



Educating Ghana: The importance of information and access

What does it take for a country to grow sustainably? Improved and accessible healthcare, improved infrastructure, a thriving private sector that creates jobs, access to finance for all and good governance are all fundamental components of every successful growth story. But arguably one of the most important factors is an educated populace. A strong education system that harnesses the full potential of every citizen has the power to change a country's future and sustain its growth for years to come. So how well is Ghana doing in educating the young men and women who will lead the country in the future? The answer, not surprisingly, is a mix of successes, failures and persisting challenges.

Ghana has achieved commendable milestones at the primary school level by increasing enrolment rates and school completion rates. However, when we look at enrolment at the secondary

school level, some major challenges still remain. Ghana's centralized application system for admission to secondary school is based on merit and this creates an opportunity for talented students to attend the best and most prestigious schools in the country, irrespective of their socio-economic background. In a country like Ghana where a high level of inequality persists, such a system can play a crucial role by making quality education accessible to all. As recent evidence from the country shows, this



KEY FINDINGS:

- Students from low income backgrounds tend to overestimate their exam performance.
- Less privileged students are more likely to list cost or distance as the most important factor in choosing Secondary High Schools.
- Less privileged students tend to apply to low performing secondary schools. This is true even if they are high performing students and they expect to get a distinction.
- The CSSPS is not effectively coordinating school placement. Over 40% of SHS students were attending different schools from the ones they were placed in.

About IGC

The International Growth Centre (IGC) aims to promote sustainable growth in developing countries by providing demand-led policy advice based on frontier research.

Based at LSE and in partnership with Oxford University, the IGC is initiated and funded by DFID.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Ensure that students receive information on their academic performance before making applications to secondary schools.
- Provide students with a list of schools and information about the previous year's admission cut-off scores for courses in each school before they apply.
- Increase efforts to address financial constraints for students from lower income backgrounds.
- Implement regular surveys to gain additional information about students' choices and to track their progress through the secondary school system.

has not been the case. So what is holding back an otherwise good system from being successful? A recent study by the International Growth Centre offers some insight and the results have important policy implications for the education sector in Ghana.

As the system now stands, application to senior high school is centralized through a Computerized School Selection and Placement System (CSSPS). This allocates junior high school students to senior high schools based on students' ranking of their preferred program choices and their performance on the Basic Education Certificate Exam (BECE). A very important aspect of this system is that students have to choose their schools and submit applications before taking the BECE. At the same time, schools do not determine the precise cut-off scores for admission but simply declare how many vacancies they have available for the coming year. This means that although students know that admission is based on merit, they do not know what specific exam scores are required for admission to any given programme or school. In other words, students have no way to realistically assess their chances of admission to any particular school. Their assessments are based on uninformed expectations.

As the IGC study 'Imperfect Information and School Choice in Ghana' highlights, the issue is even deeper than that. Authors Kehinde Ajayi and Henry Telli find that students from low income backgrounds overestimate their performance in the BECE exams compared to their wealthier counterparts. Even without information on admission cut-off scores for each school, this optimism should lead these students to apply to the top schools

in the country. On the contrary, the authors find that despite being confident about their own performance, students from low income backgrounds apply to secondary schools with lower expected admission requirements. This implies that there are other underlying factors that affect the decisions of these students. In analysing what such factors might be, the authors find that compared to others, low income students are less likely to think of academic performance as a deciding factor. Instead, cost and distance stand out as more important factors of concern for students from such backgrounds. This decision making pattern is a major limitation to the ability of CSSPS in providing equal opportunity to students from all backgrounds. Policies must be directed to address such issues if CSSPS is to be truly inclusive and successful.

In line with the current discussion in the country about making secondary high schools progressively free, it is important for Ghana and its policymakers to consider how to make the centralized admission system more inclusive. An issue that should be of great concern is the fact that in 2013, only about 53.5% of BECE candidates qualified for admission to secondary high schools. The high number of non-admitted candidates has serious implications for the Ghanaian economy in the long term. Without an improvement in the quality of education at the primary and junior high school level, almost half of the country's youth are at risk of falling out of the formal education system. It is vital that the government of Ghana treat this matter with the level of urgency that it requires. Improving the quality of learning will require a series of holistic policies. In the short term, quicker policies can be taken to make the centralized admission system in Ghana a success. We cannot undermine the importance of information and access in creating an inclusive education ecosystem in the country. With the right strategies, Ghana can ensure that every child has the opportunity to reach their full potential and lead the country into a brighter future.



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