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Abstract

This paper reports the results of two qualitative studies undertaken at two contrasting universities and involving semi-structured interviews with 98 full-time undergraduates. These studies aimed to explore the experiences of students from low income backgrounds in receipt of a means-tested university bursary, with particular reference to their entry to higher education, retention on course and likelihood of academic success.

The two studies had convergent findings, despite being undertaken separately, using different methodologies and in contrasting settings. It was found that bursaries had no impact on application behaviour for a large majority of the students and where there was an impact, this was sometimes counterintuitive. However, students generally described bursaries as having a positive impact on their student experience by enabling them to engage more readily in what they perceived to be a 'normal' student lifestyle and to develop protective and motivational social and institutional networks.

Paper

Since 2006, English universities have been compelled to offer additional bursaries to full-time undergraduates from low income backgrounds if they wish to charge tuition fees above a minimum level. Universities have autonomy over the design of their bursary schemes, resulting in a plethora of different configurations in existence, with contrasting eligibility criteria, prioritisation, size and payment regimes. Similarly, the bursaries can be offered as cash sums, as accommodation vouchers, public transport payment cards and other forms of goods-in-kind felt likely to benefit students.

Bursaries are a big business, with the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) reporting that £543 million was spent nationally in the 2014/15 academic year. Over the lifetime of university bursaries, around £4 billion has been dispensed to students from low income backgrounds in order to notionally offset the cost of increasing tuition fees. While there is great diversity, a typical bursary amounts to around £1,000 per year – higher in high status universities and lower in universities that have more eligible students.

However, OFFA has begun to question the efficacy of bursaries. Firstly, a national survey established that they had little impact on students' decisions to enter higher education and which university to choose (OFFA 2010). Secondly, analysis of national aggregated data found no

evidence that bursaries have a positive impact on retention either, although the analysis was rightly guarded in terms of issues with the data available (OFFA 2014). Clearly, the provision of additional cash-in-pocket might be expected to offset financial pressures on students from less affluent backgrounds, making them more likely to persist and thrive in their studies; indeed, this is what universities continue to believe, even in the light of OFFA's tentative analysis (OFFA 2015). This provides OFFA with a serious quandary: why are students not being influenced by their (arguably) largest policy intervention?

This paper reports the results of two qualitative studies undertaken in two contrasting universities in the same city; Old University (an elite university with relatively few students from disadvantaged backgrounds) and New University (a mid-status university with a diverse social mix). The studies were undertaken separately, but have been brought together here for comparative purposes. The Old University study was longitudinal in nature, tracking a cohort of 40 bursary holders from their entry to higher education in 2013 and through into their second year. The New University was cross-sectional and focused on two samples of 29 bursary holders in their first and third years of study respectively. In both instances, the method used was semi-structured interview, generally lasting 30 to 45 minutes.

Participants were asked a range of questions about their family background, their entry into higher education and their subsequent experiences. These data were then contextualised with respect to the bursary received and how this formed part of their wider student experience, focusing, for example, on how it was used and what the implications would have been if the bursary had not existed. The studies were thus constructivist and interpretivist in nature, probing how bursaries had contributed to the act of becoming and being a student, both in a practical sense and in terms of the social and institutional relationships that it had enabled them to develop. In both instance, thematic analysis was used to make sense of the large quantity of data collected. Whilst the two studies were sited within contrasting universities and used slightly different methodologies, the results were very similar. This provides the research team with strong confidence in their validity, as well as the likelihood of generalisability to other university settings.

The first finding was that there was very little evidence for bursaries exerting an impact on university recruitment. In a substantial majority of cases, students were unaware about the existence of bursaries other than in the broadest terms prior to choosing their preferred universities – and in some instances, after arrival. This was not generally explained by a lack of information, but rather a low priority placed on financial matters, coupled with a belief that the amount they received would be similar. Contrary to policy intentions, a small minority of students even inferred that large bursaries signified inferior provision and so acted to steer the students away from the universities that were offering them. As such, these studies conclude that bursaries have little impact on decisions to enter higher education or between universities.

In terms of retention and success, a more mixed picture was identified, reflecting to an extent the individual circumstances of the students themselves. While gratitude for the bursary was ubiquitous, relatively few students specifically articulated a belief that it had enabled them to

remain on their studies and that they would have left without it. Rather, they described ways in which it had enhanced their student experience, both socially and academically. Some described being able to access preferred housing options (e.g. in campus halls) and a 'normal' student lifestyle, while others discussed participation in student clubs and societies that would otherwise have been closed to them. Others saw bursaries in a fluid relationship with paid part-time work, with the former allowing them to reduce the latter, especially at key moments of academic pressure. Others talked about forms of academic expenditure to obtain core books, materials or equipment, particularly within practical subjects.

These studies therefore conclude that there is a very strong likelihood that bursaries have a protective effect on students from low income backgrounds, allowing them to become full members of the university community and enabling them to avoid crippling part-time work commitments. This is felt to be likely to feed into improved retention and success, albeit indirectly through the uses detailed above. Finally, some students constructed bursaries as being a motivational aspect of a reciprocal relationship with a university that had faith in them and an interest in their success.

References:

- OFFA (2010) Have bursaries influenced choices between universities? Bristol: OFFA.
- OFFA (2014) An interim report: Do bursaries have an effect on retention rates? Bristol: OFFA.
- OFFA (2015) What do we know about the impact of financial support on access and student success? Bristol: OFFA.