Towards Sustainable Development

The Uganda Business Climate Index

The situation in schools in Uganda, a year after full reopening from the COVID-19 lockdowns

Introduction

A year after the full reopening of the economy, schools nationwide are still grappling with the aftermath of COVID-19 and its containment measures. As such, they are faced with the need to adapt and recover after an extended closure. Notably, trends of persistent increases in school fees have emerged, given the financial strain of the pandemic on schools. Specifically, the extended closure of the economy created significant financial burdens for education institutions, forcing the majority of them to increase school fees to sustain operations, cover additional expenses and make up for lost revenue (Kahunde et al., 2022). Worse still, inflation and rising costs of resources further contributed to the upward trend in school fees (ibid).

The increase in school fees started in the reopening of third term of the 2022 (September 2022), which affected the cost of education. Since then, schools have persistently increased their school fees. For instance, at the beginning of the first term in February 2023, schools increased their charges after the observed increment in the third term of 2022. It is worth noting that while the need to ensure the financial viability of schools is understandable, the consistent and substantial increase in fees has raised concerns, both at the individual and government levels. Affordability of education has become a pressing issue, potentially compromising accessibility and widening educational inequalities. Thus, it is imperative for schools and educational authorities to strike a balance between financial sustainability and equitable access to education, to ensure that quality education remains accessible to all segments of society.

Another development from COVID-19 is the change in curriculums to compensate for the learning loss from school closures (Kasirye et al., 2023). Upon full reopening of education institutions, the abridged curriculum was to be implemented in all classes except the beginning classes, i.e., primary one, senior one, and senior five. The implementation of the new curriculum presents both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, it offered the opportunity for teachers to cover the missed learning material during the lockdown. On the other hand, the rapid rollout of the new curriculum has resulted in uneven implementation of the same due to issues such as insufficient teacher training and limited access to necessary resources to facilitate its use.

Thus, the aim of the rapid survey is two-fold: a) to explore the implications of the persistent school fees increment on student enrolment; b) to examine the curriculum changes that were effected upon the full reopening of educational institutions from the pandemic-related lockdown in January 2022.

Key Messages

Since reopening schools in January 2022, schools have persistently increased their charges termly.

Measures to counter the learning loss experienced during the pandemic, such as curriculum changes, have not been effectively implemented.

The learning loss is likely to persist given the increasing school fees, poor implementation of the abridged curriculum and other gender-specific factors such as pregnancy and childcare.
Methods

This rapid survey randomly selected two private schools (one in urban and the other in peri-urban areas) from twenty-two (22) districts from five regions (Kampala, central, north, east, and west). In total, forty-one (41) private schools, comprising thirty-seven (37) secondary and three (3) primary were interviewed. The survey compared the period from the full reopening of education institutions (January 2022) to the first term of 2023. The data collection was undertaken in April 2023. The schools were interviewed using a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire sought to enlist information from the school heads regarding their experience with the curriculum changes (the abridged curriculum) after one year of its implementation and the persistent increase in school fees. Specifically, the survey attempts to examine the impact of the continued increase in school fees on school enrollment, and the implementation of the new curriculum meant to compensate for the learning lost during the lockdown. The major indicators explored include the percentage of surveyed schools that further increased their school fees in the first term of 2023 after the general increase in the third term of 2022, the changes in student enrollment because of the continuous hikes in school fees, the challenges in the implementation of the curriculum changes, among others. In addition, the survey explored the school leaders’ suggestions on how best future curriculum changes can be implemented.

The survey was conducted under the auspices of the COVID-19 Responses for Equity (CORE) initiative. As part of the CORE initiative, the Economic Policy Research Centre (EPRC) is implementing a project, "Mitigating Socio-Economic Impacts of COVID-19 and Promoting Post-Pandemic Resilience in Uganda". The EPRC project focuses on micro, small and medium enterprises, and education, as an enterprise, is one of the four sectors of focus under this project. This partly justifies the focus on private schools. Since the pandemic outbreak, this is the fifth rapid survey focusing on schools—with previous surveys held in February 2021, August 2021, February 2022, and November 2022.

Findings

Persistent hikes in school fees, reasons, and impact on enrollment

Figure 1 shows that the survey indicates that seven in every ten surveyed schools further increased their fee charges in the first term of 2023, in addition to the increment they made September 2022 (third term of the previous academic year). This increase could be explained by the cost of living that has been on the rise since the reopening of the economy, which resulted from supply constraints caused by the pandemic. Consequently, schools increased their charges to cater to the rising expenses (Kahunde, 2022).

Most schools further increased their charges by less than 25 percent of the school fees charged in the previous term (Figure 1). While the increment looks meagre, its persistence in the subsequent terms may have devastating effects on school attendance, as some students may either change schools (which is expensive) or altogether drop out of school (Kahunde, 2022).

The survey also revealed that the need to meet the high cost of school necessities such as stationery and food is the main reason for the continued increase in school fees. Figure 2 shows that eight in every ten schools reported that they increased their charges to increase the schools’ ability to afford the rising prices of goods and services,
which are key for the smooth-running of the schools. While the increment is justifiable, its overall impact on enrollment cannot be overlooked.

Regarding changes in enrollment, schools reported an increase in the number of boys in the first term of 2023 (Table 1). This implies that the decrease in enrollment was registered among female students only. School fees increment was key among the reasons for the decline in the number of female students, followed by pregnancy, with 44 percent and 35 percent of schools reporting so, respectively (Figure 3). These findings corroborate those of Nuwematsiko et al. (2022), whose results revealed that, even in the pandemic’s aftermath, its effects are more felt by girls than boys, given the high rates of unwanted pregnancies registered during the lockdowns. Indeed, juggling their education with raising children is burdensome, which explains the high dropouts recorded long after the pandemic ended.

**Table 1** Change in the overall total number of students in the sampled schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Third Term 2022</th>
<th>First Term 2023</th>
<th>Difference</th>
<th>% change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total number of girls</td>
<td>11,450</td>
<td>11,124</td>
<td>-326</td>
<td>-2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of boys</td>
<td>12,162</td>
<td>12,324</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 3** Main reason for the decrease in girls’ enrollment (% of schools)

- School fees increment: 44.1%
- Pregnancy and child care: 35.3%
- Others specify (child marriage): 8.8%
- Child labour: 5.9%
- Changing school: 5.9%

Even in the schools that participated in the curriculum training, the majority of them (32 percent) had only a proportion (50-74%) of their teaching staff trained (Figure 5). These findings confirm those of Kasirye et al. (2023), who argued that the cascade training model (where a few teachers are trained and tasked to train others) is used in curriculum training. The inadequacy of resources was cited among the key obstacles to a holistic approach to curriculum training. Additionally, school leaders who participated in the survey noted that inadequate learning materials, such as textbooks, have been challenging.

**Figure 5** Proportion of teachers that took part in curriculum training (% of schools)

- 50%-74%: 32.4%
- 75%-100%: 26.5%
- 25%-49%: 26.5%
- Less than 25%: 14.7%

**Curriculum changes due to learning losses from COVID-19 lockdowns**

Two in every ten schools in the sample did not have any of their teachers participate in the training sessions for the abridged curriculum (Figure 4). Due to the learning loss that learners experienced because of the prolonged lockdown, the government introduced the abridged curriculum for all continuing students (Kasirye et al., 2023). This was implemented after the passing of the automatic promotion proposal, where, upon the full reopening of education institutions, learners were to join the next class after the one they were in prior to the pandemic without any assessment. The abridged curriculum was intended to enable learners to catch up with the work they missed in their previous classes (ibid).
Conclusion and recommendations

The education sector has not yet stabilized since it was fully reopened in January 2022. The indirect impacts of the pandemic are still being felt a year later. The persistent increment in school fees and other pandemic-related factors, such as early pregnancy and childcare, have affected girls’ access to education. This implies that a gendered learning loss has persisted, in addition to one experienced during the lockdown period.

Worse still, measures such as curriculum changes meant to resolve the learning loss have not been effectively implemented due to resource constraints to facilitate training for all teachers and to purchase adequate learning materials for all schools. As such, some schools have not fully recovered the lost learning during the pandemic. More succinctly, the abridged curriculum has not achieved its overall objectives due to the highlighted implementation challenges.

Based on the findings of this report, the study recommends that:

There is a need to fast-track the possibility of regulating school fees in both private and government schools. Regarding the abridged curriculum, more resources must be invested in future curriculum changes to have all teachers on board and distribute adequate learning materials to all schools.

References

