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The Effect of Learners' Sponsorship on Students' Retention in USE Schools in Bugisu Sub Region

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Student retention in secondary education remains a significant concern, particularly in developing countries like Uganda, where socio-economic barriers impede access to education. The introduction of Universal Secondary Education (USE) in Uganda in 2007 aimed to address these challenges by providing free secondary education, but retention rates remain low due to ongoing financial burdens. This study explored the impact of learners' sponsorship, particularly through government-sponsored programs like USE, on student retention in secondary schools in Bugisu Sub Region, Uganda. Using a mixed-methods approach, including quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, and focus group discussions, the research examined the role of financial support and parental involvement in influencing retention. The findings reveal that government-sponsored education significantly improves student retention, with fee exemptions and supplementary financial support contributing to increased enrolment and regular attendance. However, challenges such as the need for further financial support for additional costs (e.g., transportation, meals) remain. The study concludes that while government initiatives like USE have had a positive impact, there is a need for enhanced investment in expanded financial support, and increased parental engagement to further improve retention rates. These findings offer valuable insights for policymakers and educators aiming to improve secondary education retention in similar contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

Student retention in secondary education remains a significant challenge globally, with far-reaching consequences for individual economic opportunities and broader societal outcomes. Research consistently shows that students who do not complete secondary education face increased risks of unemployment, low-wage employment, and social marginalization (Pipa et al., 2024). In Uganda, the introduction of Universal Secondary Education (USE) in 2007 aimed to address these challenges, particularly for vulnerable groups such as orphans, girls, and children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. By offering free secondary education, the policy sought to remove financial barriers to education. While enrolment rates have increased, student retention continues to be low, with many students dropping out due to financial constraints and other limited resources (Getange & Onsombi, 2016; Aja-Okorie & Umennabuike, 2024).

Although the USE initiative has successfully expanded access to secondary education, it has not adequately addressed the socio-economic factors that affect student retention (Huylebroeck & Titeca, 2015). While tuition fees are waived, additional costs—such as lunch, transport, and other school-related expenses—remain significant barriers for many families. In Bugisu Sub Region, where this study is based, the implementation of USE has enabled children from low-income families to access secondary education. However, retention rates continue to be suboptimal, primarily due to these persistent financial challenges.

This study explores the effect of learners' sponsorship on student retention in USE schools within the Bugisu Sub Region. Sponsorship programs have been introduced to support students who are financially disadvantaged, but their impact on retention rates has not been thoroughly analysed. The objectives of this study were: to determine the impact of learners' sponsorship on student retention, to examine the role of parents and socioeconomic factors in retention rates and to evaluate the government's role in creating equal educational opportunities for secondary school students in Bugisu Sub Region. The research aims to provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of sponsorship programs in improving retention and to offer policy recommendations for enhancing their impact in similar contexts.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

This study is based on two key theories: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System Theory (El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022) and the Transformational Leadership Theory (Breevaart & Bakker, 2018). The former provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the role of various environmental systems in shaping a child's development, with a focus on student retention within the school system. Bronfenbrenner, (1977) outlines five environmental systems—microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem—that influence student retention. The microsystem emphasizes direct relationships with peers, teachers, and family; the mesosystem reflects the interactions between different parts of a student's environment, such as home and school; the exosystem includes external environments, like parents' workplaces, that

indirectly impact students; the macrosystem highlights societal values and cultural norms; and the chronosystem considers changes over time, such as transitions between educational stages. Bronfenbrenner's theory underscores the importance of both the environment and the active role of the student in shaping retention outcomes.

The Transformational Leadership Theory emphasizes the role of leaders who inspire, motivate, and support their followers (Downton, 1973; Burns, 1978; Bass, 1990). Transformational leaders foster a positive environment by providing inspirational motivation, addressing individual needs, and encouraging creativity. In educational settings, such leaders are critical for motivating both teachers and students to work toward shared goals, such as student retention. This theory suggests that leaders must adapt their approach to meet the needs of their subordinates and create supportive environments that enhance retention.

Together, these theories emphasize the complex, dynamic factors that influence student retention. A school's leadership plays a crucial role in shaping an environment that supports students, using available resources and fostering a positive, nurturing culture that encourages long-term academic success. Transformational leadership is essential for improving school culture and outcomes, thus promoting student retention.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The issue of student retention in education remains a significant concern for governments and societies worldwide, especially in developing countries where financial constraints and socio-economic factors often undermine efforts to keep students in school (Niehues et al., 2019). Retention is defined as the continued participation of learners in the educational process until the completion of the education cycle. Despite various policies and strategies aimed at enhancing smooth transitions and reducing school dropout rates, many students, particularly in developing countries, continue to

withdraw from school prematurely (Ertem & Gökalp, 2020). This challenge is evident in many sub-Saharan African countries, including Uganda, where the government has made efforts to address education access through initiatives such as the Universal Secondary Education (USE) program. Launched in 2007, USE was designed to tackle issues such as illiteracy, high dropout rates, and low secondary school completion rates by subsidizing education and making it more affordable for families (MoES, 2020). These efforts are aligned with global commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Education for All (Stenzel et al., 2024). However, despite these efforts, student retention continues to be a challenge (Huylebroeck & Titeca, 2015), particularly in rural areas like Bugisu Sub Region, Uganda, where socio-economic barriers remain high.

Various studies have identified factors contributing to low retention rates, such as poverty, inadequate school infrastructure, and lack of parental support (Hapompwe et al., 2020; Ogola et al., 2014). In Kenya, for instance, the introduction of free primary education led to increased enrolment but also resulted in higher teacher-student ratios and delays in the disbursement of government funds, which negatively affected retention rates (Mulinge et al., 2022). Similarly, research from Zambia indicated that poor pedagogical practices, lack of adequate school resources, and socio-economic challenges significantly hindered students' progression beyond the primary level (Hapompwe et al., 2020). In this context, the role of government-sponsored programs, such as USE in Uganda, becomes critical. While previous studies have explored the impact of socio-economic factors and government subsidies on retention, few have specifically focused on the role of government sponsorship in enhancing retention in secondary schools, particularly in rural areas.

The literature suggests that socio-economic factors, such as poverty and family income, play a significant role in student retention. For example,

studies by Kotiano et al. (2022) and Mutinda and Ochieng (2022) found that students from low-income families are more likely to drop out due to the financial burden of education. Similarly, in Kenya, Ogola et al. (2014) observed that some parents withdrew their support for education once they realized the government was committed to providing free primary education, though delays in the allocation of funds led to resource shortages and ultimately affected retention rates. In Uganda, the introduction of USE aimed to reduce the financial burden on families, but challenges in the effective implementation of the program, such as delayed funding and inadequate infrastructure, may still hinder its success in improving retention rates.

Despite these challenges, there is a growing body of research suggesting that targeted sponsorship programs, including government subsidies and initiatives to support vulnerable students, can significantly improve retention. Studies by Salau et al. (2021) and Runhare et al. (2021) have shown that support mechanisms, such as mentorship programs, school-community partnerships, and the provision of school feeding programs, can positively influence retention rates by addressing some of the barriers that students face. However, there remains a lack of research specifically examining how government-sponsored programs like USE contribute to retention in Uganda, particularly in rural regions like Bugisu Sub Region, where students may face additional socio-economic challenges due to their agrarian lifestyle.

Moreover, there is a need for a deeper understanding of how the ecological and institutional environments, including school leadership, community involvement, and government policy, interact to impact retention. Studies by Yang (2019) and Tsemato et al. (2024) suggest that these environmental factors can either support or impede students' retention depending on how they are managed. In Uganda, where school leadership and community involvement are critical in the implementation of policies like USE, the

effectiveness of these programs in promoting retention has yet to be fully explored. Furthermore, the specific challenges faced by schools in rural areas, such as Bugisu Sub Region, where agricultural-based economies often limit family income and access to resources, are not sufficiently addressed in the existing literature.

This study, therefore, sought to fill these gaps by examining the impact of learners' sponsorship on student retention in USE schools in Bugisu Sub Region, Uganda. It explored how government-sponsored programs, particularly USE, influence retention rates in rural settings, considering both the socio-economic context and the role of school leadership and community involvement. By addressing these gaps, this research hopes to contribute valuable insights into the effectiveness of sponsorship programs in improving retention and offer policy recommendations for enhancing their impact in similar contexts.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, triangulating both quantitative and qualitative research designs to explore the impact of learners' sponsorship on student retention in Universal Secondary Education (USE) schools in Bugisu Sub Region. A descriptive research design was used to assess the frequency of events and to quantify the effects of sponsorship on retention, providing a snapshot of key variables. The study population consisted of 8,909 students enrolled in USE secondary schools, with a sample of 339 students selected using Slovin's formula to ensure statistical validity. In addition, 27 key informants, including community development officers, head teachers, and teachers, were purposively selected, alongside 21 parents for focus group discussions.

The sample was chosen using random sampling for students to represent the broader population, while purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used for selecting key informants and parents. Data were collected through questionnaires, semi-

structured interviews, focus group discussions, observations, and documentary reviews. A structured questionnaire was administered to students to assess their perceptions of sponsorship and retention, while interviews with teachers, head teachers, and community officers explored their perspectives on the issue. Focus group discussions provided insights into parents' views on sponsorship and its impact on retention. Documentary reviews supplemented these data sources by examining relevant policy and enrolment documents.

To ensure the reliability and validity of the data, a pilot study was conducted, and the instruments were tested for reliability using Cronbach's Alpha, which yielded a value of 0.816. Expert reviewers also evaluated the instruments for content validity. Ethical considerations were central to the study, with informed consent obtained from all

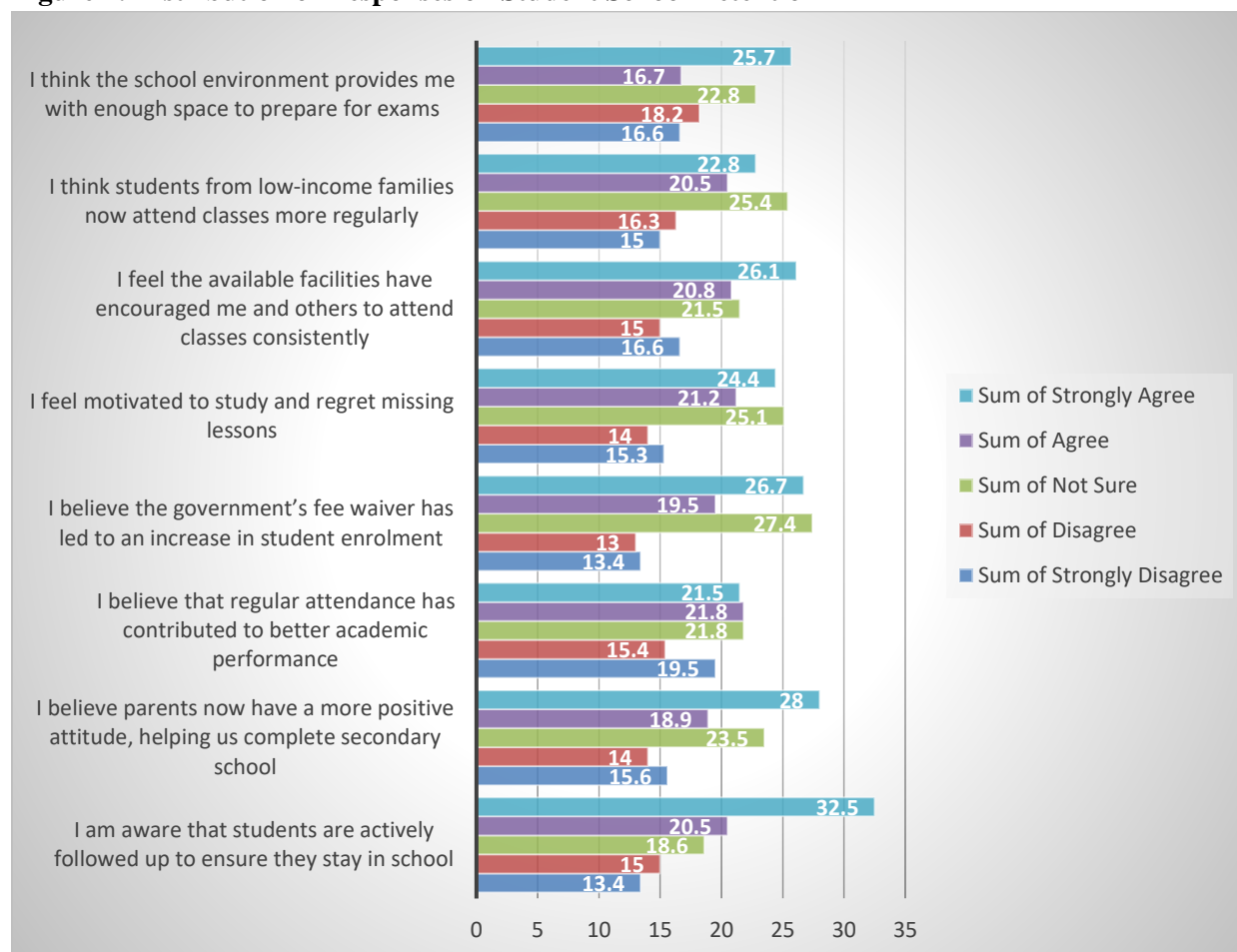
participants, and confidentiality ensured throughout the research process. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative data were analysed through content analysis to identify key themes related to sponsorship and retention. The mixed-methods approach provided a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing student retention in USE schools.

FINDINGS

Student School Retention in USE Schools

Respondents were asked for statements that explore general factors influencing student retention in schools within the Bugisu sub-region, including government initiatives, facilities, and student motivation. Figure 1 below presents the findings.

Figure 1: Distribution of Responses on Student School Retention



The findings highlight a generally positive yet mixed perception of factors influencing student retention in secondary schools. The majority of students (46%) agree or strongly agree that the government's fee waiver contributes to increased enrolment, though a notable proportion (26%) express disagreement, with 27% unsure, indicating some uncertainty about its effectiveness. Similarly, while 43% of students believe financial support improves attendance among low-income families, 31% disagree or remain uncertain, suggesting that challenges persist in ensuring consistent attendance.

Regarding the relationship between regular attendance and academic performance, 43% of students affirm its importance, though 35% remain unconvinced, indicating that other factors may play a role in academic success. The majority (47%) of students perceive school facilities as encouraging regular attendance, although 31% express doubt, pointing to a potential gap in the perceived effectiveness of these resources.

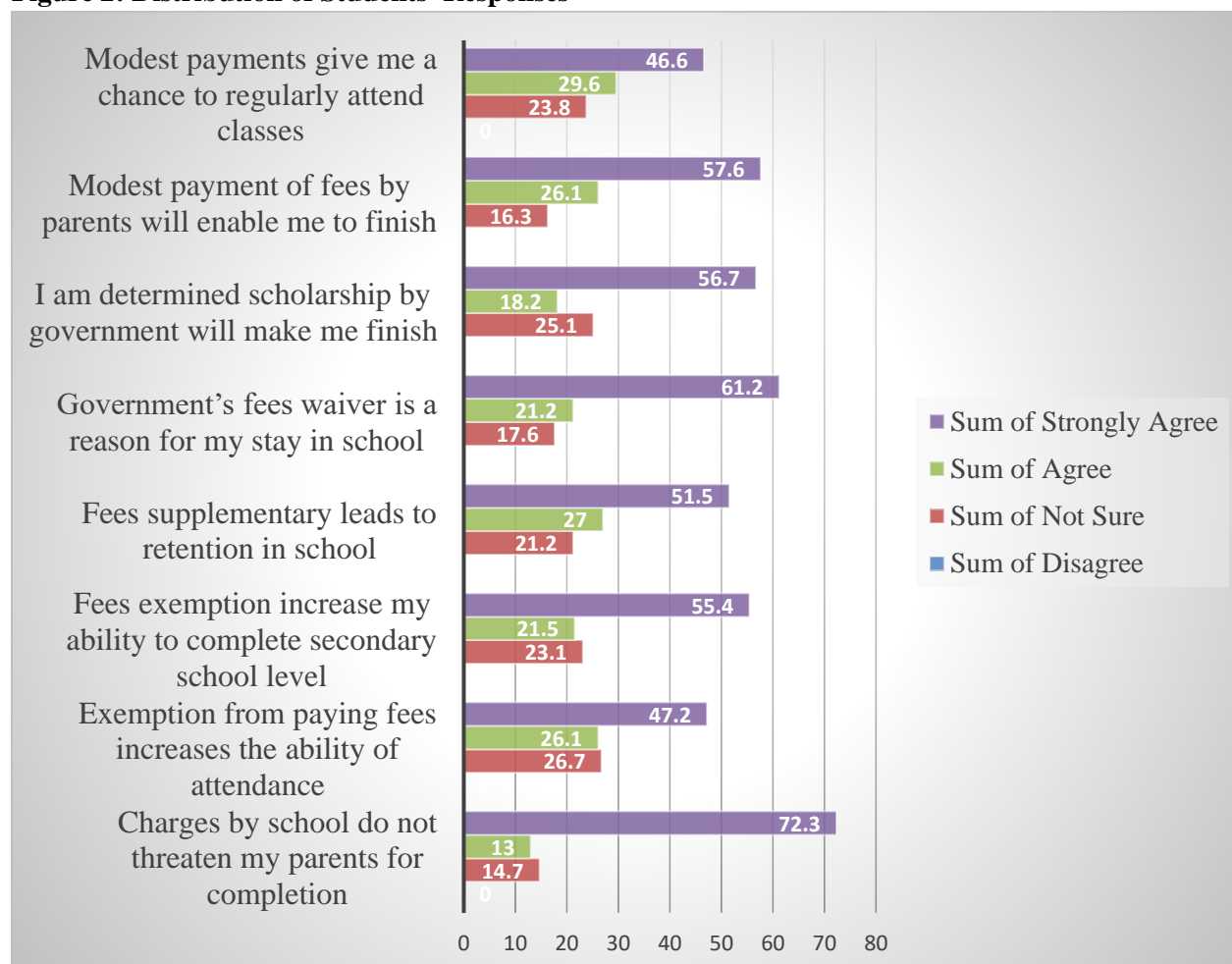
The follow-up mechanisms aimed at ensuring student retention are viewed positively, with 53% of students acknowledging their impact. However, 28% express uncertainty or disagreement,

suggesting room for improvement in their implementation or awareness. Motivation to study and regret for missing lessons is also seen positively by 46% of students, but a significant proportion (29%) feel less motivated, highlighting variability in student engagement.

Finally, while 47% of students report increased parental support for education, 30% disagree or remain unsure, indicating inconsistent parental involvement. Overall, the data suggests that while students benefit from government initiatives, school facilities, and follow-up efforts, there are areas where further improvements are necessary to enhance retention and academic success.

Effects of Learners' Sponsorship on Students' Retention

The primary aim of the study was to investigate the impact of learners' sponsorship on student retention in USE schools. The hypothesis was that sponsored learners would feel more confident and supported, thereby increasing their likelihood of continuing their education and completing secondary school. The findings, presented in Figure 2 below, support this hypothesis.

Figure 2: Distribution of Students' Responses

The result from Figure 2 reveals that various financial support mechanisms significantly affect students' ability to remain in school and attend regularly. A majority of students strongly agree that fee exemptions enhance their ability to complete secondary school (55.4%) and attend school regularly (47.2%). Similarly, 51.5% of students strongly agree that supplementary fees contribute to retention, suggesting that manageable additional costs are seen as facilitating continued education.

Furthermore, a significant number of students (57.6%) believe that modest parental fee payments are crucial for completing their education. Additionally, 72.3% feel that school charges do not place an overwhelming financial burden on their parents, indicating that financial pressures are often manageable. The role of government support is also

highlighted, with 56.7% of students strongly agreeing that government scholarships enable them to finish their studies, and 61.2% attributing their retention to the government's fee waiver.

While the responses show strong agreement with these financial aids, there remains a proportion of students who are unsure about the direct impact of these factors, particularly with regard to government scholarships (25.1%) and modest payments enabling regular attendance (23.8%). This suggests that while financial interventions are vital, other factors, such as personal circumstances and school quality, may also influence retention.

In conclusion, financial support through fee exemptions, supplementary charges, and government programs plays a significant role in

enhancing student retention. However, a portion of students remains uncertain about the extent of these factors' influence, pointing to the need for a holistic approach to improving school attendance and retention.

Findings for qualitative data validate the quantitative findings. The findings suggested that these exemptions significantly increased parental involvement in students' education. With tuition fees no longer a burden, parents were more attuned to their children's academic progress and well-being. One parent highlighted that:

Initially, parents had the duty to look for tuition and encourage them to always attend classes. When the government exempted parents from paying tuition, they became more focused on ensuring their children could finish their studies.

However, some students grew distant from their parents, perceiving the government as the sole financial supporter of their education. As expressed in the focus group discussions (FGDs),

There are some students who detached from their parents, having realized that it is the government that is responsible for paying their tuition. They became indispensable to their parents.

Furthermore, the government's financial support was identified as a key factor in student retention and academic completion. Both teachers and other key informants observed a noticeable increase in student attendance following the introduction of the Universal Secondary Education (USE) policy. A key informant remarked,

There has been an increase in daily attendance at classes since the implementation of USE.

This policy, however, also led to greater demands for infrastructure, including additional classrooms and desks, in order to accommodate the growing student population. Although parents were

generally appreciative of the government's support, concerns about students' academic performance persisted. Despite receiving tuition assistance, parents continued to bear some financial responsibilities, such as fees for meals, transport, uniforms, and learning materials. Nevertheless, these additional charges were not perceived as significant obstacles to completing education. One parent in the FGDs noted,

Although most USE parents are poor with few or no sources of income, some of the charges by schools are no longer threats to the education of their children.

Additionally, students acknowledged that while certain school charges remained, they no longer posed a major challenge to their education. In the past, students could be barred from final exams due to unpaid tuition fees, but this issue has largely been resolved through government support. Reflecting on the past, one parent remarked, *"This has, however, become an issue of the past."* Signifying a shift in the financial burden on parents and students.

Moreover, students expressed confidence that the government's scholarship program would enable them to complete their secondary education. This sentiment was echoed by key informants, with one student stating, *"We are determined that the scholarship given will lead us to finish or complete the level."*

A key informant further noted that the USE program had been designed for long-term sustainability, aiming to provide universal access to education as a constitutional right. The informant observed,

USE as a government program has been implemented to last for a long period. It has been implemented so as to enable all children to access and enjoy education services as a right.

The study also revealed that the removal of government support would have left many students uncertain about their educational future. Parents

emphasized the significance of this support in enabling their children to continue and complete their education. As one parent commented, “*With the support from the government, children who wish to study must complete their careers.*”

Both students and parents underscored the critical role of government assistance in facilitating secondary education completion. Additionally, the study highlighted that regular school attendance was linked to improved academic performance, which was supported by a conducive learning environment enhanced by resources such as stocked libraries and laboratories. Teachers acknowledged that:

There was an agreement that teachers alone would not have led to students' academic performance without other factors. Other

factors include a conducive environment for teaching-learning that improved with stocked libraries and laboratories.

In summary, the study demonstrates that the government's fee exemption program significantly contributes to the retention and completion of secondary education by alleviating financial pressures on both students and parents, while also promoting a supportive learning environment.

H₀₁: There is No Relationship Between Learners' Sponsorship and Students' Retention

To investigate the relationship between learners' sponsorship and retention, the study tested the null hypothesis (H₀₁), which suggested that learners' sponsorship has no significant effect on student retention. The results of a simple linear regression are presented in Table 1 below;

Table 1: A Simple Linear Regression Between Learners' Sponsorship and Retention

Model Summary^b										
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change in R Square	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change	
1	.155 ^a	.024	.021	6.14722	.024	7.471	1	304	.007	
a. Predictors: (Constant), Sponsorships										
b. Dependent Variable: SR										
ANOVA^a										
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F				Sig.	
1	Regression	282.330	1	282.330	7.471				.007 ^b	
	Residual	11487.657	304	37.788						
	Total	11769.987	305							
a. Dependent Variable: SR										
b. Predictors: (Constant), Sponsorships										
Coefficients^a										
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients B	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.	Correlations Zero-order	Partial	Part	Collinearity Statistics Tolerance	VIF
1 (Constant)	20.535	2.028		10.127	.000					
Sponsorships	.157	.057	.155	2.733	.007	.155	.155	.155	1.000	1.000
a. Dependent Variable: SR										

The Pearson correlation analysis, presented in Table 1, showed a moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.$

$155, p < 0.05$) between sponsorship and retention (SR). Additionally, regression analysis revealed that

learners' sponsorship explained 2.4% ($R^2 = 0.024$) of the variance in student retention, a finding that was statistically significant. The ANOVA results in Table 1 confirmed a significant relationship between sponsorship and retention ($F = 7.471$, $p < 0.05$), indicating the model's validity in capturing this relationship. Lastly, the regression coefficients in Table 1 demonstrated that each unit increase in learners' sponsorship was associated with a positive change in retention. The standardized coefficient ($\beta = 0.155$, $p < 0.05$) further corroborated the significant impact of sponsorship on retention. As a result, the null hypothesis was rejected, supporting the alternative hypothesis that learners' sponsorship significantly influences student retention.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the impact of learners' sponsorship on student retention in Universal Secondary Education (USE) schools in Bugisu Sub Region. The data indicate that government sponsorship plays a crucial role in ensuring students' continued enrolment and successful completion of secondary education.

Impact of Learners' Sponsorship on Student Retention

The study's central hypothesis—that learners' sponsorship positively affects student retention—was confirmed by the results. The findings revealed a strong association between government-sponsored education (i.e., USE) and students' decision to stay in school. A majority of the students indicated that the financial support provided through USE alleviated significant barriers to education, particularly the burden of tuition fees. This corresponds with the findings of Ercikan & Roth (2014), who argued that when financial barriers are reduced or removed, students are more likely to remain in school and complete their education.

The fact that the study showed a moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.155$) between sponsorship and retention, and the regression analysis demonstrated

that sponsorship explained 2.4% of the variance in retention, further reinforces the notion that government-sponsored education directly influences students' ability to stay enrolled. Though the percentage of variance explained may seem low, it is important to consider that retention is influenced by a variety of factors, such as student motivation, family support, and school quality, many of which were not directly measured in this study. However, the government's provision of free education, including fee exemptions, was identified as a critical factor contributing to retention.

Parental and Socioeconomic Influence

The findings also highlighted the role of parents and socioeconomic factors in retention rates. While the government's financial support alleviated tuition costs, parents were still responsible for additional charges, such as meal fees, transportation, and scholastic materials. The modest payments required from parents were not perceived as significant barriers to education, and this suggests a shift in the financial dynamics between parents, students, and the school system. The shift away from the burden of tuition fees allowed parents to focus more on ensuring that their children attended school regularly and performed well.

This is consistent with previous studies, such as that by Vasileiou et al. (2018), which suggested that when government programs like USE provide financial relief, families tend to engage more positively in their children's education. However, the study also found that some students became less engaged with their parents upon realizing that the government was responsible for paying tuition. This suggests that while sponsorship may reduce financial burdens, it can also alter the dynamics of family involvement in education, as discussed by the FGDs.

Government's Role in Creating Equal Educational Opportunities

The government's role in the education system, particularly in the provision of financial

sponsorship, was also highlighted in the study. The findings suggest that the USE program has effectively opened doors for many students who would otherwise have struggled to complete secondary school. The fee waiver allowed students to focus on their studies without the constant worry of unpaid fees. This is consistent with the findings of other scholars such as Getange and Onsombi, (2016), who emphasized that governmental intervention in education can play a pivotal role in promoting educational equality and improving retention rates in schools.

However, while the government's support was appreciated, there were challenges regarding the adequacy of infrastructure to accommodate the increasing number of students. The study found that the growth in student enrolment due to USE led to greater pressure on resources, particularly classrooms, desks, and other learning materials. This highlights the need for continued investment in educational infrastructure to support the growing student population.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study provide compelling evidence that learners' sponsorship, particularly through government programs like USE, has a significant impact on student retention in secondary schools. The study demonstrated that financial support from the government removed one of the largest barriers to education—tuition fees—thereby enabling many students to complete their secondary education. Additionally, parental involvement and socioeconomic factors were important in maintaining regular school attendance and performance. However, the study also highlighted challenges related to the adequacy of school infrastructure and the role of parental involvement, which requires further attention.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made to enhance the effectiveness of learners' sponsorship programs in improving student retention:

- ✓ While the government's fee exemptions have positively affected retention, students still face additional costs for materials, transportation, and meals. It is recommended that the government consider expanding its financial support to cover these supplementary costs, ensuring that education is truly free for all students.
- ✓ The rapid increase in student enrolment under USE has placed significant pressure on school infrastructure. The government should allocate more resources for the construction of classrooms, provision of desks, and upgrading of learning facilities to ensure that all students have access to a conducive learning environment.
- ✓ While the study found that government support has reduced parental financial strain, it is important to maintain strong parent-school partnerships. Schools should engage parents in the educational process, encouraging them to monitor their children's academic progress and participate in school activities.
- ✓ Although government sponsorship helps many students, some still face challenges that affect their retention. Programs should be tailored to assist students from the most vulnerable backgrounds, ensuring they have equal opportunities to complete their education.
- ✓ Continuous monitoring of the USE program is necessary to assess its impact on retention and academic performance. The government should implement regular evaluations to identify challenges and adjust the program accordingly to meet the evolving needs of students.

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