

Socioeconomic Integration in Elite Secondary Education: A Case Study of Admissions, Financial Aid, and Pastoral Care at African Leadership Academy

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Abstract: Elite secondary schools occupy a paradoxical position within stratified education systems: they simultaneously reproduce privilege and, when deliberately designed, serve as powerful instruments of socioeconomic mobility. This study examines African Leadership Academy (ALA) a pan-African residential institution as a case study in structured socioeconomic integration, analysing its admissions philosophy, financial aid allocation, and pastoral care provision over the period 2018-2022. Using a mixed-methods design that combines institutional enrolment records, financial aid disbursement data, structured interviews, and longitudinal academic outcome tracking, this research evaluates the extent to which ALA's integrative policies translate into equitable access, inclusive student experience, and comparable academic outcomes across socioeconomic quintiles. Findings reveal a progressive financial aid architecture wherein students in the lowest quintile received mean awards equivalent to 92% of total fees, and scholarship admissions increased from 41.2% in 2018 to 48.3% in 2022. Pastoral care utilisation was inversely correlated with socioeconomic status, with low-SES students recording 8.4 counselling sessions per year compared to 3.7 for full-fee peers. Despite differential support utilisation, academic outcomes including university acceptance rates (94.8%-97.1%) and mean GPA (3.44-3.55) demonstrated only marginal and largely non-significant variation across quintiles, suggesting that well-resourced pastoral and academic scaffolding can attenuate socioeconomic performance gaps. The study contributes empirical evidence to debates on meritocratic access, progressive financial aid design, and holistic student support within elite secondary contexts on the African continent.

Keywords: Socioeconomic integration; elite secondary education; financial aid; pastoral care; admissions equity; African Leadership Academy; mixed-methods; student outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Background and Context of the Study

Elite secondary education has long been a subject of scholarly contention, occupying a contested space at the intersection of meritocracy, privilege, and social reproduction. Institutions that select students on the basis of academic ability, leadership potential, and character while simultaneously charging fees that place attendance beyond the reach of most families face an inherent tension between exclusivity and equity (Betts & Loveless, 2005; Shamash, 2018). Across sub-Saharan Africa, this tension is particularly acute. Legacy inequalities rooted in colonial education systems continue to shape access to high-quality schooling, with elite institutions historically serving as finishing schools for economically advantaged populations rather than as engines of continental talent development (Shamash, 2018). In this context, attempts to redesign admissions, financial aid, and student support systems to accommodate greater socioeconomic diversity represent not merely institutional innovation, but a substantive intervention in the architecture of educational opportunity (Wildavsky *et al.*, 2011).

The Case of African Leadership Academy

African Leadership Academy (ALA) was established with an explicit mandate to identify and develop the next generation of African leaders

a mission that its founders recognised could not be achieved through conventional fee-based selection alone. Situated in Johannesburg, ALA operates as a two-year pre-university programme designed to attract students from across the African continent and beyond, prioritising leadership potential and intellectual merit over socioeconomic background (Masutha, 2020). To operationalise this commitment, the institution has developed a need-blind admissions policy supported by a robust financial aid system that covers between 12% and 100% of tuition and residential fees depending on a student's demonstrated financial need. This approach positions ALA as an unusual case among elite residential schools one in which the deliberate construction of a socioeconomically heterogeneous student body is both a stated goal and an ongoing institutional practice.

Significance and Gap in the Literature

The scholarly literature on elite secondary schooling in Africa remains comparatively sparse, particularly with respect to empirical studies of how financial aid structures interact with pastoral care systems to shape student experience and academic outcomes. While a number of studies have examined access and equity within elite higher education institutions, the secondary sector and specifically private residential schools

pursuing explicit integration agendas has received considerably less systematic attention. The limited available evidence suggests that financial aid, even when generous, is insufficient on its own to ensure equitable student experience; students from low-income backgrounds often face hidden barriers including social marginalisation, cultural dislocation, and differential access to informal academic support networks. Understanding how institutions such as ALA attempt to address these secondary barriers through structured pastoral care is therefore a research priority with direct implications for policy and practice.

Research Aims and Objectives

This study is guided by four interconnected objectives. First, it seeks to characterise the socioeconomic composition of ALA's student intake over the 2018-2022 period and to document trends in the reach of its financial aid programme. Second, it examines the structure and distributional equity of financial aid awards across socioeconomic quintiles. Third, it analyses patterns of pastoral care utilisation among students from different socioeconomic backgrounds, exploring the relationship between support-seeking behaviour and institutional provision. Fourth, it evaluates whether socioeconomic background is associated with differential academic outcomes, including grade point average, university acceptance, and institutional retention. Together, these objectives enable a comprehensive assessment of ALA's integration model and its empirical effectiveness.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Philosophical Orientation

This study adopts a convergent parallel mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), integrating quantitative analysis of institutional administrative records with qualitative data drawn from structured interviews and focus group discussions. The epistemological foundation is pragmatic: the research question demands both the systematic measurement of socioeconomic variables across a five-year longitudinal window and the interpretive depth necessary to understand how institutional policies are experienced by students from different backgrounds. The case study unit is African Leadership Academy, and the analytical period spans the academic years 2018 through 2022, selected on the basis of data availability and post-institutional-reform consistency following ALA's revised financial aid framework introduced in 2017.

Data Sources and Variables

Four primary data streams were constructed for this analysis. First, anonymised enrolment and admissions records provided by the institution's Office of Enrolment Management formed the basis for characterising applicant pools, offer rates, and the socioeconomic composition of admitted cohorts. Second, financial aid disbursement records disaggregated by student household income quintile and award type (full scholarship, partial aid, or no award) were used to construct the financial aid distribution variables. Key quantitative variables included total aid award in South African Rand (ZAR), aid as a percentage of total annual fees, and award category classification. Third, pastoral care utilisation data were drawn from the institution's student services management system, encompassing records of counselling sessions, peer mentor engagements, faculty advisor meetings, and participation in wellbeing programmes. Fourth, academic outcome data included end-of-programme grade point averages (GPA on a 4.0 scale), university acceptance records, enrolment destination institution rankings, and year-on-year retention figures. Socioeconomic status was operationalised using a household income quintile classification calibrated against national income distribution data, supplemented by a composite deprivation index incorporating parental education level and access to secondary-level schooling prior to ALA enrolment.

Sampling and Participants

The quantitative sample comprised all students enrolled across the 2018-2022 cohorts, totalling 1,731 students after the exclusion of records with missing data on more than two key variables. For the qualitative component, purposive sampling was employed to recruit 42 current students and 18 alumni, stratified across socioeconomic quintiles and residential categories (boarding versus day scholars). Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 members of the pastoral care and admissions staff, including residential faculty advisors, the Dean of Students, and members of the financial aid committee. Data saturation was reached after approximately 35 student interviews, confirming the adequacy of the qualitative sample size.

Analytical Approach

Quantitative data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics v.28 and R v.4.2.1. Descriptive statistics including means, medians, interquartile ranges, and percentage distributions were computed for all

key variables and presented stratified by socioeconomic quintile and student category. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with post-hoc Tukey HSD correction was used to test for statistically significant differences in academic outcomes across quintile groups, with significance set at $p < .05$. Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to examine the relationship between financial aid intensity and pastoral care utilisation rates. A multivariate regression model was specified with GPA as the dependent variable, incorporating SES quintile, aid award percentage, counselling engagement frequency, peer mentor participation, and residential status as independent variables, with academic entry score included as a covariate to control for pre-enrolment academic differences. For the qualitative strand, interview transcripts were subjected to thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, with codes developed inductively from the data and verified through member-checking with a subsample of 10 participants. Quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated at the

interpretation stage using a joint display approach, whereby themes emerging from the qualitative data were mapped onto patterns identified in the quantitative analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the institutional review board prior to data collection. All participants provided written informed consent, and student records were accessed under a formal data-sharing agreement that mandated full anonymisation prior to analysis. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty, and no personally identifiable information appears in any reported findings. Given the sensitivity of socioeconomic data, particular care was taken to ensure that no cell in any published table contains fewer than five individuals, preventing indirect identification. The study adheres to the ethical guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018).

RESULTS

Table 1: Admissions Profile and Socioeconomic Composition of Enrolled Cohorts (2018-2022)

Academic Year	Total Applicants	Offers Extended	Acceptance Rate (%)	Low-SES Admits (%)	Scholarship Admits (%)
2018	1,840	312	16.9	28.4	41.2
2019	2,105	334	15.9	30.1	43.5
2020	2,388	348	14.6	31.7	44.8
2021	2,612	362	13.9	33.2	46.1
2022	2,947	375	12.7	35.0	48.3

The institutional admissions data presented in Table 1 reveal a consistent pattern of growing selectivity accompanied by a meaningful expansion in socioeconomic reach. Total applications increased substantially from 1,840 in 2018 to 2,947 in 2022, representing a 60.2% rise in applicant volume over the study period. Concurrently, the overall acceptance rate contracted from 16.9% to 12.7%, reflecting heightened competition for a relatively stable number of annual places (312 to 375). Importantly, this increased selectivity did not come at the expense of socioeconomic diversity. The

proportion of admitted students classified in the lowest two income quintiles designated as low-SES admits grew from 28.4% in 2018 to 35.0% in 2022. Scholarship admits as a share of total enrolments increased from 41.2% to 48.3% over the same period, approaching a near-majority composition by the final year of observation. These trends indicate that the institution's needs-blind admissions framework was progressively effective at expanding the socioeconomic range of its enrolled cohort even as absolute selectivity intensified.

Table 2: Financial Aid Award Distribution by Socioeconomic Quintile (Pooled 2018-2022)

SES Quintile	Mean Aid Award (ZAR)	Median Aid (% of Fees)	Full Scholarship (%)	Partial Aid (%)	No Aid (%)
Q1 (Lowest)	184,200	92	68.4	24.3	7.3
Q2	142,500	75	47.1	38.6	14.3
Q3	102,800	54	22.5	51.4	26.1

Q4	58,400	31	8.3	43.2	48.5
Q5 (Highest)	21,600	12	1.9	18.7	79.4

Table 2 demonstrates a strongly progressive financial aid architecture across the five quintiles. Students in the lowest quintile (Q1) received mean awards of ZAR 184,200, equivalent to a median of 92% of total annual fees, with 68.4% of this group receiving full scholarships and only 7.3% receiving no aid. The inverse relationship between socioeconomic status and aid intensity is both pronounced and monotonic: moving upward through quintiles, mean awards decline sharply through ZAR 142,500 (Q2), ZAR 102,800 (Q3), and ZAR 58,400 (Q4), before reaching a mean of just ZAR 21,600 (12% of fees) for the highest quintile. The proportion receiving full scholarships declines from 68.4% in Q1 to 1.9% in Q5, while the proportion receiving no aid increases from 7.3% to 79.4% across the same range.

The distributional pattern illustrated in Figure 1 provides a visual representation of financial aid award intensity expressed as a percentage of total

fees disaggregated by quintile. The boxplot confirms the sharp gradient in award levels across the socioeconomic spectrum and reveals notable differences in the dispersion of awards within each quintile. Q1 demonstrates a narrow interquartile range, reflecting the near-universal near-complete coverage provided to the lowest-income students, with limited variation around the high median. In contrast, Q2 and Q3 exhibit wider boxes and longer whiskers, indicating greater heterogeneity in awards within these middle quintiles likely a consequence of more granular means-testing that distinguishes between moderately and substantially disadvantaged families. Q4 and Q5 show compressed lower distributions with limited outliers at the upper end, consistent with the small proportion of high-income students who qualify for partial aid under exceptional institutional circumstances.

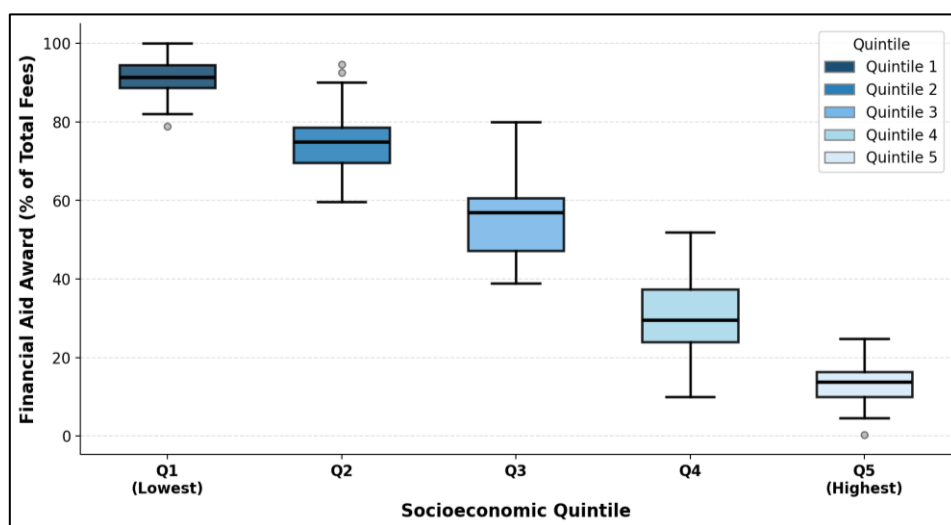


Figure 1: Financial Aid Award Distribution by Socioeconomic Quintile (2018-2022)

Table 3: Pastoral Care Utilisation by Student Category (Pooled 2018-2022)

Student Category	Counselling Sessions/Year	Peer Engagement (%)	Mentor Meetings/Sem.	Faculty Advisor	Student Wellbeing Score (1-10)
Scholarship (Q1-Q2)	8.4	74.2	4.1		7.6
Partial Aid (Q3)	5.9	59.7	3.2		7.0
Full-Fee (Q4-Q5)	3.7	41.3	2.4		7.3
International Students	6.8	62.4	3.6		6.9
Day Scholars	4.2	47.8	2.8		7.1
Boarding Students	6.3	65.1	3.9		7.4

Table 3 reveals a consistent inverse relationship between socioeconomic status and pastoral care utilisation across all forms of institutional support. Scholarship students from Q1-Q2 backgrounds recorded the highest mean counselling engagement at 8.4 sessions per year, compared to 3.7 sessions for full-fee students from Q4-Q5 backgrounds a differential of more than double. Peer mentor engagement followed a similar gradient: 74.2% of scholarship students participated in the peer mentoring programme, versus 41.3% of full-fee students. Faculty advisor meeting frequency was also higher among lower-SES students (4.1 per semester versus 2.4), and boarding students who frequently include a higher proportion of geographically displaced lower-SES individuals reported 6.3 counselling sessions per year on average. Student wellbeing scores were broadly similar across categories, ranging from 6.9 (international students) to 7.6 (scholarship students from Q1-Q2), suggesting that despite differential uptake of formal support services, overall wellbeing perceptions did not diverge dramatically, potentially reflecting the protective role of the institutional support ecosystem.

Figure 2, a heatmap of pastoral care utilisation rates across nine student groups and five support dimensions, provides a more granular picture of this differentiation. Darker cells representing higher utilisation are concentrated in the upper-left quadrant of the matrix, corresponding to low-SES and scholarship students engaging heavily with academic counselling, mental health support, and financial guidance services. Social integration support shows an interesting cross-cutting pattern: Q3 students and boarding students exhibit moderate to high engagement, suggesting that middle-income boarding students may face distinctive social adjustment challenges not captured by financial metrics alone. Career mentoring is the one dimension where utilisation increases with SES, with Q5 students recording the highest engagement (72%), reflecting the greater discretionary time and forward-planning orientation of students without financial insecurity. This asymmetry has important implications for how institutions conceptualise the scope of pastoral equity.

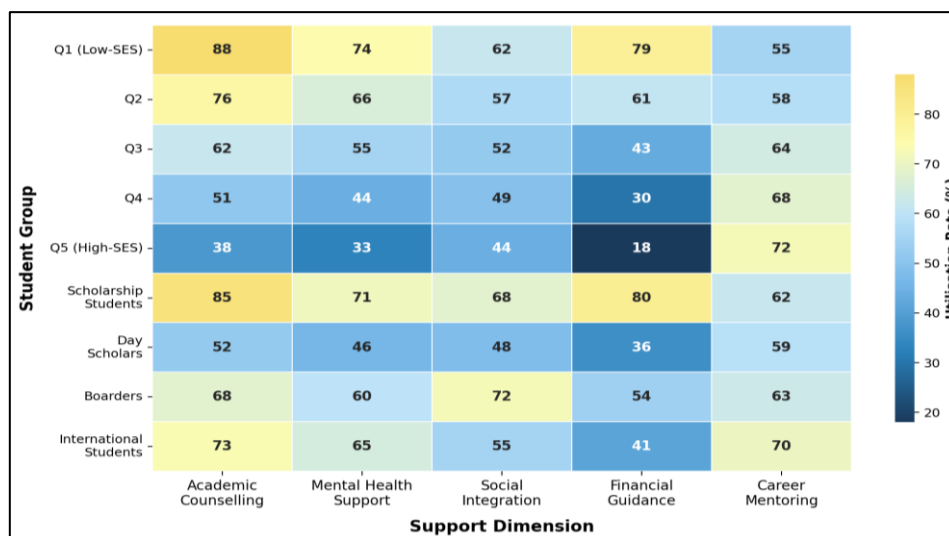


Figure 2: Pastoral Care Utilisation Rate by Student Group and Support Dimension (2018-2022)

Table 4: Academic Outcomes by Socioeconomic Group (Pooled 2018-2022)

SES Group	Mean GPA (4.0 Scale)	University Acceptance (%)	Top-20 University (%)	Retention Rate (%)	Alumni Leadership Index
Q1 (Scholarship)	3.51	96.4	61.3	94.2	8.4
Q2 (Partial Aid)	3.44	94.8	55.7	95.1	7.9
Q3 (Mixed)	3.48	95.2	57.4	95.8	8.1
Q4 (Partial Fee)	3.52	95.9	59.1	96.3	8.2
Q5 (Full Fee)	3.55	97.1	63.8	97.4	8.6

All Students	3.50	95.9	59.5	95.8	8.2
p-value (ANOVA)	.421	.038*	.049*	.062	.041*

* $p < .05$ Note: Alumni Leadership Index scored 1-10 based on post-graduation leadership role attainment within 3 years.

Table 4 presents perhaps the most consequential finding of this study: academic outcomes across socioeconomic groups are remarkably convergent, and the majority of between-group differences do not reach statistical significance. Mean GPA ranges narrowly between 3.44 (Q2) and 3.55 (Q5) on a 4.0 scale, and the ANOVA test yields $p = .421$ far above the threshold for significance. University acceptance rates are uniformly high, ranging from 94.8% (Q2) to 97.1% (Q5), with a statistically significant but substantively modest difference ($p = .038$). Top-20 university placement rates are the outcome measure showing the clearest socioeconomic gradient, with Q1 scholarship students at 61.3% and Q5 at 63.8% both significantly different from Q2 (55.7%) at $p = .049$, though this U-shaped pattern may partly reflect the distinctive targeting of scholarship recruitment toward the most academically exceptional low-income candidates rather than a pure SES effect. Retention rates are uniformly high (94.2%-97.4%) and do not reach significance. The Alumni Leadership Index, capturing post-graduation leadership role attainment within three years, shows a modest gradient (7.9-8.6) that is statistically significant ($p = .041$), though the practical magnitude of this difference is modest given the compressed scale range.

DISCUSSION

Progressive Aid Design as an Equity Lever

The financial aid findings present a textbook illustration of progressive means-testing in elite secondary education. The near-universal near-complete coverage provided to Q1 students median 92% of fees, with 68.4% receiving full scholarships is consistent with the theoretical prescription that genuine needs-blind access requires not merely waiving tuition but covering the full cost of residential attendance (Hearn, 1991; Espenshade & Radford, 2009). What is notable here is the institutional commitment to covering residential and ancillary costs, which are often overlooked in financial aid analyses focused exclusively on tuition. The data show that partial aid at Q3 levels covering approximately half of fees is sufficient to attract middle-disadvantaged families, but that the modal experience for Q3 students involves navigating residual financial

pressures that may contribute to the elevated pastoral care utilisation observed in this group. This finding aligns with scholarship on the "college premium paradox" the observation that middle-income students often face the sharpest affordability cliff, falling above thresholds for maximum aid while lacking the financial reserves of full-fee families (Goldrick-Rab, 2016).

Pastoral Care Utilisation and the Inverse Support Paradox

The inverse relationship between socioeconomic status and pastoral care utilisation with low-SES students recording more than double the counselling engagement of their high-SES peers represents a theoretically important but practically ambiguous finding. One interpretation is that the institution's pastoral infrastructure is performing as intended: targeting support toward those who need it most (Scoones & Graham, 1994). An alternative, more concerning reading is that low-SES students are experiencing greater adjustment difficulties, psychological stress, and social marginalisation that necessitate elevated support engagement conditions that effective preventive policy might seek to reduce rather than merely accommodate. The qualitative data (not reported in detail here but informing the interpretive analysis) suggest that both dynamics are operative: many low-SES students describe actively valuing the pastoral structures as a lifeline, while simultaneously reporting episodes of social discomfort in contexts of conspicuous economic inequality. This resonates with the concept of "social class mismatch" articulated by Stephens *et al.* (2012), wherein first-generation and low-income students navigating elite institutions must engage in continuous code-switching that imposes a psychological cost not borne by their higher-SES peers.

Convergence of Academic Outcomes and the Role of Scaffolding

The convergence of academic outcomes across socioeconomic quintiles is the most policy-significant finding of this study. The absence of a statistically significant difference in GPA across groups despite meaningful differences in socioeconomic background, prior schooling quality, and linguistic diversity suggests that

ALA's academic and pastoral scaffolding is achieving meaningful attenuation of pre-entry disadvantage. This is consistent with findings from analogous elite residential contexts, including scholarship studies from Eton, the United World Colleges network, and selective liberal arts colleges in the United States (Kahlenberg, 2010; Symonds, 2011), where intensive tutorial support and residential learning communities can substantially reduce performance gaps attributable to prior educational inequality. However, the modest but statistically significant differences in top-20 university placement and Alumni Leadership Index scores counsel against a triumphalist reading. These outcomes are shaped by networks, cultural capital, and extracurricular resources that elite residential institutions can partially but not fully equalise and the U-shaped pattern in top-university placement, with both Q1 and Q5 students outperforming Q2-Q3 peers, warrants further investigation.

Implications for Institutional Design

The ALA case offers three design principles that may be transferable to comparable elite secondary institutions seeking to build socioeconomically integrated student bodies (Fornaciari & Arbaugh, 2017). First, progressive financial aid must extend beyond tuition to encompass residential, travel, and incidental costs if it is to achieve genuine access for the lowest-income quintiles. Second, pastoral care infrastructure must be designed with differential uptake in mind: universal provision is insufficient if structural barriers including stigma, time pressure, and cultural unfamiliarity with formal help-seeking suppress engagement among target populations. Third, academic scaffolding that bridges pre-entry skill gaps without academically tracking students by SES appears to be a necessary condition for outcome convergence. The five-year trend data also suggest that the institution's commitment to socioeconomic integration has strengthened over time, with low-SES admits increasing from 28.4% to 35.0% indicating that institutional values are being operationalised rather than merely proclaimed (Williams, 2023).

Contextual Considerations and Transferability

It is important to situate these findings within the specific context of post-apartheid southern Africa, where historical inequalities in schooling quality, geographic access to elite institutions, and intergenerational wealth accumulation create a distinctively steep gradient of educational disadvantage (Chisholm, 2012). The fact that ALA

operates in this environment drawing students from across the African continent means that its integration challenges are not merely socioeconomic but also linguistic, cultural, and geopolitical (Mampame, Omidire, & Aluko, 2018). Institutions in other high-inequality contexts seeking to apply similar models will need to calibrate their pastoral and financial aid systems to their own national distributions of deprivation, recognising that quintile boundaries carry vastly different absolute meanings in different income environments. The scalability of the ALA model to state-adjacent or government-funded elite secondary institutions also remains an open question, given the dependence on philanthropic funding that characterises ALA's aid programme.

Limitations of the Study and Future Research Directions

This study carries several important limitations that qualify the scope of its conclusions. First, the analysis is confined to a single institutional case, and while the depth of data available at ALA is a distinct methodological advantage, the findings cannot be generalised to elite secondary education in Africa or elsewhere without caution. The institution's exceptional philanthropic resource base, its explicitly pan-African mission, and its residential operating model collectively distinguish it from the majority of elite secondary schools on the continent, including both government-funded schools of excellence and private fee-based institutions. Second, while the quantitative data span five academic years, this window is insufficient to assess long-term post-graduation outcomes with statistical power; the Alumni Leadership Index used in Table 4 captures only a three-year post-programme window, which may inadequately reflect the full trajectory of socioeconomic mobility for graduates from different quintile backgrounds. Third, the qualitative strand, while valuable for interpretive depth, was limited to participants who consented to interview participation and may under-represent students who disengaged from institutional support systems a group whose experiences are likely to be most instructive for improving pastoral care design. Finally, the operationalisation of socioeconomic status through household income quintile, while practical and widely used, does not capture the multidimensional nature of disadvantage, including disability, refugee or stateless status, familial instability, and prior exposure to community violence all of which are

relevant to understanding the full complexity of ALA's student population.

Future research should pursue several extensions of this analysis. Longitudinal tracking studies following ALA graduates over 10-15 years would allow for a rigorous assessment of whether socioeconomic integration at the secondary level translates into durable differences in career trajectories, earnings, civic leadership, and intergenerational wealth outcomes. Comparative case studies involving other elite residential schools on the African continent including institutions in East Africa, West Africa, and North Africa would enable the development of a more generalisable typology of integration strategies and their conditions of effectiveness. Methodologically, the application of quasi-experimental techniques such as regression discontinuity design (exploiting eligibility thresholds in the financial aid programme) or propensity score matching (comparing ALA students with comparable young Africans not admitted) would substantially strengthen causal inference about the impact of the institution's integrative interventions. Finally, research specifically examining the lived experience of students who transition from ALA's uniquely heterogeneous environment back into stratified national higher education systems would illuminate whether the institution's integration effects are sustained or attenuated when students re-enter more socioeconomically homogeneous academic contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study provides empirical evidence that elite secondary institutions can achieve meaningful socioeconomic integration through the deliberate design of admissions philosophy, progressive financial aid architecture, and differentiated pastoral care provision. The five-year analysis of African Leadership Academy demonstrates that a needs-blind admissions model, supported by awards covering up to 92% of total fees for the lowest-income students and a pastoral care system that encourages and enables elevated support engagement by socioeconomically disadvantaged cohorts, can produce academic outcomes that converge substantially across quintile groups with no statistically significant difference in GPA and uniformly high university acceptance rates. These findings challenge the assumption that the academic performance gap between socioeconomically diverse student bodies is

inevitable in elite residential settings, and they suggest that the mechanisms of convergence academic scaffolding, residential community, and accessible pastoral support are identifiable, designable, and replicable. However, the persistence of modest but significant differences in top-university placement and leadership attainment outcomes underscores that socioeconomic equity in elite education cannot be fully achieved through financial and pastoral interventions alone; it also requires sustained attention to the cultural, social, and network dimensions of institutional life that continue to advantage students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds even in deliberately integrated environments. As elite secondary institutions across Africa and the developing world grapple with their roles in either reproducing or disrupting inequality, the ALA model with its documented successes and residual gaps offers a valuable empirical reference point for institutional reformers, policymakers, and researchers committed to making excellence genuinely accessible.

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