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Evaluating the impact of higher education funding aimed to address student hardship

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Abstract: This paper explores the findings of an evaluation conducted at Sheffield Hallam University to understand the impact of institutional financial support provided to students who are under-represented in higher education or who are facing hardship. The government has made funding available to address hardship faced by students due to the Covid-19 pandemic, with providers deploying various institutional financial support schemes to help students navigate the student lifecycle. However, there is often a lack of evidence about how these support packages help improve students' outcomes, which is a requirement of the Office for Students. The paper seeks to address this gap by providing an overview of the evaluation of the institution's financial support schemes, including the methodology which used a validated financial support evaluation toolkit as the framework for the data collection and analysis. The impact of the funding on recipients and the evaluative approach adopted will be reflected upon.

Paper: Higher education providers spend substantial sums of money each year on bursaries, scholarships, hardship funds, and other types of financial support for students. The Office for Students (OfS) have reported that, according to the 2018-19 access agreements, providers are estimated to spend over £382 million on financial support (OfS, n.d.). There is an expectation from the OfS that, where there is a commitment of resources to financial support, providers will share evidence of how the financial support will improve outcomes for those from underrepresented groups or other students in the greatest need. The government has made funding available to support students in higher education that are facing hardship due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Two allocations of funding, totalling £70 million, were bestowed to providers in December 2020 and February 2021, which was followed by an additional £15 million in April 2021 (OfS, 2021).

Recent research has highlighted the potential impact of the pandemic on all students. The Student Academic Experience Survey in 2021 identified that mental health concerns was the primary reason why students were considering leaving their course (Neves & Hewitt, 2021). Lack of finances (NUS, 2020) and 'digital' infrastructure were other concerns reported by students within institutional data and across the sector. There is acknowledgement from the OfS that the challenges facing 'marginalised' groups of students could be further exacerbated due to the pandemic. Relevant literature has helped to build an understanding of the potential difficulties facing some students, such as Black, Asian Minority Ethnic students (Singh, 2020), disabled students (OfS, 2020b), care experienced and estranged students (Unite, 2020) and international students (OfS, 2020a). Various support schemes need to be deployed by providers to help different groups of students navigate the

student lifecycle. However, there is often a lack of evidence about the impact of financial support packages which can limit an understanding of 'what works' across the sector (Stevenson et al., 2020).

This paper explores the findings of an evaluation conducted at Sheffield Hallam University to understand the impact of institutional financial support provided to students who are under-represented in higher education or who are facing hardship. A range of types of financial support were available within the institution that students might be eligible for, including Access to Remote Learning, Rental Hardship Support and Postgraduate and International Living Support. In line with OfS' expectations, it is necessary to evaluate these schemes to determine their impact on recipients and to identify possible improvements to existing processes.

The paper will begin by sharing details of the methodology and findings of the evaluation. The validated financial support evaluation toolkit (McCaig et al., 2016) was implemented as the framework for the data collection and analysis for this evaluation, as recommended by the OfS. A total of 347 recipients of institutional hardship funding completed the survey tool, which was adapted for the context of this research, that asked questions to students about: their sources of finances used to fund their higher education study; the extent to which the hardship funding had helped them academically and personally; whether they had undertaken paid work; and their experiences of the application process. Quantitative and qualitative data from the survey was analysed, specifically by using descriptive statistics, statistical testing and thematic analysis, and triangulated to identify a set of key themes.

The survey responses showed that high percentages of respondents reported that the hardship funding was important for their financial ability to continue studying. The financial support was deemed to be pivotal for recipients in helping them pay for essential living costs, allowing them to concentrate on their studying at university and alleviating stress and anxiety. The paper will provide further details about the ways in which the financial support has affected different groups of students, for example, by level of study and home fee status. Further statistical analysis will be undertaken on institutional data to evaluate the relationship between financial support and student success outcomes, which is advocated by the toolkit.

The paper will conclude by exploring the implications of the findings, in relation to the aims of the financial support packages, and how they have informed practice. The evaluative approach that was adopted will be reflected upon, including its limitations, the use of the adapted toolkit and a consideration of how future evaluations might be conducted to continue to raise the standards of evidence. This paper will contribute to the emerging literature on the impact of institutional financial support on students in higher education who are facing hardship due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

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