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School reopening in Uganda after the COVID-19 lockdowns: preparedness, attrition, challenges and prospects for recovery



Photo by: EPRC

Introduction

Globally, several governments implemented school closures as one of the primary containment measures of the Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). As such, education has been among the worst affected by the pandemic. Arguably, Uganda had the world's most extended school closure. Specifically, about 15 million learners were sent back home for two years. This negatively affected the tremendous progress that the education sector had registered through deliberate interventions to expand access to education, i.e., Universal Primary Education (UPE) and Universal Secondary Education (USE).

Because of the prolonged closure, the National Planning Authority (NPA) predicted the inability of many learners to return to school for reasons such as early pregnancies, child marriage, child labour and lack of school fees and scholastic materials. A low teacher turn-up was predicted, as teachers sought alternative but potentially more lucrative commercial activities, such as retail trade, boda-boda riding, and agriculture, among others. NPA further cited the inability of some private schools to reopen due to financial difficulties. Private schools' primary source of income is school fees—whose payments were interrupted by the extended closure. Furthermore, the risk of multiple cohorts being in the same class when schools reopen was projected. Policy options such as automatic promotion have been initiated to address this potential challenge.

The full reopening of schools in January 2022 is expected to revive the ailing education sector. However, schools are still experiencing numerous COVID-19 related challenges even after reopening. This rapid survey explored the preparedness of private schools to reopen fully, the level of attrition among students and teachers, the challenges in keeping schools open in the future and the perceptions about the recovery pathways of the sector to the pre-pandemic period.

Methods

This rapid survey randomly selected two private schools (one in urban and the other in peri-urban area) from 22 districts from four regions (central, north, east and west). In total, 45 private schools, comprising 40 secondary, 4 primary and 1 tertiary institution, were interviewed. The survey covered the period before and after the COVID-related school closures. The data collection was undertaken in February 2022.

The private schools were interviewed using a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire sought to enlist information from the school heads regarding private schools' experience, preparedness and recovery pathways. Specifically, major indicators examined include; preparedness to reopen, changes in enrolment, preparedness to care for pregnant and breastfeeding students, staffing levels, staff remuneration

and vaccination, automatic promotion, access to supplies and credit, etc. In addition, the survey assessed schools' perception of when they expect the education sector to be revived back to the pre-COVID-19 situation.

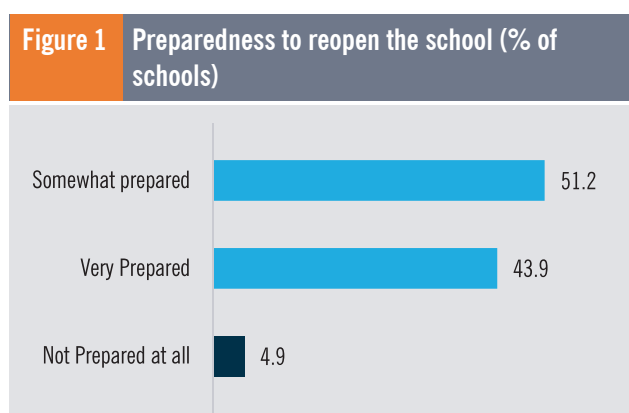
The survey was conducted under the auspices of the COVID-19 Responses for Equity (CORE) initiative. As part of the CORE initiative, the Economic Policy Research Centre (EPRC) is implementing a project **"Mitigating Socio-Economic Impacts of COVID-19 and Promoting Post-Pandemic Resilience in Uganda"**. The EPRC project focuses on micro, small and medium enterprises, and education is one of the four sectors of focus under this project. This partly justifies the focus on private schools. Since the pandemic's start, this is the third survey focusing on schools—with previous surveys in February 2021 and August 2021.

Findings

Preparedness to reopen

To reverse learning losses incurred due to the pandemic, the World Bank (2021) encouraged countries to prioritise the reopening of the education sector, citing the steep cost of keeping schools closed. This was after there was increasing evidence indicating the possibility of minimising health risks to children and staff with adequate measures put into place (*ibid*). While Uganda adhered to the above in January 2022, several schools were not ready to reopen following the two-year lockdown.

In this case, only four in every ten schools were very prepared to reopen, while more than one half were somewhat prepared, and others (5%) were not prepared to reopen at all (Figure 1). The lack of preparedness was attributed to the inadequate finances required for the smooth running of school operations. The low student turn-up exacerbated the financial challenges as private schools mainly rely on school fees paid by students to meet school expenditures, such as paying for utilities (Sunday et al., 2021).

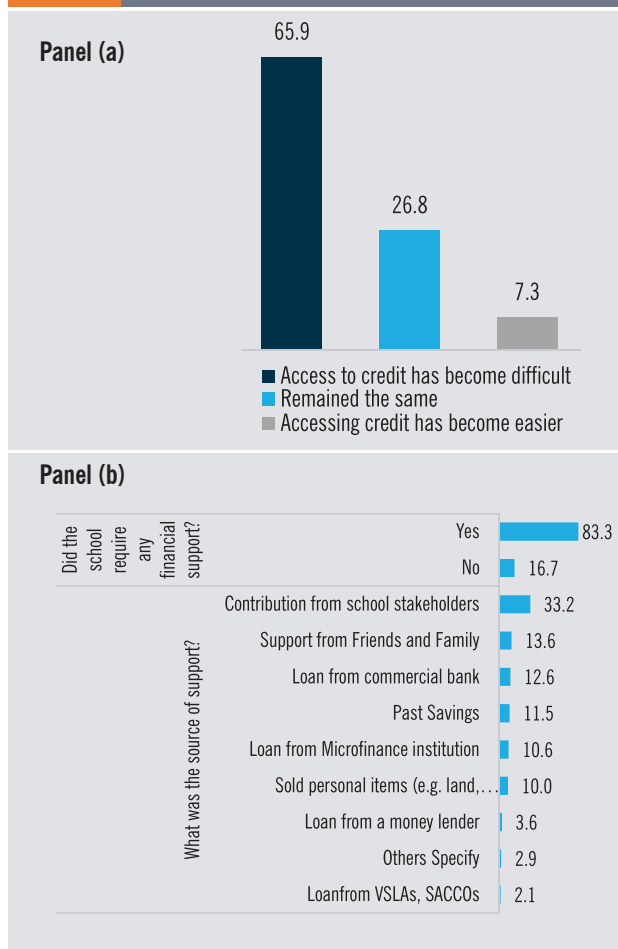


Source: EPRC Rapid Schools Survey February 2022

Financial challenges were among the main causes of the unpreparedness of schools to reopen after a long shutdown. The need to renovate school structures, purchase scholastic materials and clear outstanding payment arrears elevated the financial needs of private schools. It is thus not surprising that eight in every ten schools needed financial support at the reopening of schools early this year. Indeed, survey findings in Panel (a) of figure 2 reveal that 66 percent of the surveyed schools found it difficult to access credit. Among other reasons, the heads of the sampled schools attributed difficulties in accessing credit due to the outstanding loans they had acquired prior to the pandemic and during the phased reopening, drop in enrollment which reduced their ability to meet their loan obligations and the high-interest rates that made credit very expensive. The above constraints highlight the need for the government to provide financial support to private schools through low-cost credit and negotiations with financial institutions to ease the terms of payment of arrears to fasten the sector’s recovery to the pre-pandemic situation.

Regarding the sources of credit, schools obtained financial support from various sources to reopen. Panel (b) of Figure 2 shows that schools’ primary source of support was school stakeholders, such as parents and shareholders (33%). This alludes to the impact of the pandemic on private schools’ access to credit from financial institutions, such as commercial banks and microfinance institutions. The pandemic created a situation where lenders were hesitant to lend, owing to the uncertainty around the government’s decision to keep schools open.

Figure 2 Access to financial support

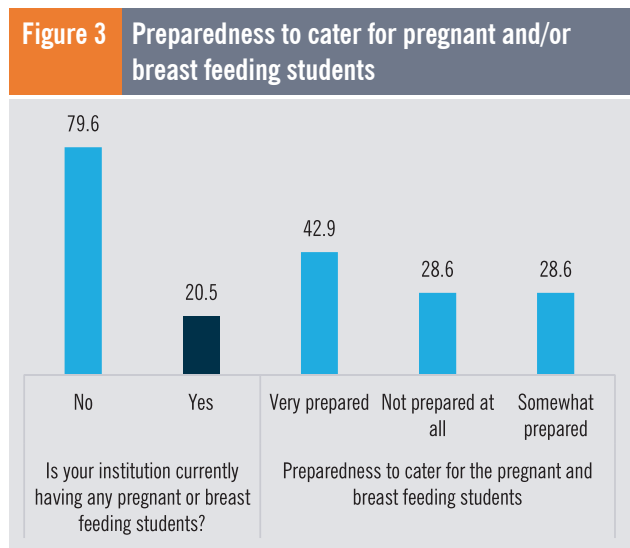


Source: EPRC Rapid Schools Survey February 2022

Preparedness to cater for pregnant or breast feeding girls

The COVID-19 lockdown resulted in a spike in teenage pregnancies (NPA, 2021). As part of strategies for school reopening and recognising the rising teenage pregnancies, the Ministry of Education issued “*Revised guidelines for the prevention and management of teenage pregnancy in school setting in Uganda*”. The guidelines made it mandatory for “all schools to prioritise the admission of the young mothers/girls after pregnancy and that parents/caregivers shall report the school that has refused to admit their daughter to the district education officer”. Partly as the result of this policy initiative, several pregnant and breast feeding students had the courage to report back in January 2022 (Refer to Figure 5 panel (b)). Of the surveyed schools, two in every ten of them had a pregnant and/or a breast feeding student (Figure 3). Admitting these students back into school is likely to enable the continuation of learning that would otherwise be lost had they decided to drop out of school.

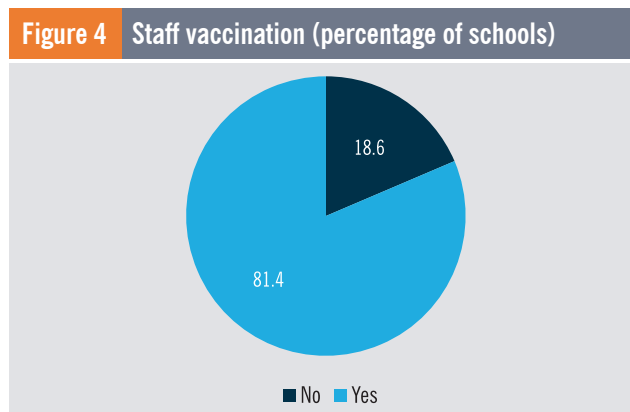
Nonetheless, schools’ preparedness to look after the vulnerable (pregnant and breast feeding) learners is generally considered inadequate. More than half of the surveyed schools revealed that they were not fully prepared to receive expecting and breastfeeding students (Figure 3). School heads indicated that the school environment would not be favourable to such students. For instance, the lack of resources to provide them with special care such as a special diet and medical attention makes schools unprepared to admit such learners. Additionally, the school timetable is not flexible enough to accommodate breastfeeding and resting time, given the amount of school time lost during the two-year shutdown. Thus, the government should take the above incidences into consideration when encouraging schools to admit such vulnerable learners.



Source: EPRC Rapid Schools Survey February 2022

Staff vaccination

Although it was mandatory for every school to have their staff members fully vaccinated against COVID-19 before reporting back to schools, this was not the case. Following the announcement of the full reopening of the education sector in January 2022, the government made it mandatory for all staff members to get fully vaccinated against COVID-19 before reporting back to schools. Despite this directive, about two in every ten schools did not have their staff members fully vaccinated (Figure 4). This was attributed to the inadequacy of vaccines in nearby vaccination centres, especially for the second jab and medical reasons (pregnancy and health complications) that barred them from getting vaccinated.



EPRC Rapid Schools Survey February 2022

Attrition

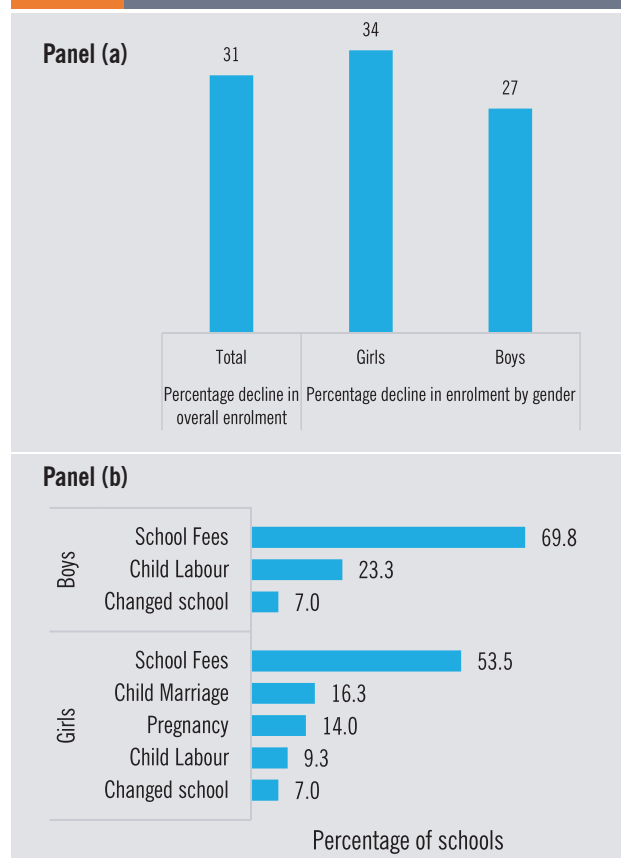
Student Attrition

Millions of learners are at risk of never returning to school after the prolonged shutdown of schools. In 2021, the National Planning Authority projected that, for various reasons, 30 percent of learners in Uganda might not return to school forever. Panel (a) of Figure 5 reveals a 31 percent decline in overall enrollment of the surveyed schools. The dropout rates were higher for female students (34%) compared to male students (27%). The findings corroborate those of the World Bank (2021) that found a disproportionate effect of the pandemic on enrollment rates of girls and other vulnerable populations. This implies a reversal in the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) that was higher for girls relative to that of boys both at primary (118% and 116% respectively) and secondary (31% and 29% respectively) levels according to the 2019/2020 national household survey.

For both female and male learners, the drop in enrollment was mainly attributed to the affordability of school fees. More than half of the schools in the sample highlight school fees challenges as the main reason for their students' failure to return to school in January 2022 (panel b of figure 5). The findings speak to the adverse impact of the pandemic on household income which, in turn, increased parents'/guardians' inability to pay school fees for their children (Sunday et al., 2021). The findings corroborate those of the 2019/2020 national household survey, which revealed that costs associated with education accounted for six in every ten learners that had left school at the time of the survey. This suggests a need for government to address the shortcomings in Universal Primary Education (UPE) and Universal Secondary Education (USE) schools that have forced school heads in such schools to charge school fees and many parents to prefer private schools which charge exorbitant fees.

School heads also attribute the declining enrollment to children's engagement in child labour, especially for male students. This is likely to worsen the high number of young boys involved in child labour (20.3%) compared to girls (14.5%) as per the 2019/2020 national household survey. For the case of female learners, child marriage and pregnancy were reported as the reasons for their failure to return to school. This suggests that future lockdowns are likely to contribute to the 10 million more girls estimated by the World Bank to be at risk of early marriage across the globe in the next decade.

Figure 5 Changes in enrollment and reasons by gender

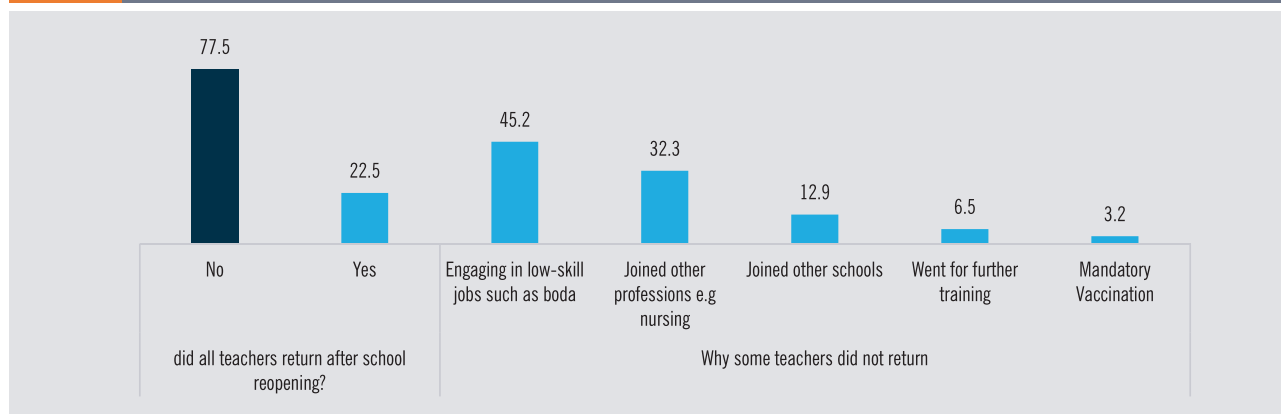


Source: EPRC Rapid Schools Survey February 2022

Staff Attrition

As earlier noted, unlike government-aided schools, most private schools in Uganda rely majorly on school fees as their primary source of income to pay staff members and run school affairs. The economy-wide closure meant that some schools could not collect school fees, making them unable to continue paying salaries to their staff. Consequently, these

Figure 6 Staff turn-up and reason for not turning up.



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were forced to find alternative profitable means of survival. It is thus not surprising that staff turn up was below expectations.

Of the surveyed schools, only 23 percent reported having all their pre-pandemic teachers return after reopening the education sector in January 2022 (Figure 6). Schools mainly reported that most of the staff had engaged in-low skill jobs such as Boda-Boda riding (45.2 percent), followed by teachers joining other professions, for example, nursing (32.3 percent). This has negative implications on the 207,000 qualified teachers at the primary level and the 64,900 secondary school teachers that the education sector had registered in 2017¹. The government will have to invest more resources in training and registering new teachers, which may not be possible in the short run. Furthermore, the low staff turn up implies a heavy workload for the few available teachers, resulting in exhaustion.

Teaching staff are less likely to return to their jobs than the non-teaching staff.

Notably, there are variations in the impact of school closures on teaching vis a vis non-teaching staff in private schools. With an overall 13 percent decline in the total number of staff, the decline was more inclined to teaching staff as compared to the non-teaching staff. The percentage decline in the number of teaching staff (14.8 percent) almost doubled that of non-teaching staff (7.8 percent) after the reopening (Table 1). The low turn up of teachers is attributed to the uncertainty created by the pandemic regarding school operations. The fear of being rendered jobless in case COVID-19 cases soar again made teachers prefer their newly acquired, more profitable jobs as opposed to teaching.

The results are similar to those of Sunday et al. (2021), who found a disproportionate impact of the pandemic on teaching staff relative to

Table 1 Percentage decline in staff numbers after reopening

	Number of staff before the school closure	Number of staff after full reopening	Percentage change
Total	1,756	1,531	-12.8
Teaching staff	1,258	1,072	-14.8
Non-teaching staff	498	459	-7.8

**Only staff members in the surveyed schools are considered*
Source: EPRC Rapid Schools Survey February 2022

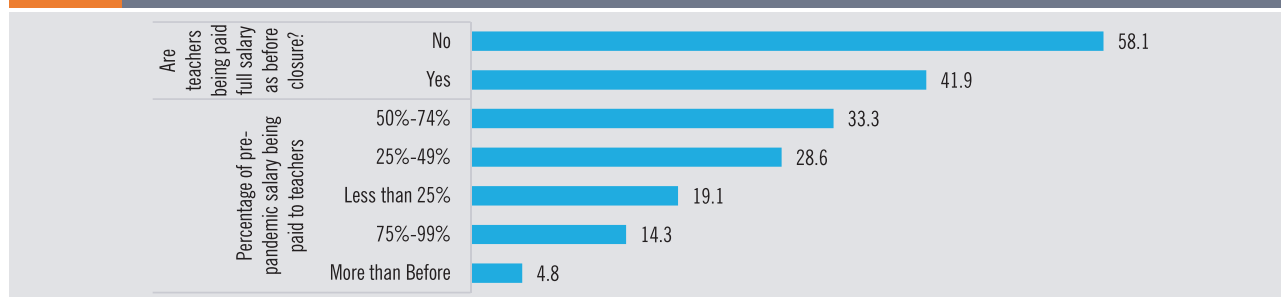
the non-teaching staff during the partial reopening of schools. This implies that it was easier for teachers to find alternative jobs given their skill levels relative to the non-teaching staff. In addition to this, in all schools, the non-teaching staff such as cleaners and cooks are fewer and earn relatively lower pay, making it easy for school heads to call them back.

Teachers' pay has been lowered below the pre-pandemic salaries, impacting their welfare and increasing the chances of having more teachers remaining in their newly acquired jobs.

The instituted COVID-19 containment measures increased the cost of doing business for firms (Kahunde et al., 2021) and schools (Sunday et al., 2021). As a result, many schools were forced to devise alternative cost-cutting measures to remain in operation. One of these measures is salary restructuring. The rapid survey results presented in Figure 7 reveal that more than half of the surveyed schools (58 percent) changed their salary structures. Most of these were paying between 50-74 percent of the pre-pandemic salaries, followed by 25 percent to 49

1 <https://www.education.go.ug/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Abstract-2017.pdf>

Figure 7 Percentage of pre-pandemic salary being paid



Source: EPRC Rapid Schools Survey February 2022

percent. This is attributed to the financial distress faced by schools after the prolonged shutdown.

The reduction in teachers' wages has negative implications on their welfare as well as that of their families. Additionally, a lower pay is a disincentive for teachers, forcing them to continue part-timing in other sources of income, giving less attention to teaching. Indeed, these findings further explain the low staff turn-up highlighted in Figure 6 and Table 1 above. On a good note, some schools (5%) are paying teachers more than they were earning before the pandemic outbreak.

Changes in student-teacher ratio

The reduction in the number of students and teachers affected the Pupil-Teacher Ratio (PTR) in the sampled schools. The survey findings show an improvement in the PTR from 21:1 before school closure to 17:1 after full reopening (Table 2). However, this signifies a faster dropout rate of students relative to the reduction in the number of teaching staff and thus should not be mistaken for an improvement in the PTR. As shown in figure 5, the percentage decline in the number of students that reported back to school (31%) doubled that of the teaching staff (15%-refer to Table 1). Thus, while increasing the number of teachers is an important priority, more attention should be geared towards reducing the number of students that are dropping out

Table 2 Comparison of student-teacher ratio before school closure and after full reopening

	Before school closure	After reopening (currently)
Total number of teaching staff	1258	1072
Total number of pupils	26474	18356
Pupil-Teacher Ratio	21:1	17:1

**Only teaching staff and students in the sampled schools are considered.*
Source: EPRC Rapid Schools Survey February 2022

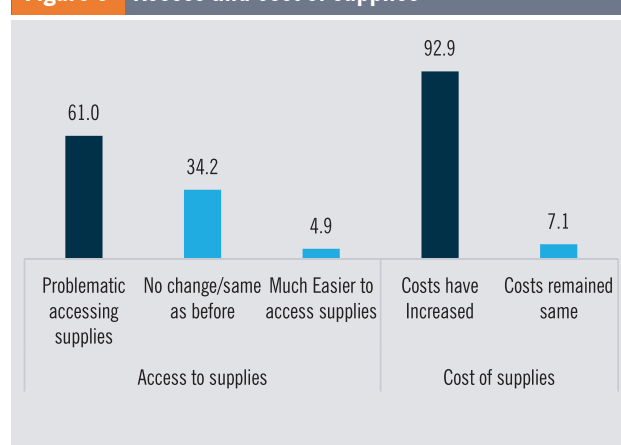
Challenges in running the schools and perceptions about future

Challenges in running the schools

Despite reopening, schools are still facing difficulties that deter their operations' smooth-running. More than half of the sampled schools reported high operating cost (21%), low preparedness to take on the extra work that came with the automatic promotion of students to higher classes (19%), and the low student turn up (18%) (Figure 8) as the key challenges in their operations.

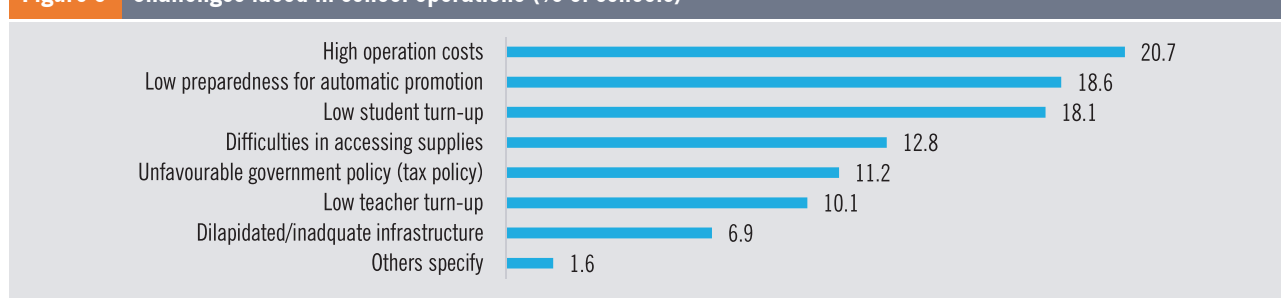
The high cost of running schools is partly attributed to the need to observe Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) such as purchasing sanitisers and hand-washing equipment. This is besides the rising prices of supplies such as laundry soap and food stuff which are key in curbing the spreading of the virus. Indeed, 61 percent of the sampled schools are finding it problematic to access supplies due to the high

Figure 9 Access and cost of supplies



Source: EPRC Rapid Schools Survey February 2022

Figure 8 Challenges faced in school operations (% of schools)



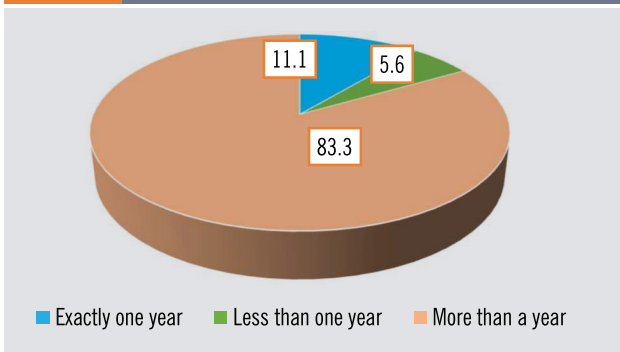
Source: EPRC Rapid Schools Survey February 2022

of school.

cost of the same. Nine in every ten schools attributed the difficulties in accessing supplies to the rising prices of goods and services (Figure 9). The high operating costs were exacerbated by the low student turn up (refer to Panel (a) of figure 5), which resulted in a contraction in the revenue collected by private schools to meet the increasing cost of supplies.

Regarding the government directive of automatic promotion upon reopening, every learner joined a class above the one they were in prior to the pandemic. This consequently came with extra work as schools are striving to cover the two-year syllabus in one year. This extra work amidst the low staff turn-up made school heads feel less prepared for the automatic promotion of learners after the lengthy lockdown.

Figure 10 Perception of school heads regarding the recovery period of the education sector



Source: EPRC Rapid Schools Survey February 2022

Perceptions about the future

Private school heads are pessimistic about the future recovery of the sector because of the uncertainty about keeping schools open. Of the surveyed schools, 83 percent expect the education sector to take more than a year to recover fully to the pre-pandemic situation (Figure 10). This pessimistic view regarding the recovery path is attributed to the expectation that the government may shut down the schools again in anticipation of a re-surge in COVID-19 cases. Additionally, the negative thinking about the future alludes to the challenges schools face in their operations, as explained in the section above. As such, interventions targeted towards the recovery of the education sector are pertinent.

Conclusion and recommendations

The reopening of schools in January 2022 has seen learners and teachers report back to school under the conditions popularly referred to as “the new normal” after the longest school closure of two years. While this has shielded the country from the rising negative consequences of the pandemic and its containment measures, a lot has to be done to increase the preparedness of schools and other stakeholders, such as parents, to adapt to the transitions. To ensure faster recovery of the education sector.

The government should provide temporary financial support to private schools given their role in supplementing the provision of education services alongside government-aided schools. This will enable them to have enough resources at hand to meet both the ordinary school expenses, including an increase in teachers’ remuneration and the pandemic-related expenses like purchasing hand sanitisers providing

The Economic Policy Research Centre (EPRC) has been producing the Business Climate Index (BCI) for Uganda since June 2012. The BCI reflects the perceptions of Ugandan business managers on the current and near-future (expected three months ahead) business conditions. The BCI is a perceptions indicator of economic activity and the general business environment in which businesses operate. BCI aims to forecast turning points in economic activity and thus provide critical information for policymakers both in Government and the Private Sector.

About EPRC

The Economic Policy Research Centre (EPRC) is an autonomous not-for-profit organization established in 1993 with a mission to foster sustainable growth and development in Uganda through advancement of research – based knowledge and policy analysis.

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