

Why Academic Qualifications Matter for Local Government Political Leaders

By Walter Akena¹

Between January to March 2021, Ugandans elected national and local government leaders organised by the Electoral Commission. There has been an ongoing debate about the qualification of potential candidates especially those vying for leaderships at local government levels. There are no requirements for academic qualifications for those seeking to occupy political offices at local government levels except for district chairpersons and city mayors.

Background

There have been two previous attempts by Parliament to set a minimum requirement for local government leaders. In 1998, the House passed a bill to introduce a minimum requirement of Ordinary Level for Sub-county leaders. Again in March 2020, Parliament passed the Local Governments (Amendment) Bill, 2019 introducing minimum education requirements for candidates intending to vie for the positions of Local Council Chairpersons, Mayors of Town Councils, Divisions and the Councilors². In both instances, the President rejected the bills and returned them to Parliament. The President opposed the issue of qualifications arguing that it blocks potential leaders from vying for office³. Government Spokesman and Executive Director of Uganda Media Center Mr Ofwono Opondo shared the same sentiment with the President. He described the bill as *a step backwards in Uganda's universal, popular and participatory democracy*⁴.

Suffice to note that the decision to pass the Local Governments Amendment Bill came on the backdrop of a recommendation by Uganda Local Government Association (ULGA) to Parliament that there should be an introduction of education requirements on the leaders in Local Government because it was affecting their performance and had an impact on service delivery. Further, the suggestion that local government leaders should possess some minimum academic qualification has been a mainstay recommendation of eight (8) local government council scorecard assessment reports by ACODE. The President's rejection of the bill, therefore, raises the question; do leaders' education qualification matter anyway?

It should be noted that education is a critical component of a country's human capital, it increases the efficiency of each worker and helps economies to move up the value chain beyond manual tasks or simple production processes. It can be defined as the stock of skills, competencies, and other productivity-enhancing characteristics⁵. Education is a particularly interesting aspect of political selection given the strong correlation found between educational attainment and earnings, which is consistent with education either enhancing skills or signalling ability. Education is also strongly correlated with civic engagement. Education is thus a compelling indicator of a leader's quality⁶.

At the societal level, education drives long-term economic growth, spurs innovation, strengthens

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² <https://parliamentwatch.ug/parliament-passes-the-local-government-amendment-bill-2019>

³ <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/museveni-rejects-a-level-qualification-for-mayors>

⁴ <https://www.mediacentre.go.ug/Opinion/don%E2%80%99t-use-academic-qualification-narrow-democratic-space>

⁵ (World Economic Forum, 2016)

⁶ (Besley & Marta, Do democracies select more educated leaders?, 2011)

institutions, and fosters social cohesion. Indeed, making smart and effective investments in people's education is critical for developing the human capital that will end extreme poverty⁷. It raises the benefit from social participation because it facilitates seamless information exchange. Educated people are better able to express what they know, to inform, and to persuade. They are also better able to acquire new information, to understand, and to learn⁸.

Why education matters

Since Plato, political observers have often argued that governing is best left to those who are highly educated and formal educational attainment of political leaders has steadily gained recognition as a measure of the quality or competence of those leaders⁹. There is evidence of the correlation between the leader's level of education and the quality of the policy¹⁰.

Over the last four years, the Local Government Councils Scorecard Assessment (LGCSI) conducted by ACODE revealed that more educated councillors tend to perform relatively better than their counterparts with low levels of education. Councillors with the Master's degrees obtained the highest average scores of 53 per cent compared to those with lower qualifications. Councillors with Bachelor's Degrees came in the second position with an average performance rate of 48 per cent followed by the diploma holders in the third position with 47 per cent and the trend goes down as the level of education diminishes. These results imply that for

the Council to perform better, the level of education of Councillors matters. This suggests that it's important to have a minimum education qualification for Councillors so that Councils can attract better performing leaders¹¹.

The findings of the scorecard assessment revealed that 32 per cent of councillors with primary level education scored between 0 - 25 per cent as compared to just 4 per cent with a master's degree. Also, none of the councillors with primary level education qualification could achieve a score of 76 per cent and above yet 17 per cent of those with a master qualification, 20 per cent of post-graduate diploma respectively scored 76 per cent and above.

The regression results reveal that if councillors advance their academic qualification to certificate, diploma and bachelor's degree level, their performance is likely to improve by 8 per cent compared to those with a primary level qualification. Also, upgrading councillors' academic qualification to a master's degree level is more likely to improve their performance by 15 per cent compared to those who attained the primary level of qualification. Besley et al (2011) note that highly educated leaders are better citizens and are more likely to act in the benefit of public interest.

These findings are consistent with that of who found that leaders with more formal education produce better outcomes in some aspects of leadership. They might be better at moving proposals through the legislative process and that they are more adept at policy processes and consequently spurring

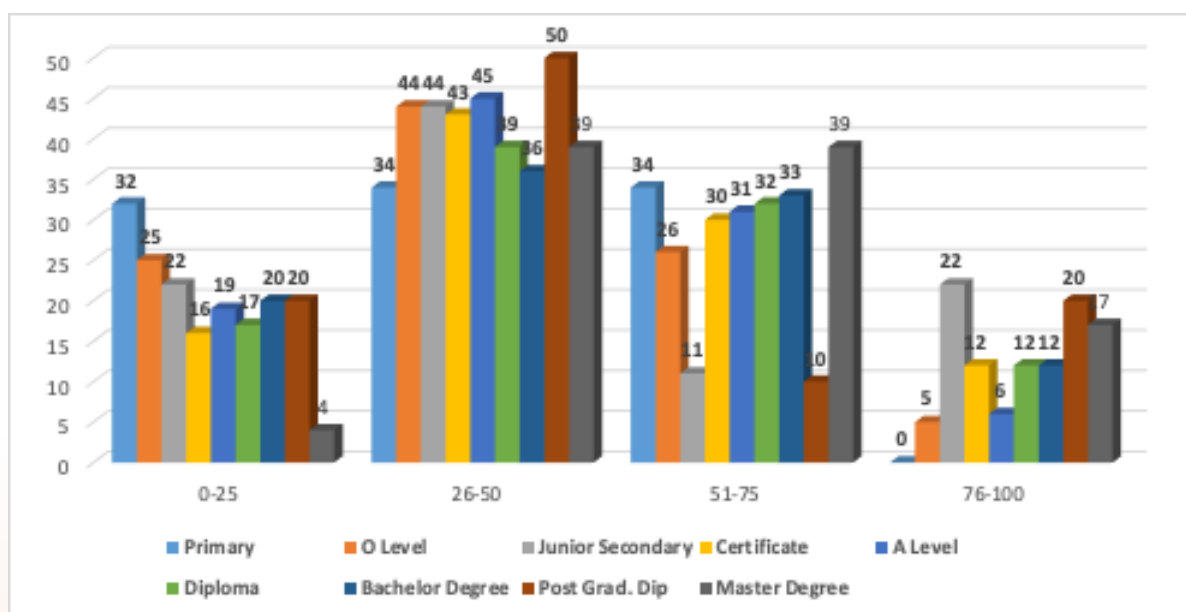


Figure 1: Education Level and Councilor Performance. Source: ACODE Local Government Council Assessments (FY 2013/2014, 2014/2015, 2016/2017 & 2018/2019)

⁷ (World Bank, 2018)

⁸ (Edward L. , Giacomo A. M. , & Andrei , 2007)

⁹ (Nicholas & Noam , What Good Is a College Degree? Education and Leader Quality Reconsidered, 2015)

¹⁰ (Besley & Marta , Do democracies select more educated leaders?, 2011)

¹¹ <https://www.acode-u.org/uploadedFiles/PRS96.pdf>

development¹².

Similarly, regarding the level of education for Speakers of district councils; the higher the level of education attained by a Speaker, the more likelihood of better performance. The descriptive statistics reveal that Speakers who attained higher academic qualifications performed relatively better compared to those with low academic qualifications. It is observed that a relatively higher percentage of Speakers who hold a diploma, a bachelor's degree, a post-graduate diploma and master's degree scored 76 per cent and above compared to their counterparts with lower education levels. Majority of the Speakers scored in the range of 51 - 75 per cent but this level of performance had higher proportions with those having a master's degree qualification (80%).

Uganda's aspiration under the vision of 2040 is to transform from a peasant to modern and prosperous society. To achieve this vision, the country targets to reform the architecture of government service delivery system to act as a unit, harness synergies and deliver public services efficiently and effectively¹³. The Local Governments Act arrogates planning and budgeting powers to local governments. The Act recognizes the District Council as the planning authority in a district and implores councils to work according to guidelines established by the National Planning Authority¹⁴. This underpins the role that local governments play in turning Uganda's vision of a transformed society into reality. It also invigorates the need to have leaders with competence at the local government levels to drive the growth and transformation of this country.

Leaders are the important driving force for the growth of societies since some of them are more competent than others and are more able to make better policy choices which enhance economic performance. The benefit of having more educated leaders is premised on the assumption that highly educated leaders are also better citizens and are more likely to act in the benefit of public interest¹⁵. While Section 37 of the Local Governments Act establishes a technical planning committee at districts and lower local government level for purposes of planning, the plans are submitted to councils for consideration. For the councillors to make sense of the plans submitted to councils for consideration, it requires that they have basic knowledge of the planning figures. While the council is recognized as a planning authority, lack of sufficient skills and expertise on the part of the

councillors have limited the performance of this function¹⁶.

In addition to the planning function, the Local Governments Act also empowers political leaders in local governments to supervise the civil servants employed in the service of the council. Unlike the political leaders, civil servants have strict requirements for qualifications. Under the Public Service Standing Orders, only applicants with required qualifications and experience are supposed to be recruited into the service. This, therefore, means the leaders in Local Government carry out a supervisory role on highly qualified technocrats in offices which makes it difficult for them to understand most of the information being transmitted from the central government.

Currently, to be elected as a district or city councillor in Uganda one does not require any academic qualification¹⁷ and yet as members of the council, they are expected to play a critical role in the planning and budgeting process of a local government which entails approval of District Development Plans, Capacity Building Plans, Revenue Enhancement Plans, Annual Work plans and District Budgets¹⁸. Furthermore, the planning documents are prepared and written in the technical language by the technical staff. Also, being the highest decision-making organ in a district, the council makes critical resolutions regarding the provision of public services prescribed in Part 2 of the Second Schedule of the Local Governments Act.

Conclusion

Given the critical role that the elected political leaders play in local governments-planning and oversight roles-it is important that they have minimum formal education to be able to effectively and efficiently play such roles. Being the driving force to achieving the Vision 2040, local governments need to have the competence to perform its functions as a planning unit and competence involves having qualified political and technical leaders.

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12 (Nicholas & Noam , What Good Is a College Degree? Education and Leader Quality Reconsidered, 2015)

13 (Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, 2020)

14 See Section 35 (1), (2) and (3) of the Local Governments Act.

15 (Timothy & Stephen, 1997)

16 (IRC, March 2015)

17 Section 116, LGA CAP 243 (1997).

18 Section 35, 77, and 82 of the Local Governments Act CAP 243 (1997).

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