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Original Article

Academic Incentives and Completion Rates Among O-Level Students in Secondary Schools of Kajara County, Ntungamo District

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The study was about academic incentives and completion rates among O-Level Students in secondary schools of Kajara County, Ntungamo District. Academic incentives are increasingly recognised as a crucial strategy in enhancing student motivation, performance, and school completion rates. This study aimed to assess the effect of academic incentives on completion rates among O-Level students in secondary schools in Kajara County, Ntungamo District. The objectives were to examine the various forms of academic incentives used, assess the progression in completion rates over the past three years, and establish the relationship between academic incentives and completion rates. The study employed a cross-sectional design. This was conducted among a sample of 357 participants, including head teachers, teachers, members of boards of governors, and students, selected from secondary schools in Kajara County. Data were collected through questionnaires and interview guides. Qualitative data were analysed thematically, while quantitative data were analysed using SPSS Version 28.0. Findings indicated that various academic incentives were in use, such as scholarships, academic prizes, extra tutoring, mentorship programs, and merit-based rewards. These incentives were widely perceived as motivating and effective in enhancing academic performance. The analysis also revealed a general upward progression in completion rates over the past three years. A Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.134 ($p = 0.009$) showed a weak but statistically significant positive relationship between academic incentives and completion rates, indicating that incentives slightly contributed to higher retention and completion rates. The researcher concluded that academic incentives are instrumental in supporting student retention and success at O-Level. While the correlation with completion rates was weak, the significance of the relationship underscores the positive role incentives play in education. It is recommended that the government increase funding for academic incentive programs, especially scholarships and mentorship initiatives. School administrations are encouraged to ensure fair and transparent distribution of incentives. Additionally, stakeholders should address underlying barriers such as poverty and lack of parental support to improve student retention holistically.

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INTRODUCTION

Globally, academic incentives have long been recognised as powerful tools in educational systems to promote student achievement and enhance school completion rates (Jacob & Gokbel, 2018). These incentives come in various forms, such as scholarships, academic awards, merit-based recognitions, certificates, and participation in academic competitions. They are designed to create a sense of purpose and direction among learners by rewarding effort, excellence, and consistency. In countries like the United States, educational institutions and government programs have implemented structured reward systems, including tuition waivers, grants, and financial aid packages, aimed specifically at students who demonstrate academic potential or improvement. These incentives serve multiple purposes: they not only motivate students to engage more actively with their studies but also help reduce dropout rates by providing tangible goals and rewards that justify sustained effort. Moreover, for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, such support can be instrumental in overcoming economic and social barriers to education (Johnstonbaugh, 2018). In essence, academic incentives act as both motivational and supportive mechanisms that drive learners to persist despite challenges, thereby

improving both academic performance and overall educational attainment.

In Africa, many countries use academic incentives to help improve education and raise the completion rate of students. These countries often face challenges such as limited resources, high dropout rates, and unequal access to education (Fafunwa & Aisiku, 2022). As a result, many governments and organisations offer incentives like scholarships, prizes, and cash rewards to motivate students. These programs not only aim to improve academic success but also help with issues like gender inequality and the low number of students completing secondary education. These efforts focus on increasing the completion rate of students across the continent (Salmi & D'Addio, 2021).

In East Africa, countries such as Kenya, Tanzania, and Rwanda have used academic incentives to improve education and boost the completion rate of students (Juma & Stonier, 2023). These incentives include scholarships, merit awards, and other forms of financial help, all aimed at reducing dropout rates and encouraging students to succeed in school. For example, in Kenya, the government runs the Secondary School Bursary Scheme, which helps students from poor families attend secondary

school, thus improving the completion rate of students in the country (Ngari, 2020).

Uganda introduced various programs to encourage students to do well in school and improve their completion rate, especially in secondary schools. One of the main programs is the Universal Secondary Education (USE) initiative, which aims to make secondary education affordable for all students, including those from poor families. In addition to this, there are scholarships and awards for students who perform well academically (Kakuba et al., 2021). Despite these efforts, Uganda still faces challenges like overcrowded classrooms and limited school facilities, which affect the quality of education. Academic incentives also aim to reduce gender and regional differences in education, especially in rural areas, which can help improve the completion rate of students in Uganda.

In Kajara County, Ntungamo District, in southwestern Uganda, many students come from poor families, and this often leads to high dropout rates as parents struggle to pay school fees or students face early marriages (Ntungamo District Education Officer's report 2022/2023). To help, schools in the area have started offering academic incentives like school supplies, awards for good performance, and scholarships provided by local businesses and NGOs. These initiatives are designed to help improve the completion rate of students in Kajara County, motivating them to stay in school and complete their education.

Objectives of the Study

- To examine the various forms of academic incentives implemented in secondary schools within Kajara County.
- To assess the progression of O-Level completion rates in secondary schools of Kajara County over the last three years.
- To establish the relationship between academic incentives and the progression of completion rates among O-Level students in secondary

schools of Kajara County over the last three years.

Research Questions

- What are the various forms of academic incentives implemented in secondary schools within Kajara County?
- What is the progression of O-Level completion rates in secondary schools of Kajara County over the last three years?

Hypothesis

H₀: There is no statistically significant relationship between academic incentives and the progression of completion rates among O' Level students in secondary schools of Kajara County over the last three years.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Various Forms of Academic Incentives Used in Secondary Schools

According to a study by Seli (2019), academic incentives can help students stay motivated and focused on their studies. When the rewards align with a student's personal goals and aspirations, they become more enthusiastic about their learning. For instance, students who are motivated by the idea of earning a scholarship for college might work harder to achieve better grades. However, Smets (2018) also points out that it is important to use these incentives carefully. If not managed well, incentives can lead to unhealthy competition or feelings of unfairness among students. Therefore, teachers and school administrators need to think about how they implement these rewards, ensuring they are fair and supportive for all students.

Eichhorn et al. (2019) showed that verbal praise and being publicly recognised for their efforts can significantly increase a student's engagement and willingness to perform well in school. When students receive praise from teachers or are acknowledged in front of their peers, they feel more appreciated and motivated to continue working

hard. For example, a student who is congratulated in front of the class for improving their test score may feel more confident and motivated to keep working. This shows that incentives do not always have to be material or monetary to be effective; simple words of encouragement can have a big impact on students' motivation.

Kapur (2018) found that while these rewards might improve students' scores in the short term, they often lose their effectiveness once the rewards are no longer available. This suggests that when students are only motivated by external rewards, such as gifts or certificates, they might not develop a true interest in learning. Instead, their motivation is tied only to the reward, not to the learning itself. While extrinsic rewards can be useful, it is important to combine them with intrinsic rewards, such as a sense of personal achievement, to keep students motivated in the long run.

Feng & Sass (2018) found that when students have a positive relationship with their teachers, the incentives offered by those teachers are more likely to be effective. If students feel that their teachers care about them and their success, they are more likely to respond well to academic rewards. This means that incentives are not only about the rewards themselves but also about the connection between the student and the teacher. When students feel supported and understood by their teachers, they are more likely to be motivated to do well and appreciate the incentives offered to them.

Shirk (2020) argued that academic incentives should not be the same for all students. His study suggested that different students have different needs and respond to rewards in various ways. For example, students from lower-income families might be more motivated by financial incentives, such as scholarships or school fee waivers, than students from wealthier backgrounds. On the other hand, some students may be more motivated by personal growth or the recognition of their hard work. Incentives should be personalised to suit the unique backgrounds and needs of students. This

means that schools should consider the cultural and socioeconomic factors of their student body when designing incentive programs to make sure they are effective.

McPherson & Schapiro (2021) found that academic rewards can address both the academic and social needs of students. For example, in South Africa, students from disadvantaged communities were more motivated by incentives that helped them overcome financial barriers to education, such as scholarships or assistance with school fees. By offering support in areas beyond academics, such as financial assistance, schools can help students feel more secure and focused on their studies.

Wisener & Eva (2018) showed that the type of subject students are incentivised for can influence their motivation. For example, students who were rewarded for excelling in subjects like science and mathematics showed more interest in these areas compared to students who were incentivised for other subjects. This suggests that subject-specific incentives can be more effective in encouraging students to focus on particular areas of study. It also implies that schools may need to tailor their incentive programs to focus on the subjects that are most important or that students might be struggling with, rather than offering broad, general rewards.

Students who were rewarded not only for their academic achievements but also for participating in activities like sports, arts, or community service were more motivated to engage in a wider range of school activities. This suggests that students benefit from a more well-rounded approach to incentives, where achievements in various areas of school life are recognised. Encouraging students to participate in extracurricular activities, in addition to focusing on their academic performance, can help develop a more balanced skill set and contribute to overall personal growth (Guilmette et al., 2019).

Academic incentives should be combined with constructive feedback to be truly effective. When students received feedback on their performance

along with rewards, they were better able to understand their strengths and areas for improvement. This type of feedback, coupled with incentives, encouraged students to work harder and improve their skills. It shows that incentives are not just about offering rewards but also about guiding students through the learning process (Amerstorfer et al., 2021).

Level of Completion Rates among O-Level Students in Secondary Schools

Cheung (2018) found that students who were more interested and involved in their schoolwork were more likely to finish their education. Having enough learning materials, like textbooks and computers, also helped students stay in school. Schools where teachers were caring and students felt supported had higher completion rates. Mutunga suggested that creating a positive environment, where students are encouraged and motivated by their teachers, can increase the number of students who finish their O' Levels.

Naven et al. (2019) found that students from poor families often dropped out because they couldn't afford things like school fees, uniforms, and books. The study suggested that providing financial support, such as scholarships or free school materials, could help these students stay in school. By easing the financial burden on families, more students would have a better chance of completing their O' Levels.

Students who did well in their first few years of secondary school were more likely to continue their studies and complete their O' Levels. High-performing students were motivated by the possibility of continuing their education after secondary school. Schools should pay extra attention to students who struggle in the beginning to help them catch up and stay on track, which would lead to higher completion rates (Pascoe et al., 2020).

Students whose parents were active in their education were more likely to finish school. This

involvement could be anything from helping with homework to attending school meetings. When parents show interest in their child's schooling, it boosts the student's confidence and motivation. Galle's research recommended that schools should create programs to help parents become more involved in their children's education, especially in areas where parental involvement is low (Bartz, 2018). Schools with better buildings, clean classrooms, and safe, comfortable environments had higher completion rates. When students feel that their school is a safe and pleasant place to be, they are more likely to attend regularly and complete their education. The study highlighted the importance of improving school facilities, especially in poorer areas, to encourage students to stay in school and finish their O' Levels (Wachter, 2018).

Schools with strong leaders who were involved in their students' progress had higher completion rates. When principals provided guidance and support, students were more likely to feel motivated to complete their O' Levels. Training school leaders in how to create a supportive and encouraging environment could help improve completion rates and reduce dropouts (McNair et al., 2022). Students who had friends and support networks in school were more likely to stay motivated and complete their education. Positive relationships with peers helped students overcome challenges and made school a more enjoyable place to be. Schools should encourage teamwork and build a sense of community to help students feel more connected and supported, which could lead to higher completion rates (Mishra, 2020).

When teachers were well-trained, dedicated, and actively engaged with their students, the students were more likely to succeed and stay in school. Good teachers can inspire students and help them overcome academic challenges. Students who were frequently absent from school were at a higher risk of dropping out. Missing school made it harder for students to keep up with their lessons, and they often

fell behind. Schools should monitor attendance carefully and find ways to support students who are absent due to personal or family issues (Werang et al., 2023). Students who understood how their education could help them get a good job were more motivated to stay in school. When students saw the link between their schoolwork and future job opportunities, they were more likely to stay focused and finish their studies. Schools should include career counselling as part of their curriculum to help students plan for their future and stay motivated to complete their O' Levels (Filgona et al., 2020).

The Relationship between Academic Incentives and Completion Rates among O-Level Students in Secondary Schools

Students who received rewards for their academic achievements, such as scholarships, certificates, or public recognition, were more motivated to finish their studies. The study showed that academic incentives help create a positive and competitive environment in schools. This environment pushes students to work harder, as they see that their efforts are being rewarded. Mutunga concluded that such incentives play a key role in helping students stay focused and complete their O' Levels (Shirk, 2020). Rewards such as money, certificates, and prizes had a strong positive effect on students' motivation to stay in school. The study highlighted that when students receive tangible rewards, they feel recognised and valued, which encourages them to work harder and finish their education (Robinson et al., 2021).

Offering additional support, such as free tutoring, learning materials, and access to extra-curricular activities as rewards, helped students stay in school. These incentives made it easier for students to focus on their studies, even in schools with fewer resources (Zhang & Bray, 2020). Students who were offered rewards like academic awards, recognition for improvement, and merit-based incentives had higher completion rates. When students were recognised for their efforts, it boosted their motivation and commitment to finish their

studies (Carson, 2020). When students received certificates, prizes, or public recognition, they felt proud of their hard work and were more likely to stay motivated. This increased motivation led to better academic performance and, in turn, higher completion rates. Schools should make incentives a regular part of their academic culture, as they help to encourage a positive environment where students strive to succeed (Hebert, 2018).

Even small gestures like recognising students in front of their peers or giving them positive feedback can significantly impact their motivation. When students were praised for their hard work, it made them feel good about their efforts and pushed them to continue working toward their goals (Owens et al., 2020).

When students were rewarded as a group or team, they were more likely to encourage one another to stay focused and complete their studies. Peer-based rewards helped foster a supportive environment where students worked together to achieve their academic goals (Michaelsen et al., 2023). When teachers actively participated in setting goals, tracking students' progress, and offering feedback, students were more likely to stay engaged and motivated. The study highlighted that when students feel supported by their teachers, they are more likely to stay in school and finish their education (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019).

Students who saw that their academic efforts could lead to real-world benefits, like scholarships or future career opportunities, were more likely to complete their O' Levels. Schools should make sure that academic incentives are tied to long-term benefits, helping students see how their education can lead to greater opportunities in the future (Kitchen et al., 2018). When students received rewards, such as scholarships or leadership roles, they were more likely to continue their education beyond O' Levels. Students who had received incentives felt more confident in their abilities and were motivated to pursue higher education (Girelli et al., 2018).

METHODOLOGY

Study Population

The study population comprised head teachers, teachers, members of the Board of Governors to represent parents, and students from secondary schools in Ntungamo Municipality.

Sample Size

The study targeted a sample size of 357 participants from a total population of 5,000. This included 6 head teachers, 42 teachers, 30 members of the Board of Governors (only management members, such as the Chairperson of the Board of Governors, Vice-Chairperson, Treasurer, Secretary, Deputy Head Teacher, and School Bursar from each school), and 309 students (with an average of 59 students randomly selected from each school).

Table 1: Showing Target Population and Sample Size

Category of Respondent	Target Population	Sample Size	Sampling Technique
Head Teachers	6	6	Purposive Sampling
Members of the Board of Governors	30 (5 from each school)	30	Purposive Sampling
Teachers	120 (20 from each school)	42	Simple Random and Stratified
Students currently in school	4,874	309	Simple Random and Stratified
Total	5,000	357	

Sampling Techniques

Selection of Teachers and Students Currently in School

A simple random sampling technique was used for selecting teachers and students, while purposive sampling was used to select headteachers and members of the board of governors.

Data Collection Methods

A questionnaire was the primary data collection tool, designed for both teachers and students. For headteachers and members of the board of governors, an interview guide was used.

Data Analysis

For objectives one and two, data were analysed using qualitative methods, specifically a thematic approach. This involved finding common themes

and patterns in the answers, helping to understand the participants' views and experiences. The researcher coded the data, grouping similar responses into categories, which were then used to make conclusions about how academic incentives affected student completion rates.

For objective three, quantitative data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 28.0, focusing on bivariate analysis (Pearson Correlation Coefficient). Bivariate analysis was employed to explore relationships between academic incentives and completion rates among O-Level students in secondary schools of Kajara County, Ntungamo District.

Data Presentation, Analysis and Interpretation

Response Rate

Table 2: Showing Target Population and Sample Size

Category of Respondent	No. of Instruments	No. of Instruments Returned	Response Rate
Head Teachers	6	6	100.0%
Members of the board of governors	30	28	93.3%
Teachers	42	40	95.2%
Students currently in school	309	305	98.7%
Total	387	379	97.9%

Table 2 above shows that the study achieved a high overall response rate of 97.9%, with 379 out of 387 instruments returned. All head teachers responded (100%), while members of the board of governors had a response rate of 93.3% (28 out of 30). Teachers returned 40 out of 42 instruments (95.2%), and students had the highest return rate of 98.7% (305 out of 309). These high response rates across

all categories indicate strong participation and enhance the reliability and credibility of the study findings.

The Relationship between Academic Incentives and the Progression of Completion Rates among O-Level Students in Secondary Schools of Kajara County Over the Last Three Years.

Table 3: Pearson Correlation Coefficient for Academic Incentives and the Progression of Completion Rates

Correlations		Academic incentives	Progression of completion rates
Academic incentives	Pearson Correlation	1	.134**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.009
	N	379	379
Progression of completion rates	Pearson Correlation	.134**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.009	
	N	379	379

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The Pearson correlation coefficient was 0.134, indicating a weak positive relationship between academic incentives and completion rates. The relationship was statistically significant ($p = 0.009 < 0.01$), suggesting that the association between the two variables was unlikely to have occurred by chance. Therefore, the null hypothesis, which stated, "There is no statistically significant relationship between academic incentives and the progression of completion rates among O' Level students in secondary schools of Kajara County over the last three years," was rejected.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Discussion of Findings

The Various Forms of Incentives Used in Secondary Schools of Kajara County

The study findings revealed that academic incentives were widely used and perceived as effective in secondary schools of Kajara County, with high levels of agreement across various indicators. Respondents acknowledged the provision of scholarships, academic prizes,

additional tutoring, recognition, mentorship programs, and merit-based rewards, all of which were seen to enhance student motivation, performance, and completion rates. The overall mean score of 4.01 indicated a strong consensus on the positive impact of academic incentives in reducing dropout rates and promoting educational attainment among O-Level students.

This is in line with Shirk (2020), who revealed that students who received rewards for their academic achievements were more motivated to finish their studies. Similarly, Eichhorn et al. (2019) found that verbal praise and public recognition can significantly increase student engagement and motivation. The findings also align with Carson (2020), who noted that merit-based rewards can boost students' motivation and commitment to their studies.

Additionally, the study's findings are consistent with Zhang & Bray (2020), who highlighted the importance of offering additional support, such as tutoring and mentorship programs, to help students stay in school. Furthermore, the results support Hebert's (2018) assertion that recognising students' efforts and achievements through incentives can lead to better academic performance and higher completion rates. The use of scholarships as an incentive is also supported by Naven et al. (2019), who found that financial support can help students from poor families stay in school.

The researcher views that academic incentives, including scholarships, prizes, tutoring, recognition, and mentorship programs, play a crucial role in motivating O' Level students in Kajara County, fostering better academic performance, reducing dropout rates, and ultimately contributing to improved educational outcomes.

The Progression of Completion Rates among O-Level Students in Secondary Schools of Kajara County Over the Last Three Years

The study findings revealed that the level of completion rates among O-Level students in

secondary schools of Kajara County was generally high and positively influenced by academic incentives. Respondents widely agreed that academic incentives, including scholarships and awards, contributed to improved completion rates, with many also acknowledging financial constraints as a key reason for school dropouts. The overall mean score of 3.97 indicated a strong agreement on the improving progression in completion and the effectiveness of incentives in supporting students to complete their education. This is in line with Cheung (2018), who found that students who were more interested and involved in their schoolwork were more likely to finish their education. Similarly, Pascoe et al. (2020) found that high-performing students were motivated by the possibility of continuing their education after secondary school, leading to higher completion rates.

The findings also align with Naven et al. (2019), who noted that providing financial support, such as scholarships, can help students from poor families stay in school and complete their education. Additionally, the study's findings are consistent with Werang et al. (2023), who highlighted the importance of monitoring attendance and providing support to students who are absent due to personal or family issues, which can help improve completion rates. Furthermore, the results support Filgona et al., (2020) assertion that when students understand the link between their education and future job opportunities, they are more likely to stay focused and complete their studies.

The researcher views that the high completion rates among O' Level students in Kajara County are largely driven by the positive influence of academic incentives, such as scholarships and awards, as well as the recognition of financial constraints, which collectively help students overcome barriers to completing their education.

The Relationship between Academic Incentives and the Progression of Completion Rates among O-Level Students in Secondary Schools of Kajara County Over the Last Three Years

The study findings revealed a weak but statistically significant positive relationship between academic incentives and the progression of completion rates among O-Level students in secondary schools of Kajara County over the last three years. With a Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.134 and a p-value of 0.009, the results indicate that as academic incentives increase, completion rates tend to improve slightly. Consequently, the null hypothesis was rejected, confirming that academic incentives have a meaningful influence on student completion progression in the area.

This is in line with Shirk (2020), who found that students who received rewards for their academic achievements were more motivated to finish their studies, leading to improved completion rates. Similarly, Robinson et al. (2021) found that tangible rewards, such as money and certificates, had a strong positive effect on students' motivation to stay in school and complete their education. The findings also align with Carson (2020), who noted that academic incentives, such as awards and recognition, can boost students' motivation and commitment to their studies, resulting in higher completion rates.

Additionally, the study's findings are consistent with Zhang & Bray (2020), who highlighted the importance of offering additional support and incentives to students to help them stay in school and complete their education. Furthermore, the results support Hebert's (2018) assertion that recognising students' efforts and achievements through incentives can lead to better academic performance and higher completion rates. The weak but statistically significant positive relationship between academic incentives and completion rates is also consistent with Kapur's (2018) finding that while extrinsic rewards can

improve students' scores in the short term, they may not necessarily lead to long-term motivation.

The researcher views that while academic incentives have a weak but statistically significant positive impact on completion rates among O' Level students in Kajara County, their influence is modest, suggesting that while incentives can improve completion rates slightly, other factors may also play a significant role in students' educational success.

Conclusions

A variety of academic incentives were actively used in secondary schools, including scholarships, academic prizes, extra tutoring, public recognition, mentorship programs, and merit-based rewards, all of which were widely perceived by respondents as effective in motivating students and improving academic performance.

Findings revealed a generally improving progression in completion rates among O-Level students, with many respondents agreeing that most students were completing their education, despite the presence of some challenges such as financial constraints and dropout risks.

The study also found a weak but statistically significant positive correlation between academic incentives and completion rates, suggesting that increased use of academic incentives contributes to improved student retention and completion over time.

Recommendations

Various Forms of Academic Incentives Used

The government should increase budgetary support to secondary schools specifically for implementing academic incentive programs such as scholarships, awards, tutoring, and mentorship schemes.

Policy makers should develop and institutionalise clear guidelines to ensure the equitable distribution

and sustainability of academic incentives across all public secondary schools.

Headteachers should strengthen and diversify academic incentive programs in their schools by integrating both financial and non-financial rewards to cater to various student needs and enhance motivation.

Inspectors of schools should regularly monitor and evaluate the implementation of academic incentive programs to ensure they are effective, consistent, and aligned with educational objectives.

Progression of Completion Rates among O-Level Students

The government should implement community-based interventions that address socio-economic challenges such as poverty and early marriage, which affect student retention and completion.

Headteachers should put in place systems to identify students at risk of dropping out and provide timely interventions such as counselling, parental engagement, and academic support.

Inspectors of schools should conduct regular assessments on student progression and completion rates and recommend necessary improvements to school administrations.

Teachers should provide mentorship and individualised academic support to students, helping them stay motivated and focused on completing their education.

Relationship between Academic Incentives and the Progression of Completion Rates

The government should scale up investment in academic incentive programs that have proven to positively impact student retention and completion, ensuring their availability across the country.

Policy makers should incorporate academic incentives into core national education strategies aimed at enhancing secondary school completion rates.

Headteachers should use school performance data to evaluate the impact of academic incentives and improve the targeting and effectiveness of these programs.

Teachers should continuously encourage and recognise student progress through academic incentives, fostering an environment that supports sustained learning and school completion.

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