



PROJECT> Student Finance
CLIENT> Higher Education Authority

Case Study > October 2008

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QUESTION: If x is the number of students eligible for grant aid, and y is the number of websites providing information on this subject, calculate - to the nearest whole number - the optimum value of y .

ANSWER: The optimum value of y is 1 - www.studentfinance.ie!

THE CLIENT

It's 2005. The Higher Education Authority (HEA) has carried out an intensive review of access funding for students entering third level education. It identifies a serious problem in the information stream. Some candidates who may be eligible for grant aid are either unaware of the supports available to them, or are so confused as to their options that they miss their chance for further education all together.

Currently, information on individual grant aid schemes can be found on the websites of all the higher education institutions, as well as those of County and City Councils, Vocational Education Committees (VECs) and the Department of Education. However, there is no one stop shop as recommended in the HEA review, which could provide clear and concise information on eligibility criteria and application processes.

THE BRIEF

What's needed is a comprehensive and user-friendly guide to financial supports for students. It must be clear, concise and accessible to all, and should reach the following target market:

- Second level students applying for further education
- The parents of these students
- Mature students
- Students with disabilities;
- Students already in third level
- Early school leavers
- Guidance Counselors and Student Welfare Officers

THE OBJECTIVES

- Raise awareness of the available financial supports for all students entering further and higher education, particularly those from disadvantaged or minority groupings who would not apply otherwise
- Provide clarity to the complex system of applying for maintenance grants and establish a one stop shop online resource
- Encourage greater take-up of schemes for eligible applicants and increase the number of students entering third level education
- Provide a guide to financial supports for access practitioners and guidance counselors

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THE SOLUTION

It's January 2008. www.studentfinance.ie is launched by Mary Hanafin T.D., the then Minister for Education and Science. The new site is promoted through an integrated marketing campaign including posters, leaflets, online advertising, radio ads, and PR activities throughout the summer, reaching its peak during the key August / September period when Leaving Cert results and CAO offers are published.

The campaign featured a fresh, clean StudentFinance.ie brand identity with the call to action tagline 'it's your future'. The website and marketing materials have a bright, positive feel to appeal to a young student audience using images of 'students' of all age groups and circumstances to show that third level education is accessible to all.

www.studentfinance.ie has been designed to help users to quickly and conveniently identify the various sources of financial support for which they are eligible and how they can apply. The website features text resizing and low vision options and its structure reflects established best practice in maximising accessibility.

A 'Maintenance Grant' section provides a convenient step-by-step guide to eligibility in clear, user-friendly terms and can guide students through the scheme requirements in a way that is relevant to individual circumstances.

Step-by-step guides are also provided for other sources of financial assistance for students, such as 'Fund for Students with Disabilities', 'Back to Education Allowance', 'Student Assistance Fund' and the 'Millennium Fund'. Information on course fees, along with details on eligibility for free fees, are also available.

For the first time information on all financial support schemes available to students - including scholarships - has been brought together in one information portal. This information can be easily and regularly updated - a benefit that was difficult to implement prior to the launch of www.studentfinance.ie as the information generally existed in hard copy format and in disparate locations

THE RESULTS

- From February to October 2008 there have been 178,188 visits to www.studentfinance.ie, surpassing the HEA target of 120,000 visits by **58,188** visits or **48.5%**!
- **65,975** or **37%** of these visits were made in August and September alone, coinciding with Leaving Certificate results, Central Applications Office (CAO) offers and the beginning of many Third Level institutions' academic terms. This underlines the significant benefit of www.studentfinance.ie to prospective and current third-level students and the effectiveness of the site in reaching its target market.
- Of the 178,188 visits **126,931** or **71.3%** are unique visitors coming to the site. These visitors viewed on average 8 pages per visit. There are an estimated 90,000 students who entered Third Level education this year so that equates to approximately **1.4 visits per enrolled student**.
- While statistics are not yet available, general evidence suggests that applications for maintenance grants have increased for 2008-2009 as a result of the new website.

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- The new website has proved of huge interest to international students coming to Ireland to study, with most international visitors coming from the Czech Republic (10.7%), USA (5.3%) and UK (5%). Other international visitors arrived from all over Europe, UAE, Canada, New Zealand and Japan, **132 different countries in total**.
- Widespread media attention greeted the launch of www.studentfinance.ie. It was publicised on the RTÉ Six One News, and on the Pat Kenny radio show on RTÉ Radio One. Ireland AM and TV3's breakfast show, also featured an item on the site. Additionally several interviews were given on local radio and in the print media.
- There are currently over **1,330** links to www.studentfinance.ie from external websites that are not search engines. Virtually all higher education and student websites now link directly to www.studentfinance.ie. In particular, links have been developed with www.qualifax.ie, which provides comprehensive information on further education and training courses, the Central Applications Office (CAO) that processes first year college applications and www.citizensinformation.ie that provides public service information online.
 - A link to www.studentfinance.ie has been placed on the home pages of www.qualifax.ie and www.cao.ie
 - www.cao.ie referred 16.7% of all site traffic,
 - www.citizensinformation.ie referred 10.5%
 - www.qualifax.ie referred 7.5%.
- In just 9 months www.studentfinance.ie has achieved an impressive Google page ranking of **7 out of 10**. Normally it would take a website years to achieve this high a ranking. Other well established education resource sites such as www.education.ie, www.cao.ie and www.citizensinformation.ie all have a page rank of 8 out of 10, only 1 point above the newly launched Student Finance site.
- Due to the success of www.studentfinance.ie the website www.mygrant.ie has ceased to operate and instead directs users to www.studentfinance.ie which has now become established as the source of information on grants for students attending Third Level education.
- Partnerships have also been formed with other organisations as a result of the launch of the new site. These include Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS), the Department of Social and Family Affairs, and the Revenue Commissioners.
- The site has also received a warm welcome from the County/City Councils and the Vocational Education Committees (VECs) who have placed links on their own websites and distributed promotional material.
- It has also been beneficial for the Department of Education and Science and the grant administering bodies as it serves as an information portal to which students can be directed.

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THE FEEDBACK

From Students:

"It has been a huge help to my family and myself who, before now, knew nothing of how to apply for grants. The website is extremely easy to navigate and provided me with everything I needed to know."

Annalisa,
Student.

"Essential viewing for every student, school leaver and final year student."

Hamid Khodabakhshi,
President of the Union of Students in Ireland.

From Professionals:

"What a great site. It will help in our adult guidance work. Thank you!"

Maria,
Adult Educational Guidance Service.

"I can honestly say this is one of the most beneficial sites to come online in a long time."

David,
Guidance Counsellor.

From the Media:

"Lack of information is a barrier to accessing education, so an initiative like this is of real benefit."

Irish Independent,
23 January 2008.

"Tens of thousands of students and their families have turned to a new website for advice on grant applications and other college finance issues."

Irish Examiner,
22 August 2008

From the Client:

"Overall, the HEA has benefited hugely from the launch of www.studentfinance.ie, in that it is now better equipped to deliver on its mission to promote higher education as an option to all."