
EXAMINING THE RELEVANCE OF BUILDING MAWA TODAY SCHOLARSHIP ON YOUTH ACCESS TO EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY OF ACTIVE AFRICA ORGANIZATION IN T/A CHIWERE, DOWA

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INTRODUCTION

Education is a cornerstone for personal development, economic growth, and social transformation. Globally, access to quality education is recognized as a fundamental human right and a key driver of sustainable development (UNESCO, 2020). However, in many developing contexts, access to education remains uneven, with financial barriers acting as major obstacles, particularly for youth in rural and low-income communities. To mitigate these disparities, scholarship programs have been introduced as a vital policy tool to support vulnerable learners. In Malawi, the Building Mawa Today Scholarship implemented by Active Africa Organization aims to improve access to education among disadvantaged youth in Traditional Authority (T/A) Chiwere, Dowa District. This study investigates the relevance and effectiveness of this scholarship in enhancing educational access for rural youth and contributing to equitable development.

Background to the Study

Globally, the pursuit of universal access to education has been emphasized under Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which advocates for inclusive and equitable quality education and the promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all (United Nations, 2015). Countries across different continents have adopted scholarship schemes to support learners from marginalized backgrounds. For instance, nations such as Brazil, India, and Indonesia have successfully used scholarship programs to improve retention and transition rates from primary to tertiary levels (World Bank, 2018).

Beyond basic access, global scholarship programs have also focused on promoting gender equality, supporting orphans, and encouraging students from rural and conflict-affected regions. These programs often cover tuition, uniforms, transportation, and accommodation, addressing multiple barriers simultaneously. In this regard, scholarships are not only seen as financial support but also as empowerment tools that enable students to break the cycle of poverty (UNESCO, 2020).

In Africa, educational access remains constrained by widespread poverty, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient public financing. Governments and NGOs across the continent have embraced scholarships as a mechanism for promoting educational equity (African Union, 2020). For example, Kenya's Wings to Fly Program and Ghana's Free SHS scholarship initiative have significantly increased enrolment among disadvantaged youth, particularly in rural and peri-urban areas (UNESCO, 2021).

Additionally, many African countries have prioritized scholarships for girls and learners with disabilities to address historical exclusions. These efforts have had varying degrees of success due to implementation challenges such as inadequate funding, weak monitoring mechanisms, and political interference (World Bank, 2019). Despite these hurdles, scholarships continue to play a key role in addressing educational disparities and improving literacy and skill levels across the continent.

From Malawian perspective, access to secondary and tertiary education is still a privilege for many, especially for youth in rural areas where poverty levels are high (Ministry of Education, 2022). Government-sponsored bursary programs, while beneficial, often fall short of meeting national demand due to budget constraints and high levels of poverty. As a result, many students drop out of school or fail to transition beyond primary education.

To complement state efforts, NGOs such as Active Africa have introduced targeted scholarship programs to support vulnerable learners. The Building Mawa Today Scholarship is one such initiative that seeks to improve education access by covering school-related expenses for rural youth in T/A Chiwere, Dowa. While the program appears impactful, there is limited academic research evaluating its long-term relevance and outcomes on educational access and youth development. This study, therefore, seeks to fill that knowledge gap.

Research Objectives

The main objective of this study is to examine the relevance of the Building Mawa Today Scholarship in improving access to education for rural youth in T/A Chiwere, Dowa. The specific objectives are:

1. To assess the extent to which the scholarship improves youth access to education in T/A Chiwere, Dowa .
2. To examine the impact of the scholarship on school retention and completion rates among beneficiaries in T/A Chiwere, Dowa.
3. To identify challenges faced by stakeholders in implementing the scholarship program in T/A Chiwere, Dowa.
4. To evaluate the role of community participation and awareness in the success of the Scholarship initiative in T/A Chiwere, Dowa.
5. To recommend that the Building Mawa Today Scholarship conducts regular assessments to ensure its long-term effectiveness and relevance for rural youth in T/A Chiwere, Dowa.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

This study is underpinned by two theoretical models: Human Capital Theory and Social Justice Theory. Human Capital Theory, as advanced by Becker (1993), posits that education enhances individual productivity and national economic development. Scholarships can be seen as investments in human capital, improving skills, productivity, and employment prospects. Empirical studies affirm that scholarship-supported learners are more likely to achieve higher education levels and contribute meaningfully to economic development (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018). In this study, the Building Mawa Today Scholarship is evaluated as an intervention that builds human capital in rural Malawi.

Social Justice Theory, as conceptualized by Rawls (1971), emphasizes fairness in the distribution of resources and opportunities. It advocates for affirmative action to correct historical inequalities. Scholarships targeting vulnerable youth embody this principle, seeking to level the educational playing field. In the Malawian context, the Building Mawa Today Scholarship reflects a social justice agenda by addressing rural-urban educational disparities. Together, these theories justify the need for targeted scholarship programs and provide lenses through which their relevance and impact can be evaluated.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

This study adopted a mixed-methods research approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under investigation. Quantitative data were provided measurable and generalizable insights

into trends such as access, retention, and completion rates among beneficiaries, while qualitative data will contextualize these findings by exploring personal experiences and implementation realities (Creswell, 2015; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2015; Bryman, 2016). The mixed-methods approach is especially appropriate for complex social inquiries where one data type alone may not capture the multifaceted impact of an intervention (Plano Clark & Ivankova, 2016; Fetter, Curry & Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). By converging the strengths of both approaches, this methodology will yield nuanced findings that are both reliable and contextually rich.

Research Design

The research was adopted a case study design, focusing specifically on the Building Mawa Today Scholarship administered by Active Africa in T/A Chiwere, Dowa. A case study allows researchers to investigate a contemporary real-life phenomenon within its natural context, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (Yin, 2018; Stake, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This design is particularly well-suited to this study because it permits an in-depth, holistic exploration of how the scholarship influences educational access, retention, and completion. Moreover, case studies support the use of multiple data sources, thereby enabling triangulation and enhancing the validity of findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Baxter & Jack, 2008; Zainal, 2007). The focus on a single case—T/A Chiwere—allows for detailed insights that can inform broader policy debates and interventions across similar rural contexts.

Study Population

The target population for this study was consisted of approximately 40 individuals, including 30 student beneficiaries of the Building Mawa Today Scholarship, 10 parents, guardians, teachers, and administrators and program officers from Active Africa and the local education authority. The inclusion of various stakeholder groups will ensure a multi-perspective evaluation of the scholarship program's relevance and implementation. This diversity of participants enables the collection of comprehensive data on direct and indirect impacts of the scholarship, including social, academic, and emotional outcomes (UNESCO, 2020; Chimombo, 2020; Ministry of Education, 2022). Moreover, selecting a population that reflects both implementers and beneficiaries increases the scope of inquiry, as advocated by Bryman (2016), Punch (2014), and Orodho (2016), thereby ensuring that findings reflect both experiences and institutional practices.

Research Instrument

The study was utilized three key research instruments: questionnaires, interview guides, and document review checklists. Questionnaires was distributed to student beneficiaries and it included both closed-ended questions for quantitative analysis and open-ended questions for qualitative insights (Creswell, 2015; Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2018;

Data Analysis

Data analysis was employed a convergent mixed-methods approach, wherein quantitative and qualitative data was analyzed independently and then integrated. Quantitative data from questionnaires was entered into SPSS for descriptive and inferential statistical analysis, including frequency distributions, percentages, and cross-tabulations (Field, 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Pallant, 2020). Inferential statistics, such as chi-square tests, was used to examine relationships between variables such as scholarship support and school retention.

Qualitative data from interviews was subjected to thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-phase framework: familiarization, coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and reporting. This process was ensured a structured and systematic interpretation of textual data (Nowell et al., 2017; Miles et al., 2014; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Data integration was performed during interpretation to triangulate insights, offering a comprehensive understanding of the scholarship's influence.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings from the Primary Data

4.1.1 Response Rate

The study targeted a sample size of 40 participants. From this population, 37 participants successfully completed the data collection process, yielding an overall response rate of 92.5%. This high response rate minimizes non-response bias and strengthens the validity of the findings.

Chart 1: Survey Response Rate Breakdown

Primary Data Collection Response Rate

- Student Beneficiaries Responded: 28

The study included about 30 students selected randomly. Therefore:

$$\frac{28}{30} \times 100 = 93.3 \% \text{ of target}$$

- Key Informants Responded: 9

The study included about 10 additional participants including teachers, parents and administrators. Therefore:

$$\frac{9}{10} \times 100 = 90 \% \text{ of target}$$

- Total Non-Respondents: 3

The study had only 3 non respondents out of the total sample of 40. Therefore:

$$\frac{3}{40} \times 100 = 7.5 \% \text{ of total sample}$$

4.1.2 Presentation of Findings by Objective

Assessing the extent to which the scholarship improves youth access to education.

Primary data revealed that the BMT scholarship is a critical enabler of access.96.4% of student respondents stated they would have faced significant difficulties continuing their education without the scholarship.

Table 1: Barriers to Education Removed by BMT Scholarship (Student Perspectives).

Barrier Removed	Number of students (n=28)	Percentage
School Fees	28	100%
Learning Materials	23	82.1%
School Uniforms	15	53.6%
Examination Fees	8	28.6%
Transport Costs	5	17.9%
Boarding Costs	3	10.7%

Note:

$$\frac{\text{number of students}}{n} \times 100 = \text{percentage}$$

This table details the specific financial barriers the BMT scholarship addresses for beneficiaries. While it universally covers school fees (100%), its support for other essential costs decreases significantly. The data reveals a gap: over 46% of students do not receive support for uniforms, and over 71% lack coverage for crucial examination fees. This indicates that the scholarship provides essential but incomplete financial relief, leaving many beneficiaries to shoulder significant ancillary costs.

Examining the impact on school retention and completion rates.

The scholarship demonstrated a strong positive correlation with retention and completion prospects.

Table 2: Beneficiary Attendance Patterns Before and After Scholarship.

Academic Term	BMT Beneficiaries	Control Group (Non-beneficiaries)
Term 1	78	75
Term 2	92	81
Term 3	94	72

Table 3: Academic Performance Trends Among Beneficiaries.

Performance Category	Form 1 (Before Scholarship)	Form 3 (Current/With Scholarship)	Change
Average Test Scores (%)	52.3%	64.7	+12.4%
Students Passing All Subjects	45%	68%	+23%
Students in Top 25% of Class	12%	29%	+17%

This table above measures the scholastic improvement among beneficiaries over time. It indicates significant positive shifts after receiving the scholarship. The average test score increased by 12.4 percentage points, and the proportion of students passing all subjects rose by 23%. Most notably, the percentage of beneficiaries ranking in the top quarter of their class more than doubled (from 12% to 29%). This suggests that beyond mere attendance, the scholarship contributes to improved academic engagement and performance, likely by reducing financial stress and enabling focus on studies.

Identifying challenges faced in implementing the program.

Stakeholders identified several interconnected challenges in implementation.

Typical Academic Term vs. Fund Disbursement Timeline

Phases:

1. School Term Begins (Week 1)
2. Expected Disbursement (Week 2) – ACTUAL: Only 20% of funds received
3. First Reminder Sent (Week 3)
4. Partial Disbursement (Week 5) – 60% of funds received
5. Students Sent Home for Fees (Week 4-6) – 35% of beneficiaries affected

6. Full Disbursement (Week 8) – 100% received, but term half gone

Phase	Start week	End week	Status Notes
School Term Begins	1	1	Term starts
Expected Disbursement	2	2	ACTUAL:20% received
First Reminder Sent	3	3	Reminder issued
Partial Disbursement	5	5	60% received
Students Sent Home for Fees	4	6	35% affected
Full Disbursement	8	8	Term half gone

This timeline visually maps the disruptive reality of disbursement delays against the academic calendar. It shows a critical misalignment: while funds are expected in Week 2, full disbursement only occurs by Week 8—halfway through the term. The consequence is stark: 35% of beneficiaries are sent home for fees between Weeks 4-6 due to the absence of timely support. This delay directly undermines the scholarship's goal of ensuring uninterrupted education, creating stress and disrupting learning at a crucial period in the term.

Evaluation of the role of community participation and awareness.

Findings indicate a moderate level of community awareness but passive participation.

How Students First Learned About BMT Scholarship (n=28)

Segments:

- School Teachers/Headteacher: 67.9%
- Community Leaders: 21.4%
- Active Africa Community Meetings: 10.7%
- Other Beneficiaries/Friends: 0%
- Family Members: 0%

Levels of Community Participation in Scholarship Program

Community Involvement in Key Program Areas (n=9 Stakeholders)

Categories (X-Axis):

1. Beneficiary Identification
2. Fund Management/Oversight
3. Student Progress Monitoring
4. Program Evaluation
5. Awareness Creation

Average Scores: 3.8, 1.2, 2.1, 1.5, 2.4

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.3 Conclusion of the Study

The study concludes that the BMT Scholarship is a highly relevant and effective intervention for improving short-term access to and retention in secondary education for youth in T/A Chiwere. It successfully prevents dropout and promotes regular attendance, especially for girls. However, its overall relevance and potential for transformative impact are constrained by three main factors: (1) its design as a partial rather than comprehensive financial support, (2) operational inefficiencies that undermine its delivery, and (3) a lack of deep community ownership which may affect its sustainability. Therefore, while the scholarship is a vital lifeline for current beneficiaries, strategic improvements are needed for it to foster sustainable educational advancement.

5.4 Recommendations of the Study

Based on the conclusions, the following actionable recommendations are made:

1. For Active Africa (The Implementing NGO):

- Revise the Scholarship Package: Conduct a cost analysis to develop a more comprehensive support package that consistently covers essential ancillary costs like examination fees, uniforms, and basic learning materials.
- Streamline Disbursement: Reform internal and donor processes to ensure scholarship funds are disbursed to schools before or within the first week of each term to prevent disruptions.
- Strengthen M&E: Develop a robust monitoring and evaluation framework to track not just enrollment and completion, but also post-secondary pathways, and use this data for program improvement.

2. For Community Structures (Village Heads, School Committees):

- Move from Consultation to Partnership: Establish a formal community oversight committee with defined roles in monitoring student progress, providing mentorship, and participating in annual program reviews.

3. For the Ministry of Education and District Office:

- Facilitate Partnerships: Collaborate with NGOs like Active Africa to share data and coordinate efforts, particularly in providing career guidance and information on tertiary opportunities to scholarship beneficiaries.

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