



**Optimising student success
in higher education:
The (unique) contributions of the
bursary support provider sector
A SUMMARY**



Penny Morrell

March 2022

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INTRODUCTION

This publication comprises extracts from the final report of a research project which enquired into the bursary support provider sector's insights regarding ways of optimising student success in higher education in South Africa – and the (unique) contributions it might make to this.

Funded by the DG Murray Trust and commissioned by the Rural Education Access Programme (REAP), the project began in March 2020 just as the first COVID lockdowns were being implemented. While undertaken by a researcher contracted and managed by REAP, the work was carried out in active close collaboration with members of the National Bursary Support Providers Forum (NBSPF), a network of about 25 organisations which support university students in South Africa. Not only did this provide a rich source of information, but working groups of volunteers from the Forum ensured that the knowledge and ideas produced were well-grounded in practice.

This is the first time that this kind of comprehensive practitioner-based overview of the sector has been documented in this way – and it has promoted a growing sense of cohesion within the Forum. It has also generated energy and interest at a time when members were engaging with the challenges produced by the lockdowns; and some began implementing the ideas while the research was still underway.

The findings and recommendations will complement the launch of a membership charter for the NBSPF at its national symposium on 29 and 30 June this year.

The executive summary below outlines the main findings. This is followed by a summary of the findings and recommendations. The contents page of the main report is given in Appendix A.

ACCESS TO THE REPORTS

This report – plus the full report and a number of sub-reports that inform it – are available on the websites of REAP and the NBSPF:

<https://www.reap.org.za/pages/reports.html>

<https://nationalbursaryforum.org.za/resource-portal/>

They are as follows:

Main reports

- | | | |
|---|--|------------|
| 1 | Optimising student success in higher education: The (unique) contributions of the bursary support provider sector: Full report | April 2022 |
| 2 | Optimising student success in higher education: The (unique) contributions of the bursary support provider sector: A Summary | April 2022 |

Sub-reports: Academic outcomes

- | | | |
|---|--|----------|
| 1 | Terms used in the bursary support provider sector when measuring academic outcomes: Towards developing common usage / definitions | Nov 2020 |
| 2 | Guidelines for organisations compiling selected retrospective stats: throughput, time to completion and year-on-year progression rates | Nov 2021 |
| 3 | Academic outcomes of students supported by four bursary support provider organisations | Oct 2021 |

Sub-reports: Psycho-social outcomes

- | | | |
|---|---|----------|
| 1 | Towards measuring psycho-social outcomes in the bursary support provider sector | Nov 2020 |
| 2 | Eight psycho-social outcomes and their indicators | May 2021 |
| 3 | Matrices for assessing the psycho-social outcomes and indicators | May 2021 |
| 4 | A selection of compulsory indicators for assessing psycho-social outcomes: An example | May 2021 |
| 5 | Measuring psycho-social outcomes and indicators: A Guide | May 2021 |

Sub-report: Employment outcomes

- | | | |
|---|---|----------|
| 1 | Terms used in the bursary support provider sector when measuring employment outcomes: Towards developing common usage / definitions | Aug 2020 |
|---|---|----------|

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research set out to discover what difference the work of bursary support provider (BSP) organisations make to student success at universities¹ – and what their (unique) contributions to this might be. It particularly found that the individual support offered to these largely first generation students is likely to promote academic success and to mitigate dropout – though it also found that the variety of services offered within the sector and the various conditions across universities and the country undermines the ability to make easy comparisons.

The students

The first section of the main report² maps the terrains in which the sector operates. It rehearses the nature of current university students – globally and in South Africa – and describes the challenges faced by first generation students in particular, most of whom come from financially under-resourced settings and who face major adjustments as they enter universities for the first time.

The profile of the approximately nine thousand students supported by organisations in the National Bursary Support Provider Forum (NBSPF) is described. While most are from financially under-resourced households, some are from the ‘missing middle’. The profile of students supported is largely gender balanced, and most are South African as very few organisations support foreign nationals.

Possibly most notably, is that the students supported by these organisations are often not those with the best matric marks so much as are selected for having qualities of perseverance, tenacity etc.

The contexts

The report briefly describes the diverse higher education sector in South Africa in which these students study. It notes the different kinds of difficulties faced by universities, particularly since access has been promoted through the provision of loans – and now grants – through NSFAS.

¹ As BSPs work primarily at universities, the research does not address other kinds of higher education institutions like TVET colleges.

² Available at <https://www.reap.org.za/pages/reports.html>

The role of university education in society is briefly reviewed, suggesting that the BSPs promote both individual and public 'goods'. While being a graduate improves an individual's access to meaningful work, first generation graduates are known to remit some of their incomes home, once they are employed. In addition, some organisations offer their services within an overtly social justice framework, which promotes civic responsibility and community service.

A concern about the advent of 'blended learning' (comprising online and in-person provision) is expressed. It points to the added disadvantages to those whose schooling will not have prepared them for self-managed learning and whose home environments are unlikely to be conducive to learning online. It also notes the loss of enquiry and contestation which are fundamental to critical learning – as well as the loss of exposure to others – that is provided by being on campus.

The unique offering

The different student support services offered by some universities and BSPs are described.

The main difference - heard throughout this research – is the individual attention that BSPs can offer and which the universities mostly cannot. This is said to provide support at times when it is most needed, addressing crises, mitigating loneliness, assisting with problem solving, referring to existing resources etc. - all of which contribute to reducing possible dropout and failure.

The fundamentally supplementary role being played by these small external organisations is noted, however, as they focus mainly on personal support and development, leaving academic support largely to the universities.

The menu of offerings

The research reports in detail on the offerings of seven BSPs who agreed to be key informants. This shows that most organisations offer what each regards as 'full' funding that should cover students' academic needs, housing and personal expenses. Many do so by topping-up NSFAS funding.

The unsurprising finding is that full funding and regular one-on-one support are the centrepieces of the BSPs' offerings and are deemed to be crucial to the difference made. In addition however, a menu of other services allows support to be customised for each student's needs. Some organisations make participation in some activities compulsory, believing that they are fundamental to student wellbeing and success; others leave more discretion with each student.

All seven organisations offer individual mentoring in some form and all have development programmes focussing on various lifeskills, including financial management. They all supplement the orientation offered by the universities. Most monitor academic progress and all refer students to the systems and resources within universities. Most offer some kind of job search skills, though these offerings tend to be quite light. Some also offer medical support and some have funds for transport. The report briefly reviews the obstacles to students accessing these services.

Importantly the research found that BSPs offer these services in a wide variety of dosages and use different approaches and modalities. This difficulty in comparing their effectiveness, then, is compounded by varieties in their funding models, in selection criteria, in the choice of universities and fields they study in which they support students, among others.

A notable gap is that very few BSPs offer information or support about nutrition, which has become an issue in the context of non-catering accommodation in which many first years are housed.

Measuring outcomes

Given that the research question was about what difference the BSP organisations might be making to student outcomes (success), considerable detailed work on measurement was undertaken – measurement of academic outcomes, of employment outcomes and of the thorny issue of psycho-social outcomes.

Academic outcomes

In the past decade, the focus in the higher education sector has shifted from access to success – foregrounding the measurement of throughput and, in some instances, progression rates. These two important measures have been defined differently within and beyond the sector, however, undermining the ability to make comparisons – to show that the extra support makes a difference to academic success. In order to do so, then, a common way of measuring academic outcomes (referenced to national measures where this was possible) was developed for use within the sector.

Four BSPs then undertook a retrospective analysis of their own data using the agreed methods of counting – with some unexpected results, some having lower outcomes than expected. While a comparable national dataset was difficult to access, comparisons with a notionally comparable dataset of NSFAS students suggested that half of these BSP projects obtained better outcomes while the other half may not have. This needs further work to be conclusive however, and recommendations about national data and developing agreed ways of measuring are made so that more secure comparisons can be made.

Employment outcomes

If they are to intervene in the cycles of poverty as some intend, BSPs are increasingly aware of the importance of supporting graduates to access the workplace or income-generating opportunities. Not many BSPs offer this support within their programmes, however, and only a few are accountable for employment outcomes.

Nonetheless, ways of measuring employment outcomes were developed during this research – much of which was about defining levels and durations of work suitable for graduates. No pilots of these tools were conducted, however.

Psycho-social outcomes

Working on measuring psycho-social outcomes was the most innovative part of this research. As the claim has historically been that psycho-social support is what this sector can uniquely offer, finding out the extent of the difference they make – and which bits are the most effective – was a key question, but also the most evasive.

Nonetheless the research undertook to identify psycho-social competencies / outcomes that would both support academic success and be an outcome in their own right, inasmuch as they support employability. Eight outcomes were eventually agreed to following a review of international workplace competencies – and 29 indicators with rating tools were developed. These are being piloted by two organisations; a third organisation is piloting their own set of outcomes and will participate in the conversations about what is possible.

Future sustainability

The research raises the question of how the sector might sustain itself, given current perceptions that undergraduate education is now fully funded by the state. Different sources of funding – including the Socio-Economic Development, Skills Development and Enterprise Development funds – are mentioned, as are suggestions of thinking about operating differently.

While not a new idea, supporting NSFAS-funded students without an offer of additional funding needs further investigation. Increasing reach and reducing costs through decreasing staff:student ratios was also mentioned. These do not comply with the model based on full funding and individual support model, however, and would require a fairly radical re-think.

FINDINGS: THE DIFFERENCES BURSARY SUPPORT PROVIDERS CAN MAKE

The purpose of this research is to be able to say, in an authoritative way, what difference the work of the BSP sector makes to student success. Those involved in student success around the country are increasingly interested in which initiatives actually make a/ the difference – and funders are increasingly keen on hard evidence regarding return on investment, given other calls on their funding.

The usual way in which BSPs provide evidence is to cite academic throughput and year-on-year progression rates; they also use case studies to illustrate the changes that a BSP has made to the lives of some of those supported. These can be dramatic, given that most of the beneficiaries are first generation students and the differences made (to that person and their household/family) can be substantial.

The report outlines some of the factors that confound counting, however, through which BSPs must pick their way when accounting and being accountable.

The evidence collected in this research project is given in the main report – and, more substantively, in the more detailed sub-reports, some of which is not repeated in the main report. These are all available on the

<https://www.reap.org.za/pages/reports.html>

<https://nationalbursaryforum.org.za/resource-portal/>

What follows is a summary of the findings, the difference the BSPs may be making, and recommendations.

1. Selection

1.1 Student profile

Almost all BSPs support students from financially under-resourced households and, often, poor schooling. Where BSPs link their selection to students funded by NSFAS, the increase in the **household incomes** used by NSFAS in the financial means test has widened the pool from which to select. In addition, some BSPs are also interested in supporting students in the ‘missing middle’ (household income up to ±R600,000). Others will retain their focus on those who are from really financially impoverished backgrounds. This reflects the much-mentioned diversity of the sector.

Many BSPs do not select those with the best **matric marks**, preferring those who have mid-level results, as they find these students are often more realistic about what they can achieve and what it takes to do so. In this way they avoid the 'Hero to Zero' effect when good matric students battle to adjust to academic requirements at university. Selecting mid-level matriculants also means that most BSPs do not compete with organisations providing scholarships who invariably select those with the best matric marks – although BSPs may lose some of their better achieving students to these programmes along the way.

Most organisations also select students on the basis of the **personal characteristics** that they prize – using various approaches (both formal and informal) to assess qualities like resilience, tenacity, motivation, etc.

Some recruit only those **in their first years of study**, while others recruit students at **other stages** of their (undergraduate) studies. These choices carry different degrees of risk of failure and dropout.

Some BSPs select only from **designated geographical areas**.

BSPs report a fairly even distribution of **genders** among their students.

The difference this makes

By supporting mid-level students – as opposed to matriculants with top marks – the BSP sector is making available supports they might otherwise not have accessed. It is these apparently mediocre students whose outcomes are given in this report – which, although not benchmarked against a completely comparable dataset, suggests they are doing better than the average.

Recommendations

1. The sector continues to support students from poorer households – while venturing into support for the missing middle as suits each organisation's interests.
2. The sector continues to recruit those with mid-level matric results.
3. The sector monitors academic outcomes with regards to gender, in the event that extra interventions are needed with male students.

1.2 Higher education institutions and fields of study

Most BSP organisations support students at public universities, with a few doing so at private universities. A minority support students at TVET colleges.

Given the unevenness of quality and provision at public higher education institutions (HEIs), some BSPs choose to only work at those with enough services and quality for a student to possibly succeed – while others work across the board, but choose faculties/fields which are reputed to be ‘good enough’. Some BSPs work at only a selection of HEIs, given their limited organisational capacity. In choosing certain HEIs or particular fields of study – particularly STEM³ and health sciences – some organisations are realising their interests in:

- services available for referral; and/or
- history of success / throughput; and/or
- graduate employability; and/or
- feasibility with regards to their own staffing.

BSP staff tend to know what services are offered at the universities at which they support students – and some work concertedly to know academic staff and the staff offering support services to facilitate the support needed for their students.

A lack of information regarding post-school education and training (PSET) generally as well as possible careers and courses matched to a realistic sense of what they might be suited to do, leads some students to make poor course selection and become unnecessary dropouts. This is particularly difficult for students who did well in matric and who aim ‘high’ in their selection of course and HEI, only to fail miserably – the Hero to Zero phenomenon. As a result, there is increasing interest in pre-enrolment work – i.e. working with school learners – to help them make more informed decisions. We did not enquire into this work, however, nor did it come up spontaneously. Our sense is that this is not an area in which the BSPs engage much – other than during the selection process.

The difference this makes

At well-resourced universities, the BSPs assist with navigating the institutional systems and with referrals – and perhaps work with a lighter touch given the services available. That being said, early diagnosis, follow-up after referrals and tracking academic progress are exactly the individual attention that BSPs can offer all students with most HEIs cannot, no matter how well-resourced they are. This is reported to make a/the difference when times are tough.

³ Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics.

At less well-resourced universities, some BSPs may provide more services in the absence of their being offered (sufficiently) by the HEI in an attempt to promote student wellbeing and success.

As the BSP sector largely does not work in TVET colleges it cannot be making a difference there.

Some BSPs' specialised foci on fields of study (like STEM subjects) may well enhance results – but without comparing them with a control group (which has not had extra support) it is difficult to know this.

Recommendations

1. The provision of individual support to students at public universities should continue – being constantly alert to (good enough) services offered by the HEIs in order to facilitate referrals.
2. As the return on investment at private universities tends not to be good (it is expensive for no additional rates of success) this option should not be pursued.
3. BSP staff to ensure that they keep up-to-date with what is being offered at the universities so that duplication is avoided and relationships with university staff is fostered as suitable.
4. Where the NBSPF sees a glaring issue that impedes student success, particularly with regards to first generation students (e.g. poor basic nutrition) it could initiate advocacy (e.g. for a national HEI feeding scheme), ideally partnering with other national organisations.
5. While the TVET sector is not easy to work in – given its organisational challenges and funding models – a more layered set of PSET options beyond universities would better suit many young people's interests and abilities; it will also provide a more diversely skilled set of graduates for the country. If the BSP sector is to contribute to the public – and individual – good, then the recommendation is that the NBSPF sets up an interest group to develop and monitor ways of working in the more functional parts of the TVET sector.
6. Serious consideration to be given to pre-enrolment work – either contracting with organisations who already work in this area, or by developing a competence within the BSPs themselves (though this will be informed by their geographical footprint and recruitment strategy). While this cannot guarantee that learners will make the right choice, it would reduce the hit-and-miss decision-making process in which some students are forced to engage.

1.3 Progress and exclusion

Most organisations have criteria for continuing their support to students, largely to do with their annual academic results. While some BSPs are relatively lenient, many link their criteria to those of NSFAS, given that they utilise their funding as part of the support package. This ‘survival of the fittest’ is another form of selection – and affects the throughput statistics⁴ of those who draw these lines.

A clear finding in the retrospective analysis of statistics is that the throughput rate leaps from just over 60% to around 90% when an extra year is allowed for – e.g. four years for a three-year degree.

The difference this makes

Many BSP organisations’ alignment with NSFAS’ criteria for exclusion is unavoidable given their funding models. The statistics in Table 2 below suggest that the dropout rate may be lower for BSP-supported students than general NSFAS-supported students, however, suggesting that the combination of selection and support is making some difference.

Where BSPs are not bound to NSFAS criteria, however, more lenient options would make a difference to those students who may require an extra year to complete their qualification.

Recommendations

1. Wherever possible, BSP organisations should budget for one extra year for all undergraduate students.
2. It remains a question as to whether some BSP organisations could be contracted by the state to support NSFAS-funded students more broadly. Pilots on how to do this should be undertaken to see what the basic criteria would be to be able to make a widespread difference.

⁴ Care should be taken not to assume that students leave university when a BSP withdraws their support however. They may access support elsewhere and go on to graduate.

2. Overall assessment of what makes the difference

Seven BSP directors interviewed for this research, plus 250 alumni surveyed, both rated individual psycho-social support as making the biggest difference to student success. Given that organisations can be seduced by their own practices, the alumni's responses were an important corroboration of this central finding.

That being said, psycho-social support is offered in a range of ways and dosages without any immediately evident correlation of which works best. The retrospective analysis of statistics showed that the two organisations with better throughputs rates had a lighter dosage than the two which did not – but there were other variables that mitigated against this being a simple finding. What was clear is that a lighter dosage of psycho-social support can make a difference.

The lowest ranking of career / work readiness services is an indication of the lack of attention it is paid and therefore of its lack of impact. It would be instructive to know who it would be rated were it given more prominence in the overall menu of options.

2.1 Seven BSP directors

The directors were asked – in an open-ended question – which supports were central to making a real difference to their students and which they might increase/intensify or reduce, depending on resources available. All seven volunteered that psycho-social support made the biggest difference – followed by lifeskills and full financial support.

Table 1: Perceptions of services offered – by number of organisations

	Makes the biggest difference N=7	Add or intensify N=7	Reduce N=7
Psycho-social services	7	2	0
Lifeskills	2	3	
Full financial support	2		
Academic support	1	1	
Career / work readiness		1	2

2.2 Alumni

As seen in in Figure 1 below, more than three quarters of the alumni who were surveyed rated the following services ‘very valuable’ or ‘quite valuable’.

The services associated with **finding work** – networking, job search, graduate placement and in-service training – were less frequently identified as ‘very valuable’ or ‘quite valuable’. This should be read against the later finding which prioritised these services as needing considerably more attention.

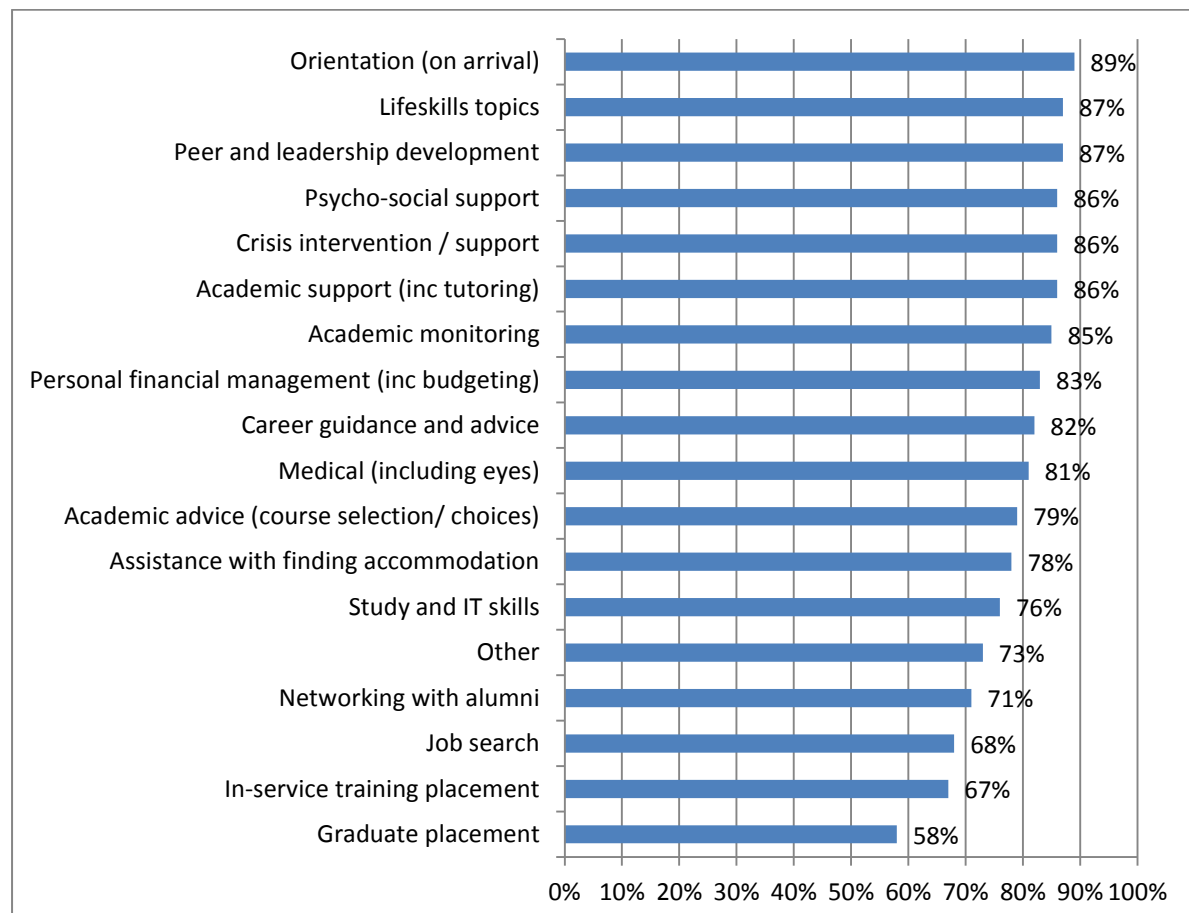


Figure 1: Proportion of alumni surveyed who accessed a service – who found it ‘very valuable’ or ‘quite valuable’

3. Wraparound support

'Wraparound' support comprises financial, academic, psycho-social, developmental and, sometimes, medical assistance.

While the menu of support elements is broadly the same across BSPs, there is considerable variation in how, and how much, is offered, to whom and when. Dosages and styles differ sometimes quite markedly across organisations – as does the compulsory /voluntary nature of the engagements.

For instance some BSPs provide standard compulsory offerings to all students (varied by stage of study) – while some are only responsive to each student's needs, selecting from their menu what is actually needed. Some provide a combination of these, comprising a core offering supplemented by responses to individual students.

Two elements are regarded as essential, however:

- Full financial support (see below); and
- Individual psycho-social support.

3.1 Modalities

Three ways in which services are offered:

- by BSP staff; and/or
- by students commissioned as mentors of some kind; and/or
- by HEI units / outside organisations to which students are referred.

Most BSPs designate staff members to particular students while some choose not to. Certainly where mentors are concerned, students are allocated to either a peer or senior mentor. Their offerings can take a variety of forms but peer mentors tend to be more like a bother/sister and helps them navigate and find services they need while senior mentors seem to take on a more academic role. Mentors meet with students individually and/or in groups.

When staff refer students to services in the HEI or another organisation they invariably follow up to see if the service needed was delivered and was effective. Where this is not the case, some pay for private services – though not all organisations can afford to.

In terms of the ways in which supports and services are offered, one-on-one consultations were the most popularly valued by the alumni respondents (91%), followed by development work done in groups (88%).

The difference this makes

A concern has been that this comprehensive approach is a luxury and too much – that a pared down version might work just as well.

The research finds, however, that the difference is made to each individual by a combination of the essential supports – full financial support and individual psycho-social support – PLUS whatever other services meet their particular needs. In other words the essentials are necessary but not sufficient and success can be undermined by a lack of support in one of the more optional aspects. Some BSP directors said they would rather reduce student numbers than only keep one element of their model.

Examples of the differences made by comprehensive support given by two directors are:

- ‘confidence, soft skills (communication, empathy), initiative. They are more self-aware An individual managing staff [in a clinic] commented that some staff seemed ‘different’ (in a good way) – and they turned out to be Umthombo students.’⁵
- ‘REAP graduates are more rounded than a ‘NSFAS student’ – and are (hopefully) a more ethically responsible citizen.’⁶

The main finding, then, is that the BSP sector’s offering of a combination of essential supports, with one-on-one support at the centre plus customised support for each student, is what makes the difference.

Recommendations

1. Where a BSP cannot offer the full range of supports, partnering with other services who can supplement their offering through contracting or referral is essential for a comprehensive basket of services to be offered to address the varied needs of these students.

⁵ Interview with Gavin MacGregor, Umthombo Youth Development Foundation, 25 March 2021.

⁶ Interview with Russell Davies, REAP, 23 April 2020.

4. Financial support

Some BSPs feel strongly that anything short of (reasonable) full funding – so that students are not distracted by concerns about material support – is not worthwhile. They generally provide this full support, while some who would like to, are unable to afford to do so.

In contrast, some consider their support as only a contribution, which the student needs to supplement elsewhere to meet their material needs.

The difference this makes

In the retrospective analysis of statistics, however, the academic outcomes of those who had been fully funded did not simply correlate with better throughputs.

Nonetheless, if students from vulnerable backgrounds are to be able to compete equally, this research supports full funding – both from a psycho-social and social justice point of view. That being said, supporting fewer students with more, rather than more students with less, will have implications for return on investment (ROI). This will not be popular and will need to be addressed, given a possible decrease in the funding available and funders' increasing interest in the ROI, as well as calls to increase the reach of this sector's influence.

Recommendations

1. This research supports funding students fully – both from a psycho-social and social justice point of view.
2. The implications for the ROI of supporting fewer students with more, rather than more students with less, could be addressed directly with funders. Ideally this would have been supported by evidence of the difference this support makes to academic throughput – but this research has not shown this definitively. The psycho-social and social justice points of view may need to be mobilised in their absence.
3. These recommendations need to be read alongside those outlined in 'Increasing the reach' below which suggests also piloting support to NSFAS-funded students without the provision of top-up funding.

5. Academic outcomes

Most BSPs refer students to university-based services to access actual academic support, including writing skills. All monitor their students' progress, however, and some assist with managing their course selection within their qualification. Some offer tutorials, either individually or in groups, paying for a tutor or having senior students volunteer. Some provide study skills.

Academic outcomes – like throughput, progression, dropout etc – are the standard measurement of success, both for funders and national student success efforts. Excellent lifeskills and academic failure are not a close second!

BSPs have used indicators of academic success to report on their effectiveness for many years. The fact that they have been using these concepts differently and have been counting these various indicators in different ways, however, has undermined the possibility of their making comparisons across organisations, however. They have nevertheless been comparing their results with others' on the basis of what each organisation had reported.

In the context of this research, a working group of BSP organisation volunteers developed definitions and methods for common calculations of key concepts – and four of these did retrospective calculations to test these methods, and their own data. While the quantitative outcomes were revealing – with one organisation having to re-understand its outcomes in the light of this exercise – the variables in their modus operandi were sufficiently diverse to confound easy comparisons.

If organisations sign up to the common ways of naming and counting, comparisons can begin to be made within the NBSPP at least. This is less possible with regards to national statistics, however, as terms are not used consistently by the major institutions (DHET, NFAS, CHE) – and who/what is being counted is not always clear, making comparisons with national data invidious.

Rather oddly, with respect to identifying which of their efforts made the biggest difference to student success, only one of the seven directors interviewed mentioned academic-related support at all – and they suggested that training in study skills was important to making the difference, and they would add more academic monitoring if they could.⁷ None of the directors commented on academic monitoring as being a crucial aspect of making a difference. This was surprising given that early detection with regards to academic difficulty is exactly one of the values of providing individual support.

⁷

Interview with Jodi Bailey, Moshal Scholarship Program, 30 April & 4 May 2020.

As seen in in Figure 1 above, 86% and 85% of alumni survey respondents found academic support and academic monitoring either very or quite valuable, however.

The difference this makes

Given that the BSPs are effectively supporting students whose household incomes are similar to those being supported by NSFAS, a central question is whether the sector makes a difference to these students compared to those only funded by NSFAS. Given that BSPs

- select students – while NSFAS supports all financially eligible candidates;
 - select the HEIs and fields of study in which they will support them;
 - provide students with various forms of support which others do not get (besides those accessing focussed funding and support elsewhere);
- the BSPs’ outcomes cannot be fairly compared to those of NSFAS students more generally.

These variables, among others, confounded the ability to make a true comparison with NSFAS data within the sub-study of retrospective stats of four BSP organisations. In addition, it was difficult to get a comparable data set:

- we could not easily access data for NSFAS students for the **same start years** as those being used for the retrospective analysis we undertook; and
- the DHET study from which we accessed the NSFAS data included **distance students** who are known to have lower throughput rates – while the BSP sector has very few students studying through distance.

Table 2 below nonetheless summarises the findings of a comparison of these not perfectly matched data sets – which show that the BSP sector does better with its cohorts of students⁸ than those generally funded by NSFAS. It is notable, however, that the NSFAS outcomes in the STEM fields are better than others and closer to the BSP outcomes.

Despite the directors’ reticence, there is no doubt that the close monitoring of each student’s progress – and their provision of referral to assistance as needed – is a central part of the BSP sector’s offering. While some universities also do this, they cannot hope to provide individual support and follow-up in the way these smaller organisations can. This is done to various degrees of sophistication and some organisations may well do it better than others.

In addition, psycho-social support – especially as it relates directly to academic performance – provides the necessary support when students are despondent and in danger of dropping out.

⁸ Bear in mind that the BSP sector statistics are averages of the four organisations outcomes and that the outcomes of two organisations were considerably lower than the other two which were consistently high.

Table 2: Comparisons of throughputs rates reported by DHET with those in this study – by field of study⁹

DHET throughput rates			This study's average throughput rates		
overall finding	after five years of studying	after six years of studying		after five years of studying (2015 cohort)	after six years of studying (2014 cohort)
'Business studies students have the lowest throughput rates'	22,1%	27,9%	This study does not have 'Business Studies' as a category. The closest is Management which has high throughput rates	100% – although the sample was under 20 students.	80%
'followed by the humanities'.	24,8%	28,9%	Humanities had among the highest throughput rates.	89%	85%
'Education in general (covering all qualifications) has the next highest throughput rate, although lower than the Bachelor of Education on its own.'	54,1%	57,8%	Throughput rates for education looks comparably similar	76%	76%
'Science, engineering and technology fields have the highest throughputs of all fields of study.'	Science: 56,3% Technology: ? Engineering: 43,8% ¹⁰	Science: 62,8% Technology: ? Engineering: 54,1%	Our study shows variable outcomes for science and Technology Engineering throughput rates are generally poor	Science: 59% Technology: 83% Engineering: 31%	Science: 73% Technology: 50% Engineering: 50%
'The MBChB qualification, a 6 year degree prog. for medical doctors, has very high throughput rates when compared to all other qualifications.'	not available	66,8%	Throughput rates for health sciences (generally) look comparably similar	85%	88%

⁹ Sub-report: *Academic outcomes of students supported by four bursary support provider organisations. October 2021.* Table 11, p 36.

¹⁰ These rates increase with additional years. So, for instance, after ten years Engineering has throughput rates of 65,4% (2008), 63,9% (2007) etc

Recommendations

1. Care must be taken when comparing outcomes, as the diversity within the BSP sector – and with national data – undermines easy comparisons.
2. Consider advocating for national statistics (e.g. NSFAS) to be made more accessible such that datasets can be requested. Short of this, comparisons are difficult.
3. Enable BSPs to learn from each other regarding their systems for monitoring /tracking students' academic progress.
4. Actively advocate for harmonising the methods and terms used for quantifying academic outcomes within the BSP sector. This would begin to make it possible to compare outcomes between organisations – which would be useful both to be able to advocate for the sector's work, and to improve practices.
5. Popularise the value of these comparisons within the sector – and advocate for organisations to shift their data systems in line with the standard methods and terms .
6. Have NBSPF members sign up for doing cohort studies – in line with the standard methods and terms in the sector – so that throughput data can begin to be collected.
7. Engage with various civil society /university-based student success fora about standardising methods and terms of quantifying student success, in the interests of better understanding student success and what may contribute to it.
8. Possibly engage with DHET and NSFAS about standardising methods and terms of quantifying student success to promote common terms and methods within the country.

6. Psycho-social support

Psycho-social interventions and support are a significant part of the 'unique contribution' being made by the sector – with one-on-one support being central to this.

In the first instance, psycho-social support is instrumentalised in the interests of promoting academic success – i.e. by supporting students through life issues so that they are less distracted from their academic work.

But increasingly some organisations see the development of psycho-socially well and competent students as an end in itself – as contributing to producing employable graduates and good citizens.

6.1 Individual ('one-on-one') attention

All organisations provide one-on-one support to their students. Each student meets regularly with a staff member who knows their circumstances and is a consistent presence to whom they can refer questions / concerns. Some regard this as an *in loco parentis* model; others as professional mentoring. Some offer it monthly; others less frequently.

All seven organisations – and, I would safely venture, more generally beyond these seven – regard psycho-social support as the key to the difference they make.

At the heart of the value of this individual psycho-social support are

1. orientation
2. belonging (consistent relationship with BSP staff and a student cohort)
3. early detection and diagnosis
4. provision and referral
5. navigation
6. follow-up and accountability

This research argues that, in addition to full funding, these are the central elements that make up the BSP model more generally; that, together, these are the factors that make the difference.

The alumni respondents surveyed for this research affirmed the commonsense impressions that the personalised support offered by the BSPs is fundamental to the sector's ability to making a difference.

One-on-one sessions have survived the lockdowns as on-line communication has become ubiquitous. While it obscures some of the information an in-person session can offer, it has provided a good alternative and most organisations will include on-line communication in their models – alongside in-person sessions – as it is more efficient and often, sufficiently effective.

When asked what they would definitely keep if they had to cut elements of their support model, most identified one-on-one interactions as untouchable; noting that this was the one thing that large institutions do not/ cannot offer – with one adding that *‘personal development – individual sessions and workshops – is not a component that gets offered anywhere else, while things like careers, counselling, wellness etc are available at the university /elsewhere.’*¹¹ Three organisations also noted the importance of holding students to account through psycho-social interactions.¹² One organisation thought that an improvement in the general provision of support services would be ‘if every student could have a relationship with someone who knows them, who has their best interests to heart, and has high expectations of them’.¹³ Another would increase their psycho-social services if they could.¹⁴

The question of whether / how the reach of this labour-intensive model might be extended is still being addressed.

6.2 Group work

One way of increasing the reach of psycho-social support is to run group sessions. Some organisations who are doing so claim that this provides a safe space for some students who find the one-on-one sessions awkward. Group sessions also reduces isolation, currently a key issue, and promotes students as a resource to one another.

6.3 Psycho-social development / lifeskills

Complementing the individualised psycho-social support are the generic lifeskills development sessions which offer competences in a range of skills useful in university life and, in many cases, employment. Some BSPs make attendance compulsory and their group format again enrolls students as resources to one another. While there are key topics covered by many BSPs, the menus and formats are once again not the same across organisations.

6.4 Orientation / FYE

A concerted programme of skills to manage university life and studying are offered to first year students by most universities through their First Year Experience (FYE) / orientation programmes. This is supplemented by most BSPs who run an additional programme which introduces students to the supports they offer and provides insights into skills of navigation, time management, and social issues like diversity etc.

¹¹ Interview with Stacey Rontiris, Tomorrow Trust, 15 & 21 April 2020.

¹² REAP, Umthombo, Tomorrow Trust.

¹³ Interview with Stacey Rontiris, Tomorrow Trust, 15 & 21 April 2020.

¹⁴ REAP.

6.5 Community engagement

Some (many?) organisations require that their students pay back – or pay forward - by doing community outreach work. This is usually recognised publicly in some way, even if only on a transcript that records their contributions.

6.6 Measuring psycho-social outcomes

The contribution of psycho-social efforts to student success, then, needs to be quantified. Currently qualitative evidence, in the forms of case studies and students' views, is given. These are supplemented by various statistics regarding academic success, the ultimate goal of all organisations. There are pressures for some quantitative measurements for psycho-social factors themselves, however.

This complex aspect of measurement has been underdeveloped in NGOs in South Africa. While psychometrists produce profiles of various personal characteristics, even they are wary of measuring 'difference'.¹⁵

Again through a working group of NBSPF volunteers, this research has identified eight behavioural outcomes, with each having two to four indicators. Matrices to measure each indicator have also been developed. (As most BSPs do not employ psychometrists, no psychological assessments have been included.) Organisations choose from these for each academic stage and then for each student. Staff and students then do a baseline, followed by progress assessments. By requiring that do these assessments with one another, staff's interventions are more focussed and accountable and students take responsibility for their own goals and working towards their achievement, with the organisation's support.

This process of measurement began to be piloted by one organisation in 2021 and another is doing so in 2022. Feedback will be used to ascertain if this model is worthwhile and, if so, to refine the system.

The difference this makes

All seven organisations say that psycho-social interactions are indispensable to what makes the difference to student success. The one-on-one format enables early detection of issues, while group sessions enrol students as resources to one another and are said to reduce isolation, especially during lockdown.

¹⁵ This includes a concern for measuring only what organisations might actually influence – which speaks to the vexed issue of causality and attribution. How does an organisation know if it is their intervention that made a / the difference?

The sector would benefit from clearer evidence of the difference this makes, however – what difference is made, how, and to what extent. Work is underway in this regard and recommendations for ways forward are made.

The lifeskills sessions supplement this individual attention. 87% of alumni surveyed rated lifeskills as very or quite valuable – the second highest after orientation. In contrast, only two¹⁶ of the seven BSP directors identified **life skills** as contributing to making the biggest difference. If they had the resources to do so, one of these would add financial literacy for everyone – while another¹⁷ would ‘improve FYE / navigation skills etc by having all junior students mentored by a senior student’.

The ROI of the BSPs’ orientation / FYE programmes are being questioned. While they establish the foundation for the relationship with the BSP and supplement the university’s programme, their residential format used by many BSPs is expensive. As lockdown has provided the opportunity to develop alternative ways offering this programme, it is likely that this is an aspect of the offering whose format will change – as will, perhaps some of the content which was not essential.

Recommendations

1. Consider formulating a generic model that presents the factors that are central to the sectors’ making the difference – for use in advocacy for the differences made by the sector.
The model proposed above could be used as a starting point (comprising orientation; belonging; early detection and diagnosis; provision and referral; navigation; follow-up and accountability).
2. Use lockdown experiences of providing psycho-social support on-line as an opportunity to review and refine the modality toward more efficient delivery – and with a view to possibly expanding reach.
3. Promote the increasing use of group sessions for psycho-social support as this reduces isolation, enrolls students as peer resources and, again, possibly enables increasing reach.
4. Continue to offer lifeskills sessions.
5. Review and refine FYE / orientation programmes with a view to retaining their value, while reducing the cost.
6. Pilot the psycho-social measurements and make a finding as to its feasibility and usefulness.

¹⁶ Career Wise, Moshal

¹⁷ Old Mutual Education Trust (OMET).

7. Measuring employment outcomes

While many BSPs provide final year students with some work readiness skills, these are often not extensive and do not include actual support in job search. Only a few organisations work concertedly with senior students and alumni to actually secure employment – or even internships; this is embedded in these organisations' main purposes and are an important outcome for them.

Alumni put the desire for more of services relating to job search at the top of their list. They rated the existing services 'very valuable' or 'quite valuable' less frequently: networking with alumni (71%), job search (68%), in-service training (67%) and graduate placement (58%).

The skills needed for the 4IR (by international corporates in particular) are going to put particular pressures on first generation students, whose schooling has not provided the foundation for the agility, critique and initiative that these skills imply.

Some organisations gesture at providing an introduction to entrepreneurship, but the main emphasis remains on formal employment. Given the local and global economic context, this may need to change.

Income-generating opportunities of some kind – and competencies to cope in the world of work – are important outcomes if higher education qualifications are to realise their promise of providing both a public and individual goods. Again a working group of NBSPF volunteers developed definitions and methods for counting employment outcomes. This has not been piloted however, but simply offered to those who may be interested.

The difference this makes

This research argues that, like pre-enrolment work, assisting graduates to find work/employment / income generating opportunities of some kind could be increased. While some universities offer this, many do not. This would better serve the social justice framing which informs the founding and work of many of these organisations.

That being said, this is outside the current realm of practice of most BSPs and would be a significant piece of new work. Again this might be better undertaken by working in partnership with organisations already working in this field.

Recommendations

1. Consciously mainstream work-related competencies, at least into the lifeskills programmes, including (but not only) those competencies prioritised by the 4IR literature. (These are included in the eight competencies in the psycho-social measuring mechanisms.)
2. Increase the work readiness component – and include skills in on-line job searches linked to each student's interests.
3. Consider offering – or linking students to – entrepreneurship programmes. Be sure this is their actual interest as being an entrepreneur does not suit everyone.
4. Consider popularising the employment outcomes among BSPs who want to track employment.

8. Increasing the reach

The question is whether the reach of these organisations should – and could – be increased, either under their own auspices or by contracting to HEIs, to NSFAS or DHET. Are they fit for purpose, or are they necessarily a supplementary, boutique offering – or something in between?

The shifts in some donor funding, alongside the advent of funding from renewable energy organisations – plus larger contracts available through B-BBEE and funds like Skills Development – suggests that the time may be ripe for some scale-up for those BSPs who have an appetite for it, though many are modest, focussed organisations which are not geared for large-scale engagement.

Some questions to be pursued are:

- whether the critical element – one-on-one psycho-social support – can be retained when going to scale;
- what the implications are of working with students who are not fully funded; and
- how selection may be done, if at all.

The difference this makes

It is clearly desirable to be able to provide support that makes a difference to more students – though the form would have to retain those elements that are deemed to making the difference!

Recommendations

1. Pilot support to NSFAS-funded students without any extra / top-up funding and compare the outcome with a control group of those not supported. Attempt to limit the variables (e.g. within a few particular courses at a few selected institutions) so that the finding is relatively stark.
2. Research the prospects of funding from BBBEE , SED (Socio-Economic Development), ED (Enterprise Development) and SD (Skills Development).
3. Consider working in alliance with one another to obtain larger contracts.

APPENDIX A – CONTENTS OF THE MAIN REPORT

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