Rural – Urban Disparities and Access to Government University Scholarships: An Analysis of Equity in the District Quota System in Uganda

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Abstract

This study investigated whether the district quota system of awarding government scholarships to students joining public universities was affecting the rural – urban inequity in accessing government scholarship by 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. With equity of opportunity, the study looked at beneficiaries of the district quota system across the rural – urban divide. With equity of the process, the study examined the courses being taken by the beneficiaries of the quota system, policy and administration. 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 across the rural – urban divide.

Key Words: district quota system, rural – urban divide, social class, Sociology, Education

Background to Study

The social stratification and the resultant social class inequality are the reasons governments make equity interventions in provision of social services. In the education sector, learners are born and raised in different socio-economic condition that impact their achievement at school and subsequent access to educational and job opportunities. 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. Equity can be conceptualized as fairness in the distribution of some good, service or burden(Ghosh, 2001). Economic literature divides equity into procedural equity and distributional equity. Procedural equity is concerned with the fairness in the rules, procedures or processes by which resources are allocated, while distributional equity refers to fairness in the actual distribution or resources or outcomes. In the education context, equity is realized when there is a fair distribution of educational opportunity to all students who are willing and able to enroll for a given type or level of education regardless of their gender, socio-economic status or location (Godfrey Bagonza, 2009).This study considered equity as fairness in the distribution of opportunity and process of education to all students who are willing and able to study regardless of their location. Equity in the district quota system implied fairness in allocation of district quota scholarships to the intended beneficiaries so that people are not disadvantaged or advantaged by location in accessing the scholarships and participation in university education.

Contextualization of the Study

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 who have applied for those courses would take the scholarships. The beneficiaries end up being students from well to do families who attended 'first world' schools located mostly in urban centers which in some cases are more expensive than university (Mugagga, 2006).

The merit-based system of 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 in 2005 introduced the affirmative action of district quota system to achieve two major objectives; to help bright students who could not access university education due to stiff competition on national merit; to help districts that fail to have students admitted on government sponsorship on national merit. The districts that fail to have students admitted on government sponsorships are all rural districts. With the district quota system, the government allocates scholarship quotas per district to be competed for by students who have missed on the merit - based 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 are posted to study at various public universities. The study examined how this admission track on government sponsorship has achieved equity in terms of opportunity and process of university education across rural – urban divide in order to inform the policy direction of achieving equity in university scholarships.

Problem Statement

District quota system admission policy was introduced in public universities in Uganda in 2005 mong others to reduce rural – urban inequity in access to government scholarships. 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. Since this admission track was established in 2005, there has not been any evaluation to ascertain whether it is achieving equity across the rural – urban divide. 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 the rural – urban divide with a view of informing the policy direction so as to achieve equity in education for a fair and harmonious society.

Objective of the Study

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

Research Question

How does the district quota system address the rural – urban disparities in access to and process of education in Uganda.

Literature Review

Theoretical

The study was anchored on the Theory of Maximally Maintained Inequality (MMI) and the Theory of Effectively Maintained Inequality (EMI). The theory of Maximally Maintained Inequality (Raftery and Michael, 1993) explains the relationship between socio-economic background factors and equity of opportunity of access to different education levels by different socio-economic groups during the period of expansion of education opportunities. According to the theory, all factors being equal, growth in [higher] education is a result of natural increase in population and gradual improvement in socio-economic status of low socio-economic classes. This increase in education does not remove barriers faced by individuals because of their social economic position. For people from lower classes to obtain opportunities resulting from education expansion, opportunities must increase faster than the increase in demand as a resultant of population growth and social class composition. If completion of a given level of education becomes universal for the high socio-economic status children, the effect of socio-economic background on that level of education declines over time resulting into diminished inequality of opportunity. In other words, quantitative inequalities in access to education will be "maximally maintained" during the period of expansion of education opportunities diminishing only when access by the socio-economically advantaged groups reaches saturation point (Boliver, 2010). Boliver (2010) further expounds on the theory by asserting that 'education in and of itself cannot reduce educational inequalities simply because those from more advantaged socio-

economic backgrounds are better placed than others to take up the new educational opportunities that the expansion affords'. Much as the theory of maximally maintained inequality (Raftery, E & Michael, 1993) looks at equity of opportunity resulting from expansion of education, its assertion that, in instances of competition for opportunity between different social economic classes, the high socio-economic status class will take all the additional opportunities up to a point of saturation makes a basis for this study. In relation to the theory, the study examined whether government scholarships on quota system can reach the intended beneficiaries given the competition from students from high socio-economic classes.

Lucas (2001) expands on the Maximally Maintained Inequality Theory (Raftery and Michael, 1993) by asserting that socio-economically advantaged social groups secure for themselves and their children some degree of advantage wherever advantages are commonly possible. If quantitative differences are common the socio-economically advantaged will obtain quantitative advantage, while if qualitative differences are common, the socio-economically advantaged will obtain the qualitative advantage (Lucas, 2001). The socio-economically advantaged tend to secure for themselves a qualitatively better kind of education at any level such that qualitative inequalities of access to more prestigious programs and institutions will be "Effectively Maintained" and may even increase once quantitative inequalities in access begin to decline. The research anchored on this theory to examine how the district quota system which is meant to impact access to university education affect the process of education for the intended beneficiaries beyond quantitative access.

Empirical Review

Education inequality between rural and urban areas is a potential bottleneck for human capital development (Zhang, Li, & Xue, 2015), yet the neoclassical growth theory emphasizes that long term development relies on productivity improvement driven primarily by human capital accumulation. According to (UNESCO, 2013) there is disparity between rural and urban areas in sub-Saharan Africa in terms of attendance, progression and completion. For instance, 86% of urban children attend primary school as compared to 72% of rural children. This is despite the universal primary education in many Sub-Saharan African countries. These findings of UNESCO (2013) are on primary education sector moreover aggregating sub-Saharan Africa. The study examined rural urban disparity in government scholarships to university students in Uganda an area that has not been given much attention. Increase in educational opportunities does not detach educational attainment from social origins with the associated constraints. (Molla & Gale, 2015) carried out a critical policy analysis of Ethiopia's higher education and found out that despite various equity policies in place, higher education is characterized by inequality about women, and geo politically marginalized ethnic groups and people from peripheral and rural areas. Such critical policy analysis is necessary in Uganda given the fact that Uganda has various equity policies whose implications have not been examined.

In a study of women access to higher education in rural and urban china (Zuoxu, Weihong, and Xiaowei, 2010b) found out that, the proportion of women in higher education increased by more than 30% between 1947 and 2005 due to an overall expansion in higher education. However due to traditional prejudices, socio-economic conditions and social cultural constraints, increase of rural women in higher education was only 4% for the same period. When educational opportunities are presented where urban areas must share those opportunities with rural areas, urban areas take the highest percentage. Zuoxu et al., (2010b) further notes that, urban women dominated attendance in high status private institutions whose majority students continue in higher education and rural women dominate public high schools and low performing private institutions whose graduates have fewer chances of progressing in higher education. This according to (Zuoxu, Weihong, and Xiaowei, 2010a) is due to the fact that location influences individual education decisions including which institution to attend and course to do. They further argue that even if access to higher education increases, new increase in educational opportunities for women will primarily benefit urban women due to differences between rural and urban women educational conditions (Zuoxu et al., 2010b). The findings of Wang (2011), Yuxiao (2013) and Zuoxu et al. (2010b) are contradicted by the findings of Jinzhong (2010) who calculated

urban high school access to higher education opportunities over rural high school students access to the same opportunities. Findings from Jinzhong (2010) analysis of the disparity index indicate that the there is a marked disparity between rural and urban high school leavers access to higher education, but the disparity has been reducing over time. Though the rate of growth in the number of students registering for higher education exceeds the rate of growth for urban students, there is still a disparity with the advantage going to urban school leavers though the disparity is consistently shrinking (Jinzhong, 2010). The analysis further discovered that there is a great disparity between rural and urban high school leavers attendance to the top universities where rural students are significantly underrepresented. Jinzhong (2010) asserts that fairness in education access is not only in terms of quantity but also in terms of opportunity to access the best quality schools. Jinzhong (2010) noted that the proportion of rural students decreased as the rank of school increased such that the top high-status universities and colleges were dominated by students from urban areas.

Mulongo (2013), while analyzing inequality in higher education in Kenya asserts that participation in higher education in Kenya is skewed in favor of urban and metropolitan areas because the challenges faced by students from rural areas disadvantage them from competing for places at university. Mulongo (2013) further argues that access to higher education in Kenya is dependent on socio-economic status and since rural areas are predominantly poor, they are underrepresented in higher education. For example, only 0.5% of the students come from the arid and semi-arid areas while 84% of the students come from well to do families from urban areas. Mulongo, (2013) further argues that the situation at Nairobi University is not different from other public and private universities in Kenya where the rural areas are significantly underrepresented in universities. Mulongo (2013) further argues that regional inequality in Kenya is rooted discriminatory colonial policy that set up development infrastructure including education amenities in areas that hard attractive resources neglecting areas that did not have resources. However, Mulongo (2013) is not clear on the methodology he used for the study, yet the findings are very important since Uganda and Kenya have a similar historical context since they were under the same colonial master. Government scholarship to public universities have indeed increased enrollment including that of girls, but it is not clear to what extent have the rural girls benefited in terms of access and indeed it is not clears which courses they enroll for at the university. According to Zuoxu et al. (2010a), the decision concerning what to study may be influences by the location of individual whether rural or urban, yet equity must be analyzed at the enrollment and the process. The studies of Wang (2011) and Zuoxu et al. 2010b) cannot be relied to make conclusions about Uganda due to spatial and contextual differences hence the need for this study.

In a study of educational inequality in rural and urban Sindh in Pakistan,(Noman and Ambreen, 2014) using Gini coefficient calculated the variation of education between rural and urban areas and within urban and rural areas and discovered that educational inequalities were decreasing in urban areas over time but in rural areas the inequalities were increasing over the same period with the Gini index in rural areas of over 70%. Noman and Ambreen, (2014) argue that the limited facilities for secondary education such as classrooms, drinking water, and teachers especially female teachers in rural areas is responsible for low enrollment of students into higher education from those areas. That rural areas in addition are held back in education terms by rigid cultural practices that discourage education especially of girls' which practices are not so rooted in urban areas. socio-economic and cultural conditions in Saeed's study context is not different from Uganda but high reliance on Gini coefficient measurement of variation leaves unanswered questions especially of qualitative nature.

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.

Findings

The pertinent research question that guided the data analysis, presentation, and interpretation of the findings was: How does the district quota system address the rural – urban disparities in access to and process of education in Uganda? Data was analyzed in order to determine:

1. The percentage of government scholarship taken by urban areas before the introduction of the quota system.
2. Whether the district quota system caused any change in allocation of scholarships between rural and urban areas
3. The courses being taken by rural and urban students on the district quota system?

Kampala and Wakiso districts were sampled out for analysis as urban areas. Since Kampala and Wakiso are the most influential urban areas in terms of education results, the findings based on the sample can be used to generalize the relationship between rural and urban areas in terms of education. To determine the percentage of government scholarships allocated to urban areas before the introduction of district quota system, study reviewed admission recorded for government sponsored students for five academic years before introduction of the district quota system.

Table 1: Percentage of students on government sponsorship from Kampala and Wakiso District before introduction of district quota system

Year	Total admitted	Kampala	Percentage	Wakiso	Percentage
2001/2001	3098	359	13	-	-
2001/2002	3789	584	15	-	-
2002/2003	2549	282	11	214	8
2003/2004	2770	393	14	280	10
2004/2005	2512	365	15	254	10

The study revealed that for the academic year 2000/2001 Kampala district took 359 (13%) of the scholarships the government awarded to students joining public universities. In 2001/2002 academic year the percentage of government scholarship taken by Kampala district alone increased to 584 (15%). Data in Table 1 further indicate that for 2002/.2003 academic year, Kampala took 282 (11%) of the government scholarship while Wakiso took 214 (8%) of the scholarship; the combined percentage for the two districts for that academic year being 19%. For 2003/2004 academic year, Kampala took 393 (14%) while Wakiso took 280 (10%) the combined share for the two districts for that academic year being 24%. For 2004/2005 academic year, Kampala took 365 (15%) and Wakiso took 254 (10%) of the government scholarships the combined

percentage for the two districts being 25%. Findings in table 1 imply that before the introduction of the district quota system Kampala and Wakiso district dominated the government scholarship every year. For the 2004/2005 academic year a quarter of the scholarships just went to two urban districts. These districts are situated in one region thus indicating the high level of regional inequality in government scholarships before introduction of the quota system.

Has the district quota system caused any change in allocation of scholarships between rural and urban areas?

It should be noted that government did not increase scholarships, it is the formula for the distribution of the scholarship that changed to bring fairness in accessing the scholarship by different regions. This means that increasing the chances for one region had to reduce the number previously taken by other regions. The study investigated whether the percentage share of urban areas had reduced due to the introduction of the district quota system. This would imply that the share to the rural areas has increased since the number of scholarships did not increase with the introduction of the quota system. Data on the admission records both on merit and district quota for five academic years starting with 2012/2013 academic year was collected and findings are presented in table 2.

Table 2: Merit combined with Quota system for Kampala and Wakiso Districts

Year	Total admitted	Kampala	% Age	Wakiso	%age	% age for 2 districts
2012/2013	2497	331	13	285	12	25
2013/2014	2589	361	14	342	13	27
2014/2015	2468	314	13	323	13	26
2015/2016	2488	283	12	383	16	28
2016/2017	2510	260	11	352	14	25

Findings in table 2 reveal that the introduction of the district quota system did not change the percentage of the government scholarships awarded to students from the urban districts of Kampala and Wakiso. When slots on national merit are combined with those on the quota system, still the urban districts of Kampala retain their lion's share of the government scholarships. Data in table 2 indicate that in 2012/2013 academic year, Kampala district took 13% of the scholarship while Wakiso district took 12%, which is the same percentage that was taken by the two districts in 2004/2005 academic year, the combined percentage for the two districts being 25% which is the same as the year preceding the introduction of the district quota system. In 2013/2014 academic year, Kampala district took 14% while Wakiso took 13%, the combined total percentage for that year being higher than the any of the five years preceding the introduction of the district quota system. For the academic year 2014/2015, Kampala and Wakiso each took 13% of the scholarships while for the academic year 2015/2016 Kampala took 16% while Wakiso took 16%; the academic year 2016/2017 Kampala took 11% while Wakiso took 14% of the scholarships.

Since there was no increase in the number of scholarships offered by the government, findings in table 2 indicate that the Urban districts have maintained the same advantage over rural districts in government scholarships even with the introduction of the district quota system. Finding further indicate that there is a slight increment in government scholarships allocated to urban districts over time. This could imply that as urban areas expand and attract more high-status schools, advantages over rural in terms of education opportunities increase worsening the rural- urban imbalance in educational opportunities. Analysis of data further reveals that although Kampala and Wakiso are advantaged in merit system, they receive the highest numbers of scholarships on the district quota system. During interviews, one registrar in charge of admissions

was asked why Kampala is allocated more slots on district quota system yet it takes the highest number on national merit. His answer was that district quota system is based on the number of the secondary school student population in the district, the district with high number of secondary schools takes a big quota of the district quota scholarships. This finding implies that the method used for bringing equity on district basis has not achieved its intended purpose because the disparities between rural and urban areas are instead increasing even with the district quota system in place.

Courses being done by rural and urban students on the district quota system
Data was collected on the courses students from Kampala and Wakiso were offering in the academic year 2015/2016 and 2016/2017 and compared with the overall course allocation on the district quota system for the same period. Findings reveal that in 2015/2016 academic year, out of the 22 students admitted on quota system from Kampala district only 1 (5%) student was given a science course (Bachelor of science in Cytotechnology), 6 (27%) were given business related courses the 15 (68%) were given arts and social sciences courses. There were no students in Engineering, Medical, Agricultural and Mathematical sciences yet these are the fields of study being encouraged by government for economic growth and development. For Wakiso district in 2015/2016 academic year, of the 15 students who were admitted on the district quota system, 2 (13%) were given bio-medical lab technology, 3 (20%) were given business related courses, the rest 10 (67%) were given arts and social sciences. Like it was the case for Kampala district, there were no students in Engineering, Agricultural or Mathematical sciences – areas considered more relevant in the job market today.

For the academic year 2016/2017, Kampala district was given 23 students on the district quota system. Findings reveal that only 1 (4%) students were admitted on Bachelor of Laws, 10 (44%) were admitted on business related courses, 12 (52%) were admitted on arts and social sciences courses. As it was in the 2015/2016 academic year, there were no students in Engineering, Medical, Agricultural or Mathematical sciences. Findings reveal that Wakiso district did not have a different trend from that of 2015/2016 academic year. Of the 15 students admitted on the district quota system, 1 (7%) was given civil engineering, 6 (40%) were given business related courses, 8 (53%) were given arts and social sciences courses. These findings imply that over 95% of the students on the district quota system from Kampala and Wakiso urban districts are given arts and social sciences courses. These courses are considered low track courses because they have low prospects of immediate employment after university and, they have low income prospects. Review of admission records reveals that though all courses are available on the district quota system, the cut off points for most competitive science courses make them out of reach of students admitted on the district quota system. Over 90% of the courses offered to the district quota beneficiaries are business, arts and social sciences courses. The high track courses especially in sciences, law and traditional business courses have very high cut off points and therefore are dominated by students from high status school from mainly urban centres.

One Registrar revealed during the interview that it is not about distributing courses, 'it is about distributing places to ensure each district gets. The same registrar opined that they cannot give affirmative action on courses offered because there is need to maintain quality in university education.

> *"We cannot for example reduce the cut off point for* [bachelor of] *medicine because we need to maintain the quality of doctors not to put the nation in the hands of substandard doctors. In some courses, the need for maintaining quality supersedes the need to appear fair to everyone. If students want those courses, they have to work hard for them and qualify on merit".*

This implies that the rural-urban disparity in the process of university education regarding the courses being done by students on government scholarship has persisted despite the introduction of the district quota system due to the fact that performance remains a principle criterion for admission to high courses at university.

Conclusion

The District Quota System has not affected the rural – urban inequity in access to and process of education in Uganda inherent in the merit - based system. In allocation of district quotas, urban districts get more places because they have higher number of secondary school students. Therefore, the regional imbalance in government allocation of scholarships to public university has not been addressed by the district quota system.

Recommendations

1. Urban districts should not be included in the district quota system since they take the lion's share of the merit – based system. Poor schools in urban areas should be categories as rural schools on school classification such that students from those schools get considered for district quota scholarships.

2. Government should increase percentage of district 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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