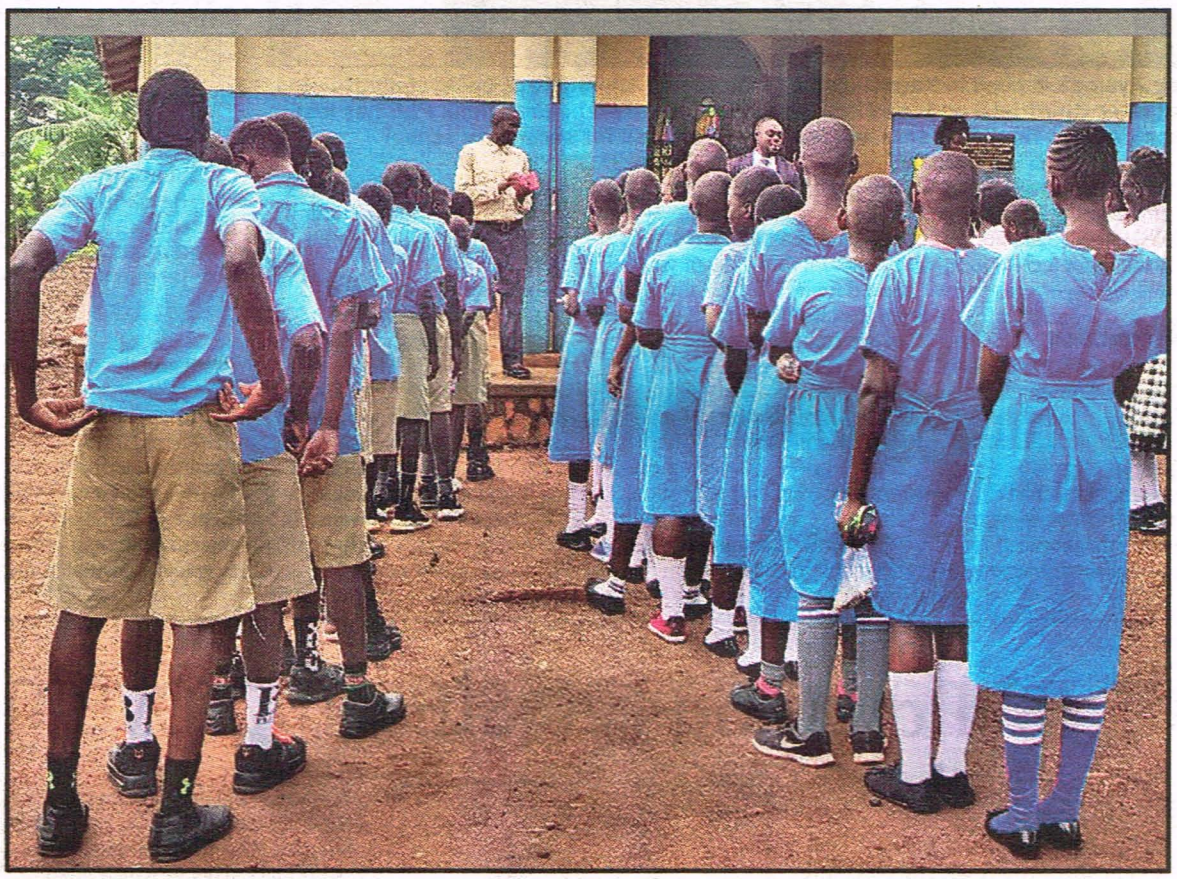
MMALIMU

Experts suggest alternatives

Among many middle class Ugandan parents, a debate on the relevancy of Primary Leaving Examinations (PLE) to their children's education is raging. To some, PLE is outdated and no longer tenable, but to others, it is the standard way of assessing a learner's readiness for secondary school, writes **MAUREEN NAKATUDDE**

Is PLE still relevant to Uganda's education needs?



Primary Seven candidates lining up for checking as they prepare to write their PLE exams. A section of educationists have suggested the abolition of PLE and a shift to continuous assessment

Martha Nakayaga sat for her Primary Leaving Examinations last year in Kampala and was sure of scoring aggregate four. To her disappointment, however, she scored aggregate six. And to make matters worse, some of her classmates scored aggregate four and five. As a result, Nakayaga was inconsolable despite attempts by her parents to console her.

About 80km away in Kayunga district, Beatrice Akello, another pupil, was disappointed, but in a different way — she was in Division U, meaning she does not qualify to join secondary school. Akello wants to repeat Primary Seven, but she thinks she is too tall and old to be in Primary Seven, where she has to study with her younger brother.

Akello is not alone. Each year, many children across Uganda score Division U or remain ungraded in Division X, making them ineligible to transition to Senior One.

According to the 2025 PLE results, the number of registered candidates who did not qualify for next level of education stood at 98,220 — 87,650 in Division U and 10,570 in Division X.

Such a big number of learners failing to transition to the next level of education, in addition to the anxiety around PLE has made some stakeholders question the relevancy of the exams.

Prof. Vincent Kakembo, the vice-chancellor of Muteesa II Royal University, says many countries have moved away from the PLE system.

He says emphasis should be put on the competencies of learners at different stages and then recommend them into the appropriate fields at the high school level.

"I have been in different countries such as the UK, South Africa, among others. You don't see this sort of primary leaving examination. It is just a matter of ensuring that students attain the desired competencies after which you have one major exam at per-university," he says.

Kakembo also calls for a switch to the competence-based curriculum at primary school level.

Although he agrees that learners should be examined at different levels, he says national exams should not be done at Primary Seven.

"At Primary Seven, I still feel that these examinations can be handled internally within primary schools. The learners' competencies and strong areas can be identified at that stage," Kakembo says.

He explains that learners should be given career guidance, depending on the subjects or fields they are good at as they transition to secondary school.

Kakembo says the current competition around PLE is unnecessary.

"It is being fuelled by the commercialisation of education," he says.

To transition learners, Kakembo suggests internal pre-entry exams.

Deogratious Kamuntu, an education consultant in Kampala, agrees with Kakembo, arguing that in countries such as Canada, children are not examined until they have clocked the age of 16 — at college level.

Kamuntu also says while regular assessments are good, it eats into the time that would be spent building competencies that allow the learner to gain knowledge.

He roots for more competence-based learning.

"Here, learners focus more on experiential learning, project-based learning, and newer approaches," he says.

Kamuntu says developing countries such as Uganda should focus on approaches that focus on learning by doing, creating opportunities for learners to gain knowledge and demonstrating it, as opposed to the rote learning and memorisation system that PLE is based on.

"So, you ensure that the performance in the routine day-to-day learning accounts for a significant portion of the end-of-cycle assessment. The PLE system is defective. For instance, if a learner has been in school for seven years, are you going to judge their proficiency in a skill or competency by an examination of two-and-a-half hours or are you going to look at their journey right from Primary One?" he says.

Kamuntu says whereas PLE is good, it does not look at other competencies and life skills that the learner has acquired — like relating well with their peers, art, music, debating, dance and drama. He, therefore, suggests Uganda's education system should rethink how learners acquire knowledge, the values, skills and competency that it aims to build.

PLE PROPONENTS

Daniel Nkada, a former commissioner for basic education at the education ministry, says whereas some people

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are rubbishing PLE, it is still relevant to the needs of today's education.

"PLE helps schools to transition the learner from one level to another," he says.

He notes that PLE is the 'barometer' for establishing pupils' comprehension abilities across the country.

Nkada, however, says a time has come when parents should also mind about the skills the children have gained and how they can apply them.

Dr Joseph Cuthbert Epodoi, a senior consultant surgeon and urologist at Soroti Referral Hospital, also agrees with Nkada, saying PLE helps to sieve the strong learners from weak ones so that appropriate action is taken.

He says PLE helps the Government, teachers and other stakeholders to know the effectiveness of teaching in schools so that appropriate action is taken.

Epodoi agrees, saying basic skills such as communication and innovation should be built in primary schools.

Prof. Betty Nannyonga Kivumbi, a lecturer at Makerere University, says primary education is the foundation of other studies, which is assessed through PLE.

She, however, encourages the Government to roll out the competence-based curriculum in primary schools, with the aim of empowering learners with skills, knowledge and understanding for a child to succeed in life.

Andrew Ayamba, a pupil in Kagadi district who scored aggregate 5, being congratulated by his father (third-left) and teachers. Whereas some stakeholders think PLE has lost relevance, others think it assesses a learner's readiness for secondary school

REVIEW COMMISSION

In May 2025, the he Education Policy Review Commission (EPRC) recommended the scrapping of Primary Leaving Examinations.

The commission, chaired by former education minister Amanya Mushega, called for phasing out Primary Seven and recommended replacing PLE with school-based continuous assessments.

"I do not think any of you is asked for a PLE pass slip when requesting for a job," a member of the commission said during the release of the report in May.

The team advocated for an 11-year long basic education framework with a year of pre-primary (nursery) education, and six years of primary.

This will be a shift from the current education system that has a structure of seven years of primary education, starting at Primary One for children aged six years.

The commission instituted by the First Lady and the Minister of Education and Sports, Mrs Janet Museveni, in Legal Notice No.5 of 2021, was tasked with reviewing the Government White Paper on Education of 1992 to establish the implementation status, effectiveness, and relevance of the policy towards achievement of the education needs of users and the goals of the Government.

REVIEW EFFORTS

According to the National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC), a review of the curriculum at primary level is going on, with the target year of roll-out being 2028.

"Consultations with stakeholders are going on. The aim is to align with the one at O' and A'level [competence-based] as well the pre-primary and university," Tadeo Bwambale, the NCDC public relations officer, told *Mwalimu.*

WHY WORLD BANK CALLED FOR ABOLITION OF PLE

Amidst declining rates of transition from primary to secondary schools, the World Bank in 2019 advised that Uganda does away with PLE.

The bank said Uganda would save about sh306.4b that it said went into conducting the exams annually.

According the authors of the report, if Uganda did away with PLE, it would greatly improve the transition rates to lower secondary, which, according to them, is currently very low. The report indicated that the high number of learners who fail to transition to secondary school means massive wastage of resources by training pupils who do not progress.

The bank's 13th edition report titled: Economic Update on Human capital in Uganda, pointed out that of the over 1.7 million pupils who joined Primary One, only about 30% made it to Primary Seven. According to the report, even after sitting the national examinations, almost half of them fail to join secondary school.

The World Bank said Uganda needed to improve the transition rate from primary to lower secondary education from 32% to 47% by 2025.

The bank argued that PLE is a great limiting factor in the transition of pupils. It questioned the validity and quality of the exams done in a few hours in determining the pupils' fate.