

Youth as Assets, Not Beneficiaries: Rethinking Skills Development for Inclusive Growth in Uganda

Policy Paper

Shaping Africa's Future with Evidence, Equity, and Innovation for Impact



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Table of Contents

List of Abbreviations.....	ii
Executive Summary	iii
1. Introduction	1
2. Policy Context in Uganda	1
3. The Problem	2
4. Why Youth Should Be Treated as Assets	3
5. Policy Recommendations	4
5.1 Embed work-relevant skills across the education system	4
5.2 Strengthen flexible school-to-work pathways	4
5.3 Deepen employer and industry engagement.....	5
5.4 Finance inclusion, not only enrolment	5
5.5 Recognize informal and community-based learning	5
5.6 Involve youth in designing skills policy.....	5
6. Implementation Considerations	5
7. Conclusion.....	6
References	8

List of Abbreviations

MGLSD	Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development
MoES	Ministry of Education and Sports
NCDC	National Curriculum Development Centre
NEET	Not in Employment, Education or Training
NPA	National Planning Authority
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UBOS	Uganda Bureau of Statistics

Executive Summary

Uganda’s development future depends heavily on how effectively it equips its young population with relevant skills for work, enterprise, and civic participation. Recent national data show that Uganda remains a youthful country, with youth aged 18–30 constituting about 23.4% of the total population. This creates both an opportunity and a policy challenge: if well-prepared, youth can drive productivity, innovation, and inclusive growth; if excluded from meaningful skills and employment pathways, the country risks deepening inequality, unemployment, and social frustration.

Uganda has already made important reforms. The lower secondary curriculum emphasizes competencies, practical learning, creativity, and preparation for the world of work, while the TVET Policy and the Technical and Vocational Education and Training Act, 2025 provide a stronger framework for skills development, quality assurance, and industry relevance.

However, serious gaps remain. The National Planning Authority’s *Employment and Skills Status Report 2025* highlights persistent skills mismatches, weak education-to-work transitions, and a high proportion of youth not in employment, education, or training. These challenges suggest that Uganda’s skills system still too often treats youth as programme recipients rather than as productive assets whose capabilities can fuel national transformation.

This policy paper argues that Uganda should adopt an asset-based approach to youth skills development. It recommends embedding work-relevant competencies across the education system, strengthening flexible pathways between school and work, financing inclusion for marginalized groups, formalizing recognition of informal learning, deepening employer engagement, and ensuring youth participation in skills policy design. Such reforms would better align Uganda’s education system with the goals of inclusive growth, decent work, and national development.

1. Introduction

Uganda's education system must do more than expand access to schooling; it must enable young people to become active contributors to national development. In a country with a large and growing youth population, education policy cannot remain narrowly focused on certification and examination success alone. It must prepare young people with the knowledge, practical skills, adaptability, and confidence needed for employment, entrepreneurship, and problem-solving in a changing economy (UBOS, 2025; NCDC, 2020).

Yet public and policy discourse often frames youth as beneficiaries of skilling programmes, grants, and interventions rather than as assets with agency, talent, and productive potential. This framing is limiting. It encourages short-term project responses instead of systemic reform. A more effective policy approach would recognize youth as partners in development whose capacities must be intentionally nurtured through an inclusive and responsive education and training system (UBOS, 2025; NPA, 2025).

This paper examines Uganda's education and skills landscape and argues for a shift from a beneficiary model to an asset-based model of youth development. It focuses especially on how the education system can better support inclusive growth through relevant, flexible, and equitable skills development.

2. Policy Context in Uganda

Uganda has already introduced reforms that provide a foundation for rethinking skills development. The lower secondary curriculum framework was designed to move away from rote learning and toward competency-based education. It emphasizes practical learning, critical thinking, creativity, project work, and preparation for the world of work. The curriculum also includes pre-vocational options intended to expose learners to practical and employable skills at an earlier stage (NCDC, 2020).

At the post-basic level, Uganda's TVET Policy recognizes that the country needs a more responsive skills system that addresses labour-market demands, productivity, and lifelong learning. The policy notes that past approaches were often overly theoretical and overly focused on academic credentials rather than occupational competence. It therefore calls for a system with

stronger industry linkage, multiple learning pathways, and recognition of skills acquired both formally and informally (MoES, 2019).

The Technical and Vocational Education and Training Act, 2025 strengthens this direction by providing a legal and institutional framework for coordinating, regulating, and promoting TVET in Uganda. It establishes structures for quality assurance, regulation of providers, development of curricula and qualifications, and the creation of a Skills Development Fund. This gives Uganda a firmer basis for transforming skills development into a more coherent national system (TVET Act, 2025).

Taken together, these reforms show that Uganda has already recognized the importance of practical, employable, and competency-based learning. The challenge now is to ensure that implementation moves beyond institutional reform to a broader rethinking of youth as central actors in inclusive growth.

3. The Problem

Consider Sarah, an 18-year-old in rural Gulu who completes her O-Levels with strong grades. Her school was expected to implement elements of the competency-based curriculum, but in practice it lacked equipment, trained instructors, and resources for meaningful pre-vocational learning. A year later, Sarah is back at home helping on the family farm. A local mechanic is willing to take her on as an apprentice, but without a clear certification pathway or support structure, the opportunity feels informal, uncertain, and socially undervalued. Her potential remains visible, but untapped.

Sarah's story is hypothetical, yet it reflects a broader national challenge: despite ongoing reforms, the transition from education to productive work remains weak for many young Ugandans. The *Employment and Skills Status Report 2025* points to continued challenges in job creation, labour-market relevance, and skills development, and highlights a high share of youth who are not in employment, education, or training. This reflects not only unemployment, but also the failure of education and training systems to connect effectively with labour-market realities (NPA, 2025).

One major problem is the mismatch between the skills many young people acquire and those demanded by the economy. Employers often seek practical, technical, digital, and soft skills, while many learners still pass through systems that reward theoretical mastery more than applied competence. Uganda’s own TVET policy acknowledges that earlier models of skills development did not adequately address this gap (MoES, 2019).

A second challenge is inequality in access to quality skills development. Youth from rural areas, low-income households, young women, and learners with disabilities often face financial, geographic, and institutional barriers that reduce participation and completion. Inclusive growth is therefore undermined when skills systems fail to reach those who would benefit most from them (NPA, 2025; MGLSD, 2025).

A third challenge is the continued social hierarchy between academic and vocational pathways. Although policy reforms increasingly emphasize competencies and multiple pathways, many families and institutions still view vocational or technical routes as second best. This discourages learners from pursuing practical fields even where those fields may offer stronger prospects for livelihoods and local economic contribution (NCDC, 2020; MoES, 2019).

4. Why Youth Should Be Treated as Assets

Reframing youth as assets changes the focus of policy. It shifts attention from helping “vulnerable beneficiaries” toward building the capabilities of young people as workers, innovators, entrepreneurs, creators, and community leaders. This perspective is more aligned with Uganda’s demographic reality and more useful for long-term development planning (UBOS, 2025).

An asset-based approach also aligns with the intent of Uganda’s curriculum reform. The lower secondary curriculum aims to produce learners who can think critically, apply knowledge, create solutions, and function in real-world contexts. These are not the goals of a passive support model; they are the goals of a system that expects young people to contribute meaningfully to society and the economy (NCDC, 2020).

In addition, treating youth as assets broadens the understanding of economic contribution. Young people contribute through farming, microenterprise, vocational trades, digital work, creative

industries, care work, and local innovation, not only through formal wage employment. Skills policy should therefore support diverse pathways into productivity, including formal, non-formal, and informal learning systems (MoES, 2019; TVET Act, 2025).

Just as important is the cost of failing to make this shift. If Uganda does not successfully transition to an asset-based model, the consequences will be significant. Economically, the country risks lower productivity, slower structural transformation, and the continued waste of human capital at a time when youth should be driving growth. Socially, prolonged exclusion from meaningful opportunity can deepen frustration, dependency, risky migration, and disillusionment among young people. In that sense, inaction is not neutral; it carries real national costs.

Finally, an asset-based perspective strengthens inclusion. When young women, rural youth, poor learners, and youth with disabilities are excluded from quality skills development, Uganda loses talent, productivity, and social cohesion. As the National Planning Authority (2025) emphasizes, inclusion is therefore not only a social justice issue but also an economic one.

5. Policy Recommendations

5.1 Embed work-relevant skills across the education system

Uganda should treat skills development as a core function of education at all levels rather than as a separate track for a few learners. Competency-based learning, digital literacy, communication, teamwork, problem-solving, entrepreneurship, and practical application should be consistently integrated across the curriculum. This would build on the direction already established under the lower secondary curriculum reform (NCDC, 2020).

5.2 Strengthen flexible school-to-work pathways

Government should make progression routes between general education, TVET, apprenticeships, community-based learning, and higher education more visible and easier to navigate. The TVET Policy already supports multiple pathways and recognition of prior learning. These provisions should be operationalized through clear guidance, public awareness, and stronger articulation mechanisms between institutions (MoES, 2019).

5.3 Deepen employer and industry engagement

Skills development will be more relevant if employers, producer groups, local enterprises, and sector bodies are more actively involved in curriculum review, occupational standards, assessment, and workplace training. The TVET Act, 2025 provides a stronger basis for this through sectoral skills structures and regulatory mechanisms. Uganda should use this framework to strengthen alignment between training and labour demand (TVET Act, 2025).

5.4 Finance inclusion, not only enrolment

An inclusive skills strategy must address the actual costs that prevent participation. This includes bursaries, transport support, assistive devices, rural access measures, menstrual health support, and targeted support for disadvantaged learners. Without financing for participation and completion, policy commitments to inclusive growth will remain weak in practice (NPA, 2025; MGLSD, 2025).

5.5 Recognize informal and community-based learning

A large share of skills acquisition in Uganda occurs outside formal institutions through apprenticeships, self-employment, family enterprises, and community practice. Uganda should accelerate systems for recognition of prior learning and certification of competencies obtained outside school. This would especially help out-of-school youth and informal workers gain visibility and progression opportunities within the formal skills system (MoES, 2019; TVET Act, 2025).

5.6 Involve youth in designing skills policy

If youth are to be treated as assets, they must also be engaged as policy actors. Their views should be incorporated into curriculum feedback, district planning, TVET consultations, and programme design. Youth participation improves relevance and accountability and helps ensure that reforms reflect lived realities rather than top-down assumptions (UBOS, 2025).

6. Implementation Considerations

A strong policy paper should not only state what should be done but also reflect on how reform can be delivered in practice.

One major challenge will be financing. Expanding inclusion bursaries, supporting recognition of prior learning, and operationalizing the Skills Development Fund will require sustained resources. Uganda should therefore explore blended financing approaches, including stronger public-private partnerships, targeted employer contributions in high-growth sectors, and better alignment of donor-supported youth programmes with national systems rather than parallel projects.

A second challenge is the deep-rooted social preference for academic pathways over technical and vocational ones. This is not simply a policy issue; it is also cultural. Government and partners should invest in a sustained public communication effort that showcases successful young people in TVET, agribusiness, construction, digital work, and the creative economy. The country needs visible “skills champions” who help change public attitudes and elevate the status of practical careers.

A third challenge is ensuring meaningful employer engagement rather than symbolic representation. Employer participation should be tied to concrete roles in curriculum review, apprenticeship placement, workplace assessment, and sector forecasting. Uganda could begin with a few high-potential sectors such as agribusiness, tourism, construction, and digital services, where successful collaboration models could then be scaled.

A fourth challenge is implementation inequality across regions. In practice, Schools and training centres do not begin from the same level of infrastructure, staffing, resourcing or local economic opportunity, meaning, reforms should be phased and adapted to local contexts, with stronger support directed to underserved rural areas and disadvantaged districts.

7. Conclusion

Uganda has already taken meaningful steps toward reforming education and skills development. The competency-based curriculum, the TVET Policy, and the TVET Act, 2025 all signal recognition that the country needs a more practical, flexible, and labour-responsive education system. What remains is to make these reforms work together under a clearer policy philosophy: young people should be treated not as passive beneficiaries of support, but as assets whose capacities are central to national transformation (NCDC, 2020; MoES, 2019; TVET Act, 2025).

A skills agenda built on this principle would support inclusive growth more effectively. It would connect learning to livelihoods, reduce exclusion, recognize diverse talents, and better position Uganda to benefit from its youthful population. In this sense, rethinking skills development is not just an education reform issue; it is a national development imperative. It is time to stop managing youth as a problem to be solved and start investing in them as the nation's most valuable asset for building a prosperous and inclusive Uganda.

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