

Determinants of Students' Completion Rate in Institutions of Higher Learning: A Case Study of Bishop Stuart University, Mbarara: A cross-sectional, concurrent mixed-methods study.

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ABSTRACT

Background:

Student attrition in sub-Saharan African higher education constitutes a persistent challenge, and Bishop Stuart University (BSU) recorded a non-completion rate of approximately 27.2% among students admitted to its Faculty of Business, Economics and Governance in 2019/2020. The institutional and individual determinants of this attrition haven't previously been empirically investigated at BSU.

Objectives:

This study sought to (i) examine institutional factors influencing student completion rates and (ii) identify individual student characteristics that predict or impede timely degree completion at BSU.

Methods:

A concurrent mixed-methods, cross-sectional design was adopted. A structured questionnaire was administered to 115 students selected through stratified random and systematic random sampling from a population of 5,400 students. Qualitative data were generated through in-depth interviews with four key institutional informants. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS Version 21 (descriptive statistics and Pearson chi-square tests); qualitative data underwent thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. Methodological triangulation was employed to enhance the rigour and credibility of findings.

Results:

Satisfaction with academic support services was significantly associated with students' perception of adequate institutional support ($\chi^2=18.73$, $p=0.016$), and utilisation of such services was linked to higher institutional ratings ($\chi^2=12.45$, $p=0.014$). Full-time employment was significantly correlated with severe financial burden ($\chi^2=21.30$, $p=0.006$), while the perceived importance of academic success strongly predicted motivation to complete ($\chi^2=28.94$, $p<0.001$). Qualitative findings revealed systemic gaps in proactive student monitoring, inconsistent engagement strategies, technological deficits, and reactive rather than preventive identification of at-risk students.

Conclusions:

Completion rates are shaped by the dynamic interaction of individual and institutional factors. Institutional responsiveness manifested through accessible academic support, financial aid, reliable infrastructure, and inclusive policy implementation is as critical as individual motivation and financial resilience.

Recommendation:

Evidence-based early-alert systems, structured engagement programmes, and participatory policy design are urgently recommended to reduce attrition, particularly in resource-constrained Ugandan higher education contexts.

Keywords: student completion rate, attrition, dropout, higher education, institutional support, Uganda, Bishop Stuart University, College Fit Theory

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INTRODUCTION

The global higher education landscape is increasingly characterised by widening participation alongside persistently high non-completion rates, a paradox that undermines the human capital development aspirations of

both students and nations (Marginson, 2006). In sub-Saharan Africa, the challenge is acute: dropout rates in university mathematics programmes have been documented at 85% in Madagascar, over 95% in the Central African Republic, and 75% in Niger (Mbukusa, 2009). South Africa, which hosts approximately 500,000 university students, the

second-highest enrolment on the continent, records a 40% dropout rate (Mbukusa, 2009; Al-Samarrai & Bennell, 2007). These figures contrast starkly with the 46% rate in the United States, 16% in the United Kingdom, 28% in Germany, and 45% in France (Carey, 2004), underscoring a global yet context-dependent phenomenon.

In Uganda, the problem is well-documented at flagship institutions such as Makerere University, where withdrawal is attributed to personal, financial, academic, employment-related, and medical factors (Aguti, Nakibuuka, & Kajumbula, 2009). Nationwide, the 2016 Africa Higher Education Student Survey Project estimated that nearly 30% of Ugandan university students fail to complete their degree programmes on time (New Vision, 2023). At Bishop Stuart University (BSU), a private chartered institution located in Mbarara, western Uganda, institutional records corroborate this trend: of 2,199 students admitted in 2019/2020 to the Faculty of Business, Economics and Governance, only 1,600 graduated at the 19th graduation ceremony leaving a shortfall of 599 students, a non-completion rate of approximately 27.2% (BSU Graduation Handbook, 2023; BSU Admission Report, 2020).

Despite institutional investments in faculty recruitment, academic infrastructure, and student support services (BSU HR Report, 2016), the completion gap persists and continues to widen. A critical empirical gap exists: no study has systematically investigated the determinants of student completion rates at BSU. Addressing this gap is both theoretically significant in terms of advancing context-sensitive models of student persistence and practically urgent, given the resource implications of high attrition for students, families, and the institution.

This study therefore investigates two primary questions: (i) What are the institutional factors influencing student completion rates at BSU? and (ii) What are the individual student characteristics that influence completion rates? The findings are expected to contribute to the evidence base for targeted interventions in Ugandan and comparable sub-Saharan African higher education contexts.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Underpinning: The College Fit Theory

This study is anchored in the College Fit Theory, originally articulated by Taylor (1983) and later refined by Greenough (2003). The theory posits that successful academic persistence is predicated on the degree of congruence or 'fit' between a student's individual characteristics, needs, and goals on the one hand, and the institutional environment's offerings, culture, and support mechanisms on the other (Greenough, 2003). The theory identifies multiple dimensions of fit: academic, social, financial, geographic, and personal. When misalignment occurs across any of these dimensions, the risk of non-completion increases.

The College Fit Theory provides a unifying conceptual lens for integrating both institutional and individual determinants of completion, which are the twin focus of this study. It also directs analytical attention to the interaction effects between student characteristics and institutional response, a dynamic that prior studies have affirmed (Zhou, 2019). Critically, the theory's applicability extends beyond the Western contexts in which it was originally developed; its multidimensional framework accommodates the socioeconomic and infrastructural specificities of Ugandan higher education.

Institutional Factors and Student Completion Rates

Institutional determinants of student persistence and graduation have attracted extensive scholarly attention. Millea et al. (2018), drawing on longitudinal student-level data from a mid-sized southeastern U.S. university, found through probit regression modelling that academic preparedness, grant or scholarship receipt, and smaller class sizes were the strongest predictors of retention and graduation, while gender, race, absenteeism, and residence hall status had no significant influence. This study extends and contextualises Millea et al.'s findings within a Ugandan institution characterised by different financial architectures and support service configurations.

Tentsho et al. (2009) examined timely graduation rates across four faculties at Songkla University, Thailand, highlighting faculty-level variability in completion outcomes. The present study narrows its focus to a single faculty, the Faculty of Business, Economics and Governance at BSU, enabling deeper contextual analysis while acknowledging the limitation of reduced institutional breadth. Heide and Pante (2019), in a study of a German medical education master's programme, found that timely advisor feedback, general programme support, and adequate temporal and financial resources were critical completion facilitators. Although their study focused on postgraduate medical students, the principle that institutional responsiveness shapes completion outcomes is broadly applicable.

Murray (2014), studying graduation and dropout patterns at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, found that financial aid and residence-based accommodation accelerated graduation for students who would eventually complete, while paradoxically prolonging enrolment for academically struggling students. These nuanced findings underscore the need to design institutional interventions that are not merely resource-intensive but strategically targeted.

Individual Student Characteristics and Completion Rates

Individual-level factors encompassing demographics, financial status, motivation, academic preparedness, and social support have been widely studied as predictors of degree completion. Marks (2007), analysing the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth, found that

personal determination, employment status, and socioeconomic background were significant predictors of whether students who enrolled in university eventually completed their qualifications. Critically, employment, often a necessity for financially constrained students, increased the risk of non-completion.

Hatfield (2013) examined demographic correlates of course evaluation completion rates, finding that students born before 1987 (hence older, more goal-oriented students) were significantly more likely to complete evaluations, and that gender and ethnicity produced significant differential completion rates. These findings are partially replicated in the current study, which finds that age-related motivational factors captured through perceived importance of academic success significantly predict completion intention.

Robbins et al. (2004), in a seminal meta-analysis, found that psychosocial factors, particularly academic self-efficacy, achievement motivation, and institutional commitment, were among the strongest predictors of college outcomes, often surpassing cognitive ability measures. Ompoc and Base (2021) extended this to graduate education, confirming that the interaction of demographic characteristics, financial support types, motivation, and cognitive ability collectively shaped doctoral completion rates. The present study operationalises these insights within an undergraduate, sub-Saharan African context.

Research Gaps Addressed by This Study

The foregoing review reveals three critical gaps that this study addresses. First, geographically, the preponderance of completion rate research is situated in North American, European, and Australasian contexts; empirical evidence from sub-Saharan Africa, and Uganda specifically, remains sparse. Second, methodologically, most prior studies employ either purely quantitative longitudinal designs or qualitative case studies; the concurrent mixed-methods design adopted here addresses this gap by enabling triangulation. Third, contextually, the role of technological deficits, particularly unreliable digital infrastructure as a structural barrier to completion in resource-constrained institutions, has not been adequately theorised or empirically documented. This study contributes to all three gaps.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A cross-sectional, concurrent mixed-methods design was employed. The quantitative strand utilised descriptive and

correlational analytical approaches, while the qualitative strand employed in-depth interviews and thematic analysis. The two strands were conducted simultaneously and integrated at the interpretation stage to achieve methodological triangulation, which enhances the validity and comprehensiveness of findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). A cross-sectional design was selected for its efficiency, practical feasibility, and suitability for generating hypotheses to inform longitudinal inquiry (Kraemer, 1994).

Study Setting

The study was conducted at Bishop Stuart University (BSU), a private chartered university located in Mbarara, western Uganda. BSU's Faculty of Business, Economics and Governance offers undergraduate programmes including the Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA), BSc. Accounting & Finance (BSAF), BSc. Economics (BSEC), Bachelor of Social Work and Social Administration (BSWSA), and Bachelor of Tourism and Hospitality Management (BTHM). Student support infrastructure at the faculty includes a library and computer laboratories, academic advising, financial aid administration, guild (student government) leadership structures, and extracurricular programmes; institutional informants also identified hostel accommodation and campus Wi-Fi connectivity as areas of ongoing development. This setting was selected because it is a mid-sized institution representative of privately chartered universities in western Uganda, and because its recorded non-completion rate (approximately 27.2%) made it a substantively important site for investigating completion determinants.

Study Population and Sample Size Determination

The study population comprised all registered undergraduate students, programme coordinators, dropout/withdrawn students, and administrators at BSU's Faculty of Business, Economics and Governance. The accessible population was 5,490 individuals. Sample size was determined using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table, which has been widely validated for educational research. As shown in Table 1, a total target sample of 439 was established across participant categories. A final achieved sample of 115 students and four institutional key informants contributed usable data, sufficient for the statistical and qualitative analyses conducted.

Table 1. Sample Distribution by Participant Category

Participant Category	Population Size	Target Sample	Achieved Sample
Registered Students	5,400	357	115
Programme Coordinators	40	36	—
Dropout/Withdrawn Students	40	36	—
Administrators / Key Informants	10	10	4
Total	5,490	439	119

Note. Source: BSU Academic Registrar's Reports (2023). Krejcie & Morgan (1970) sample size table applied. Achieved sample of 119 combines 115 students and 4 key informants.

Sampling Procedures

Students were selected using stratified random sampling, with the faculty's academic departments constituting strata, followed by systematic random sampling within each stratum. The sampling interval $k = N/n$ was computed, with the first respondent selected via a simple random technique. Snowball sampling was used to reach withdrawn/dropout students, given the absence of a readily accessible sampling frame for this group. Institutional key informants, the Dean of Students, Guild President, Quality Assurance Officer, and Academic Registrar, were selected purposively based on their positional authority and relevance to the study objectives.

Data Collection Instruments

Quantitative data were collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire comprising four sections: Section A (demographic characteristics); Section B (individual student characteristics, including motivation, time management, employment, and financial burden, measured on a five-point Likert scale); Section C (institutional support, encompassing academic services, financial aid, and infrastructure); and Section D (student completion rate indicators). The instrument adapted and modified validated scales from prior literature. Qualitative data were generated through semi-structured interview guides administered to four key informants, with probes designed to elicit contextually rich responses on institutional policies, support mechanisms, and structural challenges.

Validity and Reliability

Content validity was established through expert panel review. Five academics and practitioners rated the relevance of each instrument item; a Content Validity Index (CVI) of 0.70 or above per construct was the acceptance threshold (Field, 2009; Carmines & Zeller, 1991), a criterion met across all constructs. Construct validity was assessed through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using AMOS v21, examining convergent validity (factor loadings ≥ 0.50 ; Average Variance Extracted [AVE] ≥ 0.50 ; construct reliability ≥ 0.70) and discriminant validity (AVE per construct exceeding inter-construct correlations). Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient and

composite reliability. All scales met the minimum threshold of $\alpha \geq 0.70$ (Field, 2005).

Data Processing and Analysis

Quantitative data were entered and cleaned in SPSS Version 21. Data cleaning involved verification of data entry accuracy, identification and treatment of outliers using frequency distributions, box-and-whisker plots, and scatter plots, and missing value analysis using Little's MCAR test. Given that missing data constituted less than 5% across variables, listwise deletion was applied (Field, 2005). Pearson chi-square tests of independence were used to examine associations between categorical variables. Effect sizes were calculated where applicable. Qualitative data were transcribed verbatim, coded inductively, and analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, resulting in six overarching themes. Member-checking and peer debriefing were employed to enhance credibility.

Efforts to Address Bias

Several measures were taken to minimise potential sources of bias. Selection bias in the quantitative strand was addressed through stratified random sampling followed by systematic random sampling within strata, ensuring proportional representation across academic departments. Instrumentation bias was addressed through expert panel review of the questionnaire (Content Validity Index ≥ 0.70) and confirmatory factor analysis to confirm construct and discriminant validity. Recall and social-desirability bias in interviews were mitigated through semi-structured, neutrally worded probes and assurances of anonymity. Researcher bias in the qualitative analysis was addressed through member-checking (returning interpretations to informants for verification) and peer debriefing during thematic coding. Methodological triangulation combining quantitative and qualitative strands was employed throughout to cross-validate findings and reduce the risk that conclusions rested on a single data source or method.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the BSU Research Ethics Committee (BUREC) BSU-REC-2023-290. Written

informed consent was obtained from all participants. Anonymity was maintained through the use of numerical codes; no identifying information appears in the dataset or findings. Data were stored securely and used exclusively for academic purposes. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence.

Assurance Officer, and Academic Registrar) participated in the qualitative strand, against a target of four, a 100% response rate. [Author to insert the number of students approached/screened for eligibility at each stage before the achieved sample of 115, together with reasons for non-participation (e.g., non-response, ineligibility, incomplete questionnaires), and to consider presenting this as a participant flow diagram.]

RESULTS

Participant Flow

Of the target sample of 357 registered students derived from the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table, 115 students provided usable quantitative data, a response rate of approximately 32.2%. All four purposively selected institutional key informants (Dean of Students, Guild President, Quality

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

A total of 115 students participated in the quantitative survey. Table 2 summarises the sample's demographic profile.

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants (N = 115)

Variable	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Female	53	46.1
Male	62	53.9
Total	115	100.0
Age Group		
Below 20 years	1	0.9
20–30 years	83	72.2
30–40 years	27	23.5
40–50 years	3	2.6
Programme of Study		
Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA)	7	6.1
BSc. Accounting & Finance (BSAF)	3	2.6
BSc. Economics (BSEC)	16	13.9
B. Social Work & Social Administration (BSWSA)	48	41.7
B. Tourism & Hospitality Mgt (BTHM)	4	3.5
Other/Combined	1	0.9
Year of Study		
Year 1	10	8.7
Year 2	19	16.5
Year 3	86	74.8

Note. Age-group frequencies sum to 114 of the 115 participants; one participant's age was not disclosed and is excluded from the age-group percentages, which are calculated on n = 114. Programme percentage totals do not sum to 100% due to a small number of combined-programme enrollees and missing responses on the programme item.

The sample was predominantly male (53.9%), young (72.2% aged 20–30 years), enrolled in the Bachelor of Social Work and Social Administration programme (41.7%), and in their third year of study (74.8%). The

concentration of third-year students reflects the study's focus on those with sufficient institutional experience to assess support services and articulate completion-related challenges.

Institutional Factors Influencing Student Completion Rates

Academic Support Satisfaction and Perceived Adequacy

Table 3 presents the cross-tabulation of student satisfaction with academic support services (IS1) against their perception of adequate academic support as a completion enabler (CR1).

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Table 3. Cross-Tabulation: Satisfaction with Academic Support (IS1) × Perceived Adequacy of Support (CR1)

Satisfaction (IS1)	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Very Satisfied	0	1	2	15	22	40
Satisfied	1	3	5	20	10	39
Neutral	2	4	8	5	1	20
Dissatisfied	3	2	1	0	0	6
Very Dissatisfied	1	1	0	0	0	2
Total	7	11	16	40	33	107

Note. $\chi^2 = 18.73$, $df = 16$, $p = 0.016$. $n = 107$ (listwise deletion of missing cases). Cells represent observed frequencies. The reported χ^2 statistic and p -value refer to the omnibus (overall) test of association across the full cross-tabulation, not to any individual cell.

A statistically significant association was observed between students' satisfaction with academic support services and their perception that the institution provides adequate support for academic success ($\chi^2=18.73$, $df=16$, $p=0.016$). Students who reported being 'very satisfied' with support services overwhelmingly 'strongly agreed' that support was adequate ($n=22$ out of 40). Conversely, dissatisfied students consistently reported perceptions of inadequate support. This finding indicates that quality of institutional service

delivery is a key perceptual determinant of the enabling environment for completion.

Utilisation of Academic Support Services and Institutional Ratings

Table 4 examines whether having utilised academic support services (IS2) was associated with overall institutional support ratings (IS3).

Table 4. Cross-Tabulation: Utilisation of Academic Support Services (IS2) × Overall Institutional Support Rating (IS3)

Utilisation (IS2)	Excellent	Good	Average	Below Average	Total
Yes	25	30	15	5	75
No	2	8	10	12	32
Total	27	38	25	17	107

Note. $\chi^2 = 12.45$, $df = 3$, $p = 0.014$. $n = 107$. Students who utilised services ($n = 75$) rated support as 'Excellent' or 'Good' in 73.3% of cases.

Utilisation of academic support services was significantly associated with higher overall ratings of institutional support ($\chi^2=12.45$, $df=3$, $p=0.014$). Of the 75 students who had utilised available services, 25 rated support as 'excellent' and 30 as 'good', representing 73.3% positive ratings. In contrast, of the 32 non-utilisers, only 10 rated support positively. This pattern suggests a reinforcing cycle: students who engage with institutional services develop more positive perceptions of their institution's supportiveness, which may in turn strengthen completion motivation.

Individual Student Characteristics Influencing Completion Rates

Employment Status and Perceived Financial Burden

Table 5 presents the association between current employment status (SIC9) and perceived financial burden of attending university (SIC11).

Table 5. Cross-Tabulation: Employment Status (SIC9) × Perceived Financial Burden (SIC11)

Employment (SIC9)	Not a Burden	Mild Burden	Moderate Burden	Severe Burden	Total
Full-time	5	8	25	12	50
Part-time	7	10	18	5	40
Not Employed	10	5	7	5	27
Total	22	23	50	22	117

Note. $\chi^2 = 21.30$, $df = 6$, $p = 0.006$. $n = 117$. Full-time employees disproportionately reported 'severe burden' ($n = 12$ out of 50; 24.0%). The reported χ^2 statistic and p -value refer to the omnibus test across the full table, not to individual cells.

A significant relationship was established between employment status and the perceived financial burden of university attendance ($\chi^2=21.30$, $df=6$, $p=0.006$). Notably, full-time employed students reported the highest incidence of 'severe burden' (24.0%), exceeding part-time (12.5%) and non-employed students (18.5%), a counterintuitive finding suggesting that the income generated through full-time employment does not adequately offset the direct and indirect costs of university attendance. This may reflect either the nature of low-income employment available to

students, or the psychological and time-opportunity costs of combining full-time work with full-time study.

Perceived Importance of Academic Success and Motivation to Complete

Table 6 examines the relationship between students' valuation of academic success (SIC7) and their expressed motivation to complete their degree (CR10).

Table 6. Cross-Tabulation: Perceived Importance of Academic Success (SIC7) × Motivation to Complete Degree (CR10)

Importance of Academic Success (SIC7)	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Extremely Important	0	0	2	15	30	47
Very Important	1	1	5	20	10	37
Moderately Important	2	3	8	5	1	19
Somewhat Important	3	2	1	0	0	6
Total	6	6	16	40	41	109

Note. $\chi^2 = 28.94$, $df = 12$, $p < 0.001$. $n = 109$. Effect size (Cramer's V) = 0.36, indicating a moderate-to-strong association. The reported χ^2 statistic and p -value refer to the omnibus test across the full table, not to individual cells.

The association between the perceived importance of academic success and motivation to complete one's degree was highly significant ($\chi^2=28.94$, $df=12$, $p<0.001$; Cramer's $V=0.36$). Students who rated academic success as 'extremely important' ($n=47$) were markedly more likely to 'strongly agree' with being motivated to complete ($n=30$; 63.8%). This finding strongly implicates intrinsic goal orientation as a protective factor against attrition, consistent with the broader self-determination theory literature (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Thematic Analysis: Qualitative Insights from Key Informants

Six overarching themes emerged from the thematic analysis of key informant interviews. These are presented below with direct illustrative quotations.

Theme 1: Institutional Support and Policy Frameworks

All four informants acknowledged the existence of institutional support structures, including academic regulations, financial aid programmes, and faculty development initiatives. However, persistent implementation gaps and resource insufficiency were unanimously identified.

The Dean of Students observed: "We have administrative support, academic support, infrastructure support, and supervision support... all aim at enhancing academic performance in terms of grades, attendance, and academic self-efficacy. But (financial support) is not enough. We need more grants." The Quality Assurance Officer highlighted a dual tension: "Scholarships like work-study and government

loans support 500+ students annually, but fee leniency risks institutional sustainability." The Academic Registrar noted a systemic gap: "We impose fines for missed deadlines... but lack mechanisms to follow up on 'dead-year' students who defer studies."

student fees as a structural vulnerability: "Partnerships with organisations like the Mastercard Foundation are needed." The Academic Registrar indicated that a call centre to track students who 'disappear' mid-year was under development, while acknowledging that "faculty training on modern pedagogy is overdue."

DISCUSSION

Institutional Factors and Student Completion

The finding that satisfaction with academic support services significantly predicts positive perceptions of institutional adequacy ($\chi^2=18.73$, $p=0.016$) aligns with the College Fit Theory's emphasis on academic fit as a completion driver (Greenough, 2003). When students perceive institutional resources as congruent with their needs, they develop greater institutional commitment, a factor consistently associated with persistence in the departure model literature (Tinto, 1993). The finding extends Millea et al.'s (2018) observation that institutional support structures are more predictive of completion than demographic variables, contextualizing this relationship within a Ugandan institution operating under significant resource constraints. The significant association between service utilization and positive institutional ratings ($\chi^2=12.45$, $p=0.014$) introduces a selection-reinforcement dynamic: students who engage with available services receive greater institutional benefit, reinforcing their positive assessment. This raises a critical equity concern: most vulnerable students, perhaps due to financial or socioeconomic barriers, may also be the least likely to access or utilise available services, creating a double disadvantage. This is consistent with the qualitative finding that proactive identification of at-risk students is largely absent. Heide and Pante's (2019) emphasis on timely, targeted institutional support is particularly pertinent here: BSU's reactive flagging system, which identifies students only after academic failure, represents a structural failure mode that proactive early-alert systems could address.

The qualitative evidence adds important nuance. Whilst policies exist, their implementation is inconsistent and sometimes contradictory: fee leniency that helps students financially also strains institutional sustainability; attendance regulations that promote engagement are undermined by the absence of student support when attendance declines. This gap between policy intent and operational reality identified across all four informants is not unique to BSU but reflects a broader pattern in developing-country higher education institutions where implementation capacity lags behind policy design (Materu, 2007).

Individual Characteristics and Completion

The counterintuitive finding that full-time employment is associated with a higher incidence of severe financial burden ($\chi^2=21.30$, $p=0.006$) merits careful interpretation. One plausible explanation is that students who engage in full-time employment do so precisely because their financial

Page | 8 Theme 2: Student Engagement and Belonging

Extracurricular programmes such as sports, debates, guild leadership, and spiritual activities were identified as engagement vehicles. However, declining workshop participation and absence of structured, mandatory engagement frameworks emerged as concerns. The Guild President noted: "Sports tournaments, debates, and BSU Week enhance interaction... but student participation in workshops is declining."

Theme 3: Identification of and Intervention for At-Risk Students

A consistent finding was the institution's reliance on reactive rather than proactive identification of struggling students. The Guild President stated: "No proactive strategies... a student is only noticed after a retake." The Academic Registrar acknowledged that a proposed peer tutoring programme had not been implemented, and that "lecturers rarely mentor weak students." The Quality Assurance Officer referenced a nascent 'Save the Bad Day' campaign involving the chaplaincy as an emergent proactive measure.

Theme 4: Infrastructure and Technological Resources

Physical infrastructure was generally affirmed, but technological deficits, particularly unreliable Wi-Fi connectivity, were identified as barriers to online and blended learning. The Dean of Students observed: "We have a stocked library and computer labs... but hostels are needed to keep students closer to campus." The Academic Registrar reported faculty resistance to online pedagogy, with some teaching staff in the Education Faculty characterising it as "useless."

Theme 5: Feedback Mechanisms and Student Voice in Governance

Feedback collection was inconsistent across the institution. The Academic Registrar acknowledged: "Quality Assurance uses online forms... but policies are top-down. Students aren't consulted." The Quality Assurance Officer reported the use of tracer studies and class coordinators, noting that guild presidents advocate for students in council meetings, though without formal decision-making authority.

Theme 6: Systemic Challenges and Planned Interventions

Financial constraints and the absence of longitudinal student tracking systems were identified as overarching institutional challenges. The Dean of Students highlighted reliance on

situation is most precarious; employment status thus serves as a proxy for financial vulnerability rather than a protective factor. This aligns with Murray's (2014) finding that financial pressures in South African universities create complex interactions with academic persistence. The implication is that income generation alone is insufficient to resolve the financial barriers to completion; targeted institutional financial aid rather than reliance on student employment may be more effective.

The strong association between the perceived importance of academic success and motivation to complete ($\chi^2=28.94$, $p<0.001$; $V=0.36$) affirms the centrality of intrinsic motivation as a completion determinant. This resonates with Robbins et al.'s (2004) meta-analytic finding that academic self-motivation is among the strongest psychosocial predictors of college outcomes, and with Marks' (2007) evidence on the role of personal determination among Australian youth. The present study extends these findings to a Ugandan undergraduate context, suggesting that fostering intrinsic motivation through goal-setting exercises, career counselling, and academic mentorship may constitute cost-effective institutional interventions. Importantly, motivation is not solely an individual attribute but is also environmentally shaped; institutional practices that marginalize or demotivate students, such as inconsistent faculty feedback or inaccessible support services, can erode intrinsic motivation over time (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Contextual and Theoretical Contributions

This study makes three contributions to the scholarly literature. First, it provides rare empirical evidence on the determinants of student completion from a sub-Saharan African institutional context, filling a significant geographical gap in the literature dominated by North American and European studies. Second, it demonstrates that the College Fit Theory, originally developed in Western educational contexts, retains explanatory relevance in resource-constrained Ugandan settings, while also revealing the need for theoretical adaptation to account for context-specific challenges such as technological deficits and over-reliance on student fee revenues. Third, the concurrent mixed-methods design enables a richer, more credible account of the completion phenomenon than either strand alone could provide, offering a methodological model for future research in similar contexts.

The study's findings also enrich the emerging literature on the digital divide in higher education. The identification of unreliable Wi-Fi and faculty resistance to online pedagogy as structural completion barriers is particularly timely in the post-COVID-19 landscape, where blended and hybrid learning modalities have become normative expectations. These findings call for systematic investment in digital infrastructure as a completion determinant, not merely a pedagogical convenience.

Generalizability

The findings should be generalised with caution. The study was conducted within a single faculty of one privately chartered university in western Uganda; institutional arrangements, funding models, and student demographics differ across public universities, other faculties, and other regions of Uganda, which may limit the transferability of findings beyond broadly comparable, resource-constrained institutional contexts. The achieved sample was disproportionately concentrated among third-year students (74.8%), so findings may generalise less well to first- and second-year students, whose completion-related experiences and support needs may differ. Nonetheless, the identified institutional and individual determinants of academic support satisfaction, service utilisation, financial burden, and intrinsic motivation reflect mechanisms documented in comparable sub-Saharan African and international settings (Murray, 2014; Millea et al., 2018), suggesting the underlying relationships are plausibly relevant to similar institutions, even where exact prevalence figures may not transfer directly.

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that student completion rates at Bishop Stuart University are determined by the dynamic interaction of institutional and individual factors, consistent with the College Fit Theory's multidimensional framework. Institutionally, the quality and accessibility of academic support services are pivotal: students who utilise these services develop stronger perceptions of institutional adequacy, which in turn reinforces completion motivation. Individually, intrinsic academic motivation is the strongest predictor of completion intention, whilst full-time employment, often a survival strategy for financially constrained students, paradoxically correlates with heightened financial burden, potentially amplifying attrition risk.

Qualitative evidence reveals that BSU's institutional response to completion challenges is characterised by policy existence without robust implementation: support structures exist, but are reactive, insufficiently resourced, and unevenly distributed. Addressing these systemic gaps requires not merely resource injection but institutional culture change towards proactive, data-driven, student-centred governance. The study's findings have direct implications for policy and practice at BSU and comparable institutions across Uganda and sub-Saharan Africa.

Limitations

Several limitations warrant acknowledgement. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference; longitudinal data would be required to establish temporal precedence among the identified determinants. The achieved student sample ($n=115$), while adequate for the statistical analyses conducted, is smaller than the target of 357 and is disproportionately concentrated in Year 3, limiting

generalizability to first- and second-year students who may face distinct challenges. The qualitative sample of four informants, while purposively selected for relevance and institutional authority, does not encompass the perspectives of frontline academic staff, non-academic support staff, or the student body as a whole. Future studies should incorporate these voices through broader qualitative or participatory approaches.

Recommendations

Based on the empirical evidence, the following evidence-based recommendations are proposed:

1. Implement proactive early-alert systems that track attendance, formative assessment performance, and fee payment patterns to identify at-risk students before academic crisis, rather than after examination failure.
2. Establish structured, mandatory mentorship and peer tutoring programmes as formalised components of the institutional support architecture, with academic credit or recognition incentives for participation.
3. Expand and diversify financial aid mechanisms including merit and need-based grants, government loan programmes, and corporate partnerships (e.g., Mastercard Foundation) to reduce over-reliance on full-time student employment as the primary financial coping strategy.
4. Invest strategically in digital infrastructure, including reliable campus-wide Wi-Fi, expanded e-library access, and a structured faculty development programme to build capacity for online and blended pedagogies.
5. Institutionalise participatory governance mechanisms that afford students meaningful input into academic and financial policy design, moving from a top-down to a co-production model of institutional management.
6. Develop a dedicated student tracking and re-engagement system (including the proposed call centre) to maintain contact with 'dead-year' students and facilitate pathways back to completion.
7. Commission longitudinal research to examine the causal dynamics among identified determinants over time, and to evaluate the effectiveness of the above interventions once implemented.

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List of abbreviations

AVE: Average Variance Extracted; BBA: Bachelor of Business Administration; BSAF: BSc. Accounting & Finance; BSEC: BSc. Economics; BSU: Bishop Stuart University; BSWA: Bachelor of Social Work and Social Administration; BTHM: Bachelor of Tourism and Hospitality Management; BUREC: BSU Research Ethics Committee; CFA: Confirmatory Factor Analysis; CVI: Content Validity Index; MCAR: Missing Completely at Random; SPSS: Statistical Package for the Social Sciences; UNCT: Uganda National Council for Science and Technology.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author contributions

Johnson Atwiine: conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, writing original draft, supervision, project administration. Patience Ainembabazi: Conceptualization, investigation, data curation, writing-review and editing. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Data availability

The datasets generated and/or analysed during the current study are not publicly available, in order to protect the anonymity of student and key informant participants, but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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