

Meritocracy: A Remedy to Addressing Social Injustices in Selecting Students to Public Higher Education in Malawi?

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This article was not written with the assistance of any Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology, including ChatGPT or other support technologies.

Abstract

This essay analyzes whether an ostensibly merit-based policy of selecting students for public higher education can act as a remedy to ameliorate social injustices in Malawi's education system. We address this question through the lens of equity based on a broader discussion of ethnicity in Malawi. The paper is organized in the following sections. First, we provide an overview of the geography of Malawi. This is followed by a detailed review of the literature on the educational system focusing on access and equity between the predecessor quota system and the current merit-based policy. The article concludes by arguing that the merit-based policy is very likely to perpetuate rather than ameliorate social injustices in education, as the future of students accessing public higher education is in jeopardy if they have attended under-resourced schools. Therefore, we strongly recommend

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that the Malawi government consider re-adopting the quota system, which if designed carefully could serve to address social injustices in access to higher education.

Keywords: equity, higher education, Malawi, meritocracy, quota system, social justice

Introduction

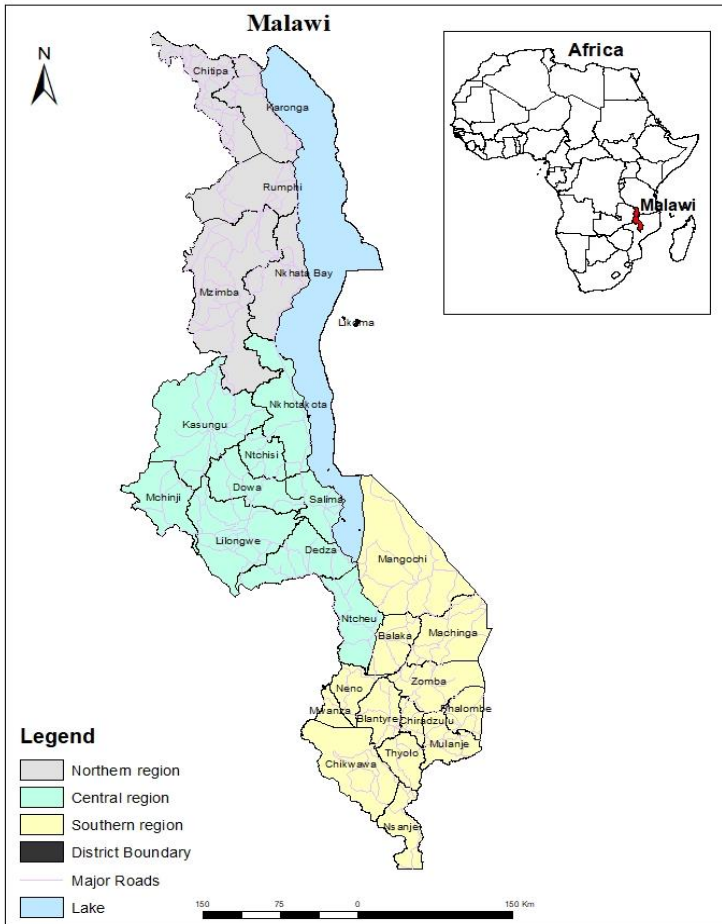
Our aim in this essay is to provide an analysis and recommendations regarding Malawi's higher education student selection policy, given that this policy: a) has been under active debate and revision; and b) has major implications for equity and social justice in this context. Our analysis and discussion of the policies center around social justice/injustice in Malawi's higher education system and present the perspective that the current "merit-based" policy poses threats to the basic principles of social justice in the context of access to public higher education in Malawi. To support this analysis, we apply Ashley Crossman's (2019) and Emma Smith's (2018) definitions of social justice in education as we analyze the likely effects of this new policy in context. We aim through this essay to provide a critical understanding of policy implications as well as strongly recommend to the Malawi government that they reinstate a quota system rather than continue with its current merit-based policy when selecting students to attend public higher education. Doing so, we argue, is the best way for the government to foster more equitable access to public higher education. Our essay accordingly begins by providing a concise background regarding the Malawian context. We then discuss and analyze issues of access and equity in higher education by debating two educational policies.

Overview of Relevant Context

Malawi is situated in the Southern part of Africa. It is bordered by Tanzania to the North, Zambia to the West, and Mozambique to the East via the South (Fig. 1). The country is geographically divided into three regions (northern, central, and southern) and has a total of 28 districts. Each of these regions is associated with distinct ethnic groups/tribes, which frequently come together around political issues. Therefore, the politics of Malawi often takes on a regional perspective with particular regions tending to favor particular party affiliations and sets of issues.

Figure 1

Map of Malawi Showing Districts by Region (Dzimbiri et al., 2022)



According to the Malawi population and housing census report of 2018, out of 17.6 million of the country's population, 44% reside in the southern region, followed by 43% and 13% in the central and northern regions, respectively (National Statistics Office, 2019). Once ruled by the British, Malawi attained self-rule in 1964; Hastings Kamuzu Banda became the first president, and he ruled Malawi for nearly 30 years. During Banda's autocratic regime, primary education was not free. In 1994, Malawi's new President, Bakili Muluzi, introduced free primary education (Inoue & Oketch, 2008). Free education, as used here, means the removal of direct expenditures for one to access education services; these costs include fees for tuition, uniforms, textbooks, and so on (UNESCO, 2002 as cited in Inoue & Oketch, 2008). From 1964, Malawi had only one public university

called the University of Malawi (Msiska, 2015) until 1997, when Mzuzu University (MZUNI) was established. In 2011, two other public universities were established: the Malawi University of Science and Technology (MUST), and the Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources (LUANAR).

More recently, in 2021, the Malawi University of Business and Applied Sciences and Kamuzu University of Health Sciences were also established. Per the new higher education admissions policy, selection of students to public universities is based on one's performance in the Malawi School Certificate of Education (MSCE); the exams are administered by the National Examination Board of Malawi in the final grade in senior secondary school (Galafa, 2019). Our essay does not attend to the properties of the exams themselves, such as the strength of their measurement of the constructs they purport to measure. These are important attributes that will affect the overall strength of the policy and should be the focus of additional research. Instead, we focus at a broader level—and with the assumption that, even if these exams are of impeccable quality, there are substantial issues associated with the application of the merit-based admissions policies, especially in highly unequal contexts. The merit-based policy is a major shift from the predecessor approach to selection into higher education.

During the one-party rule, the first president of Malawi introduced a quota system policy for selecting students to higher education, arguing that this constituted an affirmative action that would provide opportunities for students who are originally from the southern and central regions, as they were deemed underrepresented in the public universities (Mashinga, 2020). The quota system policy, however, faced considerable challenge and backlash, as certain groups argued it exacerbated social injustices regarding access to education (Galafa, 2019). For instance, some politicians—primarily from the central and northern regions—argued the policy was deliberately introduced in favor of a specific ethnic group/tribe or region to have access to public higher education.

Given the nature of Malawian politics, which is hugely associated with tribes, ethnicity, and regions, people from the north and central regions coupled with some civil society groups deemed the quota system as “political” and discriminatory in nature (Mashinga, 2020). Specifically, the Tumbuka tribe, who are predominantly in the north, coupled with the Chewa tribe from the central region, have been claiming to be the victims of the quota system policy. Thus, people from these two regions contend that this policy was unjust, and it had negative implications for educational opportunities arguing that the majority of the deserving students from the “Tumbukas” and “Chewas” were denied access to public colleges and universities as compared to other tribes from the southern region in Malawi. Consequently, there was a perceived need for a new, ostensibly merit-based policy in which students who have performed highly in their Malawi School Certificate of Education (MSCE) exams would be selected to public universities (Mashinga, 2020). Such challenges and concerns resulted in the Malawi government, through the ministry of education, abolishing the quota

system in 2020 and replacing it with the current, exam- and merit-based policy as a new strategy for admitting students to public colleges and universities.

The merit-based policy is perceived and presented by some as a fair strategy in selecting students to public universities in Malawi, while at the same time the earlier-used quota system is presented as a policy that aimed at marginalizing people from the northern region to access higher education (Gunde et al., 2021). In this essay, we describe the inherent unfairness of this new policy in this context and argue how the predecessor admission policy was substantially better at addressing issues of social justice relative to higher education access.

Theoretical/Conceptual Orientation: Social Justice, Equity, and Problematizing Meritocratic Admissions Policies

This article is guided by the theory of social justice across the lines of equity and meritocratic approaches to social justice education. We draw on the ideas of Ashley Crossman (2019) on meritocracy, and Emma Smith's (2018) definition of social justice in education to support our analysis and to advance a clearer understanding of the politics of social justice in relation to educational policy formulation. First, meritocracy is defined as a social system in which social status and success is based on people's abilities, talents and effort such that those who are successful are believed to have achieved that based upon their merit (Crossman, 2019). Smith (2018) defines social justice as equitable distribution of benefits of the society, which includes wealth, income, opportunities to education and other resources, and whereby this distribution is achieved based on the principles of equality, equity and merit. Regarding the principle of equity, Smith draws on the ideas of John Rawls who argued equity is the most important principle of social justice in as far as reducing inequality is concerned. Equity is based on the principle of need in the allocation of resources or opportunities as it recognizes the existing differences that make—certain group of people more disadvantaged in comparison to another. Therefore, our essay draws on social justice as equity to critically analyze whether the current merit-based policy of admitting students to public higher education can act as a remedy to ameliorate social injustices in Malawi's education system.

Discussion

Drawing on our analysis of student higher education selection educational policy, this section discusses the politics of social justice in Malawi and describes this policy's implications in perpetuating inequalities in access to public higher education. To do so, we first present and discuss critical issues regarding access to education in Malawi, and then we discuss the politics of equity and how this affects social justice education.

Pertinent Issues Regarding Access to Public Education in Malawi

After the dawn of democracy in 1994, Malawi's new President introduced a free primary education policy in the same year (Mbewe, 2002), which just one

year later had already produced a 50% surge in primary enrollment (Kadzamira & Rose, 2003). Over the years, there has been a continued rapid increase in primary school enrollment as a result of the ambitious educational reform—known as “universal primary enrollment”—which aims at increasing access to both primary and secondary education while also addressing issues of inequity (Kadzamira et al., 2003).

A recent report released by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) found that the enrollment rate in public primary schools grew by 1.9% on average in the 2018/2019 academic year (MoEST, 2019). Previous statistics also show that between 2015 and 2018 secondary education enrollment rate grew by 2.9% on average and that figure was higher compared to 2.7% for primary education enrollment (MoEST, 2019). The high enrollment rate in public secondary schools (2.9%) entails that a significant number of students who graduated from primary school have been unable to reach the secondary level. Likewise, the rapid increase in secondary education in Malawi has resulted in high and increasing demand and pressure for higher education, especially through Malawi’s public universities (Mambo et al., 2016).

While the demand for public higher education continues to increase, the country’s public universities do not have sufficient space to accommodate or absorb all qualified students. In fact, at present just a small fraction of secondary school graduates are able to obtain access to these universities: According to a report released by the World Bank on improving higher education in Malawi for competitiveness in the global economy, fewer than 30% of the graduates from secondary school in Malawi get admitted into public universities (Mambo et al., 2016). This situation is attributed mainly to limited capacity in the public’s higher education system (Mambo et al., 2016).

The situation was even worse in the 2010 university admission process since only 19.4% of the students who graduated from secondary school and were qualified for higher education got selected to public universities (Mambo et al., 2016). Accordingly, we recognize that there has been a substantial growth of enrollment capacity, but that it is still quite limited. It was also in 2010 when the Malawi government, through the Ministry of Education, informed the general public that the selection of students to public universities was based on the “Equitable Access policy” (Mashinga, 2020). This was re-introduced as a remedy to address regional inequalities in access to education, in which public universities were deemed to be hugely dominated by students from the northern region (Mashinga, 2020). According to the quota system policy, the top ten students from each of the 28 districts across the country were being offered a place in public universities (Mashinga, 2020). This controversial policy resulted in criticisms from some quarters of the country’s population, coupled with politicians arguing that it left out many of the “deserving students” from the northern region who could not access public universities, hence the demand for educational reform to the current, ostensibly merit-based policy.

The Politics of Equity: From Quota System to (Apparent) Meritocracy

Smith (2018) notes in her book *Key Issues in Education and Social Justice* that for the past decades, political ideologies have been the driving force on how people perceive schooling and also have a great influence on how the state promotes issues of social justice in education globally. In Malawi, for example, politics of social justice in public higher education, specifically on the issue of the Equitable Access to Education policy, increasingly became a major aspect of the political agendas of the then opposition parties supported by some other civil society organizations. Equity in terms of access to higher education and its implications is defined differently among scholars, educators, and others. Mambo et al. (2016) define equity as “equality of opportunity in access to, and success in, higher education, regardless of the place of birth, location, gender, ethnicity, religion, language, disability, and parental income” (p. 5).

Galafa (2019) states that the Equitable Access to Education policy aims at addressing the existing discrepancies in the access to higher education based on geography in Malawi. However, in our view, Galafa’s critical understanding and appraisal of this policy are somewhat flawed as they are not well aligned with the basic definition of social justice in education. Smith (2018) describes social justice in the context of education as equity for everyone based on the principle of need. By contrast, Galafa (2019) argues that the “Equitable Access to Education” policy is not meant to address inequalities but rather it is meant to address what he views as the systemic discrimination of a certain group of people which exacerbates inequalities and promotes mediocrity over meritocracy in Malawi.

Such disparities in understanding the policy needs and the rhetoric about its implications can have a remarkable influence on people’s perceptions and understanding of equity and access to public universities. Politicians and other civil society organizations accordingly may have strategically opposed the quota system policy in favor of the merit-based system to win votes from people mainly from northern Malawi, who viewed this policy as a form of tribalism and/or regionalism. Thus, according to the critiques of the quota system, the selection of students to public universities based on the districts and region of one’s origin is discriminatory and unjust, and the only strategy to address this crisis was through a presumably more objective and fair merit-based system (Galafa, 2019).

While the quota system policy received a lot of criticism, a huge amount of evidence from many other countries serves to underscore how a well-designed quota system can be critical towards addressing structural inequalities; indeed, such approaches appear more capable of leveling the playing field in systems beset by inequalities than do merit-based programs that, though being argued as being more objective and meritocratic in nature, would instead invariably favor those whose backgrounds have afforded them greater access to resources and opportunities. In the USA, for example, the introduction of quotas in schools has been historically used as an affirmative action to address existing inequalities based on race and social class status (Galafa, 2019).

Crossman (2019), in his article on understanding meritocracy from a sociological perspective, defines meritocracy as a social system where one's prosperity and social status are attained based on their talents, abilities, and effort or hard work. This implies or assumes that success is inevitable for everyone in a society, so long as one works hard and has abilities to do something. This understanding ignores disparate psychosocial and physical challenges, families' socio-economic backgrounds, and societal systems and structure factors that may limit or disadvantage an individual or group of people to have access to resources and succeed. A recent study conducted in Canada, the USA, and Nigeria on meritocracy in the education system found that ostensibly meritocratic policies in determining student's access to higher education fail to take into account of the root causes of students' academic success or failures, which has implications on one's performance (Erivwo et al., 2021).

Regarding the shortfalls of the meritocratic system in education, Erivwo et al. (2021) cite Mijs (2015), and argue that "individuals are no longer deserving of their success because meritocracy itself is flawed in that it perpetuates a generational cycle where high achievers come from a generation of people that have found success in the meritocratic system" (p. 9). In accordance with the above argument, Crossman (2019) offers an example using Western societies where the merit-based system has historically, and continues to, put elite or wealthier people in advantageous positions to accumulate more wealth as well as power and influence over the poor or underprivileged communities. Crossman (2019) similarly argues that people who are born in wealthier families or neighborhoods/communities have more privileged access to better resources as compared to those from poor and underprivileged households. Thus, under such circumstances, disparities are inevitable in the context of access to quality education, such that students from poor families and underprivileged communities are more likely to access poor and under-resourced education facilities, and this has implications on students' performance.

A key implication, in other words, is that ostensibly meritocratic policies do not, in fact, support a meritocratic system—i.e., one that is consistently rewarding talent or hard work. Rather, notwithstanding lofty rhetoric to the contrary, many citizens find themselves unable to compensate for vast and growing social inequalities that constrain their opportunities (Sandel, 2020). Ultimately, such disparities between rhetoric and realities are processed by citizens who may obtain a sense of hypocrisy, betrayal, and educational injustice (Piketty, 2020). What this suggests is that politicians, rather than simply adopting meritocratic-appearing education policies, would do better to focus intently on identifying and redressing educational and societal inequalities and injustices. Notwithstanding, opportunity disparities in inequitable contexts create disadvantages in a variety of ways, including when they sit for high-stakes examinations. Some scholars argue that the basic principle of meritocracy can be inherently linked to Social

Darwinism, in which the life of an individual is subjected to the survival of the fittest (Mijs, 2016).

Thus, ostensibly meritocratic policies in education violate the principles of social justice, need, and equality (Mijs, 2016), as they do not consider individual differences, nor do they consider and account for internal and external hindrances that may affect students' performance. The introduction of such policies in education accordingly serves instead toward widening already existing divides and social injustices—and in this case, they cement inequitable access to higher education across Malawi. More specifically, this policy seems certain to favor already advantaged individuals and groups, who will be more likely to be deemed worthy of higher education admission (and who, subsequently, will benefit from widened professional opportunities and will pass these benefits on to their kin).

Given the persistent differences in the quality of education standards and the widespread poverty gap between and within rural and urban areas in which rural schools have poor and inadequate educational resources, this policy especially jeopardizes the performance of the vast majority of students from rural areas. This problem pushes many students from rural areas to migrate to urban areas of Malawi with the hope of accessing a better education to increase their opportunities of getting selected to public secondary schools (Mbewe & Nampota, 2007). Therefore, the gap in terms of educational quality between rural and urban areas puts a certain group of people from urban areas at higher chances of performing well in their National Exams, thereby increasing their opportunities of being selected to public universities. More broadly, students' socio-economic characteristics are also a factor that might affect students' academic achievements, and this has to be critically examined in relation to the merit system as a policy for selecting students for public universities.

A study that examines the inequality gap in children's educational attainment in Malawi found that 48% of children from wealthier households had attained access to early childhood education, in comparison to the 30% of children from low-income households having such access (Sosu et al., 2019). The outcome of this study provides a picture to suggest that students from wealthier families and those attending the best secondary schools have extra advantages to do well in their academic achievement/performance, and this increases their chances of benefiting from the new, test-based policy as compared to those who are poor and attend under-resourced schools. Thus, the new policy—despite being presented as merit-based—in fact has the potential to exacerbate the gap between the rich and the poor, as well as create and/or maintain an unequal society in terms of equity and access to higher education across the country.

A critical analysis of the literature in the Malawian context shows that there is a huge knowledge gap regarding the implications of merit-based policy in access to higher education, and this could be attributed to several factors, including politics of social justice. Related to this point, Kadzamira and Rose (2003) argued that the process of formulating educational policy in Malawi does not engage or

involve all concerned stakeholders such as parents, teachers, communities, local leaders, and other organizations that work on education projects. Since the merit-based policy can be argued to be part of a political agenda used by some politicians for their political capital, there has been little or no civic education and engagement with the general population and other stakeholders to critically analyze the implications of the policy in as far as social justice in education is concerned.

Horsford et al. (2018) argue that a critical analysis of and engagement with the proposed policy can provide a great deal of understanding of the implications of policies. This is particularly important as we live in a society where inequalities continue to increase, coupled with political divisions based on class, race, geography, etc. Using the ideas of Horsford et al. (2018) on the need for critical policy analysis across the lines of politics, class, and geography in Malawi's context, one can, therefore, argue that the implementation of the merit-based policy was either driven by political interests or by a lack of critical understanding of the "equitable access to education" regarding addressing social injustices in and beyond education.

Implications

We examined whether the current educational policy for selecting students for higher public education is a panacea for ameliorating social injustices in Malawi's education system. Accordingly, we have analyzed the educational policy shift from a quota system to a merit system and its implications towards achieving social justice in access to public higher education in Malawi, with an emphasis on equity and need. We found that a critical analysis of the literature reveals two fundamental issues: (1) the emerging policy dilemma is being driven by politics along with a failure to engage and involve all relevant stakeholders in the educational policy decision making; and (2) there is a dearth of knowledge and a lack of critical understanding of the policy implications in the context of social justice education via the principle of equity.

To support this analysis, we have drawn from the literature, especially from the work of Mijs (2015) who argued that meritocratic approaches create unfulfillable promises towards reducing inequalities in the education spaces. Thus, three lessons are drawn from meritocratic system in regard to its implications for social justice education and these includes: (1) educational institutions in practice significantly distort the ideal meritocratic process; (2) opportunities for merit are themselves determined by non-meritocratic factors; and (3) any definition of merit favors some groups in society while putting others at a disadvantaged position (Mijs, 2015).

Such issues may be ubiquitous, but in our view are especially problematic in highly unequal and/or tribalized contexts such as Malawi. Drawing examples from Western education systems (e.g., as in the USA) regarding efforts to reduce racial inequalities in access to quality education through affirmative action policy, we recommend that this offers a platform for the Malawi government and relevant

stakeholders to reconsider and rethink about the implications of the current merit-based policy relative to a quota-based system.

Informed by our understanding of social justice based on the principle of equity in education (Smith, 2018), we argue that the implementation of ostensibly meritocratic system for admitting students to public higher education puts the vast majority of students mainly from under-resourced schools and those from low socio-economic backgrounds into jeopardy and this poses a severe threat to social justice in education. Therefore, many schools with poor education standards are more likely to face stiff challenges to produce the best students who will make it to public universities under the current policy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the current system perpetuates inequalities in access to higher education in Malawi. This review has revealed that policymakers and implementers failed to take account of the underlying principles of equity and need as far as social justice in education is concerned.

Our call to action is to recommend the Malawi government reconsider reversing the newly enacted policy and opt for a quota system, as it offers a justified affirmative action toward addressing injustices in access to higher education across the country. Besides, we recommend that it will be essential to collect and analyze data regarding the distribution of opportunities in Malawi (e.g., by geography, demography, etc.). We believe that such data would foster clearer conclusions regarding access and social justice and would further support evidence-informed policymaking in this regard. As well, institutions of higher education in Malawi could potentially help by voluntarily providing such data.

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