CHAPTER 8

# Exploring the Determinants of Entry Grades and Challenges Faced by Students Admitted to Public Universities in Uganda through Direct Entry Schemes?

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**Abstract**

Entry into public universities in developing countries is highly competitive, presenting significant opportunities for aspiring students. While existing research primarily focuses on determinants of academic performance during university studies, there is limited exploration of factors influencing entry grades and challenges faced by students while at the university. Using the Input-Transformation-Output model, this research examines determinants of students' entry grades and challenges encountered by students in Gulu University in Northern Uganda and Makerere University in Central Region. Data on determinants of students' entry grades and insights into challenges faced by students while at the university were collected using key informant interviews and analysed using content analysis. Findings revealed that the programme of study, entry scheme, selection criteria, entry academic performance, and intake capacity determined students' entry grades. Students face numerous challenges, including inadequate facilities for those with disabilities, difficulties balancing academics with co-curricular activities, lack of career guidance, financial constraints, insufficient learning materials, limited internet access, high student-teacher ratios, and social obstacles. The study highlights the complex determinants of entry grades and the diverse challenges faced by students in Ugandan public universities and proposes targeted interventions to address these issues, thereby fostering academic success and equitable opportunities for all students.

**Keywords**

public universities – entry grades – students – direct entry schemes – academic performance

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## 1 Introduction

Issues surrounding students' entry grades, and the associated challenges faced by those admitted to universities in their pursuit of academic excellence have been highlighted as crucial within the global agenda (Mutie, 2011; Kuo, 2011; Mporanayo & Andala, 2018; Yan & Wu, 2020). Several studies have explored the impact of entry grades on academic outcomes (Cyrenne & Chan, 2012; Aciro et al., 2023; Aidoo-Buameh & Ayagre, 2013; Aboma, 2023). For instance, Cyrenne and Chan (2012) examined the influence of entry grades and other factors on students' academic performance at the University of Winnipeg in Canada, revealing that international students with solid entry grades sometimes performed poorly by the end of their university programmes. Similarly, Aidoo-Buameh and Ayagre (2013) investigated the relationship between entry grades in accounting at the undergraduate level and final academic performance at Central University College in Ghana, finding no significant correlation.

Aboma (2023) focused on the correlation between admission procedures and academic performance at Madda Walabu University in Ethiopia, reporting a significant positive relationship between the two. Furthermore, Aciro et al. (2023) explored the connection between high school grades and university academic performance in Uganda, finding no significant interrelation between high school grades and performance in Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery programmes. Notably, male students who joined university with lower grades than their female counterparts outperformed them by the end of their studies, possibly due to the unique challenges they faced during their academic journey.

An evaluation of the literature mentioned above reveals a limited understanding of the determinants of students' entry grades and the challenges faced by undergraduate students in Ugandan universities as they strive for academic excellence. Therefore, this study seeks to assess, first, the determinants of students' pre-entry grades to public universities and, second, the challenges that university students encounter during their studies in Uganda's public universities.

University students often contend with a myriad of challenges in their pursuit of academic dreams (Mutie, 2011; Kuo, 2011; Lee & Opiyo, 2011; Mporanayo & Opiyo, 2018; Yan & Wu, 2020). These challenges include financial difficulties, such as raising tuition fees (Mutie, 2011); racial and language barriers for international students (Kuo, 2011; Lee & Opio, 2011); difficulties faced by rural students adjusting to elite universities (Yan & Wu, 2020; Alghail & Mahfoodh, 2016); and balancing academics with co-curricular activities. Institutional

challenges, including inadequate career guidance, limited internet access, understocked libraries, insufficient facilities for disabled learners, scarce learning materials, and high student-teacher ratios, further complicate their academic experience (Mporanayo & Andala, 2018).

In Uganda, the establishment of public universities falls under the jurisdiction of the MoES, operating in accordance with regulations set by the NCHE and subject to parliamentary approval (The Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act, 2001, as amended in 2003 and 2006). These institutions primarily rely on public funding allocated through the National Budget to sustain their operations. The country currently boasts nine public universities, including Makerere University, Mbarara University of Science and Technology, Kyambogo University, Gulu University, Busitema University, Muni University, Soroti University of Science and Technology, Lira University, and Kabale University (The Republic of Uganda: Ministry of Education and Sports, 2024). This study was conducted at Makerere and Gulu Universities, two prominent institutions within Uganda's higher education landscape (Aciro et al., 2023).

Public universities in Uganda offer undergraduate degree programs through three primary entry schemes: direct, diploma, and mature age. Our research focuses on the direct entry scheme, which considers candidates who have completed the Uganda Advanced Certificate of Education (UACE) or A' Level and met the minimum admission requirement – typically at least two principal passes at A' Level (Wamala, 2013). Admission is highly competitive, characterised by stringent criteria and high cut-off points. However, entry grades for students admitted under the direct admissions scheme vary across years, study programs, and different admission schemes, including national merit, district quota, talented sports persons' scheme, disability scheme, and private sponsorship scheme. Moreover, admitted students frequently encounter significant challenges during their academic journey, stemming from both the intricacies of the admission process and the realities of campus life.

While the admission process for public universities in Uganda presents promising opportunities for prospective students, it is marked by fluctuating entry grades and formidable challenges (Mohamed, 2020; Lee & Opio, 2011). Although the direct entry scheme provides a pathway for eligible candidates, the dynamic nature of entry grades poses a considerable hurdle for applicants. The challenges faced by admitted students span a broad spectrum, encompassing difficulties associated with various entry schemes and broader issues related to campus life (Mporanayo & Andala, 2018). This study investigates these complexities, exploring the determinants of entry grades and examining the challenges encountered by students in Ugandan public universities, with the aim

of fostering a deeper understanding and facilitating targeted interventions to enhance the higher education experience. The chapter is structured into five sections: introduction, methodology, results, discussion, and conclusion.

## 2 Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research approach. The quantitative phase utilised a retrospective documentary analysis to get insights on entry grades and academic performance of students. The qualitative approach explored two key aspects: (1) the determinants of entry grades under direct admission to public universities in Uganda and (2) the challenges faced by admitted students during their studies. This methodological choice aligns with the recommendations of Creswell (2018) and Saunders and Bezzina (2015), who advocate for the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to explore complex issues. Eyisi (2016) also supports this approach, emphasising its ability to achieve in-depth understanding through triangulation.

The study was conducted in Makerere University and Gulu University. Makerere University was selected due to its status as Uganda's first public university. At the same time, Gulu University was chosen to represent regional public universities, particularly as northern Uganda's first non-residential public university. Stratified sampling was employed to ensure diversity in academic programs, focusing on four critical programs in both universities: i.e., Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery, Bachelor of Science in Agriculture/Bachelor of Agriculture, Bachelor of Business Administration, and Bachelor of Development Studies.

The research population consisted of deans and heads of departments from selected faculties at Makerere University and Gulu University. These individuals were purposely chosen to represent different facets of Uganda's public university system.

Quantitative data on entry grades and academic performance were extracted from graduate records and databases at Makerere and Gulu Universities. Additionally, key informant interviews with seven deans and thirteen heads of departments provided insights into entry grades and the challenges students faced across various admission schemes.

To analyse quantitative data, cross tabulations and frequencies were used while for qualitative data, content analysis was applied to derive meaningful insights on determinants of entry grades and challenges students face during their studies.

Throughout the research process, ethical considerations were strictly adhered to. Ethical clearance from Gulu University Research and Ethics Committee (GUREC) and then from Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST) was obtained. All participants were informed about the study's purpose, and consent forms were provided to ensure voluntary and informed participation.

## 3 Results

### 3.1 *Entry Grades under the Direct Entry Admission Scheme*

The findings on entry grades of students admitted to the two public universities, as shown in Table 8.1, reveal that over half of the students had a weighted score[1] of 41 and above, indicating that the majority of admitted students performed exceptionally well at A' Level. Additionally, 29% of students had a weighted score from 31–40, while 16% had a weighted score between 11–30. These results underscore the importance of high grades as a critical determinant for enrollment in public universities.

### 3.2 *Entry Grades Based on a Programme of Study*

The findings on students' entry grades across different academic programs at Makerere and Gulu Universities under the direct entry admission scheme (Figure 8.1) indicate that the range of entry grades for science programs was generally narrower than that for humanities. This suggests that students admitted to the two humanities programmes had entry grades ranging from very low to very high. In contrast, students in the two science programs had grades that were more closely clustered. However, there was a notable difference in grade

TABLE 8.1 Entry grades of students admitted to Makerere and Gulu Universities in Uganda under the direct entry admission scheme

| **Student's entry grades (weighted score)** | **Percentages** |
|---|---|
| 11–20 | 2 |
| 21–30 | 14 |
| 31–40 | 29 |
| 41 and above | 55 |
| Total | 100 |

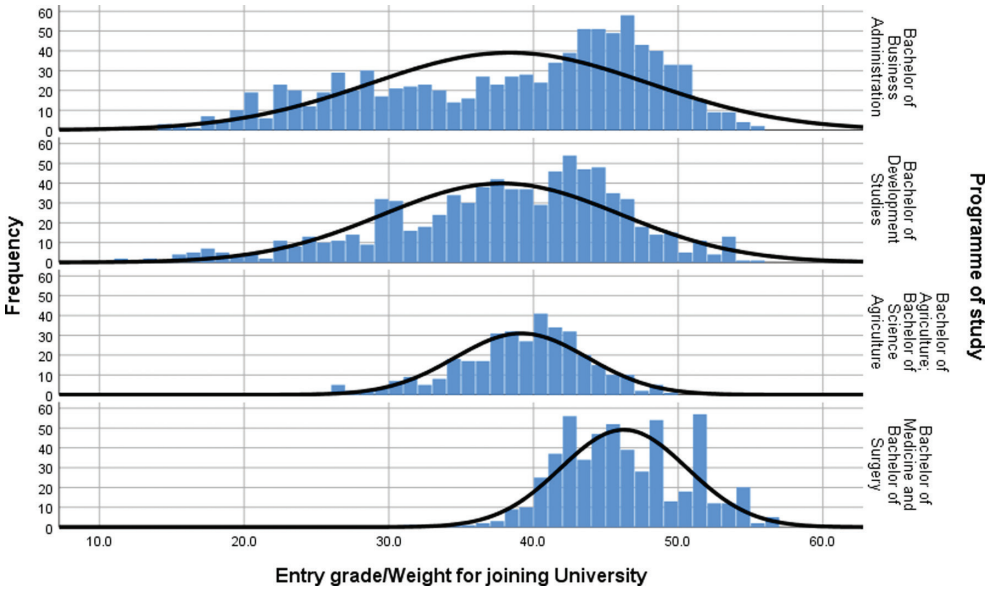



FIGURE 8.1 Entry grades of students admitted to Makerere and Gulu Universities under direct entry admission schemes by programme of study

levels between the two science programs: students admitted to the Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery programs had distinctly higher grades than those in the Bachelor of Science in Agriculture program. For the two humanities programs, both the range and levels of grades were almost identical. These findings confirm that Medicine is a highly sought-after field, attracting students with top grades.

### 3.3 *Determinants of Entry Grades in Public Universities in Uganda*

The investigation into the factors influencing entry grades for students under direct entry schemes at Ugandan public universities, particularly Makerere and Gulu Universities, uncovered a wide range of determinants shaping admission criteria. Insights from deans and heads of departments revealed a complex and nuanced understanding of these factors, highlighting the multifaceted nature of the admissions process. Participants emphasized the significant impact of various factors, as illustrated in Figure 8.2.

Figure 8.2 illustrates a comprehensive model detailing the determinants influencing the entry grades of students admitted to public universities in Uganda under direct entry admission schemes. At the heart of this model is the dynamic interaction between various factors shaping these entry grades, reflecting the nuanced nature of the admissions process.

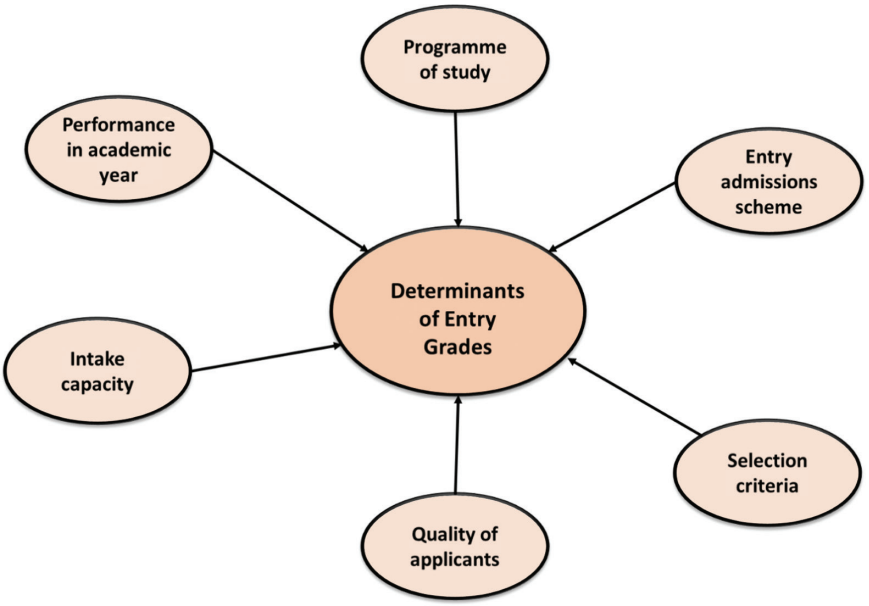



FIGURE 8.2 Model for determinants of entry grades of students admitted to public universities in Uganda under direct entry admission schemes

The primary determinant of entry grades identified in the study was the nationwide performance of A' Level students. Higher overall performance across the country correlated with elevated cut-off points,[2] while lower performance led to reduced cut-offs. This relationship between student performance and entry grades underscores the broader educational landscape's impact on university admissions. One participant highlighted this fluid nature of entry grade determination, stating; *the highest and lowest entry grades vary depending on the performance of students in the country in a particular academic year* (KII Number 3).

The programme of study also emerged as a critical factor influencing entry grades. High-demand programmes, such as the Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery, consistently required higher entry grades due to significant demand and competition. This finding highlights the intricate link between programme popularity and admission criteria. Additionally, entry grades varied based on the admission schemes, with students admitted under the national merit scheme typically presenting higher scores than those admitted through other pathways. This distinction emphasises the differential impact of various entry routes on admission standards, reflecting the diverse institutional landscape within Ugandan public universities. Overall, these

findings reveal the complex web of factors influencing entry grades, from student performance to programme demand and admission scheme specifics, providing valuable insights into the dynamics of university admissions in Uganda.

Deans and heads of departments shed further light on the relationship between A' Level performance and entry grades in Ugandan public universities. Participants noted that entry grades fluctuate based on the general performance of students nationwide in a given academic year. Higher national performance leads to higher cut-off points, reflecting increased competition for university slots, while lower performance results in lower cut-offs. One respondent also observed the rising trend in entry grades over time, remarking, 'roughly, these days, the entry grades have gone so high as compared to those days. Now a student should have 2 'A's' and a 'B' to join Bachelor of Development Studies on government sponsorship' (KII Number 17). This observation underscores the evolving nature of entry-grade criteria, mirroring broader trends in academic achievement and the growing competitiveness of university admissions.

The insights provided by deans and department heads also highlight the increasing stringency of entry-grade requirements in Ugandan public universities. Entry grades have steadily risen, reflecting a trend towards higher academic standards for admission. This upward trajectory underscores the growing competitiveness of university admissions, with stricter criteria ensuring the selection of top-performing students. The assertion that 'Now a student should have 2 'A's' and a 'B' to join Bachelor of Development Studies on government sponsorship' (KII Number 17) illustrates the heightened expectations placed on prospective university students, emphasising the increasingly competitive nature of higher education in Uganda.

Moreover, the informants emphasised the variability in entry grades across different academic programmes. Entry grades were found to be heavily influenced by the popularity and competitiveness of specific programmes, with high-demand fields like Medicine requiring significantly higher entry grades than others. Participant Number 2 highlighted this trend, noting, 'The highest grades in this faculty are those who score an 'A', 'B', and 'C' in their 'A' Level. We get the majority of students from those who failed to join the medicine course' (KII Number 2). Similarly, Participant Number 6 remarked on the consistently high entry grades for the Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery, stating, 'The cut-off points to qualify a student to join a course like Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery on either government or private sponsorship is always high compared to the other programs offered in this faculty' (KII Number 6).

These insights underscore the competitive nature of admissions to specific programmes, where only students with exceptional academic performance secure placement.

Additionally, the study revealed that entry grades for specific programmes could fluctuate based on factors such as the quality of the applicant pool and institutional capacity. Participant Number 8 elaborated on this variability, mentioning instances where the entry grades for Medicine fluctuated depending on the composition of the applicant pool and overall competitiveness in a given year. 'We have sometimes had the lowest depending on the cut-off points in a particular year', noted Participant Number 8, highlighting the fluidity of entry-grade requirements, influenced by factors beyond academic performance alone.

Deans and department heads also underscored the role of entry admissions schemes in shaping entry grades. Students admitted under the national merit scheme consistently exhibited the highest scores compared to those admitted through other avenues such as district quotas, talent-based admissions, or private sponsorship. As KII Number 9 explained,

> the cream that comes under national merit sponsorship always have the highest scores, for example, 20 or 19 or 18 points, but those who come via private scheme come with even 8 points provided they score two principal passes in essential subjects.

This observation highlights the significant variance in academic performance among students admitted under different schemes, emphasising the disparities in selection criteria across various entry pathways.

Furthermore, the mode of study emerged as another factor influencing entry grades, with different cut-off points established for day, weekend, and evening programmes. Participant Number 17 noted, 'The cut-off points vary between day and evening students. For day students, it can be 35 points, and for evening students, it comes down to 20 points to join this course of Bachelor of Science in Agriculture'. This discrepancy reflects universities' nuanced approach to admissions, tailoring criteria to accommodate the diverse needs of students enrolled in different modes of study.

Finally, the research highlighted the intricate selection criteria for various programmes, contingent on essential and relevant subjects. Informants stressed the role of the Joint Admissions Committee and individual university admission boards in setting these criteria. Participant Number 10 noted,

I must say that things have changed so much in this institution because the university selection system determines students' entry grades. However,

sometimes, the university tries to be lenient to those students who want to come on private sponsorship by lowering the cut-off points.

This insight reflects the balance between national standards and university-specific adjustments in admissions criteria.

Overall, the research findings underscore the complex interplay of factors influencing entry grades in Ugandan public universities. From the quality of the applicant pool to the programme's popularity, mode of study, and the selection criteria employed by universities, these factors collectively shape the dynamic landscape of university admissions in Uganda.

### 3.4 *Challenges Students under Direct Entry Schemes Encounter while at the University*

Interviews with deans and heads of departments reveal a range of challenges faced by students in Uganda's public universities, as shown in Table 8.2. These challenges, although varying by entry scheme, often present significant obstacles across different admission pathways. For instance, students admitted through the national merit and district quota schemes frequently experience disruptions due to strikes, pointing to a broader issue of campus unrest. Meanwhile, students admitted under the disability scheme confront unique difficulties, such as social isolation, limited mobility, and inadequate facilities that fail to meet their specific needs. The interviews highlight how these challenges severely impact students' academic progress, particularly for those dealing with disabilities that slow their learning pace and restrict access to essential resources.

Privately sponsored students face a different set of challenges, primarily revolving around financial constraints and the need to balance family, work, and academic responsibilities. The interviews emphasise the complexity of these issues, revealing how limited financial support strains students' ability to continue their studies while managing other obligations. Similarly, talented sports persons struggle to balance their athletic commitments with academic responsibilities, often resulting in time management difficulties and subsequent academic underperformance.

Beyond these scheme-specific challenges, all students encounter systemic issues such as a lack of career guidance, socio-economic difficulties, administrative inefficiencies, and technological barriers. These challenges manifest in various ways, including insufficient learning materials, limited internet access, high student-to-teacher ratios, and rigorous examination standards set by lecturers. Overall, the interview data highlight the multifaceted challenges facing students in Uganda's public universities and underscore the need for comprehensive support systems to address these obstacles and create a more conducive environment for student success.

TABLE 8.2 Challenges faced by students under the different entry admission schemes in public universities in Uganda

| Challenges associated with the various entry schemes | | | | General challenges |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **National merit and district quarter** | **Disability scheme** | **Private scheme** | **Talented sports persons' scheme** | |
| Involvement is strikes | Students' social distance from them | Limited funding | Inability to balance the time between sports and academics | Lack of career guidance |
| Poor performance | Slow work pace | Responsibilities (family, work, and studies) | | Lack of personal requirements |
| | Mobility problems | | Poor performance | Administrative-related challenges relating to limited learning materials, limited internet, electricity load shedding, high student-teacher ratio, inadequate resources to run the university |
| | Sight and hearing challenges | | | |
| | Limited facilities to support the learning of students with disability | | | Lack of orientation for some students, |
| | | | | Technological challenges |
| | | | | Poverty |
| | | | | Over-relaxing; lack of self-drive to study |
| | | | | Setting challenging exams by lecturers |

The challenges faced by students under various entry admissions schemes in public universities in Uganda, detailed in Table 8.2, reveal a complex landscape of obstacles within the educational system. Students admitted under the National Merit and District Quota schemes, for example, often encounter disruptions due to strikes, leading to academic underperformance. This suggests a link between campus unrest and diminished academic outcomes, reflecting interruptions to the learning environment. In contrast, students admitted under the Disability Scheme face distinct issues such as social isolation, mobility constraints, and insufficient facilities tailored to their needs. These challenges highlight the critical need for inclusive practices and accessible resources to support students with disabilities.

Privately sponsored students experience financial difficulties and the strain of balancing family, work, and academic responsibilities. This intersection of socio-economic factors and educational access underscores the necessity for targeted support mechanisms to alleviate financial pressures and enhance academic success. Similarly, talented sportspersons struggle to manage their time effectively between athletic and academic commitments, often leading to academic underperformance. This situation emphasises the need for holistic support systems to help students manage both their sports and academic responsibilities.

Across all entry schemes, students face a range of systemic challenges, including inadequate career guidance, administrative inefficiencies, technological barriers, and socio-economic hardships. These challenges manifest as limited access to learning materials, insufficient internet connectivity, high student-to-teacher ratios, and stringent examination standards. Addressing these systemic issues requires comprehensive interventions aimed at improving support structures, promoting inclusivity, and fostering a conducive learning environment.

Interview insights provide a vivid picture of the challenges encountered by students across different admission schemes. Participant 1 highlighted how strikes impact National Merit students, stating:

> The national merit students are faced with the problem of getting involved in strikes, which takes a lot of the time that they should have used to concentrate on their studies. They do this as a means of trying to get more money from the government.

They also observed that these students often become complacent, noting:

> National merit students also tend to relax during year one of their studies at the university. They think, after all, we excelled in 'A' Level'. Relaxing in

> year one causes them to perform poorly. Once the performance is poor in year one, they cannot improve so much in the last semesters of their studies since grading is based on Cumulative Grade Point Average.

Participant 14 discussed the unique challenges faced by students under the Disability Scheme, mentioning issues such as a lack of interpreters and physical limitations. They stated,

> We do not have interpreters for some deaf cases. These deaf students say they can hear lecturers when they are near, but, in most cases, when the lecturers or persons talking are far away, they cannot hear them. One disabled student had only one finger, and he used that one finger to hold the pen and write. This student was very bright but was brought down by this challenge in spite of more time given to him to accomplish his tasks.

This highlights the need for specialised support services for students with disabilities.

The financial struggles of privately sponsored students were also noted, with Participant 1 emphasising difficulties in securing tuition fees. These financial pressures can lead to missed exams, irregular attendance, and late registration. Participant 16 pointed out the detrimental effects of poverty, explaining that:

> The detrimental effects of poverty on academic performance underscore the disproportionate burden borne by students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly within the private sponsorship scheme.

Furthermore, Participant 12 discussed the impact of electricity load shedding and internet connectivity issues on student performance, noting, 'The lack of fuel for standby generators disrupted teaching and private studies'. It highlighted the challenges posed by internet connectivity issues, particularly with the introduction of e-learning programmes.

Administrative hurdles were also mentioned, with Participant 12 lamenting the inadequacy of library resources and secretarial services. Participant 16 added that 'smartphone addiction' diverts attention away from academic pursuits, and Participant 5 emphasised the difficulty some students face in balancing academic, work, and family commitments. These insights underscore the need for increased support services to address the diverse needs of students and facilitate their academic success.

## 4 Discussion

### 4.1 *Determinants of Entry Grades*

The discussion on the determinants of entry grades for public universities under direct entry admission schemes highlights the complexities of the selection process. The study reveals that several factors, including annual performance quality, the entry scheme, selection criteria, program of study, and intake capacity, influence entry grades. It is evident that the quality of A' Level performance directly impacts the cut-off points for admission each year, with higher national performance resulting in elevated cut-off points. This finding is consistent with previous research by Nunes et al. (2010), which noted a correlation between entry qualifications and pre-university performance. Furthermore, Nshemereirwe (2013) and Boliver and Powell (2022) underscore the significance of A' Level academic performance in university selection, focusing on its predictive value for academic success at the degree level.

The admission process aims to uphold principles of procedural fairness by consistently and transparently evaluating students' potential to succeed in university settings. However, this focus on high-performing students raises concerns about potentially neglecting candidates with weaker grades who might benefit from additional support to excel academically.

The study also reveals disparities in entry grades among different admission schemes, with those under the National Merit Scheme typically achieving higher entry grades due to intense competition. The research highlights the role of joint admissions committees and university admissions boards in determining entry grades through weighted scores based on essential subjects for specific programs. Aminudin et al. (2018) support this approach, noting that weighted scores help in selecting suitable candidates from a pool of applicants. Mercer and Puddey (2011) emphasise the need for ongoing evaluation and validation of selection criteria to align with evolving admission standards. Understanding admission criteria is crucial not only for admissions boards but also for university stakeholders, including deans, directors, and heads of departments, to ensure alignment with institutional objectives.

Additionally, the study points out that the program of study and intake capacity affect entry grades, with specific programs having distinct requirements. For example, science programs generally have higher entry grades compared to humanities programs due to varying demands across fields of study. This aligns with Kwadwo et al. (2023), who argue that science and mathematics subjects often have stricter grading standards compared to humanities.

However, entry-grade requirements can vary significantly within the broader categories of science and humanities (Adamuti-Trache & Sweet, 2014). Intake

capacity also influences entry grades, with higher capacities potentially leading to lower entry requirements. This dynamic is particularly evident in the allocation of government slots by joint admissions committees and the determination of private sponsorship slots by university admissions boards. Ensuring that admission processes remain transparent and equitable is essential, with decisions guided by the overarching goal of facilitating student success and academic excellence.

### 4.2 *Challenges Encountered by Students under Direct Entry Schemes*

Examining the challenges faced by undergraduate students admitted to public universities through direct entry admission schemes reveals a complex array of issues, encompassing both scheme-specific and broader systemic problems. While many challenges are linked to the specifics of various entry schemes, some issues transcend these schemes and affect all students, regardless of their mode of admission (Yan & Wu, 2020).

For example, students admitted under the National Merit and District Quota schemes often face disruptions due to involvement in strikes. In contrast, students admitted through Disability Schemes encounter unique difficulties, including slower work pace due to disabilities, mobility issues, and inadequate facilities for learning and assessment. These findings align with Lee (2014), who emphasised the need to address the specific challenges faced by students with disabilities, such as visual or physical impairments, which can significantly hinder their educational experience.

Similarly, students under the Talented Sports Persons scheme struggle to balance academic and sporting commitments, which can impede their academic progress. This issue contrasts with the argument by Garcia and Subia (2019), who found a positive correlation between academic performance and participation in school athletics. According to their research, higher academic performance often accompanies greater involvement in sports, suggesting that athletics can enhance academic outcomes through improved physical health and discipline.

Privately sponsored students frequently face financial constraints, which force them to manage multiple responsibilities, including familial and work obligations, to sustain their education. This financial strain often results in late registration, missed exams, delayed graduation, or even dropping out. Mitchell et al. (2019) highlight similar global concerns, documenting how rising tuition fees and reduced funding exacerbate educational inequalities between students from different socio-economic backgrounds.

The study also identifies several general challenges affecting all students, regardless of their entry scheme. These include a lack of career guidance, instances of over-relaxation, endemic poverty, and administrative issues such

as inadequate learning materials, poor internet connectivity, and electricity shortages. These challenges not only hinder academic progress but also contribute to a sense of disorientation among students who struggle to adapt to university life (Lee, 2014; Kuo, 2011). Addressing these pervasive issues requires comprehensive institutional support mechanisms to meet the diverse needs of students and foster an environment conducive to learning and personal development. Additionally, tackling broader systemic issues like tuition inflation and resource constraints is essential for ensuring equitable access to higher education and promoting student success.

## 5 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the complexities surrounding entry grades for students entering public universities in Uganda. It highlights the multifaceted nature of determinants influencing entry grades, including academic performance, program of study, entry schemes, and selection criteria. For instance, the consistently high entry grades required for programs such as Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery underscore the competitive nature of these fields and the rigorous selection processes involved. Similarly, the consistently high scores achieved by students admitted under the National Merit Scheme reflect the intense competition associated with this entry route.

The study also reveals a range of challenges that students face throughout their university experience, which arise from both specific entry admission schemes and broader systemic issues. These findings emphasise the necessity for public universities to implement proactive measures that address the diverse needs of students and foster a supportive learning environment. Additionally, there is a call for increased involvement of department heads and key stakeholders in the admission process to ensure greater transparency and accountability. Addressing these challenges is crucial for enhancing student success and improving the overall quality of higher education in Uganda.

## 6 Limitations of the Study

While this study has provided valuable insights into the influence of entry grades on the academic performance of undergraduate students, determinants of students' entry grades and challenges encountered by students in public universities in Uganda; it is essential to acknowledge its limitations,

which may have affected the research process and the generalisation of the findings. One of the primary limitations of this study was the heavy reliance on secondary data compared to primary data. This reliance on pre-existing data sources, such as academic records and electronic databases, which may have constrained the depth of analysis and limited the ability to explore certain factors that could only be addressed through primary data collection. This limitation could have affected the comprehensiveness of the study. On the other hand, variability in primary data is yet another factor which might have contributed to limitation of the study. The use of primary data collected through interviews with deans and heads of departments introduced variability in responses. Respondents' personal knowledge, exposure, and convictions influenced the information they provided. This subjectivity in responses may have made data analysis more challenging. It could potentially affect the reliability of the qualitative findings.

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## Notes

1 Weighted sources are cumulative marks candidates obtain after calcu.
2 Cut-off point is the minimum weighted score on admitting students for a particular programme of study. It is arrived at after admitting the last student for a programme.

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