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Uganda: Admissions Favour Rich

BY CONAN BUSINGE, 28 JUNE 2012

A city businessman's daughter, Sarah, from an upscale school in Kampala has just landed a government scholarship to study medicine at Makerere University, Kampala.

Sarah, Mwalimu's investigations show, studied at Namityango junior before going to Nabisunsa Girls, where in her A'levels last year she scored 24 points. Sarah will join 3,000 other students from well-to-do families and top schools in Uganda.

Sarah's cousin, Akugizibwe, a daughter of a teacher in Sironko district will, however, not make it to university. She scored three points less than Sarah. She has now opened up a shop to raise some income for the family.

This has been the trend over the years where children from well-to-do families take up 75% of all scholarships in public universities, while those from poorer families are left to fend for themselves.

The remaining 25% of the scholarships, which are 1,000 slots, are distributed three ways. That is quota system (896 slots), talented sports persons (40 places) and students with special needs (64 slots).

This has stirred a debate in academic circles with views that the 75% of scholarships should instead be reverted to the quota system and the remaining 25% go towards merit-based government scholarships.

A study conducted a few years ago by A. B Kasozi, the executive director of the National Council for Higher Education, shows that 93% of slots in public universities go to the children of rich commercial farmers, businessmen and civil servants.

According to records at the public universities, 36.6% of the students' parents are rich farmers, 33.1% are salary earners and 23.2% are business people.

The survey indicates that one's background determines their access to higher education and scholarships in public universities.

"Children of the wealthy attend the best nursery, primary and secondary schools," says Kasozi. He explains that these institutions have facilities needed to enable students obtain the good grades required for tertiary institutions, thereby earning them a government scholarships.

At the end, it is those children from rich families that can compete to join public universities, or even get the state to pay their fees, while their poor counterparts join other tertiary institutions.

These findings are corroborated by another study on social backgrounds of Makerere students and the potential for cost-sharing.

The study conducted by K. M. Mayanja found that higher education was dominated by students from wealthy backgrounds. The Gordon McGregor visitation committee of 2007, to public universities also made the same observations.

In recent years, out of the 12,000 schools in the country, about 300 take up all the slots for government sponsorship at state universities. Nearly 100 schools of the 300 take up about to 80% of all the government sponsorship slots annually.

In such upscale schools, parents pay about sh1.2m per term or sh3.6m annually in school fees. "How then do they fail to pay just sh2m at university?" asks Patrick Magezi, a secondary school teacher in Kiboga district.

This year the highest number of students admitted on government sponsorship came from schools like St. Mary's S S Kitende, Uganda Martyr's

High School, Namugongo, Ntare School, St Mary's College, Kisubi and Mount St Mary's College, Namagunga had the highest number of students sent to university on government sponsorship.

The other top schools include Namityango College, Mbarara High School, St. Mary's Rushoroza, Buddo SS, Trinity College, Nabbingo, Gayaza High School, King's College Budo, Turkish Light College, Naalya SS (Namugongo) and Nabisunsa Girls School.

The schools that topped the admissions are Bweranyangi Girls, Kawempe Muslims, Crested SS and Kitabi Seminary. In 2011, Kitende, Namugongo and Mengo still had the highest number of students, who were admitted on government sponsorship to the five public universities.

Others are Gombe SS, Masaka SS, Kawempe Muslims, St. Mary's College Kisubi and Naalya SS. About 64 upscale schools had more than 10 students admitted on government scholarships to public universities this year. A total of 113 schools countrywide had only one student admitted on government Sponsorship.

In 2010, still Kitende, Kawempe, Budo and Namagunga had some of the highest number of students admitted on government sponsorship. Other schools that performed were Uganda Martyrs' Namugongo, Mulusa Academy, Ntare School, St. Mary's College Kisubi, Naalya SS (Bweyogerere), BP Cyprian Kihangire SS.

Some senior educationists like Makerere University's chancellor Prof. Mondo Kagonyera have argued that the government sponsorship scheme in public universities be scrapped and replaced with one which caters for poor students only.

This, he observes, is because the scheme benefits children from well-to-do families, who attend top schools, while the under-privileged counterparts, who go to rural schools, cannot compete for the limited slots.

In a 2004 paper, Government Student Sponsorship at Makerere University: a Fivefold Paradox, it was found that 80% of the 39 schools from which over 70% of the students admitted to Makerere came from, charged a lot more tuition fees than some of the most populous university faculties and schools.

Kampala University's vice-chancellor Prof. Badru Kateregga, says there is need to give an equal share of 50% on merit and the other 50% on quota admissions.

"This would mean that children from poor and those from rich families are all taken care of. Good performers, irrespective of the families they come from, should all be given an equal share of the scholarships," he argues.

The gist of government scholarships in public universities was to help the bright, but needy students. But over the years, this goal has been lost and it is not the bright but rich students taking up almost all the slots annually. With the delayed start of the loan scheme, most of the bright, but poor and students will most likely miss out on university education.

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