

Four decades of Museveni's education expansion, science and technology



Students at Wandegaya Training Centre practising shoe making under The Presidential Initiative on Skilling the girl child. PHOTO COURTESY

BY DAVID WALUGEMBE

The education sector is one of the 'outstanding priorities of governments, beyond classrooms, lecture halls, and laboratories, to influence economic development.

From a country emerging

from years of instability in 1986 with limited access to education, Uganda today boasts millions of learners in primary schools, secondary schools, universities and vocational institutions, hence a transformation.

In 1986, access to education was a privilege for only a few. Many children, especially in rural

areas, never had the chance to complete primary school. Schools were inadequate, teachers were underpaid, and higher education opportunities were scarce.

According to the 2026 NRM manifesto, Uganda has 12,549 government/government-aided primary schools,

1,416 government or government-aided secondary schools, 189 tertiary institutions and 10 government universities.

Uganda has about 32,653 private primary schools, 6,121 private secondary schools, 115 private tertiary institutions and 68 private universities. There are also 9,412,869 children

in the government primary schools, 1,178,484 in government secondary schools, 30,171 students in government tertiary institutions and 111,598 students in government universities.

Currently, about 11,130,179 learners are enrolled in primary schools and 1,709,267 in secondary schools. This has led to a rise in the national literacy rate to 74 percent in 2024 from 43 percent in 1986.

The free education revolution

In 1997, Uganda's education system underwent significant strides through the introduction of Universal Primary Education (UPE), abolishing tuition fees for millions of Ugandan children.

The policy opened classroom doors to children from poor families who had previously been locked out of the education system.

Primary school enrolment surged from about 2.2 million learners in 1986 to more than 5.3 million by 1997, eventually surpassing 9.5 million pupils in later years.

"As we stop the theft of drugs, the next pressure on our families is the cost of education in government schools. In the coming term (kisanja), we are

determined to implement free education for our children in government schools (primary, secondary and tertiary)," he stated in the manifesto.

Speaking on the importance of education over the years, President Museveni repeatedly emphasised that education was essential for national transformation.

As UPE graduates increased, the government introduced Universal Secondary Education (USE) in 2007, making Uganda one of the countries in sub-Saharan Africa to provide free secondary education on a large scale.

Though schools charge learners money for requirements, the policy widened opportunities for children from low-income families and significantly increased enrolment in secondary schools across the country.

Building schools across Uganda

The NRM government embarked on a massive infrastructure expansion programme to ensure education reached every corner of the country; nearly every parish has a government-aided primary school, and seed secondary schools have been constructed in sub-counties across Uganda.

This has enabled thousands of new classrooms, science laboratories, and dormitories to be built; teacher recruitment has steadily increased; and teacher salaries, particularly for science teachers, have progressively improved.

Competence-Based Curriculum and Skills Training

In 2020, the government rolled out a new competence-based, lower secondary curriculum focused on practical learning, creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving rather than memorisation.

The reforms, designed to equip learners with skills relevant to the modern economy, have greatly impacted education, with a hope of

producing job creators, not merely job seekers.

"What is important is education that helps our children solve problems and create wealth," Museveni said.

The government also intensified vocational and technical training programmes to address youth unemployment.

Empowering girls through skills development

Among the flagship social empowerment programmes has been the "Skilling the Girl Child" initiative, targeting vulnerable girls and young women aged between 15 and 30 years.

The programme has provided free vocational training in tailoring, hairdressing, baking, weaving, catering, and craft making, hence empowering communities, reducing poverty, improving household incomes and helping young women become self-reliant entrepreneurs.

Across Kampala and other urban centres, thousands of beneficiaries have started small businesses, creating employment and improving livelihoods within their communities.

Key strides in science and technology

The government's emphasis on science education has led to the expansion of science laboratories in secondary schools, increased government sponsorship for science students at universities, and led to the growth of medical training institutions and regional referral teaching hospitals.

It has also led to the promotion of agricultural research and modern farming technologies and increasing enrolment in engineering, medicine, ICT and biotechnology programmes.

"We aim to establish smart classrooms nationwide and fully connect education institutions to Wi-Fi and negotiate with social media tech giants to enable our young people to monetise their content," Museveni said.

Technology and innovation have led to the expansion of ICT infrastructure and internet connectivity in schools and universities, the introduction of computer studies and digital literacy programmes, and growth of innovation hubs and university-based research centres.

It has also led to the development of e-learning systems and digital curriculum

platforms, hence the rise of Ugandan tech innovators in fintech, health technology and software development.

The education experts say the government's greatest contribution has been opening opportunities for ordinary Ugandans to access education regardless of social background.

From village classrooms to university lecture halls, mil-

lions of Ugandans who once had little hope for formal education have become teachers, doctors, engineers, lawyers, entrepreneurs and public servants.

As President Museveni begins another seventh term in office, the education sector is one of the pillars of his long political legacy, a journey that transformed Uganda from a nation with

limited educational opportunities into one striving for universal learning, skills development and scientific progress.

And for many families across Uganda, the story of free education remains deeply personal: a story of dreams unlocked, futures rewritten and generations empowered through the power of learning.

EMPOWERING GIRLS THROUGH SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Among the flagship social empowerment programmes has been the "Skilling the Girl Child" initiative, targeting vulnerable girls and young women aged between 15 and 30 years.

The programme has provided free vocational training in tailoring, hairdressing, baking, weaving, catering, and craft making, hence empowering communities, reducing poverty, improving household incomes and helping young women become self-reliant entrepreneurs.

Across Kampala and other urban centres, thousands of beneficiaries have started small businesses, creating employment and improving livelihoods within their communities.