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Uganda's post-colonial privatisation policy in higher education: an integrative literature review and case study analysis

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Abstract
Globally, the trend toward privatizing higher education has been accelerating, driven by economic and policy shifts. Uganda has aligned with this movement, becoming one of the African countries implementing privatization to enhance accessibility and efficiency in its universities. However, the benefits and challenges of higher education privatization in Uganda remain underexplored. This study assesses them through two private universities as case studies. An integrative literature review identified challenges in Uganda's privatization policy. This was followed by qualitative interviews with sixteen (16) stakeholders (students, n = 10; parents, n = 3; employers, n = 3) to assess its impact on accessibility, quality, funding, and employment. Semi-structured interviews involving students, parents, and employers revealed that although the policy led to the massification of higher education, it also led to the commodification and academisation of education, whereby business principles have been imported into the country's higher education sector, thus focusing more on profit maximisation other than quality education delivery. The study recommends that the Ugandan government and policymakers, such as the Ministry of Education and Sports and the National Council for Higher Education, do more to safeguard the education system from being too commercialised, commodified, and over-marketised.

Keywords Privatization policy · Capitalism · Higher education · Private universities · Uganda

1 Introduction

UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) recognises higher education as integral to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by playing a multifaced role in eradicating poverty while addressing social needs such as education, health, social protection, and job opportunities, among many others [1]. In recent years, developed and developing countries have increasingly focused on higher education [2]. Mainly, substantial expansion of private higher education has occurred globally [3]. Lahmandi-Ayed and colleagues assert that public institutions are commonly perceived as less efficient than private ones, and private institutions are often adopted to compensate for the inefficiencies of the State. For instance, in African countries like Uganda, whose public institutions have limited resources to accommodate the increasing educational demand, private higher education provides an alternative solution to meet

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the growing needs for quality education and access to learning opportunities [4]. The private sector is among many countries' fastest-growing segments in higher education [5].

As a general principle, higher education should function as a public good, accessible to all regardless of financial capacity [6]. However, privatization raises concerns about accessibility and quality, as profit motives in privatized institutions may overshadow the goal of fostering an educated populace and promoting social welfare [7]. This shift risks turning education into a commodity, prioritizing revenue over equitable access to quality education [8]. The consequences of such a shift could be detrimental if higher education ceases to serve its intended societal purpose.

As for its definition, privatisation has been described as a vague concept [9], but it simply "involves permitting private providers to enter the higher education system and partially privatising public institutions" [10]. Privatising higher education presents an opportunity for many countries to diversify, meet market demands, and provide additional options to expand higher education access [11]. Nonetheless, Kopycka [12] argues that private mass higher education is often of lesser quality. Private higher education institutions (HEIs) across the globe encounter significant challenges, such as declining demand, global competition, and the rise of cross-border education, which have led governments to question their long-term sustainability [11].

Surprisingly, in some countries, policies to privatise higher education are motivated chiefly by financial reasons [13]. That is, HEIs are marketised for profits. "For-profit higher education" leads to predatory education, which gives birth to negative educational experiences [7]. Predatory privatisation of higher education provides incentives to authorities and benefits private entities involved [14], often to the detriment of the educational institution and its stakeholders as it undermines the public good of higher education [7]. Private higher education has also faced criticism for distorting and undermining the public mission of HEIs, transforming them into profit-driven enterprises that impose high fees and provide a limited selection of programs, often of inadequate quality [9]. Consequently, there have been calls for countries to lean towards the "de-privatisation" of higher education in the past few years [15]. Despite the pressure to privatise higher education being currently at its lowest [13], the creation of private higher education in Uganda is on the rise [8].

Although Uganda first enacted a privatisation policy in 2001, the country has in recent times witnessed the massification of private higher education to promote educational access and enhance quality. The implementation of the privatisation policy and the significant rise of private higher education in a post-colonial era raises crucial questions about their impact on the education sector. However, till date, sparse studies have examined the progress of the privatisation policy in achieving its intended objectives and spillover effects on career opportunities for students, parental funding of education, and the production of an equipped workforce of employers. Jamshidi [5] mention that an ideal privatisation policy for HEIs should outline the role of private providers in the national long-term education strategy, instilling confidence in potential investors and partners. At the same time, it should demonstrate collaboration involving private investors working alongside the government to fulfil national objectives.

The non-existence of studies gauging Uganda's privatisation policy necessitates investigating the policy features, motivation, milestones achieved, and benefits and challenges arising in the policy aftermath. This scoping review and case study analysis aim to fill this gap by examining the challenges, opportunities, and potential strategies for improvement within Uganda's higher education privatisation framework. The findings will be beneficial in enhancing public–private partnerships in higher education to promote educational quality. The study gives a voice to stakeholders –students, parents, and employers– directly affected by Uganda's privatisation policy, intending to answer the following research questions. 1. What are the challenges emerging in the aftermath of privatising HEIs in Uganda? and 2. How have stakeholders benefited from the privatisation of higher education in Uganda?

1.1 The privatization process

Since the 1970s, the global economy has witnessed widespread adoption of privatisation as a key policy [16]. Privatisation refers to the transfer of shares or assets from the public to the private sector, usually achieved through sales [17, 18]. According to Levy [19], privatisation involves all activities that increase the private sector's economic role. It aims to boost private sector participation and strengthen markets, expanding opportunities and reducing public participation [20, 21]. Based on neoliberalist ideology, the transfer of state-owned utilities to the private sector has been advocated, arguing that the market is better suited for their management [16]. Supporters claim that privatisation improves access to services such as higher education while enhancing efficiency and accountability [22]. Conversely, critics contend that the private sector may exploit profit opportunities, leading to concerns regarding providing special programs [23].

The privatisation process spans a spectrum from entirely public to entirely private structures, where a shift towards the private end as Wang [18] points out, signifies privatisation through increased private participation and market-oriented approaches without completely eradicating the public sector. Rather than complete public ownership elimination, privatisation manifests as a shift towards less "publicness" and more "privateness." Understanding the dynamic interplay between privateness and publicness provides insights into the evolving nature of the privatisation process [24].

Scholars have long predicted universities' global emergence and rapid growth in the twenty-first century [25]. Between 2000 and 2010, private universities worldwide experienced substantial growth, accounting for an annual higher education enrolment increase from 100 million to over 150 million students [26]. In the African higher education context, many countries recognise the importance of engaging stakeholders in establishing private universities, consequently increasing enrolment [27].

2 Historical background of higher education privatisation in Uganda

A number of factors, both internal and external, have contributed to the fast growth of private universities, according to research conducted in several regions [28–30]. Public universities' capacity to accommodate increasing admissions requests is a primary internal driver of the surge, as are governmental budgetary restraints, falling academic standards, and interruptions to academic continuity. The external factors driving this expansion include the revolutionary effects of the information and communication technology revolution, globalization, and neoliberal economic policies. These factors have had a major effect on the global landscape of higher education.

Within the Ugandan context, private education has had a long-standing history, dating back to the colonial era. As a British protectorate from 1894, Uganda saw the establishment of its first Department of Education by the colonial government in 1925. Voluntary agencies, including missionary groups, also played a crucial role in providing formal education after the post-independence political struggles, which in many cases left the country's economy in a daring state from 1987 to 2000. But prior to the year 2000, Uganda had a relatively small number of higher education institutions, with only nine private universities and four public universities in operation. Like many other African countries, Uganda implemented the structural adjustment programs (SAPs) advocated by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund [31, 32]. These adjustment programs were mainly targeted at a change in the country's economic policies and organisational structures, thus favouring market forces and private enterprises [33]. During the post-colonial era, the Ugandan government's shift towards liberalising the education sector led to a gradual increase in private higher education institutions [34].

Furthermore, introducing free primary education in 1997 and secondary education in 2007 led to a significant rise in university enrolment [8] and the subsequent emergence of private universities [35]. However, government involvement in higher education began in 1922 by establishing the first technical college at Makerere University. By 1962 (a year in which the country gained independence), higher education in Uganda was predominantly government-controlled, offering free education [8].

However, in a post-colonial time (i.e., in 1988), the first private university was established, which later prompted the government to enact the Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act in 2001, regulating HEIs and including provisions for privatisation. It was with the enactment of this act that the early 2000s marked a period of rapid growth, coinciding with the global and regional trends of liberalizing the education sectors. For instance, post 2000 alone, Uganda witnessed the establishment of more 35 private universities to make it 44, and an additional 13 public universities, bringing the total number of universities to 57 [36]. The fast growth, increasing visibility, and classification of private institutions as acknowledged by the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) are all signs of their rapid proliferation [37]. Of the 44 private universities in the country, 37 (or 84.1%) have all been accredited by the NCHE, ensuring that they meet required standards for higher education in Uganda including aspects such as land, staffing, educational facilities, governance, financial resources, and physical infrastructure. With this significant surge in the number of universities particularly private ones, it reflects the government's strategy to meet the rising demand of higher education and reduce the burden of public universities, like Makerere, which had for so long struggled to accommodate the increasing enrolment due to limited funding. Therefore, the existing literature on commercialisation and academic capitalism provides a very strong foundation for examining the challenges and benefits of higher education privatisation [8, 38]. However, it is essential to understand the variations and interactions between HEIs, the labour market, and the government. Through an analysis of policy extant literature and exploration of stakeholders' perceptions (i.e., students, parents, and employers), this study provides insights into the challenges and benefits of privatising higher education institutions in Uganda.

2.1 Policy documents on privatizing Uganda's HEIs

Four available government documents are relevant for understanding Uganda's higher education privatisation policy. These selected documents include two legal documents from the Parliament of Uganda, alongside two others from the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoE&S). They were published during the implementation of the Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act (UOTIA) in 2001 through its amendment in 2006. However, the 2003 amendment, which focused on consolidating small institutions into a single public institution, was excluded from the table because it diverged from the core objective of the study. Table 1 outlines the objectives and main features of each document.

The 2001 UOTIA played a crucial role in establishing the National Council for Higher Education [NCHE], the regulatory body for all universities in Uganda. Subsequently, the 2006 amendment to the UOTIA clarified the requirements for private institutions to be recognised as private degree-warding institutions. In addition to the documents above, two Ministry of Education documents, the Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP, 2004–2015) and the Revised ESSP (2007–2015) are relevant. The ESSP, implemented from 2004 to 2015, aimed to ensure equal participation and collaboration, focusing on private HEIs. In 2007, the Revised ESSP addressed limited funding by introducing public–private partnerships and providing financial support for private institutions. The revised plan emphasised adherence to standards and regulations to maintain quality education (MoE&S, 2004, 2008).

As delineated in Table 1, the policy advocating for the privatisation of higher education in Uganda has been rigorously promoted, with well-defined objectives established to facilitate the efficient operation of private universities. The amendments within the ESSP document have been influential in formalising the public–private partnership in the higher education sector, a domain that necessitates further advocacy. One of the significant challenges private universities face within this neoliberal framework is the scarcity of funding from donor entities [37, 39, 40]. In addition, it becomes imperative for the government to intervene by providing the necessary financial support because such an intervention is not solely beneficial for private universities but is crucial for the nation at large, considering the instrumental role of higher education in achieving sustainable development. Private universities may impose exorbitant tuition fees without governmental financial backing, thereby prioritising profit maximisation over delivering quality education. This could result in the production of underqualified graduates, adversely impacting the national economy.

However, private universities have also played a crucial role in expanding access to higher education, particularly in areas where public institutions like Makerere have struggled to meet growing enrolment demands. They have filled gaps due to limited public funding [41] and are recognized for their educational innovations, offering specialized programs and flexible learning approaches. This adaptability enhances graduate employability [42]. Despite challenges, private universities have significantly contributed to Uganda's higher education transformation, providing alternative pathways and addressing issues like increased enrolment and graduate unemployment [43]. Their impact on the sector's growth and development is undeniable.

3 Methods

3.1 Research design

Qualitative methodology was considered an appropriate approach for this study, as it allows for a more comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives [44]. The study employed two main approaches. In the first approach, relevant studies in the literature were analysed, followed by semi-structured interviews with stakeholder groups who are the beneficiaries of the policy.

3.1.1 First phase: literature search and selection

The initial phase of data collection involved an integrative literature review (ILR) of relevant studies that resulted in 10 journal articles sourced from two reputable electronic databases (Web of Science [WoS] and Google Scholar). The rationale for doing an ILR is due to its ability to function well with mature topics, whether or not they need ongoing evaluation, criticism, or the possibility of rethinking the topic's knowledge base in light of new information [45].

Table 1 The main features of the policies

No	Author(s)	Title	Publication Type	Objective	Main Features
1	Parliament of the Republic of Uganda	Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act, 2001	Legal Document	Establish and develop a system governing higher education institutions (NCHE) to regulate and guide the establishment of both public and private institutions	Division five, part XVII- proposes guidelines on establishing private universities in the country
2	Parliament of the Republic of Uganda	Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act (Amendment), 2006	Legal document (amended)	An Act to amend the Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act, 2001, Act 7 of 2001	Section 82D, close (1)- (4), proposes guidelines on when private universities qualify to be regarded as Private Degree Awarding Institutions
3	Ministry of Education and Sports (MoE&S)	Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP), (2004–2015)	An Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP) document	The education system is relevant to Uganda's national development goals, which include expansion and equitable participation in tertiary and higher education institutions (both public and private) The partnership of the Ministry and other agencies in service delivery and capacity building	Shift from subsidising universities to subsidising students at public and private institutions Compliance of private institutions with ministry standards and regulations
4	Ministry of Education and Sports (MoE&S)	Revised ESSP (2007–2015)	A revised Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP) document	Formalising and enhancing public–private partnerships in higher education services and capacity-building	Proposals were made to enhance support lines of credit to both public and private institutions to ensure they have adequate funding to support expansion

Table 2 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion	Exclusion
Published 2001- April 2024	Published before 2001
Peer-reviewed journal articles	Book chapters/reviews, dissertations, conference proceedings, commentary articles, editorials, and grey literature
Papers written in English	Papers not written in English
Papers that discuss the privatisation of higher education in Uganda	Papers that discuss the privatisation of education in Uganda at lower levels (i.e., primary and secondary)
Empirical primary research (Quantitative, Qualitative or Mixed methods)	Theoretical or conceptual papers, systematic review papers, and meta-analyses

In addition, the purpose of this ILR was to compile literature outlining the benefits and challenges of privatising Uganda's HEIs in the aftermath of the policy's inception. The eligibility criterion for the initial screening of studies is summarised in Table 2.

Search keywords included (privat* polic*) AND ("higher education" OR "universit*" OR "tertiary") AND Uganda. An initial search yielded 78 records: 16 in WoS and 62 in Google Scholar. First, 17 duplicates were found and deleted. After that, titles and abstracts were reviewed. 35 articles did not fit our study's goal, and 4 were not journal articles. The remaining 22 articles were then thoroughly examined, with 12 later deemed irrelevant as they focused on primary and secondary education. Ultimately, 10 articles were retained for analysis. The results of our literature search confirmed that sparse studies have investigated the spillover effects of the privatisation policy in Uganda. A PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) flow chart was drawn to show articles' identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion (see Fig. 1). Insights on research methods, challenges, benefits, and recommendations identified from the 10 reviewed articles are outlined in the matrix of Table 3.

3.1.2 Second phase: interviews

The second approach for data collection employed in the study was semi-structured interviews. The primary objective was to obtain stakeholders' perspectives on the potential benefits and challenges of privatising higher education institutions in Uganda. We employed multiple sampling techniques to select appropriate sites and participants. Through convenience sampling, two private universities in Kampala, Uganda's capital, were selected as study sites. Snowball sampling was used to recruit students, while parents and employers were included through purposive sampling. Convenient sampling allowed for the selection of universities that were most accessible, whereas snowball sampling enabled the recruiting of students with relevant characteristics. Purposive sampling allowed for selecting individuals with extensive knowledge of the issues being investigated. These sampling techniques ensured that the chosen participants were appropriate and provided clear insights for the study [46].

As presented in Table 4, 16 participants were interviewed online, including 10 students (five from each of the two universities), three parents, and three employers. All the parents had children studying in private universities, while the employers had experience recruiting and supervising graduates from private or public universities within their respective organisations. The employers represent diverse sectors, from the Ministry of Finance, Planning, and Economic Development (MoFPED), another from the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), and the third from a large town service transport company. Online interviews provide flexibility for researchers and participants, allowing for effective data collection despite geographical constraints [47]. Before the interviews, participants were provided with a detailed explanation of the study's purpose. Informed consent was obtained, and they were assured of anonymity. The interviews were audio-recorded for subsequent transcription and analysis.

4 Data analysis

The analysis of data comprised two main aspects. The first aspect involved using an integrative literature review to analyse the literature studies obtained. The second aspect involved analysing the interview transcripts using a thematic analysis approach. Thematic analysis consists of the identification of emerging themes that become categories for analysis [48]. The analysis of the transcripts consisted of six steps: familiarising with the data, generating initial codes, searching for

Table 3 Summary of phase one findings

No	Author(s) and Year	Document	Title	Method	Benefits	Challenges	Recommendation based on the findings
1	Ochwa-Echel (2016)	Journal article	Private universities in Uganda: Issues and challenges	Interviews and focus groups; secondary data from the prospectus, promotional brochures, mission statement and strategic plans	Flexibility and autonomy in their operations allow them to respond more swiftly to changing educational needs and market demands	Variable quality and standards, as the accreditation process may vary, and some institutions may prioritise profitability over educational quality	There's a need for careful evaluation and regulation to ensure that private universities maintain high educational standards while promoting inclusivity and affordability
2	Ddungu & Edopu (2016)	Journal article	Social Responsibility of Public and Private Universities in Uganda	Cross-sectional survey	Contributions to various industries, engagement in community service, and outreach	Lower levels of CSR in public universities compared to private ones	Increased involvement of universities in CSR activities to benefit communities and enhance their roles
3	Atwebembeire et al., (2018)	Journal article	Performance Monitoring and Quality Teaching and Research in Private Universities in Uganda	Cross-sectional survey design, questionnaires, interviews	Performance monitoring contributes to quality teaching and research, provides constructive feedback on staff performance, and encourages setting agreed-upon targets and rewards based on performance reviews	Performance monitoring practices are coercive and unsustainable, requiring improvement in participatory-oriented performance monitoring mechanisms	Managers should adopt participatory-oriented performance monitoring mechanisms, establish agreed-upon targets, provide constructive feedback, and implement rewards based on performance reviews to enhance quality teaching and research
4	Asiimwe & Steyn (2013)	Journal article	Obstacles hindering the effective governance of universities in Uganda	Questionnaires were used for the quantitative part, and semi-structured interviews were used for the qualitative part	Balancing bureaucracy in management; Development of appropriate structures, systems, processes, and procedures for decision-making and implementation; Increased operational autonomy for universities	Lack of commitment, poor quality education, Conflicting values	Improvements in governance, funding mechanisms, and decision-making processes are necessary to enhance the quality and relevance of higher education in Uganda
5	Mande (2015)	Journal article	The effect of the cost of education on the choice of private universities in Uganda	Surveys, Questionnaires	Smaller class sizes, Greater focus on career development, and access to resources	Higher tuition fees, Additional functional fees, Limited financial aid options, Reliance on fees policy	Policymakers and institutions should strive to address the concerns of financial accessibility while maintaining the quality of education provided by private universities

Table 3 (continued)

No	Author(s) and Year	Document	Title	Method	Benefits	Challenges	Recommendation based on the findings
6	Alemiga & Kibukamusoke (2019)	Journal article	Determinants of the quality of academic staff in the process of teaching and learning in private universities in Uganda	Interviews and Observations	Increased access, Diversification of programs, and Industry partnerships	Issues with quality assurance, Inequitable distribution, affordability	Implement a comprehensive recruitment process within private universities to ensure that only highly qualified and competent individuals are hired as academic staff
7	Mugabi (2012)	Journal article	The role of private universities in the provision of higher education in Uganda: Growth and challenges	Qualitative interviews	Provide education at a minimum public cost, enrol a significant number of students, and cater to different student groups' professional and cultural needs	Limited program innovativeness: some programs offered are not relevant	Government must create policies that recognise and support private universities, ensuring their accountability and fair access to resources
8	Ssesanga (2004)	Journal article	Ethical Issues in the Marketisation of Education: The Case of for Social Justice and Market Oriented Reforms in Uganda's Higher Education	Qualitative approach, through theoretical analysis and argumentation	Increased access to higher education due to market-driven reforms, expansion of education opportunities, and potential improvements in educational quality through competition among institutions	Ethical concerns, i.e., prioritising business efficiency over educational ideas, risk of relegating educational principles in favour of profit-driven motives, potential exacerbation of inequalities, particularly for the marginalised, shift in educational philosophy from pedagogical to managerial	Maintain a balance between market-oriented reforms and educational ideas, implement robust regulatory mechanisms to ensure ethical conduct and quality standards, prioritise social justice considerations in the design and implementation of privatisation policies, and foster dialogue and scholarly scrutiny to address the moral implications of market-driven reforms in higher education

Table 3 (continued)

No	Author(s) and Year	Document	Title	Method	Benefits	Challenges	Recommendation based on the findings
9	Alani (2021)	Journal article	Effects of Government and Private Sector Financing on Higher Education Enrolment in Uganda (1970–2014)	Quantitative (Generalised Least square method)	Private sector financing leads to higher education enrolment growth	Potential financial constraints limiting the ability of households to contribute to private sector financing for higher education; inadequate investment financing could restrict the expansion of higher education opportunities, particularly in terms of infrastructure and resources	Encourage private sector investment in higher education through measures such as tax incentives or public–private partnerships, expand higher education student loan programs to ease financial barriers for students, particularly those from low-income households, and promote household consumption to stimulate private sector financing for higher education
10	Nabaasa (2019)	Journal article	Liberalisation of university education and the quality of teaching approaches: a perspective of public and private university Education in Eastern Uganda	Mixed Methods Approach (cross-sectional survey and qualitative interviews)	Private universities, as part of liberalisation, may introduce innovative teaching methods and approaches to enhance the quality of education	Maintaining compliance with national guidelines may be difficult, especially for private universities with varying resources and capacities	Strengthen the monitoring role of the National Council for Higher Education to ensure universities adhere to national guidelines and standards, foster collaboration between public and private universities to share best practices and enhance teaching quality across the higher education sector in Eastern Uganda, implement regular pedagogical training programs for all teaching staff to equip them with contemporary teaching approaches relevant to the twenty-first century

Fig. 1 PRISMA Flowchart

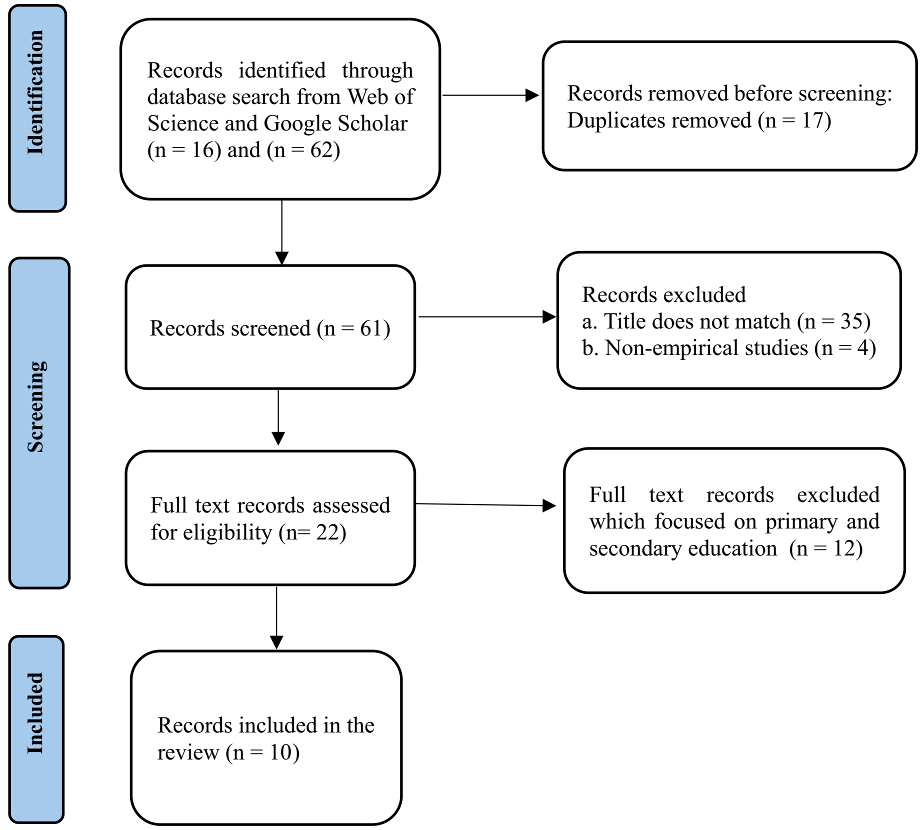

Table 4 Participants demographic information

*Students	Gender	Year of Study	Course
1. Denis	M	2	Law
2. Derrick	M	2	IT
3. Suzie	F	1	Law
4. Samantha	F	2	B. Administration
5. Geoffrey	M	2	Computer science
6. Ivan	M	3	Law
7. Kelly	F	2	Accounting
8. Thomas	M	3	IT
9. Athena	F	3	Law
10. Junior	M	2	B. Administration
*** Parents**		**Occupation**	
11. Martin	M	Educationist	
12. Godwin	M	Businessman	
13. Tracy	F	Researcher	
***Employers**		**Organisation**	
14. Cathy	F	CAA	
15. Fredrick	M	MoFPED	
16. Jude	M	Transport Company	

*Pseudonyms: Participants' names are pseudonyms (not actual names)

themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and producing a report [49]. The transcribed text was coded based on meaning, and semantic-related codes emerged into subthemes that were eventually formulated into main themes. Any discrepancies in the analysis were discussed until a consensus was reached.

4.1 Findings

4.1.1 First phase: findings from the literature on privatisation

4.1.1.1 Challenges Based on the analysis of 10 studies reviewed, five themes emerged related to the challenges of privatising HEIs in Uganda. These include high tuition fees, prioritising profit over education, ineffective quality assurance systems, financial constraints, and limited program innovativeness. These themes are presented in this section.

The literature analysis highlights several key challenges facing private higher education institutions in Uganda, starting with high tuition fees. Many potential students are unable to attend private institutions in Uganda due to the exorbitant tuition rates, which continue to rise and pose a significant barrier to affordable higher education, especially for low-income and marginalised students [35, 50].

The emphasis on profitability over educational quality is another pressing issue within Ugandan private HEIs. Ochwa and Sessanga [8, 51] highlight that these institutions often prioritise revenue generation over the academic needs of their students. This shift in focus results from the financial pressures they face, leading them to prioritise revenue maximisation over delivering high-quality education, thus undermining educational outcomes and institutional integrity.

Moreover, the absence of effective quality assurance systems further complicates privatisation. Despite the institutions' efforts to increase access to higher education and introduce creative programs, ineffective quality assurance systems compromise their reputation and education quality [52, 53]. Thus, educational standards vary across institutions due to a lack of frameworks for guaranteeing curricular relevance, student results, and teacher quality.

Financial constraints severely limit the capabilities of private universities in Uganda, as highlighted by Alani and Nabaasa [54, 55]. Poor funding is a significant problem in public universities and significantly worse in private ones. The capacity of private institutions to provide sufficient resources and assistance to students is hampered by inadequate funding. This is further evident in inadequate financing for academic programs, faculty pay, and infrastructure development. Consequently, students may experience academic delays and limited access to necessary educational resources.

Lastly, the limited innovativeness in program offerings at private universities remains a critical concern [37]. These universities struggle to offer innovative and varied programs that meet the changing demands of students and the job market. Without the ability to provide creative and diverse programs, private universities in Uganda risk losing their competitive edge and failing to provide quality education that equips students for future challenges.

4.1.1.2 Benefits The review of journal articles revealed three significant benefits of privatising higher education in Uganda. These benefits include increased access to higher education, operational flexibility, and the adoption of innovative teaching methods and approaches.

One outstanding benefit identified is the increased access to higher education [37, 51, 52]. It was generally acknowledged that establishing private colleges has expanded university enrollment. This growth has addressed the difficulty of accommodating rising students, which public universities alone could not sufficiently serve.

Another benefit is private institutions' flexibility in business operations [8, 53]. These universities can react quickly to students' educational needs, thus fulfilling educational expectations without arduous bureaucratic processes. To illustrate their capacity to adapt and keep offering high-quality education in a dynamic setting, several private universities swiftly shifted to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, adopting innovative teaching methods and approaches is a hallmark of privatised higher education. Nabaasa [55] highlights how deregulation and market competition drive private universities to innovate in their pedagogical practices, improving the quality of education they deliver. Additionally, these institutions often develop customised programs targeted to particular job goals, substantially contributing to workforce development [56]. To support these advancements, private universities may choose lower classes to facilitate personalised professional development and offer greater resource access [50].

4.1.2 Second phase: findings from the interviews

4.1.2.1 Challenges of privatising HEIs in Uganda Private universities contribute enormously to higher education; however, this study highlights challenges associated with privatising Uganda's universities from stakeholders' viewpoints.

Data from the interviews revealed three primary challenges: predominant focus on profit generation, production of underprepared graduates, and inadequate facilities and infrastructure.

Predominant focus on profit generation: A concern frequently voiced by interviewed students is that private institutions often raise tuition fees to pursue profits. This practice consequently limits access for low-income students who cannot afford such exorbitant amounts. Athena (Year 3, Law) expressed:

> On the negative side, there's a high cost in terms of tuition. In private universities, tuition increases occasionally, which becomes a massive burden to either the parents or guardians of the student, and remember, some students pay for their tuition.

In addition to that, parents who also bear the financial burden share this sentiment. Godwin (Parent) had this to say:

> It's becoming increasingly difficult to keep up with the tuition hikes in private universities. Every year, the fees seem to increase, putting a strain on our finances. We want our children to have the best education, but it's tough when the costs are constantly rising.

Producing underprepared graduates: A troubling issue with some private institutions is where students in entirely on-site programs obtain degrees without ever setting foot in a class. This raises concerns about academic dishonesty but also leaves graduates underprepared for the demands of the workforce. This practice, primarily driven by the institutions' focus on generating revenue rather than imparting knowledge, undermines the integrity of the educational process. As Suzie (Year 1, Law) shared:

> You will be shocked that some of our fellow students graduate without attending class. This is a significant challenge for private universities because their aim is the money from the students, not the knowledge to be delivered to them.

Limited facilities and infrastructure: Limited facilities and infrastructure are notable drawbacks in private universities. For instance, Junior (Year 2, Business Administration) pointed out the stark differences in resource availability compared to public institutions, which often receive government funding and are thus better equipped. He recounts his frustration in not finding relevant books for his major:

> One other challenge I can point out is that private universities lack enough infrastructure and facilities, for example, some laboratory equipment, and you will also find that libraries are not fully stocked. I've looked for some books in line with my major on several occasions, but I did not see them in the library.

This perspective is echoed by a parent, Martin, an educationist who, despite acknowledging the positive contributions of private universities, prefers public ones for their established reputation and consistent performance in national rankings. According to Martin, private universities still have a long way to go before they can compete with public ones, even though they've helped to accept a lot of advanced-level (A-level) graduates. The fact that students from public universities frequently do better on the pre-entry examinations at the Law Development Centre (LDC) adds weight to this belief, even though many people think that one private university in Uganda (name withheld) produces better lawyers than most public universities. He shares:

> If all other factors were constant, I would still take my child to a public university because these are some old entities with good reputations but, most importantly, the best performers based on the current rankings and metrics.

Regardless of the type of institution, all interviewed employers mainly highlighted the positive side that new graduates from private universities bring to the workplace. Employers consistently emphasised the valuable skills and fresh perspectives new graduates from private institutions bring to the workplace. This indicates that private universities can still nurture capable professionals despite infrastructure and resources issues.

4.1.2.2 Benefits of privatizing higher education in Uganda Privatising higher education in Uganda has brought several advantages, as indicated by stakeholder interviews. These include increasing student enrollment at higher education institutions, achieving students' dreams, elevating education quality through competitive forces, responsiveness to student needs, ideological orientation and personalised attention, and employability skills.

Increment in student enrolment at higher education institutions: The Ministry of Education's Higher Education Investment Plan for 2004–2005 includes expanding access to universities as its primary goal. Privatisation has enabled many more students to attend university, which is widely regarded as a positive development. This is because public universities are understaffed and unable to meet the growing demand for higher education, but private universities can fill this void. The importance of private institutions in increasing enrolment was reaffirmed by Kelly (Year 2, Accounting) expressed:

> There has been easy access to higher education. These universities have rapidly increased, so it is easy for upper secondary school students to join them since they have also been built in most of the country.

Making students' dreams achievable: Students highlighted that high admission cut-off points and a lack of course/programme options make it difficult to gain admission to public institutions in Uganda, hindering them from pursuing their academic aspirations. In contrast, the admissions standards for private institutions are lower, and students are offered more leeway to enrol in majors that align with their interests. In addition, students' academic performance and future employment opportunities are improved by attending private institutions because of the more accessible and desired course alternatives they provide. Echoing the sentiment of other students, Derrick (Year 2, IT) shared:

> Another advantage is that, for example, if one completed upper secondary school and did not get excellent grades but wanted a particular course (for example, Law), they could only have an opportunity to be admitted by a private university.

Elevating education quality through competitive forces: There can be no free-market paradigm without competition. Private universities also improved the educational environment by providing high-quality academic programs catering to various student demands, allowing them to compete more effectively amongst themselves and with public institutions. Samantha (Year 2, Business Administration) disclosed:

> Based on my major (computer science), private universities provide the best quality because we have all the equipment required for my course. Because of COVID-19, our university quickly turned classes online without delay.

Responsiveness to student needs: Unlike public institutions notable for lengthy bureaucratic procedures, private universities respond quickly to students' demands and make efficient administrative decisions. Therefore, timely service delivery is guaranteed by quickly and efficiently responding to changing student demands. As Ivan (Year 2, Law) elaborated:

> If, for example, we need some gadgets for online learning, the university will immediately have them bought on time. This COVID-19 period has been so challenging, and if, by any mistake, the necessary learning materials are not provided on time, it delays the teaching and learning process.

Ideological orientation and personalised attention: This is the feedback we got from parents when we questioned them about private universities. Parents know that some for-profit organisations emphasise serving their communities and providing high-quality education, while others prioritise profit over ethics. Given the effect of institutional values on students' intellectual and personal development, such values must be carefully considered. Echoing the perception of other parents, Godwin (Parent, Businessman) highlights the importance of ideological orientation in selecting a private institution for his children. He believes that private colleges should transparently communicate their ideologies to attract students who share similar values:

> If you, for example, take a private university A (name withheld), it being a church-founded institution, its moral doctrine and orientations cannot be the same as those of university B (name withheld)," and I do believe that it focuses on quality education without compromising profits… I would, therefore, prefer having my child at such a university at any time of the day.

Tracy (Parent, Researcher) observes that private universities in Uganda tend to be more flexible and sensitive to individual student needs. This claim is based on the assumption that private institutions are mostly run as for-profit businesses in a perpetual state of recruitment and retention mode. She commented:

> The truth is, I would still prefer my children to attend privately owned universities because if you look at it, some of these institutions resemble high schools, providing students with a certain level of personalised attention and catering to their course selection preferences.

To meet the demands of their varied student body, private colleges are known to provide individualised academic programs, flexible study alternatives, and online learning. Parents believe these universities have a better grasp of current employment trends and can better tailor their curricula to help students stand out to potential employers.

Employability skills: Employers shared insightful perspectives on the employability skills of graduates from private universities, highlighting their possession of transferable abilities such as organisational skills, collaboration, and attention to detail. Cathy (Employer, Civil Aviation Authority), having experienced hiring and working with graduates from both public and private universities, emphasised that most private university graduates frequently exhibit these competencies, allowing them to collaborate well, meet strict deadlines, and be open to criticism and improvement. Cathy reflects on her extensive experience:

> I've worked with students who graduated from both types of institutions. Still, I particularly noticed that those from private universities quickly adapt to the work environments, keep time, efficiently work in teams and are ready to learn at any given time.

While Cathy acknowledges that graduates from private universities do not possess a unique set of talents exclusive to them, she recognises these skills are prevalent. These characteristics may also be present among public university graduates, influenced by their background and employment preparedness. Listening attentively, being flexible, and having good interpersonal skills are all aspects that Cathy says are influenced by experience and personality.

In addition, while praising recent graduates from private institutions, employers emphasised their capacity for lifelong learning. Flexibility, receptivity to feedback, and a hunger for knowledge are all traits that this quality embodies. Regardless of academic background, graduates must continuously study to succeed. Another employer, Fredrick (Ministry of Finance, Planning, and Economic Development, MoFPED) explained:

> I've supervised fresh graduates from some private universities, and I keenly noticed that the majority, though not all, are willing to continue learning. To a certain extent, those from public universities do the same.

This emphasis on continuous learning aligns with the broader need for employees to invest in their human capital, whether they hold a degree or not. Admitted to Jude's transport company, graduates from private universities adapted to corporate conventions and understood organisational processes quickly. Their integration capacity is a plus in the employment market, although some may need time to acclimate.

> Most of the students I've worked with from private universities have been flexible when copping with company agendas. They're trainable and quickly understand how our organisation works.

It is reasonable to assume that recent graduates from private colleges are more flexible workers because they quickly pick up on organisational processes. Being productive and living up to employers' expectations are both made possible by this crucial talent.

5 Discussion

In this study, we have explored the privatisation policy in Uganda's HEIs, including some of the challenges and benefits of the policy right from its inception. Our knowledge of privatisation's radical potential in Uganda's higher education system was greatly enhanced by a comprehensive review of relevant literature and data from qualitative interviews.

Regarding the challenges, most of the existing research expresses concern that private institutions primarily prioritise profit, which aligns with previous studies [7, 25, 57]. Higher education is frequently regarded as an excellent subject to market imperatives and "is increasingly seen as a commercial product to be bought and sold like any other" [58]. Because of the incorporation of commercial principles into the delivery of educational services, this occurred as a consequence of commoditising and academising higher education. Our study emphasises the vital role of private universities in expanding access to higher education. Still, it also notes that some of these institutions have lost sight of their original purpose of providing excellent education in favour of putting profit above everything else.

Institutional credibility and academic integrity suffer when financial gain drives unethical actions. This is evident in private universities, where profit maximization often results in large class sizes, diluted education quality, and the hiring of less qualified faculty. The pressure to 'publish or perish' further leads to publications in non-credible, pay-to-publish journals, diminishing both the institutions' academic reputation and the value of their degrees, ultimately harming graduates' employment prospects. A case in point is that some parents doubt the students' abilities who graduate from these universities. These problems indicate a severe challenge in the private higher education sector, where the quest for profit may obscure the fundamental goal of teaching and fostering academic development. Therefore, based on the abovementioned challenges, we propose enhancing regulatory supervision and accreditation to safeguard academic honesty and high-quality education in response to the profit-driven focus in private universities. Measures such as public disclosure of finances, frequent audits, and open financial processes should improve accountability issues. The credibility and confidence in Uganda's private higher education system will be restored by adopting required ethics training for staff and providing incentives to universities that concentrate on quality.

However, privatisation is not necessarily detrimental, according to Lyall and Sell [59], who described the de facto privatisation of higher education. For instance, stakeholders have voiced several benefits that are consistent with the claims made by Qureshi and Khawaja [60] and others of which these findings demonstrate that the rising demand for higher education is fuelling a dramatic growth in the number of private institutions [61]. In neoliberal frameworks, it was also brought to light that private universities play a crucial role in providing access to higher education for many students who would not have had options at public institutions [62, 63]. Adding a voice to what other scholars have already mentioned, we argue that to guarantee that neoliberal privatisation, mainly fuelled by globalisation, substantially contributes to students' academic and personal growth, balancing profit motives with fundamental educational objectives is exceptionally vital.

5.1 Conclusion, Implications, and Limitations

The privatisation movement in Uganda is an excellent example of the real-world applications and broader effects of the privatisation discussion among Ugandans. Because of the rising fiscal pressures and the growing demands for access, higher education can no longer solely rely on the diminishing government subsidies, nor can it be entrusted to competitive market forces. This is so because the public sector loses some of its financial and administrative clout when universities become privately owned and operated. This change marks a significant inversion in a nation where universities are seen as both publicly funded and independently operated. The problems with privatising Uganda's higher education institutions persist even after over two decades. Our study's results highlight the critical need to discover and execute workable solutions for Uganda's higher education institutions (HEIs) to reap the advantages of privatisation.

While it's reasonable that private universities need a steady income stream to stay open and in full operation, we argue that universities should not be too privatized and instead be rethought as places of social, civic, and cosmopolitan learning. Instead of being pushed by nothing more than business motivations and market pressures, it should continue to play a crucial role in civil society's wellness and the overall development of its populace.

We also urge the government, stakeholder groups and other regulatory bodies such as the Ministry of Education and Sports and the NCHE, which may have a say in who may enter private universities, to do more to stop the education system from being too commercialised, commodified, and over-marketised. It is essential to take this hands-on approach since these trends limit student access and make people, plus other stakeholders, question the quality of education these universities provide. Ensuring students have the skills and knowledge they need for future success shouldn't be pushed aside by an obsession with profit-making. Our argument stems from Uganda's governance crisis, where centralized power has eroded state institutions, fostering corruption and inefficiency. Neoliberal policies favoring unregulated markets have similarly influenced the privatization of higher education. Private universities, focused on profit over public good, have become corporatized, often prioritizing financial gain over academic excellence and access, particularly post-2000. This style of marketization risks deepening inequalities, benefiting only those who can afford it. We urge the government to prioritize higher education as a public good, ensuring it remains a right for all, not a privilege for a few. In addition, we also urge the government to strengthen its oversight role in order to ensure that the expansion of private universities contributes positively to Uganda's educational and social goals.

The problem of private universities producing half-baked students may be alleviated if the government, via the NCHE, routinely monitors these institutions. Hiring competent lecturers with extensive expertise is essential, as is maintaining high academic standards. Private universities will significantly benefit from these regulationary enforcement to raise the bar on education quality.

For private universities to deliver high-quality education and produce qualified graduates, collaboration among students, teachers, administrators, regulatory agencies, and the government is essential. The NCHE must prioritize reaccrediting expired courses to prevent the national embarrassment of graduates holding unrecognized degrees. Ensuring academic honesty, transparency, and responsibility is critical, as failures in higher education quality or accessibility can have severe consequences for the nation's future. The reaccreditation process deserves the utmost attention to safeguard our educational standards and national reputation.

Regarding the implications, several stakeholders have cautiously proposed that private universities maintain a solid adherence to their ideological orientations, as this would allow them to regain the trust and support of a significant portion of their clientele. Therefore, we argue that giving considerable attention and consideration to adhering to the university's mission and vision is crucial. In so doing, private universities can effectively uphold their established objectives without any deviations. As a result, they can deliver an education that is both appropriate and well-received by students and the nation as a whole. The critical takeaway for vice-chancellors and other leaders of private institutions is to ensure the effective execution of their objectives from the outset.

As for the limitations, we cannot generalise this study's findings to all higher education institutions in the country since it only covers two private institutions in Uganda and has a small sample of stakeholder groups. Future research might use quantitative approaches and consider a larger sample of stakeholders to address these constraints.

Author contributions A.M. led the research from inception to completion, working on all sections of the paper and preparing all tables and figures. O.O. edited the introduction, worked on the literature review, and carefully reviewed the methodology. M.A. contributed to writing parts of the introduction and advised on improvements for the other sections. All authors reviewed and edited the manuscript.

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Data availability Data availability The data that support the findings of this study are available upon request. This includes data obtained from an integrated literature review and semi-structured interviews conducted with students, parents, and employers. Integrated Literature Review: All relevant literature sources are publicly available and can be accessed through academic databases and journals. Semi-Structured Interviews: Due to privacy and confidentiality agreements with the participants, the interview data are not publicly available. However, de-identified data may be made available upon reasonable request to the corresponding author, provided that ethical and privacy considerations are upheld.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate Data collection and protocol were approved by the Institutional Review Board at Beijing Normal University on October 18th, 2022. The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards outlined in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its subsequent amendments or comparable ethical standards. Given that the study involved non-invasive and anonymized interviews without collection of sensitive personal data, it was granted an exemption from requiring additional ethics approval by the ethics committees of the two Ugandan universities in the study.

Consent for publication Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study, and their data were anonymized to protect their identities.

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