**Understanding the impact of bursaries on QMUL students – executive summary**

This summary presents the findings from a three-stage project, conducted by independent researchers, designed to understand the overall impact that financial support through bursaries had on students at Queen Mary University London (QMUL)[[1]](#footnote-1).

* A review of existing literature on the impact of student financial support on the experience and outcomes of students in receipt of bursaries
* Findings from a 2018 survey on the financial aspects of student life, comparing the views and experiences of students in receipt of financial support from QMUL, with those who aren’t eligible
* Analysis of the outcomes of the 2012/13 cohort in terms of retention and completion of degree, degree class achieved and, through the DLHE survey, progression to further study or graduate employment, as well as the 2015/16 cohort in terms of progression to second year

## Existing evidence

The literature and review considered the pre-existing evidence in terms of the three stages of university life: **‘getting in’** (to uni), **‘getting on’** (at uni) and **‘getting out’** (of uni, post- graduation),

It is at the ‘**getting on’** stage that this is strongest for bursaries having a positive impact. Studies in different universities all point to a positive impact of bursaries on the student experience, in terms of managing competing priorities between part time work and money management, in participating more fully in student life, fostering a sense of ‘belonging’, in improving retention rates, and increasing financial resilience more broadly.

The evidence of the impact of bursaries at the ‘**getting in’** stage is both thinner and less emphatic. While some reviews suggest that the financial considerations of undertaking a degree did not seem to be a major factor in students’ applications decisions on whether and where to apply, the position may be more nuanced. For those surveyed in the middle years at school and who do not end up going, financial concerns may well have been a factor in their dropping out of contention, while the choice of where to study may be influenced by a preference to stay at home. Finally, recent research has also underlined how potential HE students are confronted with a bewildering array of information and options, particularly about finance and related student support.

At the ‘**getting out**’ stage research evidence is also thin on the ground, although one study does suggest that receipt of a bursary can improve the chances of receiving a good degree. The evidence base will grow, at least for internal institutional consumption, under the tightened research requirements of the Office for Students (OfS) in support of Access and Participation Plan submissions.

# Key findings:

### **Bursaries have a positive impact at the ‘getting on’ stage of university**

The outcomes have been measured using the underlying premise recommended by OfS, that a positive impact of receiving a bursary arises where such students **are at least as positive** in their survey responses as those receiving no bursary; so bursaries are at least ‘levelling the playing field’ of undergraduate spending-power. Overall, the results of both our survey, and to an extent our analysis of student data, are in this positive vein, although there are a few exceptions. It should also be noted that there were few differences resulting from different amounts of bursary.

### **Bursaries are used as a substitute for other forms of income**

Bursary recipients show consistent differences from their peers in terms of sources of income (repayable or otherwise). Funded, lower income students were disproportionately less likely to receive money from family and friends and were less dependent on employment income than their unfunded peers, although they did tend to work slightly more hours during term time. By inference, they have fewer funds to call upon here but also less pressure to call upon them. They are also more likely to draw upon government lending, both the maintenance loans and the tuition fee loan, but had no more commercial borrowing than their unfunded peers. They were no more likely to incur unexpected costs (although they worried more about them), nor to have had their choice of accommodation constricted by financial concerns. **The bursary, therefore, does appear to be levelling the playing field by standing as a substitute for other forms of income or borrowing that may not be as accessible to them as to their peers from higher income backgrounds**.

### **Bursaries recipients worry more than non-recipients about finances**

Nevertheless, bursaries do not completely remove the emotional worries over finance. Bursary recipients showed higher levels of concern over repaying borrowing and were more likely to worry over having enough money to meet basic costs as well as those unexpected ones. On the other hand, they were *less* likely than those from higher income backgrounds to report finding it hard to cope with the demands of university, and their general levels of reported wellbeing were similar. **Worries over finance, therefore, do not appear to be spreading to other areas of university life**.

### **Bursaries holders are more likely complete their degree than they would have been otherwise**

Exploring the outcomes for students confirms that here too bursaries appear to ‘level the playing field’, and also helps us to understand the impact of the QMUL bursary on the ‘getting out’ stage of university. There was very little difference between funded and unfunded students in terms of actual outcomes, both academic and in employment: these being retention and completion of degree, class of degree achieved and post-graduation experiences in the labour market. In fact, when looking at likelihood of completing their degree, we find what might be considered a ‘protective’ effect of the bursary. This means that **students in receipt of the bursary are more likely to complete their degree than they would otherwise be expected based solely on their demographic background.** Bursary recipients were also in fact more positive about how well their degree had prepared them for employment, even though their outcomes were very similar, perhaps having less social and economic capital to call upon when seeking work.

# Some known unknowns

We do not know exactly *why* bursaries have a positive effect. It may be more than just the financial boost; the receipt of a bursary may also cement the personal confidence and resilience of the recipients, and of their sense of common purpose with their University. This theme emerges strongly in the literature review. Similarly, we cannot judge how these largely positive Bursary impacts would compare with switching equivalent resources to other ‘WP’ supporting alternatives, but there is no strong incentive from our results to do so. Rather, the continuing relevance of the University’s bursary provision to students suggests that to remove or significantly reduce bursaries, particularly if competitors institutions retained theirs, would likely have a negative impact on QMUL’s appeal for such WP students.

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1. For full methodology and results, see xxxxx [↑](#footnote-ref-1)