

Malawi's Public Higher Education 'Equitable Access' Policy: Is it working?

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Introduction

Education is a pillar of Malawi's socio-economic growth and poverty reduction. Malawi's National Education Sector Plan (NESP) (2008-17) aims at an 'expanded equitable access to Higher Education'. However, Malawi's primary and secondary sectors are marked by increased inequity relating to quality and transition rates. Malawi has few public Universities with a yearly enrolment capacity of around 2000 students against around 7000 eligible entrants.

Malawi is currently implementing 'District of Origin Quota' Selection Policy to secondary and higher education to promote 'equitable access' to public education. This research examines the selection policy and practice in relation to a social justice/equitable access framework to higher education.

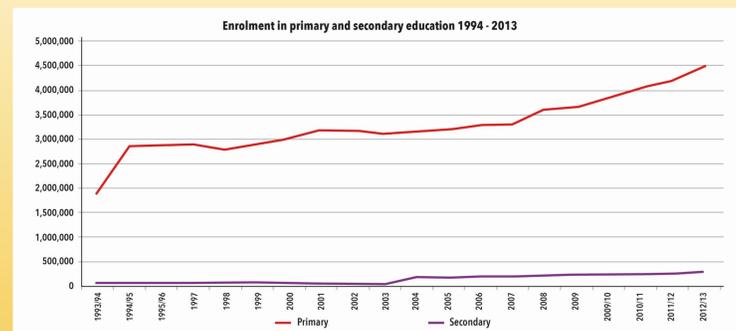
Research Context

- Malawi's Policy Investment Framework (2000) intended to reduce existing regional and district access disparities, increase female enrolment of women, poor students, and students with special needs.
- Malawi Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (2002) encouraged access and equity in education by focusing on girls, orphans and special needs students.
- A total of only 10% of Malawians live in the main urban areas. There are more primary and secondary schools in rural areas where the quality of education is poor.
- In 2012/13, only 1730 students were enrolled to public universities out of 6373 who were eligible, having passed University Entrance Examinations (Nation Newspaper, 2013).

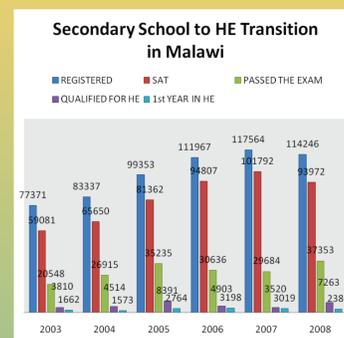
'District of ethnic origin quota' selection in Malawi

- Higher education should be seen to be benefiting the whole country.
- There are fewer places in public Universities in Malawi and a small number of students are offered places each year.
- Policies of government have emphasised socio-economic factors including gender, disability and poverty to underpin selection to public universities.
- "Under 'quota' selection, top 10 qualified candidates from each district are offered places and thereafter, the rest are selected based on merit and the size of the population of the districts they originate from" (Ministry of Education).

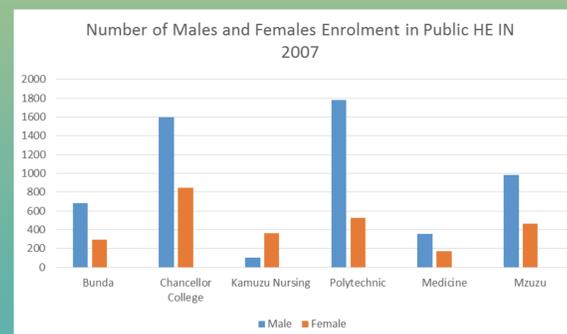
Enrolments at Primary and Secondary Levels in Malawi (1994 -2013)



Source: EMIS, 2013



Source: Chivwara, 2013



Source: EMIS, 2008

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Equity Framework for HE Enrolment

James (2007) conceptualises equity in higher education to include:

- Those who have the ability to go on to HE can do so.
- There are no barriers of access to HE.
- The selection for HE is without discrimination.
- All people have the same opportunity to develop their talents.
- The selection to HE is on academic merit.

Typical Approaches to Equitable Enrolment to HE

Widening access policies: common in developed countries. They aim to provide early support from primary, secondary up to higher education to people from deprived backgrounds.

Affirmative action: commonly used to ensure to redress historical marginalisation and inequalities.

Quota policy: are largely controversial are also used to promote wider access to HE.

Newspaper coverage of Malawi's 'Quota selection Policy'

Quota policy has been a source of heated public debate in Malawi since it was re-introduced in 2009 after being abandoned in 1993 when a court ruled it discriminatory.

'Student cheat Quota System' (The Times, 19 March 2016)

'Illusions of elite entitlement: Quota and Malawi's higher education access woes' (Nyasa Times, 12 November 2012)

'Quota System; Good policy gone bad?' (Nation Malawi, 22 April 2016)

'Court backs controversial quotas' (University World News, 31 January, 2010)

'[President] Bingu faults tertiary selection system' (Malawi Digest, 15 October, 2009).

Research Question & Research Methods

To what extent is equity access to HE being achieved through the 'Quota' Selection policy in Malawi?

Documentary analysis, Secondary data analysis of selection lists and other educational statistics, interviews with key informants.