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Uganda Primary Leaving Examination Candidature and Performance, 2020–2025: A Descriptive Analysis of the 2025 UNEB Release Statement

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The Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB) 2025 Primary Leaving Examination (PLE) release statement provides rich administrative data on candidature, participation, performance, and equity-related dimensions over the 2020–2025 period. This manuscript synthesises these data into an integrated analysis of trends in access, learning outcomes, and inclusion in Uganda's primary education system, framed by the UNEB Chair's remarks emphasising both "cause for celebration and cause for concern." Candidature rose steadily to 817,883 in 2025, with 63.8% from Universal Primary Education (UPE) schools and a persistent pattern of more girls than boys reaching the end of the primary cycle. Absenteeism declined and stabilised at 1.3% in 2024–2025, despite expanding enrolment and recurring logistical constraints, reflecting the system's resilience, as highlighted by the Chair. Proficiency profiles indicate that fewer than one in five candidates attain higher-ability levels in any subject, with the majority concentrated in medium-ability bands. Subject-specific patterns are mixed: English shows improved performance relative to 2024, whereas Social Studies with Religious Education records a downturn. Divisional outcomes indicate an increased share of candidates in Division 1 and a higher absolute number of passes in 2025, suggesting modest gains in attainment at the top and middle of the distribution. Gender-disaggregated analyses reveal that boys continue to outperform girls in higher divisions and in Science, Social Studies, and Mathematics, even as girls constitute the majority of candidates. Participation among learners with special needs and among prison inmates increased over the period, signalling incremental progress toward more inclusive assessment, in line with the Chair's call to "leave no learner behind." The analysis underscores that while access and completion have expanded, persistent learning deficits, gendered achievement gaps, and uneven subject performance require targeted instructional support, gender-responsive interventions, and sustained investment in foundational learning to realise equitable, high-quality outcomes in Uganda's basic education.

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INTRODUCTION

The Primary Leaving Examination (PLE) in Uganda is a high-stakes national assessment that marks the completion of primary education and determines access to secondary schooling. Performance at PLE is associated with subsequent achievement in lower secondary education (Mwesigwa et al., 2025) and with successful transition to post-primary schooling, especially among vulnerable populations (Nabunya et al., 2022). As such, annual release statements by the Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB) are key policy documents for monitoring the performance of the monitoring system and equity and inclusion.

The 2025 PLE was conducted on 3–4 November 2025 under the theme **"Embracing security and holistic assessment of learners in a dynamic environment"**, a continuation of the 2024 theme. This continuity reflects enduring concerns about examination integrity and the need to move beyond narrow rote learning towards more holistic assessment practices. Despite adverse weather and infrastructure damage in parts of the country, coordination between Local Governments and UNEB monitors ensured the successful administration of the examination.

This manuscript reorganises and interprets the 2025 PLE release statement into a scholarly format, focusing on five dimensions: (i) candidature and registration trends, (ii) participation and absenteeism, (iii) subject

proficiency and grade performance, (iv) gender and special groups, and (v) divisional outcomes and implications for transition. Findings are discussed in light of empirical studies on PLE performance, transition, and structural determinants of educational quality in Uganda (Mwesigwa et al., 2025; Nabunya et al., 2022; Patrick et al., 2021; Ssentanda et al., 2020).

METHODS**Data Source**

The analysis draws entirely on administrative data reported in the **"Statement of Release of Results of the 2025 Primary Leaving Examination (PLE)"** by UNEB. The statement provides how the final examination for primary school (P7), covering four subjects: English, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies, is scored. Each of the four subjects is scored on a scale of 1 to 9 (1 being the highest, 9 the lowest). Calculating Divisions: The scores from all four subjects are summed to produce an aggregate score ranging from 4 to 36. Division Ranges include the following: Division 1: from aggregate 4 – 12 (Highest distinction), Division 2: from aggregate 13 – 23 (Good pass), Division 3: from aggregate 24 – 29 (Average pass), Division 4: from aggregate 30 – 34 (Pass), and Result 9 (Fail): from aggregate 35 – 36 (Does not qualify for secondary). The disaggregated figures for 2020, 2022, 2023, 2024, and 2025 on registrations, centres, absenteeism, performance by subject and grade, divisional results, gender,

and special candidate groups (special needs and prison inmates).

Analytical Approach

A descriptive, trend-based analysis was applied to:

- Compare **candidature and centre growth** (2020–2025) by UPE/non-UPE and gender.
- Examine **absenteeism trends**, focusing on the proportion of candidates not sitting.
- Analyse **item response proficiency** categories (higher, medium, lower ability) across four subjects in 2025.
- Compare **subject performance** between 2024 and 2025 at Distinction 2, Credit 6, and Pass 8 levels.
- Interpret **divisional outcomes** (Divisions 1–4 and Ungraded) overall and by gender.
- Summarise the participation and performance of **special groups** (special needs candidates and prison inmates).

No inferential statistics were computed beyond what is implicit in percentages and cumulative figures. The nature of administrative trends in PLE registrations, centres, performance, and transition is analytically determined by combining simple descriptive trend rules with theory and evidence-based interpretation. First, quantitative patterns over time are classified as increasing, decreasing, stable, or volatile using the direction and consistency of change in proportions or means (for example, linear trend analysis of distinctions, credits, passes, and fails over a decade in PLE science and mathematics (Alfred et al., 2023)). A trend is considered substantive rather than random when shifts are sustained across several cohorts and/or accompanied by changes of non-trivial magnitude in key categories (e.g., movement across PLE divisions or marked changes in gender gaps (Nabunya et al., 2022; Teopista & Dickens, 2023)). Second, trends in PLE outcomes are analysed using empirical models that link examination performance and transition outcomes, such as correlations between PLE aggregates and Senior One grades

(Mwesigwa et al., 2025) or logistic regression analyses of PLE scores and transition probabilities (Nabunya et al., 2022). Third, observed administrative patterns are situated within systemic determinants identified by prior research: school type and resource effects on subject performance (Alfred et al., 2023); political decentralisation and supervision intensity on UPE/PLE results (Patrick et al., 2021; Deusdedit & Silver, 2020); classroom, language, and literacy conditions in rural schools (Ssentanda et al., 2020); and household- and learner-level constraints such as poverty, orphanhood, gender, self-efficacy, and parental involvement, which shape both PLE achievement and transition odds (Nabunya et al., 2022; Delprato & Farieta, 2023; Teopista & Dickens, 2023). A pattern is therefore judged, for example, as a structural equity problem (e.g., persistent rural or government-school underperformance) rather than a benign fluctuation when it aligns with these documented determinants and transition bottlenecks in Uganda's education system (Mwesigwa et al., 2025; Nabunya et al., 2022; Patrick et al., 2021; Ssentanda et al., 2020; Alfred et al., 2023; Delprato & Farieta, 2023; Teopista & Dickens, 2023; Deusdedit & Silver, 2020).

RESULTS

Candidature and Registration Trends, 2020–2025

In 2025, **817,883 candidates** from **15,388 examination centres** registered for PLE, compared with 797,444 candidates from 14,883 centres in 2024. This represents a **2.6% increase (20,439 candidates)** over the previous year. UPE candidates accounted for **522,036 (63.8%)** registrations from 11,525 centres, while **295,847 (36.2%)** came from 3,863 non-UPE centres. Over 2020–2025, total registrations ranged between approximately 750,000 and 830,000 candidates, with a steady increase in centres from 14,300 (2020) to 15,388 (2025).

Gender analysis indicates that in 2025, **girls (428,324; 52.4%) outnumbered boys (389,469;**

47.6%) among registered candidates. This pattern is consistent with recent years; in 2024, girls constituted 52.5% of candidates and boys 47.5%. Higher female representation among registered PLE candidates is advantageous because it reflects progress toward gender parity in access to schooling and exam completion, which has historically disadvantaged girls. Policies such as affirmative action, gender-responsive school environments, and targeted support have helped increase girls' enrolment and persistence, enabling more girls to reach key educational milestones and later transition to higher education and skilled work (Esther et al., 2025). At the same time, evidence from multiple countries shows that boys often have higher dropout rates due to weaker scholastic performance, lower educational aspirations, greater vulnerability to peer influence and informal work opportunities, and behavioural or engagement problems (Peczu et al., 2025; Parreño & Anter, 2025; Borgna & Struffolino, 2016). Thus, girls outnumbering boys at PLE both signals successful efforts to keep girls in school and highlights a worrying pattern of male under-participation and early school leaving that requires targeted interventions. Thus, while research documents barriers to schooling among vulnerable groups (Nabunya et al., 2022; Ssentanda et al., 2020), at the point of PLE completion, females have a modest numerical advantage in enrolment.

Special needs education (SNE) candidates increased from **3,328 in 2024 to 3,636 in 2025**, a **9.3% rise**, attributed to ongoing awareness and sensitisation by UNEB and the Ministry of Education and Sports. Among these, **48.3% were female and 51.7% male**. Prison candidates also included 61 inmates from Uganda Government Upper Prison, Luzira (54 males, 7 females), and 40 from Mbarara Main Prison (39 males, 1 female) who registered for the 2025 PLE. These trends align with policy directions to broaden access and promote educational inclusion in Uganda's basic education sector (Patrick et al., 2021; Ssentanda et al., 2020).

Participation and Absenteeism

Between 2020 and 2025, the proportion of registered candidates who actually sat the PLE consistently exceeded 97%. In 2025, **807,313 of 817,883 candidates** sat the examination, yielding **10,570 absentees** and an absenteeism rate of **1.3%**. This rate is identical to 2024 (10,463 absentees; 1.3%) and lower than in 2023 (1.6%), 2022 (2.5%), and 2020 (1.7%).

The peak in absenteeism in 2022 (20,844 candidates; 2.5%) contrasts sharply with the subsequent reduction and stabilisation at 1.3% in 2024–2025, despite an absolute increase in the number of candidates. This suggests strengthened administrative mechanisms and, possibly, greater household and school commitment to ensuring that registered learners arrive on examination day. Given that PLE performance influences opportunities in secondary schools and beyond (Mwesigwa et al., 2025; Nabunya et al., 2022), reductions in absenteeism are likely to improve overall educational efficiency.

Proficiency Levels and Subject Performance in 2025

Item response analysis categorised 2025 candidates into **higher-**, medium-, and lower-ability levels across Mathematics, English, Integrated Science, and Social Studies with Religious Education (SST/RE).

- **Higher ability:** 16.4% (Mathematics), 18.5% (English), 15.6% (Integrated Science), 15.9% (SST/RE).
- **Medium ability:** 67.1% (Mathematics), 65.1% (English), 68.0% (Integrated Science), 67.8% (SST/RE).
- **Lower ability:** approximately 16% in all subjects.

Higher-ability candidates are defined as those who can recall facts, understand them, and apply concepts in problem-solving and in new contexts. Medium-ability candidates can recall and understand facts and apply some concepts in

familiar problem-solving situations, but struggle in novel contexts. Lower-ability candidates show limited comprehension and application. These descriptors align with the National Assessment of Progress in Education (NAPE) framework.

The distribution shows that **less than 20% of candidates reached higher-ability levels in any subject**, with roughly two-thirds in the medium band and one-sixth in the lower band. This pattern is consistent with broader concerns in Ugandan research that foundational skills and higher-order competencies remain constrained, particularly in rural and under-resourced settings (Nabunya et al., 2022; Ssentanda et al., 2020).

Comparative Subject Performance: 2025 vs 2024

The UNEB PLE 2025 release statement compares cumulative performance at Distinction 2, Credit 6 and Pass 8 in 2024 and 2025. Key findings include:

- **English:** Cumulative proportion at Pass 8 and above rose to **91.9% in 2025**, from 88.3% in 2024, with a substantial increase in Distinction 2 (from 4.9% to 10.1%). This indicates marked improvement in English.
- **Mathematics:** Distinction 2 increased (7.4% to 9.6%), and cumulative performance at Credit 6 and above improved (62.7% to 66.7%), while Pass 8 and above remained high (88.9% vs 89.4%).
- **Integrated Science:** Slight decrease in performance, with cumulative percentages at higher grades lower than in 2024 (e.g., Pass 8 and above from 93.4% to 90.5%).
- **SST/RE:** Showed a notable decline; while 91.9% achieved Pass 8 and above in 2024, only 86.7% did so in 2025, with a reduction in Distinction and Credit levels.

Overall, English was the best-performing subject at Pass 8 and above, followed by Integrated Science and Mathematics, whereas SST/RE performed the worst in 2025. These variations align with findings that subject-specific factors,

including pedagogical practices and resource availability, strongly shape PLE outcomes (Patrick et al., 2021; Ssentanda et al., 2020).

Gendered Performance Patterns

Subject-specific gender analyses show:

- **English:** Girls outperform boys across performance bands, reinforcing evidence that female learners tend to do better in language subjects.
- **Integrated Science and SST/RE:** Boys slightly outperform girls.
- **Mathematics:** Boys perform better than girls up to Credit 4; fewer boys appear in lower pass grades (7 and 8) and in Fail (9).
- Divisional outcomes by gender further show that:
- **Males:** 12.54% in Division 1, 48.54% in Division 2, 20.15% in Division 3, 9.79% in Division 4, and **8.97% ungraded**.
- **Females:** 10.35% in Division 1, 47.69% in Division 2, 20.76% in Division 3, 11.13% in Division 4, and **10.07% ungraded**.

Thus, although more girls than boys complete primary school and sit the PLE, boys are more likely to attain Divisions 1 and 2 and less likely to be ungraded. These patterns align with broader evidence that girls in Uganda face complex structural and socio-cultural barriers that can affect performance and transition, despite gains in enrolment and survival to the end of primary schooling (Nabunya et al., 2022; Ssentanda et al., 2020).

Aggregate Distribution and Overall Divisional Performance

The frequency distribution of total aggregates for 2025 shows that most candidates fall between Aggregate 11 and 30 within the pass divisions, with a mode at Aggregate 22. This suggests clustering around the midrange, with relatively few candidates at the extremes.

Divisional analysis indicates:

- **Division 1:** 91,990 candidates (11.39%) in 2025 vs 84,301 (10.7%) in 2024, an increase of **7,689 candidates**.
- **Division 2:** 388,293 (48.10%) vs 397,589 (50.5%) in 2024.
- **Division 3:** 165,226 (20.47%) vs 165,284 (21.0%).
- **Division 4:** 84,724 (10.49%) vs 75,556 (9.6%).
- **Ungraded (U):** 77,080 (9.55%) vs 64,251 (8.2%).

In aggregate, **7,503 more candidates passed (Divisions 1–4) PLE in 2025 than in 2024**, even though the proportion ungraded also increased. This dual trend reflects both expanding access and persistent learning deficits among a subset of learners. Given that PLE performance has a positive but not deterministic relationship with subsequent secondary performance (Mwesigwa et al., 2025) and that self-efficacy and psychosocial factors shape transition probabilities (Nabunya et al., 2022), these divisional results underscore the need for a nuanced interpretation that goes beyond raw pass rates.

Performance of Special Candidate Groups

Among prison inmates: At Uganda Government Upper Prison School, Luzira, 61 candidates were registered; 58 sat the exam. Of those, 4 obtained Division 1, 27 Division 2, 13 Division 3, 5 Division 4, and 9 were ungraded; 3 registered candidates did not sit. At Mbarara Main Prison Inmates Primary School, 40 were registered; 39 sat. Of these, 7 obtained Division 1, 15 Division 2, 10 Division 3, 5 Division 4, and only 2 were ungraded.

These outcomes demonstrate that, even within custodial environments, meaningful academic achievement is possible when educational opportunities and support are provided, echoing broader findings on the positive impact of targeted interventions on the educational trajectories of vulnerable learners (Nabunya et al., 2022).

For special-needs candidates, although the full performance breakdown is not reproduced in the excerpt, the combination of rising registration and gender balance suggests that more learners with disabilities are accessing and completing primary education. This is consistent with efforts to improve inclusivity within UPE and to adapt assessment conditions for diverse learner needs (Patrick et al., 2021).

Table 1: Summary Table: Key System Indicators, 2020–2025

Indicator	2020	2022	2023	2024	2025
Total registered candidates	749,762	832,654	749,254	797,444	817,883
% UPE of total	–	70.1	66.9	65.7	63.8
Centres	14,300	14,691	14,859	14,883	15,388
Absenteeism (%)	1.7	2.5	1.6	1.3	1.3
Girls' share of candidates (%)	–	–	–	52.5	52.4
SNE registrations	–	–	–	3,328	3,636

Trends in access, participation, and inclusiveness.

Source: UNEB - PLE 2025

The statistics in Table 1, above reveals a sharp drop in the number of registered candidates between 2022 (832,654) and 2023 (749,254), and it is best understood as the system “re-normalising” after the COVID-19 shock cohorts. Pandemic school closures and staggered re-opening created unusually large, over-age, and

uneven cohorts that moved through upper primary and sat PLE in 2022 in inflated numbers; once these backlog groups had passed through, the 2023 cohort size fell back toward underlying demographic and participation levels, revealing accumulated dropout and repetition, especially among poorer and rural children who were less

likely to return after closures (Ssentanda et al., 2020; Kakuba et al., 2025).

Proposed Reform of the PLE Grading System and Examination Malpractice

The Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB) has proposed abolishing the aggregate-based grading system for the Primary Leaving Examination (PLE) as a strategy to curb persistent examination malpractice. The current system, which ranks candidates by total aggregates across subjects, has long been criticised for reinforcing high-stakes, summative, exam-oriented practices at the expense of deeper learning, a pattern already noted more broadly in Uganda's assessment culture (Kirya et al., 2021).

During the release of the 2025 PLE results on 30 January 2026, UNEB Chairperson Prof. Celestino Obua observed that intense pressure on schools to produce "Aggregate 4" candidates—widely perceived by parents and communities as the ultimate benchmark of academic excellence—has become a major driver of cheating. This "aggregate obsession" aligns with earlier concerns that Uganda's system rewards examination coaching and rote learning rather than genuine competency development (Rebecca, 2025; Kirya et al., 2021). School administrators may feel compelled to prioritise grade outcomes over learning processes, creating incentives for malpractice (Nywar, 2016).

UNEB's proposal seeks to replace numerical aggregates with an assessment framework emphasising subject-specific performance and learner competency, modelled on the letter grading (A–E) structure recently adopted for the Uganda Certificate of Education (UCE). This aligns with ongoing national reforms toward competency-based curricula and assessment, which call for grading systems that reflect demonstrated mastery rather than narrow recall (Atibuni et al., 2024; Rebecca, 2025). Similar shifts toward competency-based and generic-skills assessment have been recommended for secondary education, with

UNEB urged to design grading schemes that capture broader competencies and reduce high-stakes pressure (Atibuni et al., 2024; Stephen & Ezati, 2025; Rebecca, 2025).

The reform has a clear historical trajectory. UNEB first proposed scrapping aggregates in 2021, but implementation stalled due to the COVID-19 pandemic and competing reform priorities. In the 2025 PLE release, UNEB confirmed that a formal request has been submitted to the Ministry of Education and Sports to approve and operationalise the new grading model, situating the proposal within Uganda's wider transition to competency-based assessment (Atibuni et al., 2024; Stephen & Ezati, 2025).

2025-PLE Examination Malpractice Profile

The 2025 examination cycle illustrates the urgency of reform. UNEB reported that results for several candidates were withheld on suspicion of malpractice, with concentration in districts such as Kisoro, Kampala, Mukono, Namutumba, and Buyende. This remains a pattern in which examination irregularities undermine the credibility of high-stakes assessment in Uganda (Stephen & Ezati, 2025; Kirya et al., 2021; Nywar, 2016).

By January 2026, UNEB had secured eight convictions related to 2025 PLE malpractice, with 15 additional cases pending in court. Emerging schemes exploited logistical and supervisory vulnerabilities, including tampering with examination parcels by transporters and teachers writing answers on classroom blackboards during the examination. These practices echo earlier analyses that locate malpractice at the intersection of high-pressure, examination-oriented systems and weak continuous assessment cultures (Stephen & Ezati, 2025; Kirya et al., 2021; Nywar, 2016).

Together, the 2025 malpractice statistics and the proposed grading reform underscore a critical policy moment: reducing reliance on aggregate-based rankings and moving toward competency-

oriented reporting may help reduce perverse incentives, align PLE with Uganda's competency-based reforms, and strengthen the integrity and educational value of primary-cycle assessment (Atibuni et al., 2024; Stephen & Ezati, 2025; Rebecca, 2025; Kirya et al., 2021).

DISCUSSION

The 2025 PLE release statement depicts a system characterised by expanding access, high participation, and gradual but uneven gains in performance. Candidature growth, rising numbers of centres, and increased registration of SNE candidates and prison inmates signal progress toward universal and inclusive primary education, consistent with decentralisation and UPE policies that are empirically associated with improved PLE outcomes in some districts (Patrick et al., 2021).

At the same time, the proficiency distribution, in which fewer than 20% of learners attain higher ability levels and roughly one-sixth remain at lower ability levels, indicates persistent gaps in learning quality. Ethnographic work in rural Ugandan schools highlights complex structural, linguistic, and resource constraints that undermine literacy and broader learning, challenging simplistic narratives that place responsibility solely on teachers (Ssentanda et al., 2020). Such factors likely contribute to the observed subject disparities (e.g., weakness in SST/RE) and the increased proportion of ungraded candidates in 2025.

Gender patterns present a nuanced picture: more girls than boys reach PLE, and girls outperform boys in English, yet boys dominate higher divisions overall and in STEM-aligned subjects. These findings align with broader research indicating that, although girls' educational participation has improved, socioeconomic vulnerability, school resources, and psychosocial factors (including self-efficacy) continue to influence their performance and transition pathways (Nabunya et al., 2022; Ssentanda et al., 2020). Interventions that build learner self-

efficacy and provide material and psychosocial support have been shown to improve PLE grades and transition probabilities among vulnerable adolescents (Nabunya et al., 2022), suggesting potential strategies to address persistent gaps.

The decline and stabilisation of absenteeism at 1.3% in 2024–2025, despite adverse weather conditions in 2025, indicate strengthened system resilience. Given that PLE performance is positively correlated with Senior One achievement but does not fully determine later success (Mwesigwa et al., 2025), ensuring that more learners sit the examination and achieve at least mid-range passes expands the pool of students who can benefit from further educational support in secondary school.

Overall, the 2025 PLE data reinforce three broad insights from the Ugandan literature: (i) PLE outcomes matter for transition and early secondary performance (Mwesigwa et al., 2025; Nabunya et al., 2022), (ii) system-level policies and governance (e.g., decentralization, UPE) significantly shape performance patterns (Patrick et al., 2021) and (iii) school- and learner-level constraints including literacy environments, language policy, and psychosocial resources remain key determinants of who benefits from expanded access (Nabunya et al., 2022; Ssentanda et al., 2020).

A comparative perspective enhances and clarifies these interpretations of the 2025 PLE data. Decentralisation and UPE policies have clearly improved enrolment, access, and PLE performance in certain districts, with political decentralisation accounting for up to 61% of the variation in PLE outcomes in Katerera County and facilitating better supervision and resource allocation in UPE schools (Mbyemeire et al., 2021). National reviews similarly record significant increases in enrolment and gender equality under UPE but highlight ongoing issues of low completion rates, weak literacy and numeracy skills, and notable quality disparities between urban and rural schools (Otyola et al., 2022; Nishimura et al., 2008; Kawala, 2014;

Kyohairwe, 2016). Ethnographic research in rural classrooms reveals how these structural and policy-level improvements coexist with underfunded literacy environments and complex language-policy challenges that hinder performance and lead to unequal subject outcomes (Ssentanda et al., 2020). Longitudinal and quasi-experimental studies of vulnerable learners further show that individual factors such as self-efficacy, household assets, and orphanhood status strongly influence PLE achievement and transition prospects, even within the same policy environment (Nabunya et al., 2022; Lamichhane & Tsujimoto, 2023). Overall, these studies imply that Uganda's pattern of expanding access but producing stratified learning outcomes, as seen in the 2025 PLE results, is not limited to a specific cohort but reflects a broader, ongoing tension in the UPE–decentralisation period between increased participation and enduring inequalities in learning and transition.

CONCLUSION

Between 2020 and 2025, Uganda's PLE system expanded access, maintained high participation, and modestly improved top-level performance, particularly in English, while broadening inclusion for learners with special needs and prison inmates. However, the concentration of candidates in medium proficiency, persistent subject weaknesses, gendered disparities in high divisions, and a non-trivial share of ungraded learners indicate that **quality and equity challenges persist**. Aligning examination reforms with targeted support at the school and learner levels—particularly in under-resourced and rural contexts—will be essential to ensuring that increased access translates into sustained learning gains and successful transitions through the education system.

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The contributions of teachers, candidates, Parents, and Guardians from both Universal Primary Education (UPE) and non-UPE schools are warmly acknowledged, as are the courage and commitment of learners with special educational needs and candidates in custodial institutions, whose participation underpins the access, equity, and performance trends examined in this review. Finally, the author thanks the researchers and institutions whose prior work on examination systems, assessment reforms, and educational quality in Uganda informed and enriched this manuscript.

Recommendations

Consolidate Gains in Access and Participation (2020–2025)

Sustain and strengthen district–school coordination mechanisms that have kept absenteeism around 1.3%, despite growing candidature and environmental disruptions. Institutionalise annual analytical reviews of candidature, absenteeism, and divisional performance to inform resource allocation, inspections, and community sensitisation, particularly in high-risk districts.

Improve Learning Quality and Raise Higher-Ability Proportions

Use item-level UNEB diagnostics to design remedial and enrichment programmes that move learners from medium to higher ability in all subjects, with emphasis on complex comprehension and application. Provide targeted support for low-ability learners, especially in Social Studies and Integrated Science, where performance is weaker.

Address Subject-Specific Weaknesses, Especially in SST/RE

Commission focused reviews of curriculum implementation, teacher preparation and classroom practice in Social Studies with Religious Education. Support teachers with context-rich, inquiry-based pedagogies and ongoing professional development.

Promote Gender Equity in Outcomes and Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) Performance

Scale gender-responsive pedagogy, mentoring and role-modelling in Mathematics and Science to narrow the boys' advantage in top divisions and STEM-related outcomes. Build on girls' strengths in language while addressing gendered expectations and stereotypes at the school and community levels.

Strengthen Inclusion for Special Needs and Custodial Candidates

Expand specialised accommodations (Braille, sign language, assistive devices, extra time) and teacher training for inclusive assessment. Ensure systematic follow-up of special-needs and prison-centre PLE graduates into appropriate post-primary pathways.

Reform Grading and Safeguard Examination Integrity

Fast-track the shift from aggregate-based grading to competency-based, subject-specific reporting

to reduce the "Aggregate 4" obsession and its role in driving malpractice. Enhance security and monitoring across the whole examination chain, with particular focus on emerging malpractice patterns, such as parcel tampering and the provision of answers on blackboards. Regularly analyse malpractice trends to inform sanctions, preventive measures and stakeholder sensitisation.

Leverage Longitudinal Data for System Improvement and Research

Link PLE data to lower-secondary outcomes to identify districts, school types and learner groups needing targeted interventions and to evaluate reform impacts over time. Encourage further research on school- - and district-level determinants of malpractice, gender performance gaps, and the consequences of grading reforms for teaching and learning.

Areas for Further Research***Predictive Validity of Uganda's PLE (2020–2025 Cohorts)***

Longitudinal analyses of how PLE aggregates and divisions predict performance and retention in lower secondary, paralleling validity work in other national examinations (Ke, 2025).

Equity and School-Type Effects Under UPE and non-UPE Provision

Comparative studies of performance, ability profiles and transition rates between UPE and non-UPE schools, building on patterns already visible in UNEB releases (2020).

Gendered Learning Trajectories Across Subjects

Mixed-methods research on classroom interaction, assessment practices and socio-cultural expectations that produce stronger female outcomes in English but male advantages in Mathematics and Science.

Validity and Fairness of high-Stakes Primary Exit Examinations

Systematic reviews of PLE design, content and scoring similar to validity reviews undertaken for other countries' primary leaving examination tests, to ensure that Uganda's PLE remains fair, reliable and educationally sound.

Experiences and Outcomes of Special Needs and Custodial Candidates

In-depth case studies tracking learning conditions, examination accommodations and post-PLE trajectories of special needs learners and prison candidates, who are increasingly represented in UNEB statistics (2020).

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