

Perceptions of the Students Work Aid Programme (SWAP) At Tertiary Institutions in South Eastern Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The study advocates for the expansion of the Nigerian Education Loan Fund's (NEL Fund) mandate to include the Students Work Aid Programme (SWAP), in order to accommodate more financially disadvantaged students who cannot access student loans. The primary objective of the study is to determine the availability of SWAP in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. In addition, it examines the impact of SWAP on the completion of undergraduate studies and the enhancement of post-graduation employment opportunities. The scope of the study covers tertiary institutions—universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education—in South Eastern Nigeria that are owned by the federal and state governments as well as private establishments. Using an exploratory mixed methods approach, data were collected from 104 respondents (staff and students) across 20 institutions that reflect this institutional mix. The findings reveal that: (i) SWAP is available in only a few institutions in South Eastern Nigeria; (ii) there is a need to introduce SWAP in all tertiary institutions where it is currently unavailable; (iii) SWAP has a positive effect on undergraduate study completion, as it improves completion rates and reduces dropout rates; (iv) SWAP provides opportunities for students to acquire workplace knowledge and skills; (v) awareness of SWAP among staff and students is relatively low; and (vi) SWAP should be made a mandatory programme in tertiary institutions in Nigeria to support financially disadvantaged students. The study makes policy recommendations for the development of a financial aid system that integrates SWAP into NEL Fund, and funded through the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TET Fund).

Keywords: Dropout rate, Financial aid system, Knowledge and skills for workplaces, Nigerian Education Loan Fund (NEL Fund), Students Work Aid Programme (SWAP), Tertiary institutions in South Eastern Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Education and societal advancement are closely interconnected, sharing both asymmetrical and symmetrical relationships. Education drives societal development through innovation, environmental improvement, and capacity building. Conversely, societal advancement contributes to infrastructural development and increased access to education. The nexus between education and development is well documented in the literature and remains a subject of enduring scholarly interest (Nziadam & Amadioha, 2025; Gado, 2024; Onwughalu, 2022).

Over time, various strategies have been employed to increased access to education and support learners in completing studies at different levels. These include government-led initiatives such as budgetary funding, free education policies, infrastructural development, international collaborations with organisations like the World Bank and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), as well as legislation such as the Nigerian Education Loan Fund (NELFund), (Akinteye, 2025; World Bank Group, 2025; Heyneman & Lee, 2016).

In Nigeria, following the enactment of the Student Loans (Access to Higher Education) (Repeal and Re-enactment) Act, 2024, on April 3, 2024, the Nigerian Education Loan Fund (NEL Fund), came into effect, and started operations on May 24, 2024 (Ngelale, 2024; Bolaji, 2024; Odinkonigbo, 2025). The history of student loans in Nigeria can be traced to 1972 with the establishment of the Nigeria Students Loans Board (NSLB)

through Decree 25 of 1972, under the regime of General Yakubu Gowon. In 1976, its scope of coverage was expanded through Decree 21 to increase access to the loans. The scheme was reorganised with the promulgation of Decree 12 of 1988. In 1993, by the virtue of Decree 50, the Board was decentralised and the National Education Bank replaced the Nigerian Students Loan Board (The Cable, 2024; Abdullahi, 2024; Quadri, 2024; Odinkonigbo, 2025).

The Students Work Aid Programme (SWAP) is another form of support that promotes the completion of undergraduate studies and reduces dropout rate. However, in Nigeria, the programme has not received adequate attention or consideration despite its inherent benefits. Of particular relevance is the direct assistance it offers to undergraduates, which helps to meet institutional obligations and enhance their capacity to fit in and function effectively at workplaces after graduation.

The origin of the Students Work Aid Programme (SWAP) known also as Work-Study Programme (WSP), can be traced to Europe, particularly Switzerland and Australia, where the “European Student Relief (ESR) was established on August 7, 1920.” The philosophy behind the evolution of SWAP transitioned from providing various forms of support to students after World War I to creating “working students” who could finance their education (Nies, 2020). Since its inception, the basic eligibility requirement for participation is verifiable need for assistance without discrimination based on colour, sex, belief, or other factors, which has remained consistent. However, institutions have introduced additional criteria in line with their local contexts and programme structures (Suleiman, 2023; Ooreofe, 2023).

SWAP, which began as the “European Student Relief,” later expanded to 19 European countries and 42 countries across four continents, including North America, (Nies, 2020). In the United States, for instance, the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, now known as the Higher Education Act of 1965 introduced the Federal Work-Study Program in the country (Kagan, 2024). In Africa, the programme is implemented in tertiary institutions in countries such as Cameroon, Ghana, Uganda, South Africa, among other countries (Africa Renewal University, 2025; Adi University, 2022; Palm University College, 2012). In Nigeria, some tertiary institutions owned by the federal and state governments, as well as private establishments, have adopted and implemented the programme (Madonna University, n.d; Babcock University, 2025; University of Ibadan, 2012; University of Benin, 2022). However, when the total number of tertiary institutions in the country is compared with those that have introduced and implemented the Students Work Aid Programme (SWAP), its presence could be described as a drop in the ocean. This partly accounts for the paucity of research on SWAP in the Nigerian context, especially in the light of the financial challenges faced by many undergraduates in the country.

The foregoing circumstances motivated this study, which advocates the development of a financial aid system that integrates the Students Work Aid Programme (SWAP) into the Nigerian Education Loan Fund (NELFund), to be funded through the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund). The study is structured into seven sections. The introductory section provides the background to the study, followed by a brief review of the literature in section two. Section three presents the methodology, detailing the research design, area of study, population, and methods of data collection and analysis. Section four contains the findings and discussions. Section five presents the policy recommendations for integrating SWAP into NELFund. Section six presents the conclusion of the study, while sections seven and eight addressed the study’s limitations and suggestions for further research, respectively.

Statement of the Problem

Several factors contribute to the inability of some undergraduates in Nigeria to complete their studies or lead to their eventual withdrawal from tertiary institutions. Chief among these is inadequate funding, which limits students’ capacity to meet essential financial obligations to their institutions (Nurmalitasari & Faizuddin, 2023; Lorenzo-Quiles, Galdón-López, & Lendínez-Turón, 2023; Odinkonigbo, 2025). A practical approach to addressing this challenge is the provision of student loans alongside the introduction or expansion of the Students Work Aid Programme (SWAP) across tertiary institutions in the country.

Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of this study is to propose a policy recommendation for a financial aid system that integrates the Students Work Aid Programme (SWAP) into the mandate and scope of the Nigerian Education Loan Fund's (NELFund).

The specific objectives are to:

- (i). Determine the availability of the Students Work Aid Programme (SWAP) in tertiary institutions in South Eastern Nigeria.
- (ii). Ascertain whether SWAP should be introduced in all tertiary institutions across the country where it is currently unavailable.
- (iii). Evaluate the impact of SWAP on completion and dropout rates of undergraduate students.
- (iv). Examine whether SWAP provides opportunities for students to gain knowledge and skills relevant to the workplace.
- (v). Assess the level of awareness of SWAP among staff and students in tertiary institutions in South Eastern Nigeria.
- (vi). Determine whether SWAP should be made a mandatory programme in Nigerian tertiary institutions to support financially disadvantaged students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The varied terminology used by tertiary institutions to describe financial assistance for economically disadvantaged students often obscures discourse on the subject. One such term is the Study Work Programme (SWP), which refers to a study arrangement for workers or employees enrolled in tertiary institutions on a full-time or part-time basis (Avdic & Gartell, 2015; Devilly, Jasin, Lim, & Foo, 2022). Another is the Work-Study Programme (WSP), which denotes the type of work students engage in—usually off campus—depending on their course of study, as part of programme completion requirements. This may be paid or unpaid and is variously labelled as placement, internship, fieldwork, industrial training, or attachment (Epprecht, 2004; Kenefick, 2015; Epstein, 1973).

Additionally, the financial assistance provided by tertiary institutions to disadvantaged students who work in designated on-campus locations for stipends has been referred to by different names, including Work and Study Scheme, Work Study, Work Study Programme, and Student Work Study Programme (Africa Renewal University, 2025; Adi University, 2022; Palm University College, 2012; Madonna University, n.d.; Babcock University, 2025; University of Ibadan, 2012; University of Benin, 2022). This terminological overlap has led to confusing the programme with the Students Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES) in some literature (Oyeniyi, 2012).

For the sake of clarity and to avoid such confusion, this study adopts the term Students Work Aid Programme (SWAP) to describe the financial assistance provided by tertiary institutions to economically disadvantaged students who work in designated on-campus locations for stipends.

It is presumed that the Students Work Aid Programme is widely known and implemented in tertiary institutions across the world, and that students are therefore aware of its existence (Tuononen, Räisänen, & Hyytinen, 2024; Tuononen & Hyytinen, 2022; Drewery & Pretti, 2021; Passaretta & Triventi, 2015). The idea behind the programme is that financially disadvantaged students can engage in paid work within their institutions while continuing their studies. The philosophy guiding the programme, which appears to be universal, is its dual aim of providing financial support to students and offering them opportunities to acquire workplace-relevant knowledge and skills. Where the programme is considered effective and efficient, it enhances students' prospects of securing employment upon graduation (Passaretta & Triventi, 2015). In

addition, it provides opportunities to apply classroom theories to practical situations, build self-confidence, improve efficiency, and develop skills such as effective communication, problem-solving, and teamwork (Tuononen, Parpala, & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2017).

Gaining admission into tertiary institutions does not guarantee completion, as one of the major barriers to graduation is the availability of mechanisms for financing undergraduate studies. A significant number of enrolled students withdraw before obtaining their credentials or certificates. Therefore, attention should shift toward developing strategies aimed at “improving completion rates” (Baum & Schwartz, 2015:38). The effectiveness and usefulness of SWAP in some countries have been documented (Ntakana, 2011). Its inherent benefits include facilitating the completion of studies and reducing dropout rates (Glocker, 2011; Scott-Clayton & Minaya, 2016; Stampen & Cabrera, 1988). The academic performance of participants may influence their retention in the programme and contribute to completing their studies within the stipulated time. When the work assigned to students aligns with their field of study, it reinforces learning, improves academic performance, and enhances future employability (Tuononen, Räisänen, & Hyytinen, 2024; Jackson, 2023; Passaretta & Triventi, 2015).

The programme can have either positive or negative effects on students, particularly in terms of academic performance and employability (Monteiro, Almeida, & Garcia-Aracil, 2016; Sawhney & Bansal, 2015). In many cases, there is a misalignment between the jobs students undertake and their fields of study, which negatively affects their post-graduation employment prospects. As Kenefick (2015:1) observes, “Too often, though, the jobs they take are not in their field of study, which can impair the potential for career exploration and improved employment outcomes in the future.”

In light of the above, research on the Students Work Aid Programme in Nigeria remains very limited. The few existing studies have focused on the programme’s relevance, impact, and the challenges encountered by participating students (Omonijo, Anyaegbunam, & Okoye, 2020; Oludayo, Omonijo, Uche, Rotimi, & Nwadiakor, 2014; Ilori & Akerele, 2024). Other works have concentrated on the Students Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES) (Auru & Wakili, 2020; Anyaeneh & Ochuba, 2019; Ogbuanya, Njoku, Kemi, & Ogunkelu, 2018; Oyeniyi, 2012). There is an urgent need to first map the existence of the programme, especially in the face of current economic realities and the financial challenges experienced by many students in the country, in order to determine where it is implemented and where it is not. This would provide a basis for evaluating its performance in institutions where it exists, particularly in terms of the work experience it offers, its relevance to workplace demands, and its role in addressing the skills mismatch contributing to high unemployment levels in Nigeria. To contribute to filling this gap, the present study explores the perceptions of staff and students regarding SWAP in tertiary institutions in South Eastern Nigeria.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research design for this study is exploratory mixed methods. The design combines qualitative and quantitative approaches to explore the perceptions staff and students in tertiary institutions in South Eastern Nigeria about the Students Work Aid Programme. The approach integrates qualitative and quantitative data that enables the study to provide insights and understanding on SWAP in terms of availability, awareness, benefits and perceived impact. The design is adopted because research and literature on the Students Work Aid Programme in Nigeria is very limited, and to generate information needed for informed policy recommendations that guide practice.

Area of the Study

The study was conducted in South Eastern Nigeria, comprising five states, namely Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo States. South Eastern Nigeria is one of the six geo-political zones or regions in Nigeria.

Population of the Study and Sampling Technique

The population of the study comprised all tertiary institutions—universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education—in South Eastern Nigeria that are owned by the federal and state governments as well as private establishments. When the study was conducted, according to the National Universities Commission (n.d), National Board for Technical Education (n.d) and National Commission for Colleges of Education (n.d), the five states in South Eastern Nigeria have a total 85 accredited tertiary institutions as shown in table 1 below. The target population included staff and students of these institutions.

Table 1: Tertiary Institutions in South Eastern Nigeria

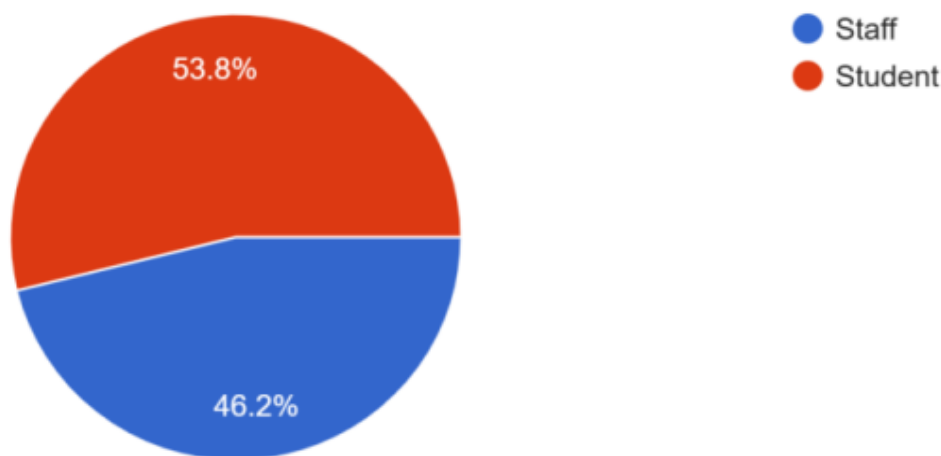
S/N	Nature of ownership of institutions	Universities	Polytechnics	Colleges of Education
1.	Federal	8	5	4
2.	State	10	5	5
3.	Private	24	11	13
Total		42	21	22

Sources: Adapted from the National Universities Commission. (n.d). *Nigerian Universities*. <https://www.nuc.edu.ng/> National Board for Technical Education. (n.d). *Approved Polytechnics*.

<https://www.digitalnbte.nbte.gov.ng/Public/PUCPolytechnics> National Commission for Colleges of Education. (n.d). *NCCE Accredited Colleges*. <https://ncce.gov.ng/AccreditedColleges>

Due to the large size of the population, a combination of purposive and cluster sampling techniques was used to sample a total of 20 institutions (that reflected the institutional mix or diversity) and 104 respondents (47 staff 46.2%) and (57 students 53.8%) across the participating institutions were involved (see figure 1). While purposive sampling ensured that institutions where SWAP is available and unavailable were included, cluster sampling ensured that the three categories of tertiary institutions (universities, polytechnics, colleges of education) and ownership types (federal, state, private) were represented.

Figure 1: Status of Respondents



Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

Primary data were collected through structured questionnaires (with both closed and open-ended items). Secondary data were obtained through the review of relevant literature. On the other hand, percentages were used to analyze quantitative data, and qualitative data were analyzed through content and thematic analyses.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

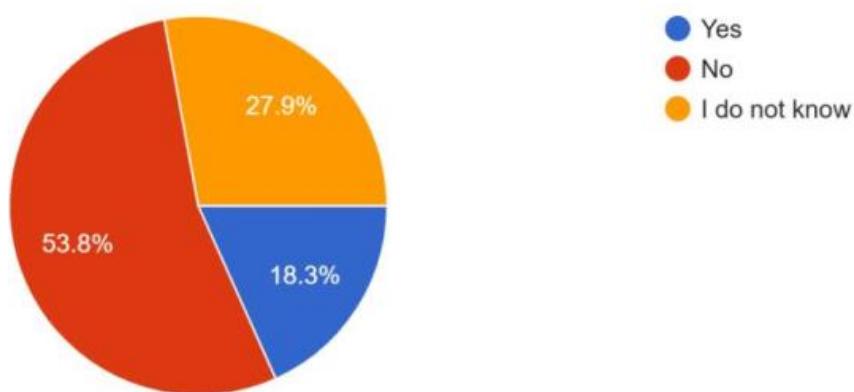
The broad objective of this study is to rely on integrated qualitative insights and quantitative data generated from foundational information to propose policy recommendations for a financial aid system that integrates the Students Work Aid Programme (SWAP) into the mandate and scope of the Nigerian Education Loan Fund's (NELFund).

The presentation of the findings and discussions are done in line with the order of the study's objectives.

(Un)availability of the Students Work Aid Programme (SWAP) in Tertiary Institutions

The study found that SWAP was available in only a few tertiary institutions and unavailable in most, as shown in figure 2. Notably, even in institutions where the programme had been in place for a considerable period, some respondents still indicated that SWAP was unavailable in their institutions. This suggests a low level of awareness, an issue examined under a subsequent theme in this study. Furthermore, this finding reinforces the earlier observation in the literature review regarding the limited research on the Students Work Aid Programme in Nigeria. This not only helps to explain, at least in part, why the programme may not be widely known in the country, but also underscores the need for calls for more research on the programme.

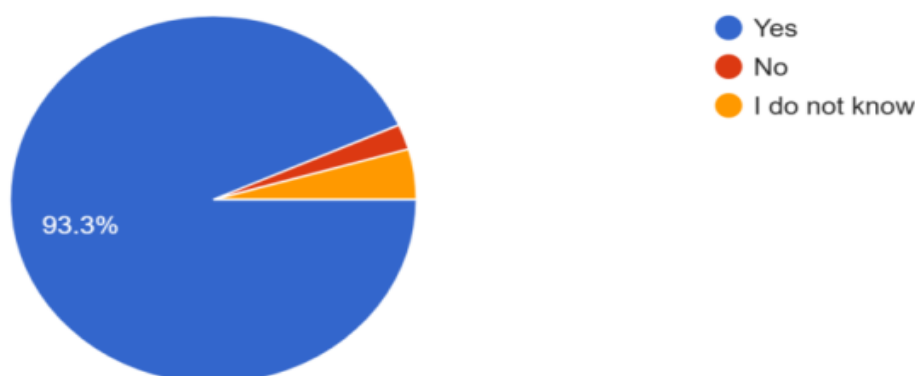
Figure 2: (Un)availability of SWAP in Tertiary Institutions



Introduction of Students Work Aid Programme in all Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria

Despite the low level of awareness of the programme among respondents, an overwhelming majority indicated that SWAP should be introduced in all tertiary institutions across the country where it is currently unavailable (see figure 3). This response may not be unconnected with the introductory section to the survey instrument, which provided a brief explanation of SWAP, its inherent benefits, and the specific objectives of the study. The information presented may have increased respondents' understanding of the programme and in turn, influenced their responses.

Figure 3: SWAP should be introduced in all tertiary institutions across the country



Impact of Students Work Aid Programme on Study Completion and Dropout Rates

Globally, the reasons for the introduction and sustainability of the student loan scheme are largely similar. These include expanding access to tertiary education, facilitating the completion of studies, and addressing manpower needs by producing a skilled workforce (Ayoko, 2025; Abdulrahman, 2023; Oluwole, 2023; Ziderman, 2002; Salmi, 2003). The findings of this study revealed that SWAP also embodies these features among its inherent benefits (see figures 4 & 5 below). Specifically, the programme has a positive relationship with tertiary education, as it facilitates the completion of studies and reduces the dropout rate through the financial support it provides to students.

Figure 4: SWAP support students financially to complete their studies

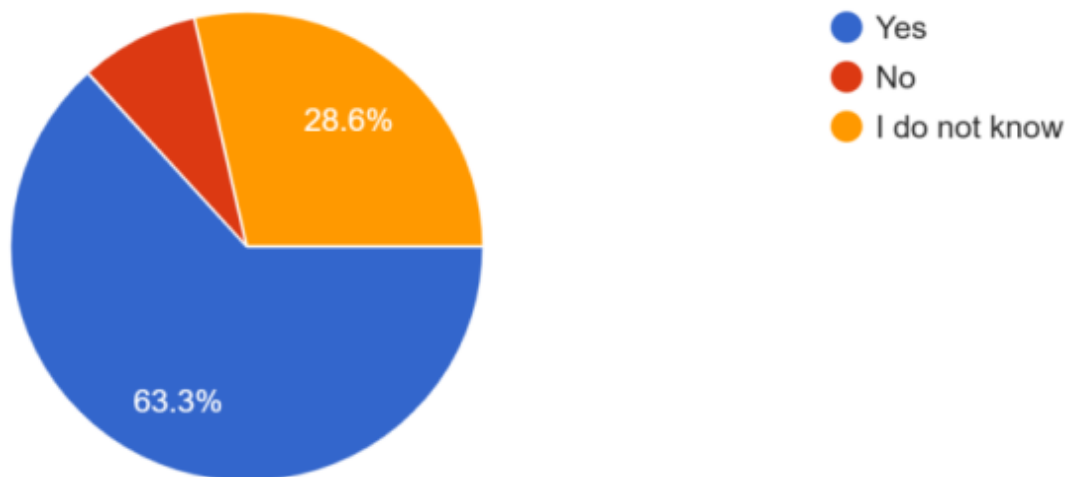
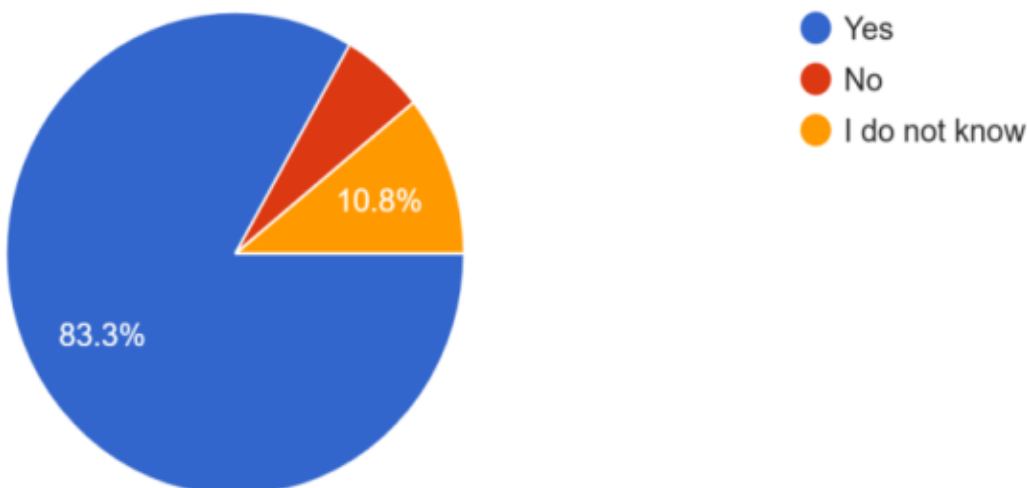


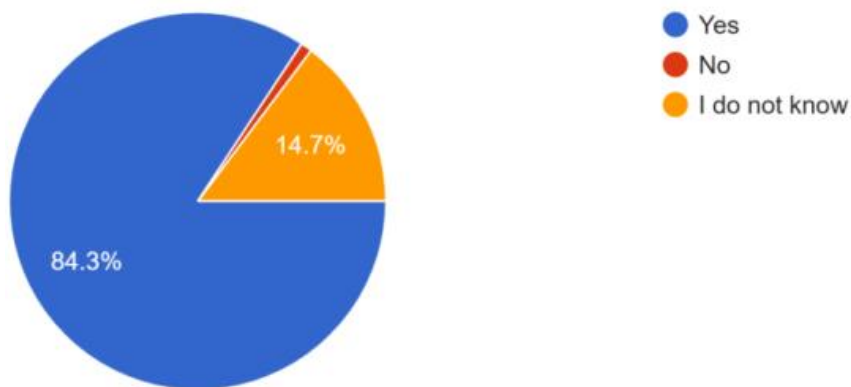
Figure 5: SWAP reduces dropout rate through the financial support it provides to students



Students Work Aid Programme and Opportunities to Acquire Knowledge and Skills Relevant to the Workplace

The study further revealed that owing to the hands-on training provided by SWAP, students are able to acquire practical skills and knowledge that are directly relevant to the workplace (see figure 6). This complements the theoretical knowledge imparted in classrooms and enhances the production of a skilled workforce. In tertiary institutions where SWAP is available, the programme creates diverse work opportunities, including engagement in institutions' ventures on campus and facilities such as the campus radio station, library, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Unit, event planning, clerical services, compound maintenance, and related activities.

Figure 6: SWAP creates diverse work opportunities for students to acquire practical skills and knowledge relevant to workplace

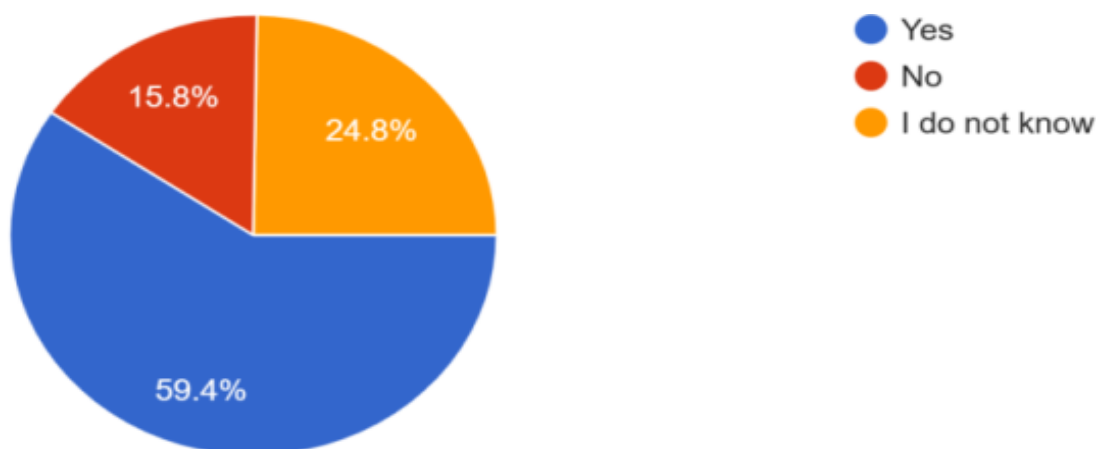


Given the types of jobs students engage in, the knowledge they acquire, and the skills they develop (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2022), SWAP can have either positive or negative implications for students' academic performance and employability (Monteiro, Almeida, & Garcia-Aracil, 2016; Sawhney, & Bansal, 2015). When students' assigned works in the programme are directly related to their courses of study, they tend to reinforce classroom learning, improve academic performance, and enhance future employment prospects (Neubert, 1997; Tuononen, Räisänen, & Hyytinen, 2024; Jackson, 2023; Passaretta, & Triventi, 2015).

However, the types of jobs listed above raise two major concerns: (i) whether students in the programme are assigned to roles that aligned with their fields of study, and (ii) whether the knowledge and skills gained through SWAP are directly relevant to workplace needs. As shown in figure 6, an overwhelming majority of respondents agreed that the knowledge and skills acquired through SWAP are relevant to the workplace. Nevertheless, this study observes that while some students are placed in roles connected to their academic disciplines, others are not. Similarly, not all the knowledge and skills gained through SWAP may directly address workplace requirements.

As a corollary to the above, a follow-up question was posed to determine whether the knowledge and skills acquired through SWAP help bridge the skills mismatch gaps between what is taught in schools and what is demanded in the workplace. The responses revealed a notable decline in the number of respondents who agreed, alongside an increase in those who either disagreed or were uncertain, as shown in figure 7. This contrasts with the more optimistic results presented in figure 6.

Figure 7: SWAP and bridging skills mismatch gaps

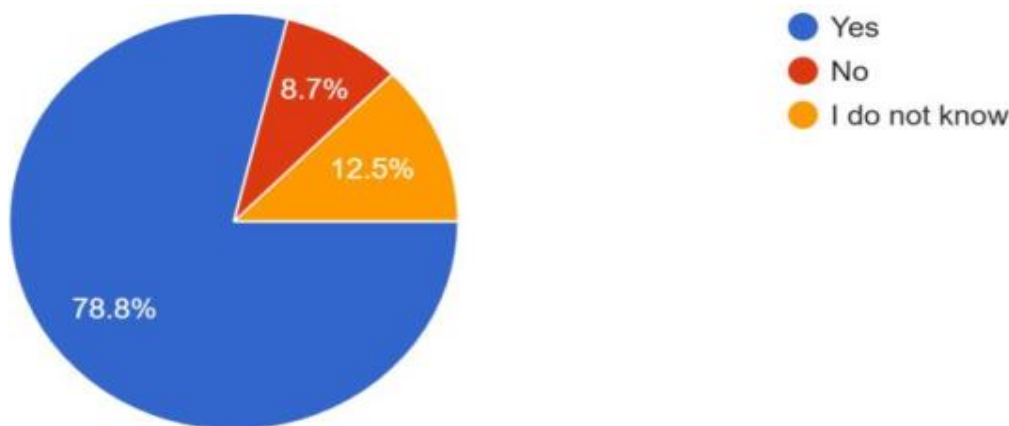


Skills mismatch remains a global challenge, particularly in relation to graduate unemployment (Zheliabovskii, 2025; International Labour Organization, 2019). One potential strategy for addressing this challenge is to prioritize industry-based knowledge and workplace-relevant training, which can both strengthen SWAP's impact in tertiary institutions and, conversely, be enhanced through its implementation.

Level of Awareness of SWAP among Staff and Students in Tertiary Institutions

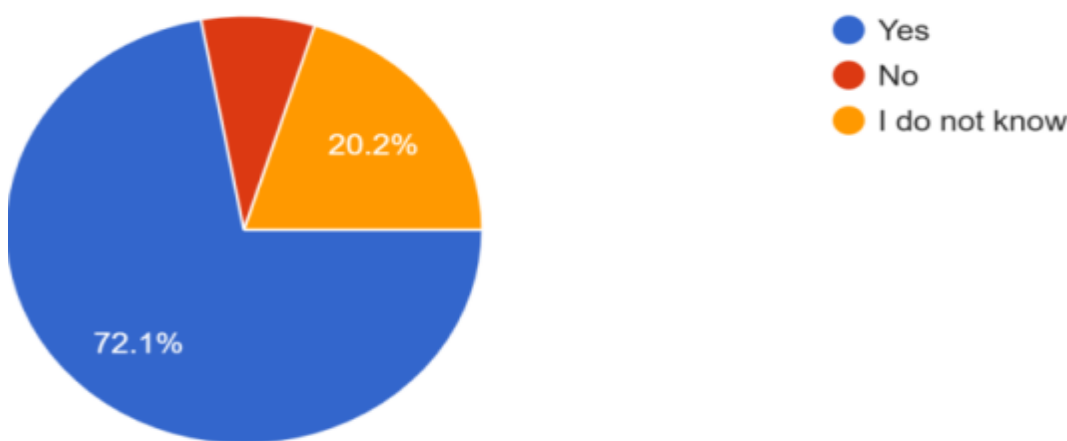
The Students Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES), introduced in Nigeria in 1973 by the Industrial Training Fund (ITF) (Industrial Training Fund, n.d; Oyeniyi, 2012), is a compulsory programme in all tertiary institutions in the country. Although not all courses or disciplines are eligible to participate, it is generally assumed that staff and students in tertiary institutions should have some level of awareness of SIWES. However, the findings of this study reveal that some respondents reported being unaware of SIWES, despite its compulsory status in Nigerian tertiary institutions (see Figure 8). This suggests that gaps in communication or orientation may exist within tertiary institutions.

Figure 8: SIWES is available in tertiary institutions in Nigeria



Given the established level of awareness of SIWES, this study used it as a reference point to compare with SWAP in assessing the level of awareness of the latter. To achieve this, the respondents were asked a similar question in two different forms. When asked whether SIWES is different from SWAP, the majority indicated that the two programmes are indeed different (see Figure 9).

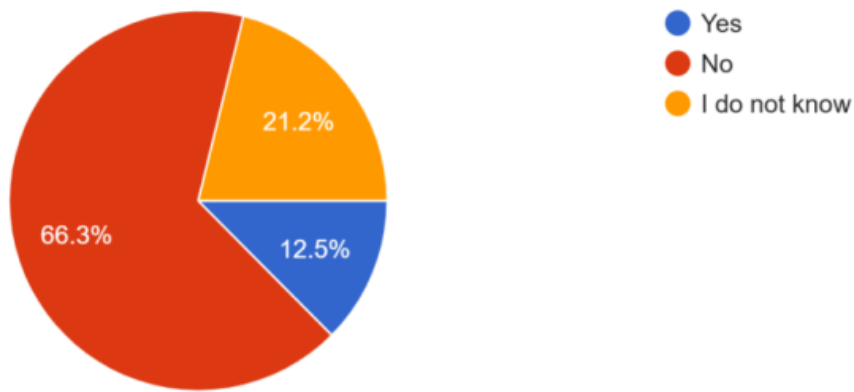
Figure 9: SIWES is different from SWAP



On whether SIWES and SWAP are the same, the findings in Figure 10 reveal a relatively low level of awareness of SWAP, particularly when compared with the results in Figure 9. The proportion of respondents who affirmed that SIWES and SWAP are different decreased from 72.1% to 66.3%, thereby confirmation that not all respondents clearly distinguished between the two programmes. Similarly, when the responses of those who believed that both programmes are the same (12.5%) and those who were uncertain (21.2%) are combined, the proportion is significant rather than negligible.

The outcome aligns with earlier patterns observed in the study, where notable proportions of respondents expressed disagreement or uncertainty on related themes. Taken together, these findings corroborate the conclusion that awareness of SWAP remains relatively low among staff and students in tertiary institutions.

Figure 10: SIWES and SWAP are the same

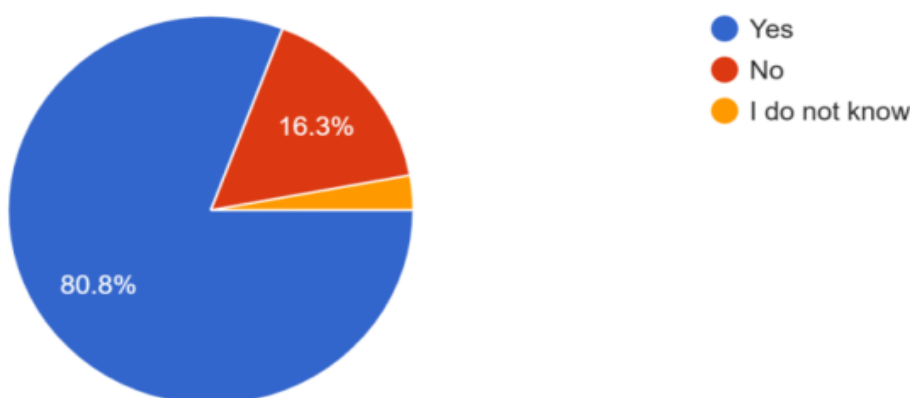


Both the Students Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES) and the Students Work Aid Programme (SWAP) operate within tertiary institutions in Nigeria and share the common goal of equipping students with skills and knowledge relevant to the workplace. However, their design, scope and implementation differ significantly. SIWES targets students in specific disciplines and is implemented primarily through industrial attachments or placements outside the campus. By contrast, SWAP is open to students across all disciplines and functions as a multi-purpose programme aimed at providing financial support, facilitating the completion of studies, reducing dropout rates, and offering work opportunities within the campus environment.

SWAP as a Mandatory Programme in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions

Despite the relatively low level of awareness of SWAP, the majority of respondents expressed the view that it should be institutionalized as a mandatory programme in Nigerian tertiary institutions (see Figure 11). In essence, the findings suggested that SWAP should be made available across all tertiary institutions in the country, similar to SIWES. This position appears to be linked to respondents' recognition of the inherent benefits of SWAP in supporting students and enhancing their educational outcomes.

Figure 11: SWAP should be a mandatory programme in tertiary institutions in Nigeria



Developing a Financial Aid System in Nigeria: Policy Recommendations for Integrating the Students Work Aid Programme (SWAP) into the Nigerian Education Loan Fund (NELFund)

A streamlined and well-coordinated financial aid system, comprising scholarships, grants, loans (federal and state governments, private), the Students Work Aid Programme (SWAP), and related support mechanisms, is largely lacking in Nigeria. Ideally, if such a system exists, it should assist students and their families in covering tertiary education expenses like tuition, fees, accommodation, learning materials, stationeries, transportation and upkeep. The recent reintroduction of student loans in the country has renewed national attention and intensified discourses around the broader structure of financial assistance. This study, however, focuses specifically on student loans and the Students Work Aid Programme, acknowledging that other types of assistance exist in uncoordinated and fragmented forms across the country.

The student loans and the Students Work Aid Programme (SWAP) share several core objectives. Both are need-based interventions aimed at expanding access to education by providing financial support, promoting the completion of studies, and reducing dropout rates. Additionally, both require applicants to be bona fide undergraduate students to qualify for consideration. However, a key distinction lies in repayment, while student loans must be repaid, support provided through SWAP is non-payable (Odinkonigbo, 2025; Lake Forest College, 2025; Ngoladi, 2025). In Nigeria, student loans are funded directly by the federal government through NELFund, while SWAP currently operates at the institutional level. It is typically financed by the tertiary institutions where it is available. This institutional funding model may explain its unavailability in many institutions across the country.

Given the shared goals of student loans and SWAP, and the need to further broaden access to tertiary education; this study advocates the development of a financial aid system (Akinseye, 2025; Lake Forest College, 2025) that integrates SWAP into NELFund. These recommendations are particularly relevant in the light of the criticisms and challenges surrounding student loans and NELFund (Durosinmi, 2024; ActionAid Nigeria, 2025; Ngoladi, 2025).

Legislation to Integrate SWAP into NELFund

This study recommends the expansion of mandate of the Nigerian Education Loan Fund (NELFund) to formally integrate the Students Work Aid Programme (SWAP) into its scope of operations. Such integration would broaden the social safety nets available to students, thereby extending support to a larger number of financially disadvantaged undergraduates, many of whom are currently unable to access the student loans (Durosinmi, 2024; ActionAid Nigeria, 2025).

Integrating SWAP into NELFund would not only enhance access to tertiary education, but also strengthen the financial assistance available to needy students. To achieve this, legislative action by the National Assembly is required to amend the Student Loans (Access to Higher Education) (Repeal and Re-enactment) Act, 2024. This amendment could be initiated through an Executive Bill from the Presidency.

Participation of Regulatory Agencies, and Supervisory Bodies

The National Universities Commission (NUC), National Board for Technical Education (NBTE), and the National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE) as regulatory agencies and supervisory bodies are key stakeholders in the tertiary education sub-sector. Already, they play central roles in the administration and implementation of the Students Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES), and the experience positions them strategically to support the integration of SWAP into NELFund.

These agencies can play three crucial roles in this regard: (i) Through policy advocacy, they can engage the Federal Ministry of Education and the Presidency to highlight the need to integrate SWAP into NELFund as part of a broader financial aid framework. (ii) Through institutional mobilization, they can encourage tertiary institutions to prepare and submit formal proposals to the Presidency and the National Assembly in support of amending the Student Loans (Access to Higher Education) Act, 2024 to accommodate SWAP. (iii) When SWAP is integrated into NELFund, they can play co-administration and oversight roles. These agencies should play similar roles in administration, supervision and implementation as they currently do in SIWES. Their participation would enhance coordination, accountability, and institutional compliance.

Funding by the Federal Government and Complemented by Tertiary Institutions

At present, the Students Work Aid Programme (SWAP) is funded solely by the tertiary institutions where they are available. This model limits its reach and excludes institutions with weaker financial capacity. As a policy recommendation, the funding for SWAP should be led by the federal government, with complementary support from tertiary institutions where it is financially feasible. The Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) already provides financial support to tertiary institutions in the country in various ways, which include resources for teaching, learning, infrastructure, library, laboratory, research, staff development, and

innovation (Sowole, 2025). This existing institutional relationship positions TETFund to support SWAP integration.

Section 12 of the Student Loans (Access to Higher Education) (Repeal and Re-enactment) Act, 2024 identifies “the Federal Inland Revenue Service (FIRS) and the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund)” as the primary funding sources for NELFund (Ngoladi, 2025:3; Odinkonigbo, 2025:30). This existing framework can be leveraged to extend funding to SWAP once integrated into NELFund. With the introduction of a new tax regime that broadens the tax base, and close revenue leakages (Uwaegbute, Agbeyi, Otufale, Erikune, Adu & Siloma, 2025; Akewushola, 2025), more funds will be available to sustain both student loans and SWAP, enhancing long-term viability. Thus, SWAP should be formally included in the funding mandate of TETFund, enabling expanded national coverage, institutional collaboration, and sustainable financing.

Mitigating the Challenges of Student Loans Recovery

A major criticism against the student loan scheme in Nigeria concerns the difficulty of repayment (Abdullahi, 2024; The Cable, 2024; Ngoladi, 2025; Punch Editorial Board, 2025). The concerns include: high default risks, unemployment after graduation, limited repayment mechanisms, etc. Integrating the students Work Aid Programme (SWAP) into NELFund can significantly reduce the burden of student loan recovery through a mixed-aid model. Instead of relying solely on repayable loans, a portion of financial support would be provided as stipends through SWAP. These stipends are non-repayable and as such, they reduce the total loan amount disbursed per student. Furthermore, stipends under SWAP are lower in value than the conventional loans, and more manageable within the existing funding frameworks. Unlike loans, SWAP offers students work-based engagement, enhances skills, productivity, and employment. It also reduces dependence, while promoting accountability. By combining repayable and non-repayable aid within NELFund, the pressure of loan repayment is reduced, fewer students default, government expenditure becomes more sustainable, and the programme gains broader public acceptance.

CONCLUSION

The recent reintroduction of student loans in Nigeria has renewed national attention and intensified discussions on the broader structure of financial assistance in the tertiary education sector. Drawing on existing literature and survey data from staff and students in universities, polytechnics, colleges of education, owned by the federal and state governments, and private establishments across the five states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo States in South Eastern Nigeria, the study identified key findings that justify the development of a financial aid system integrating the Students Work Aid Programme (SWAP) into the mandate of NELFund.

The overwhelming support from respondents for the introduction of SWAP in all tertiary institutions in Nigeria, alongside the inherent benefits of the programme in expanding access to tertiary education, supporting the completion of studies, and contributing to workforce development, forms the foundation of the study’s policy recommendations. The advocacy is driven by the need to provide financial assistance to a greater number of economically disadvantaged undergraduates who are currently excluded from the student loans, and mitigate the challenges associated with the administration of the loan and its repayment. By integrating SWAP into NELFund, Nigeria can adopt a more inclusive, flexible, and sustainable financial aid system that supports national goals in education, equity, and human capital development.

Limitations Of The Study

This study has two major limitations: (i) scope of the study and sample size, and (ii) the methods of data collection. First, the study covered only the South East zone, which is one of the six geopolitical zones that made up the country. This limitation was further compounded by the sample size, as only 20 out of 85 institutions in the zone were surveyed. Second, in-depth interviews with key informant, which could have provided deeper insights into the experiences of institutions, were not included in the methods of data collection.

These shortcomings affect the findings of the study in ways that may limit their generalisability to the entire country. Nevertheless, the findings provide adequate insight into the Students Work Aid Programme (SWAP), its inherent benefits, and how it complements student loans. Furthermore, on the one hand, the study offers government and policymakers foundational information on the need to develop a financial aid system in the country, and, on the other, provides stakeholders with useful material for advocacy.

Suggestions For Further Research

Further studies should consider a wider geographic scope and a larger sample size, and should also incorporate in-depth interviews with key informants in the data collection process. Additional areas that further research could explore include: (i) assessment of existing assistance and support programmes in the country, including their accessibility, with a view to informing a comprehensive financial aid system; (ii) given the inherent benefits of SWAP, particularly in knowledge and skills acquisition, should SWAP be restricted to only financially disadvantaged students or made available to all interested student? (iii) Should SWAP be limited to campus-based opportunities only, or should it include opportunities both on-campus and off-campus? Examine the (iv) effectiveness, and (v) sustainability of assistance and support programmes, (vi) and their funding models.

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