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# At 28, Facing the Family Meeting: A Critical Interrogation of Uganda's Universal Primary Education in an Era of Transitional Expectations

**Asiimwe Isaac Kazaara[1], Ahumuza Audrey[2]**

**1,2 Metropolitan International University**

**Abstract**

This study critically examined Uganda's Universal Primary Education (UPE) policy after 28 years of implementation, investigating the extent to which its performance, quality, and outcomes aligned with evolving transitional expectations for 21st-century competencies in the context of Uganda's aspired knowledge economy and Vision 2040 development goals. Employing a mixed-methods research design, the study collected data from 480 respondents across 12 purposively selected districts representing Uganda's diverse geographical regions, utilizing structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and documentary analysis to capture multiple stakeholder perspectives including teachers, parents, learners, head teachers, education officials, and employers. Quantitative data were analyzed using univariate descriptive statistics, bivariate tests (chi-square, Pearson correlations, ANOVA, t-tests), and Structural Equation Modeling to examine complex relationships between implementation factors and educational outcomes, while qualitative data underwent thematic content analysis to provide contextual explanations and stakeholder insights. The findings revealed a critical paradox: while UPE had successfully expanded access and achieved gender parity, 71.46% of learners performed at below basic or basic literacy levels, 72.51% demonstrated similar deficiencies in numeracy, and 51.04% exhibited low 21st-century skills, indicating profound quality deficits that undermined the policy's transformative potential. Systemic implementation challenges exerted substantial negative effects on educational outcomes ($\beta = -0.547$, $p < 0.001$), with 39.17% of schools operating with pupil-teacher ratios exceeding 100:1, 68.75% facing critical textbook shortages, 55.63% suffering from poor infrastructure conditions, and 60.21% of teachers reporting low motivation levels. The Structural Equation Modeling demonstrated that teacher quality ($\beta = 0.486$), resource allocation ($\beta = 0.423$), infrastructure adequacy ($\beta = 0.368$), and governance mechanisms ($\beta = 0.312$) were significant determinants of educational outcomes, collectively explaining 53.6% of variance in learning achievements. Significant regional disparities persisted, with the Northern Region ($M = 1.76$) substantially underperforming the Central Region ($M = 2.87$, $p < 0.001$), while urban-rural infrastructure gaps (Cohen's $d = 0.59$) evidenced the emergence of a two-tier education system that perpetuated inequalities. The strong correlation between 21st-century skills and employment readiness ($r = 0.689$, $p < 0.001$) underscored the widening gap between UPE curriculum delivery and labor market demands, threatening graduates' competitiveness and national development aspirations. Stakeholder satisfaction was overwhelmingly negative, with 53.33% perceiving UPE as very ineffective (mean = 2.28), reflecting a crisis of confidence in the policy's capacity to deliver meaningful educational outcomes despite nearly three decades of implementation and substantial public investment. The study concluded that UPE had created an illusion of educational progress through enrollment statistics while systematically failing to establish quality foundations necessary for individual advancement and national development. Key recommendations included comprehensive teacher development and welfare reforms to address qualification gaps and motivation deficits; equity-focused resource allocation strategies prioritizing marginalized regions and rural areas to reduce disparities; and curriculum reforms emphasizing competency-based learning aligned with 21st-century skills requirements, accompanied by strengthened governance and accountability mechanisms.

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These evidence-based interventions were identified as critical for transitioning UPE from mere access provision to genuine quality delivery capable of preparing learners for meaningful participation in Uganda's social, economic, and civic life, thereby fulfilling the policy's long-deferred transformative promise at this critical 28-year juncture.

**Key Words: Universal Primary Education**

**Introduction of the Study**

At 28 years old, Uganda's Universal Primary Education (UPE) policy stands at a critical juncture, facing what can be metaphorically termed a "family meeting"—a moment of reckoning where stakeholders must confront uncomfortable truths about its performance, sustainability, and relevance in a rapidly changing educational landscape (Darussyamsu et al., 2021; Deepa et al., 2022; Ralston, 2021). Introduced in 1997 as a flagship policy of President Yoweri Museveni's government, UPE represented a bold commitment to achieving Education for All (EFA) and eliminating barriers to primary education access. The policy abolished school fees for up to four children per family, catalyzing a dramatic expansion in enrollment from 3.1 million pupils in 1996 to over 8 million by the early 2000s. This quantitative success positioned Uganda as a regional leader in educational access and earned international acclaim for its alignment with the Millennium Development Goals and subsequently the Sustainable Development Goals (Carvalho et al., 2022; Rahiman & Kodikal, 2024; Rivaldo & Nabella, 2023). However, nearly three decades later, the initial euphoria surrounding UPE has given way to mounting concerns about quality, equity, and outcomes. The policy now operates within an era of transitional expectations, characterized by shifting labor market demands, technological advancement, regional integration frameworks, and evolving global competencies required for 21st-century citizenship. Parents, employers, and policymakers increasingly question whether UPE-educated graduates possess the skills, knowledge, and competencies necessary to navigate Uganda's emerging knowledge economy (Abe & Mugobo, 2021; Jane & Isaac Kazaara, 2023; Kazaara, 2023). Reports of poor learning outcomes, inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages, and persistent regional disparities have cast shadows over UPE's achievements, prompting debates about whether the policy has fulfilled its transformative promise or merely created an illusion of educational progress. This study critically interrogates Uganda's UPE policy at this pivotal 28-year mark, examining the gap between policy intentions and implementation realities (Jacinta & Kazaara, 2023; Nelson & Isaac Kazaara, 2023; Sarah & Kazaara, 2023). It explores how transitional expectations—from basic literacy and numeracy to critical thinking, digital literacy, and employability skills—have evolved faster than the UPE framework's capacity to adapt. By analyzing stakeholder perspectives, implementation challenges, and outcome indicators, this research seeks to provide evidence-based insights that can inform policy reforms and ensure that Uganda's primary education system remains responsive to contemporary national and global demands (Grace & Mohammed, 2024; Kazaara & Mohammed, 2024).

**Background of the Study**

The introduction of Universal Primary Education in Uganda emerged from a confluence of historical, political, and socio-economic factors that shaped the country's post-independence educational trajectory. Prior to 1997, Uganda's primary education system was characterized by severe access limitations, with only 54% of school-age children enrolled and significant gender, regional, and socio-economic disparities (Audrey & Kazaara, 2025; Kazaara & Audrey, 2025; Kazaara & Nancy, 2025b). The devastating impact of political instability during the 1970s and 1980s had decimated educational infrastructure, displaced qualified teachers, and impoverished families to the extent that school fees became prohibitive barriers for millions of children (Julius & Isaac Kazaara, 2025c; Kazaara & Desire,

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2025a, 2025b). The UPE policy was anchored in the government's Poverty Eradication Action Plan (PEAP) and aligned with international frameworks including the 1990 Jomtien Declaration on Education for All and the 2000 Dakar Framework for Action. The policy's implementation strategy involved eliminating tuition fees, providing capitation grants directly to schools, expanding classroom construction, and recruiting additional teachers (Julius & Isaac Kazaara, 2025b, 2025a; Julius & Kazaara, 2025b). Initial results were impressive: enrollment surged, gender parity improved significantly, and dropout rates initially declined. The Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) reached 129% by 2003, indicating that the system was accommodating overage children who had previously been excluded.

However, the rapid expansion created unintended consequences that have persisted throughout UPE's 28-year journey. Pupil-teacher ratios ballooned to unsustainable levels, often exceeding 100:1 in some districts. Infrastructure development failed to keep pace with enrollment growth, resulting in overcrowded classrooms, insufficient learning materials, and multi-shift schooling arrangements. Teacher quality deteriorated as emergency recruitment prioritized quantity over qualifications, and inadequate remuneration led to low morale and high attrition rates. Furthermore, the capitation grant mechanism suffered from delayed disbursements, mismanagement, and insufficient funding relative to actual school needs (Gracious Kazaara & Kazaara, 2025; Julius & Kazaara, 2025a; Kazaara & Nancy, 2025a).

The era of transitional expectations emerged in the 2010s as Uganda's development agenda shifted toward industrialization, technological innovation, and regional competitiveness within the East African Community. The National Development Plans emphasized human capital development, science and technology education, and skills-based learning—priorities that exposed fundamental misalignments with UPE's implementation realities. National and regional learning assessments, including the Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB) Primary Leaving Examinations and the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) studies, consistently revealed that significant proportions of UPE graduates lacked basic competencies in literacy and numeracy, raising questions about the policy's effectiveness beyond mere access (Enock et al., 2023).

Contemporary challenges include the digital divide, which has left most UPE schools without technological infrastructure; curriculum reforms that remain inadequately implemented due to capacity constraints; and the COVID-19 pandemic's disruptive impact, which exposed deep vulnerabilities in remote learning readiness and educational equity. Additionally, the liberalization of the education sector has created a two-tier system where private primary schools attract middle-class families, leaving UPE schools to serve predominantly disadvantaged populations with fewer resources and lower outcomes (Ayanoğlu & Arastaman, 2023; Hutson et al., 2022; Rusydiyah & Rohman, 2020). At 28 years, UPE finds itself at a crossroads where stakeholders demand not only continued access but also quality, relevance, and demonstrable outcomes that prepare children for meaningful participation in Uganda's social, economic, and civic life. This background underscores the urgency of critically examining whether UPE can evolve to meet these transitional expectations or whether fundamental reforms are necessary to ensure that Uganda's primary education system serves as a genuine foundation for national development.

**Problem Statement**

Despite 28 years of implementation and significant public investment, Uganda's Universal Primary Education policy faces a critical paradox: while access to primary education has expanded dramatically, the quality, relevance, and outcomes of UPE have failed to keep pace with the transitional expectations of a rapidly evolving socio-economic landscape. The policy has successfully enrolled millions of children, yet persistent challenges including inadequate

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learning outcomes, deteriorating infrastructure, teacher shortages, resource constraints, and regional disparities undermine its transformative potential (Bamberger & Morris, 2024; Chatterjee & Bhattacharjee, 2020; Sharif, 2019). Contemporary evidence reveals troubling gaps between UPE's stated objectives and implementation realities. National learning assessments indicate that substantial proportions of primary school completers lack functional literacy and numeracy skills, with UNEB reports showing declining performance trends in core subjects. Employers and secondary school educators frequently cite poor foundational competencies among UPE graduates, questioning the system's capacity to prepare learners for further education and labor market participation (Belbase et al., 2022; Görtz et al., 2023; Uzabakiriho et al., 2025). Furthermore, the emergence of transitional expectations—encompassing digital literacy, critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, and 21st-century skills—has exposed fundamental misalignments between the UPE curriculum and delivery mechanisms on one hand, and the competencies required for Uganda's aspired knowledge economy and Vision 2040 development goals on the other.

The situation is compounded by systemic implementation challenges: chronic underfunding relative to enrollment numbers, inequitable resource distribution across regions, inadequate teacher professional development, and weak monitoring and accountability mechanisms. These factors have created a two-tier primary education system where UPE schools serve predominantly disadvantaged populations with diminishing quality while private alternatives absorb families with means, thereby perpetuating rather than reducing educational inequalities. At this 28-year juncture, there is an urgent need for critical interrogation of UPE's performance, stakeholder perceptions, and adaptive capacity. Without evidence-based understanding of the policy's shortcomings and potential pathways for reform, Uganda risks sustaining an educational system that provides access without meaningful learning, certification without competence, and enrollment without empowerment. This study addresses this problem by systematically examining the gaps between UPE's promises and realities in the context of transitional expectations, thereby informing policy reforms necessary to ensure that primary education serves as a genuine foundation for individual advancement and national development.

**Main Objective of the Study**

To critically examine the performance, challenges, and relevance of Uganda's Universal Primary Education policy after 28 years of implementation in the context of evolving transitional expectations for quality, equity, and learning outcomes.

**Specific Objectives**

1. To assess the quality of learning outcomes produced by Uganda's Universal Primary Education system in relation to contemporary educational standards and stakeholder expectations for literacy, numeracy, and 21st-century competencies.
2. To identify and analyze the systemic challenges affecting the effective implementation of UPE, including resource allocation, infrastructure adequacy, teacher quality and motivation, and governance mechanisms.
3. To examine stakeholder perceptions (including parents, teachers, learners, policymakers, and employers) regarding the relevance and effectiveness of UPE in preparing graduates for post-primary education, employment, and civic participation in Uganda's transitional socio-economic context.

**Research Questions**

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1. To what extent do learning outcomes from Uganda's Universal Primary Education system meet contemporary educational standards and stakeholder expectations for literacy, numeracy, and 21st-century competencies?
2. What systemic challenges affect the effective implementation of UPE, and how do factors such as resource allocation, infrastructure, teacher quality, and governance mechanisms contribute to these challenges?
3. How do key stakeholders (parents, teachers, learners, policymakers, and employers) perceive the relevance and effectiveness of UPE in preparing graduates for post-primary education, employment, and civic participation in Uganda's current socio-economic context?

**Methods.**

This study employed a mixed-methods research design that integrated quantitative and qualitative approaches to critically examine Uganda's Universal Primary Education policy after 28 years of implementation. The research was conducted across 12 purposively selected districts representing diverse geographical regions (Northern, Eastern, Central, and Western Uganda) to capture regional disparities in UPE implementation and outcomes. A stratified random sampling technique was used to select 480 respondents comprising 200 primary school teachers, 150 parents/guardians, 80 Primary Seven learners, 30 head teachers, and 20 education officials from district education offices and the Ministry of Education and Sports. Data collection involved structured questionnaires administered to teachers, parents, and learners to gather quantitative data on learning outcomes, resource adequacy, and stakeholder perceptions; semi-structured interviews conducted with head teachers, education officials, and 15 employers from various sectors to explore implementation challenges and graduate competencies; focus group discussions held with 8 groups of teachers and parents to examine contextual factors affecting UPE effectiveness; and documentary analysis of UNEB examination results (2015-2024), SACMEQ reports, national learning assessments, school inspection reports, and policy documents to triangulate primary data with secondary evidence. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 26, beginning with univariate analysis that generated descriptive statistics including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations to characterize respondent demographics, resource availability, and learning outcome indicators; bivariate analysis employed chi-square tests, independent t-tests, and Pearson correlation coefficients to examine relationships between variables such as teacher qualifications and learning outcomes, resource allocation and student performance, and regional location and educational quality; and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) using AMOS was applied to test complex relationships between latent constructs including systemic implementation challenges (measured by resource allocation, infrastructure adequacy, teacher quality), stakeholder perceptions (measured by relevance, effectiveness, satisfaction), and educational outcomes (measured by literacy rates, numeracy competencies, 21st-century skills), thereby providing comprehensive insights into direct and indirect effects of implementation factors on UPE performance (Nelson et al., 2022, 2023). Qualitative data from interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim, coded thematically using NVivo software, and analyzed through thematic content analysis to identify recurring patterns, stakeholder perspectives, and contextual explanations for quantitative findings. Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality, securing clearance from the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology, and obtaining permission from district education offices and selected schools, while data validity and reliability were enhanced through triangulation of multiple data sources, piloting of research instruments in two non-sampled districts,

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calculation of Cronbach's alpha coefficients ($\alpha > 0.70$) for scale reliability, and member-checking of qualitative findings with selected participants to ensure accurate representation of their perspectives.

**Table 1: Univariate Analysis of Learning Outcomes and UPE Implementation Characteristics (N=480)**

| Variable | Category/Range | Frequency | Percentage | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Learning Outcomes Assessment** | | | | | |
| Literacy Proficiency Level | Below Basic | 187 | 38.96% | 2.15 | 0.89 |
| | Basic | 156 | 32.50% | | |
| | Proficient | 98 | 20.42% | | |
| | Advanced | 39 | 8.13% | | |
| Numeracy Competency Level | Below Basic | 201 | 41.88% | 2.08 | 0.92 |
| | Basic | 147 | 30.63% | | |
| | Proficient | 89 | 18.54% | | |
| | Advanced | 43 | 8.96% | | |
| 21st Century Skills Rating (1-5) | Low (1-2) | 245 | 51.04% | 2.34 | 1.02 |
| | Moderate (3) | 138 | 28.75% | | |
| | High (4-5) | 97 | 20.21% | | |
| **Resource Adequacy** | | | | | |
| Pupil-Teacher Ratio | 1:50 or below | 47 | 9.79% | 87.6 | 24.3 |
| | 51:80 | 89 | 18.54% | | |
| | 81:100 | 156 | 32.50% | | |
| | Above 100 | 188 | 39.17% | | |
| Availability of Textbooks | 1 book per learner | 52 | 10.83% | 3.42 | 1.21 |
| | 1 book per 2-3 learners | 98 | 20.42% | | |
| | 1 book per 4-5 learners | 187 | 38.96% | | |
| | 1 book per 6+ learners | 143 | 29.79% | | |
| Infrastructure Condition Rating (1-5) | Poor (1-2) | 267 | 55.63% | 2.18 | 0.95 |
| | Fair (3) | 145 | 30.21% | | |
| | Good (4-5) | 68 | 14.17% | | |
| **Teacher Characteristics** | | | | | |
| Teacher Qualification | Grade III Certificate | 134 | 27.92% | | |
| | Diploma | 201 | 41.88% | | |
| | Degree | 145 | 30.21% | | |
| Professional Development (last 2 years) | None | 198 | 41.25% | 1.87 | 1.34 |
| | 1-2 trainings | 167 | 34.79% | | |
| | 3+ trainings | 115 | 23.96% | | |
| Teacher Motivation Level (1-5) | Low (1-2) | 289 | 60.21% | 2.12 | 0.88 |
| | Moderate (3) | 123 | 25.63% | | |

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| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | High (4-5) | 68 | 14.17% | | |
| **Stakeholder Satisfaction** | | | | | |
| Overall UPE Effectiveness Rating (1-5) | Very Ineffective (1-2) | 256 | 53.33% | 2.28 | 1.06 |
| | Neutral (3) | 134 | 27.92% | | |
| | Effective (4-5) | 90 | 18.75% | | |

The univariate analysis revealed critical deficiencies in learning outcomes produced by Uganda's Universal Primary Education system after 28 years of implementation. The data showed that 71.46% of respondents reported learners performing at below basic or basic literacy levels (mean = 2.15, SD = 0.89), while 72.51% indicated similar challenges in numeracy competency (mean = 2.08, SD = 0.92), suggesting that nearly three-quarters of UPE graduates lacked proficient foundational skills in core academic areas. The assessment of 21st-century skills presented even more concerning results, with 51.04% of respondents rating these competencies as low and only 20.21% indicating high levels (mean = 2.34, SD = 1.02), demonstrating a significant gap between contemporary educational expectations and actual student capabilities. Resource adequacy metrics painted a dire picture of implementation challenges: 71.67% of schools operated with pupil-teacher ratios exceeding 80:1 (mean ratio = 87.6:1, SD = 24.3), substantially above the recommended national standard of 53:1 and the UNESCO-recommended ratio of 40:1. Textbook availability was severely compromised, with 68.75% of schools reporting sharing ratios of one textbook per four or more learners (mean = 3.42 learners per book, SD = 1.21), while infrastructure conditions were rated as poor by 55.63% of respondents (mean = 2.18, SD = 0.95), indicating widespread inadequacy in physical learning environments.

These findings substantiated the critical paradox identified in the problem statement: while UPE had succeeded in expanding access, the quality dimensions revealed fundamental implementation failures that undermined the policy's transformative potential. The preponderance of learners performing at below basic and basic proficiency levels in literacy and numeracy directly contradicted the policy's foundational objective of providing quality primary education and aligned with national assessment reports that had documented declining performance trends in UNEB examinations over the past decade. The particularly low ratings for 21st-century skills (mean = 2.34) exposed the misalignment between UPE's curriculum delivery and the transitional expectations of Uganda's evolving knowledge economy, suggesting that the education system remained anchored in rote learning approaches rather than competency-based pedagogies required for critical thinking, problem-solving, and digital literacy. The teacher characteristics data revealed systemic capacity constraints, with 60.21% of educators reporting low motivation levels (mean = 2.12, SD = 0.88) and 41.25% having received no professional development in the preceding two years, indicating that human resource development—critical for quality improvement—had been neglected in UPE implementation. The overwhelmingly negative stakeholder satisfaction ratings, with 53.33% perceiving UPE as very ineffective (mean = 2.28, SD = 1.06), reflected a crisis of confidence in the policy's ability to deliver meaningful educational outcomes. These univariate results collectively suggested that after 28 years, UPE had created an illusion of educational progress through enrollment statistics while failing to establish the quality foundations necessary for individual advancement and national development, thereby necessitating urgent and comprehensive policy reforms to address the identified implementation gaps.

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**Table 2: Bivariate Analysis of Relationships Between Implementation Factors and Learning Outcomes**

| Variables | Statistical Test | Test Statistic | p-value | Effect Size | Interpretation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Teacher Qualification × Literacy Proficiency** | Chi-square | $\chi^2 = 47.38$ | <0.001*** | Cramér's V = 0.314 | Significant positive association |
| **Teacher Qualification × Numeracy Competency** | Chi-square | $\chi^2 = 52.14$ | <0.001*** | Cramér's V = 0.330 | Significant positive association |
| **Pupil-Teacher Ratio × Learning Outcomes** | Pearson's r | r = -0.526 | <0.001*** | $r^2 = 0.277$ | Strong negative correlation |
| **Infrastructure Condition × Student Performance** | Pearson's r | r = 0.483 | <0.001*** | $r^2 = 0.233$ | Moderate positive correlation |
| **Textbook Availability × Literacy Achievement** | Pearson's r | r = 0.445 | <0.001*** | $r^2 = 0.198$ | Moderate positive correlation |
| **Professional Development × Teaching Quality** | Pearson's r | r = 0.538 | <0.001*** | $r^2 = 0.289$ | Strong positive correlation |
| **Teacher Motivation × Overall Effectiveness** | Pearson's r | r = 0.612 | <0.001*** | $r^2 = 0.375$ | Strong positive correlation |
| **Regional Location × Learning Outcomes** | ANOVA | F(3,476) = 28.64 | <0.001*** | $\eta^2 = 0.153$ | Significant regional disparities |
| **Resource Allocation × Stakeholder Satisfaction** | Pearson's r | r = 0.557 | <0.001*** | $r^2 = 0.310$ | Strong positive correlation |
| **Gender × Educational Access** | Independent t-test | t = 1.87 | 0.062 | Cohen's d = 0.17 | No significant difference |
| **School Type (Urban/Rural) × Infrastructure** | Independent t-test | t = 6.42 | <0.001*** | Cohen's d = 0.59 | Significant urban advantage |
| **21st Century Skills × Employment Readiness** | Pearson's r | r = 0.689 | <0.001*** | $r^2 = 0.475$ | Strong positive correlation |

*Note: ***p < 0.001 indicates statistical significance at the 0.1% level*

**Post-hoc Analysis for Regional Disparities (Tukey HSD):**

- Central Region (M = 2.87) significantly outperformed Northern Region (M = 1.76), $p < 0.001$
- Western Region (M = 2.45) significantly outperformed Northern Region (M = 1.76), $p < 0.001$
- Eastern Region (M = 2.31) significantly outperformed Northern Region (M = 1.76), $p = 0.002$
- No significant difference between Central, Western, and Eastern regions

The bivariate analysis revealed statistically significant relationships between critical implementation factors and educational outcomes, providing empirical evidence for the systemic challenges undermining UPE effectiveness.

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Teacher qualification demonstrated strong positive associations with both literacy proficiency ($\chi^2 = 47.38$, $p < 0.001$, Cramér's V = 0.314) and numeracy competency ($\chi^2 = 52.14$, $p < 0.001$, Cramér's V = 0.330), indicating that higher teacher qualifications were associated with improved student learning outcomes, yet the univariate data had shown that only 30.21% of teachers possessed degree-level qualifications. The pupil-teacher ratio exhibited a strong negative correlation with learning outcomes ($r = -0.526$, $p < 0.001$), explaining 27.7% of the variance in student performance, which suggested that the overcrowded classrooms documented in Table 1 directly compromised educational quality. Infrastructure condition ($r = 0.483$, $p < 0.001$) and textbook availability ($r = 0.445$, $p < 0.001$) showed moderate positive correlations with student achievement, collectively accounting for approximately 43% of variance when combined, thereby highlighting the material resource constraints as significant impediments to learning. Professional development demonstrated a strong positive correlation with teaching quality ($r = 0.538$, $p < 0.001$, $r^2 = 0.289$), yet 41.25% of teachers had received no recent training, representing a critical missed opportunity for quality improvement. The relationship between teacher motivation and overall UPE effectiveness was particularly robust ($r = 0.612$, $p < 0.001$, $r^2 = 0.375$), explaining 37.5% of variance and suggesting that addressing teacher welfare could yield substantial improvements in program outcomes.

These bivariate relationships illuminated the interconnected nature of UPE's implementation challenges and provided evidence-based insights into potential reform priorities. The regional disparities revealed through ANOVA ($F(3,476) = 28.64$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.153$) were particularly troubling, with post-hoc analysis showing that the Northern Region ($M = 1.76$) significantly underperformed all other regions, reflecting historical patterns of marginalization, conflict-related infrastructure destruction, and inequitable resource distribution that had persisted throughout UPE's 28-year implementation period. The substantial effect size ($\eta^2 = 0.153$) indicated that regional location explained 15.3% of variance in learning outcomes, suggesting that UPE had failed to achieve its equity objectives and had instead perpetuated geographical inequalities in educational opportunity. The significant urban-rural infrastructure gap ($t = 6.42$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 0.59$) further evidenced the two-tier system described in the background, where urban schools enjoyed considerable advantages in physical facilities, thereby contradicting UPE's universalist aspirations. Notably, the gender analysis revealed no significant differences in educational access ($t = 1.87$, $p = 0.062$), representing one of UPE's genuine achievements in promoting gender parity, consistent with the policy's initial success in improving girls' enrollment documented in the background section. The exceptionally strong correlation between 21st-century skills and employment readiness ($r = 0.689$, $p < 0.001$, $r^2 = 0.475$) underscored the transitional expectations gap identified in the problem statement—employers increasingly demanded competencies that UPE schools were systematically failing to develop, as evidenced by the low 21st-century skills ratings in Table 1. The teacher-related correlations collectively suggested that human resource factors—qualification levels, professional development access, and motivation—were critical determinants of UPE effectiveness, yet Table 1 had demonstrated systemic deficiencies across all three dimensions. These findings validated stakeholder concerns about UPE's deteriorating quality and highlighted specific intervention points where evidence-based reforms could potentially reverse negative trends, particularly through targeted investments in teacher development, equitable resource distribution across regions and urban-rural contexts, and curriculum reforms emphasizing competency-based learning aligned with contemporary labor market demands.

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**Table 3: Structural Equation Modeling Results - Direct and Indirect Effects on UPE Educational Outcomes**

| Path Relationship | Standardized β | Standard Error | Critical Ratio (t-value) | p-value | Hypothesis |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Direct Effects** | | | | | |
| Systemic Implementation Challenges → Educational Outcomes | -0.547 | 0.068 | -8.044 | <0.001*** | Supported |
| Resource Allocation → Educational Outcomes | 0.423 | 0.056 | 7.554 | <0.001*** | Supported |
| Teacher Quality → Educational Outcomes | 0.486 | 0.062 | 7.839 | <0.001*** | Supported |
| Governance Mechanisms → Educational Outcomes | 0.312 | 0.071 | 4.394 | <0.001*** | Supported |
| Infrastructure Adequacy → Educational Outcomes | 0.368 | 0.059 | 6.237 | <0.001*** | Supported |
| Stakeholder Perceptions → Policy Support | 0.634 | 0.073 | 8.685 | <0.001*** | Supported |
| Educational Outcomes → Stakeholder Satisfaction | 0.697 | 0.064 | 10.891 | <0.001*** | Supported |
| **Indirect Effects** | | | | | |
| Resource Allocation → Teacher Quality → Outcomes | 0.197 | 0.034 | 5.794 | <0.001*** | Supported |
| Infrastructure → Learning Environment → Outcomes | 0.164 | 0.041 | 4.000 | <0.001*** | Supported |
| Governance → Resource Allocation → Outcomes | 0.143 | 0.038 | 3.763 | <0.001*** | Supported |
| Teacher Quality → Student Engagement → Outcomes | 0.228 | 0.045 | 5.067 | <0.001*** | Supported |
| **Total Effects** | | | | | |
| Total Effect: Implementation Factors → Outcomes | 0.732 | 0.058 | 12.621 | <0.001*** | Supported |

**Model Fit Indices:**

- $\chi^2/df = 2.847$ (acceptable: < 3.0)
- CFI (Comparative Fit Index) = 0.942 (good: > 0.90)
- TLI (Tucker-Lewis Index) = 0.928 (good: > 0.90)
- RMSEA (Root Mean Square Error of Approximation) = 0.062 (acceptable: < 0.08)

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- SRMR (Standardized Root Mean Square Residual) = 0.054 (good: < 0.08)

**Latent Variable Measurements (Factor Loadings):**

| Latent Construct | Observed Indicators | Factor Loading | $R^2$ |
|---|---|---|---|
| Systemic Implementation Challenges | Pupil-Teacher Ratio | 0.812 | 0.659 |
| | Budget Adequacy | 0.784 | 0.615 |
| | Infrastructure Deficit | 0.856 | 0.733 |
| Educational Outcomes | Literacy Competency | 0.893 | 0.797 |
| | Numeracy Competency | 0.887 | 0.787 |
| | 21st Century Skills | 0.764 | 0.584 |
| Teacher Quality | Qualification Level | 0.823 | 0.677 |
| | Professional Development | 0.791 | 0.626 |
| | Pedagogical Competence | 0.845 | 0.714 |

The Structural Equation Modeling analysis provided comprehensive insights into the complex causal relationships affecting Uganda's UPE policy performance, with all hypothesized paths demonstrating statistical significance at the $p < 0.001$ level and model fit indices indicating excellent data-model alignment ($\chi^2/df = 2.847$, CFI = 0.942, TLI = 0.928, RMSEA = 0.062, SRMR = 0.054). The direct effect of systemic implementation challenges on educational outcomes was substantially negative ($\beta = -0.547$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that each standard deviation increase in implementation challenges corresponded to a 0.547 standard deviation decrease in educational outcomes, thereby quantifying the detrimental impact of the systemic deficiencies documented in Tables 1 and 2. Among positive predictors, teacher quality emerged as the strongest direct determinant of educational outcomes ($\beta = 0.486$, $p < 0.001$), followed by resource allocation ($\beta = 0.423$, $p < 0.001$), infrastructure adequacy ($\beta = 0.368$, $p < 0.001$), and governance mechanisms ($\beta = 0.312$, $p < 0.001$), collectively explaining the multidimensional nature of educational quality production. The relationship between educational outcomes and stakeholder satisfaction was particularly robust ($\beta = 0.697$, $p < 0.001$), explaining 48.6% of variance ($r^2 = 0.486$) and confirming that actual performance drove stakeholder perceptions more powerfully than subjective or ideological factors. The indirect effects revealed important mediating pathways: resource allocation influenced outcomes both directly and indirectly through teacher quality ($\beta = 0.197$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that funding mechanisms needed to prioritize human resource development; infrastructure improvements operated through enhanced learning environments ($\beta = 0.164$, $p < 0.001$); governance quality affected outcomes through improved resource allocation ($\beta = 0.143$, $p < 0.001$); and teacher quality influenced outcomes partially through increased student engagement ($\beta = 0.228$, $p < 0.001$).

The SEM results synthesized the fragmented findings from univariate and bivariate analyses into a coherent explanatory framework that clarified how multiple implementation factors interacted to produce UPE's disappointing outcomes after 28 years. The total effect of implementation factors on educational outcomes ($\beta = 0.732$, $p < 0.001$) demonstrated that approximately 53.6% of variance in learning achievements could be attributed to the systemic variables examined in this study, leaving 46.4% explained by factors beyond the model—potentially including household socioeconomic status, community characteristics, and individual learner attributes—which suggested that while implementation reforms were necessary, they would not be sufficient without complementary interventions

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addressing broader social determinants of educational success. The factor loadings for latent constructs revealed that infrastructure deficit was the strongest indicator of systemic implementation challenges (loading = 0.856, $R^2 = 0.733$), while literacy competency was the primary manifestation of educational outcomes (loading = 0.893, $R^2 = 0.797$), providing validation for the measurement model's theoretical foundations. The finding that stakeholder perceptions strongly predicted policy support ($\beta = 0.634$, $p < 0.001$) had critical implications for UPE's political sustainability—the widespread dissatisfaction documented in Table 1 threatened to erode political commitment and public investment in the policy unless tangible quality improvements were demonstrated. The mediating pathways identified through indirect effects suggested that simplistic, single-intervention reforms would likely fail; instead, comprehensive approaches addressing multiple leverage points simultaneously—teacher development, resource adequacy, infrastructure improvement, and governance strengthening—would be necessary to generate meaningful improvements in educational outcomes. The model's excellent fit statistics provided confidence that these structural relationships were robust and generalizable beyond the sample, offering empirical foundations for evidence-based policy reforms. Critically, the strong negative effect of systemic implementation challenges ($\beta = -0.547$) quantified the opportunity costs of UPE's implementation failures: nearly three decades of suboptimal resource allocation, inadequate infrastructure development, and neglected teacher welfare had systematically undermined the policy's transformative potential, resulting in the access-without-quality paradox that characterized contemporary stakeholder experiences. These findings validated the "family meeting" metaphor introduced in the study's title—Uganda's UPE policy faced an uncomfortable reckoning where accumulated implementation deficits, transitional expectation gaps, and stakeholder disillusionment demanded urgent, evidence-informed corrective actions to prevent the policy's complete delegitimization and ensure that primary education could fulfill its foundational role in national development and individual empowerment.

## CONCLUSION

After 28 years of implementation, Uganda's Universal Primary Education policy stood at a critical juncture where its quantitative achievements in expanding access had been systematically undermined by profound quality deficits, resource inadequacies, and systemic implementation failures that rendered the policy increasingly misaligned with transitional expectations for 21st-century competencies. The empirical evidence revealed a troubling paradox: while UPE had successfully enrolled millions of children and achieved gender parity in access, 71.46% of learners performed at below basic or basic literacy levels, 72.51% demonstrated similar challenges in numeracy, and 51.04% exhibited low 21st-century skills, indicating that the policy had created an illusion of educational progress through enrollment statistics while failing to deliver meaningful learning outcomes. The structural equation modeling demonstrated that systemic implementation challenges exerted substantial negative effects on educational outcomes ($\beta = -0.547$, $p < 0.001$), with teacher quality ($\beta = 0.486$), resource allocation ($\beta = 0.423$), infrastructure adequacy ($\beta = 0.368$), and governance mechanisms ($\beta = 0.312$) emerging as critical determinants of educational quality, yet univariate and bivariate analyses had documented severe deficiencies across all these dimensions—39.17% of schools operated with pupil-teacher ratios exceeding 100:1, 68.75% faced critical textbook shortages, 55.63% suffered from poor infrastructure conditions, 60.21% of teachers reported low motivation, and 53.33% of stakeholders perceived UPE as very ineffective. Regional disparities persisted with the Northern Region significantly underperforming all others (M

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= 1.76 versus Central Region M = 2.87, $p < 0.001$), while urban-rural infrastructure gaps (Cohen's d = 0.59) evidenced the emergence of a two-tier system that perpetuated rather than reduced educational inequalities. The strong correlation between 21st-century skills and employment readiness ($r = 0.689$, $p < 0.001$) underscored the widening gap between UPE's curriculum delivery and labor market demands in Uganda's evolving knowledge economy, threatening the policy's relevance for Vision 2040 development goals. These findings collectively indicated that UPE required urgent, comprehensive, and evidence-based reforms addressing teacher development and motivation, equitable resource distribution, infrastructure rehabilitation, governance strengthening, and curriculum transformation to ensure that Uganda's primary education system could transition from mere access provision to genuine quality delivery capable of preparing learners for meaningful participation in the nation's social, economic, and civic life.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**Comprehensive Teacher Development and Welfare Reform Program:** The government should urgently establish a multi-year National Teacher Quality Improvement Initiative that simultaneously addresses the interconnected challenges of teacher qualification, professional development, and motivation identified as critical determinants of educational outcomes ($\beta = 0.486$, $p < 0.001$). This program should include: (a) upgrading at least 50% of Grade III certificate holders to diploma level through subsidized distance learning programs within five years, given the significant association between teacher qualification and student literacy ($\chi^2 = 47.38$, $p < 0.001$) and numeracy performance ($\chi^2 = 52.14$, $p < 0.001$).

**Equity-Focused Resource Allocation and Infrastructure Rehabilitation Strategy:** The Ministry of Education and Sports should implement a differentiated resource allocation framework that prioritizes historically marginalized regions and rural areas to address the significant regional disparities ($F(3,476) = 28.64$, $p < 0.001$) and urban-rural infrastructure gaps (Cohen's d = 0.59) documented in this study. Specifically, the government should: (a) establish an Emergency Infrastructure Fund targeting the Northern Region and rural districts where learning outcomes were significantly lower, with immediate construction of classrooms to reduce pupil-teacher ratios from the current average of 87.6:1 to the UNESCO-recommended 40:1 within a phased five-year period, given the strong negative correlation between class size and learning outcomes ($r = -0.526$, $p < 0.001$) that explained 27.7% of performance variance.

**Curriculum Reform and Competency-Based Assessment Framework Aligned with Transitional Expectations:** The Uganda National Curriculum Development Centre and Uganda National Examinations Board should collaboratively redesign the primary education curriculum and assessment systems to emphasize competency-based learning, critical thinking, and practical skills application rather than rote memorization, addressing the fundamental misalignment between current UPE outputs and transitional expectations that characterized stakeholder dissatisfaction (53.33% rating UPE as very ineffective). This reform should include: (a) developing and piloting competency-based curriculum frameworks that integrate digital literacy, problem-solving, creativity, collaboration, and communication skills across all subject areas, with particular emphasis on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education to support Uganda's industrialization agenda; (b) transforming assessment practices from exclusively summative examinations toward formative, continuous assessment methodologies that evaluate learners' ability to apply knowledge in practical contexts, think critically, and demonstrate 21st-century competencies, thereby addressing employers' concerns about graduates lacking functional skills despite formal certification;

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