African Journal for the Psychological Studies of Social Issues

EDITORIAL ADVISORY BOARD

ASSESSING THE ROLE OF THE NIGERIAN EDUCATION LOAN FUND (NELFUND) IN PROMOTING FINANCIAL INCLUSION AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN NIGERIA

Oyeteju Odufuwa[1*], Opeyemi Ajibola[2], Inioluwa Okebiorun[1]

[1]Department of Economics, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria
[2]Department of English, National Open University of Nigeria, Abuja
***Corresponding author**: toluwaniteju04@yahoo.com*

ABSTRACT

The cost of living, particularly tuition fees at Nigerian public universities, has risen disproportionately relative to wages in recent years, increasing the risk of school dropouts. NELFUND was introduced to break financial barriers in higher education and reduce dropout rates. This pilot study aims to examine the structure and impact of NELFUND on students. Using an online survey, six universities, with a representative university from each geopolitical zone were surveyed to collect data on students' socio-demographic characteristics, the influence of the loan on academic performance, its role in promoting financial inclusion, and beneficiaries' awareness and understanding of the loan repayment plan. The variables were analysed using descriptive statistics. The results of the study revealed that the loan has positively improved respondents' academic focus and reduced financial stress. It was discovered that disbursements take too long, and there is a lack of formal communication regarding repayment terms. Despite these issues, over 90% of respondents expressed willingness to recommend the loan to peers, and more than 70% considered the repayment plan fair and manageable. Therefore, the study recommends that the loan be disbursed early to maximise its impact and achieve the loan's purposes.

***Keywords**: NELFUND, Higher Education Financing, Inclusive Education in Nigeria*

INTRODUCTION

Higher education is a rich cultural and scientific asset that enables personal development and promotes economic, technological, and social change (UNESCO, 2023). Education is the bedrock of human capital and is critical in the promotion of economic growth and development (Oketch, 2016). In Nigeria, higher institutions of learning:, universities, polytechnics and colleges of education act as catalysts of knowledge-based development, social mobility and sustainable development (Lentjushenkova, 2021). With the world economy moving more towards knowledge-intensive sectors, nations such as Nigeria, which have a huge youth population, will easily absorb this population bubble with the aid of guided investments in tertiary education (UNESCO, 2023). Existing literature in development economics has provided evidence that the returns to education, both publicly and privately, are generally positive, meaning that investing in tertiary education yields higher benefits to both individuals and societies (Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2016; Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018). In addition, Nigeria is currently experiencing a youth bulge, as over 70 percent of its population is children and youths below age 35; it is vital to build their capacity through investments in their health, education, and training (UNPop, 2025). Hence, the need to prioritize access to education for its teeming youth population.

In recent times, there has been an upsurge in the enrolment rates into higher institutions of learning (Yusuf & Ibrahim, 2024). The problem of underfunding, worn-out campuses, overcrowded lecture halls, and a lack of staff in public institutions of tertiary learning is weighing heavily on the institutions. Hence, government-owned universities are unable to meet up with the current demand. This has led to the establishment of a number of private institutions to buffer the shortfall. Yet, some students, though interested, are unable to fund their higher education. Additionally, higher education has become more expensive with tuition fees (Edinoh, Ogunronbi, & Fom, 2023), hostel facilities, commuting, textbooks, and other miscellaneous fees becoming so exorbitant and have escalated beyond the reach of many households (Edinoh, Ogunronbi, & Fom, 2023; Ogunode & Ukozor, 2024). Consequently, economic hardship locks many students out or, in other cases, forces them to quit halfway due to financial deprivation (Zulfikar, Christie, Pradana, & Putri, 2023).

Higher education attainment almost doubles the probability of entering paid employment (Somani, 2021). However, higher education is not equally accessible to everyone in Nigeria, and economic

limitations have become an overwhelming factor that interferes with enrollment and graduation (Muhammad & Olawale, 2024). Disproportionately impacted are students from low-income families, rural communities, and marginalized areas (Jacob, Solomon, & Jegede, 2020). The socio-economic differences are then translated into unequal academic achievement and future prospects. This is heightened by the lack of a strong institutionalised support system for the financially-insecure students. Although scholarships and bursaries exist, their reach is limited, and allocation is often plagued by inefficiencies and political interference (Abuselidze, 2022).

Higher education has expanded considerably over the years (Diris and Ooghe, 2018). As a result, funding for higher education has increased. The Nigerian Education Loan Fund (NELFUND) was introduced to provide financial support to students pursuing tertiary education in Nigeria. While the initiative is expected to reduce financial barriers and enhance access to education, little is known about how the loan structure and disbursement affect students' academic outcomes. Janjua (2011), Somani (2021), and Agbelusi (2023) have highlighted the significance of student loan schemes in promoting inclusive higher education, but contextual analysis in Nigeria remains sparse.

Given the immense importance of education as a tool of social mobility and economic progress, the cost of higher education has been increasing even as household earnings show no growth or even decline (Amie-Ogan & Osaat, 2016). Despite being highly subsidised, public universities have gradually shifted the finacial burden from universities to students and their families by increasing tuition fees, surcharges, and indirect charges (Igbinedion & Amos, 2021). Historically, the financing environment for Nigerian students has been fragmented (Ahmed, 2015). Though merit-based scholarships, state bursaries and private grants exist, they tend to be narrow in reach, inaccessible or not distributed on a systematic basis. Moreover, most of these programs are politically compromised, poorly transparent, and underfunded (Oyekan, Ayorinde, & Adenuga, 2023). Hence, many students have to resort to personal or family savings, informal loans, or even working part-time, which are often unsustainable and negatively affect academic progress. Furthermore, limited access to financial support contributes to high dropout rates, increased academic pressure, and underperformance among academically capable but economically disadvantaged students (Salihu & Jibrin, 2022). It is within this context that NELFUND aims to bridge existing gaps by providing a comprehensive, transparent, and sustainable framework for financing higher education.

In an effort to expand access to affordable, high-quality education and to address longstanding challenges within the educational system, the Government of Nigeria established the National Education Loan Fund (NELFUND) through the Students Loans (Access to Higher Education) Act, signed in 2023. It is a pioneering policy initiative instituted to make tertiary education more democratic. The Student Loan Initiative is a zero-interest loan designed to support Nigerian students in paying their institutional charges while also providing monthly upkeep to such students in any higher institution of their choice. According to NELFUND, as of April 2025, about ₦39 billion had been disbursed, with about 205,000 students benefiting from the Fund. Its main goals feature a low dropout rate, fair access to colleges, and the growth of a more inclusive, qualified labour force. The coordination of the Fund is carried out through the collective efforts of the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN), higher education institutions, and employers, and the pyramid of repayments is based on post-graduation earnings.

Education loans have played a major role in increasing access to higher education in different parts of the globe. The United States issues student loans through the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), the United Kingdom through the Student Loans Company (Lung-Moladovan, IoanMoldovan, & Alexandra, 2012), and Kenya through the Higher Education Loans Board (HELB). Ghana also runs the Students' Loan Trust Fund. These plans vary in structure, interest policy, eligibility criteria and repayment model. On the one hand, they have managed to expand access to higher education; on the other hand, there are problems pertaining to loan recovery and default rates, as well as affordability.

Given that the NELFUND is a recent development, this study adopts a quantitative study to explore the short-term impact of NELFUND on the students' education outcomes, identify some

of the challenges being experienced by the students in accessing the funds and examine the extent to which the fund has aided financial inclusion for the recipients. The study targeted federal universities that have completed a full session since the commencement of the students' loan. Questionnaires were administered to beneficiaries of the loan.

Understanding the structure and impact of NELFUND is essential to informing stakeholders about its effectiveness, identifying implementation gaps, and recommending improvements. Given the rising cost of education and the economic challenges that students face, this study is crucial to assess whether NELFUND achieves its intended goals, particularly in supporting academic performance.

About NELFUND (National Education Loan Fund)

The National Education Loan Fund (NELFUND) is an initiative of the Government of Nigeria, created in the framework of the Students Loans (Access to Higher Education) Act, 2024 (Loan Act, 2024). It is the first institutionalised attempt to provide interest-free loans to indigent students at public tertiary institutions in the country. NELFUND strives to improve equal access to tertiary education by providing grants to students who meet certain socio-economic and academic eligibility criteria (NELFUND, 2024). The Act stipulates that the Fund will be administered through a main digital system in partnership with the Central Bank of Nigeria, tertiary institutions, and employers (ITEdge News, 2025). It is expected that beneficiaries of the loan will commence repayment two years after the completion of the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), if they are employed. The repayment plan follows an income-based principle, with repayments made via salary deductions by an employer. A very interesting aspect of NELFUND is that its loans offer an interest-free mechanism, which is a significant departure from profit-oriented financial products.

Additionally, only students who gain admission into public tertiary institutions are eligible. The loan covers tuition fees and, in some cases, the living costs (NELFUND, 2024). The Fund, however, excludes students who have committed a past criminal offence involving fraud, drug abuse, or examination malpractice. Although NELFUND can help address long-standing equity concerns in higher education, its future will be compromised if there is a lack of transparency from the governing body, an ineffective digital interface, weak inter-agency relations, and recovery models that do not prioritise the well-being of students after graduation (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2023).
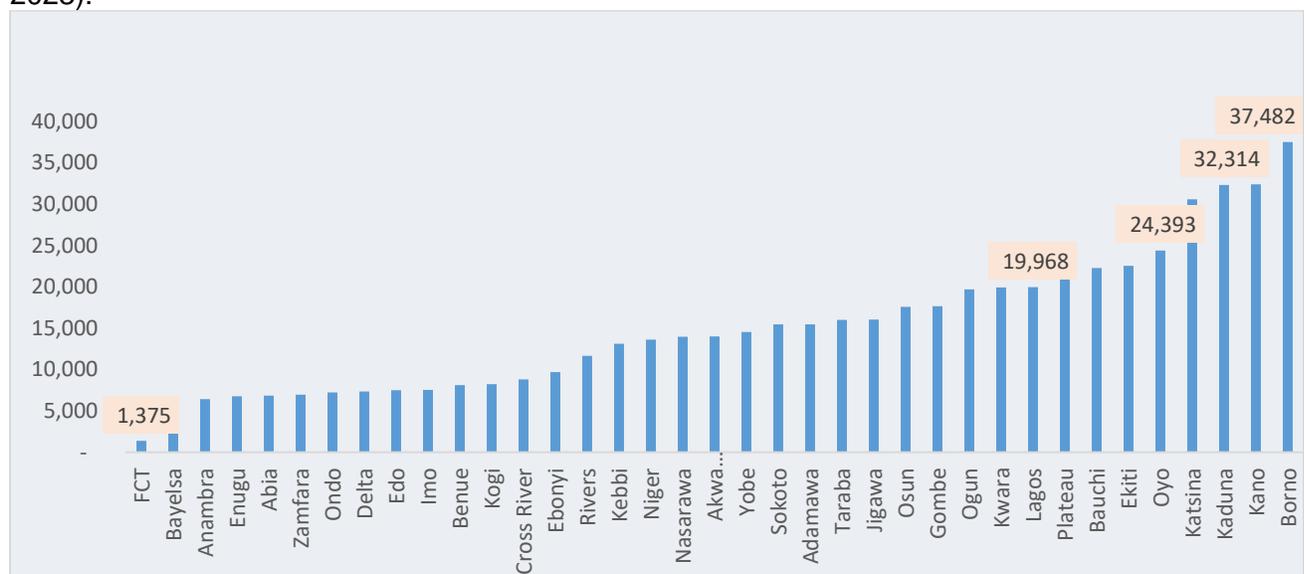

Figure 1: NELFUND beneficiaries by state
Source: NELFUND website (accessed May 05, 2025)

Students from all the states in Nigeria are beneficiaries of the loan. The total beneficiaries of NELFUND is 560,537 students. The Federal Capital Territory has the fewest beneficiaries of the loan, with only 1,375 students, while Borno State has the most, with 37,482 students. In conflict-prone states like Borno, high figures could result from targeted inclusion efforts, donor-backed campaigns, or high demand due to extreme financial need. Figure 1 shows that the northern states have more beneficiaries, with Kano, Kaduna, Katsina, and Bauchi states at the top of the list. This could be due to higher awareness and application rates in the northern states, and students from economically disadvantaged areas are more likely to apply. Oyo State, followed by Lagos, Ekiti and Ogun, have the highest number of beneficiaries in the southern states. This could be due to the presence of large student populations in public tertiary institutions in those states.

METHODOLOGY
Study Area and Scope
This research was conducted at six universities in Nigeria, located in different geopolitical zones. These selected universities are publicly run, including federal and state-owned universities, in which the National Education Loan Fund (NELFUND) has been utilised. The decision to disperse the study regionally is intended to account for geographic, institutional, and socio-economic variations, which can influence access to the initiative and perceptions of the NELFUND scheme.

Design of the Study
The study adopted a quantitative research design to examine the structure and impact of NELFUND among its beneficiaries. This design was chosen because it allows for the collection of measurable data suitable for statistical analysis, thereby facilitating the identification of patterns, relationships, and trends in the access to, utilisation of, and outcomes associated with the loan scheme. A structured questionnaire was used in data gathering, and it played the central role in the collection of data from beneficiaries of the student loan. The questionnaire took into account relevant variables that covered demographic features, awareness, and accessibility of the loan, experiences in the disbursement of the loan, academic results since the loan was disbursed, and perceptions on the effects of the loan. The quantitative method provided an opportunity to utilise the statistical instruments like descriptive and inferential analysis in order to evaluate the correlation between access to student loans and students' outcomes.

Study Population
The target population involves undergraduate students in the Nigerian public universities who have successfully accessed the NELFUND loan. Such students constituted the main source of information about the loan structure, its accessibility, its effects on the academic progress and perceptions about its repayment. The universities were selected in relation to the degree of participation in the NELFUND program and geographic representation.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria
To ensure the relevance and accuracy of the data, the following inclusion and exclusion criteria were employed in order to justify the relevance and adequacy of the information. The inclusion criteria include students who have already received at least one disbursement of the NELFUND program, individuals pursuing studies at the university currently in the 200-600 level, and those willing to participate voluntarily by providing written consent. On the other hand, the exclusion criteria include students at the 100-level, as they have not yet gone through the NELFUND application process or received disbursement, and postgraduate students, since NELFUND is only available for undergraduate students, and those who are not enrolled in the six selected universities, even if they are NELFUND beneficiaries. These criteria were used to limit the study sample to only the students who were directly affected by the research being conducted, and hence increase the internal validity of the results.

Sampling Technique

Zone	Institution Name	Applicants
North East	University of Maiduguri	31,478
North West	Bayero University Kano	22403
North Central	University of Jos	14,106
South West	University of Ibadan	9,846
South South	University of Uyo	9,052
South East	Ebonyi State University	5,821

The participants for the study were selected using a three-stage sampling method. The first stage used stratified sampling to partition Nigeria into its six geopolitical zones: North Central, North East, North West, South East, South South, and South West. This enabled national representativeness and accounted for regional differences in higher education infrastructure and access to funding. For the second stage, one public university in each zone was purposefully selected based on the highest number of NELFUND beneficiaries, using available administrative data on the NELFUND official portal. Such a purposive criterion was based on the fact that the sampled institutions were actively involved in the loan programme. The last stage involved a simple random sampling of students. At each selected university, random sampling was used to select respondents. This allowed for the removal of selection bias, and all eligible beneficiaries had an equal opportunity to participate.

Procedure for Data Collection

Data for the study was obtained using structured questionnaire. The questionnaires were deployed to respondents using the google form. A contact person was gotten in each of the institutions to reach out to beneficiaries of the loan. Given that, the current study is a pilot and a full-scale study will be conducted subsequently.

Variable Description

The questionnaire was designed and made adjustable to be consistent with the aims of the study. The questionnaire consists of six sections: Socio-demographic characteristics, Family socio-demographics, Loan Access, Impact of Loan on Learning Outcomes, Knowledge on Loan Repayment, and Recommendation. The participants' socio-demographics include gender, age, and level of study, while the family socio-demographics include parents' educational and employment status. The third section assessed the difficulty of accessing the loan and its usefulness to beneficiaries, and the fourth section focused on how the loan impacted beneficiaries' CGPA.

The survey questionnaire was administered via a soft copy (Google Forms). The use of Google Forms provided more coverage, especially to students in remote regions and during the holiday periods when students may not be able to attend physical classes or be present on campuses. Participation in the survey was voluntary.

Method of Data Analysis

Data gathered was analysed statistically using descriptive analysis and inferential methods, with the STATA package. Descriptive Statistics were employed in generalising participant attributes, such as age, gender, and academic level. Means, frequencies, percentages and standard deviations were computed to explain the patterns in NELFUND access and usage.

RESULTS

Socio-demographic characteristics of students accessing the NELFUND Loan

Table 1: Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants (N=79)

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	38	48.10
Female	41	51.90

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Secondary School Attended		
Private secondary school	29	36.71
Public secondary school	50	63.29
Current University		
Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria	4	5.06
Bayero University, Kano	14	17.72
Ebonyi State University	0	0.00
University of Ibadan	25	31.65
University of Jos	9	11.39
University of Maiduguri	4	5.06
University of Uyo	23	29.02
Level of Study		
200 level	19	24.05
300 level	27	34.18
400 level	30	37.97
500 level	3	3.80
Schooling and Doing Business		
Yes	29	36.71
No	50	63.29
Class of Degree as at 1ˢᵗ NELFUND		
First class	7	8.86
Second Class (upper division)	36	45.57
Second Class (lower division)	31	40.51
Third class	3	3.80
Pass	1	1.27

The respondent's gender distribution indicated that 51.9% are female and 48.1% are male. The majority of the respondents (63.29%) attended public secondary school. This indicates that the scheme is likely reaching students from less privileged educational and financial backgrounds, as Nigerian public schools often serve students from low-income backgrounds. The institution with the highest number of respondents is the University of Ibadan (31.65%) followed by University of Uyo (29.02%), while Ebonyi State University has no one participating in the Survey. This is a result of not being able to reach out to anyone who attends the institution. 24.05% of respondents are in 200 level, 34.18% in 300 level, 37.97% in 400 level, and 3.8% in 500 level. The majority of individuals that have applied for loan are in their final year. A high proportion of respondents (63.29%) do not combine schooling with entrepreneurial activities. This may reflect that the loan has been able to reduce the number of students engaging in business to fund themselves. Over 80% of respondents were in the upper half of the grading system at the time they assessed their first loan. This implies that the loan is largely supporting students who are academically capable, thereby reducing the risk of dropout or deferment among intellectually motivated students.

Table 2: Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants

	Observation	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Age	79	24.18	4.31	18	47
Hours Worked per week (for working students)	33	17.24	19.64	0	84

The ages range from 18 to 47 years with a mean of 24 years. The minimum hours worked per week is 0 and the maximum hours worked is 84 hours and the mean value is 17.24 (Table 2). This implies that on average, 1 student works for approximately 17 hours per week, and there are some students who work longer hours and may not frequently attend lectures.

Table 3: Family background/Socioeconomic variables of

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Parental Status		
Both parents alive	49	62.03
Both parents deceased	7	8.86

Father only alive	2	2.53
Mother only alive	21	26.58
Father's Educational Status		
Informal education	1	1.96
No education	2	3.92
Primary education	5	9.80
Secondary education	19	37.25
Post-secondary education	24	47.06
Mother's Educational Status		
Informal education	0	0
No education	4	5.19
Primary education	18	23.38
Secondary education	37	48.05
Post-secondary education	18	23.38
Father's Employment Status		
Self-employed	33	55.00
Unemployed	9	15.00
Wage employed	18	30.00
Mother's Employment Status		
Self-employed	46	65.71
Unemployed	16	22.86
Wage employed	8	11.43

The highest number of respondents comes from a two-parent home, which may ensure greater financial stability, while 37.97% of respondents have either lost one parent or both, making them economically vulnerable. The majority of respondents' fathers (84.31%) and mothers (71.43%) had at least completed secondary education. Although the majority had an educated parent, there is also representation from families with minimal or no formal education. The majority of respondents' fathers are self-employed (55%), and only 30% are wage-employed. This reflects Nigeria's dominant informal economy. This could also explain why many students come from households with irregular income flows, increasing the need for support like NELFUND. The mothers of most respondents are also self-employed (65.71%), with smaller percentages of wage earners (22.86%) and the unemployed (11.43%). This aligns with trends in many Nigerian homes, where women are involved in informal trades or businesses.

Table 4: Access, Usage and Refund Experience

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Sources of payment of school fees		
Parents	28	35.44
Self (student)	22	8.86
Family members	17	6.33
Boyfriend/partner	5	21.52
Other scholarship	7	27.85
Component of Application		
School fees alone	7	8.86
School fees and stipend	72	91.14
Timeliness of loan to meet the school fees		
Paid school fees before the loan was disbursed	48	60.76
Had not paid school fees before the loan was disbursed	31	39.24
Repayment of Fees as at the time of data collection		
Yes	27	34.18
No	52	65.82
Are you willing to apply for the loan in subsequent loans		
Yes	60	75.95
No	19	24.05
How many sessions have you applied for the NELFUND?		
Once	68	86.08
Twice	11	13.92

Most of the students (35.44%) reported that they were mainly financed by their parents when it came to the payment of tuition fees, a considerable portion, however, also reported that tuition was financed by themselves (27.85%) or relatives (21.52%). A smaller percentage relied on boyfriends/partners (6.33%), or other scholarships (8.86%), which represents a variety of backgrounds of financing NELFUND beneficiaries. On the element of the loan application, a majority, 91.14 percent of the respondents borrowed both tuition and stipends, which indicates that the students are prevented by both school-related expenditure and living expenses that require monetary aid.

Regarding timeliness, 60.76% of the students reported that they had already paid their school fees before receiving the disbursed funds, suggesting that there may be technical issues with the loans, particularly regarding alignment with schedules set by institutions. The percentage of those who waited to pay after borrowing the loan was only 39.24 percent. As far as loan repayment is concerned, 65.82 percent of respondents were not repaying the loan by the time of data collection considering the nature of the repayment model established by NELFUND, which depends on the employment status of the beneficiary after graduation. Nevertheless, 34.18 per cent had already started their repayment, which could have involved students who worked part-time or had early clearance obligations.

Regarding the intention to continue participation based on a loan, the loan is regarded as positively taken, and 65.95 percent of the respondents said that they were ready to apply again for the loan. This demonstrates a high level of satisfaction or unmet needs. Only 24.05 percent were unwilling to reapply. Lastly, 86.08 percent of the respondents have obtained the loan once, as compared to 13.92 percent who have utilized it twice, meaning that most of the respondents were first-timers as at the time the survey was conducted.

Knowledge and Perception of Respondents about Loan Requirement

According to the respondents, documentation on the NELFUND platform is not stressful or difficult. The documents required were easy for the respondents to provide, ensuring equal access to the loan for everyone. The documents required to be registered include a passport photograph, a JAMB admission letter, a valid school Identification number, a National Identification Number (NIN), a birth certificate, and a student's Admission Letter. In addition, all beneficiaries were certain that the loan was provided by the Federal Government. The majority of respondents obtained information about the loan scheme from their respective institutions or the social media. The registration platform was user-friendly and easy to navigate. The average time used to apply on the platform per student was about 30 minutes (based on the availability of all required documentation).

Table 5: Effect of loan on Students

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Do you still work and school now that you have accessed the loan?		
Yes	39	49.37
No	40	50.63
How has the loan changed your attendance at lectures?		
Improved significantly	47	59.49
Improved slightly	16	20.25
No change	15	18.99
Declined	1	1.27

49.37% of respondents reported that they continued to work, while 50.63% reported that they no longer work. The near even distribution indicated that, to a certain extent, the loan has reduced financial pressure, enabling half of the students to focus more on academics. Others still needed supplementary finance, which can be due to delays in disbursement or insufficiency of the monthly stipend. The loan has significantly and positively impacted the lecture attendance of beneficiaries. 59.49% and 20.25% of respondents experienced a significant and slight improvement in attending lectures, respectively. Improved attendance implies a reduced need for a part-time job, reduced financial stress, and greater stability in meeting academic obligations.

Repayment Plan of the Loan
The majority of respondents (89.87%) were aware of the NELFUND repayment plan, while 10.13% of respondents were not. However, despite this high awareness, only 20.25% confirmed receiving formal communication about the repayment plan, compared to the 79.75% who had not received any official information. Over 70% agreed that the loan scheme was fair and manageable and only 34.18% were dissatisfied with the repayment plan. In addition, an overwhelming 91.14% stated they would recommend the loan to fellow students with only 8.86% stating otherwise.
Therefore, there is a wide gap between general awareness and institutional communication. The majority of the students obtained information about the repayment plan from informal sources, such as peers and social media, which may have an impact on their knowledge of the terms in the loan contract. Most students find the repayment terms reasonable, indicating that the income-contingent loan repayment model is considered viable. The high percentage of individuals that will recommend the scheme reflects perceived benefits in access, affordability, and support despite communication or administrative gaps.

Table 6: Awareness and Perception with NELFUND Loan Repayment

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Are you aware of the repayment plan for the loan?		
Yes	71	89.87
No	8	10.13
Is the repayment plan fair and manageable for an average graduate		
Yes	58	73.42
No	21	26.58
Have you received any formal communication about the loan repayment plan?		
Yes	16	20.25
No	63	79.75
Are you satisfied with the loan repayment plan?		
Yes	52	65.82
No	27	34.18
Would you advise your fellow students to apply for the loan?		
Yes	72	91.14
No	7	8.86

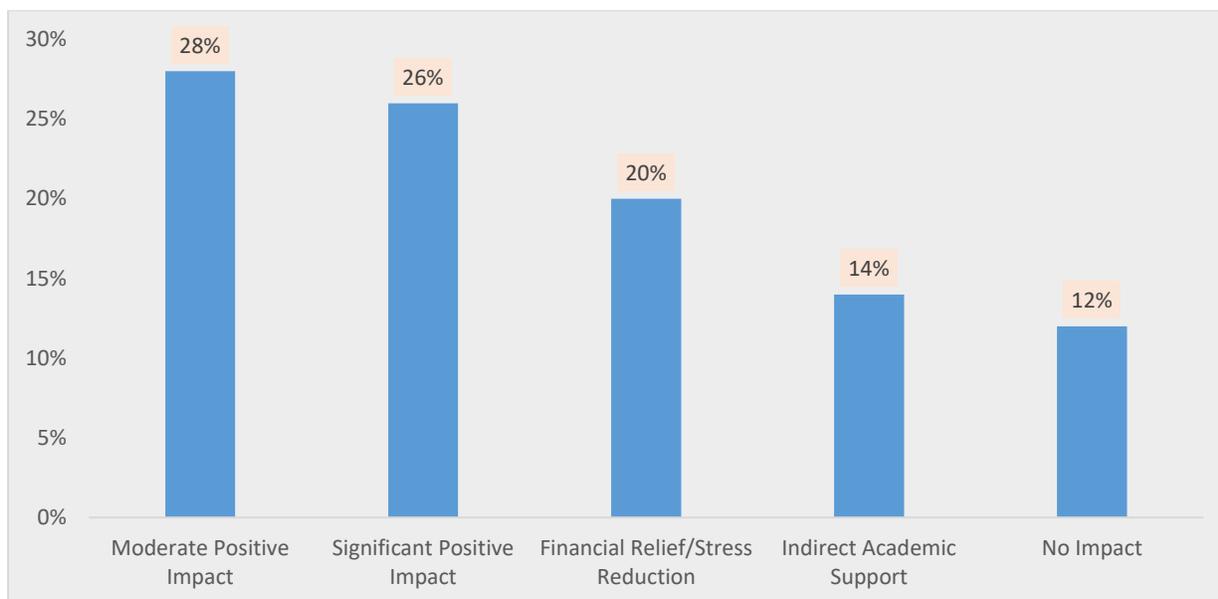**Impact of the Loan on academic performance**

Figure 2: How receiving the loan has aided academic performance.
Source: Authors' compilation

The majority of the respondent (28%) noted that receiving the loan had a moderate positive impact on their academic performance; however, a few (12%) stated that receiving a loan had no impact or negative feedback on their academic performance (Figure 2). It is important to note that 20% reported that getting the loan resulted in financial relief or stress reduction.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The results obtained in the study revealed important details related to the design and the perceived effectiveness of the National Education Loan Fund (NELFUND) to university students in Nigeria. Most of the respondents reported using NELFUND for tuition and stipends. This corroborates Chapman and Dearden (2022), who observed that the schemes most successful in Australia are those that cover both direct and indirect education costs through income-contingent loans. Equally, in Ghana, Mahmoud et al. (2024) found that learners preferred loans with flexibility, which is not limited to tuition fees, because cost-of-living costs may significantly impact participation in academic life.

This study also demonstrated that the majority of students were required to pay tuition before loan disbursement, raising the question of whether disbursement should occur before or after payment. This is in line with the study by Bomer et al. (2021) in Kenyan universities, which revealed that delays in disbursement are the key deterrent of satisfaction and continuity of the loan. Therefore, the disbursement structure is a determinant that is crucial towards the perceived effectiveness.

Furthermore, a large proportion of students demonstrated high attendance levels in classes and better performance following the accessibility of the loan. Respondents attributed that to decreased financial demands, better opportunities of learning materials, and less time spent on part-time employment. The results coincide with those of the work by Qi et al. (2022), which stated that financial assistance can alleviate psychological and logistical burdens and enable students to pay more attention to studying.

Although 89.87 percent of the students received some information about the loan repayment plan, only 20.25 of them were formally informed by the administrators of the NELFUND. Nevertheless, the majority of respondents (73.42%) found the repayment plan to be reasonable and within their means. However, the communication gap reveals an administrative inefficiency. Other students

(91.14) reported that they will recommend the loan to other students. This is already a good sign of perceived benefit and positive user experience.

However, the fact that so many had to resort to alternative means of paying their tuition fees prior to disbursement suggests that, unless disbursements align with institutions' academic calendars, NELFUND may miss its opportunity to help those who need its assistance most.

Recommendations
Based on the feedback from respondents, the following recommendations

1. Respondents recommended that the NELFUND portal should be made more user-friendly, with real-time updates on application status and disbursements, and options to correct errors made during the application process.

2. A need for earlier and more predictable disbursement of funds, prompt reimbursements of fees already paid by students, and an upward review of loans, especially in the amount given for monthly stipends, to cater for inflationary realities.

3. Beneficiaries proposed greater flexibility in loan structure, including partial or full conversion of loans to grants, extended repayment periods, and the option for students to borrow only what they need, such as applying for upkeep support alone.

4. They recommended expanding coverage to support students throughout their studies, and the inclusion of postgraduate students, and students in technical and vocational institutions.

5. They further recommended stricter monitoring and evaluation of participating institutions, data-driven impact assessments, effective feedback mechanisms, wider publicity through social media, and complementary student support services such as financial literacy and career guidance seminars.

There are plans to extend the current study to a larger sample to examine additional parameters and more comprehensively assess the impact of the NELFUND loan, not only on students' academic performance but also on other relevant academic, socio-economic, and psychosocial outcomes. In addition, research can be conducted to examine perceived differences between applicants and non-applicants. Subsequently, other researchers can adopt a mixed-methods to further evaluate perceptions of the Loan, especially among NELFUND administrators, University Management, and other major stakeholders.

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