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## BENEFITS OF THE TUITION FEE FREE POLICY AS PERCEIVED BY PORT MORESBY RESIDENTS

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### Key Points

- The Tuition Fee Free (TFF) policy is a free education program of the Papua New Guinea (PNG) government to increase student enrolment, retention and quality of education.
- High enrolment and retention contributed to lower the quality of education due to inadequate facilities, teachers and monitoring and evaluation.
- The policy is important to improve the literacy rate, which is necessary for PNG to reach its dream of becoming one of the richest nations in the world.
- Disadvantaged and low-income families tend to receive the greatest benefit from the TFF policy.
- Sound strategies are needed to ensure enrolment, retention and quality aspects of education are sustained.

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## BENEFITS OF THE TUITION FEE FREE POLICY AS PERCEIVED BY PORT MORESBY RESIDENTS

By Thomson Honga

The Tuition Fee Free (TFF) policy is a free education program introduced by the government of Papua New Guinea (PNG). It was introduced in 2012 with the aim to increase access to quality basic and secondary education for all school-aged children throughout PNG. The policy is important to improve literacy levels and increase the skilled workforce. This paper focuses on one of the key findings from research conducted by Honga (2019) in 2019 in Port Moresby, which investigated the impact of the TFF policy on the recipient families. Honga (2019) found that low-income families received the greatest financial benefits from the TFF policy. The study involved interviews with the parents and students of the same family groups. Findings included that families in the low-income group have seen improvements in their financial conditions as a result of the TFF policy. The policy benefits poor, disadvantaged, and low-income families and has the potential to positively impact many households. Therefore, the PNG government should consider continuing this free education program. However, there is still need for the government to improve facilities for learning, increase the number of teachers and provide proper monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the policy.

### The importance of the TFF policy

The TFF policy was introduced in 2012 by the government to subsidise basic and secondary education system in the country. The primary aim of the policy was to increase student enrolment, retention and quality of education (Walton et al., 2017). The policy also contributed to relieving many families from the burden of paying tuition fees for their children. The free education program improved enrolment and retention rates at school level, but did not go far in improving quality of education (Walton et al., 2017) in PNG. The challenge of sustaining quality of education has been directly associated with inadequate school facilities such as classrooms, as well as high teacher-student ratios, and poor monitoring and evaluation of the TFF policy. The TFF policy has, to an extent, improved literacy levels in PNG. This was attributed to higher enrolment and retention rates of school-aged

children at the basic and secondary education level.

Increasing the literacy levels of citizens in a country is a key driver to attaining both the quantity and quality of the country's workforce (Oketch & Rolleston, 2007). The higher the number of trained skilled workforce, the higher the level of output (productivity) in the economy. As such, the TFF policy has the capacity to increase supply of quality workers in PNG.

### Package benefits of TFF policy to households

In PNG, the government strived to provide access to quality basic and secondary education for low-income households through the TFF policy. The policy provided the greatest benefits because of its capacity to alleviate financial burden of low-income families (Morgan et al., 2014). It was found that poor households received the greatest financial benefits from the policy. The TFF policy also has the potential to improve the welfare of poor and disadvantaged households in Port Moresby.

Approximately 73 percent of the parents interviewed and 100 percent of the students interviewed reported that the TFF policy improved their family's financial position (Honga, 2019).

One of the parents interviewed stated that his family's financial status has improved:

"The extra savings as a result of free tuition fee have provided me with the opportunity to be able to pay for some goods and services that I have sacrificed in the past due to school fee."

One of the students interviewed made similar assertion:

"Previously, my parents saved money to pay for my school fees, but now they can use this money for other family expenses because TFF is relieving my parent's financial burden."

The low-income families in PNG have the potential to receive the greatest financial benefits from the TFF policy. The policy is especially beneficial for this group, which makes up a large segment of the income groups in PNG. Therefore, the TFF policy should be continually implemented in PNG.

## Potential strategies to make TFF policy more sustainable

The TFF policy has come short of achieving the quality of education in PNG. Therefore, effective strategies are needed to ensure that key indicators of education such as access, retention and quality are achieved at the same time. Potential strategies that can be used to make implementation of the TFF policy more effective are the following:

- **Continue government support, funding and implementation of the TFF policy.** The TFF policy is especially beneficial for low-income families. The policy has the potential to positively impact many households. It can also improve the literacy rate at the base-level of the society. An improved level of literacy for poor and low-income families is a positive indicator for social development for a country. Therefore, the government should continue to fund and implement the TFF policy in a more sustainable way.
- **Improve school infrastructure and facilities for learning.** Increase in enrolment and retention contributed in lowering the quality of basic education due to poor infrastructure and facilities at the schools. Lack of adequate classrooms have resulted in overcrowding, which further impacted quality of education. Overcrowding in classrooms has burdened the resources available, such as teachers and teaching materials. Adequate facilities will address the overcrowding to sustain quality of education and maintain higher enrolment and retention at the same time.
- **Recruit more skilled and qualified teachers.** There is an acute shortage of well-trained and qualified teachers in PNG. As a result of the TFF policy, the number of students enrolled each year has surpassed the number of teachers available. This has contributed to higher teacher-student ratios in some basic and secondary schools in PNG. Training and recruiting more teachers will reduce workloads per teacher. This would assist teachers to provide more quality teaching approaches.
- **Institute proper monitoring, evaluation and reporting systems.** The TFF policy is one of the major social programs introduced with significant budget support, resources and workers to implement it. Hence, proper monitoring, evaluation and reporting are critical to assess the outputs, outcomes and impact against the program objectives. Increasing accountability and governance of TFF funds at the national, sub-national and school level is also critical. This is to ensure that public funds are distributed in a transparent manner across recipient

agencies.

- **Legislate the TFF policy.** The TFF policy had been implemented in PNG on four different occasions since the country's independence. The latest implementation was in 2012 by the O'Neill government and is the most successful implementation, having lasted for eight years. In 2019, the Marape Government reviewed and refined the policy to have a much narrower scope of funding and political support. History has shown that sustainability has been an issue as a result of constant change of political will. Therefore, a more sustainable approach is to legislate the policy. This will guarantee higher literacy rates and an adequate supply of skilled workers in PNG. This strategy has been successful in New Zealand and several countries in Scandinavia.

## Conclusion

The TFF policy is one of the important social support programs introduced by the PNG government to provide free education to its citizens. The primary aim is to increase student enrolment, retention and quality of education and also to lessen financial burden of low-income families. However, it seems that the policy did not go far in sustaining quality of education; this shortfall has been attributed to poor school facilities, high teacher-student ratios, and lack of proper monitoring and evaluation of the policy. Low-income families have the potential to receive the greatest benefit from the TFF policy. Therefore, the policy should be continued because it has the capacity to benefit many households in PNG. The policy also has the capacity to improve literacy rates and increase the skilled workforce, which are positive indicators for social development in PNG. In order to sustain quality of education, attention should be given to constructing more classrooms and school facilities, recruiting more trained teachers and putting in place a proper monitoring and evaluation framework. A more sustainable approach is to transform the policy into a law. It is hoped that this paper will contribute to the policy-related discussions about the current Government's decision to reduce TFF funding.

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