

Education

Will higher education certificate increase university enrolment?

If one fails to join higher education under direct entry with at least two principal passes for a degree, one principal pass for a diploma, and under the mature-age entry, the Higher Education Certificate (HEC) is now a recognized fourth pathway. A prospective student enrolls for a one-year HEC program instead of repeating A-level or its equivalent and is eventually admitted after passing, writes **YUDAYA NANGONZI**.



Graduands take selfie after the graduation

When Dorcus Chelangat completed her A-levels at Kabei Seed Secondary School, Bukwo in 2018, she was dissatisfied with her performance. She blamed her "dismal results" on lack of reading materials, quality science teachers, and unequipped laboratories at the government school.

"We had one teacher of Biology who was a drunkard and after some time, he was interdicted. We spent a term and a half without his replacement. To date, I have never used a beaker in my life. During Uneb practicals, some chemicals would react and you write varying results because we used metallic cups instead of glass beakers. A few would get access to pipettes and many of us passed the theory aspects but failed practicals," Chelangat said.

Her senior six class of 2018 comprised 14 students. Of these, five were pursuing sciences and Chelangat was the only female in the science class.

Even though she obtained 10 points in Biology, Chemistry, Mathematics, and ICT to emerge the best candidate at school, her parents advised her to repeat S6 or sit at home because they could not raise tuition at the university.

Thanks to the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) Uganda, Chelangat was picked from Bukwo and enrolled at Busitema University for a one-year Higher Education Certificate (HEC) in the 2019/20 academic year. She passed well with a Cumulative Grade Point Average of 4.39 that the university relied on to admit her to the Bachelor of Science in Anesthesia program - her dream four-and-a-half year course.

fully funded by FAWE Uganda.

Now a first-year student, Chelangat admitted that the HEC is a shorter route to pursue a degree, though demanding, but not comparable to the pressure in a school setting as a repeater.

She was among the pioneer students of the HEC at Busitema that attended the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) stakeholders workshop facilitated by FAWE Uganda at Skyz Hotel, Naguru aimed at

popularizing the program. Although the HEC program been run by some universities since 2008, it was a preserve of foreign students and labeled as an access or foundation course before one is admitted fully to a degree or diploma program.

According to the Principal Higher Education Officer at NCHE, Dr Cyrus Ssebugenyi, this was improper.

"This business of leaving out local students with qualifications must stop. In 2016, we came in to harmonize this program because universities were teaching it at different durations and the programs being offered were not good enough. We needed uniform comparable standards across all institutions," Ssebugenyi said.

He said whereas there's still some resistance by parents and universities to admit students, the program is not meant for failures.

"Several people have been asking whether the NCHE has not diluted qualifications by allowing people who have failed to join higher education. Anybody who gets a UNEB certificate has not failed. It is like saying that somebody who has got a pass degree has failed. This person has passed only that the classes of excelling differ. The certificate is for only those who have passed but not to their satisfaction despite getting a UNEB certificate," he said.

Ssebugenyi linked the program with schools that admit learners with only 4s, 8 in 8, and 20 points (maximum points only).

"So, what happens to those with 10 points and below who haven't failed but a university cannot take them due to the stiff competition? We think some students don't perform well at A-level because they are not well-

exposed. So, the HEC exposes them to the rigors of the programs of their choice. If they pass, in addition to the secondary qualifications, one also submits their HEC certificate and the university will evaluate them based on the HEC provided they have slots for the course."

He also proposed that government needs to discuss how the HEC can be capitalized on to bridge the sciences and arts divide with a view that the current education system encourages early specialization of children. This, he insisted, is not only encumbering the government's effort to promote sciences but also discouraging potential art students to join science courses at a higher level.

"We would easily modify the HEC for art students who want sciences to train them for a longer period than one year. This is a proposal but can be a reality if the public welcomes the idea because it is already working well in other countries," Ssebugenyi said.

INCREASED ENROLMENT

The executive director of the NCHE, Prof Mary Okwakol, is optimistic that the HEC program will see more students get access to higher education as the country grapples with low Gross Enrolment Ratios (GER) and inadequate funding. In Uganda, higher education has grown in numerical terms from slightly less than 20 licensed tertiary institutions in 1986 to 236 and from one university to 53 today, according to NCHE statistics.

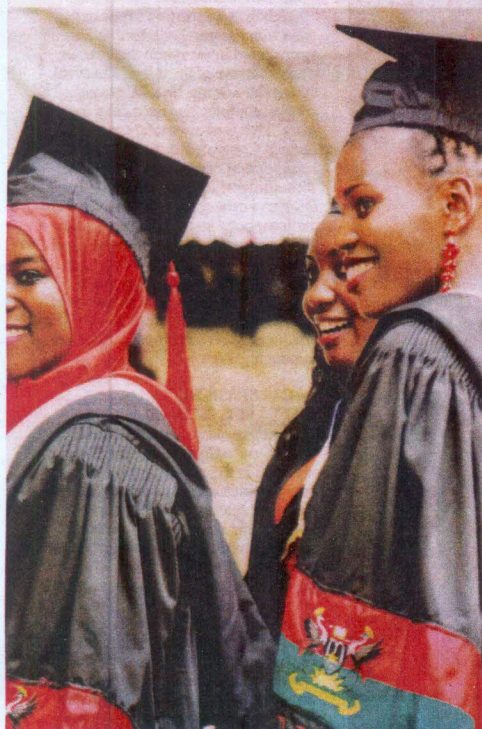
Despite the numerical growth of institutions, the GER remains relatively low at just 6.83%.

The Unesco defines GER as the number of learners enrolled in a given level of education, regardless



NCHE executive director Prof Mary Okwakol

Education



ABOUT THE HIGHER EDUCATION CERTIFICATE PROGRAM

MINIMUM ADMISSION REQUIREMENTS

UCE or its equivalent and UACE with at least two subsidiary passes obtained in principal subjects or its equivalent. The UACE holder with only one principal pass shall be deemed to meet the admission requirements.

Vocational qualifications at level 2 or level 3 of the Uganda Vocational Qualifications Framework.

Qualifications equivalent to UACE as shall be determined by NCHE in consultation with U.S.T.B.

An ordinary certificate from an institution recognized by NCHE.

Students whose foreign secondary school qualifications are not considered equivalent to UACE but permit admission into higher education in the foreign country. Such students shall have passed at least a credit in each of the five subjects. In addition, foreign students whose studies were not conducted in English shall show proof of proficiency in the English language at centers accredited by NCHE.

DURATION

The minimum duration of the program is one academic year

structured as two semesters or three-trimester program lasting not less than 34 weeks including the examination period. The HEC program that targets professional orientation may take more than one academic year but shall not exceed four semesters.

PROGRAM STRUCTURE

The HEC is a full-time program involving at least 20 contact hours per week and at least one hour for a consultation where students have one on one engagements with lecturers. Students are required to undertake foundational courses in: foundation mathematics, computing skills, communication skills, and introduction to development studies.

The foundation mathematics is meant for students who wish to pursue degrees that do not require rigorous mathematics. For engineering/physical sciences, they require different mathematical content.

A candidate is deemed to have passed if one obtains at least 40% in coursework, 40% in final examinations, and 50% in the aggregated mark. For admission to a degree program, one must have passed an HEC with at least a class II (credit) and class III (pass) for a diploma.

of age, expressed as a percentage of the official school-age population corresponding to the same level of education.

World Bank statistics show comparative enrolment figures with Uganda being at the tail end as in many cases. For instance, Kenya is at 10.2%, Tanzania 16.8%, Burundi 11.6% while outside the region, South Africa is at 23.8%, and Egypt at 36.5%. The UK, from which Uganda mimics her education system, is at 56.5%.

Okwakol urged the government to find avenues of increasing access to higher education to bridge the gaps.

"I have seen children with good grades but cannot progress for lack of tuition. Government should find ways of increasing financial support to higher education and increase facilities in existing institutions so that they can enroll more students," Okwakol said.

She added: "Access to education should not be restrictive but at the same time it is not just about mass education. In so doing, we must ensure that quality is not compromised. I, therefore, challenge universities to ensure that programs they offer are relevant and aligned to the development priorities of Uganda."

The director of Higher Technical, Vocational Education and Training (HTVET), Dr Jane Egau Okou, agreed that access is still a matter of concern at all levels of education.

"While we have realized some gains in access at lower levels of education, the gains are quickly eroded when we cannot keep the children in school and later transit to higher education levels. The HEC program is commendable but it should not bring in concerns of quality because that is where we

shall lose it all," Okwakol said, urging academic registrars to admit only eligible people for the program.

UNIVERSITY REGISTRARS SPEAK

Although the HEC is envisioned to be a time and cost-effective venture instead of repeating, academic registrars were concerned about its threat to diploma courses. Being a one-year program, most students are now preferring to go for it and then proceed to the degrees instead of studying for a two-year diploma program and later upgrading to a degree.

The academic registrar of Busitema University, Dr Lillian Gimuguni Nabaasa, said student enrolment on the HEC has increased from 72 in the first cohort to 150 today.

"There's no student who is stupid or a failure as long as one is supported to progress to another level. This certificate is not known and whether it works or not, but it is slowly picking up," Gimuguni said. In the first cohort, out of the 72 students admitted to the HEC in the 2019/2020 academic year, at least 68 passed and only four had one retake each in the foundation courses.

The university later absorbed 60 students of which 17 are at the Faculty of Health Sciences, Engineering (12), Agriculture and Animal Sciences (17), and the faculty of Science and Education (13).

For all students admitted to degree programs, she said, there are dropouts at the moment due to poor performance.

At Cavendish University, the academic registrar, Michael Okopa, said there's still low enrolment of local students on the program. Out of the 111 total candidature in 2018, only

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Dorcas Chelangat is now pursuing a Bachelor of Science in Anesthesia degree

11 were Ugandans.

"There's still low motivation in local students and when they join, they treat it as a loss in their academic journey. They have not yet appreciated the program. There's also a negative attitude from some facilitators about teaching foundation classes as they expect them to be at the same level like other direct students on degree programs," he said. For foreign students, the English language is also still a big challenge yet it's a prerequisite for passing an HEC program since most of them use Kiswahili, French, and Arabic in their native countries.

Meanwhile, at the stakeholder's engagement, students also argued that the public will best appreciate the HEC if "big players" in education like Kyambogo and Makerere universities admitted students on the same. They also requested government sponsorship of HEC successful students.

Speaking on the sidelines of the meeting, the Makerere University academic registrar, Alfred Masikye Namoah, declined to delve into details as to why the university had not taken up students under the HEC for more than 10 years since it was established.

"That is a policy issue. It has to first be discussed through the various organs of the university. As an individual, I cannot just pronounce myself on such a sensitive policy matter. We are aware that the HEC existed but we have to follow the right channels before introducing it to students. It will be discussed at an appropriate time," Masikye told *The Observer*.

NCHE urged institutions that are offering the HEC and those intending to do so to review and develop such a program taking into consideration the minimum standards, and later submit it for accreditation.

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