Review Commission, commonly associated with Prof Senteza Kajubi, helped set the stage for later reforms, including the 1992 Government White Paper on Education.

According to the Ministry of Education and Sports, Uganda had more than 7,600 education institutions in 1985, including about 7,000 primary schools, 527 public secondary schools, less than 100 tertiary institutions, and only one university (Makerere University).

By May 2026, the ministry reported

79,819 schools and institutions, including 45,466 primary schools, 7,503 secondary schools, 1,494 post-primary institutions, 126 international schools, plus 55 universities and degree-awarding institutions.

Literacy has also improved. The 2024 National Population and Housing Census found that 74 percent of persons aged 10 years and above could read and write meaningfully in any language.

Universal Primary Education

One of the biggest turning points in Uganda's education journey was the introduction of Universal Primary Education in 1997. Before UPE, school fees and other charges were among the biggest barriers to primary education, especially for poor families.

To combat high illiteracy and low access to schooling, the government launched UPE, initially offering free primary education for up to four children per family. The policy was later expanded to cover all children.

According to the Education ministry, primary school enrolment doubled within one year of UPE's introduction. At that enrolment rose from about 2.5 million to 5 million pupils. By May 2026, according to the ministry, primary enrolment stood at about 11.4 million learners.

Dennis Mugimba, the ministry spokesperson argued that UPE opened education doors to children who would otherwise have been left out because schools were either unavailable or unaffordable.

"The question we need to ask ourselves is where these pupils would have been had it not been for the government's introduction of the universal primary education intervention," he said. "These pupils were not going to private schools because these were much more costly than public schools



President Museveni (2nd right) with Makerere University and Education ministry officials during the university's centenary celebrations in October, 2022. PHOTO/MAKERERE UNIVERSITY

2.1 million

The current secondary school enrolment due to USE and the expansion of public secondary schools.

at the time."

The latest education statistics show that Uganda has more than 45,000 primary schools. The Education Statistics Abstract 2025 reports that the total number of primary schools is 45,164, of which 12,544, or 27.8 percent, are government-aided schools, while 32,620, or 72.2 percent, are private.

The National Population and Housing Census 2024 Community Module also shows the spread of primary education at the parish level. It found that 78.5 percent of parishes had at least one primary school. It further found that 58.0 percent of parishes had at least one government-funded primary school, while 44.9 percent had at least one private-funded primary school.

Over 40 years, primary education has, therefore, expanded both in enrolment and in delivery points. However, the growth has also created pressure on classrooms, teachers, textbooks, sanitation facilities, and school management.

Universal Secondary Education

The growth of primary education created demand for secondary education. In 2007, the government introduced Universal Secondary Education to increase transition from primary to secondary school and make secondary education more affordable.

In 1986, Uganda had 527 grant-aided secondary schools, and total enrolment in secondary education did not exceed 180,000 students. The education ministry says secondary enrolment has since grown to about 2.1 million learners,

SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION

Special Needs Education (SNE) has also expanded. Before 1986, SNE interventions were largely limited to primary education in a few selected schools. Learners with special needs who wanted to proceed further often had to leave the country, if they could afford it, or join vocational training.

Today, official statistics show a much larger number of SNE learners in the system. The Education Statistics Abstract 2025 reports that there are 580,219 learners with special needs in primary schools. The Ministry of Education and Sports similarly cites 38,642 SNE learners in secondary schools.

The government also established the Uganda National Institute of Special Education at Kyambogo in 1996 to train teachers for SNE. When Kyambogo University was established in 2003, UNISE was incorporated into the university.

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In 1986, there were 527 public secondary schools. This number has risen to 1,507, with 5,959 private secondary schools, bringing the total to 7,466 secondary schools, according to the Education Statistics Abstract 2025.

According to Mr Mugimba, secondary education was previously harder to access than primary education, with few public schools and limited private provision.

"When the government introduced USE in 2007, what we saw was not just an increase in the number of public secondary schools, but also private schools

came on board because of the liberalisation of the delivery of secondary education," he said.

Mr Mugimba added that since 2016, the government has built more than 250 new secondary schools, with another 116 under construction.

A major plank of the secondary expansion strategy has been the policy of establishing a public secondary school in every sub-county where none exists. The ministry says this policy has contributed to a fourfold improvement in the transition rate from primary to secondary education, from less than 15 percent in the early 1980s to 60 percent as of 2025.

The expansion of secondary education has been accompanied by curriculum reform. In response to criticism that the system was too focused on rote learning, Uganda introduced a lower-secondary competence-based curriculum. It emphasises skills, practical knowledge, problem-solving, and links to vocational training. Further curriculum realignment is underway at primary and A-Level to align with the competence-based approach.

Gender parity and access

One of the most visible changes in basic education has been the narrowing of gender disparities. Before UPE, girls were less likely than boys to enrol and remain in school.

The Education ministry said before 1997, only about 34-40 percent of girls enrolled in primary education. The ratio is now close to one-to-one, meaning that for every boy enrolled in primary education, a girl is enrolled as well.

The same improvement has been seen in secondary education, where the ministry says female enrolment has moved from about 30 percent in 1986 to a near one-to-one ratio today.

The Education Statistics Abstract 2025 shows that primary enrolment stood at 11,787,396 learners, of whom 5,607,675

or 47.6 percent, were female. Secondary enrolment stood at 2,044,586 learners, of whom 51.6 percent were female and 48.4 percent male.

In higher education, Uganda has moved from having only one public university in 1986 to a much larger university and tertiary education system.

According to the education ministry, 1,239 students were admitted to Makerere University in 1986, all on government bursaries.

As of 2026, the ministry says Uganda has 10 public universities distributed across regions. These include Makerere University, Kyambogo University, Mbarara University of Science and Technology, Gulu University, Busitema University, Lira University, Soroti University and Mountains of the Moon University.

The government is also preparing new public universities for Bunyoro and Busoga, and a constituent college of Gulu University in Moroto, Napak as a seed for a future public university for Karamoja.

The ministry says universities, both public and private, now graduate about 10,000 students annually, compared to about 1,000 in 1986.

The Education Statistics Abstract 2025 provides a broader count of degree-awarding institutions, putting the total at 73, comprising 55 universities and 18 other degree awarding institutions.

The introduction of private sponsorship in public universities in the 1992/1993 academic year also widened access for families that could not afford university education but whose children did not qualify for government scholarships.

In 2005, the government increased university bursaries to 4,000 slots, of which 1,000 were ring-fenced for affirmative action, persons with disabilities, and sports, while 3,000 remained centralised merit-based bursaries.

Affirmative action and student loans

Affirmative action has played an important role in widening access to higher education for girls. The government introduced the 1.5 points affirmative action policy for girls entering higher education in 1990. This raised female enrolment in higher education from as low as 17 percent in the late 1980s to between 44 percent and 47 percent in public universities.

The government also introduced the Higher Education Students Financing Loan Scheme in 2014. According to the ministry, the scheme started with fewer than 1,500 beneficiaries, increased to 2,000 beneficiaries in the 2025/2026 academic year, and is now set to support 2,500 to 3,000 new beneficiaries in 2026/2027 following an additional Sh10b allocation.

To date, more than 16,000 Ugandans have benefited from the loan scheme, about one-third of them female. The scheme targets academically strong but economically disadvantaged students.

Persistent challenges

Despite the expansion, Uganda's education system still faces major pressures.

One of the challenges is ensuring that all learners entering the education system are absorbed and retained through the higher levels. In 2000, the number of learners sitting national primary examinations was around 360,000. In 2025, 807,313 pupils sat for the Primary Leaving Examination, showing the scale of growth in the primary completion pipeline.

Mr Mugimba says the increase has been made possible by expanding public secondary schools, liberalising the delivery of education to allow private sector participation, and improving facilities in public schools.



PHOTO/FILE

“Growth. When the government introduced USE in 2007, what we saw was not just an increase in the number of public secondary schools, but also private schools came on board because of the liberalisation of the delivery of secondary education,”

Dennis Mugimba, spokesperson, Ministry of Education and Sports

“In the last 40 years, we have put up more than 30,000 classrooms, right from primary schools to secondary schools. Now, we are grappling with the challenges of success. That created more learners coming to secondary schools, hence the need for USE,” he says.

But the growth in learner numbers has created pressure on infrastructure and staffing. The Education Statistics Abstract 2025 shows that the pupil-teacher ratio in government primary schools is 61:1, compared with 35:1 in private primary schools.

The pupil-classroom ratio in government primary schools is 79:1, compared with 38:1 in private schools. At the secondary level, the student-classroom ratio is 75:1 in government secondary schools and 46:1 in private schools.

Such ratios point to congestion in many public schools. For example, Mengo Secondary School has an enrolment of more than 7,000 students, and Kololo Secondary School has more than 4,000 students.

Quality remains a major concern. The Education Statistics Abstract 2025 shows that in the 2023 assessment, 57.5 percent of P3 learners were rated proficient in numeracy and 53.9 percent in English literacy.

At P6, 58 percent were rated numeracy proficient, while only 42.7 percent were English literacy proficient.

Hidden costs also continue to undermine access. Although UPE and USE are designed to be tuition-free, parents often still cover the costs of uniforms, meals, scholastic materials, examination fees, and school development or maintenance charges. These costs con-

time to push some children, especially from poorer households, out of school.

Stakeholders take

Dr Mary Goretti Nakabugo, the executive director of Uwezo Uganda, which conducts learning assessments, says the government needs to refocus on the foundations of learning.

"In the 1960s, after independence, there was a focus on expanding the training of teachers for primary and secondary education to ensure that we had a strong foundation for education. I think we are now a bit diverging from that; there is now a bias towards upper levels of education," she says.

She argues that recent education budgets show greater emphasis on secondary, tertiary, and skills development, while primary education, where the foundation is built, has not received sufficient attention.

"If you look at the current budgets of education, for example, the budget for secondary education has been increasing quite significantly while the budget for primary education has been reducing," she says. "We are forgetting that the foundation is built in the early years, in primary education."

On UPE in government-aided schools, Dr Nakabugo says parents are still being charged examination and building maintenance fees, undermining the promise of free primary education and contributing to drop-outs before completion of the primary cycle.

She also urges the government to improve the quality of graduates. She cites the 2014 Inter-University Council for East Africa survey, which estimated that 63 percent of graduates in Uganda

lacked the relevant skills to perform in their respective jobs.

Dr Nakabugo also raises concerns about learning outcomes and values, saying that many children in the early years still struggle to read and comprehend, even after several years in school.

Mr Patrick Kaboyo, the National Secretary of the Federation of Non-State Education Institutions, an umbrella body for private-school proprietors, accuses the government of failing to fully implement recommendations of earlier education review commissions.

Since 1986, Uganda has had two major education commissions. The Kajubi Education Commission (1987-1989) laid the foundation for the 1992 Government White Paper and the later introduction of UPE.

The Education Policy Review Commission (2021-2025), chaired by Amama Mubanga, was tasked with reviewing the current system, examining inefficiencies, and proposing a new macro-policy framework aligned to 21st-century skills and innovation.

"The Kajubi Commission proposed very good things to be done for education. It proposed the vocationalisation of education. It proposed the professionalisation of education, funding, and many other things. But not all that the late Senteza Kajubi and his team proposed was implemented," Mr Kaboyo says.

Mr Kaboyo, who is also the executive director of the Education Advocacy Network, criticises the government for withdrawing USE support from private schools under the public-private partnership arrangement.

He says the decision contributed to school dropouts and weakened the capacity of some private schools to retain teachers and other experienced personnel.

Sylvia Namabidde, the former Woman Member of Parliament for Mityana District and former chairperson of Parliament's Committee on Education, says Parliament passed laws to enable school construction, teacher recruitment, payment of teacher salaries, provision of instructional materials, school laboratories, and ICT labs, but the need remains greater than the available resources.

"There are some areas where the schools are not enough, where classrooms are not enough, and teachers are not enough. Government needs to get more money to build more schools, recruit more teachers, and support schools with textbooks," she says. "When they introduced the competence-based curriculum, teachers were not adequately prepared to handle it."

Uganda's education sector has changed dramatically over the last 40 years. Access has expanded, enrolment has surged, girls' participation has improved, public universities have spread beyond Kampala, TVET has grown, and special needs education has become more visible in the national education landscape.

Yet the sector's biggest challenge is now the quality of that access. Millions more children are in school, but too many are still in overcrowded classrooms, too many leave before completing their cycle, and too many progress through the system without mastering foundational literacy, numeracy, and practical skills.

The next phase of reform will, therefore, have to focus not only on how many children enter school, but how well they learn, how long they stay, whether the education they receive prepares them for work, citizenship, and national development.



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CURRENT PRIMARY SCHOOL ENROLMENT

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On UPE in government-aid