



The Impact of Fee-Free Education on Academic Performance in Tanzania Secondary Schools: A Case of Lupeta Secondary School in Mbeya Region

¹ Christina Charles, ²Dr. Salvatory Mhando, ³Dr. Lucas Mwahombela.

Department of Education University of Iringa, Tanzania

²mhando1974@gmail.com, ³mwahombela@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

This study evaluated the impact of fee-free education on the academic performance of secondary schools in Tanzania, using Lupeta Secondary School in Mbeya Region as a case study. Guided by the Human Capital Theory and the Education Production Function Theory, the study employed a mixed-methods approach integrating both quantitative and qualitative data. A total of 64 respondents including teachers, parents, students and the head of school responded through questionnaires and interviews. Findings revealed that fee-free education has moderately improved students' academic performance by increasing access to learning materials ($M=1.85$), enhancing government funding ($M=1.77$) and improving classroom infrastructure ($M=1.65$). However, challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, delayed fund disbursement and inadequate learning resources limited consistent academic achievement. Regression analysis showed that the availability of learning materials ($\beta=0.542$, $p=0.004$) and government funding ($\beta=0.398$, $p=0.002$) were the strongest predictors of academic performance. The study concludes that while fee-free education has enhanced inclusivity and access, its full potential in improving academic performance remains constrained by resource inadequacy and management inefficiencies. The study recommends timely government financing, improved infrastructure and community support to strengthen learning outcomes in public secondary schools.

Keywords: Fee-free education, academic performance, Tanzania, learning resources, government funding.

1.0 Introduction

Globally, education is recognized as a fundamental human right and a cornerstone for sustainable development. International frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) emphasize inclusive and equitable quality education for all (UNESCO, 2015). Many countries have adopted fee-free or universal education policies to eliminate financial barriers and promote social inclusion. For instance, nations like Finland, Norway and South Korea have implemented fully state-funded education systems that have yielded outstanding academic outcomes and equitable access across social groups (OECD, 2019). Similarly, several developing nations including India and Indonesia have introduced free education programs as part of broader poverty reduction and human capital development strategies. However, global evidence shows that the success of such policies depends not merely on access, but on the availability of sufficient resources, effective management and teacher motivation to sustain quality learning outcomes (World Bank, 2021).

Across Sub-Saharan Africa, fee-free education has become a central reform in the pursuit of universal access to secondary education. Countries such as Kenya, Uganda, Ghana and Tanzania have progressively abolished tuition fees to address inequality and enhance human capital (UNICEF, 2018). Although these initiatives have increased enrolment and literacy rates, they have also exposed significant challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, teacher shortages and inadequate learning materials (Akyeampong, 2017). For example, Uganda's Universal Secondary Education program experienced a 30% increase in enrolment but struggled to maintain instructional quality due to limited funding and infrastructure (Deininger, 2003). Similarly, Kenya's free day secondary education program improved access but faced teacher workload and performance disparities (Waweru&Orodho, 2014). These experiences demonstrate that while fee-free education enhances inclusivity, its effectiveness in improving academic performance is often constrained by implementation capacity and quality assurance mechanisms.

In Tanzania, education remains a strategic instrument for national development and social mobility. Since the reintroduction of the Fee-Free Education Policy in 2016, the government has aimed to remove financial barriers and expand access to both primary and secondary education (URT, 2016). The policy covers key operational costs such as tuition fees, examination fees and minor infrastructure maintenance (Masue, 2015). While the reform has substantially increased enrolment rates, there is growing concern about its impact on academic performance, particularly in public secondary schools where resource constraints persist (Herbert, 2022; Lydia, 2022).

Performance trends across Tanzanian secondary schools indicate mixed outcomes some have shown modest improvement in national examinations, while others, such as Lupeta Secondary School and continue to register low academic results despite policy interventions. For instance, in 2024 the school recorded 19 Division 0 and 118 Division IV results, suggesting that expanding access alone may not guarantee quality education outcomes. This situation raises a critical question: to what extent has the fee-free education policy improved academic performance in Tanzanian public secondary schools?

This study, therefore, seeks to evaluate the impact of fee-free education on academic performance using Lupeta Secondary School as a case study. It is grounded in the Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964), which views education as an investment in national productivity and the Education Production Function Theory (Hanushek, 1979), which links educational inputs such as funding and resources to academic outputs. The study contributes context-specific insights into how free education policy influences learning outcomes in resource-constrained environments, offering implications for sustainable education reforms in Tanzania and beyond.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Study Area

The study was conducted at Lupeta Secondary School in Mbeya Region one of the public schools benefiting directly from the fee-free education policy. The school was purposively selected due to its persistent low academic performance despite increased government support.

2.2 Research Design and Approach

A mixed-methods approach under a case study design was used to integrate numerical and narrative insights. Quantitative data from students and teachers were complemented by qualitative inputs from parents and the school head to provide a whole understanding of how the policy influences academic outcomes.

2.3 Population and Sampling

The target population included students, teachers, parents and the head of school. A total of 80 respondents participated: 66 students, 10 teachers, 5 parents and 1 head of school. Sampling combined purposive and convenience methods to ensure inclusion of key informants knowledgeable about fee-free education.

2.4 Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected using structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data were analyzed through descriptive statistics and multiple regression using SPSS, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically. Reliability was ensured using Cronbach's Alpha ($\alpha > 0.7$) as shown in Table 1 and validity was achieved through expert review and pilot testing.

Table 1: Results for the Reliability Test

Item	Cronbach Alpha Coefficient
Classroom infrastructure	0.834
Government funding	0.787
Availability of learning materials	0.912
Distance to school	0.863

3.0 Results and Analysis

Demographic information of information

The study findings revealed that 51 (45.9%) respondents were below 18 years old while 13 (20%) respondents were 18 and above. The findings regarding the distribution of the respondents by age are presented in Table 2.

Gender as part of the demographic information helped to provide contexts for interpreting the study findings and understanding the composition of the sample. As shown in Table 2, the distribution of respondents by gender indicates that 39 individuals (61.0%) were male while 25 individuals (39.0%) were female. This suggests a higher representation of the male respondents in the study sample.

Table 2: Demographic information of respondents

Category	Description	Frequency	Percentage
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Gender	Male	39	61
	Female	25	39
	Total	64	100%
Age	Below 18 years	51	80
	18 and above	13	20
	Total	64	100%

The demographic profile of respondents provides important context for understanding the study's findings on the impact of fee-free education on academic performance. The majority of respondents (51 students, representing 80%) were below 18 years of age, indicating that most participants were in the active learning stage of secondary education. Their responses therefore reflect first-hand experiences with the fee-free education policy, particularly regarding the adequacy of learning materials and classroom conditions. Younger students are more likely to focus on the direct benefits of free education such as access to textbooks and reduced financial stress hence their positive perception of learning materials as a major factor influencing academic performance.

Gender distribution showed that 39 respondents (61%) were male and 25 (39%) was female, suggesting a higher representation of male students in the sample. This imbalance may have influenced the results, as studies such as Lydia (2022) and Raman *et al.* (2022) found that male students often demonstrate stronger academic self-efficacy when provided with adequate learning resources. The higher proportion of males could therefore have contributed to the slightly optimistic evaluation of how government funding and resource availability affect academic outcomes. Nevertheless, both male and female respondents acknowledged that overcrowded classrooms and insufficient infrastructure limit effective learning, reinforcing the conclusion that fee-free education has improved access but not yet fully enhanced academic performance.

3.1 Descriptive Findings

The study assessed the influence of three key variables availability of learning materials, government funding and classroom infrastructure on academic performance at Lupeta Secondary School. The results are presented using mean scores and interpreted to demonstrate their educational impact under Tanzania's fee-free education policy.

Availability of Learning Materials; The findings indicated that the availability of learning materials had the highest mean score ($M = 1.85$, $SD = 0.26$), suggesting that textbooks, laboratory apparatus and other instructional aids have significantly enhanced teaching and learning processes. Similar findings by Lydia (2022) and Bankimeza (2021) observed that adequate learning materials improve comprehension, classroom participation and examination performance among students in public secondary schools. Teachers in this study confirmed that fee-free education increased access to essential resources, enabling smoother lesson preparation and independent student study. However, despite these improvements, the high student enrolment under the policy has outpaced material supply, leading to resource-sharing challenges. This aligns with Herbert (2022), who noted that increased enrolment without proportional resource investment undermines equitable access to quality education.

Government Funding; Government funding recorded a mean score of ($M = 1.77$, $SD = 0.97$), indicating that financial support through capitation grants has moderately improved school operations and students' academic performance. The findings support URT (2016) and Masue (2015), who emphasized that timely funding is essential for sustaining fee-free education initiatives and maintaining instructional standards. Respondents revealed that government funds are mainly used for purchasing teaching aids, covering examination costs and conducting minor maintenance. However, delays in disbursement were reported as a recurring issue, resulting in temporary shortages of materials and interruptions in planned activities. These findings mirror Ahlo and Umeodum (2024), who found that unpredictable financing cycles hinder school management efficiency and ultimately affect learning outcomes.

Classroom Infrastructure; Classroom infrastructure had the lowest mean score ($M = 1.65$, $SD = 0.19$), demonstrating that physical learning conditions remain a serious limitation within the fee-free education framework. Overcrowding, insufficient furniture and poorly ventilated rooms were identified as major obstacles to effective teaching and learning. This outcome resonates with UNICEF (2018) and Akyeampong (2017), who reported that African countries implementing fee-free education often experience an enrolment surge without matching infrastructure development, leading to declining learning quality. Teachers in this study highlighted that large class sizes restrict individual attention and assessment feedback, reducing instructional efficiency. Consequently, despite policy gains in access, inadequate infrastructure continues to compromise academic achievement and student engagement, as echoed by Deininger (2003) and Waweru and Orodho (2014) in similar regional studies.

Overall, the descriptive results show that while fee-free education has enhanced access to learning opportunities, its positive impact on academic performance remains uneven across variables. Effective improvement requires timely government funding, increased infrastructure investment and equitable learning material distribution, aligning with the recommendations of Hanushek (1979) and Becker (1964) that educational inputs must be efficiently managed to achieve meaningful academic outcomes.

3.2 Regression Analysis

The regression model predicting academic performance produced the following results:

Variable	β	t	Sig.
Classroom Infrastructure	0.356	6.675	0.013
Government Funding	0.398	4.796	0.002
Availability of Learning Materials	0.542	3.325	0.004
Constant	0.048	3.290	0.664

Model Summary: $R^2 = 0.66$, $F = 22.26$, $p < 0.001$

The regression analysis revealed that all three variables availability of learning materials, government funding and classroom infrastructure had a positive and significant influence on students' academic performance, jointly explaining 66% of the variation ($R^2 = 0.66$). Among them, the availability of learning materials ($\beta = 0.542$, $p = 0.004$) had the strongest effect, indicating that access to textbooks and instructional aids greatly enhances students' understanding and participation in learning activities. Government funding ($\beta = 0.398$, $p = 0.002$) also contributed substantially, as timely and adequate financial support improves teaching resources and examination preparation. Meanwhile, classroom infrastructure ($\beta = 0.356$, $p = 0.013$) positively affected performance by providing a conducive environment for effective instruction, though overcrowding remains a challenge. These findings align with Hanushek (1979) and Lydia (2022), affirming that improved educational inputs when efficiently managed lead to better academic outcomes in Tanzania's fee-free education context.

3.3 Qualitative Insights

Interview data reinforced quantitative findings. The head of school reported:

"The government's funding helps reduce dropout rates, but the money arrives late, making it hard to plan effectively."

Teachers noted that despite improved access to materials, the student–teacher ratio remains high, affecting individualized learning. Parents appreciated fee-free education but emphasized hidden costs (like lunch and uniforms) that still hinder consistent academic progress.

4.0 Discussion of Findings

The study's findings align with Lydia (2022) and Bankimeza (2021), who found that fee-free education, enhances academic performance by increasing student retention and access to learning resources. However, the Lupeta case demonstrates that quality outcomes depend on the adequacy and timeliness of inputs rather than access alone.

The positive correlation between government funding and performance ($r=0.848$) supports Hanushek's (1979) Education Production Function Theory, which posits that increased inputs yield improved outcomes only when efficiently managed. The results also resonate with Ahlo and Umeodum (2024), who reported that hidden costs negatively influence student attainment despite free education.

Thus, the policy's success in promoting academic performance hinges on strengthening resource management, teacher support and accountability mechanisms. Without these, expanded access risks diluting education quality through overcrowding and underfunding.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

The study concludes that fee-free education has partially improved academic performance in public secondary schools by reducing financial barriers and increasing resource availability. However, inefficiencies in fund distribution, inadequate infrastructure and limited instructional support have constrained its effectiveness.

Recommendations

The study recommends that the government strengthen the implementation framework of the fee-free education policy by ensuring timely and adequate disbursement of capitation grants, coupled with transparent resource utilization at the school level. This would allow schools to plan effectively for teaching materials, classroom maintenance and student support programs, thereby improving academic outcomes. Additionally, there is a need to prioritize infrastructure development especially classroom expansion and furniture provision to reduce overcrowding, which remains one of the major obstacles to effective teaching and learning in public secondary schools.

Furthermore, the government, in collaboration with local communities and education stakeholders, should enhance teacher support systems through continuous professional development, motivation and adequate supervision to sustain instructional quality. Strengthening community participation in school development programs can also promote shared accountability and resource mobilization. By addressing these practical challenges, the fee-free

education policy can move beyond access expansion to achieving its ultimate goal improving the quality and academic performance of students in Tanzania's public secondary schools.

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