

Determining the impact of BU financial supports/bursaries to students

This work in progress is presented by Dr Marcellus Mbah, the lead researcher



Objective

Institutional financial supports to students who may be from low income households or experiencing some financial hardship could be said to possess the propensity to enable them to participate in higher education on a somewhat equal basis like their affluent peers (McCaig et al., 2016). The question as to whether these bursaries are serving the intended purpose of widening opportunities for higher education access, retention, wellbeing and success needs a close examination.

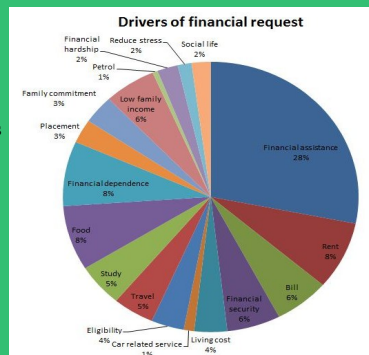
Methodology

- An instrumental case study was adopted for the project. This is because this type of approach has been shown to help understanding of a broader subject (Yin, 2013) such as the impact of institutional financial support on students accessing and succeeding in Higher Education.
- The different bursary types investigated include Maintenance Bursary, Hardship Fund and Care Leavers Bursary.
- In order to deliver a comprehensive data for a reliable outcome, a mixed methods approach was used comprising of qualitative and quantitative methods. A reviewed commission by OFFA asserts that institutions that have used a mixed methods approach to ascertain the impact of their financial support had a rich source of information that can enable a better understanding (Nursaw Associates, 2015).
- In the case of the project, instruments of the mixed methods approach consist of an online Bristol Survey (BOS) and in-depth semi-structured interviews (Stake, 1994; Yin, 2013) as well as focus groups.
- The survey was adapted from a common set of measures and survey tool for universities and colleges to use when collecting data and reporting on the impact of financial supports on students' success and wellbeing. This common tool which is currently in use by five universities was prepared by a project commissioned by OFFA in June 2015.
- The cohorts of students recruited for the study are from the 2012/13, 2013/14, 2014/2015 and 2015/2016 academic years, each student beneficiary of a university bursary was invited to complete the electronic survey and more than 600 responded.

Analysis and preliminary findings

The survey captured a broad range of data including open ended text responses which are rich in content. The in-depth qualitative data embedded in the survey is currently being analysed thematically (Boyatzis, 1998) and the following emerging findings which form part of this snapshot progress report can be advanced.

Out of the several responses on reasons for requesting financial support, the most recurrent theme was the need for financial assistance. However, many of the students went on to identify more specific motives for requesting financial assistance such as low family income and the need to afford food, rents or pay bills as illustrated:



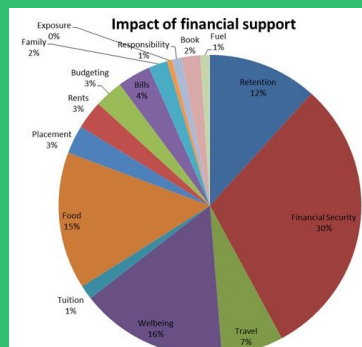
Some quotations from participants illustrating some of the reasons for seeking financial assistance

- "My families income is very low and if I needed help with financing, there was no way they could help unless it would have resulted in financial difficulties for them"*
- "My family is just myself and my mum. I don't want to always ask her for money I want to be independent but university is very expensive with bills, food and petrol"*
- "Going to university was a big decision and I was very worried about my financial situation. My girlfriend showed me the support available so it became a key factor in going to uni"*
- "I applied for the bursary as I wanted to be able to completely focus on my studies "*

Whilst participants had different motives for requesting financial support, it was useful to investigate the actual impact financial support or bursary had on their studies or university life.

In this light and when asked to state how the financial support or bursary helped them, the most recurrent them was **financial security** as evident.

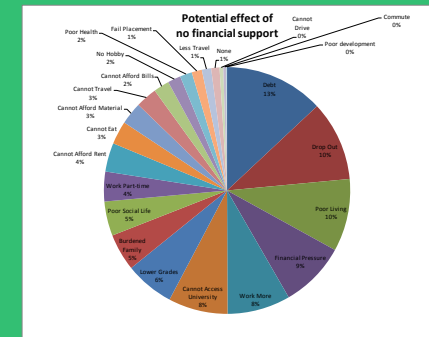
According to several of the respondents, financial aid from the university enabled them to be financially secured. That is, they could focus on their studies without the worry and stress that comes with inability to pay rents or bills.



Excerpts from students' responses illustrating some of the impacts of receiving financial supports:

- Access**
"Without this bursary I would not have been able to attend university"
- Financial security:**
"It was very helpful in terms that I knew I will have food in my fridge every month to feed my child and myself. Gave me a sense of security"
"Helped to reduce stress caused by over working or worrying about money issues"
- Retention**
"I would probably have had to leave uni and consider full time work to survive. I really appreciate the bursary and scholarship I received, it's the only reason I'm able to complete the year. Thank you"
"Allowed me to concentrate on my education and degree, provided ease and reassurance towards my finances. I genuinely do not know how i would of coped had the fund not have been available. I can not express my gratitude enough"
- Success**
"It meant I could spend more time studying instead of working, which has helped me achieve a first overall last semester"
"It took a massive burden away from me and allowed me to put everything I could into my studies and getting the best possible grades for myself"
- Wellbeing:**
"It allowed me to participate in all aspects of university life, particularly the sporting side"
"Helped me make a good group of friends as I could afford to socialise in freshers week and onward"

Participants perception of the effect of not receiving financial support was also evident



A majority of the participants suggested that if they had not received financial support, they would have incurred debt and this was followed closely by a significant number who asserted they would have dropped out as illustrated.

The most recurrent findings revealed here have commonalities. For instance, it can be maintained that the need for financial assistance as a motivating factor for students requesting support is directly related to having financial security if provided with the relevant support. Furthermore, students' lack of financial security could lead to them incurring debts which could have adverse repercussions on their studies.