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Understanding Students' Participation in the Nigerian Education Loan Fund (NELFUND): Perspectives of Subscribers and Non-Subscribers in Selected Higher Education Institutions in Ogun State, Nigeria.

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[0218] Abstract

This study investigates subscribers' and non-subscribers' perspectives to Nigeria Education Loan Fund (NELFUND) in selected tertiary institutions in Ogun State, Nigeria. The study was underpinned by the Human Capital, while the sequential mixed methods (QUAN+qual) design was adopted. The purpose sampling technique was used to select 520 undergraduates from Olabisi Onabanjo University, Taiwo Solarin Federal University of Education and Sikiru Adetona College of Education, Science and Technology, who are willing to participate in the study. Instruments used were Perception of NELFUND ($r=0.87$), Attitude to NELFUND ($r=0.86$) and Interview Guide. In-depth interviews were held with eight undergraduates executives. The quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, while the qualitative data were content-analysed. The age of the respondents were (21.80 ± 1.40) years, and 60.0 % were males. Results show that undergraduate had positive perception ($\bar{x}=2.73$) and attitude ($\bar{x}=2.74$) to NELFUND at a threshold of 2.50. Qualitative findings indicate that while NELFUND is generally perceived as a relevant policy intervention for expanding access to higher education, participation is influenced by factors such as awareness levels, trust in government systems, perceived repayment burden, and ease of application processes. Subscribers reported significant financial relief and improved access to education, whereas non-subscribers expressed concerns about debt obligations, limited information, and uncertainty about post-graduation repayment capacity. The study concludes that the effectiveness of NELFUND depends not only on policy design but also on communication strategies, institutional support, and students' behavioural perceptions. It recommends improved sensitization, simplified application procedures, and enhanced transparency in implementation to increase participation rates.

Keywords: Perception, Attitude, NELFUND, Student Loan Scheme, Higher Education, Ogun State, Nigeria

1. Introduction

Education occupies a central position in the social, economic, and political development of nations. Across societies, it is widely regarded as a mechanism through which individuals acquire knowledge, skills, competencies, and values necessary for personal advancement and national transformation (Hazelkorn & Gibson, 2019). Beyond its role in human development, education serves as a strategic investment that contributes to productivity growth, innovation, social mobility, poverty reduction, and sustainable development. It is discovered that nations that have achieved remarkable progress in economic competitiveness and technological advancement have often done so through deliberate

investments in educational systems that expand access and improve learning opportunities for citizens (Obunadike, Jiya & Ajik, [2024](#)). Consequently, access to higher education has increasingly become a major concern for some governments, policymakers, development agencies, and educational stakeholders across the world. This is because the importance of higher education in contemporary societies has led to a significant increase in demand for university, polytechnic, and college education (Ziderman, [2013](#)).

The expansion of knowledge economies, changing labour market requirements, and growing recognition of the socioeconomic benefits associated with tertiary education have encouraged more young people to seek admission into higher institutions. In many countries, especially the third worlds, obtaining a tertiary qualification is no longer perceived merely as a personal aspiration but as a necessity for securing employment opportunities and achieving social mobility (Barr, [2012](#)). As enrolment demand continues to increase, governments are confronted with the challenge of ensuring that access to higher education is not determined solely by socioeconomic background or financial capability (Olasoji, Adegboyega & Omoniyi [2023](#)). Thus, despite the recognized importance of higher education, access remains unevenly distributed across different social groups. This is because financial barriers constitute one of the most significant obstacles preventing many qualified students from enrolling in and completing tertiary education (World Bank, [2020](#)). The cost of tuition, accommodation, transportation, instructional materials, internet services, and other educational expenses has continued to increase in many countries (Bianchi, [2023](#)).

For instance, students from economically disadvantaged households, these costs often create substantial constraints that limit educational opportunities (Dynarski, [2014](#)). Consequently, the pursuit of higher education is frequently shaped by the financial capacity of students and their families rather than solely by academic merit or aspiration (Marx & Turner, [2019](#)). Globally, governments have adopted various approaches to addressing financial barriers to higher education. These approaches include scholarships, grants, bursaries, tuition subsidies, work-study programmes, and student loan schemes (World Bank [2020](#); Callender & Mason, [2017](#); Denning, [2019](#)). Among these interventions, student loan programmes have gained prominence as a mechanism for expanding educational access while distributing educational costs between governments and beneficiaries (Rothstein & Rouse, [2011](#)). Student loan systems are designed to provide financial support to students who may lack sufficient resources to pursue tertiary education, with repayment typically deferred until after graduation or employment (Shen & Ziderman, [2009](#)). To buttress, some of such schemes have been implemented in countries including the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and several emerging economies, although their structures, funding mechanisms, and repayment arrangements vary considerably (Obunadike, Jiya & Ajik, [2024](#); Solis, [2017](#)). The adoption of student loan schemes is often justified on the grounds that higher education generates both private and public benefits. It is believed that individuals who obtain tertiary education generally experience higher lifetime earnings, improved employment prospects, and enhanced social status. At the same time, society benefits from the availability of a skilled workforce capable of contributing to economic growth, innovation, civic participation, and national development. Student loan programmes therefore seek to balance the objectives of expanding educational access and ensuring financial sustainability within higher education systems (Marginson, [2011](#)). However, the effectiveness of such schemes often depends on factors such as policy design, implementation efficiency, awareness levels, repayment structures, public trust, and beneficiaries' perceptions (Marx & Turner, [2019](#)).

In Nigeria, the issue of educational financing has become increasingly important in recent decades. Since independence, successive governments have recognized education as a critical instrument for national development and social transformation (Akinteye, [2025](#)). This recognition is reflected in various educational policies and programmes aimed at expanding access to schooling at different levels. The rapid growth of Nigeria's population, however, has significantly increased demand for educational opportunities. As the population expands and more young people complete secondary education, competition for admission into tertiary institutions has intensified (World Bank, [2020](#)). Simultaneously, the cost of providing quality higher education has continued to rise due to

infrastructural demands, technological requirements, personnel costs, and institutional expansion (Baird, McIntosh & Özler, 2011). Although public tertiary institutions in Nigeria remain relatively subsidized compared to many private institutions, students and their families continue to face substantial financial pressures. Worthy to know is that educational expenses extend beyond tuition and often include accommodation fees, registration charges, laboratory fees, transportation costs, textbooks, internet subscriptions, and other academic necessities (Omoniyi, 2022). In recent years, economic challenges such as inflation, currency depreciation, unemployment, and declining household purchasing power have further increased the financial burden associated with tertiary education (Bianchi, 2023). This invariably makes several families struggle to meet educational expenses, while students increasingly seek alternative means of financing their studies. The relationship between poverty and educational access remains particularly significant within the Nigerian situation. A considerable proportion of Nigerian households experience varying degrees of economic vulnerability, making it difficult to finance tertiary education without external support (Avery & Turner, 2012). Students from low-income households are especially susceptible to delayed enrolment, interrupted studies, academic stress, and dropout risks arising from financial difficulties (Rothstein & Rouse, 2011).

In some cases, talented and academically qualified students are unable to pursue higher education due to limited financial resources (Dary & James, 2019). Such situations raise concerns regarding educational equity and social justice because access to tertiary education becomes influenced by economic circumstances rather than academic potential. The challenge of financing higher education in Nigeria has attracted considerable attention from scholars, policymakers, educational administrators, and development practitioners (Barr, 2012). Discussions have increasingly focused on identifying sustainable mechanisms that can improve educational accessibility while addressing resource constraints facing government-funded institutions. Within these discussions, student loan programmes have emerged as a recurring policy option. Advocates argue that educational loans can provide immediate financial assistance to students while enabling governments to expand access without assuming the entire cost burden of higher education (Callender & Mason, 2017). Critics, however, caution that poorly designed loan programmes may generate implementation difficulties, repayment challenges, administrative inefficiencies, and public distrust. Nigeria's experience with student loan initiatives predates the establishment of the Nigeria Education Loan Fund (NELFUND). Earlier attempts to implement educational loan programmes encountered significant challenges, particularly regarding loan recovery, administrative effectiveness, beneficiary identification, and sustainability. These experiences contributed to scepticism among some stakeholders regarding the feasibility of student loan schemes within the Nigerian environment (de Gayardon, Callender & Green, 2019). Concerns were frequently raised about graduate unemployment, weak repayment mechanisms, inadequate record management, and the possibility of loan defaults. Consequently, educational financing debates often reflected tensions between aspirations for expanded access and concerns regarding policy implementation (Denning, 2019).

At the same time, socioeconomic realities continued to underscore the need for innovative financing mechanisms. Rising educational costs, increasing enrolment demand, and widespread economic pressures heightened calls for interventions capable of reducing financial barriers confronting students. Educational stakeholders increasingly emphasized that the inability of qualified students to access higher education due to financial constraints represented not only a personal challenge but also a national development concern (Field, 2009). Excluding talented individuals from educational opportunities limits human capital development, reduces social mobility, and undermines efforts to achieve inclusive growth. The growing urgency of these concerns became particularly evident in the context of broader economic difficulties affecting Nigerian households. Inflationary pressures and declining real incomes significantly reduced families' ability to finance tertiary education. Many students reported difficulties meeting basic academic expenses, while institutions observed increasing financial pressures among their student populations.

The intersection of educational aspirations and economic hardship created a policy environment in which discussions about student support mechanisms gained renewed prominence. Consequently,

educational financing moved beyond institutional concerns to become a broader social policy issue connected to poverty reduction, youth development, employment prospects, and national competitiveness. Against this backdrop, policymakers increasingly recognized the need for a structured intervention capable of supporting students while promoting equitable access to higher education. The search for such an intervention reflected an acknowledgment that educational access should not be restricted by socioeconomic status alone. It also reflected growing recognition of the strategic role of tertiary education in preparing young people for participation in a knowledge-driven economy. As a result, attention shifted toward developing a financing framework that could provide direct support to eligible students while addressing limitations associated with previous educational funding initiatives. The emergence of new policy discussions surrounding educational loans was therefore not accidental (Ziderman, 2013). Rather, it represented a response to longstanding concerns regarding educational affordability, access disparities, and the financial challenges confronting students across Nigeria. These concerns provided the context within which the Nigeria Education Loan Fund (NELFUND) eventually emerged as a major policy initiative aimed at improving access to higher education through financial support mechanisms. While the establishment of NELFUND signalled a significant development in educational financing policy, questions regarding awareness, acceptance, participation, implementation, and student experiences remain critical for understanding the scheme's effectiveness and broader implications for higher education access in Nigeria (Omoniyi, 2023). The introduction of the Nigeria Education Loan Fund (NELFUND) represents one of the most significant recent policy interventions in Nigeria's higher education financing landscape.

It was conceived as a direct response to the persistent challenge of limited access to tertiary education caused by financial constraints. The Federal Government of Nigeria, through the Student Loans (Access to Higher Education) Act, 2024, established NELFUND as a statutory body responsible for managing and disbursing interest-free loans to eligible Nigerian students in public tertiary institutions. The policy was designed to widen access to higher education, reduce dropout rates linked to financial hardship, and strengthen human capital development by ensuring that no academically qualified student is denied tertiary education due to inability to pay. The establishment of NELFUND can be understood within the broader context of Nigeria's development priorities, particularly the need to expand educational opportunities and improve youth productivity. Nigeria, with a large youthful population, faces increasing pressure to provide accessible and affordable higher education. The growing demand for tertiary education has not been matched with adequate public funding, resulting in infrastructure deficits, rising institutional charges, and increasing reliance on families to finance education. In this context, the government introduced NELFUND as a structured financing mechanism intended to complement existing public funding and reduce the financial burden on households. A central justification for the establishment of NELFUND is the recognition of education as a public good with significant spillover benefits. While individuals gain private returns such as improved earnings and employability, society also benefits through enhanced productivity, civic participation, innovation, and reduced unemployment. Thus, providing interest-free loans, the government aims to ensure that financial barriers do not prevent capable students from accessing higher education (Omoniyi, 2023). The scheme is also intended to promote equity by creating opportunities for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who might otherwise be excluded from tertiary education (Callender & Mason, 2017).

Despite these objectives, the implementation of student loan schemes in developing contexts such as Nigeria is often complex and contested. The success of such programmes depends not only on policy design but also on public awareness, institutional efficiency, trust in government systems, administrative transparency, and students' willingness to participate. In many cases, educational loan schemes face challenges such as low uptake, misinformation, fear of indebtedness, bureaucratic delays, and weak understanding of eligibility conditions. These challenges can significantly limit the effectiveness of otherwise well-intentioned policies. In the case of NELFUND, early implementation phases have been accompanied by mixed reactions from students and stakeholders. While some students perceive the scheme as a valuable opportunity to access higher education without immediate

financial burden, others express reservations about long-term repayment obligations, uncertainty regarding employment after graduation, and concerns about administrative processes.

Additionally, differences in awareness levels across institutions and regions may influence participation rates. These variations suggest that student engagement with NELFUND is not uniform but shaped by a combination of informational, psychological, social, and economic factors. A critical issue in understanding NELFUND lies in the distinction between subscribers and non-subscribers. Subscribers refer to students who have actively enrolled in the loan scheme and are beneficiaries of the financial support provided. Non-subscribers, on the other hand, are students who meet the eligibility criteria but choose not to participate or are yet to engage with the programme. The existence of these two groups raises important questions about decision-making processes, perceptions of risk and benefit, access to information, and trust in institutional arrangements (Baird, McIntosh & Özler, 2011). Understanding why some students subscribe while others do not is essential for evaluating the effectiveness and inclusiveness of the policy. There is a practical need to understand how students actually experience and interpret NELFUND within their specific institutional and socioeconomic contexts. In many Nigerian tertiary institutions, students operate within environments shaped by financial hardship, varying levels of institutional support, and unequal access to information (Gurgand, Lorenceau, & Mélonio, 2011). These contextual realities influence how students interpret government policies and whether they perceive them as accessible, trustworthy, and beneficial. As such, students' lived experiences become crucial for assessing the real impact of NELFUND beyond policy intentions (Isiaka & Olaniyan, 2024). Another important dimension relates to awareness and communication. For any public intervention to be effective, beneficiaries must first be adequately informed about its existence, objectives, and procedures. In the case of NELFUND, questions arise regarding how information is disseminated across institutions, how clearly eligibility requirements are communicated, and whether students fully understand the application and repayment processes. Limited awareness or misunderstanding of policy details may lead to underutilization of the scheme, even among eligible students. This raises concerns about policy reach and communication effectiveness.

Furthermore, trust in government and institutional systems plays a significant role in shaping students' willingness to participate in loan programmes. In contexts where previous public programmes have faced implementation challenges, students may exhibit scepticism toward new initiatives (Gicheva, 2016). Concerns about transparency, repayment enforcement, future economic conditions, and administrative efficiency can influence decisions to subscribe or abstain. Such perceptions may not necessarily reflect the actual performance of the programme but can still significantly affect participation rates. The emergence of NELFUND also raises broader questions about educational equity and inclusion (Jacob, Kalla, Olofu & Lenshie, 2025). While the scheme is designed to promote equal access, disparities in awareness, digital literacy, institutional support, and socioeconomic background may still influence who benefits from the programme. Students in rural or underserved areas may face additional barriers in accessing information or completing application procedures. Similarly, differences in institutional capacity may affect how effectively the programme is implemented across tertiary institutions. It is against this background that this study is situated. Thus, focusing on both subscribers and non-subscribers, the study seeks to provide a more information on how students engage with NELFUND.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are to: (a) Assess students perceive the relevance and effectiveness of the Nigeria Education Loan Fund (NELFUND) in supporting access to higher education. (b) Ascertain the level of students' attitude to the relevance and effectiveness of the NELFUND in supporting access to higher education. (c) Identify factors influence students' decisions to subscribe or not subscribe to the NELFUND scheme (d) Explore the experiences, benefits, and challenges subscribers and non-subscribers report regarding the implementation and accessibility of NELFUND?

2. Theoretical Review

The study was anchored on Human Capital Theory and theory of Planned Behaviour. They are relevant to this study.

Human Capital Theory

Human Capital Theory, popularised by Theodore Schultz (1961) and further developed by Gary Becker (1964), provides a valuable theoretical foundation for understanding students' decisions regarding participation in the Nigeria Education Loan Fund (NELFUND). The theory posits that investments in education, training, and skill acquisition enhance the productive capacities of individuals and subsequently improve their economic and social outcomes. According to the theory, education should not merely be viewed as a social good but also as an investment capable of generating future returns in the form of increased earnings, improved employability, enhanced productivity, and better quality of life. The central assumption of Human Capital Theory is that individuals are rational actors who are willing to incur present costs in anticipation of future benefits. In the context of higher education, these costs may include tuition fees, accommodation expenses, transportation costs, instructional materials, and other educational expenditures.

However, financial constraints often prevent many students from accessing or completing higher education. Student loan programmes such as NELFUND are therefore designed to bridge this financial gap by providing resources that enable students to invest in their educational development. The relevance of Human Capital Theory to the present study lies in its ability to explain why students may choose to subscribe to or reject the NELFUND scheme. Students who perceive higher education as a worthwhile investment with substantial future returns may be more willing to subscribe to educational loans despite the obligation of repayment. Such students may view the loan as an opportunity to acquire valuable knowledge and skills that will improve their future socioeconomic status. Conversely, students who are uncertain about future employment prospects, repayment conditions, or the economic returns of higher education may be reluctant to participate in the scheme. The theory therefore provides a useful framework for examining the perceptions, expectations, and motivations that influence students' decisions regarding NELFUND participation. It also facilitates an understanding of how educational financing mechanisms contribute to widening access to tertiary education and promoting human capital development in Nigeria.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a mixed methods research design to examine students' perceptions, motivations, and experiences regarding the Nigeria Education Loan Fund (NELFUND), focusing on subscribers and non-subscribers in selected tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The mixed methods approach is considered appropriate because it enables the integration of both quantitative and qualitative data, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon than either approach alone. The study employed a convergent parallel design, in which quantitative and qualitative data are collected simultaneously, analysed separately, and then merged for interpretation. The quantitative component involved a structured questionnaire administered to a sample of students selected through stratified random sampling to ensure representation across gender, age, institution type, and subscription status. This component will measure variables such as awareness of NELFUND, perception of accessibility, perceived benefits, trust in government policy, and likelihood of subscription. The data will be analysed using descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, as well as inferential statistics where necessary.

The qualitative component will involve semi-structured interviews with purposively selected subscribers and non-subscribers. This will allow for in-depth exploration of students' lived experiences, motivations, and barriers influencing participation in NELFUND. Thematic analysis will be used to identify recurring patterns and meanings within participants' narratives. This dual approach ensures that statistical trends are complemented by contextual explanations. Integration of findings will occur at the interpretation stage, where results from both datasets will be compared and contrasted to identify convergence, divergence, and complementarity. This integration enhances validity and provides a richer explanation of the factors influencing students' engagement with NELFUND. Ethical considerations will be strictly observed, including informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and

voluntary participation. Participants will be assured that their responses will be used solely for academic purposes. Trustworthiness in qualitative data will be ensured through member checking and triangulation, while reliability and validity of quantitative data will be established using appropriate statistical tests. Overall, the mixed methods design strengthens the study by combining breadth and depth of analysis, allowing for a more holistic understanding of how students engage with educational financing policies in Nigeria.

Results

Demographic Characteristics

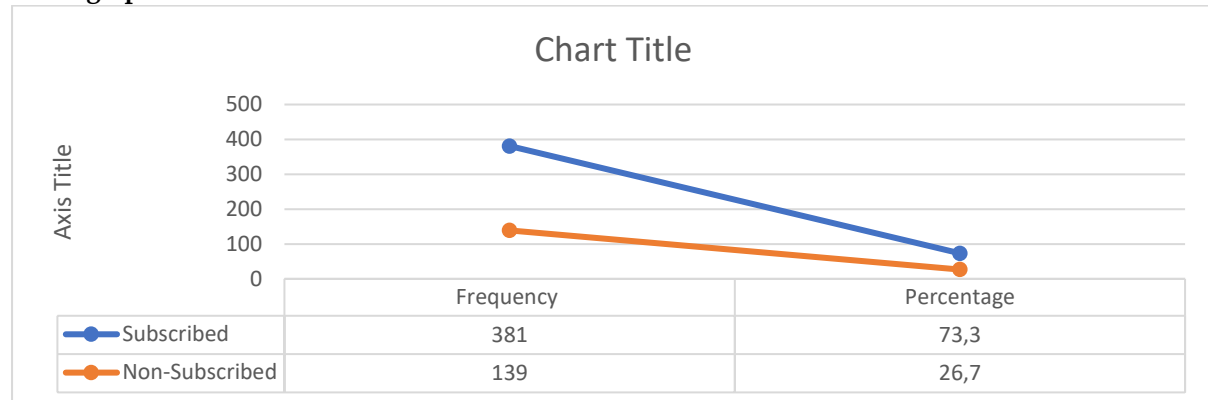


Fig.1: Subscription Status of participants

Out of the 520 respondents, 381 (73.3%) indicated that they were subscribed, while 139 (26.7%) reported that they were not subscribed. This indicates that nearly three-quarters of the respondents had an active subscription, whereas just over one-quarter were non-subscribers.

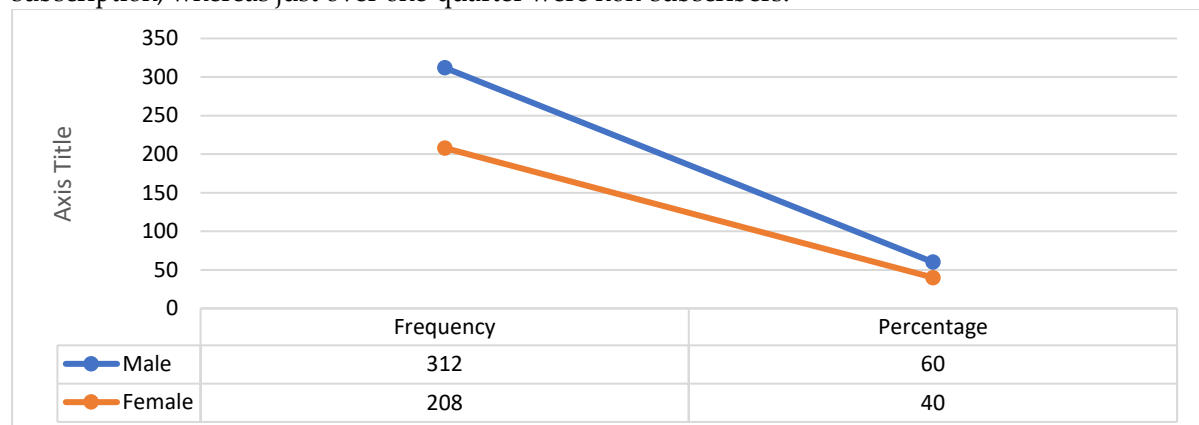


Fig.1: Gender of participants

The chart presents the gender distribution of the respondents included in the study. Out of a total of 520 respondents, 312 (60.0%) were male, while 208 (40.0%) were female. The results indicate that male respondents constituted the majority of the study participants, accounting for three-fifths of the sample, whereas female respondents represented two-fifths.

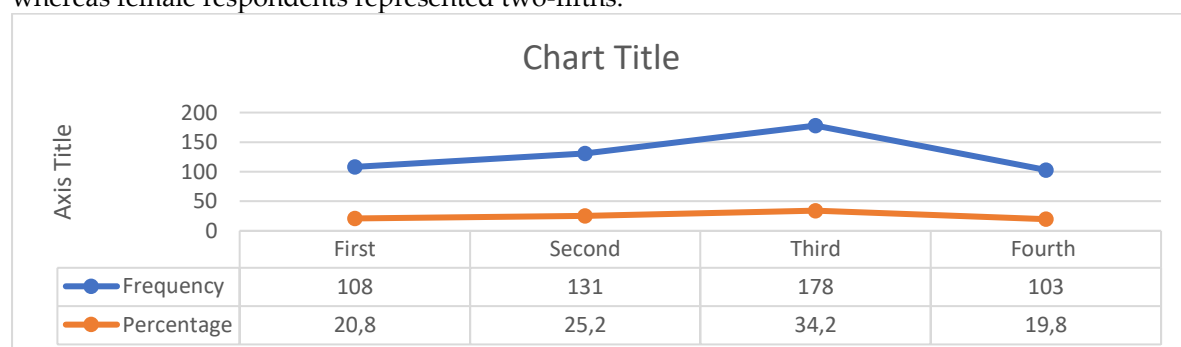


Fig.1: Level of participants

The chart presents the distribution of respondents according to their level of study. The findings reveal that third-year students constituted the largest proportion of the respondents, accounting for 178 (34.2%) of the total sample. This was followed by second-year students with 131 respondents (25.2%), while first-year and fourth-year students accounted for 108 (20.8%) and 103 (19.8%), respectively. The distribution suggests that respondents from all four academic levels were represented, although participation was highest among third-year students and lowest among fourth-year students.

Result

Research Objective 1: What the level of undergraduates' perception of the impact of NELFUND Programme.

TABLE 1: MEAN RESPONSE OF UNDERGRADUATES' PERCEPTION OF THE IMPACT OF NELFUND PROGRAMME

Sn	Items	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Std
NELFUND:							
1.	has given me the opportunity to face my studies	47 8.7	139 25.7	255 47.2	99 18.3	2.25	.854
2	has given me the opportunity of securing a sheltered	172 31.9	251 46.5	86 15.9	31 5.7	3.04	.841
3	creates a platform to increase graduates to fill vacant subject positions	184 34.1	282 52.2	48 8.9	26 4.8	3.16	.774
4	boosts my under-graduate experience	128 23.7	192 35.6	150 27.8	70 13.0	2.70	.972
5	is beneficial in term of adequate provision	223 41.3	257 47.6	54 10.0	6 1.1	3.29	.688
6	is not really a government programme	41 7.6	76 14.1	200 37.0	223 41.3	1.88	.919
7	has flexible structure to accommodate many other undergraduate students	238 44.1	245 45.4	38 7.0	19 3.5	3.30	.750
8.	Increases university enrolment	80 14.8	143 26.5	213 39.4	104 19.3	2.37	.957
9.	has been a programme that moulds destiny	216 40.0	240 44.4	41 7.6	43 8.0	3.16	.877
10.	is very relevant in the academic programme	117 21.7	134 24.8	160 29.6	129 23.9	2.44	1.08
11.	should not be stopped	49 9.1	124 23.0	205 38.0	162 30.0	2.11	.939
12.	is better than any other programme	122 22.6	130 24.1	184 34.1	104 19.3	2.50	1.04
13.	has changed my thinking about my future	59 10.9	125 23.1	189 35.0	167 30.9	2.14	.980
14.	has change my status as a youth undergraduate student	161 29.8	229 42.4	97 18.0	53 9.8	2.92	.931
15.	has given the opportunity of a practical experience	225 41.7	231 42.8	51 9.4	33 6.1	3.20	.847
16.	improved my living conditions	95 17.6	1 02 18.9	179 33.1	164 30.4	2.24	1.07
17.	Has allowed me to acquire new ideas, skills and knowledge about learning	107 19.8	94 17.4	195 36.1	144 26.7	2.30	1.07
18.	has equipped me with human management skills	223 41.3	238 44.1	53 9.8	26 4.8	3.22	.811
19.	builds in me economic skill	223 41.3	209 38.7	73 13.5	35 6.5	3.15	.887
20.	increases my capacity for survival	266 49.3	169 31.3	73 13.5	32 5.9	3.24	.900
Weighted Average: 2.73 Threshold: 2.5							

Table 1 presents beneficiaries' perception of the impact of the NELFUND programme. The result shows a weighted mean score of 2.73, which is higher than the benchmark value of 2.50. This indicates that the beneficiaries have a positive perception of the NELFUND programme.

Research Objective 2: What is the levele of undergraduates' attitude towards NELFUND Programme

TABLE 2: MEAN RESPONSE OF UNDERGRADUATES' ATTITUDE TO NELFUND PROGRAMME

S/N	Items	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Std
NELFUND							
1.	Increases access for undergraduate students	293 27.4	328 30.7	380 35.5	68 5.4	2.79	.917
2.	makes learning easier for me	233 21.8	262 24.5	464 43.4	110 10.3	2.58	.942
3.	helps students' to be living with money	265 24.8	321 30.0	352 32.9	131 12.3	2.67	.981
4.	should be sustained to augment and plan repayment for after graduation	237 22.2	323 30.2	397 37.1	112 10.5	2.64	.940
5	Provides platform for close monitoring	204 19.1	404 37.8	389 36.4	72 6.7	2.69	.854
6.	is vital at the repayment time	208 19.5	286 26.8	475 44.4	100 9.4	2.56	.907
7.	makes me feel relax in school and wanting to learn the more	264 24.7	395 37.0	330 30.9	80 7.5	2.79	.901
8	Nelfund encourage students to provide alternative views on issues	127 11.9	311 29.1	468 43.8	163 15.2	2.38	.882
9.	nelfund encourage me to obtain knowledge freely	282 26.4	342 32.0	354 33.1	91 8.5	2.76	.938
10.	has increased my school attendance	155 14.5	285 26.7	486 45.5	143 13.4	2.42	.896
11.	Nelfund is seen as facilitators of empowerment	53 5.0	160 15.0	266 24.6	590 55.2	1.70	.899
12.	makes me develop "i-can-do" spirit in difficult school tasks	714 66.8	323 30.2	32 3.0	0 0	3.64	.540
13	nelfund do not encourage classroom participation	26 2.4	191 17.9	317 29.7	535 50.0	1.73	.838
14	student LOAN adapt students to new approaches .	717 67.1	309 28.9	35 3.3	8 0.7	3.62	.588
15.	is poorly executed in universities	723 67.6	310 29.0	23 2.2	13 1.2	3.63	.591
16.	is an interest-free loan	61 5.7	108 10.1	296 27.7	604 56.5	1.65	.879
17	loans not for everybody	49 4.6	134 12.5	312 29.2	574 53.7	1.68	.863
18	beneficiaries are underperforming	711 66.5	340 31.8	18 1.7	0 0	3.65	.512
19	beneficiaries exhibit staggered attendance in school	724 67.7	316 29.6	29 2.7	0 0	3.65	.531
20	cannot lead to something meaningful to the beneficiaries	727 68.0	309 28.9	31 2.9	2 0.2	3.65	.546
Weighted Average: 2.74 Threshold : 2.5							

Table 2 presents the attitude of undergraduate students toward the NELFUND programme in Ogun State, Nigeria. The results show a weighted mean score of 2.74, which is higher than the benchmark value of 2.50. This indicates that undergraduate students generally exhibit a positive attitude toward the NELFUND programme.

RQ3: What factors influence students' decisions to subscribe or not subscribe to NELFUND?

These three dominant factors emerged from the interview conducted; awareness, trust, and perceived complexity of the application process. Subscribers reported higher levels of awareness and institutional support. Many indicated that they were guided by peers or school authorities. One participant said: "I heard about it during school orientation, and the steps were clearly explained." In contrast, non-subscribers reported limited or inconsistent information. Some were unaware of application procedures or eligibility requirements. A participant remarked: "I only heard about it late, and I did not understand how to apply". In the same vein, trust also played a significant role. Some students expressed concerns about government programmes based on previous experiences. Others questioned long-term policy stability. Additionally, perceived complexity of digital registration discouraged participation among some respondents who lacked confidence in online processes. Thus, subscription decisions were influenced by a combination of informational access, institutional support, and perceived reliability of the scheme.

RQ4: What experiences, benefits, and challenges do subscribers and non-subscribers report regarding NELFUND?

The result showed that subscribers reported largely positive experiences, particularly in relation to financial relief and reduced dependency on family support. Many noted that the loan eased pressure associated with tuition and living expenses. One participant stated: "It reduced my stress because I no longer depend entirely on my parents." Others appreciated the interest-free nature of the loan, describing it as a fair opportunity for students from low-income backgrounds. However, challenges were also identified, including delays in disbursement, uncertainty about repayment timelines, and limited communication updates from the administering body. Non-subscribers, on the other hand, reported indirect experiences shaped by observation and peer narratives. Their concerns included fear of debt accumulation, lack of clarity about repayment mechanisms, and inadequate sensitisation. Some expressed preference for scholarships or grants over loans. A participant noted: "If it was a grant, I would have applied immediately, but a loan feels like future burden." These findings explain a clear divergence in lived experiences between both groups.

4. Discussion of findings

Perceived Relevance/Effectiveness of NELFUND in supporting access to higher education: This finding shows that students have a favourable disposition toward the scheme which shows in their acceptance of the programme despite existing implementation challenges. The result revealed that the Nigerian Education Loan Fund (NELFUND) was established with the primary objective of removing financial barriers to higher education and ensuring equitable access for Nigerian students in public tertiary institutions. As outlined in its 2025 policy objectives, the Fund is designed to enhance access to higher education, promote financial inclusion without discrimination, strengthen skills development, improve socio-economic mobility, reduce dropout rates, and contribute to national economic growth through investment in human capital (NELFUND, 2025). This is in line with the submission of Denning (2019) affirmed that beneficiaries generally held a positive perception of the NELFUND programme. It also implies that undergraduate beneficiaries derive significant value from the scheme, particularly in terms of easing financial burdens associated with tuition and upkeep during their academic pursuits. This was also not at variance with the works of Dynarski, S. (2014). And Gurgand, M., Lorenceau, & Mélonio (2011). Many students expressed confidence in the programme as a reliable means of supporting their educational goals and sustaining their academic progress. This aligns with the policy intentions of NELFUND (2025) and is consistent with the findings of Batchuluun et al. (2017), who observed that social and financial support programmes positively influence beneficiaries' thinking, behaviour, and attitudes, while also contributing to character development, responsibility, accountability, empathy, and social awareness. These outcomes further reflect the transformative potential of educational support schemes such as NELFUND.

Attitude to the relevance and effectiveness of NELFUND in supporting access to higher education: The result shows a positive response which may also be attributed to government efforts aimed at promoting self-reliance among students by enabling them to pursue education without

excessive financial stress. This view is supported by Ibiam (2007), who noted that society often places value on individuals with stable and recognized sources of income. Conversely, Ijaduola, Adenaike, and Odumade (2010) argued that education has, in some contexts, lost part of its perceived essence, with some individuals engaging in the profession primarily due to opportunities for economic engagement rather than intrinsic motivation. Furthermore, the findings revealed that undergraduate students demonstrated a positive attitude toward the NELFUND programme in Ogun State, Nigeria. It can be concluded that students generally hold a favourable disposition toward the scheme which indicates general acceptance of the programme among beneficiaries in the selected institutions.

Factors influence students' decisions to subscribe or not subscribe to the NELFUND scheme: The findings are discussed in relation to the research questions and supported by relevant theoretical perspectives. The positive perception of NELFUND aligns with Human Capital Theory, which posits that individual are likely to invest in education when they anticipate future economic returns. Subscribers viewed the loan as an investment in their future, consistent with this theoretical position. However, non-subscribers' concerns about unemployment and repayment risks reflect uncertainty in expected returns, weakening the investment incentive. The Theory of Planned Behavior further explains subscription decisions. Attitudes toward borrowing, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control were evident in the findings. Positive attitudes among subscribers were reinforced by peer influence and institutional awareness campaigns, while negative attitudes among non-subscribers were shaped by fear of debt and mistrust. Perceived behavioural control was also critical, as students who found the application process complex or inaccessible were less likely to subscribe. Experiences reported by subscribers indicate that while NELFUND provides immediate financial relief, implementation challenges such as delays and communication gaps may reduce satisfaction. This suggests a gap between policy intention and operational delivery. Non-subscribers' reliance on hearsay and incomplete information further highlights weaknesses in outreach and sensitisation strategies. The divergence between subscribers and non-subscribers demonstrates that access to educational financing is not solely determined by eligibility but also by perception, information flow, and institutional trust.

Experiences, benefits, and challenges do subscribers and non-subscribers report regarding the implementation and accessibility of NELFUND: The findings of this study revealed a marked contrast between the experiences of subscribers and non-subscribers regarding the Nigerian Education Loan Fund (NELFUND). Subscribers generally perceived the scheme positively, particularly because it reduced financial stress, eased dependence on parents and guardians, and provided access to education without the burden of immediate tuition payment. These findings reinforce the central objective of student financial aid programmes, which is to improve educational access and reduce financial barriers to higher education (Akinteye, 2025). The participants' narratives suggest that NELFUND functions not only as a financial intervention but also as a psychological support mechanism by alleviating anxiety associated with meeting educational expenses. This supports previous studies which have argued that adequate financial support enhances students' academic engagement, persistence, and overall well-being (Baird, McIntosh & Özler, 2011).

The appreciation expressed by subscribers for the interest-free nature of the loan further demonstrates that affordability remains a critical determinant of students' acceptance of educational financing initiatives. Interest-free student loans are often perceived as more equitable and socially responsive because they minimise the long-term financial burden associated with borrowing (Isiaka & Olaniyan, 2024). This finding aligns with studies indicating that favourable loan conditions significantly increase students' willingness to participate in educational loan schemes, particularly among those from economically disadvantaged households (Ojebisi, 2024). Consequently, the design characteristics of NELFUND appear to contribute substantially to its attractiveness among beneficiaries. Despite these positive experiences, subscribers also highlighted several implementation challenges, including delays in loan disbursement, uncertainty surrounding repayment conditions, and inadequate communication from programme administrators. These findings suggest that while the policy intention of NELFUND is commendable, operational inefficiencies may undermine its effectiveness. Delayed disbursement can reduce the usefulness of financial assistance, especially when

students require timely payment of tuition fees or living expenses (Solis, 2017). Similarly, uncertainty regarding repayment obligations may generate anxiety among beneficiaries and weaken trust in the scheme. Previous research has consistently shown that transparent communication, administrative efficiency, and timely service delivery are essential factors influencing satisfaction with public financial support programmes (Jacob, Kalla, Olofu & Lenshie, 2025).

In contrast, non-subscribers reported experiences that were largely indirect, relying on information obtained through peers, social networks, and public discourse rather than personal engagement with the programme. Their dominant concerns centred on fear of future indebtedness, inadequate understanding of repayment mechanisms, and limited awareness of the scheme's operational procedures. These findings suggest that perceptions rather than actual experiences significantly influence decisions regarding programme participation. This observation aligns with behavioural decision-making theories, which suggest that individuals often choose based on perceived risks and anticipated consequences rather than objective information (Gurgand, Lorraineau, & Mélonio, 2011). Similar studies have found that misconceptions about student loans frequently discourage eligible students from accessing available financial assistance (Dynarski, 2014).

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined students' perceptions, motivations, and experiences regarding NELFUND from the perspectives of subscribers and non-subscribers. The findings reveal that while NELFUND is widely regarded as a valuable policy intervention for improving access to higher education, participation is shaped by multiple interrelated factors including awareness, trust, perceived risk, and ease of access. Subscribers generally benefit from the scheme and view it as a necessary financial support system. In contrast, non-subscribers remain hesitant due to concerns about repayment obligations, insufficient information, and uncertainty about implementation processes. The study therefore concludes that the effectiveness of NELFUND depends not only on its policy design but also on how it is communicated, implemented, and perceived by its intended beneficiaries. (a) Students' perceptions should be aligned with the objectives of the NELFUND scheme through sustained awareness campaigns, institutional sensitization, and community-based educational activities. (b) The NELFUND scheme should be reviewed and restructured in line with its core objectives and global best practices in student financial aid systems, while ensuring local relevance and sustainability. (c) A robust monitoring and evaluation framework should be established to ensure proper tracking of disbursed funds, prevent diversion, and guarantee effective implementation across tertiary institutions. This should include periodic assessments and annual audits of the programme. (d) Beneficiaries should be provided with structured support systems such as mentorship programmes, training workshops, and experiential learning opportunities that promote academic growth, responsibility, teamwork, and real-life professional skills. (e) The scheme should incorporate post-graduation support mechanisms, including career guidance and potential linkages to employment opportunities, to enhance socio-economic mobility and reduce the cycle of poverty among beneficiaries. (f) Consideration should be given to expanding the coverage of the programme to include students in accredited private tertiary institutions to promote wider access and educational equity.

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