

## **Teachers' Perspectives of the Challenges of Teaching Economics: A Case Study of One Public Secondary School in Uganda**

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### **Abstract:**

*This study examines the challenges of teaching Economics in one public secondary school in Uganda. The study employed a qualitative research paradigm using a case study design. The sample comprised of four Economics teachers at one selected secondary school in Kampala Uganda. Data collection methods included personal interviews, classroom observations and a focus group discussion. Content analysis was used in analyzing the data. The findings revealed that the challenges encountered by the teachers related to the Economics curriculum, inadequate textbooks and classrooms, and a high teacher-student ratio. Other challenges encountered were absenteeism on the part of the students, poor academic performance, and a poor reading culture.*

**Keywords:** *Teaching Economics Challenges, Teaching Economics Perspectives, Uganda*

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

Economics is one of the subjects taught at the Advanced (A) level in the Ugandan secondary school curriculum. The Ugandan education system was inherited from the British colonial government and so was Economics as a subject. The teaching of Economics in Uganda had its origin in the City and Guilds of London Institute. Later, the subject went to Cambridge Education, then to the East African Examination Council and finally to the Uganda National Examinations Board in 1980. The aim of teaching Economics in secondary schools in Uganda as enshrined in the teaching syllabus is to equip learners with knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes to enable them to participate, contribute, adapt to and survive in a complex economic society (NCDC, 2016). This means that the subject has to be taught well if students are to appreciate its relevance. However, effective teaching of Economics in Ugandan secondary schools has been beset with challenges and problems that have not been addressed. For instance, the number of students offering Economics at the Advanced level has reduced substantially. Additionally, the performance of students in the national examinations has declined in recent years. These declines are likely to affect the number of students admitted to study Economics at the university level. For example, the number of students admitted to reading Economics at the School of Education Makerere University was 164 in the academic year 2011/2012. This figure

had reduced to 96 students in the 2015/2016 academic year. This, therefore, begs the question: what explains the current status of Economics in Uganda?

Although it may be difficult to point to any one cause for the declines in student numbers, the teachers who have significant influences on students' life-long success and academic performance (e.g., Chetty *et al.* 2014; Nye *et al.* 2004) can help clarify these and other issues. Surprisingly, no study has attempted to seek teachers' views as to what factors hinder the effective teaching of Economics in Ugandan secondary schools, though studies have been done in other countries (e.g., Chibueze, 2014; Khadka, 2016; Kerich, 2012; Nwachukwu, 2014; Ojo & Nkoyane, 2016). Therefore, this study sought to examine teachers' perspectives of the challenges of teaching Economics in the context of one public secondary school in Uganda.

## 2.0 METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Qualitative research paradigm

This study employed a qualitative research paradigm. According to Creswell (2008), qualitative research is “an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting” (p. 2). Henning *et al.* (2006) see qualitative studies as those “which aim for depth rather than quantity of understanding (p. 3). The purpose of this study necessitated the use of qualitative research because the study sought to gain a deeper understanding of the teachers' perspectives of the challenges they face in teaching Economics.

### 2.2 Research design

The study used a case study design (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006; Baxter & Jack, 2008; Stake, 1995). Yin (2003) defines a case study “as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 5). Merriam (2009) defines a case as “an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system (p. 40). This study used the case study methodology because it was looking at a single case and a specific number of respondents in a particular community.

### 2.3 Study area

The study was carried out at Old Kampala Senior Secondary school. The school is a mixed Ordinary (O) and Advanced level public secondary school located in Kampala district. The school was started by the Indians when they first settled in Uganda and it was the first Cambridge Examination center in East Africa. The school was chosen for two main reasons. Firstly, it was one of the first secondary schools to teach Economics in Uganda. Secondly, students' performance in Economics at Old Kampala Senior Secondary school has been declining over the years.

## **2.4 Target population, sampling strategy and sample**

The target population comprised of secondary schools which teach Economics at A-level in Kampala district. Old Kampala Senior Secondary school was purposively selected as a case study. The sample comprised of all the four (4) Economics teachers at Old Kampala Senior Secondary school. Of these, three were male and one was female. Among the four teachers, one doubled at the Deputy Head Teacher as well.

## **2.5 Data collection methods**

### **2.5.1 Focus group discussion**

Data were collected between the months of August and November 2017. All four teachers participated in a focus group discussion, which lasted one hour. The focus group discussion was intended to obtain teachers' general views and perceptions of the challenges of teaching Economics at Old Kampala Senior Secondary school. The discussion was audio-taped and later transcribed. The qualitative approach and small sample size negated the quantification of results. The study only seeks to identify the challenges of teaching Economics that are important to this group of Economics teachers and illustrate their opinion in more detail.

### **2.5.2 Personal interviews**

Four teachers took part in the personal interviews. The interviews were conducted at Old Kampala Senior Secondary school, lasting between 35-45 minutes. The purpose was to elicit personal perceptions of the challenges faced in teaching Economics. This information was useful in corroborating the data from the focus group discussion.

### **2.5.3 Classroom observations**

Classroom observations were conducted in senior Five Economics classes. The researcher was a non-participant observer (Robson, 1993) during the classroom observations. The objective of the observations was to ascertain whether what was said in the personal interview sessions and focus group discussion was what played out in practice. Two Economics lessons were observed.

## **2.6 Data analysis**

Content analysis (Weber, 1990) was used in data analysis. The data were presented in themes which made it possible to draw an interpretation of the results (Bengtsson, 2016). Emerging themes were categorized while citing data from the personal interviews to further explain the focus group discussion results.

## 2.7 Validity and reliability

According to Leung (2015), “validity in qualitative research means appropriateness of the tools, processes, and data” (p. 325). Seale (1999) posits that the “trustworthiness of a research report lies at the heart of issues conventionally discussed as validity and reliability” (p. 266). The research was conducted in an ethical manner. Consent was sought from the school and the teachers who participated in the study. Permission to sit and observe Economics classes was sought from the teachers, and they were assured of confidentiality regarding their views and perceptions. To further ensure trustworthiness of the study findings, data triangulation was employed. The initial findings were reviewed by the respondents and were revised where necessary. In addition, one research assistant analyzed the focus group discussion transcripts independently to further enhance the validity of the analysis.

## 3.0 RESULTS

### 3.1 Challenges related to the Economics curriculum

Results from the focus group discussion and personal interviews revealed that the Economics teachers at Old Kampala Senior Secondary school faced a challenge with the Economics curriculum. The teachers were of the view that the Economics curriculum is abstract, theoretical and is based on the British curriculum. As one teacher aptly put it during the interview:

Economics suffers from the biases of schools of thought. The inherited curriculum from Britain, a capitalist nation places most emphasis on capitalism as the ideal economic model without adequately exploring and objectively dissecting the communism system, a system that African societies had practiced for centuries and proved reliable in stemming major economic issues such as hunger and starvation, unemployment, production and factors of production among others. For example, the way the topic of privatization is structured, the advantages far outweigh the disadvantages which create bias in learners yet even western governments, the advocates for capitalism in developing countries continue to maintain a balance between the two (Teacher 1).

The nexus between theory versus praxis also came out strongly as a challenge. Results from the focus group discussion and personal interviews revealed that Economics teachers at Old Kampala Senior Secondary school struggled to maintain a balance between teaching theory and practice. As one teacher elaborated during the interview:

The A-level Economics curriculum is abstract and more theoretical than practical yet Economics is a practical social science that aims to study and observe human behavior in relation to the allocation of scarce resources among the unlimited wants. The curriculum fails to incorporate crucial insights from other disciplines especially the science disciplines (Teacher 3).

Teacher 4 offered opinion as to why this was the case during the interview thus:

The way we were taught Economics at the university sometimes influences the way we teach. But even the Economics papers at A-level are theoretical.

Another teacher had this to say regarding the theories of Economics:

The subject relies so much on theories and assumptions when stating and solving economic problems yet in real-life it is impossible to isolate other factors from the dynamics of Economics. This could explain why some learners find it difficult to grasp such theories and concepts (Teacher 2).

Another concern related to the micro versus macro nature of Economics. As one teacher pointed out during the interview:

The subject places more emphasis on the study of aggregate economic variables such as economic growth, unemployment, inflation and little emphasis on microeconomic variables. The individual learner finds it difficult to fit and imagine himself in these macro variables. This could explain why there seems to be a parallel increase in the number of Economics graduates and unemployment in Uganda (Teacher 1).

Furthermore, the nature of Economics as a changing subject presented challenges to the teachers of Economics at Old Kampala Senior Secondary school. Teacher 2 had this to say during the personal interview: “Economics is a current and ever-changing subject. Teachers need to be updated. Economics teachers struggle to keep focused, current and objective”.

Other concerns related to the requirement that students offering Economics should take subsidiary Mathematics as a prerequisite. Referring to the consequences of this policy, Teacher 4 offered her analysis succinctly thus: “This has made students shift to Entrepreneurship instead of Economics”

### **3.1.1 Lack of Economics textbooks**

Another challenge faced by the Economics teachers at Old Kampala Senior Secondary school was the lack of up-to-date Economics textbooks. Data from the focus group discussion, classroom observations and personal interviews revealed a lack of essential textbooks for both students and teachers. Data from the classroom observations indicated that no student had an Economics textbook during the lessons at the time of data collection. A few students carried pamphlets whose authorship is questionable. As Teacher 3 explained during the interview: “The textbooks are not enough. We have only three copies of ‘Basic Economics for East Africa’ by John Ddumba Sentamu. These are shared by over 300 students”.

### 3.1.2 Inadequate classrooms

Analysis of data from the focus group discussion, classroom observations and personal interviews revealed a shortage of classrooms at Old Kampala Senior Secondary school. There were over 300 students offering Economics at the Advanced level and each stream had about 90 to 120 students. The classes were crowded making it difficult for students to sit and write comfortably. At the same time, teachers found it difficult to make the necessary classroom movements.

### 3.1.3 High teacher-student ratio

Results from the focus group discussion, classroom observations and personal interviews revealed that Economics teachers at Old Kampala Senior Secondary school faced a challenge of a high teacher-student ratio. The school had four Economics teachers against a population of over 300 students. One teacher decried the high-student teacher ratio and had this to say during the interview: *“By normal standards, you can’t teach over 100 students at a go”* (Teacher 3).

Another teacher was concerned about marking students’ answer sheets effectively given the high student numbers (Teacher 1). Yet another was more concerned about teaching the slow learners effectively (Teacher 4).

### 3.1.4 Poor academic performance

Another pressing challenge for the Economics teachers at Old Kampala Senior Secondary school was students’ poor academic performance. Results from the focus group discussion and personal interviews indicated that Economics was a difficult subject for most students. The teachers acknowledged that students’ performance in Economics was particularly poor during the 2015 Uganda Advanced Certificate of Education examinations. The teachers offered differing explanations for the likely causes of students’ poor academic performance. For example, one teacher had this to say during the interview:

Students come here for A-level with a poor background from other schools where they attended O-level. Our school encourages all Arts students to take Economics because there is a wide range of courses they can take at the university, despite their low grades from O-level. The challenge is that the proportion of students who find difficulty in Economics increases because they did not pass well at O-level (Teacher 1).

Another teacher attributed students’ poor academic performance to failure in interpreting examinations questions (Teacher 3). Yet another decried the poor handwriting and incompetence in the English language as the explanation for their failure in examinations (Teacher 4).

### 3.1.5 Poor reading culture

Results from the focus group discussion and personal interviews revealed that teachers faced a problem of a poor reading culture on the part of the students. Teachers explained that Economics is a wide subject and is offered for only two years at the Advanced level. This requires a lot of effort for both teachers and students if the course is to be covered within the stipulated time frame. The teachers pointed out that they struggled to teach whenever students failed to read the required course materials. Referring to this poor reading culture amongst students, one teacher had this to say: “These students do not want to read. Even when you ask them to read ahead, most of them will come to class when they have not” (Teacher 1).

### 3.1.6 Students’ absenteeism

Analysis of data from the focus group discussion, classroom observations and personal interviews revealed that teachers faced the challenge of absenteeism on the part of the students. The major reason for students’ absenteeism was the lack of school fees. At the time of the survey, many students had been chased from school for lack of school fees. Other reasons related to students’ poor attitude to Economics, and a lack of interest and motivation to study Economics. Decrying the effect of absenteeism on learning Economics, one teacher had this to say during the interview:

Economics requires daily class attendance in order to connect concepts in the various topics and lessons to create deep and meaningful understanding. When a student misses a class, they are not able to make the links and connections between topics (Teacher 2).

## 4.0 DISCUSSION

A number of challenges to the teaching of Economics were identified by the teachers at Old Kampala Senior Secondary school. Firstly, the study found that the teachers faced a challenge with the Economics curriculum. The teachers were of the view that the Economics curriculum is abstract and theoretical, making it difficult for them to strike a balance between theory and praxis. These findings were consistent with Ojo and Nkoyane’s (2016) study, who found that the Economics curriculum was not user-friendly to the teachers in some selected Ogbomosho secondary schools in Nigeria. In addition, the macro versus micro nature of Economics, the changing nature of the subject and the requirement that students offering Economics should take mathematics posed a challenge to the Economics teachers. However, the finding that the Economics curriculum posed a challenge to the teachers should be of concern to the Ministry of Education and Sports, curriculum developers and Economics Education specialists. Teachers need to understand the Economics curriculum in order to teach effectively so as to achieve the curriculum goals.

Secondly, lack of Economics textbooks was amongst the challenges identified by the Economics teachers at Old Kampala Senior Secondary school. UNESCO (2016) argues that in addition to a



well prepared and engaged teacher, the most effective way to improve learning and instruction is sufficient quantities of well-designed textbooks. Yet, the findings indicated that the teachers and the students lacked the latest Economics textbooks and students mainly relied on pamphlets. These findings were in agreement with other studies such as Chibueze (2014), Ojo and Nkoyane (2016), Nwachukwu, (2014) in Nigeria, and Khadka (2016) in Nepal, where lack of Economics textbooks was identified as a challenge in the teaching of Economics.

Thirdly, lack of adequate classrooms was another challenge identified in this study. The teachers reported that classrooms were not enough to cater for the number of students offering Economics. These findings resemble those of Chibueze (2014) in Nigeria and Khadka (2016) in Nepal, where inadequate classroom space posed a challenge in teaching Economics. Some studies have found physical facilities to influence students' academic performance. For instance, a study by Akomolafe and Adesua (2016) among secondary school students in Nigeria found a significant relationship between physical facilities and students' academic performance.

Fourthly, the findings revealed a high teacher-student ratio. The study found that there were only four Economics teachers against over three hundred students. These findings concur with Ojo and Nkoyane's (2016) study in Nigeria, which found a high teacher-student ratio in selected secondary schools in Oyo state. Studies have found overcrowded classrooms to affect teaching and learning. For instance, Khan and Iqbal (2012) study in Pakistan found that the number of students in classrooms ranged from 70 to 120. The researchers found that effective teaching was not possible and the majority of teachers faced discipline, physical, evaluation, and instructional problems. Even in Papua New Guinea, Epri (2016) found class sizes of 50 to 80 students, making it difficult for the teachers and the students to move freely in the classroom during the lesson.

Furthermore, poor academic performance among the students was another challenge identified by the teachers at Old Kampala Senior Secondary school in this study. The teachers reported that Economics was a difficult subject for most students leading to poor performance in the national examinations. One teacher attributed the poor academic performance to incompetence in the English language which made it difficult for students to interpret examination questions. Even Nyandwi's (2014) study in Tanzania found the lack of English language competence to be a factor in determining secondary school students' academic performance.

In addition, the Economics teachers at Old Kampala Senior Secondary school decried the poor reading culture on the part of the students as a challenge in teaching Economics. Studies have found that reading culture affects academic performance (e.g., Anyaeagbu *et al.* 2016; Egong, 2014; Oriogu *et al.* 2017). For instance, Anyaeagbu *et al.* (2016) study among secondary school students in Nigeria found that lack of reading skills resulted in students' poor attitude to study effectively.

Finally, students' absenteeism was reported as one of the challenges faced by the Economics teachers at Old Kampala Senior Secondary school. The problem of students' absenteeism was also reported by Chibueze's (2014) study among secondary school Economics students in



Ebonyi state in Nigeria. Some studies have shown that students who regularly attend school have better academic performance than absentees (e.g., Balkis et al. 2016; Korir et al. 2014).

## 5.0 CONCLUSIONS

The study sought teachers' views and perceptions of the challenges of teaching Economics at Old Kampala Senior Secondary school in Uganda. The challenges identified by the teachers related to the Economics curriculum, lack of latest Economics textbooks, inadequate classrooms and large student numbers against a staff of only four teachers. Other challenges were students' absenteeism, poor academic performance and a poor reading culture on the part of the students. Based on the findings, this study makes the following recommendations: (1) There is a need for curriculum developers to make minor revisions to the A-level Economics curriculum in lieu of the current developments in the discipline. In addition, the Ministry of Education and Sports should organize workshops, seminars, in-service training programs and skills upgrading programmes for teachers to learn about the latest developments in Economics; (2) There is need for the government to increase funding for Economics textbooks, (3) The government should earmark resources to construct more classrooms to reduce the high student-classroom ratio; (4) There is need for the Ministry of Education and Sports to recruit more teachers of Economics to mitigate against the high teacher-student ratio; (5) Teachers need to tackle the poor academic performance by employing more teacher-centered strategies of teaching and topic-based assessments; (6) There is need to encourage wider reading on the part of the students so as to instill a good reading culture (7) There is need to effectively use data to monitor, identify and support the performance and attendance of students at the greatest risk of absenteeism.

While the results of this study are of interest given the general lack of literature on the challenges faced by teachers in teaching Economics in Uganda, they are limited to one school and four Economics teachers at Old Kampala Senior Secondary school and are not representative of all schools and Economics teachers in Uganda and elsewhere. Despite the limitations, the results were interesting and indicate a number of important avenues for future research. Firstly, future studies should incorporate a larger set of schools across Uganda. Secondly, future research should incorporate a larger sample of Economics teachers to further validate the results of this study. Perhaps the most significant contribution of this study is that it presents new empirical knowledge on teachers' views of the challenges of teaching Economics in Uganda. It is hoped that the findings will stimulate new empirical research on the factors affecting the effective teaching of Economics in secondary schools, which is particularly needed in the Ugandan case. \

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