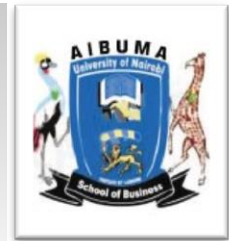




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**BRAIN POWER: AN ANALYSIS INTO COMPETITIVENESS OF KENYA'S  
SECONDARY SCHOOLS**

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***Abstract***

*Education holds a special place in the Kenyan mind. It's still seen as the conveyor belt to the upward mobility. Narrow economic opportunities and history where those who excelled in education have done well economically drive this belief. Restrictions on access to quality education during the colonial era could also have made us value education more. The restriction continued after uhuru, a hangover from colonial era. It is exhibited by competition for a few top ranked schools. So high is the competition that the coveted schools are more competitive than top universities in the world. The level of competitiveness is measured using the admission rate. Data is sourced from publicly available sources like university and school websites. The paper finds that Kenyan top ranked high school outdo Harvard and other top universities. That this is never seen as a big issues by policy makers and even academics, is a surprise. An attempt to promote more schools to national status does not seem to have reduced competition. The paper suggests that if the economy grows and more economic opportunities are available, the competition will reduce and schools will cease to a national lottery. This paper analysis this competition and derives implications not just for individuals but the nation and the spill over to the next generation.*

***Key words:*** *competitiveness, admission rate, upward mobility, selectivity*

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## Introduction

In Kenya, good secondary schools are rare. The recent outcry over bullying at one of Kenya's top public school, Alliance High School has a lot do with the scarcity of good schools (Daily Nation, March 2, 2017). One good school having problems is too many. Kenyan students sit for Kenya certificate of primary education (KCPE) at the end of 8 years of primary school. Students are selected to join secondary school based on the performance in that exam. The top students join the prestigious and highly competitive national schools while the rest go to less prestigious schools in their counties. National schools can admit students from any part of the country. County schools mostly admit students from their locality. Kenya has 47 counties after 2010 constitution. The scarcity of good schools makes competition very fierce. The ministry of education increased national schools from 18 in 2012 to 105 in 2016 by promoting secondary schools to "national status" to admit bright students from all over the country. That reduced the number of spaces available to average or disadvantaged students. It would have made more sense to build new schools. That would have increased the number of schools and given more educational opportunities to Kenyan

students. This paper looks at the competitiveness of the highly coveted secondary schools in Kenya and compares with other regions of the world. Secondary schools or high schools are equivalent to USA grade 9-12.

In this paper, the acceptance rate for top Kenyan school is compared with selected top schools elsewhere in the world. Acceptance rate is percentage of applicants to a school who get admitted. The lower the rate, the more exclusive or competitive the school is.

Data from Kenya ministry of education shows that in 2015, about 137,000 girls chose Alliance girls as their first choice. Only about 400 were picked, translating to an acceptance rate of 0.29 per cent. Alliance High School (the Boys school) had 136680 choosing the school leading to an acceptance rate of 0.292 for a class of 400. Mang'u had 136870 applying for the school, if about 400 were accepted, the acceptance rate is 0.292. If the government had not expanded these schools, the acceptance rate would be even lower. This acceptance rate is next compared with prestigious universities like Harvard or Stanford in the table below. In addition, elite schools in the USA and UK are included.

**Table 1: Data source: School websites and Internet.**

School	Year Established	Acceptance Rate (per cent)	Average Enrolment	Country domiciled
Alliance High School	1926	0.3	1620	Kenya (public)
Alliance Girls High School	1948	0.3	1600	Kenya (public)
Mang'u High School	1932	0.3	1600	Kenya (public)
Strathmore School	1961	22	352	Kenya(private)
Phillips Exeter Academy	1781	19	1085	USA
Phillips Academy Andover	1778	13	1141	USA

St. Paul's School	1856	16	541	USA
Eton College	1140	26	1300	UK
Harrow School	1572	27 (excluding A Level)	800	UK
Harvard University	1636	5.2 (class of 2020)	22000	USA
Stanford University	1885	4.69 (class of 2020)	17000	USA

### Explaining competitiveness of Kenyan schools

The demand for space in Kenya's few good (or elite) schools is unbelievable. Getting to Kenya's top high schools is harder than getting to Harvard or USA top schools like Philips Exeter Academy. The data seems to suggest that getting an admission to Kenya's top national schools is harder than winning a lottery. It is an open question if promotion of more schools to national status will disperse that competition.

How can schools like Alliance High Schools and Mang'u be more competitive than the most elite private schools in the world? Michael Mwangi, a graduate of Maseno School, and a don at University of Nairobi suggests the data above is the best evidence of the value Kenyans place on education. Not surprisingly and despite high joblessness, education still remains the best conveyor belt to a better life. Dr. Akinwumi Adesina, President of the African Development Bank as quoted by Ogutu (2017) notes that "education is the key that opens up the realization of the objectives of sustainable development."

Dr Henry Kiplangat, the Vice Chancellor of private Kabarak University attributes the low acceptance rate for top schools like Alliance to "forced choice." Students sitting for Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) must choose to a number of public secondary schools while those choosing

private schools have more discretion because they are more expensive. A top public secondary school in Kenya which can earn you a scholarship to Harvard will cost you about 1000 USD a year including boarding. A good private school can cost ten times as much.

The popularity of Alliances, Mang'u and the original 18 national schools before they were expanded to 105 may be historical. We have been talking about these schools all our lives. Their brands and their alumnus are well known. Some alumni include presidents and other well known public figures. It is no wonder from the table above the most prestigious schools are old, including Harvard. Age gives the schools time for recognition, across generations and countries. That is why starting a school or university is so hard, even if you have the money. You have to wait for years for the brand recognition and at times for your graduates to prove themselves. Advertising dilutes your brand, surprisingly. Could this explain why churches sponsor schools because their brands are already well known? Interestingly even Harvard once had religious affiliation (Harvard Gazette, October, 2016).

The low acceptance rate simply shows there are few good secondary schools in Kenya hence the intense competitions. Kenya has not been building new public schools. The

last time lots of them were built was during President Moi era in 1980s through public contribution, locally called harambee. The new secondary schools in the last few years are private, most of them girl's schools. Private investors in education shy away from boys schools; they perceive them as high risk because of indiscipline.

One unexpected consequence of these low acceptance rates in good school is raising incentives to cheat in exams, notes Prof. Kimura, a graduate of UCLA and now retired after many years at University of Nairobi. Correlating the high school national exam, Kenya certificate of secondary education (KCSE) with GPA at universities could test the "cheating effect," he suggested. To increase the acceptance rate, the government is expanding the good schools leading to over enrolment and overcrowding which might dilute their performance and prestige. The optimal size of a school in Kenya is an open question.

Good schools defy the laws of economics like the laws of supply and demand. If we admitted all those who wanted to go to Alliance or Harvard, the mystic and prestige would go down. To avoid brand dilution; we use exams and other requirements like legacy admissions. In most elite schools you are more likely to get admitted if your parents are alumni, the so called legacy admissions. A good example, about 15 per cent of current boys at Harrow School, where Winston Churchill schooled are sons of Old Harrovians (Harrow website, 2017). *Harvard Crimson* noted in 2011 that Harvard's acceptance rate for legacies has hovered around 30 percent—more than four times the regular admission rate.

Physical infrastructure is the least critical resource in good schools. It is the intangibles, the traditions, the heritage, and community. A good example , the standards

of education are so low in Kiambu County, near Nairobi despite hosting the highest number of national schools in Kenya. The proximity to Nairobi, the political and economic capital of Kenya provides economic incentives like trading , viewed as a more attractive alternative to spending years in school. The big debate on bullying in Alliance was about the school traditions and rituals which are common in all great schools. Students at Harvard touch the right boot of founder's statue around exam time ; they believe such an act gives you good luck in exams. The left boot is shinier than right.

Great public schools in Kenya have faded because leadership, context and changes in law/regulations killed the traditions. The government banned corporal punishment in schools leading to indiscipline and decline in academic performance. Powerless teachers are demotivated teachers. The missionaries who dedicated their lives to schools even preferring to be buried in schools they taught are rare. Teachers Service Commission (TSC), the employer of teachers often post teachers to their villages which breed contempt. Too much democratization in schools might have led to poor performance and scarcity of good schools too. Students now elect their "presidents", "senators" and other "reps."

### **The future of competitiveness of Kenyan schools**

One creeping problem in Kenyan public secondary schools is the rise of *totocracy*, where kids run the show. Toto is Swahili name for a child. Teachers spend all their time appeasing the kids. It becomes worse if a school has influential parents. Torn between losing their jobs or taken to court or ensuring there is discipline, teachers keep quiet. They can't punish the kids and the parents can't either. Discipline dies and schools decline. Parents fight for the few

remaining good schools; some are willing to bribe their way.

The debate on bullying at Alliance quoted the students, their parents and retired headmasters. Teachers were ignored. They are now the new magicians, get you A grades, maintain discipline and solve all the societal problems. They are supposed to succeed where parents and policymakers failed. New regulations and laws are making teachers' life harder. Soon, it will be very hard to get good teachers in our schools.

The other reason why good schools are so rare is because they defy "uberization". Age, brand recognition and huge alumni network make it very hard to disrupt great schools, the way Uber has disrupted transport. Benchmarking rarely works in education; it is all mental. Meeting a parent at Alliance or Harvard and hearing him narrate when his father left Alliance or Harvard, can't be

copied. Add the alumni network, and it becomes clear why good schools remain good. Great alumni, keep the dreams of the school alive, they give their time, money and inspiration.

A good example, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg is an alumnus of Philips Exeter Academy. George W. Bush and his father schooled at Phillips Academy Andover. Harvard has produced 48 Nobel Laureates, 32 heads of state, 48 Pulitzer Prize winners, according to its website. When will a local school in Kenya boast of that?

Founders and their legacy contribute to "goodness" of school. Four Churches sponsor Alliance High School which has famous teachers like Carey Francis and Rev. Welch and his wife, all buried in the school compound. Geoffrey Griffin founded another good School, Starehe boys Centre which educates bright but poor boys. Griffin is buried in Starehe School Chapel.



Figure 1: The resting place of Alliance High School's longest serving Headmaster. He was formerly a lecturer at University of Oxford.

Photo by XN Iraki.



## Future Research

One of the unexplored streams of thought is if the prestige of the original 17 Kenyan national schools will reduce after expanding the number of national schools from 17 to 105. It is possible their prestige could rise. Most students would want to be identified with old schools with a track record. The prestige of Harvard, Oxbridge or Philips Academy has not diminished with emergence of new schools. Data on the number of students who apply for admission in all the 105 national schools in Kenya can test the hypothesis in future. We could also investigate if covid-19 and shifting learning to online has diluted the great school brands.

Economics laws demand that every profitable industry sucks in competitors to share the profits. In education, more schools are getting into Kenyan market; they refer themselves as academies and international schools e.g. SABIS, Braeburn and Bridge (Economist, June 18, 2018). The number of such schools is not high enough. One reason is that high schools are expensive to build and manage unlike primary schools. Public schools are subsidized by the government through paying teachers' salaries and building infrastructure. To compete with public schools, a private high school would have to charge rock bottom fees and won't break even. Because of brand recognition which is a factor of time, it would take too long to pay back. The burden of converting a failed school into alternative use is also too high.

Kenya is unique, it is one of the few countries (May be Canada too) where public schools are still coveted. The overcrowding in Kenyan good public schools and indiscipline might lead to Kenyan private schools displacing public schools on prestige ranking.

Kenya could follow the pattern of developed countries where private schools displaced public school on prestige list as the country develops.

50 years after independence (uhuru), a few public secondary schools have retained their mystic and prestige. They are the dreams of every boy and girl. A few private schools have risen to share the prestige. Examples include Kabarak, Strathmore, Makini, Starehe, and missionary led schools like Mary Mother of Grace or St.Marys, Nairobi.

Governance might also lead to displacing public schools from the top of prestige list. The public schools are constrained in their decisions making and are hamstring by reliance on government subsidies. Elite schools and universities have huge endowment funds and fees giving them freedom in decision making. Harvard endowment competes with Kenya's annual budget.

Interestingly the low acceptance rate for top public secondary schools mints money for private academies at primary school level. They promise to prepare your kid for top public schools like Alliance. The prospect of paying even lower in public universities for very marketable courses is a big incentive to prepare your child by taking him or her to a good elementary or high school. That is why private academies fought quota system which is used in admission to good public secondary schools in Kenya. To diversify their markets, private academies are opening secondary school sections, and some universities. It is another issue if this is a good strategy given the fact that running an academy and a university are two different games. The study of competitiveness of Kenya's schooling system is still in its infancy. It could be enriched with other issues like the absence of Asians and whites (wazungus) in the top public schools.

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