



East African Journal of Education Studies

eajes.eanso.org

Volume 8, Issue 1, 2025

Print ISSN: 2707-3939 | Online ISSN: 2707-3947

Title DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37284/2707-3947>

EANSO
EAST AFRICAN
NATURE &
SCIENCE
ORGANIZATION

Original Article

Admission of Non-Traditional Students in the 21st Century Universities: A Tradition of Transformations

Jordan Byekwaso Lwanga^{1*}, Willy Ngaka² & George Ladaah Openjuru³

¹ Makerere University, P. O. Box 7062, Kampala, Uganda.

² Kyambogo University, P. O. Box 1, Kampala, Uganda.

³ Gulu University, P. O. Box 166, Gulu, Uganda.

* Author for Correspondence Email: jordan.byekwaso@gmail.com

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajes.8.1.2585>

Date Published: **ABSTRACT**

03 January 2025

Keywords:

*Non-Traditional
Students,
Learning in
Adulthood,
Admission
Decisions,
Future Practice,
Emergencies.*

This article analyzes the transformations in the organization and governance of admissions for older adults (non-traditional students – NTSS) in higher education at one of the public universities in Uganda. Adulthood demands acquiring new coping strategies and skills to adapt to the requirements of new and emerging roles. This demand goes beyond depending on introductory training and informal experiences based on cultural wisdom. A growing belief underscores HE as a critical tool in responding to these demands. To champion this belief, many universities are contextually defining and implementing admission decisions to select deserving adults to enrol for university education. We collected qualitative data from university managers (some of whom doubled as academics), mature age coaches, and graduate and continuing non-traditional students. The purpose of this article was to analyze how institutional decisions on the admission of non-traditional students have evolved and their implications on the future development of the HE sector. This article illustrates and concludes by raising awareness among current and future sector managers and scholars who might be new to NTSS on how institutional decisions leading to their enrolment emerged and their implications for future practice.

APA CITATION

Lwanga, J. B., Ngaka, W. & Openjuru, G. L. (2025). Assessing the Provision of Healthcare Services and their Effects in Rural Secondary Schools in Tanzania. *East African Journal of Education Studies*, 8(1), 182-193. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajes.8.1.2585>

CHICAGO CITATION

Lwanga, Jordan Byekwaso, Willy Ngaka and George Ladaah Openjuru. 2025. "Assessing the Provision of Healthcare Services and their Effects in Rural Secondary Schools in Tanzania". *East African Journal of Education Studies* 8 (1), 182-193. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajes.8.1.2585>

HARVARD CITATION

Lwanga, J. B., Ngaka, W. & Openjuru, G. L. (2025) "Assessing the Provision of Healthcare Services and their Effects in Rural Secondary Schools in Tanzania", *East African Journal of Education Studies*, 8(1), pp. 182-193. doi: 10.37284/eajes.8.1.2585

IEEE CITATION

J. B., Lwanga, W., Ngaka & G. L., Openjuru "Assessing the Provision of Healthcare Services and their Effects in Rural Secondary Schools in Tanzania" *EAJES*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 182-193, Jan. 2025. doi: 10.37284/eajes.8.1.2585.

MLA CITATION

Lwanga, Jordan Byekwaso, Willy Ngaka & George Ladaah Openjuru. "Assessing the Provision of Healthcare Services and their Effects in Rural Secondary Schools in Tanzania". *East African Journal of Education Studies*, Vol. 8, no. 1, Jan. 2025, pp. 182-193, doi:10.37284/eajes.8.1.2585

INTRODUCTION

Transitioning into adulthood comes with a decline in the use of some skills, a need to acquire new ones, and adapting to the requirements of new and emerging roles (Rogers, 2002). Organizing older adults for life in a rapidly evolving world goes beyond depending on introductory training and informal experiences based on cultural wisdom (Burns & Köster, 2016; Newman & Hatton-Yeo, 2008). Globally, there is a growing belief in higher education (HE) as a tool to respond to these demands (Nguyen et al., 2020). As a result, the advocacy for promoting learning in adulthood has gained momentum as a forefront policy issue on the decision-making agendas of several HE institutions today (Evans et al., 2019; Findsen, 2018; Martin & Dismuke, 2018). In this case, HE has become one of the critical activities in which older adults endlessly participate in their everyday lives. It is an activity and process by which they face, cope with, and use their experience to accelerate and sustain their survival (Shan, 2020). To champion this belief, individual HE institutions define, determine, and implement several admission decisions to select different categories of participants including those from non-traditional backgrounds (Gayton, 2019; Tomlinson & Basit, 2024).

This group of students is herein referred to as *non-traditional students (NTSs)*. We have adopted this term to refer to a category of undergraduate students who access university education through other admission routes such as the diploma-holder scheme (for those who have obtained diplomas) and the mature-age entry scheme (for those with mature age examination certificates) other than the traditional direct entry scheme. Being a non-traditional student is partly claimed to have emerged due to rigidity in university admission and selection procedures that could not support their progressive transition after high school (Chen, 2017; Tumuheki et al., 2023). Considering an increasing number of people transiting into older adults, analyzing how HE systems work presents us with space to reflect on how enhancing learning in adulthood is a complex and recurring job in an evolving society (Sigahi & Sznclwar, 2021).

Growth is a journey with several twists that offer unending prospects for personal advancement. Today, this journey is compelling many older adults to seek and acquire advanced work, life and survival skills to adapt to the rapidly changing demands of our society. Central to this research is that, whereas universities are implementing alternative admission procedures for enrolling non-traditional students, there is emerging confusion on who is and should be traditionally accepted (as learners) amidst the increasingly changing work, learning, and social realities. Despite a healthy and evolving policy environment (Remenick, 2019), previous analyses show how the efforts to support the enrolment of NTSs have been frequently contested, with some issues remaining unresolved (Boliver et al., 2019; Kottmann et al., 2019; Mergner et al., 2019). Some of these issues include: 1) if ageing does not distort an adult's learning abilities (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020), 2) how do resolutions for admitting NTSs emerge and being understood in different contexts (Evans et al., 2019), 3) if admitting NTSs does not tamper with an institution's positioning on the world's education and labour market (Gayton, 2019), and 4) what key policy and programming decisions are fit to serve such students (Szekely & Mason, 2019).

This portrays how the admission of NTSs is a complex decision, whose success may be affected by confusing/misleading thoughts and opinions (Burns & Köster, 2016; Martin & Dismuke, 2018). This makes their selection and admission practically problematic and seemingly a complex and costly decision to implement (Kasworm, 2018; Moríña, 2017) resulting from an abstract awareness of who these learners are (Macdonald, 2018). Therefore, leaving as it is, the objectives of the decision to recruit NTSs might seem to remain confusing (Gayton, 2019; Rainford, 2017). Drawing experience from one of Uganda's public universities, this article explores how decisions leading to the recruitment of NTSs emerge and their implication for the future organization, development and governance of HE. We address this gap by answering two research questions: (1) how have decisions leading to recruitment of NTS in HE emerged over time? and (2) what are the implications of such decisions for future policy and

practice? This analysis is critical because, as decisions are taken and policies endorsed, circumstances leading to their establishment must be clear to avoid and/or address any procedural matters arising.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Participation of Non-Traditional Students in Higher Education

Globally, the profile of NTSs in HE is a historical matter (Remenick, 2019). In the United States of America (USA) for instance, their history draws back to the late 1700s when the first adult education school (known as The Junto) (Dauer & Abhser, 2015) and the founding of other community colleges that enrolled older adults on a part-time basis (Kasworm, 2018). In Sub-Saharan Africa, Uganda in particular, the same can be traced from the establishment of the first HE institution, the present-day Makerere University in 1922 (Magara, 2009). At the time, the university operated an exclusive and selective system with restricted access through a traditional direct-entry scheme. This left out many deserving participants until the approval of extra entry schemes (mature age and diploma holder schemes) in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Ssempebwa et al., 2017), the introduction of a fees cost-sharing framework (Marcucci et al., 2008) and establishment of several public and private universities (Kasozi, 2016). Across contexts, this reflects how the HE sector has been domesticating policy reforms (Sanga, 2019) to serve those who had been systematically sidelined to renew their learning aspirations in seemingly accommodative contexts (Findsen, 2018).

To date, this has come with a noticeable increase in enrolment of NTSs in HE in the country and beyond (Tomlinson & Basit, 2024). Analysis of past studies shows that in Europe (Kottmann et al., 2019; Carreira & Lopes, 2021), the UK (Evans et al., 2019; Gayton, 2019), the USA (Kasworm, 2018; Remenick, 2019), Germany (Mergner et al., 2019), Sweden (Bagga-Gupta et al., 2020), East Africa (Sanga, 2019), Uganda (Tumuheki et al., 2023) and across the globe (Yang et al., 2015) various factors of socio-economic, cultural, historical and political nature have from time to time shaped the formation

and institutionalization of supporting policy frameworks and practices. Nevertheless, earlier observations reveal how NTSs come with remarkable tension arising from the planning process and the desire to be supported to develop into a self they cherish and aspire for (Rogers, 2002). Besides, recent insights show that many institutional staff often face difficulties distinguishing traditional and non-traditional students and cannot adequately prepare for them (Dahlberg et al., 2021). Yet, many of them (NTSs) need extra support after having spent a considerable amount of time out of school (Banerjee, 2018). Analytically, for those who participate, chances are high to strengthen their social stability and survival (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020), and create opportunities for intergenerational exchange of knowledge, opinions, and perspectives (Findsen, 2018). This is further envisaged to enhance the likelihood of productive and competitive ageing (Nguyen et al., 2020), and promote equity and social participation across generations (Aganyira et al., 2024).

Theorizing Admission of Non-Traditional Students as a Complex Decision

This article sought to explore how institutional decisions for enrolling NTS emerge; drawing from the complexity theory which is concerned with how systems evolve, survive, and adapt to contextual demands (Mason, 2008). The theory emphasizes that deciding an intervention (in this case admission of NTS) is not a one-time but a gradual consideration (Burns & Köster, 2016) that requires institutions to rely on emerging issues/crisis/feedback to propose adaptable changes in systems, procedures and practices (Sigahi & Sznclwar, 2021). In the context of HE, the theory offers a frame of perspectives on how alternative admission and enrolment guidelines (decisions) emerge from a multitude of factors in which an education system is situated (Burns & Köster, 2016; Szekeley & Mason, 2019). While focusing on its priorities and people's demands, an education system is expected to reflect and form an opinion about what can make a feasible response (Sigahi & Sznclwar, 2021). Without such reflections, making policy decisions to confront the seemingly complex social issues is likely to fail, as many of these concerns may not have been clearly

defined, hindering effective interventions (Byrne and Callaghan, 2023).

Further, attention is drawn to the three concepts of the complexity theory. First, the frame of emergencies reflects a significant change in contextual life, work, and survival demands (Mason, 2008). The impact of such changes is complex and is compelling older adults to seek redress through HE. Thus, a new category of potential university students emerges. To serve these adults, the theory suggests thinking of creating possibilities in policy and practice to enable such potential students (NTSs) to meet admission requirements (Sigahi & Sznalwar, 2021). Second, similar to emergencies is the notion of crisis which describes a state that requires radical reforms to enable a system to serve the growing interests of potential students (Byrne and Callaghan, 2023). This is related to a university system with a single dimension of admission procedure that is frequently approached by non-conventional participants who don't possess the traditional entry requirements. Either the system creates alternative decisions on admission procedures to deal with the crisis or declines and locks out many potential participants and escalates the crisis (Szekely & Mason, 2019). The third is the frame of praxis which calls for critical thinking and awareness to guide the search for and implementation of alternative procedural decisions (Burns & Köster, 2016). However, because of the complexity of the issues leading to the crisis, sometimes, administrators/managers can make decisions with partial evidence of the outcomes. This means that proposers should reflect on what is traditionally (un)acceptable to deal with the limitations of the existing systems and practices (Sigahi & Sznalwar, 2021). Therefore, enrolment of NTS in HE represents a tradition of transformation in institutional admission decisions and explains an orientation towards adapting to emerging situations (adaptive orientation).

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative case study investigated how decisions leading to the enrolment of NTSs emerged and their implication for the future organization, development, and governance of HE. The study benefited from the experiences, opinions, and

thoughts of university managers and lecturers (n=8) (who plan, administer HE systems, and engage with the end users). This group provided insights into the institutional perspectives about the current admission procedures and the future of NTSs in HE. Meanwhile, mature-age coaches (n=1) engage with potential NTSs through mature-age coaching before their enrolment. These provided additional information on the implications for future policy and practice. The study also considered participation from NTSs, both continuing (n=7) and graduates (n=7) who brought a mix of experiences from a student's perspective as the end users of HE services (Kothari, 2004). All participants were purposively selected based on their relevance to the research purpose (Lune & Berg, 2017).

The research process reflected a collaborative engagement between researchers and participants attempting to make sense of the enrolment of NTSs in HE, how it has evolved, and the implications for future practice (Creswell, 2014). We were able to profoundly explore how the current institutional decisions for supporting the enrolment of NTS in HE emerged and their implications to systems' (re)organization and practice. Data was collected through interviews and focus group discussions. Data collection sessions were conducted in English, audio-recorded, and lasted between 60 to 150 minutes. Audio recordings were later transcribed to contribute to the data analysis process. Data were thematically analyzed. This established points of convergence and disagreements in the different data sets that provided instrumental insights that were used to compile and logically present the findings (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Aware of the ethical considerations, all names used in this article are pseudonyms.

FINDINGS

This research was guided by two research questions: (1) how have decisions leading to recruitment of NTS in HE emerged over time? and (2) what implications do such decisions have for future policy and practice? Findings revealed that enrolment of NTSs in HE has benefited from a tradition of transforming decisions relating to the administration of application, selection, and admission procedures.

These findings reveal implications for the future organization and governance of HE.

The Emergency of Alternative Admission Decisions in Higher Education

From the onset, HE in Uganda functioned in the shadow of the British system. It was highly selective and exclusive and left out many deserving entrants. Admissions were issued to a specific few, who had scored high grades from high school national examinations, and were sons and daughters of key chiefs and workers in the colonial government. There was one entry scheme and admissions were offered on government sponsorship. Those who failed to obtain admission, either repeated high school to get entry points or completely abandoned school. In this regard, one of the university managers noted:

There was a noticeable increase in demand for higher education around the late 1980s and early 1990s. We had only one university with limited access and could not absorb all who wanted to enrol even when they were qualifying. The selection criterion considered those with the highest scores and many were forced to break their education journey. (Terry)

Besides high entry point requirements, other socio-economic, cultural, and historical factors contributed to partial dropout before and after high school. This is claimed to have increased the number of potential non-traditional participants. On average, findings of this research indicated that non-traditional participants spent between 15-20 years before enrolling for university education. In support of the above expression, during a focus group discussion, one of the graduate NTS also mentioned:

When I started developing breasts, my parents saw moving animals (in the form of dowry) in me. Then, I had not yet even sat my senior four national examinations. My father organized a traditional marriage ceremony in 1995. I was given away and became someone's wife. I could not continue with school until 2012. (Alison)

Over time, there was a significant recognition that many of those who failed to register for university education enrolled in various tertiary and vocational

education institutions from which they obtained certificates and diplomas, as one the graduate NTS highlighted during an interview:

I sat my high school exams in 1980 and obtained only one principal pass. I could not join the university. Instead, I joined a tertiary institution for two years and graduated with a diploma in construction management. (Reeves)

Furthermore, this study established that, upon completing diplomas and certificates, these people expressed interest in upgrading their academic qualifications to meet the changing labour market requirements. There was also a recognition that the country's economy had outgrown the available professionals of the time. Then, the emerging private (business world, civil society) and widening public service sectors needed graduate employees other than diploma and certificate holders to run the emerging sectoral job positions. A university manager reported that;

The growing local economy created special skills demands from the labour force. Some people had been retrenched and were wondering how to survive in the next stage of their lives (at work, community, and family). The demand for highly trained and efficient personnel increased and the government did not have the resources to support those who wanted to attain higher qualifications. This happened at a time when the only university then was looking at alternative avenues for meeting the demand for higher education (Terry)

Contemplatively, resolving this crisis and domesticating its demand created and promoted the non-traditional sense of university education in the country today. This opened up space for considering decisions on accommodative and flexible entry alternatives. In this regard, this study acknowledged four critical scenarios that emerged and shaped changes in the decisions leading to the selection and admission of university students. First, many people had obtained diplomas from recognized institutions and needed to progress to a degree level but had no chance. There was no policy to guide their enrolment. Second, some of those who had enrolled for diploma studies had performed poorly, and yet

some who had passed had enrolled in non-recognized institutions under degree enrolment standards of the time. The third one was a group of people who, after high school, joined the business world and thought that their business could contribute to their enrolment requirements. Fourth, this created a complex crisis that resulted in the establishment of two alternative decisions on the selection and admission of applicants. What emerged was the creation of the diploma holder scheme (for those with diplomas with distinctions and credits from recognized diploma awarding institutions) and the mature age entry scheme (which required potential beneficiaries to sit for an entry exam, whose pass mark is 50%). One of the university managers in charge of implementing admission policies shared:

Many people had graduated with diplomas and were already working. They wanted to upgrade but did not have a way of joining. The university swiftly created a diploma holder scheme to cater for them. Some other people had failed to excel in high school and could not enrol for diploma studies. Yet, some of those who enrolled failed or got a pass diploma. Others had joined non-recognized institutions and could not be considered for admission. The university established a mature age entry scheme to accommodate such people. (Carlos)

These additional entry routes meant an expansion in university enrolment, bringing on board non-traditional students through non-traditional entry schemes on private and government sponsorships. This strengthened equity and justice in the distribution of access and participation opportunities to the different generations of potential learners, as expressed by one of the graduate NTSs during a focus group discussion:

I am thankful to this university. Many adults have the opportunity to return and pursue higher studies. When I could not continue because of failure to raise the required points, I thought that was the end. However, when I learnt of the mature age entry scheme, I registered for entry exams and I succeeded. I am a proud bachelor's degree holder from a university of my choice. (Alison)

Whereas it would have been assumed that the newly created alternative routes would fully resolve the demand crisis, the findings of this study revealed the emergence of another group of degree holders who increasingly expressed demand to enrol for other undergraduate degree programs. There was no entry scheme to guide the process and this category of applicants opted to use the diploma holder scheme to tender in their applications for admission. This increased competition for non-traditional admission slots and in the process, many were left out. One of the applicants who failed to obtain admission sued the university in courts of law seeking justice. The court proceedings generated awareness of the need to consider a decision to establish another entry route for those who already possessed degree qualifications. In an interview with one of the university administrators in charge of admission policies, he expressed that:

Of recent, a new category of undergraduate applicants emerged. This group of university graduates wanted to pursue other undergraduate programs, especially in medical school, engineering and technology, law, and agriculture. There was no entry scheme for them. Instead, we were merging them with diploma holders' entrants, and initially, they shared the admission quotas/slots. However, one applicant was not admitted to the bachelor of law. She did not concede defeat and accused the university of treating degree-holder and diploma-holder applicants the same and went to court. Although the university won the case, we noted a need to separate diploma holders from degree holders. A recommendation to the Senate's admission committee led to the establishment of a degree holders' entry scheme. (Carlos)

The above expression reveals that whenever a crisis arises, it is likely that alternative responses will emerge. In this context, we acknowledged that once a highly restrictive system evolved into a flexible one with relaxed access and participation guidelines to serve the enrolment interests of different applicants. However, this did not mean that competition for access was eliminated. The implementation of each entry scheme (representing

a frame of the praxis of the complexity theory) is guided by a specific policy that defines potential targets, admission requirements and guidelines, and available admission slots. While we might not anticipate how long it took for an institution to make such decisions, responding to the demand seemed to have been a complex analysis process. From a complexity theory perspective, creating and using alternative selection and admission decisions explains and justifies an institution's adaptive orientation to emerging situations.

Implication for Future Development and Governance of Higher Education

This study showed that the consistent demand for HE training and qualifications amongst an adult population is inviting the sector's planners and managers to reflect on the current and future opportunities for strengthening learning in adulthood. Registering NTSs adds to the mix of learners' categories, participation needs and experiences, (dis)abilities, and aspirations. Therefore, accommodating and integrating these adults in an originally youth-oriented learning environment is an issue of diversity that HE managers must plan for before, during instruction (and practice), and beyond. Further, the findings revealed that this impacts the nature of curriculum design, delivery and evaluation procedures, learners' engagement, instruction styles and practices, modes of delivery, and social and curricula-supporting policies and regulations. On this note, during an interview, a university manager noted:

A diversified classroom is good on its own. The only issue is how institutions and educators, in particular, pay attention to the needs and aspirations of this diversity. Different learners have gone through experiences that require different approaches to engagement. These are important considerations in preparing, delivering, and evaluating an impactful curriculum and determining who to admit. Does an institution have strong engagement and support mechanisms to utilize and harvest from this diversity? Or else, admission of extra categories of students (NTSs) may appear as a way of collecting additional income rather than supporting learners' dreams. (Amelia)

One of the graduate NTSs strengthened Amelia's claim when he said:

While we may look different from each other (in terms of individual interests, needs, and aspirations), in a lecture room the ultimate goal is learning. Each can bring something to the table during teaching and learning...And if we are guided well, we can learn from each other's point of view and experience. (Peterson)

This shows that when generations of learners meet; they can collaboratively contribute to each other's learning goals. However, the biggest question for the current generation of managers is how to unite and innovatively engage these learners to achieve their learning goals. This study showed that teaching and learning are envisioned as activities that unite university managers, educators, and learners as active and collaborative partners while upholding and enforcing an institution's objectives and standard operating procedures. On this topical issue, one of the university managers noted:

We are not uniform, but we have some levels of unity. We should create circumstances for people to live harmoniously, work, and learn together amidst our differences. As managers, this diversity explains why certain decisions have been (and will be) made and enforced to uphold the university's standard procedures while serving various categories of beneficiaries. (Olive)

The above claims show how human beings are naturally different and that our differences provide a wide range of spaces for considering options on decisions and mechanisms for enhancing our co-existence and future collaborations. Further, the findings revealed a striking pattern of agreement among university managers that dealing with NTSs invites university management to upgrade documentation and reporting practices to segment and showcase the different categories of students that form the university's profile. Such data is key in informing decision-making processes and accounting for university services. A university manager acknowledged that:

...I don't think we have tried to work out the segmented statistics and profiles of the different

categories of students (traditional and non-traditional) we are serving. This is something we need to look into as management. We can become intentional in ensuring that the different categories of students are well captured and reported about. This is one of the basic ways of expressing diversity in our clients. People need to know that besides those who transit directly from primary to university, other categories of students join university. This can motivate them to choose to follow in their footsteps. (Joel)

Reflecting on the above expression, two factors can be used to explain why this is the case: a) the university's preferred style of projecting its students, and b) considering all students as the same. This is further emphasized by Colman, a mature age coach when he noted:

Although there are alternative admission routes through which different categories of students are selected, the system views them as the same when they are in class. The concentration is on skilling and nothing else.

This suggests a practice that managers could have been intentionally preferred. Yet, according to Joel's expression, their (NTSs) enrolment means that more participant data can be generated, compiled, and published. This data can be one of the many ways to account for students' participation and a mechanism for drawing and dealing with implications to inform future policy and practice. In this line, this study's findings suggested undertaking student surveys to collect data that can serve this purpose. Data to be collected can relate to students' motivation, participation experiences, performance, completion rates (and contributing factors), previous training fields, determinants of program choices, how they find learning, and how it can be improved. This is likely to provide a basis for making extra decisions on many issues that may include but are not limited to establishing new or discontinuing certain programs, curriculum reviews, revision of admission slots for certain programs, and reflections on learner support systems and practices. During an interview, for instance, a university manager noted that:

I would want to know many things – the number of applications and admissions for each

program, statistics on progression, completion, and dropout, which subject areas consistently get the highest or lowest pass rates in mature age entry exams, etc., and the factors informing such patterns. We need to see how we can improve our policy environment and make the university a better place for every student. (Fergie)

DISCUSSION

Reflecting on the above findings, we appreciate how several decisions have been considered to become official institutional policies in many countries to support learning in adulthood. This represents the broadening profile and vision of the HE sector extending service to non-traditional participants in an increasingly complex society (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). This teaches us that progressive ideas are likely to transform the world. When universities create extra options to select potential entrants, there is a likelihood of grooming new talents, ideas, and opinions that can transform our world. However, it may also be true to assume that if rigid managers occupy key decision-making offices, good ideas may be messed up. The visible and invisible forces of changes at workplaces and in living conditions make us think that anyone can become vulnerable and that at one stage in life, we need someone to decide to enable us to cope and adapt to the emerging demands. Failure to do so can escalate or create a crisis within a crisis.

This study showed that the enrolment of NTSs in HE in Uganda and beyond will remain constant resulting from the creation of extra admission routes. Whether the applications do or don't match the available admission slots for NTSs, there is a clear vision that alternative ideas on admissions do not remain as texts on paper. The key lesson is that, no matter how we operate in a scarcity of resources and ideas, no crisis is too complex to remain unchecked. We may sometimes not have conclusive explanations about a crisis in the shortest time but we can make strategic reflections and suggestions for redress. Thinking through what non-traditional applicants possess (as requirements) can, for instance, provide a leeway on what to consider to create alternatives for entry requirements. That way, universities play a significant role in transforming generations of lives

through a tradition of decisions. This implies that potential participants can choose an entry scheme for which they qualify. Even amidst changing socio-economic realities, we predict that implementing alternative access schemes will keep universities as open destinations for several classes of people in our society today and in the future. We appreciate that the current entry schemes provide a point of reference that allows current and future applicants to gauge their participation eligibility. This will bring new groups of applicants, participants, and celebrants who can work out today's and tomorrow's development needs and aspirations for a sustainable future. This can support earlier observations that expanding avenues for access and participation is likely to enhance social participation and justice in our communities (Aganyira et al., 2024), and strengthen social stability and progress (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020; Shan, 2020).

From this study's findings, we acknowledge that throughout the different stages of human development, people have an estimate of what to achieve and make decisions in that line. Although we can estimate what we need today to survive, we may not conclusively project what the future can require. In this case, the continued admission of NTSs in HE reflects efforts to mobilize, reawaken, and develop a generation's capacity to survive in the unforeseen future. It is not surprising that earlier studies have predicted continued growth in enrolment of NTSs in HE (Tomlinson & Basit, 2024). Consequently, the emergency of non-traditional participants is an opportunity for HE managers to rethink who their clients will be, how they will be selected, and what kind of support services they will need to succeed as learners and beyond. This leads us to recognize that one of the key determinants in decision-making is reflection and feedback, as emphasized by complexity theorists (Burns & Köster, 2016; Byrne and Callaghan, 2023). This is how we can determine what needs to be improved. It provides insights for making necessary adjustments. This study showed that when non-traditional applicants expressed interest in enrolling for degree studies, universities established alternative selection procedures to serve them. This means that when we understand our purpose in life, we can get out of our complex situations by working out alternatives within our

mandates. Even though these alternatives may come with specific terms and conditions, they encourage continuity in inspiring potential applicants and awarding admissions. To the non-traditional applicants, this builds a sense of self-awareness and being of value.

What we face today may or may not represent our final destination. What we experience today sets the momentum for igniting waves of change. Ideas of hope begin to emerge when we take stock of what the future holds. Therefore, as managers, we cannot wait until a crisis suffocates us. A crisis may not show when it will emerge and who it may spare. However, from its emergency, we learn to contemplate a handful of practical ideas from which life-transforming decisions can be drawn. Considering that some emergencies are beyond others, you cannot solve them with a one-time solution. As observed in this article (especially the literature and findings sections), HE institution managers and planners have adopted a tradition of modifying admission and selection decisions to benefit a wider spectrum of participants. This article contributes to a growing awareness of promoting learning in adulthood, particularly in the HE sector. As situations keep changing, many concerns emerge regarding how institutions can build stronger cases for shaping and facilitating decision-making to adapt to resulting demands. Similarly, when new policies and practices emerge, they do not necessarily replace but strengthen the existing ones. Proponents of the complexity theory refer to it as adaptive orientation (Sigahi & Szelwar, 2021).

CONCLUSION

Reflecting on how HE systems work presents insights into how particular decisions emerge and appreciating that recruiting NTSs is a recurring job. Our society continues to embrace self-advancement by allowing older adults to pursue their lifelong goals. This is an opportunity for them to (re)build their resilience and gain new life-enhancing insights that empower them to navigate change and meaningfully contribute to their society's transformation. Their enrolment reflects a tradition of transformation in the organization and governance of HE. Those who succeed today give us leeway to predict growing patterns of interest and

emergencies of other unpredictable factors that can ignite debates and reflections on what will inform future policies for supporting and promoting learning in adulthood. Although we acknowledge an institutional commitment to promote NTSs' ambition to learn and progress, we may not have explicitly explored and explained the complexity of arriving at such obligations. Whether we are or not able to predict what the outcome may be, to decide is a process. When we aspire for something in life, sometimes we risk, and take several chances to create change. We need to define an approach used to arrive at a particular decision. This is essential for informing similar processes in the future. To the general community of practitioners, researchers, and readers, there is an opportunity to broaden our understanding and knowledge about NTSs and how decisions that inform and promote their participation in HE are a product of a complex crisis. No matter what might have shaped their enrolment, their participation contributes to the current and future profile of the HE sector at a local and global level. However, we acknowledge that our findings were limited to data from interviews and focus group discussions and with a small sample. We recommend other studies focusing on predictive factors for the expansion of future policy decisions on admissions for non-traditional participants joining higher education and who will be the future NTSs. These can be purely quantitative, quantitative or mixed-methods studies considering a relatively larger sample of participants to provide a wider spectrum of perspectives to support the findings of this research.

Acknowledgement

We sincerely extend our sincere appreciation to the research participants for their commitment and time to the study.

Declaration of conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest

REFERENCES

Aganyira, K., Sheil, D., & Tabuti, J. R. (2024). Community perceptions of social justice in benefit distribution mechanisms of forestry carbon projects in Uganda. In *Social Justice*

Innovation in Africa (pp. 167-186). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003452423-15>.

Bagga-Gupta, S., Dahlberg, M. G., & Vigmo, S. (2020). Equity and social justice for whom and by whom in contemporary Swedish higher and adult education. *Learning and Teaching*, 13(3), 82–110. <https://doi.org/10.3167/latiss.2020.130306>

Banerjee, P. A. (2018). Widening participation in HE with a view to implementing institutional change. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in HE*, 22(3), 75– 81. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603108.2018.1441198>

Boliver, V., Gorard, S., & Siddiqui, N. (2019). Using contextual data to widen access to HE. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in HE*, 25(1), 7- 13 <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603108.2019.1678076>

Burns, T., & Köster, F. (Eds). (2016). Governing education in a complex world: Education research and innovation. OECD Publishing, Paris. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264255364-en>.

Byrne, D., & Callaghan, G. (Eds.). (2023). Complexity theory and the social sciences: The state of the art, Second edition, Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003213574>

Carreira, P., & Lopes, A. S. (2021). Drivers of academic pathways in HE: Traditional vs. non-traditional students. *Studies in HE*, 46(7), 1340–1355. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1675621>

Chen, J. C. (2017). Nontraditional adult learners: The neglected diversity in postsecondary education. *SAGE Open*, 7(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244017697161>.

Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative and mixed mixed approach* (4th ed.). SAGE Publication, Inc.

Dahlberg, G. M., Vigmo, S., & Surian, A. (2021). Widening participation? (Re)searching institutional pathways in HE for migrant students: The cases of Sweden and Italy.

- Frontline Learning Research*, 9(2), 145–169. <https://doi.org/10.14786/flr.v9i2.655>.
- Dauer, R. A., & Absher, B. (2015). The influence of student support programs upon the academic success of nontraditional students. *International Journal of Education*, 7(4), 97. <https://doi.org/10.5296/ije.v7i4.7733>
- Evans, C., Rees, G., Taylor, C., & Wright, C. (2019). ‘Widening access’ to HE: The reproduction of university hierarchies through policy enactment. *Journal of Education Policy*, 34(1), 101–116. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2017.1390165>
- Findsen, B. (2018). Learning in later adulthood: A critical perspective. In *The Palgrave International Handbook on Adult and Lifelong Education and Learning*. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-55783-4_43.
- Gayton, A. M. (2019). Exploring the widening participation- internationalisation nexus: Evidence from current theory and practice. *Journal of Further and HE*, 44(9), 1275– 1288. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2019.1678014>
- Kasozi, A. B. K. (2016). *The National Council for HE and the growth of the university sub-sector in Uganda, 2002-2012*. Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa.
- Kasworm, C. E. (2018). Adult students: A confusing world in undergraduate HE. *Journal of Continuing HE*, 66(2), 77– 87. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07377363.2018.1469077>.
- Kothari, C. R. (2004). *Research methodology: Methods and techniques* (2nd ed.). New Age International (P) Ltd.
- Kottmann, A., Vossensteyn, J. J., Veidemann, A., Blasko, Z., Biagi, F., & Sanchez-Barrioluengo, M. (2019). *Social inclusion policies in HE: Evidence from the EU*. <https://doi.org/10.2760/944713>
- Lune, H., & Berg, B. L. (2017). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences* (9th ed.). Pearson Education Limited.
- Macdonald, K. (2018). A review of the literature: The needs of non-traditional students in post-secondary education. *Strategic Enrolment Management Quarterly*, 5(4), 159–164. <https://doi.org/10.1002/sem3>.
- Magara, E. (2009). Financing a public university: Strategic directions for Makerere University in Uganda. *Journal of HE in Africa*, 7(3), p.61-86. http://www.codesria.org/IMG/pdf/3-JHEA_3_2009_Magara.pdf
- Maguire, M., & Delahunt, B. (2017). Doing a thematic analysis: A practical, step-by-step guide for learning and teaching scholars. *AISHE- J*, 3. <http://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/view/3354>
- Marcucci, P., Johnstone, D. B., & Ngolovoi, M. (2008). HEal cost-sharing, dual-track tuition fees, and HEal access: The East African experience. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 83(1), 101– 116. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01619560701649232>
- Martin, D. S., & Dismuke, S. (2018). Investigating differences in teacher practices through a comprehensive theory lens: The influence of teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 69(1), 22– 39. <https://doi.org/10.1117/0022487117702573>
- Mason, M. (2008). What is complexity theory and what are its implications for educational change? *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 40(1), 35– 49. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-5812.2007.00413.x>
- Mergner, J., Leisyte, L., & Bosse, E. (2019). The widening participation Agenda in German HE: discourses and legitimizing strategies. *Social Inclusion*, 7(1InequalitiesinAccessstoHigher), 61–70. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v7i1.1605>.
- Merriam, B. S., & Baumgartner, M. L. (2020). *Learning in adulthood: A comprehensive guide*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Moriña, A. (2017). Inclusive education in HE: Challenges and opportunities. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 32(1), 3–17.

- <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2016.1254964>.
- Newman, S., & Hatton-Yeo, A. (2008). International learning and the contribution of older people. *Ageing horizon*, 8(10), 31-39
- Nguyen, C., Leanos, S., Natsuaki, N. M., Rebok, W. G., & Wu, R. (2020). Adaptation for growth via learning new skills as a means to long-term functional independence in older adulthood: Insights from emerging adulthood. *Gerontologist*, 60(1), 4–11. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gny128>
- Rainford, J. (2017). Targeting of widening participation measures by elite institutions: widening access or simply aiding recruitment? *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in HE*, 21(2–3), 45– 50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603108.2016.1148645>
- Remenick, L. (2019). Services and support for non-traditional students in HE: A historical literature review. *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education*, 25(1), 113–130. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477971419842880>
- Rogers, A. (2002). *Teaching adults* (3rd ed.). Open University Press.
- Sanga, P. (2019). East African HE and the limitations of institutional reforms: A case study of selected public universities. *African Journal of Teacher Education*, 8, 299–320. <https://doi.org/10.21083/ajote.v8i0.5361>
- Shan, H. (2020). Towards a postcolonial politics of appearance: Unsettling lifelong learning as a racial contract. In *Decolonising lifelong learning in the age of transnational migration* (pp. 34-47). Routledge.
- Sigahi, F. A. C. T., & Sznclwar, I. L. (2021). Exploring applications of complexity theory in engineering education research: A systematic literature review. *Journal of Engineering Education*, 111, 232- 260. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jee.20438>
- Ssempebwa, J., Neema-Abooki, P., & Musaaazi, J. C. S. (2017). *Innovating university education, issues in contemporary African HE: A book in honour of Makerere University's 90 years of excellence 1922-2012*. Fountain Publishers.
- Szekely, E., & Mason, M. (2019). Complexity theory, the capability approach, and the sustainability of development initiatives in education. *Journal of Education Policy*, 34(5), 669- 685. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2018.1465999>
- Tomlinson, S., & Basit, N. T. (2024). Introduction. In N. T. Basit & S. Tomlinson (Eds.), *Social Inclusion and HE* (pp. 1–14). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1t891n1.5>
- Tumuheki, P. B., Zeelen, J., & Openjuru, G. L. (2023). Towards a Transformative lifelong learning agenda for non-traditional students at university. *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education*, 30(1), 22– 38. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14779714231196044>.
- Yang, J., Schneller, C., & Roche, S. (Eds.). (2015). *The Role of HE in promoting lifelong learning. UIL Publication Series on Lifelong Learning Policies and Strategies: No. 3*. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/igo/>.