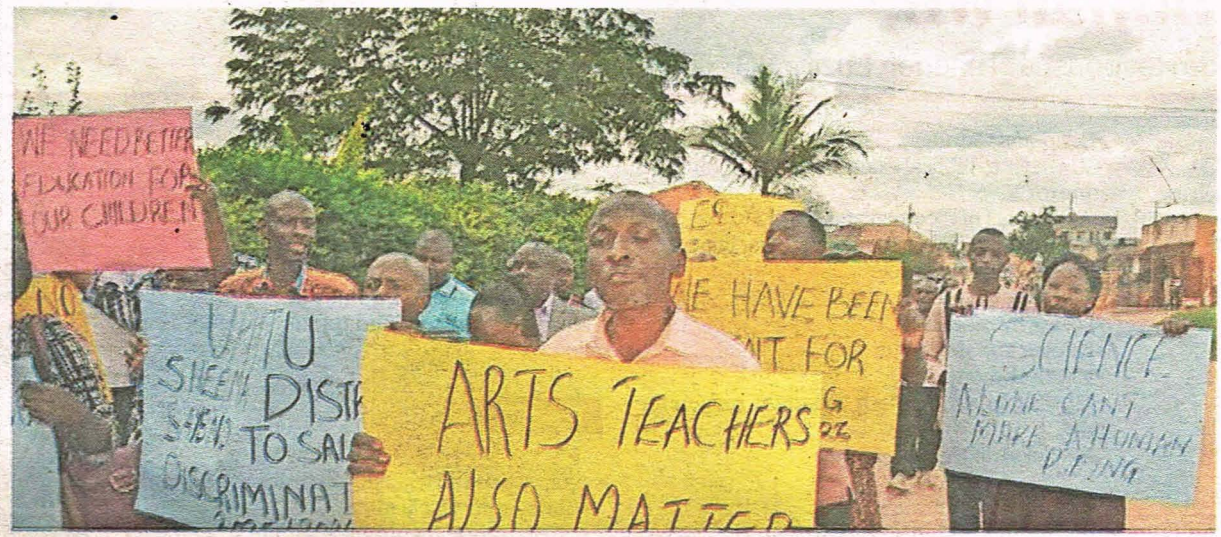
Is poor performance of students in Arts subjects linked to low pay?

Big Issue. Experts say both humanities and sciences are interconnected and should not be treated as competing fields. They say the discussion should be centred on value and output.

BY SHABIBAH NAKIRIGYA



Arts teachers protest over disparity in their salaries compared to their sciences counterparts. PHOTO/FILE

Education stakeholders have dismissed salary disparities as the primary driver for poor performance in humanities subjects, in the last O-Level examinations, arguing that there are other underlying systemic issues.

The debate around unequal pay between science and humanities teachers has in recent years gained momentum, with many humanities teachers attributing low motivation to teach to poor remuneration.

However, experts say the problem goes beyond salaries. Mr Patrick Kaboyo, an education analyst said poor scores were registered in science subjects, even after teachers here were prioritised. "Those whose examinations were cancelled in science subjects due to cheating show that the issue is not about pay, but about how effectively students are taught. And in such cases, there is no value for money regardless of the subject," Kaboyo said.

He emphasised the need for a more balanced and honest national conversation on remuneration, urging policy makers to adopt a rational approach in determining pay based on value and output.

"The discussion should be based on the value of work and not assumptions that one discipline is more important than the other," Mr Kaboyo said. According to him, both humanities and sciences are interconnected and should not be treated as competing fields.

"Scientists rely on social systems to function. They do not exist in isolation. There is interdependence between human relations and scientific development," he said. Mr Kaboyo argued that harmony in pay is important, citing that the International Labour Convention provides for equal pay for work of equal value.

He acknowledged that disparities in pay can be justified in cases where professionals demonstrate measurable innovation and impact. "If scientists or professionals are producing innovations that directly contribute to national development, then that can be considered in determining pay. But mere teaching should not automatically attract higher salaries," he added.

He further stressed that whether in sciences or humanities, what the country needs, are solutions that add value to society. Ms Sania Naggadya, the director of Studies at St Janan Schools Kabalagala, said poor performance in humanities is largely linked to classroom practices and teacher commitment rather than salary structures.

"Many teachers take on multiple part-time roles across different schools, which affects their effectiveness. This limits the time they dedicate to learners. As a result, students do not receive the attention they need," Ms Naggadya said.

She emphasised the importance of exposure to different examination formats as a way to improve performance.

"Teachers need to expose students to a wide range of questions so that they become familiar with examination patterns," she said.

Ms Naggadya also highlighted the impact of changes in assessment systems, particularly the raised pass mark, which she said has affected student attitudes. "Some students assume that pass marks are always lowered. When results come out, many are caught off guard," she explained.

She pointed to structural challenges within the curriculum, including imbalances in subject papers. "Some humanities subjects have multiple compulsory papers, making them more demanding. This creates pressure for both teachers and students," she added.

She also highlighted irregular attendance among learners, especially in schools with both day and boarding sections, has also been cited as a major concern. "Students who miss classes struggle to catch up, which affects overall performance," Ms Naggadya said. She warned that students are increasingly relying on online materials and social media for revision, yet these are often not detailed enough. "The culture of thorough reading has declined."

Mr Robert Lwanga, a senior inspector of Schools in Makindye Ssabagabo, said while salary disparities may not be the sole cause, perceptions of being undervalued have affected morale among teachers of the humanities.

"Some teachers feel that their work is not appreciated and this affects quality of their work," he said. He also noted that when teachers are constantly absent, they fail to complete the syllabus on time. This leaves learners unprepared for examinations.

Mr Lwanga added that activities such as guidance and counselling, extra coaching and student consultations are often neglected. These are essential in helping learners improve," he said.

He called for a multi-pronged approach to address the challenges, including public awareness and policy reforms. "There is a need for public sensitisation about the causes of pay disparities and their implications on education," he said.

He also urged government to fast-track the implementation of the Teachers' Policy of 2021, which seeks to harmonise salaries across the profession. "This policy will ensure that teachers at the same level are fairly remunerated. Its implementation could address some of the concerns raised," he added.

He also noted that improving humanities performance will require more than salary adjustments. He says stronger accountability among teachers, better student discipline and improved teaching strategies will go a long way.

"Unless schools address issues like teacher absenteeism, inadequate learner support and the declining reading culture, performance in humanities will remain below expectations."