

Socio-economic disparities and access to government university scholarships – The case of The District Quota System in Uganda.

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Abstract

In this paper, the authors have examined the equity implications of the district quota system of awarding government scholarships to students joining public universities in Uganda. The study sought to establish whether district quota system was achieving equity of opportunity and process of university education. The study employed a cross sectional survey design and a total of 323 respondents comprising of students, registrars and officials from the ministry of education and sports were randomly and purposively sampled. It was established that much as the district quota system has improved on equity of opportunity in accessing university through government sponsorship, it has not affected equity in the process of university education.

Key Words: Socio-economic status, quota system, social class, Sociology, Education

1.0. Background to the Study

Human societies have historically been characterized by social class stratification and the resultant competing interests of individuals and groups. The underlying cause of the social class structure and competition is unequal access to resources (Haralambos & Heald, 1980). Due to the underlying class differences and competition, the question of who gets what and for what reason arises leading to equity concerns in society. So, from the context of a rural African home with children competing for an evening meal on one hand, and from the perspective of the admissions committee of senate at public universities in Uganda with competing applicants for university places on the other hand, the question of who gets what is central to fairness, harmony and social mobility (Faakye, 2007). The institution of education is supposed to provide the equalizing effect to students born and raised in different socio-economic conditions such that the differences in achievement and subsequent access to opportunities are based on individual differences in talents and abilities not on social advantage or constraints. This is done through policies and practices that bring about equity of opportunity and process in education. The study examined how the district quota system of admitting students to public universities in Uganda on government sponsorship was achieving equity of opportunity and process across the different socio-economic backgrounds for which it was established to serve.

1.2. Contextualization of the Study

There are narratives about equity in different laws and policies of government. For example, the (The Republic of Uganda, 1995) Constitution Chapter Four 21 (2) states that a person shall not be discriminated on grounds of sex, race, color, ethnic origin, tribe, birth, creed or religion, social or economic standing, political, opinion or disability. 21 (3) discriminate means to give different treatment to different persons attributable only or mainly to their respective descriptions. According to the (The Republic of Uganda, 2001) universities and other tertiary institutions act 2001, 24 2 (b) the role of universities is dissemination and giving opportunities of acquiring higher education to all persons including; persons with disabilities wishing to do so regardless of race, political opinion, color, creed and sex. Subsection C stresses the need for provision of accessible facilities to the users of public universities. Traditionally, Uganda Government operated only a merit-based scholarship scheme where the available government scholarships would be awarded to the best students in national examinations. Universities would allocate quotas of scholarship per course and the best students in Uganda Advanced Certificate of Education Examinations would take those scholarships. The beneficiaries end up being students from well to do families who attended 'first world' schools which in some cases are more expensive than university (Mugagga, 2006)

Performance in national examinations being the only criterion for awarding government scholarship was criticized by different sections of society since students from low socio-economic backgrounds especially in rural areas could not excel in national examinations and compete favorably with their counterparts from high socio-economic backgrounds who study in better facilitated 'first world' schools situated in urban areas. Leathwood & Archer (2004) for example argue that educational ideas and practices that define education in some narrow lenses of practices like testing and competition, reinforce the class system in which different social classes have had different access to

types of schooling thus giving rise to different results which are not based on individual abilities and talents but on the differences of circumstances that determined the schools in which the students studied. Furthermore, government scholarships being awarded to students from majorly high socio-economic backgrounds meant that the poor tax payers to some extent contribute to the education of the elite class who in most cases come from and as graduates are likely to occupy the more advantageous positions in society (Leathwood & Archer, 2004; Mugagga, 2006; Woodhall, 2007) thus perpetuating unfairness in accessibility to educational opportunities by the poor and inequality in education in general.

To address the unfairness inherent in the merit-based scholarship scheme, the government through a directive in 2005 introduced the affirmative action of district quota system. With the district quota system, the government allocates scholarship quotas per district to be competed for by students who have missed on the merit scheme. Students apply for district quota scholarship under their respective districts of origin, must have a home and have studied and sat Uganda Advanced Certificate of Education in that district. Students apply to the ministry of education and sports that conducts the selection; then the selected students' names are sent to their respective home districts for verification. Those who are given these scholarships study at public universities of Makerere University, Mbarara University of Science and Technology, Gulu University, Kyambogo University, Muni University and other public universities. The same formula for distributing government scholarship beneficiaries on merit is used to distribute students on district quota system among the public universities.

The aim of the district quota system of awarding government scholarships is to help bright students who fail to access university education through the merit-based scholarship scheme due to stiff competition get a second chance. This stiff competition is exacerbated by a small and constant number of scholarships awarded annually amidst ever increasing secondary school enrolment. This system of scholarship distribution is meant to ensure equity across geographical and socio-economic divides. The study examined how this admission track on government sponsorship has achieved equity in terms of opportunity and process of university education in order to inform the policy direction of achieving equity in university scholarships.

1.3. Statement of the Problem

District quota system admission policy was introduced in public universities in Uganda in 2005 to improve equity across regional and socio-economic divides. Review of admission records of public universities revealed an elaborate admission criterion for district quota system, but there is no elaborate policy to guide and inform how equity will be achieved through this admission system. Literature review further revealed that though the district quota system may have visible impact on access, equity of the process is not yet reflected, and it has not yet been analysed. Universities may continue implementing this policy even when it is not achieving the intended goals. This may negatively affect the categories of students targeted and in turn negatively affect achievement of sustainable development goals. It is against this background that the study examined how equitable

the district quota system of admitting students on government sponsorship is across socio-economic and regional divides with a view of informing the policy direction so as to achieve equity in education for a fair and harmonious society.

1.4. Objective of the Study

To examine how the district quota system addresses the socio-economic disparities in access to and process of university education in Uganda.

1.5. Research Question

How does the district quota system address the socio-economic disparities in access to and process of university education in Uganda?

2.0. Methodology

The study employed a cross sectional survey design (Amin, M, 2005; Gay, L, 1996). The researchers selected subjects from among the public universities in Uganda and collected data from them. The design was deemed appropriate because the study required collection of data from a cross section of respondents. The study population included students on district quota system, registrars in charge of admissions and officials from the ministry of education and sports. A total of 323 respondents was sampled from 4 public universities from the 4 regions of Uganda. The respondents included 317 students on district quota scholarships for 2015/2016 and 2016/2017 academic years, 4 registrars in charge of admission from the 4 public universities and 2 officials from the ministry of education and sports responsible for handling quota allocations. The specific sample was selected using random and purposive sampling but adapting the recommendation and sample determination of Krejci and Morgan (1970) which reveals that, when $N=1800$ the sample size should be 317 (Gay, L, 1996). The research instruments included an open-ended questionnaire, interview guides and documentary analysis. Copy of admission lists, admission criteria and minutes of the admissions committee of senate were obtained from the admissions and records office at Makerere University which coordinates admissions for all public universities. Quantitative data was analyzed by computation of percentages, and presented using frequency counts and charts, tables and graphs. The qualitative data was presented under themes relating to the study.

3.0. Findings

Data was analysed in order determine;

1. Whether district quota system has achieved the purpose for which it was established?
2. Who actually gets the scholarships awarded through the district quota system in terms of socio-economic status?
3. Whether the district quota system increased access to university education by socio-economic groups prior disadvantaged by the merit system?
4. How has the district quota system affected the process of education for the beneficiaries?

The study revealed that district quota system equitably allocates the 896 scholarships annually among all the districts of Uganda. The lowest number allocated to a district for the 2 academic years was 5 students while the highest number allocated to a district was 24 students. This implies that there is numerical equity on the government scholarships to public universities that are awarded on the basis of district quota system. The study further revealed that the district quota system considers the best students who have been left out on the merit scheme implying that bright students who are left out of university admission due to the high competition on the national merit are taken on by the quota system. However, considering equity only at the numerical level risks leaving out critical underlying variables that cause and perpetuate inequity in allocation of government scholarships. These underlying variables are socio-economic, and geographical reflected not only in the equity of opportunity but also in the equity of the process of university education. Thus, the study further examined who actually gets admitted on the district quota system in terms of socio-economic background, whether the scheme has increased access to university education by socio-economic groups that were initially disadvantaged by the merit system and how the scheme has affected the process of education for the beneficiaries.

Using indicators of the level of education, occupation and income of the parents/guardians obtained from the primary respondents, the study categorised the students into three socio-economic groups which included the low-income group, the low-middle income group, and the middle-income group. The categories are represented in figure 1.1

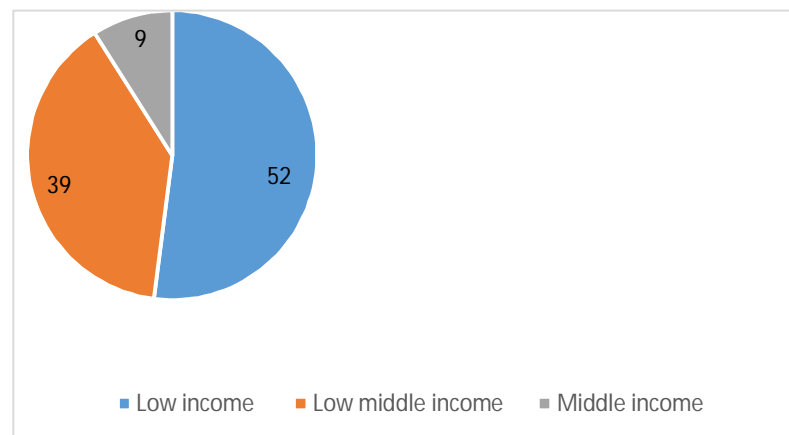


Figure 1.1: Socio-economic groups of students on quota system

Data in figure 1. indicates that 52% of students who participated in this study come from low income group. Their parents are mainly peasants and casual labourers with primary and secondary level of education. This socio-economic group has a monthly income range of between 27 to 132 USD. This group is socio-economically constrained and therefore cannot afford quality primary and secondary school education for their children or private university education for their children.

Findings in figure 1.1 further reveal that 39% of the students who participated in the study come from low-middle income group. This socio-economic group is comprised of low-level civil servants and self-employed individuals with education level ranging from certificate, diploma and degree with monthly income ranging between 134 – 527 USD. This socio-economic group is not so constrained as the low-income group because they have reasonable regular income, education and occupation. Their education level is a motivation to their children to work hard in school at least to achieve the education level of their parents. This socio-economic group can afford to educate their children in average to good schools albeit with struggle and sacrifice economically. Figure 1.1. further reveals that only 9% of the students who participated in this study have middle income parents/guardians. This socio-economic group is comprised of civil servants and businesspeople with certificate, diploma and degree respectively as their highest-level of education. Their monthly average income is over Shs. 527 USD. This is a well to do group who can afford quality education for their children in well performing government and private schools and private education at university.

The Study findings revealed that there are beneficiaries of the district quota system who come from middle income and low middle-income families, study in good schools in urban centres but register for examinations in rural districts to compete favourably for the district quota system. These students exploit the loopholes in the system to secure scholarships which are otherwise not meant for them. For example, The New Vision newspaper of 10th September 2016 reported that Makerere University had “rejected names of dubious students on the quota system”. More than 10 districts had submitted complaints that students on quota lists from their respective districts were not valid residents of the districts since those students did not live or had not studied in those districts. This finding was supported by several assertions by students who indicated that they really “cheated” the system to qualify for the district quota system. One student while answering a question on how the government can improve the district quota system sarcastically stated; “Keep the levels of corruption high for I would not have acquired the scholarship if my parent had not put in some money”. (Extracted from students’ questionnaire). On further examination of data, the study discovered that this student had studied from Kampala parents’ school for primary education, Kings College Budo – a ‘first world secondary school’ in central Uganda for his secondary education but sat for Uganda advanced certificate of education from Masaka District. The parent of this student could have bribed the district officials to certify that the student has a home and studied in the district. Another student answering the same question stated that:

While verifying students from the district, the government should go up to the parish level most students taking the scholarships are capable students from well to do families. Information about the beneficiaries should not be collected from the district officials who may not know the students. Let the government go to lower level at least up to the parish level to ascertain genuine residents of the area. (Extracted from one of the students’ questionnaires)

Another student also wrote;

[Government] *should trace data about birth and education background of individuals without asking them so that it is able to get the truth. We sat senior six exams with people we had never seen I think they were targeting the district quota system. People who study in the district miss because others come from good schools and take their places.* (Extracted from one of the students' questionnaires)

During interviews with one assistant registrar in charge of admissions from one of the participating universities, a question was to put to him as to how they ensure that government scholarships are received by the intended beneficiaries given the fact that there are allegations that people come from good schools in urban centres and register for examinations in up country schools targeting district quota slots. This is what he had to say;

Verification of the candidates is done at the district, what they tell us is the truth we take. Allocation used to be done at the district but because of corruption and favouritism, it is now done centrally at the ministry of education then names are sent to the district for verification, if the candidates do not qualify and the districts say they qualify surely there is no way we can know (Interview with assistant registrar August 2017).

The study further revealed that majority of students on the district quota system (64%) are doing Arts and social sciences courses compared to 36% doing sciences. However further analysis of secondary data does not attribute this skewing to the district quota system. Review of the State of higher education report 2010 by the national council for higher education indicates that students doing science disciplines increased from 28% in 2006 to 37% in 2010. It is noted that the significant increase in science and technology is in the fields of computer science rather than “basic, mathematical, technological or applied sciences (National Council for Higher education, 2010).

Table 1: Courses done by students on district quota system 2015/2016 Academic Year

Course	Male	Female	Total	% Age
Bachelor of Arts (Arts)	11	10	21	4
Bachelor of Arts (Social sciences)	34	27	61	12
Bachelor of Adult and Community Education)	11	15	26	5
Bachelor of Agricultural and Rural Innovation	6	6	12	2
Bachelor of Business computing	0	2	2	0.4
B. Science in business computing	0	1	1	0.2
B. Community psychology	1	0	1	0.2
B. Arts in environmental management	18	14	32	6
B. Entrepreneurship and small business management	4	0	4	0.8
B. Human resource management	36	35	71	14
B. International Business	0	1	1	0.2
B. Office and information management	2	1	3	0.6
B. Information Technology	2	7	9	1.7

B. Leisure and Hospitality Management	1	2	3	0.6
B. Science in population studies	2	0	2	0.4
B. Tourism	20	22	42	8
B. Arts in Dance	1	0	1	0.2
B. Arts in Drama	1	0	1	0.2
B. Development Studies	39	32	71	14
B. Arts in Economics	3	0	3	0.6
B. Arts with Education	1	2	3	0.6
B. Secretarial Studies	8	20	28	5
B. Industrial and Fine Arts	0	1	1	0.2
B. Laws	1	0	1	0.2
B. Library and Information Science	3	4	7	1
B. Mass communication	8	16	69	13
B. Procurement and Supply Chain Management	1	4	5	1
B. Social Work and Social and Social Administration	24	16	40	7.7
B. Urban Planning	28	15	43	8
TOTAL	266	253	519	

The study revealed that majority of the students on the district quota system are not doing a course of their dream because they did not qualify for it under the district quota system. This was indicated by 61%, 70%, 48% and 46% of the students from Makerere, Gulu, Mbarara and Busitema universities respectively. The reasons given by students for missing their dream courses were; high cut off points on their dream courses or not having money to pay fees for their dream courses. One student while explaining the scenario stated;

Government should interact with students to understand what they aspire for and sponsor them to do their dream courses, otherwise students fill in courses of lower cut off points to beat the entry limits and they end up taking whatever is provided not what they preferred. After the course they change and do other things other than the profession they studied.

(Students' questionnaire)

This implies that government could be sponsoring people to acquire knowledge and skills that they are not going to apply in the field because some of them may seek to change profession in the future. This constitutes wastage on the side of government and the individual concerned and external inefficiency on the part of the universities. When students are offered courses they do not wish to take in the first place, they are not motivated to perform well which may result into apathy and average performance on the side of the students. This view was confirmed by the statement of one student who wrote.

Some of us may not practice what we are studying because for example salary for teachers is miserable. I pray that after university I work hard and get money to do a course of my choice. (Students' questionnaire)

Academic performance is part of the process of education that is crucial for any education scholarship to achieve its output. Data was collected on whether the district quota scholarship was helping the recipients to perform well in their studies.

Table 2 : Responses of students' performance and support from government

I am performing well academically because of support from the government								
	Makerere		Gulu		Mbarara		Busitema	
Yes	40	56%	36	49%	37	62%	35	61%
NO	32	44%	37	51%	23	38%	23	39%

Data in table 2 reveals that majority of the students on the district quota system believe they are performing well because of the government sponsorship. This was revealed by 40 (56%), 36(49%), 37 (62%) and 35 (61%) of the students in Makerere, Gulu, Mbarara and Busitema respectively. The students revealed that government sponsorship has given them peace of mind because they do not have to worry about tuition fees thus, they are able to concentrate and perform well. One student stated: "I don't have to worry about where my school fees will come from, I am able to settle on my books which I think is helping me to perform well."

Another student stated;

"My parents were so happy when I got government sponsorship and now since they are not on pressure of tuition fees, they give me enough pocket money which has enabled me to settle down and read. I do not have any worries".

Findings further revealed that government support towards academic performance is felt by the students in terms of relief of the burden of worrying about school fees which has given the students peace of mind.

3.1.Conclusion

The district quota system has increased equity of opportunity to students previously disadvantaged by the merit-based system because of their socio-economic and geographical backgrounds. Secondly, district quota system has not achieved equity to the extent that many university education stakeholders think it has done. This is because some students who are not the intended beneficiaries end up exploiting the loopholes in scheme to benefit from the scheme. This is seen from the fact that 9% of the beneficiaries of the quota system are students from middle income families whose admission to university on government scholarship did not provide them with opportunity for entering university because they were sure of joining university with or without government scholarship.

3.2.Recommendations

The study made the following Recommendations;

1. For students to benefit from a district quota, they should have studied primary and secondary education from their respective districts. This is because the inequities that afflict students in their early years of schooling manifest themselves in national examinations that are used for giving out government scholarships (Crawford, Gregg, Macmillan, Vignoles, & Wyness, 2016). Students should only qualify for the district quota if they have had their primary and secondary education from such a district. Ministry of education and sports should verify the claims of students as to where they studied for primary and secondary education.
2. Government should increase percentage of quota system from the current 25% to 50% of all government scholarships to universities. This would increase access to university education through government sponsorship by students from constrained socio-economic regions.

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