

Affirmative action, gender equity and university admissions – Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania¹

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The article examines the outcomes of affirmative action policies aimed at improving access for women students to university education in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. Different interpretations of affirmative action are found in the three countries. These include lower entry scores, remedial pre-university programmes and financial assistance. There are limitations and weaknesses inherent in the piecemeal strategies that focus only on the point of admission to university. Thus affirmative action as currently applied does not enhance access and gender equity in university education. A multifaceted approach to developing gender equality in universities would require various strategies to support one another in order to enhance access and gender equity in university education in the three countries.

Keywords: gender; access to university education

The UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education (1998) demanded the elimination of all gender stereotyping in higher education envisaging elimination 'at all levels and in all disciplines in which women are under-represented' and an increase of women's active involvement in decision-making. The focus of this article is affirmative action to put some of this aspiration into practice, looking at interventions used by universities in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania to enhance women's access to university education.

Affirmative action has been practiced in all three countries since the early 1990s, but there has been no comparative analysis of its effects. Country level studies have been done for Uganda (Kwesiga 2002; Businge 2005; Morley et al. 2006), Tanzania (FAWE, 2001; Lihamba et al. 2006; Morley et al. 2006) and Kenya (Nyamu 2004; Nungu 1994; Onsongo, 2007). This article, by reviewing the different experiences in the three countries of the East African region, draws out similarities and differences in their approach to affirmative action to support gender equality in higher education.

Gender and education in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania

Different approaches to affirmative action in the three countries are partly the result of different histories of education policy and variation in levels of gender equality in secondary school.

Kenya's education system consists of two years early childhood education, eight years of primary, four years of secondary and four or more years of university education. At the end of primary and secondary school children sit for national examinations that determine progression to the next level. A pass grade of C+ for the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) examination determines those who proceed to university. In 2003, the government introduced free primary education which led to an increase in enrolment in public primary schools – from

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5.9 million in 2002, to 7.2 million in 2003, to 7.4 million in 2004 and 7.6 million in 2005 (Republic of Kenya 2006a, 16). However, improved access to primary school did not translate into larger proportions of children entering the secondary phase. The Net Enrolment Rate (NER), that is the proportion of girls and boys aged 13–18 enrolled in secondary school, in 2002 was 35%. In 2006 the secondary NER for girls was 42%, compared with 43% for boys (UNESCO, Institute for Statistics 2007). Thus the transition rates from primary to secondary school have remained low. In 2007, the enrolment at secondary education stood at one million. About a quarter of these students sit the Kenya certificate of Secondary Education Examination (KCSE) but only about 25,000 join public and private universities. Gender disparities are apparent in the admission of students to universities. In 2007, female students in the public universities comprised of about 37% of the total student population. Between 2000 and 2004, the number of female students admitted was 3836 (Republic of Kenya 2008, 58). An estimated 22% of Kenya's 45,000 university students and 5% of students in postgraduate institutions are women. Only 20% of female students are enrolled in science and technology courses (Ministry of Higher Education, Kenya 2008).

The Government of Kenya recognises that gender imbalances at secondary and tertiary institutions are a matter of concern. Sessional paper no. 1 (2005), a policy framework for education, training and research, acknowledged that despite the rapid expansion of higher education over the past two decades, challenges of access and equity still exist. To address these, the government through the respective university councils and commission for higher education is required to:

- Promote the expansion of university education and training in tandem with population growth and the demand for university places and research facilities.
- Promote private sector investment in the development of university education and training.
- Provide scholarships based on the needs of the economy; targeted bursaries and loans to the needy, taking into account gender parity (Republic of Kenya 2005, 55).

Sessional paper no. 2 on Gender and Development (2006), which is yet to be approved by parliament, supports the implementation of measures like affirmative action in the admission of girls to university, re-entry of adolescent mothers to school and enhanced bursaries for girls' education. It also promotes a review of curriculum and teaching materials to ensure gender sensitivity (Republic of Kenya 2006b, 3).

In July 2007 the Ministry of Education launched a gender policy. This included commitments to enhance access and gender equity in universities through affirmative action and provision of grants and loans (Republic of Kenya 2007, 26). But to date the policy has not been widely disseminated and limited resources have been allocated for implementation (Onsongo 2008).

The education system in Uganda consists of one year pre-primary, seven years of primary education, four year of secondary, two years of higher secondary education and three to five years of university education. Uganda introduced Universal Primary Education (UPE) in 1997. This increased school enrolment from less than three million in 1997 to 6.8 million in 2003, 7.4 million in 2004 and to about 7.2 million in 2005 (UNESCO 2006, 55). Secondary education has also witnessed tremendous growth. According to the 2005 Annual School Census, about 697,507 students were enrolled in secondary school in 2004. Girls' made up 45.5% of those enrolled. Some of the reasons given for girls participation included affirmative action used in admission, provision of sanitation and a supportive environment (UNESCO 2006a). However the overall transition rates from primary to secondary school are low. For example in 2004 only 50% of the 400,000 pupils who completed primary school transitioned to secondary institutions. There are four public universities and 17 private universities with female enrolment estimated at 34% in 2004 (Morley et al. 2006).

Uganda, unlike Kenya, has institutionalised affirmative action since the National Resistance Movement (NRM) took over the government in 1986. The new Constitution of Uganda, promulgated in October 1995, makes various provisions for gender balance and fair representation of men and women in all public sectors. Article 32:1 provides for affirmative action in favour of marginalised groups (Republic of Uganda Constitution, 1995). The government has instituted a number of mechanisms to ensure respect for human rights and equal participation of men and women. A separate ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development has been established. One of its functions is to 'empower communities, particularly marginalised groups to realise and harness their potential for sustainable and gender responsive development' (Republic of Uganda, 1996, Ministry of Gender and Community Development Plan, 2). Government commitments to gender equality in public policy have thus had a longer history in Uganda compared to Kenya.

In Tanzania there are two years pre-primary, seven years primary, four years junior secondary, two years senior secondary (A level) and three or more years of university or tertiary education. Free primary education was introduced in 2002. Enrolments in primary schools between 2001 and 2004 increased from 4.8 million to 7.1 million, but the proportion of girls remained roughly the same at 49.3% of all primary enrolment in 2001, and 48.8% in 2004. In 2004 there were 432,599 students enrolled in junior and senior secondary education. Boys constituted 52.9% and girls 47.1%. At senior secondary (A level) girls accounted for 34.7% of enrolments in 2004 (UNESCO, 2006a).

In 1990 Tanzania had only 3146 students attending its two public universities, a figure less than one tenth of the number in Kenya (Cooksey and Riedmiller 1997). These figures increased slowly. Enrolments in public universities stood at 5770 in 1995 and 9052 in 1999 (Mkunde et al. 2003, 63). Further expansion has taken place this decade. In 2008 there were six public universities. In 2004, 26,475 students were enrolled at public universities and 2543 students enrolled at private universities (UNESCO 2006a). By 2004 women's participation in higher education had reached 29% of all students enrolled (UNESCO, 2006c in Sussex School of Education, 2008). Women's participation rates are higher at private universities, 37.7% of students on higher education programmes at private universities are women (MHEST 2006, cited in Sussex School of Education 2008). At public universities, 21% of masters students and 18.9% of Ph.D. students are women, compared to 34.6% and 30.7% respectively at private universities (MHEST 2006, cited in Sussex School of Education 2008).

The Republic of Tanzania has made several attempts at ensuring gender equity in society. In addition to signing international and regional agreements related to women's rights it has developed a number of national policies. The country's constitution bans discrimination on whatever grounds. Most sectoral policy documents make reference to gender equity. The Women Development and Gender Policy 2000 provides policy guidelines to other sectors on how to achieve gender equality and equity. Gender mainstreaming is identified as the main strategy of incorporating gender issues and women's concerns in all development plans. The National Education and Training Policy of 2002, National Education Act of 1978 and the National Higher Education Policy of 1999 provides guidelines for achieving gender equity and equality in the various levels of education (Lihamba et al. 2005, 68). Thus, of all the three countries in the region, Tanzania has given most attention to gender equality generally and in education specifically.

Access, gender equity and affirmative action

In all three countries affirmative action has been used to increase women's access to university. Affirmative action refers to a body of policies and procedures designed to eliminate discrimination against marginalized groups including ethnic minorities, and women. Its main

objective is to redress the effects of past discrimination (Wanyande 2003, 50). Affirmative action is effected when a deliberate action is taken that gives such groups priority in admissions, appointment and/or nominations to positions of responsibility. However this priority to the disadvantaged does not mean that the minimum qualifications are ignored. What it means is that if there are two or more qualified people and one of them is a member of the disadvantaged group, then priority is given to that disadvantaged person. Writing about the use of affirmative action in the US, Tierney (1997) identified three forms of affirmative actions: a compensatory procedure to address past injustices; a corrective tool to address present discrimination, and an intervention to promote social equality and diversity in a given society. Affirmative action is assumed to be a temporary measure aimed at enabling members of the disadvantaged group to participate in those areas in which they have been disadvantaged. The assumption is that at some point, when such groups have been empowered, and have acquired what is necessary to enable them to participate and compete with the others, affirmative action will cease.

There are some who do not support the use of affirmative action as a means of enhancing access and gender equity in university education. There are questions raised about its use as a tool for achieving fairness in society. Some people regard it as discriminatory practice while others see it as a positive discrimination geared towards correcting injustices against certain groups who suffer these effects for reasons not of their own making. As these programmes influence the distribution of important and often scarce material outcomes for different social groups, they tend to attract strong feelings (Morley 2004).

Some critics consider affirmative action as a welfare or charity scheme for women: although gender equity issues affect society as a whole. Some people construct the beneficiaries of affirmative action as objects of charity (Morley 2004). A second criticism is that most affirmative action programmes or policies in universities are not self-sustaining. They are often externally funded and conceived and thus cannot continue if donor funding is withdrawn.

Affirmative action programmes have been accused of not having any effect on gender equity. Gender disparities often persist. Research done on gender equity interventions in higher education has shown that academics working in universities have varied views of affirmative action (Lihamba et al. 2006; Morley 2004; Morley et al. 2006; Onsongo 2008; Kanake 1997; Nungu 1994). Some argue against affirmative action on the basis that women do not need positive discrimination because they are capable. One Nigerian academic interviewed in Morley (2004) said: 'I believe both sexes are endowed equally. The fact that someone is a lady does not mean she is not endowed academically and intellectually' (Morley 2004, 9).

It is argued that that encouraging preferential treatment in university admission and hiring or appointing women to leadership positions perpetuates the myth that women are inferior. Women who enter university through affirmative action are considered inferior to other students and sometimes called names suggesting they are below standard. This name calling sometimes discourages other students from joining the programmes (Morley 2006). Some students are opposed to affirmative action on the basis of the stigmatisation of beneficiaries. A student interviewed by Nungu (1994, 15) in Kenya said: 'It has put a majority of us women into a very bad spot. Once in a while a male student will tease you that you only joined the university courtesy of the JAB decision to lower points for women'.

Affirmative action is perceived as 'reverse discrimination' (Jordaan 1995, 53, cited in Morley 2004, 11) and a means of legitimising reverse discrimination, against men and boys. Some students see it as a form of unfairness. One student from Nigeria said:

The thing is that if I were to suggest that university should do certain things for females, I would not want it... getting special treatment... that because we are female that we should be getting extra lessons or special treatment, it would not be fair. (Cited in Morley 2004,13)

Affirmative action thus is accused of reinforcing hierarchies of oppression in society. Morley (2004) observes that it sometimes means that members of a range of underrepresented groups are placed in competition with each other. Women from poor socio-economic backgrounds and those from a high socio-economic status are oppositionally positioned with men in the struggle to access university education. Affirmative action can sometimes reinforce unequal power relations when it does not address problems of girls in rural areas. In spite of all these criticisms affirmative action still remains a commonly used short-term mechanism for eliminating gender disparities. What have been some of the effects of its use in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania?

Affirmative action in East African universities

Although there is no legislation requiring universities to implement affirmative action, temporary affirmative action measures have been used by Kenyan public universities to increase access for women students. Since 2001 the Joint Admissions Board (JAB), the body that oversees student admissions to public universities, has lowered the university cut-off point (entry point) by one point for girls. The board has used its own discretion on where to put the entry point depending on overall student performance in the national university entrance examinations. This has sometimes, but not always, increased the number of women being admitted to university. The variation of cut off points over the years is summarised in Table 1.

The data in Table 1 shows that the cut off point has been varied over the years. Disparities in achievement levels at high school and constraints in government funding has limited the number of government supported students in public universities to 10,000 annually up to 2006 (Republic of Kenya, Economic Survey 2007). In 2007 an additional 7000 students were admitted to public universities in the highest intake ever in Kenya. The increase in admission was a result of an additional nine campuses and university colleges established between 2006 and 2007 to accommodate additional students (Daily Nation Newspaper 2008, 44).

The Joint Admissions Board arrives at the number to be admitted into public universities after considering the available equipment, physical and human resources. The cut off points pegged to the capacity of public universities has disadvantaged many qualified students from accessing university education in the government supported programmes. For example, when the cut off point is raised to the mean grade of B+ it means that a student must score at least 70 marks in every subject. The lower cut off points for girls do not apply to those wishing to

Table 1. Variation of cut-off points in admission to Kenya universities 2001–2007.

Year	Total number of candidates	Number of candidates with C+ and above	Entry points for male	Entry points for female	Number admitted to regular degree programs	% of students (male and female) admitted to public universities
2001	194,798	42,158	62	61	11,147	27.5%
2002	198,076	42,721	64	63	11,046	26.2%
2003	205,730	49,870	65	64	10,791	25.3%
2004	219,405	54,230	67	66	10,200	17.5%
2005	260,665	68,030	69	68	10,000	14.7%
2006	243,453	63,104	65	64	10,000	15.8%
2007	260,550	82,134	66	64	17,000	20.7%

Source: Republic of Kenya (2008, 21–96).

pursue science and technology related subjects like actuarial science, engineering, architecture and medicine where the entry grade is A.

Candidates not admitted to regular degree programmes in public universities can pursue university education through self-sponsored degree programmes (locally known as parallel or part time programmes), private universities or can go abroad. The admission of self sponsored students into public universities in Kenya commenced in 1998. According to the 2006 Economic Survey there were 35,555 students enrolled in self sponsored degree programmes (part-time or parallel) at the public universities. They constituted 44% of the total enrolment which stood at 79,910 in the 2005–2006 academic year. Students enrolled in self-sponsored degree programmes in public universities meet the cost of their tuition, accommodation, travel and meals. Even though they attend the same classes as those admitted under the government supported degree programmes they usually pay higher fees. Student enrolment in public and private chartered universities by gender is summarised in Table 2.

The data in Table 2 shows that the enrolment of female students has been fluctuating in the public universities over the years. The quantitative increase in the number of female students is probably due to affirmative action by the JAB where an average of 300 female candidates benefit annually from the lower cut off points. Moreover the number of candidates who score the minimum university entry grade of C+ is low from the poorest provinces (Onsongo 2008). The introduction of self-sponsored or part-time degree programmes in the late 1990s has contributed to women's access to university education, but few females enrol in sponsored programmes partly because of the high cost and partly because they are offered in universities based in Nairobi, in the evening and weekends. The location and timing of lectures in these programs hinders many women who live and work outside the capital from participating (Onsongo 2007).

An analysis of student enrolment in private chartered universities shows that these provided spaces for women who would have been denied university education due to the limited facilities in the public universities. Wesonga et al. (2003, 23) note that most of the courses offered in these universities are in the humanities and social sciences. The cost of local private universities is still lower than sending students abroad.

The affirmative action policies applied in Kenyan public universities has not been officially endorsed by the Ministry of Education. It has been left to the discretion of JAB. Thus no legal action can be taken against JAB if it fails to institute a lower entry point for female students in any given year. Moreover there is no monitoring and evaluation mechanism in place to check the impact of the lowered entry point criteria for women on gender equity in higher education. Swainson et al. (1998) point out that the lack of an overall gender policy at the national level and

Table 2. Student enrolment in public and private chartered universities by gender 2000–2005.

Year	Public universities**			Private chartered universities		
	Male	Female	%F	Male	Female	%F
2000/2001	33,444	17,260	34%	3,093	4,050	56.7%
2001/2002	39,637	23,040	36.7%	3,122	4,089	56.7%
2002/2003	46,875	24,957	34.7%	3,476	4,163	54.5%
2003/2004	47,088	25,462	35%	3,650	4,371	54.5%
2004/2005	53,394	28,097	34.5%	3,796	4,546	54.5%

Source: Compiled from Republic of Kenya (2006).

Note: ** Data inclusive of students in the self sponsored programmes.

specifically within the education sector has meant that policies adopted to reduce gender inequalities in the education system have often been piecemeal and ineffective. This is a pertinent observation with regard to these affirmative action policies on admission in Kenya.

In Uganda affirmative action for the admission of women students has a long history. Makerere University was established in 1922 as a men's technical college. Women were first admitted in 1945. In order to increase the number of female students enrolled, the university introduced the 1.5 points scheme in 1990. Female university entrants were awarded a bonus of 1.5 points on top of their individual examination scores. The 1.5 scheme has been associated with an increase in the percentage of female students enrolled at Makerere university from 23.9% in 1989–1990 to 45.8% in 2003–2004 (Kwesiga et al. 2005, 106). The increase in a proportion of female students admitted through the 1.5 point scheme and its relation with the gender profile of student enrolment is summarised in Table 3.

The increase in the number of women students is evident. The majority of staff and students interviewed by Kwesiga et al. (2005) were of the opinion that the scheme was benefiting female students enrolled in humanities courses and girls from high-income families. A review of the 1.5 point scheme conducted by Makerere university senate in 2004 revealed that the majority of beneficiaries (about 90%) came from more privileged families, most of whom would have accessed university education without the scheme. As the 1.5 point scheme does not require information on the socio-economic status of the students, paradoxically women from rural areas have to 'win' a competitive process to enter university and gain no special recognition of their socio-economic disadvantage (Kwesiga et al. 2005, 108).

To counter the limitations of the 1.5 point scheme in 2001 the university introduced a female scholarship initiative, supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. This targets rural women who cannot afford university education even when they are admitted to the university using the 1.5 points scheme. They are given scholarships to cater for their university tuition, accommodation and upkeep. Under this scheme, 25 women are given scholarships annually to study science and technology related courses (Businge 2005). This scheme, however, has not been able to enhance gender equity further. The number of female students supported is still low compared to the number of needy cases.

Thus the affirmative action on admission in Uganda has tended to enhance access for women, but pay little attention to questions of poverty and income.

In Tanzania the University of Dar es Salaam admitted female direct entrants with lower cut-off points (at 1.0 or 1.5 points) from 1997–1998 (Lihamba et al. 2005). This preferential admission criterion for female students with lower A level grades than men is applied by the whole university, not just certain faculties. The percentage admitted without affirmative action in the year 2000–2001 was 15% while with affirmative action it increased to 27% (FAWE 2001). Admission before and after affirmative action in various courses is summarised in Table 4.

Table 3. Male and female students admitted for all programs in Makerere 1990/1991–2003/2004.

Year	Male	Female	Total	Proportion of female students admitted with 1.5
1990/91	1473	628	2101	0.29
1995/96	3309	1,723	5032	0.34
2000/01	7076	4,721	11,797	0.40
2003/04	8,214	6,941	15,155	0.45

Source: Kwesiga et al. (2005, 107).

Table 4. Percentage admitted before and after affirmative action in 2000/2001 in UDSM.

Course	Before affirmative action	After affirmative action
Arts	13%	51%
Law	28%	48%
Education (Arts)	12%	25%
Medicine	8%	25%

Source: FAWE (2001, 19).

The data in Table 4 show that there was an increase in the number of female students admitted to the University of Dar es Salaam in a number of courses after the use of affirmative action. In the science programmes, however, very few women qualified even after lowering the cut-off points, as Table 5 shows.

In 2000 the faculty of science introduced a pre-entry programme where girls, who had not attained the cut-off points, were given a remedial programme of six weeks. If they passed this course they gained admission. The programme enabled 486 female science students to join the university. Between 1997–2004 the pre-entry science programme increased the number of females admitted into the Faculty of Science in 2000–2001. Table 6 shows those who were admitted before the pre-entry and those admitted after the pre-entry programme.

A survey of the performance of the students admitted under the pre-entry programme showed that they performed very well. In the 1999–2000 third year B.Sc. (Ed.) programme, in the chemistry and biology subject combination, among the top 20 students 13 were female students admitted through the pre-entry programme (FAWE 2001, 20). This suggests that students admitted through affirmative action are not inferior academically. Through the pre-entry program, some 129 female students gained entry into the engineering program in 2004

Table 5. Undergraduate student enrolment in science related courses 1999–2000.

College	Male	Female	Total	% Female
UDSM-main campus	1221	129	1350	9.5
MUCHS	473	178	651	27.3
UCLAS	636	91	727	13

Source: Compiled from Mkunde et al (2003:63).

Key: UDSM: University of Dar-es-Salaam; MUCHS: Muhimbili University College of Health Science; UCLAS: University College of Land and Architectural Studies.

Table 6. Percentage admitted before pre-entry and after pre-entry programme in 1999/2000.

Programme	Before pre-entry programme	After pre-entry programme
B.Sc. general	25%	34%
B.Sc. education	8%	23%
B.Sc. engineering	3%	6%
P.E sports and culture	0%	48%

Source: FAWE (2001, 20).

and 2005. This intervention increased the female enrolment in engineering at the university of Dar es Salaam from a low of 7% in 2003–2004 to 18% in 2004–2005 and 21.2 in 2005–2006 (Gender Centre, University of Dar es Salaam, 2008).

A further initiative is the Female Undergraduate Scholarship Programme (FUSP) financed (with assistance from the Carnegie Corporation of New York) and managed by the University of Dar es Salaam Gender Centre. Its purpose is to give opportunities to financially disadvantaged female students who would otherwise not access university education. Since its inception in 2001 about 356 female students have benefited. A total of 128 have graduated and 13 of them have enrolled in postgraduate programmes. The gender centre that manages the programmes identified a number of challenges that have faced the effective implementation of the program, including ensuring that Tanzanians from all regions of the country benefit from the scholarships. Another challenge is the difficulty in identifying socially and economically challenged students since there are no institutionalised systems of doing this (Gender Centre, UDSM 2008).

Conclusion

Affirmative action can change the distribution of education outcomes. Some strategies advance certain groups of women but ignore others, particularly those who do not meet minimum university entry requirements. The affirmative action strategies used in the three countries have led to some change in the numbers of women gaining access to university education. In Uganda and Tanzania a combination of affirmative action strategies has provided for somewhat more openings, while the more limited intervention in Kenya has not had as much impact (Wanyande 2003). For affirmative action to have an effect on gender equity, and access to university education there is need for governments and universities to adopt multifaceted approaches in which various strategies or packages support one another in order to close the gender gap in university education.

Notes

1. This article reports on research partly carried out as part of the ESRC funded study 'Gender, Education and Global Poverty Reduction'. Award no. RES 167–250260.

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