

Transition and Dropout in Lower Income Countries: Case studies of secondary education in Bangladesh and Uganda

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

wise

world innovation summit for education
مؤتمر القمة العالمي للابتكار في التعليم

An Initiative of Qatar Foundation

 brac

Samir Ranjan Nath
Denise Ferris
Mohammed Mahbubul Kabir
Tanjeeba Chowdhury
Anwar Hossain

Executive Summary

This research explores the failure of students to transition from primary to secondary education, and dropout at the secondary level in two countries that differ in their geography and other socio-political and economic realities. The countries are Uganda, a low-income country in Sub-Saharan Africa, and Bangladesh, a lower-middle income country in South Asia. The objective of this research is to provide insight into secondary education through case studies of low and middle-income countries.

An international movement for educational development has been underway for nearly six decades. A major intervention started with the Jomtien Conference in 1990, and was an important goal of the Millennium Development initiative in 2015. During this period, educational development in low-income and lower-middle income countries was mostly concentrated on the expansion of primary and secondary education with gender parity as an overarching goal. Impressive progress has been observed in many parts of the world; however, in some countries progress has been less than satisfactory. Progress was better in South Asian countries than those in the Sub-Saharan region. Taking Uganda and Bangladesh as examples, this study explores issues related to transition failure from the primary to secondary level, and dropout at the secondary level. Such an investigation is important because the fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDGs) is the completion of primary and secondary education for all children by 2030. This target is linked with the concept of lifelong learning and sustainability in all other aspects of development.

Uganda and Bangladesh, the two countries under investigation, fall in the Sub-Saharan African and South Asian regions respectively. On the Human Development Index, Bangladesh is ranked 139th, while Uganda is ranked 163rd. According to the World Bank, Uganda is a low-income country, and Bangladesh is a lower-middle income country. The Uganda case study investigated transition failure from primary to secondary education. The Bangladesh case study looked at the dropout phenomenon at the secondary level. Both countries have compulsory primary education. In Uganda, primary education is seven years; in Bangladesh it is five years. At the end of primary education a public examination is required in both countries. In Uganda, primary education is followed by six years of secondary education, while in Bangladesh, primary education is followed by five years of secondary and two years of higher secondary education. It should be noted that the Bangladesh case study did not consider higher secondary education while addressing the dropout rate.

The following two definitions were used to frame the terms “failure to transition,” and “secondary dropout”.

- **For Uganda:** Failure to transition to secondary education refers to those students who persisted to the highest grade of primary education, but did not participate in the first grade of secondary education.

- **For Bangladesh:** Secondary dropout refers to those admitted to secondary education after passing the primary completion examination, but dropped out of school before completing secondary education.

A mixed methodology approach was adopted in preparing the cases. A household survey was conducted in both countries to examine the prevalence and intensity of the issues under investigation, and to understand their socio-economic implications. The survey included 1,907 students in Uganda, and 4,199 students in Bangladesh. Sampling was conducted to reflect gender specific estimates in each country, and also to consider the balance of urban and rural regions in Uganda and Bangladesh. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), in-depth interviews with various stakeholders, and individual case studies of students were carried out to explore the causes of transition failure and dropout, and also to examine the linkages between these factors. Various statistical techniques were used in analyzing the survey data, and thematic content analysis was employed for qualitative information.

In Uganda, over a fifth of the seventh graders (21.4 percent) of two successive years (2014 and 2015) failed to make a transition to secondary education with a higher rate for the latter year than the former. No gender difference was observed, but regional differences existed with much higher rates in the northern region, and the lowest rate was in Kampala. Repetition at the primary level was high (51.8 percent). The rate of repetition has a strong relationship to parental education; students who had parents with a lower level of education were more likely to repeat at primary level. A good portion of students repeated more than once. A statistically significant negative relationship between transition failure/repetition and parental education underscores the complexity of the issue. A student's late start in primary education, and the potential of repetition, means the student is older than normal on completion. A significant increase in the rate of transition failure with an increase in age was observed.

Transition from primary to secondary education was very high in Bangladesh (94.5 percent), with females ahead of males. Most of the students were admitted into secondary education the following year, but a few took a one-year break. The secondary dropout rate was 26.1 percent among those who were projected to complete secondary education before the fieldwork phase of this study, and 11.6 percent for those who still had time to complete – on average, 14.6 percent. The multivariate regression analysis shows that the age of enrollment in secondary education, the year of enrollment, gender, and mothers' education level were the most significant socio-economic predictors of secondary dropout. Students who started secondary education at a later age (because they started primary education late) were more likely to drop out early. Females had a higher rate of dropout. The higher the mother's education level, the lower the chance of dropout.

There were similarities in some of the findings between the two case studies. In the Uganda study, poverty was the key factor predicting transition failure. Family inability to pay tuition fees was found to cause a very high proportion

of failure to transition to secondary education. Although not as prevalent in Uganda, the Bangladesh study found that a fifth of secondary education dropout was due to family inability to afford the cost. This is, of course, found in most low-income and developing countries, particularly in remote rural communities and urban slums. In Uganda other contributors of transition failure were the examination failure rate, the scarcity of secondary educational institutions, and the low quality of education –a concern in many countries. Similarly, in Bangladesh, over 22 percent of the dropout cases were linked to the poor quality of education and a loss in interest among the students. Educational institutions should take responsibility for providing an education that builds student interest in continuing their education. Their education should progress gradually to reach to an optimal outcome. Ensuring quality of both primary and secondary education for all, as advanced in the fourth goal of the SDGs, is a major concern.

Bangladesh is celebrated for achieving gender parity in primary and secondary education; however, this is not the case in every grade, especially in secondary education. National data, as well as this study, showed that females dropout of grade eight in greater numbers than males. Security concerns, the persistence of traditional gender roles and other socio-cultural norms often prompt parents to remove their daughters from school to enter them into arranged marriages. Marriage as a major cause of secondary dropout among females was most likely among both economically well-off families, and Muslim families. Early marriage and transition failure in Uganda, and dropout in Bangladesh, were found to be closely linked. Security concerns for young unmarried women (harassment, rape, abduction, etc.) also pushes families to marry their young girls earlier than the legal marriage age. Additionally, the lack of sanitary facilities for girls in school, and the distances between home and school, often contribute to secondary dropout and transition failure.

Provisions to support mass education may be insufficient or ineffective. For instance, initiatives such as not charging tuition fees for primary and secondary education, free textbooks, the Primary Education Stipend Project (PESP), and the Female Secondary Stipend Program (FSSP) in Bangladesh, have yet to remove out-of-pocket costs for families, thus placing education costs beyond the support available. Provisions should be needs-based so that students, especially those from vulnerable families are supported fully.

It was noted that a lack of interest in education and subsequent dropout do not happen suddenly. The research provided various explanations for the lack of student interest in education, including a lack of job prospects or any tangible, immediate return from education, the expense of time and money for study, a lack of educated role models in the community, and a lack of support from family, among others. Further affirmative action is needed to create a safe and friendly atmosphere to encourage girls to have career aspirations and help support job creation for educated females. Educated women could then serve as role models for others. Technical and vocational education after a certain level of basic education should be encouraged in order to help solve youth unemployment. A commitment to making education more relevant to social and economic needs is needed. The improvement of life and the creation of livelihoods for all citizens should be prime considerations.

Employment is especially high in low-income countries, and in some cases is also high in lower-middle income countries with a bias toward the informal sector. Agriculture remains the major sector in some countries; however, a tendency to move toward a non-farm sector is also seen. Women are engaged in agriculture and home-based income generating activities, but often lack basic literacy and numeracy skills. In order to help countries move faster toward non-farm and more of formal sectors would require a strengthening of human capital. This includes providing at least eight years of basic education for all, and technical and vocational education to a good portion of youth. Contents of secondary education should therefore be aimed at qualifying students for employment, possibly after receiving some vocational education and preparation for tertiary education. A comprehensive human resource development and employment policy may be helpful in this regard. Many old and newly industrialized countries (e.g., Singapore) may have faced similar problems and have found good solutions. Lessons can be learned from their strategies.

Population growth among secondary school age children has driven enrollment. The demography factor plays a far more important role in Uganda than in Bangladesh. According to UN estimates, between 2000 and 2015, the secondary school aged population increased by 68 percent in Uganda, compared to four percent in Bangladesh with a slight decline between 2010 and 2015. As a consequence, the challenges in providing for universal secondary education by 2030 will be vastly different for the two countries. Between 2015 and 2030, secondary school age population is projected to increase by 50 percent in Uganda, but to decline by nine percent in Bangladesh. Uganda and similar countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere will have to struggle and invest more.

Finally, an emphasis on quantity has widely over shadowed the issue of quality in both primary and secondary education. But quality of education, as reflected in the fourth SDG, is a major concern. The study also finds that the lack of quality in school education contributes to transition failure and dropout. In addition, linking education with the world of work, and with tertiary education remains an issue. More attention needs to be given to the issue of lifelong learning, with the purpose of achieving success in work, and also in being aware of current global and local knowledge.



wise

world innovation summit for education

مؤتمر القمة العالمي للابتكار في التعليم

An Initiative of Qatar Foundation