

Law pre-entry tests exposes weakness in Uneb exams

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Written by Charlotte Kaweesa

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Some courses like law can no longer rely on A-level results to join the university

Schools which have been dominating admissions perform dismally as traditional giants bounce back

The newly released results of the Makerere University pre-entry examination for admission to the bachelor of laws for the academic year 2012/2013 reveal an interesting scenario and lend credence to arguments that it is not necessarily the best and brightest students that gain entry into some of the university's prestigious programmes.

The exam, which more than 1,600 candidates sat on April 28, was unprecedented at the law school and the university as a whole, and shall, according to Alfred Masikye Namoah, the Academic Registrar, The pre-entry examinations are an attempt to find a solution for the consistently high failure rate on the post-graduate bar course at the Law Development Centre (LDC), and the generally poor quality of lawyers that LDC has been churning out in recent years.

The thinking behind the bachelor of laws pre-entry exams is that once quality is assured at the undergraduate stage, chances of obtaining good calibre lawyers at the end of the production chain would be higher. It is thought that one of the reasons for the poor performance is the type of subjects students offer at A-level. Schools now encourage their students to study subjects that are easier to pass (than history and literature), and which do not require sharp writing, analytical, comprehension and critical

skills.

It is now commonplace for A-level candidates to feature on Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB) results lists as some of the best performers, with straight 'A's in such combinations as Luganda, Islamic Studies, Art and Entrepreneurship, and proudly announcing that they aspire to become lawyers!

Dr Kakungulu Mayambala, a senior lecturer at Makerere University's school of Law, explains that the pre-entry exam sought to test potential students' aptitude, analytical skills and comprehension, which are absolutely necessary for the rigours of legal education. Thus, by allowing candidates to apply with as low as 14 points (the maximum is 25 points), the university intended to give an opportunity to students that have the passion and academic aptitude to study law, but did not pass with 'A's, perhaps because they studied the 'right' subjects, as opposed to the 'easy' ones.

"In recent years, students coming in from A-level have very high points, but not in the required subjects that would have equipped them with the skills for a discipline like law. So, they come in and we're stuck with them, because you cannot fail them forever," Mayambala says.

Indeed, some schools that used to traditionally perform well, but were overtaken, at least with regard to admission to the law programme on government sponsorship, by new, exam-driven private schools, featured quite prominently among the best performers in the pre-entry exam.

"There were students with 16 points who performed extremely well in the pre-entry exam, and when you look at these, they are mostly from the schools that traditionally performed well: Uganda Martyrs SS Namugongo, King's College Budo, St Mary's College Kisubi, Gayaza High School... These are probably the ones that studied the essential subjects at A-level," Dr Mayambala explains.

A curious observation is that some schools that have been feeding the bachelor of laws programme on government sponsorship did not feature prominently on the pre-entry exam pass list. For instance, St Mary's SS Kitende, which has been providing half of the law admissions, has less than 10 candidates that made the 50% pass mark. Kawempe Muslim, another of the major law programme's student suppliers, registered an even more dismal performance.

Yet, according to some candidates that sat the exam, including The Observer's Sulaiman Kakaire, the pre-entry was "basic and fair", and sought to test candidates' general knowledge, awareness of current affairs, numeracy and reasoning.

According to Mayambala, the bachelor of laws programmes school takes, on government sponsorship, 67 students from A-level (direct entry), between five and seven from diploma programmes, and about seven through mature age entry. The best 67 candidates who applied through the direct entry scheme scored 65% and above, and will be the ones to gain admission on government sponsorship.

Mayambala says this group actually takes care of the gender aspect that is part of the Law school's admission policy. For the past four years, the school has also implemented a policy of admitting more female students (60%) than males (40%).

charlotte@observer.ug

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