

Pre-entry tests solve Makerere's problem

News

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Students check for their names on the pre-entry exams lists

The recently released results of the pre-entry exam at Makerere University continue to raise interest among members of the public, particularly within the legal fraternity.

For many, the questions are: why was the exam necessary, and what questions did it contain? According to Academic Registrar Namoah Masikye, the pre-entry exam has its origins in last year's admissions crisis.

"We had received several applications for law and decided to simply go with the best, and a funny thing happened along the way," he recalls. Masikye asked one of his assistants to list, using a computer, the best 67 students and have them admitted to the Law class — a method that would remove any human interference from the process. The outcome baffled his team; all 67 names were of female students!

As deputy Academic Registrar for admissions, Charles Ssentongo explains, all students are admitted on the strength of their performance at A-level. However, female students also get an additional 1.5 points under the affirmative action policy.

Thus, a female student that scored three A's and one B would qualify ahead of a male student with four A's. As a way out of the crisis, Masikye simply ordered that all male Law applicants with three A's and one B or better should be admitted, along with all the best female applicants, creating a larger class than had been planned for.

"We could not risk being sued for keeping male students out, but we also vowed to learn from this problem," Masikye says.

Catherine Kanababita, director of the gender mainstreaming division at Makerere, admits that the Law school is the only unit at the university where female students outnumber their male counterparts at a ratio of about 6:4.

"We still need to get more female students into university so they can develop their potential," she says.

Coincidentally, the Law Council approved a suggestion, initially raised by the Law Development Centre (LDC) four years ago, to introduce pre-entry exams to determine students that were fit to study the Bar Course.

The move followed a high failure rate on the one-year post-graduate diploma, which qualifies lawyers to become advocates. In the 2008/09 class, 485 (84.4%) of the 580 students who sat for the Bar Course exams failed.

Of the 456 students who sat for the final exams in the 2007/08 academic year, only 64 passed, while over 114 students were eventually dismissed after failing.

But Makerere was hesitant to implement the decision, since it was felt at the time that most of its own products passed the LDC exams anyway.

Then Uganda Christian University Mukono (UCU) pioneered pre-entry exams for admission to its bachelor or laws programme.

“We believe that the faculty of law here is superior to any in this land and many senior lawyers and judges are sending their children here as testament to this,” says Dr Pamela Kalyegira, dean of the law faculty at UCU.

She says the pre-entry exams have ended the issue of problem students — those who struggle through their course right up to graduation. The Islamic University in Uganda also recently started setting pre-entry exams, but Kampala International University, Nkumba University and Uganda Pentecostal University, which also offer law at undergraduate level, are still considering the merits of setting such exams, despite their higher failure rate on LDC’s pre-entry tests and the Bar Course.

For now, the pre-entry exam appears to have solved Makerere’s puzzle of whittling down 1,600 applications and setting a lighter task for the Joint Admissions Board to allocate 328 slots out of the 549 that passed, for the next Law freshman class.

The jury, though, is still out on whether the pre-entry exams will settle the high failure rate crisis at LDC. With 1,051 (66%) failing to make the 50% pass mark, there has been a lot of interest in the questions that were set in Makerere’s pioneer pre-entry exam.

As a policy, the university does not release its question papers to the public, but we have asked some candidates who sat the exams to recall the questions asked. The following is an attempt at recollection.

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