

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Awareness and implementation confidence of free higher education program under UNIFAST among HEIs in Sulu, Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Accessible higher education is a critical determinant of a nation's competitiveness in the global knowledge economy. By investing in human capital through free tertiary education, countries can cultivate a skilled workforce capable of driving innovation, attracting foreign investment, and remain to be competitive on the international stage. This quantitative study analyzed the perceptions of students (n=200) about the implementation of Unified Financial Assistance System for Tertiary Education (UNIFAST) in Sulu, Philippines. The students were purposively sampled from four (4) universities in the province. A standardized Likert-scale was used to elicit the perceptions of students based on three (3) implementation metric (i) institutions' awareness of UNIFAST, (ii) application and disbursement process, and (iii) evaluation of UNIFAST outcomes. Findings indicated that the higher education institutions (HEIs) in Sulu often implemented the provisions of the law. Additionally, inferential analysis revealed that student's demographic profile (i.e., gender, parental education attainment, family income) could influence their general evaluation of UNIFAST implementation. Notably, this could be attributed to their perception of the program as a substantial source of assistance in pursuing higher education. Likewise, the assessment of UNIFAST implementation by students may be influenced by emotional elements, such as feelings of relief and contentment. The program may receive higher ratings from students because of the emotional relief it offers, especially for individuals who are experiencing financial limitations. Future studies might consider developing a more rigorous analysis relating human emotions scaling up their overall evaluation of the UNIFAST program.

Keywords: family income; free higher education; implementation of UNIFAST; parental education background

1. Introduction

The provision of tuition-free higher education has the potential to greatly improve the accessibility of postsecondary education, especially for students coming from socio-economically disadvantaged households. The alleviation of financial obstacles facilitates the access to higher education for students, thereby fostering upward social mobility and mitigating disparities.

This study analyzed the implementation of Free Higher Education under the provisions of Unified Financial Assistance System for Tertiary Education (UNIFAST) in Sulu, Philippines. UNIFAST, also referred to as Republic Act No. 10687, is one of the scholarship programs established by the government to address

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issues regarding the growing increase of dropout rates and sustain Filipino people to finish their education. This study assessed the feedback of students based on three (3) metrics (i) institutions' awareness of UNIFAST, (ii) application and disbursement process, and (iii) evaluation of UNIFAST outcomes. Such analysis shed light on the success of UNIFAST implementation in the province as well as analysis on potential factors that influence the feedback of students (*e.g.*, their socioeconomic status, gender).

Free higher education is a product of Republic Act No. 10931 of 2017, which aims to provide equal access to high-quality university education for all individuals. Consequently, it led to the provision of tuition-free education and exemption from other school expenses in public higher education^[1]. According to its Implementing Rules and Regulations (IRR), the law should establish mechanisms that facilitate the inclusion of individuals from diverse socio-economic backgrounds in tertiary education. Additionally, it ensures that all Filipinos have equal access to high-quality tertiary education, with a particular emphasis on prioritizing academically capable students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds^[2,3].

In higher education, equality of opportunity includes not only the ability to apply to, enroll in, and eventually graduate from a university, but also the freedom to major in any field a student chooses^[4,5]. This has implications for the person's future professional route as well as, in the end, for the demographics of the work force in the nation. Focusing on specific public policy goals, the government offers incentives to encourage students to pursue specific majors, like Science and Technology (S&T) courses, known for their higher individual and societal benefits^[6,7].

Analysis conducted on recently published papers revealed that no study was conducted about the implementation of UNIFAST in the Province of Sulu. The succeeding sections of this study discussed more about the UNIFAST implementation and the significance of scholarships to students. By analyzing the implementation of Free Higher Education under the UNIFAST framework in Sulu, Philippines, this study contributes to the evaluation of a specific policy initiative aimed at expanding access to higher education. Understanding the successes and challenges of such programs is crucial for policymakers in refining existing policies and designing future interventions to better serve the needs of students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

This study was conducted in Sulu, Philippines situated in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. The calculated population density is 220 people per km² or 570 people per sq. mi^[8]. Once a thriving province in Southern Philippines, Sulu has seen its economy severely impacted by conflicts, terrorist attacks, and the presence of jihadist groups. According to Department of Agriculture, Special Area for Agricultural Development^[9], the municipality of New Panamao exhibits the highest poverty incidence, resting at 62.8%, whereas the municipality of Patikul had the lowest poverty incidence at 40.2%.

Analyzing the previous literatures, no published study was conducted about the implementation of UNIFAST in the province. For a province affected by armed conflicts and geographical divide, education can be a valuable medium to transform the lives of the people. Access to quality education is essential to empower them to be part of social transformation and sustainable growth in the region. Hence, this study initially analyzed the implementation of Free Higher Education Program under UNIFAST. The objectives of the study are to determine the level of implementation of UNIFAST program in Sulu based on the following standardized metrics: i. Institutions' awareness of UNIFAST ii. Application and disbursement process, and iii. Evaluation of UNIFAST outcomes and to determine whether students' demographic profiles (*i.e.*, gender, age, year level, parental education attainment, and family income) influence their evaluation of UNIFAST implementation.

2. Literature review

2.1. Higher education and scholarship grant

Scholarships are widely recognized as important at all levels of education around the world. Specifically, it acquired relevance when the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasized the inclusion of scholarship programs as a vehicle for attaining their objectives^[10]. SDG envisions that “by 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university”^[11].

Scholarships and financial aid can have a direct impact on students' academic motivation, ultimately leading to improved academic achievement. Campbell and Neff^[12] analyzed 105 research articles on foreign college scholarships indicated that these scholarships had six (6) key outcomes—creating human capital, generating social change, encouraging sustainable growth, internationalizing institutes, boosting bilateral relations, and increasing access to education. Furthermore, various research presented empirical evidence of the relationship between scholarships and students' academic progress, motivation, retention, satisfaction, and engagement^[13-18].

Different studies were conducted on the factors that impact the access to quality higher education. For instance, in Scotland, there is a cycle of educational and labor market disadvantage that persists through generations, impacting men and women in various ethnic groups differently^[19]. Basit^[20] argued that the influence of parental education background and socioeconomic status on the quality of elementary or preparatory schools attended by children, particularly in relation to their access to higher education, is significant, which primarily applies to individuals from both majority and minority ethnic backgrounds. Similarly, Murro et al.^[21] discovered that parents with low education attainment were challenged in teaching their children.

Earning a higher education can be more challenging for women than men due to financial constraints being a significant barrier^[22-24]. Additionally, financial constraints pose a significant obstacle for marginalized communities in Pakistan, such as slum dwellers, in accessing higher education^[10]. According to Scholly^[25], 42% of scholarships are not discoverable through simple Google search.

Indeed, in the quest for higher education and the issue of rising tuition costs in achieving them, along with the financial burden imposed on students and their families has garnered increasing attention in recent decades. Free tuition initiatives seek to promote equity in education. They acknowledge that students from disadvantaged backgrounds face disproportionate obstacles when it comes to accessing higher education. These programs are designed to level the playing field and create a more inclusive system, irrespective of a student's socio-economic background.

2.2. Socioeconomic status of Filipino students

Education is viewed as a valuable investment by many Filipino families, serving as a gateway to empowerment and job opportunities^[4,26]. It comes as no surprise that both the public and private sectors are actively involved in providing scholarships for Filipino learners. They clearly recognize the importance of well-educated students in developing a skilled human capital.

However, according to de la Cruz^[27], just 40 percent of Filipino high-school graduates possess the financial means to pursue higher education. The current situation of the impacted students and the education sector has inspired legislators to explore ways to improve the distribution of scholarships and other forms of financial aid^[28].

Previous studies have demonstrated that minority ethnic groups perceive education as a pathway to upward social mobility^[29,30]. Additionally, parents from working-class backgrounds exhibit middle-class

aspirations and attitudes towards education, leading to significant support for their children's educational pursuits, despite their limited understanding of the education processes^[31,32]. Researchers have found that education enhances the productivity of individuals with low income by improving their standing in the job market. In contrast, the widening gap between different socioeconomic groups is a result of the growing knowledge and higher remuneration of those who have a university degree^[33,34]. Within the framework of exorbitant tuition fees at prestigious universities and restricted availability of credit and financial assistance, the surge in student admissions might be attributed to the proliferation of substandard programs offered by non-accredited institutions^[30,35].

Yee^[36] studied disparities in education across different levels of achievement, covering developments from 1950 to 2015. The findings indicated that during economic recessions, students facing disadvantages might be unable to finish their education in both regular and high-status institutions. In contrast, advantaged students experience long-term effects, showing a decrease in their chances of graduating from prestigious public institutions and an increase in graduating from regular ones. The author noted that parental education had a stronger correlation with the likelihood of completing education in a traditional higher education setting, compared to not having a degree. It is conceivable that forecasting admission to prestigious institutions necessitates greater achievements from parents (college or graduate studies), or that various socioeconomic factors (such as employment type and sector, extended family connections) may also be influential, but were not able to be examined with the data at hand. These findings coincide with foreign studies indicating that parents' occupation has a substantial influence on the socioeconomic growth of individuals^[37,38], linked to education^[39-41], impacts children's lifestyle choices^[42-44].

Additionally, Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) estimated that individuals born into low-income households in Colombia would require 11 generations to attain the mean income level, in contrast to the average of 4.5 generations observed across different countries^[30]. Studies indicated that continuous parent support system could have remarkable impact on student's performance in school^[37,45] exhibiting potential in social mobility and transformation^[46,47].

2.3 Implementation of UNIFAST

The Unified Financial Assistance System for Tertiary Education Act, referred to as Republic Act No. 10687, allocated a budget of one billion pesos for financial aid in higher education. Lim et al. (2018) noted that its purpose is to primarily focus on tackling dropout rates, with only a quarter of students currently graduating from higher education and assist students who are dropping their education due to financial difficulties.

According to RA 10687, TES is designed to provide financial assistance to students for their tertiary education, covering all expenses associated with their studies at a public or private university or college. In addition to the waived tuition fee at state universities and colleges (SUCs), eligible TES recipients in SUCs will receive 40,000 pesos and 60,000 pesos for students in a private university or college^[28].

Asuncion and Tullao Jr.^[48] highlighted a few problems with the UNIFAST Act in their research. While the current IRR offered certain favorable attributes, there are also certain concerns that require attention. These include the requirement for a suitable management team to execute the program, as the Act solely delineated the obligations of the unidentified program management, and it failed to establish a comprehensive procedural flow involving the loan application, repayment, and guidance for prospective students to avail themselves of the program.

The government should prioritize expanding access to higher education because of the positive impact it has on the economy and on society. To make college more accessible, financial assistance programs should

streamline their procedures, prioritize grants over loans, and use need-based criteria instead of merit-based ones^[48].

3. Methods

3.1. Research design

This study was a descriptive-comparative research^[49,50] that analyzed the implementation of free higher education program through UNIFAST in the Province of Sulu. This study compared the perceptions of student-respondents about the implementation of the program based on three (3) metrics (*i.e.*, awareness and understanding UNIFAST provisions, application and disbursement process, and the evaluation of UNIFAST outcomes).

This study used descriptive design^[51] to analyze the level of implementation as perceived by the college students. Comparative design employed comparing the perceptions of students based on their demographic profiles (*i.e.*, sex, age, year level, parent educational attainment, and family income).

3.2. Participants and sampling

This study was conducted among HEIs in Sulu, Philippines during the Academic Year 2023-2024. The participants were college students enrolled in state colleges and universities who had acquired the UNIFAST. Purposive sampling^[52-54] was employed to select the participants to ensure variations on demographics of participants. The researchers sampled 50 participants each in four (4) HEIs in Sulu; hence, a total of two hundred (200) samples were chosen based on their sex, age, and background. Purposive sampling ensures that participants of different demographics could equally participate in the study^[55].

3.3. Research instrument

This study developed a Likert scale questionnaire based on the implementing rules and regulations of Republic Act 10931, known as Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act. The questionnaire were standardized research instruments with established validity and reliability. To suit their usability in the local setting, however, the questionnaires used in this study were subjected to the perusal of two (2) experts from the faculty members of the School of Graduate Studies of Sulu State College.

Generally, the research instrument used in this study consisted of two (2) parts. Part I focused on obtaining the demographic profile of the college students of HEIs in Sulu such as sex, age, year level, parent's educational attainment and parent's average monthly income. Part II was gathered data on the level of implementation of UNIFAST based on three (3) metrics—awareness and understanding (10-item), application and disbursement process (10-item); and evaluation of UNIFAST outcomes (10-item).

3.4. Data gathering procedure

A permit to administer the questionnaire was secured from the Office of the Dean of Graduate Studies and the Chancellor/President/Superintendent of HEIs in Sulu. After securing an approval from each HEI, the researcher launched and administered the questionnaires as well as their retrieval. While administering the survey, the researcher upheld ethical measures ensuring the confidentiality of results, safety of students, and objectiveness. The data gathering and retrieval took two (2) months to complete from January 2023 to March 2023.

3.5. Statistical analysis

This study used the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 29.0.2.0 in carrying out statistical analysis to the collected survey data.

Percentage (denoted as %) was used to analyze the demographics of the participants. Percentages provide an objective way of representing relative values, making it clearer to analyze the interactions between distinct data points.

Weighted mean to descriptively analyze the level of implementation of UNIFAST provisions. A weighted mean, also known as a weighted average, is a type of average where different data points are given different weights based on their relative importance or significance. Below is the formula for weighted mean used in this study.

The study used inferential analysis in analyzing the differences between demographic profiles. Independent samples T-test was performed to analyze the differences between two sub-groups of demographic variables (*i.e.*, sex, age). Similarly, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was employed analyzing the differences of groups (*i.e.*, year level, parent educational attainment, family income) with more than two comparing variables. After identifying statistical differences in ANOVA, Tukey’s Honest Significant Difference test, a post-hoc test, was used to determine which variables differed. These tests become statistically significant at $\alpha < 0.05$; hence, rejecting the null hypothesis.

4. Results

4.1. Demographic profile of students

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the college student-respondents. Out of 200 student-respondents, 43 (21.5%) are male and 157 (78.5%) are female. Based on age brackets, 64 (32%) are within <20 years old while 136 (68.5%) are within 21-25 years old.

Table 1. Demographic profile of the sampled participants.

Demographics		n	Percent
Sex	Male	43	21.5%
	Female	157	78.5%
Age	20 years old & below	64	32%
	21 years old & above	136	68.0%
Year Level	First Year	6	3.0%
	Second Year	7	3.5%
	Third Year	183	91.5%
	Fourth Year	4	2.0%
Parent’s Educational Attainment	Elementary graduate	91	45.5%
	High School graduate	31	15.5%
	College graduate	48	24.0%
	Post-graduate degree holder	4	2.0%
	No formal education	26	13.0%
Monthly Income	5,000 & below	166	82.5%
	5,001 to 10,000	11	5.5%
	10,001 to 15,000	13	6.5%
	15,001 & above	11	5.5%

4.2. Implementation of UNIFAST in Sulu HEIs

Table 2 shows the level of implementation of Free Higher Education Program through UNIFAST among college students in Higher Education Institutions in Sulu. Students noted that the regulations of Free Higher Education Program under UNIFAST is often implemented in the province.

Students positively rated the awareness of HEIs about the regulations and implementation of UNIFAST [\bar{x} =4.0520; σ =0.874]. They know that their institution *actively communicates, updates and changes related to UNIFAST, disseminated information about UNIFAST to students and staff, and address student inquiries and concerns about UNIFAST*. The awareness represents the understanding of the institution about the UNIFAST provisions in implementing the Free Higher Education Program.

Students perceived that the Application and Disbursement Process of UNIFAST are often implemented [\bar{x} =4.1540; σ =0.745] among the HEIs in Sulu. Students believe that their institutions *have established a streamlined application process for UNIFAST, have mechanisms in place to verify and authenticate student applications, and have protocols for addressing appeals and disputes related to UNIFAST*. This indicates the extent of UNIFAST implementation in the province with emphasis on timely disbursement, excellent application process, and authentic application assessment.

Students feel that the provisions of UNIFAST are often implemented [\bar{x} =4.1235; σ =0.74] highlighting the role of their institution in evaluating the effectiveness of UNIFAST program and strengthening its capacity. The students believe that their institutions *monitor the academic performance and achievements of UNIFAST beneficiaries, evaluates the socioeconomic impact of UNIFAST on students and their families, and collect data on the number of students who have benefited from UNIFAST*. This indicates that the institutions not only confined in distributing the funds but more importantly, to evaluate the impact of the Free Higher Education Program to student’s outcome and retention, development of human capital, and social transformation.

Table 2. Composite mean of UNIFAST implementation metric.

Metric	\bar{x}	σ	Remarks
Awareness and Understanding of UNIFAST	4.0520	0.874	Often Implemented
UNIFAST Application and Disbursement Process	4.1540	0.745	Often Implemented
Evaluation of UNIFAST	4.1235	0.74	Often Implemented

Table 3 presents the summary table gathered from inferential analysis conducted. This study compared the perceptions of students based on their demographic profiles.

Inferential analysis indicated that gender and age groups significantly varied on their perceptions on the implementation of Free Higher Education Program under UNIFAST in Sulu. For instance, female students significantly have higher understanding of UNIFAST provisions [\bar{x} =4.1650; σ =0.821] and application process [\bar{x} =4.279; σ =0.6529]. In contrast, male students often had higher assessment rating for their institution’s evaluation process [\bar{x} =4.691; σ =0.8118].

Similarly, students did not differ on their positive rating of awareness and understanding of UNIFAST provisions. Students of >21 years old has significantly higher implementation rating for application and disbursement process [\bar{x} =4.563; σ =0.782] and UNIFAST evaluation [\bar{x} =4.6431; σ =0.735].

Year level mediated the perceptions of student-respondent on the implementation of UNIFAST in the province. Tukey’s Test indicated that Third Year students significantly differed their perception of the UNIFAST implementation. Third year students positively rated the awareness of institutions on UNIFAST provisions [σ_{μ} =0.346; $p=0.001$], the application and disbursement [σ_{μ} =0.289; $p=0.00$], and evaluation of UNIFAST outcomes [σ_{μ} =0.292; $p=0.001$] compared to the other groups. It is important to note that while the results seem significant, the number of participants were concentrated in this group which could influence the outcome.

Table 3. Summary table from inferential analysis.

Demographics		Sig.	Description
Gender	Awareness and Understanding of UNIFAST	0.00*	Significant
	UNIFAST Application and Disbursement Process	0.00*	Significant
	Evaluation of UNIFAST	0.00*	Significant
Age	Awareness and Understanding of UNIFAST	0.096	Not Significant
	UNIFAST Application and Disbursement Process	0.003*	Significant
	Evaluation of UNIFAST	0.001*	Significant
Year Level	Awareness and Understanding of UNIFAST	0.00*	Significant
	UNIFAST Application and Disbursement Process	0.00*	Significant
	Evaluation of UNIFAST	0.00*	Significant
Parent's Educational Attainment	Awareness and Understanding of UNIFAST	0.00*	Significant
	UNIFAST Application and Disbursement Process	0.00*	Significant
	Evaluation of UNIFAST	0.00*	Significant
Monthly Income	Awareness and Understanding of UNIFAST	0.007*	Significant
	UNIFAST Application and Disbursement Process	0.456	Not Significant
	Evaluation of UNIFAST	0.074	Not Significant

*Significant at < 0.05

In **Table 3**, the educational attainment of parents also mediated the rating of students on the implementation of Free Higher Education Program under UNIFAST. For instance, students whose parents are elementary graduate significantly differed the rating for awareness [$\sigma_{\mu}=0.1687$; $p=0.001$] compared to those with high school graduate parents. Additionally, students whose parents are in no formal education had significantly higher ratings for application and disbursement process [$\sigma_{\mu}=0.1889$; $p=0.002$] compared to students with high school graduate parents. Additionally, same group of students had higher rating for evaluation of UNIFAST outcomes compared to students with high school graduate parents [$\sigma_{\mu}=0.186$; $p=0.002$] and with college graduate parents [$\sigma_{\mu}=0.171$; $p=0.001$].

5. Discussion

UNIFAST is a state-funded scholarship program aimed at supporting financially disadvantaged but academically deserving students in pursuing tertiary education. The program selects scholars based on both financial need and academic merit, ensuring that deserving students are given the opportunity to excel in their chosen fields of study. It was determined that the Province of Sulu *often implement* the provisions of Free Higher Education Program under UNIFAST with emphasis on ensuring consistent policy adherence among HEIs.

In this study, it was determined that students from Sulu perceived that the UNIFAST is serving its purpose within their province. They believe that their respective HEIs ensures quality higher education through UNIFAST and empowers their students, fostering academic excellence, and contributing to the socioeconomic development of the province and the nation.

Studies were conducted on evaluating the implementation of Free Higher Education under UNIFAST recently. Purigay^[48] suggested that (1) HEIs should advise students to gather all required documents for the

scholarship program in advance to meet the deadline on the CHED portal and (2) track the academic progress of each student as the TES program does not have specific grade criteria for scholarship renewal. Based on students' insights, their institutions were compliant to and upholding the purpose of UNIFAST in providing financial assistance. Students perceive their institutions to be actively communicating, updating, and disseminating information about UNIFAST to both students and staff, as well as established streamlined application processes, mechanisms for verifying and authenticating student applications, and protocols for addressing appeals and disputes related to UNIFAST.

Although this study observed compliance to UNIFAST provisions among HEIs in Sulu, demographics of the students could influence their perception and compliance evaluation. For instance, it could be that students from low-income families well-rated the implementation of UNIFAST because it greatly helped them financially rather than objectively evaluating the implementation. This might indicate that students from low familial education background valued the help and support the UNIFAST could provide compared to other sub-groups of students. Because their parents were not able to pursue their education, students feel that the Free Higher Education Program under UNIFAST could assist them in completing their higher education, consequently making them positively rate the UNIFAST implementation.

Students significantly differed their level of implementation based on institution's awareness of UNIFAST provisions. Specifically, students whose parents earn <Php5,000 differed their rating on awareness compared to other groups of income brackets. Like familial educational background, family income could also serve a mediating variable that influences the rating of students—with students living in low-income household see scholarships as their mode for continuing college.

This is not a new phenomenon in evaluation research as emotions impact the evaluation through straightforward association or sometimes, emotions can influence the evaluation indirectly through influencing the perceptions or beliefs of a person^[56-59]. A study noted that students feel relieved about finding help during their university stay^[60]. Consequently, the mediating effect of known socio-economic factors *e.g.*, family income, could indirectly influence the evaluation of students through emotional interference.

Additionally, gender could also influence the rating of students about the UNIFAST implementation. This difference in rating can be attributed to gender-based perceptions of social contexts. For instance, a qualitative study among Saudi males indicated that male students believe the scholarship program promises to provide them with work opportunities upon returning to Saudi Arabia^[61]. Similarly, among male students in Sulu, Philippines, who rated the evaluation of UNIFAST outcomes significantly higher than females because they believed that the scholarship requires them to perform well at school, ensures retention, and develops hard work. This finding highlights the gendered expectations and societal roles placed on male students, wherein success in education is closely linked to notions of societal impact and responsibility. In contrast, female students may evaluate the program's outcomes based on different criteria, such as personal fulfillment, career advancement, or community development, reflecting differences in gender norms and societal expectations.

A study on students' satisfaction of higher education service quality in Vietnam noted that assessing student satisfaction involves evaluating the educational activities offered by the university to ensure that they meet students' expectations^[62]. Expectations of students about the implementation of Free Higher Education under UNIFAST involved compliance of their institutions to the provisions of the program. Generally, when a person feels satisfied of any service they receive, they give good feedback and rate their experience well^[63-66]. In line with that, the perceptions of students about the implementation of UNIFAST manifested fundamental components of expectation and satisfaction—which required further analysis in relation to extrinsic emotional stimulants.

This study needs further assessment on how the demographic profiles of students influence their implementation rating for UNIFAST Free Higher Education Program. Qualitative data are essential in identifying strong connection between variables, especially on the context of gender, socio-economic status, and age.

6. Conclusion

Students in Sulu perceive that UNIFAST is effectively implemented in their province, with HEIs actively communicating, updating, and disseminating information about the program. The level of awareness and understanding of UNIFAST provisions among students is significantly influenced by their institution's communication and dissemination efforts. This emphasizes the importance of effective communication strategies within HEIs to ensure students are well-informed about the program.

Students' perceptions are also influenced by the educational attainment and income level of their parents. Students from low familial education backgrounds and low-income households tend to rate the implementation of UNIFAST more positively, possibly because they perceive the program as a significant support in pursuing higher education. Similarly, emotional factors, such as relief and satisfaction, may influence students' evaluation of UNIFAST implementation. Students may rate the program higher due to the emotional relief it provides, particularly for those facing financial constraints.

The study highlighted the need for further assessment, particularly qualitative data analysis, to better understand the connections between demographic profiles and perceptions of UNIFAST implementation. Qualitative data can provide insights into the underlying reasons behind students' perceptions and behaviors.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, RBT and MSA; Methodology, RBT and MSA; Software, RBT and MSA; Validation, RBT and MSA; Formal Analysis, RBT and MSA; Investigation, RBT and MSA; Resources, RBT and MSA; Data Curation, RBT and MSA; Writing-Original Draft Preparation, RBT and MSA; Writing-Review & Editing, RBT and MSA; Visualization, RBT and MSA; Supervision, RBT and MSA; Project Administration, RBT and MSA; Funding Acquisition, RBT and MSA. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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