

## Optimising the impact of university financial support to students

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### ○ **The study**

The study commissioned by the Bournemouth University's Fair Access Agreement Management Group and undertaken by the Centre for Excellence in Learning (CEL) looked into the impact of BU bursary/financial support. The intricacies surrounding the impact of institutional financial support on a student's decision to embark on university study and their subsequent success, retention, wellbeing or employability need to be fully understood so that Bournemouth University's investment in providing financial bursaries to students can demonstrate and maximise the desirable investment returns. By establishing the impact of financial support on students, the project also highlighted (a) the scope of financial support available to students; b) what differences such financial support made and how benefits could be optimised; (c) whether there were communication/marketing issues (pre-entry/pre-support) and influence on student's decision making; (d) if the level of funding were appropriate, and e) implications for future direction. A mixed methods approach was adopted and all student beneficiaries of a university bursary or financial support were invited to complete an electronic survey. 612 questionnaires were completed and these were followed by semi structured interviews and focus group discussions with a few student volunteers.

### ○ **The impact of university financial support evident**

Financial support/bursary from the university was largely considered to have a positive impact on retention and wellbeing. However, a few respondents noted that in the absence of financial support, they would still not consider dropping out. This may be because the burden of debt for students from disadvantaged backgrounds could be exacerbated by dropping out than staying on a course and seeing it through. It was also evident in the study that financial support did not play a significant part in determining choice of university or programme of study. This is similar to a study conducted by Callender and Wilkinson (2013) who found that most respondents did not feel that financial support or bursary influenced their choice of university. It is clear there are other determinants of choice of university and these may include the location of the university and its accessibility from home or place of work. Nonetheless, in instances where universities present a clear competitive advantage in the form of a higher bursary value, Corver (2010) revealed it may have an impact on choice of university. The following recommendations could be drawn from the study:

### ○ **Communication**

There was a clear issue with communication or information dissemination with respect to the different bursary and financial support schemes the university administer. Many of the respondents assert that they became aware of a bursary or financial support scheme during a crisis situation. On the basis of this, it may be helpful if prospective and all current students are provided with or could easily access information on existing financial support and bursary schemes well in advance. It can be maintained that many universities consider their financial support schemes as part of their competitive offer which could attract students from low income or less affluent background (Nursaw Associates, 2015). Getting the information on existing financial support schemes to the right targets could be considered as one of many keys to maximising the desired return on investment. Information on financial support schemes can influence the decision of prospective students to access university studies or place a request for relevant support as registered students which can boost retention, wellbeing and success. Level C respondents appeared to be better informed of existing BU bursary/financial support schemes. This suggests that there is an improved communication/marketing scheme in operation compared to previous years and the university could build on this to continue to reach out positively with information on existing bursary/financial support.

- **Funding level**

It was clearly evident that some of the respondents did not find the level of funding adequate as there were remaining struggles. These remaining struggles prompted many students to take up several hours of paid job during term time. Some of the respondents noted that working several hours during term time can potentially hamper their ability to continue or succeed in a course. The issue of insufficient level of financial support from the university is not exclusively an institutional one (BIS, 2015). Furthermore, the insufficient level of financial support may be compounded in instances whereby students use the support provided to also assist dependents as revealed in the study. However, the university may reconsider an improvement into how the financial needs of students are ascertained to inform suitability and level of support to be administered. This may be helpful in distinguishing the needs of mature students who are more inclined to face greater financial demands and budgeting when compared to their peers for instance.

- **Payment method and frequency**

Several respondents expressed frustration with the mode and frequency of payment of the bursary or financial support awarded to them. Given that “the way in which financial support schemes operate may also limit their impact” Nursaw Associates (2015, p.4), it is worth paying attention to the views of respondents. Rather than pre-paid card with instalments loaded monthly (in the case of maintenance bursary), a significant number of respondents want the bursary to be paid into their personal accounts so that they can

easily budget, as well as withdraw cash for expenditures which cannot be undertaken with the pre-paid card. Some of the respondents also underscored a desire to have the bursary paid in lump sum to facilitate expenditure on more tangible assets. Whilst there were several studies uncovered that examined student finance and the impact of university bursary/financial support, there was none that places significant emphasis on the management of bursary and touching on payment methods and frequency. Although there are merits with issuing prepaid cards with instalments loaded periodically, the university may consider administering the bursary/financial support schemes differently, and taking into consideration the individual circumstance/needs of each student.

#### ○ **Additional support**

It was evident in the study that financial support is not the silver bullet needed to promote access to higher education, retention, wellbeing, success and employability. Similar to other studies carried out, there are other mitigating circumstances that could inhibit or limit the impact of financial support (Tinto, 1993; Yorke, 2004; Wray et., 2013; Thomas, 2015; Creedon, 2015). For instance, in the presence of financial support, a student can still withdraw from university due to poor academic attainment, health issue, low morale or lack of social integration. Whilst financial support may have a positive ripple effect on these issues, an additional support which is non-financial could lead to a more positive impact. For instance, Farenga (2015) underscored that academic and pastoral support, as well as embedded mentoring can enhance the financial support provided to drive retention and success. This is particularly significant when one consider that withdrawals can still happen despite provision of bursary. In which case, there may be other reasons for withdrawal outside the scope of financial support, just as some students will find motivation to continue studying outside the remit of bursary. In order to optimise the benefit of financial support, additional support can be administered at three levels, that is, pre-financial support, during financial support and post financial support. Pre-financial support will ascertain the nature and level of bursary, as well as complementary support needed. Embedded mentoring during financial support can help the student with budgeting and addressing any non-financial issues such as stress, worries, academic struggles and low confidence. Post financial support may address remaining struggles and what difference the support made.

By implementing these recommendations, the impact of financial support/bursary articulated in the project could be optimised.

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