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Trends in Admittance and Equity in Higher Education: Are Male Students in Uganda Disadvantaged?

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Abstract: *The purpose of this study was to assess the impact of trends in admittance and equity in higher education. Using Qualitative approach in data collection, this study answered the following questions: Are Male students currently disadvantaged in admittance to higher education in favour of female students? What is the impact this imbalance in relation to job market demands for skilled labour from both sexes? What long-term initiatives might significantly increase the number of male students admitted to higher education institutions for gender equity? The findings were that the available data on trends in admitting students in higher institutions show an almost equal number of the ratio of females to male with some exceptional institutions where female ratios have exceeded male ratios. It is recommended that the government should review affirmative action policies so that the recruitment does not favor one gender as it were before the programs.*

Keywords: *Gender mainstreaming, Inclusive skills development, Higher institutions of learning, Job Market, Female access to education, Affirmative action*

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1. Introduction

The achievement of the United Nations Strategic Development Goals (SDG), particularly Goal 4 relating to education and Goal 5 mandating gender equality, as well as Uganda's government goals regarding educational gender equity and equality are both reliant on the education of teachers and students (Nabbuye,2018). Uganda has a long history of higher education in the East African region. Historically, Makerere began as a male technical institution in 1922 before becoming the first and largest university in East Africa (Kasule,2022). However, the institution didn't

admit its first female student until 1945 (Kagoda,2019). However, several gender mainstreaming strategies have been implemented since that time to boost the proportion of female students in Uganda's higher educational institutions. In fact, the Ugandan government implemented Affirmative Action policy in the 1990s to oversee higher education. To encourage more women to pursue higher education, starting in 1991, qualified women were granted 1.5 additional points when applying for college entrance. A dual track admission model was then implemented, in which a small group of students (totaling 4,000) were chosen with state sponsorship through the district quota system (1000 students) and the national merit system

(3,000 students), while a second, three to four times larger group, were enrolled as privately sponsored students (Odaga,2020 & Lubaale,2020).

Indeed, Uganda continues to acknowledge the importance of girls receiving a high-quality education for advancing gender equity, equality, girls' empowerment, and economic growth (Muhwezi,2003). Given that half of the population is under the age of 15, making it one of the youngest populations in the world, it is crucial that women contribute equally to economic growth if the nation is to reach middle-income status by 2040 (Nabbuye,2018). Given this reversed age structure, it is critical that for a government like Uganda, it is necessary to take gender equality seriously in order to offer pathways for both girls and boys to pursue higher education.

Purpose/Objectives

The purpose of the study was to make an assessment on the impact of trends in admittance and equity in higher education. The study was guided by the following research questions: Are Male students currently disadvantaged in admittance to higher education in favour of female students? What is the impact this imbalance in relation to job market demands for skilled labour from both sexes? What long-term initiatives might significantly increase the number of male students admitted to higher education institutions for gender equity?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Trends in admittance of students to higher education in Uganda

Since the sector's deregulation, when both public and private schools began operating in Uganda, gender mainstreaming has been maintained as a high priority. In order to provide spaces for a quality, gender-based education system, the government launched Universal Primary Education (UPE) and Universal Secondary Education (USE) in accordance with a world bank requirement. The USE program, like the UPE program, gave many people the chance to enroll in basic and secondary school, respectively. As a result, enrollment increased for both boys and girls from 954,328 in 2007 to 1,258,084 in 2011, with girls making up 47% of the student body. 9,639,000 students are reportedly enrolled in primary and secondary education in Uganda, with 8,841,000 of those students (92%) attending primary school (World Bank, 2017).

Many initiatives have been made in higher education institutions, particularly in public institutions like universities, to increase the accessibility of girls to education. It appears that 39% of students are female overall, however, there is significant variation between

universities. The percentage of female students at Makerere University increased from slightly under 30% in 1991 to 44% in 2004—the highest rate of any postsecondary institution—and to an overall 47–49% across all higher institutions (Altbach, 2010). The enrollment of female students remained lowest in the science programs below the original target proportion of 35%, despite gradual improvement, which brought the percentage to 33% for science programs in 2008/2009 and to 45% for the Humanities in the same year (Franklin,2020). Even in the Humanities, the proportion falls short of the 50% target for gender equality (Kubuka, 2022 & Ngoma, 2017). The overall percentage of female enrollment increased from 42.1% in 2006 to 43.8% now. The new government policy on student subsidies, which favours science-based programs and marginalizes the humanities, where females predominate, has made the gender disparity even worse (Matovu, 2018).

In a parallel enrollment situation, Uganda Christian University, a private chartered university, set a record with a total proportion of 51.5% girls graduating against 45.5% for male students during its 15th graduation, according to figures in the graduation book by 2015. During the First half of the 24th Graduation ceremony on Friday, July 28, 2023, the same University awarded degrees to 1002 students, of whom 444 (44%) were men and 562 (56%) were women (Uganda Christian University, 2023). This pattern suggests that the proportion of male students is declining, which might make it more difficult for men to obtain higher education because of the gender mainstreaming issue.

2.2 The impact of an imbalance between male and female students in relation to job market demands for skilled labor in Uganda's Higher Institutions of learning

By 2018, the number of students who were enrolled in higher Institutions of Learning who were both male and female rose by 5.14% and 3.14%, respectively. However, overall, there were 150,190 more male students enrolled in higher education institutions than female students whose number stood at 125,064 (NCHE,2018). Furthermore, the number of students graduating from Universities has been rising over time, according to a sample from a few different institutions. By way of illustration, at Kyambogo University, the number of graduates rose from 2,862 in 2003 to 7,661 in 2017–18. 7,661 students (4,119 men and 3,527 women) graduated during the graduation ceremony that took place on December 12, December 13, and December 14, 2018(NCHE,2018). According to data on student output or graduation at Makerere University, the total number of degrees conferred over a ten-year period has risen by 7% on average, from 13,297 in 2010 to 13,362 in 2019(NCHE,2018).

Looking at the above statistics from representative samples of higher institutions of learning, it can be analysed that the ratio of female to male continues to raise a new scenario with some like Uganda Christian University where the number of female students has already exceeded that of their male counter parts in enrollment. However, increased access to education for people of both sexes results in a rise in student enrollment as well as notable advancements in higher education. Studies show that increases in tertiary attainment increase the depth of human capital by increasing the number of people both men and women who enter and remain in the labor force (Goh,2014, Blau,2020 & Yeung,2020). This in turn gives the government of Uganda access to a competent labor force with a gender balance that can propel the nation into a middle-income economy.

2.3 The long-term initiatives that might significantly increase the number of male students admitted to higher education institutions for gender equity in Uganda.

Given the shift to neo-liberalism and its effects on women's involvement in the world's labor markets, it is abundantly evident that gender equality is a highly political and contentious idea in higher education today. It is also important to note that, according to numerous figures for Europe, the UK, the USA, and Uganda in particular (David, 2015), there has been a significant change in women's engagement as students in higher education institutions all over the world. However, a nation like Uganda needs to be aware of the need to put in place procedures to prevent mainstreamed genders like women from being overrepresented in higher education institutions. This would lead to yet another serious issue.

In regard to the above observation, the upward mobility strategy would be one of the long-term strategies in higher education and career pathways that would considerably improve the number of male students accepted to higher education in Uganda. A strong upward mobility rate is a sign of a strong economy, and job advancement is one of the main forces behind economic growth (Matsuzuka, 2020). This would result in a balanced ratio of men to women in higher education, which would result in a skilled labor force that is balanced and can continue to propel the economy to a first-class status.

Perhaps another approach could be revisiting the existing gender mainstreaming policies that were put in place decades ago to lift the plight of female students to match male student ratios in higher institutions of learning. Such policies such as 1.5 points for girls in public Universities and quota systems need specific timelines for review so as to keep a balanced enrollment once the initial targets were

met. Even though these programs are still crucial in attaining the original set goals, there is a need to have them reviewed to incorporate the new dynamics of disadvantaging male students in higher institutions of learning recruitment.

3. Methodology

The impact of trends in admittance and equity in higher education was reviewed in the literature in this study. A systematic literature review, according to Keele (2007), is a way to find, assess, and evaluate the research that is currently available and pertinent to a specific research question and target, topic area, or phenomenon of interest. Primary studies are individual studies that add to a systematic review; a systematic review is a secondary type of study. The design, implementation, and reporting phases of Keele's three-stage systematic literature review were modified to achieve the goals of this review (Keele, 2007). The implementation stage of this study involves finding and conducting searches, choosing the primary literature, extracting and presenting issues and data from pertinent articles/publications to meet research objectives, as well as data synthesis. The reporting stage includes a discussion of the study's findings, conclusions, and recommendations. The planning stage of this study involves confirming the need for literature and determining the questions and objectives of the investigation.

4. Results and Discussion

This paper set to address the following research questions: Are Male students currently disadvantaged in admittance to higher education in favour of female students? What is the impact this imbalance in relation to job market demands for skilled labour from both sexes? What long-term initiatives might significantly increase the number of male students admitted to higher education institutions for gender equity?

One of the key findings were that the available data on trends in admitting students in higher institutions showed an almost equal number of the ratio of females to male with some exceptional institutions where female ratios have exceeded male ratios. This means that in the near future possibilities of female students dominating in higher institutions of learning than boys may be a nearby reality. Whereas this will be good, it would also on the other hand put the male students at a disadvantage.

Furthermore, it has been established that the single most significant factor in promoting the development of a knowledge-based economy is education. In order to achieve gender parity, Uganda's education program has been quite successful in expanding the enrollment of

females. In this context, education should include any activities aimed at enhancing a person's knowledge and skill set. Another top priority is to abandon gender-blind educational policies and concentrate on each student in the classroom. Second, a woman's advantage in tertiary enrollment does not always convert into a woman's advantage in the skilled labor market. Female graduates are more likely than male graduates to work in lower-paying positions or to be unemployed, despite the fact that women are more likely than males to receive a university education. Female graduates who find employment often take on secretarial occupations, work in the public sector, or take positions in fields that, on average, employ fewer people with university degrees. In the literature assessment on graduate employment in Uganda, this has been emphasized.

Discussion

Trends in admitting students to higher institutions of learning should remain a key priority in national planning programmes. From the findings, it was established from reviewed data that some Universities such as Uganda Christian University have since 2015 had the number of female students outweigh the number of male students in recruitment (UCU,2015). Makerere and Kyambogo University also provided figures that suggest not a bigger difference between female and male ratios in recruitment (NCHE,2018). This implies that once the government does not review the existing affirmative action policies, the state may in the near future fall into a reverse trap of having a few male students enrolled in higher institutions of learning than females. This could, in turn, have a negative effect on having a gender-based balanced skilled labour force to meet the job market demands of the 4th Industrial Revolution.

Additionally, even though the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) collects data from higher institutions of learning regarding student enrollment and graduation figures, the establishment of a national online data repository centre managed by NCHE would be vital in availing the government and researchers of accurate information to inform regarding the ratio status of the male to female students to inform policy interventions. Such a repository would be made open access for potential employers. This would further reduce on unemployment of graduate students since they would be directly linked to employees in the job market.

Furthermore, government inter-agency collaboration is key to strategic national development plans. It is important to note that Uganda has already done National Development Plan I, II & III as a vehicle for its socio-economic transformation. The same strategy is important in sharing data to aid the government in formulating informed

decisions on the future of skilled labour population trends. This would equally apply in the context of this study as Uganda continues to make a great leap forward towards wealth creation.

Additionally, a study by Mbabazi (2023) found that students from rural secondary schools in Kasese District had a poor level (23%) of accessibility to higher education. The study concluded that educators should support distance learning, particularly for pupils in remote and rural areas. As a result, there would be less gender inequality in higher education. Otoja (2017) contributed further to this idea by opining on the value of distant learning in increasing the enrollment of students from rural areas in higher education institutions.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

It is observed that the government of Uganda should put in place a higher priority regarding trends in admitting students to higher institutions of learning in order to mitigate future gender-based skilled labor force challenges. This is because in order to drive an economy to middle-income status in wealth creation, there is a need to pay attention to training both genders in almost equal measure to have an all-inclusive workforce that will offer skilled services to the economy.

5.2 Recommendations

1. Since the percentage of males versus females in higher institutions of learning is almost at equal measures, it is recommended that earlier policies for gender mainstreaming in the recruitment of female students in higher levels of learning be reviewed.
2. There should be strong collaboration between government agencies especially the Ministry of Education and sports and the National Council for Higher Education in sharing data regarding student enrollment gender-based data ratios so as to guide the government in revising existing gender mainstreaming policies to strike a balance in recruiting students in higher institutions of learning.
3. There should be a central repository data base for all Universities and tertiary institutions that has updated data regarding annual students recruitment and graduation data. This can be utilized by National Council for Higher Education in ascertaining the state of recruitment ratios based

on gender in order to guide the government on intervention measures for ensuring a balance.

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