

## Widening Participation Research Fund Final Report

**Project Title:** Should expenditure be switched from bursaries to outreach? A comparative evaluation of the effects on Widening Participation of the Access to Bristol and Sutton Trust schemes

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**A brief description of the research project as presented in the original proposal, including the objectives and the research methodology:**

The project is a qualitative examination of the comparative effect of bursaries and outreach and the role they many play in firstly, choice when considering options post 18, particularly university application, and secondly, in the experience of students once at the University of Bristol.

The research has been conducted mostly using depth interviews, with some focus groups. In the first year, (2013 – 14) research was conducted with post-16 students and teachers in local schools, and students attending the either the Access to Bristol or Sutton trust outreach programmes. We also interviewed 50 first year undergraduates in three categories; UoB bursary only (19), outreach and A2B bursary (21) and outreach only (10).

In March/ April 2015 we conducted the next stage of the fieldwork, which involved re-contacting the first year undergraduates (now second year) for a second interview. We re-interviewed 37 of the original 50 participants: UoB bursary only (13), outreach and A2B bursary (15) and outreach only (9). All previous participants were contacted three times and asked to take part again.

**An outline of any departures from the original objectives and methodology, with reasons.**

We also interviewed a new cohort of first year undergraduates, to ensure that findings were not cohort specific. Initially we had intended to conduct 3 focus groups, however, our experience on the first stage of the project led us to believe that the subject matter was too personal to be shared in a group setting. Instead we conducted 21 interviews with first year 2014/15 undergraduates: UoB bursary only (5), outreach and A2B or UoB bursary (7) and outreach only (9).

**Summary of the findings:**

The research is informed by and provides evidence for an understanding of widening participation that is not just about diversifying intakes but is also about supporting inclusion in the wider University community and the opportunities that extend from it. As such, we question a suggestion that universities should act to switch expenditure from bursaries and fee waivers to outreach programmes. Although our findings agree that the current bursary system has little influence on the university choices prospective students make, that may be because the system is complicated and uncertain: eligibility for a bursary may only be confirmed once a student has been admitted to a university and begun their study. So even if a student is able to gather the

information they need to compare what is available, there is no necessary guarantee that she or he will qualify for it.

What the research highlights is the value of greater certainty. The University of Bristol's Access to Bristol scheme is attractive because it provides the guarantee of an admissions offer (in most circumstances). It also offers a generous financial package to those who are admitted from it. Bursaries (including those that do not fall under the Access to Bristol scheme) provide greater certainty in helping a student to manage their finances, to participate more fully in the life of the university, and to provide a cushion from unexpected and unplanned expenses, especially in a city that is regarded as expensive. Outreach provides greater certainty about what a university is like and what the university experience will be.

Ultimately the matter should not be one of choosing between bursaries or outreach programmes, or of switching expenditure from one to the other. It is about establishing ways of supporting students over the educational life course from school to graduation (with other intermediate stages in the case of mature students), allowing those from less advantaged backgrounds to have the same opportunity to enter and to participate in university life as those from more traditional intakes. Both outreach and bursaries help to facilitate a reciprocal 'bond' between the university and the student; the evidence is that those who benefit from such schemes are willing to 'give back' in their support to other students. Bursaries and outreach are not an either-or. They are complementary tools that can widen intake and participation within a university.

#### **Dissemination activities undertaken and planned:**

We have written a longer report that will be published on the PFRC website and which has been sent to Moneybox (Radio 4) for a programme they are doing on the effect of paid employment on students' studies.

A PolicyBristol briefing is being written and will be sent out before the University WP conference.

A journal publication has been written with researchers at UWE noting the synergies and closely aligned conclusions between this study and theirs.

#### **Suggestions for extension of the project or further research avenues:**

The loss of the maintenance grant and its impact upon WP students needs careful study. The participation (or otherwise) of WP students in University-affiliated activities might be studied: the (prohibitively high) cost of the sports pass was cited by a student as a barrier to taking part in sporting activities, for example.

There may also be a group of students who, although not eligible for bursaries (with a household income above the threshold) may also be struggling and for whom targeted support might be made available.

#### **Impact of the research findings for the University of Bristol:**

The current policy of the University of Bristol to offer cash bursaries, rather than focus on fee waivers, would appear to be an effective and appreciated policy. While the findings suggest that

there are also some benefits to fee waivers, they are perceived as secondary to that of a cash bursary.

The delivery of the bursary in termly instalments, received later in the term than the governmental loan or grant, was also a way of ensuring that bursaries were able to serve the purpose of smoothing 'lumpy expenditure', such as rental deposits, or covering unpaid internships. In terms of the level of bursary needed to be effective, there appeared to be no fundamental difference in the practical effect of receiving £2,000 rather than £3,750. However, underlying this benefit was a need for a termly amount substantive enough, for example, to pay a deposit on a rental property.

It is important to note that the research was conducted with students who began their studies in 2013 or 2014, and that those who were eligible for financial support received a non-repayable maintenance grant of £3,500 as well as the cash bursary and fee waiver. Undergraduates starting at the University of Bristol (or any English university) in autumn 2016 will no longer receive a non-repayable maintenance grant; all maintenance monies will be in the form of a loan. The removal of this grant will clearly effect the overall financial position of students from low income coming to the university.

In terms of successfully widening access to university via outreach activities, the policy implications are less clear. The findings suggest that the current outreach scheme, Access to Bristol, is successful within its own parameters; for students that live within an hour, and have achieved good grades at GCSEs, the scheme was well received, particularly by those who went on to study at Bristol. However there is clearly a limited number of eligible students in the area, and as living at home can be a barrier (as well as an incentive), the broadening of the geographical reach of Access to Bristol can only be a positive. The university has already trialled this during summer 2016, with the Insight to Bristol residential course, for post 16 students from London.

Overall, the biggest barrier to widening access was achieving high enough grades to be accepted at the University of Bristol. Our findings did show that recognition of Access to Higher Education Diploma had been effective in facilitating access for mature students.

There are ways in which Bristol is already trying to offer more certainty to those from non-traditional backgrounds, or at least implementing policies that may help applicants believe they have a reasonable chance of success. The policy of contextual offers to those from low participation schools appears to partially mitigate this barrier to attending, and the guaranteed offer of a place at Bristol for those who completed this course also encouraged applications to Bristol, in particular for oversubscribed courses. If Access to Bristol participants will have priority for available places for near miss candidates, then this should be communicated during the course.

The local post-16 landscape also needs to be considered when developing policy. For example, if the University's Bristol Scholars Scheme is extended to all Bristol schools, then there needs to be consideration on how to this will aid pupils from low performing school where there is no post 16 provision.

Finally, it is important to recognise that the University of Bristol, and perhaps all research-intensive universities, convey a particular culture to potential students, and more so once they arrive. The experience of the widening participation students, especially mature students, demonstrate that widening both access and participation may require some change of culture within the university too; the remit cannot be only to allow non-standard students to fit within

the existing culture of the university, but to expand that culture to include a broader range of experience of higher education at university. Guidance must be given to ensure that all staff in the university recognise and place importance in welcoming those students whose experiences and expectations are different from the traditional student body.

**Impact of the research findings for the higher education sector and policy makers in the UK:**

The findings from the research makes clear the importance of policy makers, when formulating Higher Education strategies, distinguishing between widening access and widening participation. As far as how bursaries may affect access to university, it is clear that they play only a small role in influencing decision over university choice, and that for them to hold more sway would not necessarily be a desirable outcome. This is not to say that bursaries are not having any effect on influencing decisions to come to university; some of the students we spoke to assumed that all universities would provide some form as support to low incomes household, and therefore a lack of any level of cash bursary could ultimately be a disincentive to apply to that university. The need for clear and easily found information also emerged, about both amount offered and likely eligibility, in order that potential undergraduates can factor this into their decision making.

It is important that higher education institutions generally recognise the difficulties in achieving grades that students coming from low participation schools can have; for example, some schools could prioritise teaching qualifications equivalent to GCSEs grades A\*-C, such as BTECs or NVQs, to improve their league table standing, which may therefore make it harder students when applying it university. Equally, there is concern over how the impending removal of AS levels may affect the ability of universities to assess the potential in candidates.

In terms of Widening Participation, our findings complement and confirm previous research (Harrison et al 2007, Chetwynd and Diggle 2013, Byrne and Cushing 2015, O'Brien 2015) that bursaries play an important role in participation, rather than access, among those from non-standard background – it allows recipients to have a University experience that is more comparable to that of other students.

There are other ways in which HEIs can assist widening participation students. Offering flexible paid work, as student ambassador via the widening participation office for example, was also a successful way of assisting students both financially and socially, and generates a virtuous cycle of WP students supporting and encouraging other WP students.

**Impact of the research findings for the higher education sector internationally:**

The key point is that widening participation is something that occurs within and has to be supported by Universities. It is not the same as access to University, which is how it has tended to be conceived.

**Other impacts of the research (e.g. for schools, local authorities, other bodies or sectors):**

The starting point for this research was a policy suggestion that expenditure should be switched from bursaries to University. We find no evidence to support such a switch – although we do find grounds for supporting both.

**Financial summary:**

	<b>Spend</b>	<b>Budget</b>	<b>Balance</b>
<b><u>STAFF COSTS</u></b>	<b>£43,025</b>	<b>£51,470</b>	<b>£8,445</b>
<b><u>NON-STAFF COSTS</u></b>			
Consumables	£7,055	£11,000	£3,945
Fees	£7,380	£5,400	-£1,980
Travel	£96	£125	£29
<b>Total non-staff costs</b>	<b>£14,531</b>	<b>£16,525</b>	<b>£1,994</b>
<b>TOTAL PROJECT COSTS</b>	<b>£57,556</b>	<b>£67,995</b>	<b>£10,439</b>