Queen Mary University of London
Impact of Financial Assistance Measures on Progression:
Executive Summary

Introduction

The analysis presented in this report investigates the relationship between bursary receipt, demographic factors and progression from the first year of study to the second at Queen Mary University of London (QMUL). To do this, it utilises a unique dataset which combines student progression data with records of household income assessments and allocation of the QMUL Bursary Scheme and National Scholarship Programme (NSP) in the academic years 2012/13, 2013/14 and 2014/15. This analysis forms part of a larger piece of research into the impact of financial support measures. The results of a related survey on undergraduate student finance are presented in a separate report. For the purposes of this research, ‘progression’ will be the term used to refer to this movement from the first year of study to the second. Within the sector, this is sometimes also referred to as ‘continuation’ or ‘retention’.

Context

Queen Mary allocates the majority of the funds committed under its Access Agreement to financial assistance measures, primarily in the form of non-repayable bursaries. This accounts for around 85 percent of spend per year, with approximately 50 percent of ‘Home’ fee paying UK students eligible to receive this assistance on the basis of their household income. Across the sector, there has been a gradual decline in the proportion of Access Agreement expenditure being allocated to financial support, reflecting a steer from the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) whose own national-level research could not find a relationship between bursaries and continuation rates.

Attempting to identify the impact of financial assistance measures on progression rates is challenging. The nature of the QMUL bursary scheme, in which (essentially) all students below a certain income threshold receive a bursary, means that there is no direct counterfactual available - we cannot know if the progression rates of low-income students would have been different had they not received a bursary. An analysis of the kind presented here can only ever seek to detect associations between bursary allocation and progression. One thing that this analysis does attempt to do is utilise the ‘cliff edge’ nature of bursary eligibility to identify a comparator group of students who were a ‘near miss’ for bursary receipt.

Key findings

- Student demographics are not homogenous across different bursary allocation groups. NSP award and full bursary recipients are alike in many respects, however, full bursary students are more likely to be male, mature or have entered QMUL via clearing, and less likely to have entered with AAB+ or equivalent. Partial bursary recipients differ to those receiving a full bursary in a number of ways, being more likely to be young, non-BME or have...
a parent that has an HE qualification and less likely to be from a lower socio-economic background.

- **Variations exist in the progression rates of different groups of students.** Male students, mature students, BME students, students who entered the institution without AAB+ or equivalent and students who entered via clearing are all less likely to progress. In regards to bursary allocation, full bursary recipients are the group least likely to progress. Within this group, those with the lowest possible income assessment (‘£0’) had the lowest progression rate. NSP award recipients and partial bursary students had the highest progression rates, including in comparison to those not in receipt of any bursary funding.

- **Variations persist even when certain other variables are held constant – though these are small.** Small but statistically significant differences exist in the progression rates of different bursary allocation groups, even when controlling for gender, age, entry tariff and ethnicity. Compared to students with a high income assessment or no income data, NSP recipients and partial bursary recipients are slightly more likely to progress, and full bursary recipients are slightly less likely to progress. Progression rates differences also persist in relation to gender, age, entry tariff and ethnicity. Conversely, no evidence is found that the ‘near miss’ group progresses at a different rate to any of the other bursary allocation groups.

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September 2016

*To access a copy of the full report, please contact Evaluation and Data Officer (Widening Participation), Jessica Benson-Egglenton (j.benson-egglenton@qmul.ac.uk).*