

Bursaries are an important component of widening participation in Higher Education and their funding should be maintained

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About the research

In 2012 the Government's Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission recommended that universities should transfer expenditure for widening participation from bursaries and fee waivers to outreach programmes instead. It did so due to the lack of evidence that the bursary system was influencing students' University choices. Research conducted between 2013-2016 by the University of Bristol's Personal Finance Research Centre has found that although the bursary system has little influence on the decisions made by prospective students in the Bristol area, the Commission's recommendation assumes a narrow view of the role of financial support. It is a view that is limited to promoting fair access, which is clearly important but does not go further to consider what it means for a student to participate in, as opposed to merely attend, a university.

Interviews conducted with students revealed that the experience of receiving a bursary brings benefits beyond the point of access. Bursaries allow those from less advantaged backgrounds to have the same opportunity to participate in university life as those from more traditional intakes. Bursaries help students to manage their finances, to participate more fully in the life and community of the university, provide a cushion from unexpected and unplanned expenses, and help to form a positive bond between the student and the institution. In short, they enhance the student experience. This research finds that it would be a mistake to stop funding them.

Bursaries bring far-reaching benefits for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and should be maintained alongside outreach programmes.

Policy implications

- The bursary and fee waiver system across the university sector is complicated and uncertain – eligibility may not be confirmed until a student is enrolled at a university. This complexity should be reduced to allow for bursaries to influence university choice.
- Although the existing bursary system may have little effect in widening access to universities, it does not follow that outreach programmes alone will do any better. Bursaries should not be replaced by outreach programmes, as is proposed, without further evaluation.
- The effect of cutting back on bursaries and financial support would be to leave students from less advantaged backgrounds less well equipped to succeed at university. It would limit the opportunity for those students to participate fully in the life and community of the university.
- The pool of school pupils who are from less advantaged backgrounds, who can meet the grade requirements of an elite University and who live nearby may not be large. Local outreach programmes will therefore struggle to diversify intakes.
- Bursaries and outreach programmes should not be viewed in the context of an either-or. They are complementary tools that should operate alongside one another.

Key findings

- Prospective students value certainty. An attraction of the University of Bristol's Access to Bristol scheme is that it normally provides the guarantee of an admissions offer.
- Running the scheme during the school day can, however, be disruptive. One pupil declined to participate because she was concerned about the impact upon her A-level study.
- Bursaries support students by helping them to manage their finances in a city that is regarded as expensive, and to participate more fully in the life of the university.
- Specific costs create barriers. At the University of Bristol, the cost of a sports pass is regarded as high, limiting participation in sports activities.
- Outreach activities and bursaries facilitate a reciprocal bond between the university and the student. Some of those involved become student ambassadors, generating a virtuous cycle of peer support.
- However, not all 'widening participation students' fit comfortably into the existing culture of what is regarded as a 'posh university'. This highlights the importance of improving the inclusivity of the university culture.

Further information

The research was conducted by the Personal Finance Research Centre over a three-year period, 2013–16. It consisted of in-depth interviews and focus groups with pupils and students in Bristol. The full report is available at: <http://bit.ly/2dMXEIM>

For further related reading see:

University Challenge: How Higher Education Can Advance Social Mobility. A progress report by the Independent Reviewer on Social Mobility and Child Poverty (October, 2012)

Contact the researchers

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“The finance they give you is a great benefit, a weight off my mind. I don't know how stressful Uni would be if I was thinking I've got to work 8 hours a week just to put food on the table ... it provides a sort of level pegging of what you should be able to achieve...”
(student)

“If they're willing to give you that money and knock money off your tuition it shows that, yes, that they want you to come to Uni.” (student)