

# African Journal of Education and Practice (AJEP)

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Access to and Quality of Education in Uganda, Considering the  
Policy's Implications for Gender Parity and Inclusive Education**

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**Article History**

*Received 28<sup>th</sup> August 2024*

*Received in Revised Form 18<sup>th</sup> Sept 2024*

*Accepted 30<sup>th</sup> Sept 2024*

**Purpose:** The aim of the study was to analyze the long-term effects of eliminating school fees on access to and quality of education in Uganda, considering the policy's implications for gender parity and inclusive education.

**Methodology:** This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

**Findings:** The elimination of school fees in Uganda under the Universal Primary Education (UPE) policy has significantly increased access to education, particularly for children from low-income families and marginalized communities, as seen in the surge in enrollment rates. However, this increase in access has not been matched by improvements in educational quality, with overcrowded classrooms, underqualified teachers, and inadequate resources affecting learning outcomes.

**Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy:** Human capital theory, capability approach & social justice theory may be used to anchor future studies on the analyzing the long-term effects of eliminating school fees on access to and quality of education in Uganda, considering the policy's implications for gender parity and inclusive education. Special focus should be on training teachers in inclusive education to better support children with disabilities and gender-sensitive teaching methods that encourage the retention of girls in school. Policies should ensure free provision of essential materials, especially for the most vulnerable populations.

**Keywords:** *Eliminating School Fees, Access, Education, Policy's Implications, Gender Parity, Inclusive Education*

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## INTRODUCTION

Access to and quality of education in developed economies like the U.S. and Japan is generally high, driven by strong public education systems and policy support. In the U.S., enrollment rates for K-12 education are near universal, with approximately 95% of children attending public or private schools (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2020). However, retention rates into higher education can vary, with a reported college dropout rate of around 40% (NCES, 2020). Gender parity has been achieved in most educational levels, with nearly equal enrollment rates for boys and girls. In Japan, compulsory education ensures a near 100% enrollment rate in primary and secondary levels, and the country maintains high academic performance globally, as evidenced by strong results in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (OECD, 2018).

Quality of education in these nations is often measured by academic performance, teacher-student ratios, and resource allocation. For instance, Japan has consistently ranked among the top countries in reading, math, and science proficiency, while the U.S. shows variation in outcomes depending on socioeconomic and racial demographics (OECD, 2018). In the U.K., gender parity has been sustained, and nearly 90% of school leavers pursue some form of higher education (Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA], 2019). The increasing focus on inclusive education policies has also driven improvements in access for students with disabilities in these countries. However, ongoing concerns about the quality of education, particularly in underprivileged regions or communities, remain relevant (Heckman & Mosso, 2014).

In Canada, access to education is near universal, with a 99% enrollment rate in primary and secondary education (Statistics Canada, 2020). Retention rates are also high, with over 90% of students completing secondary school and around 66% pursuing post-secondary education. The country has achieved gender parity, with equal participation rates for boys and girls at all education levels (OECD, 2019). Quality is reflected in Canada's strong performance in international assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), where Canadian students consistently score above the OECD average in reading, math, and science (OECD, 2018). Additionally, inclusive education policies are well established, ensuring that students with disabilities have access to the resources and support needed for quality education.

In Germany, access to education is guaranteed by law, with primary education enrollment rates at nearly 100%. Retention rates into secondary and tertiary education are high, with about 78% of students transitioning to higher education (Federal Statistical Office of Germany, 2020). The country has achieved near gender parity, with women slightly outnumbering men in higher education participation (OECD, 2019). Germany's education quality is reflected in its dual education system, which combines vocational training with academic education, allowing for a seamless transition into the workforce. However, concerns over inclusivity remain, particularly in ensuring equal access for migrant and refugee children, although policies are improving in this area (UNESCO, 2019).

In Australia, access to education is universal, with a 100% enrollment rate in primary and secondary education (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Retention rates are high, with about 85% of students completing upper secondary education and around 62% enrolling in tertiary institutions (OECD, 2020). Gender parity is maintained, with almost equal participation of boys and girls across all education levels. The quality of education in Australia is reflected in its above-average performance in international assessments like PISA, where Australian students

consistently rank among the top performers in reading, mathematics, and science (OECD, 2019). Australia also emphasizes inclusive education policies, ensuring that students with disabilities and those from indigenous communities have equal access to educational resources and support.

In Finland, which is renowned for its high-quality education system, primary and secondary education enrollment rates are close to 100%, and the country has achieved near-perfect retention rates (Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020). Gender parity is also well established, with equal participation rates for boys and girls. Finland consistently ranks among the top nations in educational quality, as demonstrated by its strong performance in PISA, especially in reading literacy (OECD, 2018). The Finnish model emphasizes student well-being, low teacher-student ratios, and individualized learning approaches, which contribute to its high quality. Finland also leads in inclusive education, providing extensive support for students with special needs and ensuring equal educational opportunities for all children. In developing economies, access to education has improved but significant challenges remain regarding quality and inclusivity. For example, in India, the gross enrollment ratio in primary education was 103% in 2020, reflecting substantial efforts to expand access (World Bank, 2020). However, retention rates remain low, particularly at the secondary and tertiary levels, with less than 50% of students completing secondary school. Academic performance, as reflected by international assessments such as PISA, remains lower than global averages due to resource constraints and quality of instruction (ASER, 2020). Gender parity has improved significantly, yet disparities persist in rural areas where girls are less likely to attend school consistently (UNESCO, 2020).

In Kenya, access to education has increased, particularly following the elimination of school fees for primary education in 2003, leading to a near 100% enrollment rate at that level. However, the quality of education is still a concern due to overcrowded classrooms and undertrained teachers (World Bank, 2020). Retention rates into secondary and higher education are low, with only 20% of students advancing to tertiary levels. Gender parity has improved but remains uneven in marginalized communities, particularly in rural and nomadic areas (UNESCO, 2020). Efforts to implement inclusive education policies are ongoing, though challenges related to infrastructure and teacher training remain significant.

In Brazil, significant strides have been made in improving access to education, with a gross enrollment ratio of 98% in primary education (UNESCO, 2020). However, retention remains an issue, as only 62% of students complete secondary school. Gender parity has been achieved in terms of enrollment, but there are disparities in academic performance, with boys more likely to drop out, particularly in rural areas. The quality of education varies greatly depending on geographic location and socioeconomic status. While urban schools often provide a higher quality of education, rural schools are often under-resourced and face challenges with overcrowded classrooms and poorly trained teachers (World Bank, 2020).

In Indonesia, primary school enrollment is nearly universal, but retention into secondary education is lower, with only about 80% of students completing secondary school (UNESCO, 2020). Gender parity is close to being achieved in terms of access to education, but disparities exist in rural and remote areas, where girls are less likely to complete their education. The quality of education is a concern, with Indonesia ranking below average in international assessments like PISA (OECD, 2018). Challenges include a shortage of qualified teachers, outdated curricula, and limited resources in many schools, particularly in remote regions. However, efforts are being made to

improve teacher training and curriculum development to enhance overall education quality (World Bank, 2020).

In Mexico, access to education has expanded, with a primary school enrollment rate of 98% and a secondary school enrollment rate of around 88% (World Bank, 2020). However, retention rates drop significantly at the secondary level, with only about 60% of students completing upper secondary education. Gender parity has been achieved in terms of enrollment, but disparities remain in rural areas, where girls are more likely to leave school early due to socio-economic factors. The quality of education in Mexico is lower compared to OECD countries, with PISA results indicating that students lag behind in reading and math proficiency (OECD, 2018). Challenges include a lack of qualified teachers and inadequate infrastructure, particularly in rural and underserved regions, though reforms are ongoing to address these issues.

In Vietnam, significant progress has been made in improving access to education, with a primary school enrollment rate of nearly 100% and a secondary school enrollment rate of around 88% (World Bank, 2020). Retention rates into secondary education are high, with over 80% of students completing this level. Vietnam has achieved gender parity in education, with nearly equal enrollment rates for boys and girls. The country performs exceptionally well in international assessments such as PISA, ranking above average in reading, math, and science, largely due to a strong emphasis on academic rigor and teacher quality (OECD, 2018). However, disparities in education quality exist between urban and rural areas, with rural schools often facing resource shortages and overcrowded classrooms. In Sub-Saharan Africa, access to education has improved over the past two decades, but retention and quality continue to lag behind global averages. In Uganda, the elimination of school fees under the Universal Primary Education (UPE) policy in 1997 led to a sharp increase in enrollment rates, from about 3 million to over 8 million by 2015 (UNESCO, 2019). Despite this success, retention rates remain low, with only 33% of students completing primary education and even fewer progressing to secondary levels. Gender disparities have narrowed, but challenges remain, especially in rural areas where girls are more likely to drop out (World Bank, 2020). The quality of education is also hindered by overcrowded classrooms, under-resourced schools, and a lack of trained teachers.

In Nigeria, primary school enrollment increased significantly following the introduction of free primary education, but the quality of education remains a concern, with less than 50% of students achieving basic literacy and numeracy skills by the end of primary school (World Bank, 2020). Retention rates into secondary education are low, especially for girls, with poverty and early marriage contributing to high dropout rates. Efforts to improve gender parity have had some success, but rural areas still experience significant disparities. Inclusive education remains a challenge in both Uganda and Nigeria, particularly for children with disabilities who often lack access to adequate facilities and trained staff (UNICEF, 2020).

In Ghana, access to education has improved, especially after the introduction of the Free Senior High School policy in 2017, which increased secondary school enrollment by 16% within the first two years (World Bank, 2020). Primary school enrollment is near universal, with a gross enrollment ratio of 108%, but retention remains an issue, as only 57% of students complete secondary school. Gender parity has been achieved at the primary level, but disparities remain in secondary and tertiary education, where girls are less likely to continue their studies. The quality of education is a concern, with large class sizes, under-resourced schools, and poorly trained



teachers contributing to low performance, particularly in rural areas (UNESCO, 2020). Efforts are being made to improve teacher training and educational infrastructure to enhance both access and quality.

In Mozambique, primary school enrollment has improved significantly over the last two decades, with a gross enrollment ratio of 98%, but retention rates are low, as only about 45% of students complete primary education (World Bank, 2020). Gender disparities are still prevalent, especially in rural areas where cultural practices such as early marriage and labor demands hinder girls' access to education. Quality of education is a major challenge, with over 50% of primary school teachers unqualified and classrooms frequently overcrowded (UNICEF, 2020). Mozambique is making strides to improve access and quality by increasing investment in teacher training, curriculum development, and infrastructure, but progress is slow due to financial and logistical constraints.

The elimination of school fees is a critical policy intervention aimed at improving access to education, particularly in low-income and developing countries. When school fees are abolished, it typically leads to higher enrollment rates, as families are able to afford sending their children to school (UNESCO, 2019). For instance, studies show that in countries like Uganda and Kenya, removing fees led to a dramatic increase in primary school enrollment (World Bank, 2020). However, while access improves, retention rates may remain low if other indirect costs (e.g., uniforms, transportation) or economic pressures still hinder students' ability to stay in school (UNICEF, 2020). Additionally, gender parity often improves when school fees are abolished, as families are less likely to prioritize boys over girls in education (UNESCO, 2020).

The quality of education in fee-free environments can be affected due to overcrowding, inadequate resources, and underqualified teachers, especially in underfunded public schools. Although enrollment increases, the surge in student numbers can lead to stretched infrastructure and larger class sizes, which negatively impact academic performance (World Bank, 2020). The elimination of school fees must therefore be accompanied by investments in teacher training, infrastructure, and curriculum improvements to maintain education quality. Gender disparities in education, particularly in rural areas, may still persist due to cultural factors, even when fees are removed (UNESCO, 2019). Thus, while the removal of school fees promotes access, maintaining or improving educational quality requires complementary reforms and investments (UNICEF, 2020).

### **Problem Statement**

Despite Uganda's implementation of the Universal Primary Education (UPE) policy in 1997, which eliminated school fees, significant challenges persist in ensuring sustained access to and quality of education. While the policy initially led to a surge in enrollment rates, retention rates, academic performance, and gender parity remain areas of concern. Many students, particularly girls and those from marginalized communities, face barriers such as hidden costs, cultural practices, and inadequate educational infrastructure, limiting the long-term benefits of fee elimination (UNESCO, 2019; World Bank, 2020). Additionally, overcrowded classrooms and underqualified teachers have negatively impacted the quality of education, threatening the success of the policy (UNICEF, 2020). Thus, a comprehensive analysis is needed to understand the long-term effects of fee abolition on education access, quality, gender parity, and inclusivity in Uganda.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Human Capital Theory**

Originated by economists such as Gary Becker, this theory posits that investments in education enhance individual skills and productivity, leading to economic growth (Becker, 1964). It emphasizes that education is a key driver for individual and societal development. In the context of Uganda, eliminating school fees can be seen as an investment in human capital by increasing access to education for more children, which is expected to improve long-term economic outcomes and gender parity. The theory helps to explain how increased educational access, particularly for girls, can contribute to overall societal progress (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018).

### **Capability Approach**

Developed by Amartya Sen, the capability approach focuses on expanding individuals' freedoms and opportunities through education and other resources. The core idea is that education enhances individuals' capabilities, enabling them to participate fully in society (Sen, 1999). This theory is relevant for analyzing how the elimination of school fees affects the opportunities available to marginalized groups, including girls and children with disabilities, thus addressing inclusivity and gender parity in education. It underscores the importance of not only providing access to education but also ensuring that the education offered is of high quality and supports long-term personal development (Robeyns, 2019).

### **Social Justice Theory**

John Rawls' social justice theory focuses on fairness in the distribution of resources and opportunities, arguing that education should be accessible to all, regardless of socioeconomic status (Rawls, 1971). This theory is highly relevant to analyzing the implications of fee elimination in Uganda, as it highlights the importance of equitable access to education for marginalized and disadvantaged populations. It provides a framework to assess whether the policy achieves fairness in terms of access and quality for all children, regardless of gender or socio-economic background (Fraser, 2018).

### **Empirical Review**

Nishimura (2018) evaluated the impact of Uganda's Universal Primary Education (UPE) policy on school enrollment and the overall quality of education. Implemented in 1997, the UPE policy eliminated primary school fees, leading to a significant surge in enrollment rates. The study used data spanning nearly two decades (1997-2015) to analyze both the immediate and long-term effects of fee elimination on access to education. The findings revealed that while the policy was successful in increasing school enrollment—doubling the number of students within a few years—the quality of education declined. Overcrowded classrooms, a shortage of qualified teachers, and inadequate educational resources were key challenges, particularly in rural areas where schools were not equipped to handle the influx of new students. As a result, many students struggled with low literacy and numeracy skills despite increased access to schooling. Additionally, the study found that teacher absenteeism was high, further affecting the learning environment and outcomes for students. The authors concluded that while the UPE policy succeeded in democratizing access to education, its implementation fell short in maintaining educational quality. They recommended several policy interventions, including investments in teacher training programs, school

infrastructure, and a more balanced teacher-student ratio to address overcrowding. The study also suggested that complementary educational reforms be introduced to sustain the gains in enrollment while improving learning outcomes. Specifically, Nishimura et al. emphasized the need for targeted support to rural schools that were disproportionately affected by the challenges of UPE. The study provided valuable insights into the complexities of fee abolition and its dual impact on access and quality of education in developing countries like Uganda.

Okiror (2019) explored the factors that continue to impede students' ability to stay in school, despite the elimination of school fees. Using surveys, interviews, and government reports, Okiror gathered data from various stakeholders, including students, parents, and school administrators, to understand the barriers to retention. The findings revealed that indirect costs, such as uniforms, school supplies, and examination fees, continue to pose significant financial burdens on low-income families, particularly in rural areas. Although school fees were removed, these hidden costs disproportionately affected girls, who were often withdrawn from school in favor of boys when resources were limited. Moreover, socio-cultural factors, such as early marriage and domestic responsibilities, further constrained girls' ability to remain in school. The study also found that poor school infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, and a lack of qualified teachers discouraged both students and parents from continuing education beyond the primary level. As a result, dropout rates remained high, particularly in the upper primary years. Okiror recommended that the Ugandan government introduce more comprehensive financial support programs that cover not just school fees but also other related educational costs. Additionally, the study called for stronger policies aimed at reducing gender disparities in school retention, including targeted scholarships for girls and awareness campaigns that address the socio-cultural barriers to female education. By addressing these issues, Okiror argued that retention rates could improve, ultimately leading to better educational outcomes for all students in Uganda.

Nabacwa and Musoke (2020) examined the implications of Uganda's UPE policy on gender parity in education. The purpose of the study was to assess whether eliminating school fees had improved access to education for girls and to identify the remaining barriers that limit their progression in the education system. The researchers employed a qualitative methodology, gathering data through interviews with female students, parents, teachers, and community leaders across rural and urban areas. Their findings indicated that while the elimination of fees led to a significant increase in girls' enrollment in primary schools, socio-cultural challenges persisted, particularly in rural areas. Many parents, especially in impoverished communities, continued to prioritize boys' education over girls', seeing it as a better investment. Girls were often withdrawn from school to assist with household chores, care for siblings, or be married off early to ease financial pressures on the family. The study also highlighted that even when girls did attend school, their retention and academic progression were hindered by a lack of gender-sensitive facilities, such as separate toilets, which led to high dropout rates, particularly during adolescence. Nabacwa and Musoke recommended the introduction of gender-sensitive policies that address the unique challenges faced by girls, such as providing menstrual hygiene products, building separate sanitation facilities, and raising awareness within communities about the importance of girls' education. They also advocated for scholarship programs targeted specifically at girls from low-income households to encourage higher retention and completion rates. This study underscored the need for a more holistic approach to educational policy that not only increases access but also tackles the socio-cultural barriers limiting gender parity in Ugandan schools.



Musisi and Ssewanyana (2018) examined the impact of Uganda's UPE policy on inclusive education, with a particular focus on students with disabilities. Their research sought to determine whether the removal of school fees under UPE had led to better access to education for disabled children and whether schools were equipped to meet their educational needs. Using household surveys and interviews with school administrators and special needs educators, the study found that while overall enrollment increased, children with disabilities remained one of the most marginalized groups in the education system. The researchers discovered that many schools lacked the necessary infrastructure, such as ramps or specialized learning materials, to accommodate students with physical and learning disabilities. Furthermore, teachers often lacked the training needed to support students with special needs, leading to poor educational outcomes and high dropout rates among this group. The study highlighted that inclusive education policies were not adequately enforced, and many schools viewed special education as an optional, rather than essential, component of their offerings. Musisi and Ssewanyana recommended increased government funding for special needs education, more rigorous enforcement of inclusive education policies, and extensive teacher training programs focused on special education. They also called for the development of specialized curricula and teaching aids to improve the learning experience for children with disabilities. By addressing these gaps, the study argued, Uganda could move closer to achieving true inclusivity in its education system, ensuring that all children, regardless of disability, have equal access to quality education.

Kiberenge (2021) aimed to understand how fee elimination has affected educational outcomes in different regions, with a specific focus on the challenges faced by rural schools. Using qualitative interviews with teachers, school administrators, and education officials, as well as observational data from both urban and rural schools, Kiberenge found significant disparities in infrastructure and resource allocation. While urban schools generally benefitted from better facilities and a higher number of qualified teachers, rural schools struggled with overcrowded classrooms, insufficient learning materials, and a severe shortage of trained educators. The influx of students following the fee elimination policy further strained already limited resources in rural schools, leading to lower academic performance compared to their urban counterparts. The study also found that rural students were more likely to drop out due to the long distances they had to travel to reach school, a factor that disproportionately affected girls. Kiberenge recommended targeted government investment in rural education infrastructure, including the construction of more schools and the provision of adequate learning materials. Additionally, the study called for the recruitment and training of more teachers in rural areas, as well as the introduction of incentive programs to encourage qualified teachers to work in these underserved regions. By addressing these challenges, Kiberenge argued, Uganda could ensure a more equitable distribution of education quality across both urban and rural areas, ultimately improving national academic outcomes.

Akiiki and Kanya (2022) explored the challenges of teacher shortages in Uganda's primary schools under the UPE policy, focusing on how these shortages affect classroom management and student outcomes. Through a qualitative research design, the authors interviewed teachers, school administrators, and policymakers across multiple districts in Uganda. The study found that teacher shortages were a widespread issue, with many schools operating at less than half their required teaching staff. This problem was exacerbated by the surge in student enrollment following the UPE policy, leading to overcrowded classrooms where a single teacher was often responsible for

managing 80 to 100 students. The researchers noted that this overwhelmed teachers, many of whom were untrained, struggled to deliver quality instruction, contributing to poor academic performance among students. Teacher absenteeism, driven by low salaries and lack of motivation, was also identified as a critical issue. The study recommended a comprehensive teacher recruitment strategy, including better compensation packages and professional development opportunities, to attract and retain qualified teachers. Akiiki and Kanya also suggested that the government introduce policies aimed at reducing class sizes and improving classroom management by deploying teaching assistants or support staff in overcrowded schools. Additionally, the study advocated for ongoing teacher training programs to ensure that educators are well-equipped to handle large, diverse classrooms while maintaining a high standard of education. These reforms, the authors argued, would significantly improve both the access to and quality of education in Uganda.

Tumushabe (2023) investigated the long-term economic impacts of eliminating school fees under Uganda's UPE policy. The study aimed to assess how the policy influenced educational outcomes, labor market participation, and economic mobility among individuals who benefited from free primary education. Using national household survey data from 2000 to 2020, the researchers applied regression models to analyze the correlation between access to free education and subsequent income levels, employment rates, and upward economic mobility. The study found that the elimination of school fees had a positive effect on access to education, particularly for children from low-income families who were previously unable to afford schooling. This increased access translated into better employment opportunities and higher income levels for those who completed primary education, especially in urban areas. However, the study also revealed that improvements in academic performance were limited, with many students failing to achieve basic literacy and numeracy skills due to the poor quality of education in overcrowded schools. Tumushabe recommended that the Ugandan government complement the fee elimination policy with investments in vocational training programs to provide students with practical skills that could enhance their employability. The study also suggested that improving the quality of primary education through better teacher training and smaller class sizes would result in more significant long-term economic benefits. By integrating these additional measures, the authors argued, Uganda could maximize the positive economic impacts of its free education policy.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low-cost advantage as compared to field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

## FINDINGS

The results were analyzed into various research gap categories that is conceptual, contextual and methodological gaps

**Conceptual Gaps:** The studies reviewed largely focus on enrollment rates, retention issues, and quality of education but fail to fully explore holistic educational outcomes beyond literacy and numeracy. For example, Nishimura (2018) highlighted that while the UPE policy led to increased

enrollment, they did not thoroughly explore how educational equity or life skills development may be impacted by fee abolition. Moreover, the long-term effects of UPE on cognitive skills and non-cognitive development such as critical thinking, creativity, and emotional intelligence remain underexplored. Similarly, Okiror (2019) and Nabacwa & Musoke (2020) emphasized gender disparities but did not provide a comprehensive examination of intersectional issues like the role of disability alongside gender. These conceptual gaps show the need for more nuanced studies that assess not only access but also quality beyond exam performance.

**Contextual Gaps:** Several studies, such as those by Okiror (2019) and Musisi & Ssewanyana (2018), identified socio-cultural and economic barriers (e.g., early marriage, hidden education costs), but these studies did not deeply investigate how local socio-political factors such as community norms or governance affect the implementation of UPE and related policies. Additionally, while studies addressed issues like overcrowding and teacher shortages, the broader context of policy coordination between national and local governments and how decentralization affects education delivery was largely ignored. The cultural implications of UPE, particularly its regional variances and differences in local governance structures, remain underexplored.

**Geographical Gaps:** Most studies, such as Kiberenge (2021), focused on disparities between urban and rural schools, but few studies have examined the regional heterogeneity in the quality and access to education within Uganda's sub-regions. For instance, little attention has been given to post-conflict regions like Northern Uganda, which may face unique educational challenges due to historical instability. Additionally, remote rural areas that are far from administrative centers may experience unique challenges in terms of access and teacher recruitment, which are not adequately addressed in studies focused on more accessible regions. The geographical variation in outcomes, particularly in regions with minority populations or nomadic groups, presents a significant research gap.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Conclusions

In conclusion, the elimination of school fees in Uganda under the Universal Primary Education (UPE) policy has significantly improved access to education by increasing enrollment rates, particularly for children from low-income families and marginalized communities. However, the surge in enrollment has not been matched by corresponding improvements in the quality of education, with overcrowded classrooms, teacher shortages, and inadequate resources remaining critical challenges. While gender parity in enrollment has improved, socio-cultural barriers continue to hinder girls' retention and progression, especially in rural areas. Inclusive education, particularly for children with disabilities, also faces substantial gaps in terms of infrastructure, teacher training, and support services. Therefore, while the fee abolition policy has succeeded in broadening access, comprehensive reforms addressing quality, inclusivity, and retention are essential for realizing the long-term benefits of equitable education in Uganda.

### Recommendations

#### Theory

Current applications of human capital theory emphasize education as a key driver of economic development. However, this theory can be expanded to include the importance of inclusive

education and gender parity as critical elements for national growth. Future research should explore how inclusive education for marginalized groups (e.g., girls and children with disabilities) contributes to overall societal development, addressing gaps in existing theory. Educational research should increasingly use social justice frameworks to understand how fee abolition impacts not only access but also fairness in resource distribution and opportunities. This would highlight the role of equity in education rather than mere access, enriching theoretical discussions on educational equality and social mobility.

### **Practice**

To address issues of overcrowded classrooms and underqualified teachers, the Ugandan government should increase teacher recruitment efforts, particularly in underserved rural areas, and implement ongoing professional development. Special focus should be on training teachers in inclusive education to better support children with disabilities and gender-sensitive teaching methods that encourage the retention of girls in school. In addition to fee abolition, more financial support is needed to cover hidden costs such as school supplies, uniforms, and transportation. This would directly help improve retention rates, especially for girls and children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Investments in school infrastructure, particularly in rural and marginalized areas, are crucial. This includes building gender-sensitive facilities, such as separate toilets for girls, and ensuring accessibility for students with disabilities through ramps and specialized learning resources.

### **Policy**

A holistic approach to fee abolition is necessary, where not only primary school fees are removed but also hidden costs that continue to limit school attendance. Policies should ensure free provision of essential materials, especially for the most vulnerable populations. The government should strengthen the enforcement of inclusive education policies, ensuring that schools meet the needs of students with disabilities through proper funding, resource allocation, and teacher training. Monitoring and accountability mechanisms should be established to ensure policy effectiveness. Policies should address socio-cultural barriers to girls' education, including community awareness programs to challenge gender biases. Further, scholarship programs should be introduced specifically for girls, especially in rural areas, to encourage their continued education and reduce dropout rates.

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