

## **What do we know about the impact of financial support on access and student success?**

**Review of the research and evaluation of the impact of institutional financial support on access and student success.**

Report to the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) by Nursaw Associates (March 2015).

### **Acknowledgements**

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### **About Nursaw Associates**

Nursaw Associates provides strategic advice and practical project implementation in social mobility, widening participation, and civic and community engagement.

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## 1. Executive summary

1. This report reviews the current evidence on the impact of institutional financial support (such as bursaries, scholarships and fee waivers) on access to higher education and the experience of students within higher education study.
2. This report looks at peer-reviewed and published research. It also considers evidence submitted in confidence to Ceri Nursaw of Nursaw Associates by universities and colleges of the effectiveness of their own financial support schemes, following a call for evidence in 2014<sup>1</sup>. The report seeks to inform future research, which the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) commissioned in March 2015<sup>2</sup>. It also aims to provide the sector, and other interested parties, with a summary of findings around financial support to date, including research and evaluation carried out within individual institutions.
3. In their access agreements, universities and colleges invest significantly in financial support and it has been seen by some institutions as a primary tool to deliver fair access in higher education. Institutions, therefore, need to have assurance that financial support is an effective mechanism. By 2018-19 higher education providers in England predict they will invest over £400 million in bursaries, scholarships and other financial support measures to help students from under-represented and disadvantaged groups<sup>3</sup>.

## Key findings

4. The findings from institutional evaluations, submitted following the call for evidence, and the review of recent national research conclude that:

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<sup>1</sup> More information on the call for evidence is available from: <http://www.offa.org.uk/publications/consultations/call-for-evidence-impact-of-financial-support/>

<sup>2</sup> More information is available from: <http://www.offa.org.uk/publications/research-in-progress/>

<sup>3</sup> This refers only to financial support delivered through access agreements. Many universities and colleges also offer other forms of financial support – for example scholarships based on academic ability or sporting excellence. These are not counted in access agreements.

- a) Financial support is not the most significant determinant in either the decision to apply to higher education or in the choice between institutions. However, from the institutional findings it appears that there is a sizeable minority of students that feel that financial support does impact on their decision to enter higher education and in choice of destination. This is not fully reflected in the national findings. This could be because of post-hoc rationalisation - where students enter higher education, receive financial support and subsequently believe that this support was important in their decision either to enter higher education, choose between institutions or continue with their studies. Alternatively, small cohorts of students may be getting 'lost' in national data.
  - b) Students receiving financial support have comparable non-continuation rates with students who do not receive financial support. Yet institutional findings show that students in receipt of financial support report that it has enabled them to stay on course and that they consider withdrawing less than their peers. This may mean that there is a difference between attitude and behaviour.
5. It is clear that broad overall conclusions do not necessarily reflect the complexity of the impact on individuals or particular groups of students. More research is needed to identify if there are any groups with similar characteristics for whom financial support has greater impact on their decisions and behaviour.
  6. The way in which financial support schemes operate may also limit their impact. This is due to of the complexity of arrangements, the variety of financial support on offer, the timing and availability of information and a lack of coordination with outreach activity.
  7. The information submitted to the call for evidence found that institutions are using a wide range of methodologies and approaches to understand the impact of their financial support. Those that have used a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods, control groups or evaluated the behaviours or perceptions of prospective students (as well as their current students) had a rich source of

information from which to more fully understand the impact of their programmes. Likewise, those institutions that have used a fine-grained and contextualised approach (such as using income bands, or targeted focus groups) have been able to deepen their understanding. This is particularly evident when impact has been evaluated by level of financial support received.

8. The use of internal institutional data with the sector to understand the relationship (if any) between retention, academic achievement and financial support is inconsistent. This makes comparisons across institutions difficult. Similarly, in surveys institutions are asking different questions from each other even if they are evaluating the same outcomes. Greater standardisation of questions across the sector could enable institutions to compare findings and assist the wider research community.
9. One thing is very clear, considering the importance that the sector places on financial support and the investment it places in it, there remains limited research into its impact. The sector needs to understand more fully where and how to invest in order to continue to improve access to higher education and ensure students are successful in (and beyond) their study.
10. More research could be undertaken at a local and national level by institutions, the research community and other interested parties into the:
  - role of outreach and whether early intervention (such as prior to year 12) could increase the impact of financial support
  - effect of financial support on the decisions to study and what to study post-16
  - interplay between wellbeing and financial support
  - effects of financial support on different student groups from groups under-represented in higher education including those studying part-time, mature students, specific minority ethnic communities and those from families whose household income is less than £15,000
  - impact of different types of financial support
  - impact of financial support on student outcomes, which includes degree achieved, and onward progression to employment or postgraduate study.

## 2. Introduction

11. This report reviews the research and evaluation into the impact of financial support on access to higher education and the experience of students within higher education. It considers peer-reviewed and published research alongside institutional reviews and evaluation, following a call for evidence. It has been written to inform future research, which OFFA commissioned in March 2015, and to provide the sector, and other interested parties, with a summary of the findings to date. It takes into account research and evaluation carried out within individual institutions.
12. This report considers published research on financial support and the evaluation and research findings that universities and colleges submitted to OFFA as part of a call for evidence. The findings from the call for evidence have provided a unique insight into whether institutional and national findings correlate and whether there is any commonality of approach across different institutions.
13. Through their access agreements, by 2018-19 higher education providers in England predict they will be spending over £400 million in bursaries, scholarships and other financial support measures. This is a significant amount of expenditure and investment by institutions, and so the sector needs to understand how financial support can be best used to support widening participation across the whole student lifecycle. This is a particularly challenging area of work with many complex factors in play. Identifying causality and isolating the effect of institutional arrangements, outside of the impact of Government funding, is very difficult. Yet it remains important that we continue to research and build our understanding of the impact of institutional financial support on students.
14. OFFA commissioned this work to build on previous work carried out in house. In 2014 the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) published *An interim report: Do bursaries have an effect on retention rates?* (Office for Fair Access, 2014). The report found no evidence that institutional bursary schemes in operation between 2006-7 and 2010-11 had an observable effect on the continuation rates of young full-time first-degree students. The analysis did not seek to understand the role that

institutional bursaries play in the post-2012 system of student fees nor did it take into account institutional diversity and the wider impact on the student experience.

15. This review complements that work by reporting on the research and evidence into the impact of financial support on access to higher education and the experience of students within higher education study. It considers peer-reviewed and published research alongside institutional evaluation. The findings from this report will allow OFFA, and the sector, to understand the broader national picture alongside the approach and findings from institutions (including the scope, nature and process of the evaluation).
  
16. This report is interested in the impact of institutional spend rather than spend provided by Government. For the purposes of this work, student financial support is defined as institutional funding for students from under-represented groups to support the costs associated with higher education study (for example, bursaries and scholarships, fee waivers and in-kind support such as accommodation discounts). The impact of hardship funds was not investigated, as they are used as emergency funds. The National Scholarship Programme (NSP) was included because it has institutional funding associated with it, it is administered by institutions and has been designed (within parameters) by institutions.

### 3. Methodology

17. Nursaw Associates were commissioned as an external consultancy to conduct the review. Nursaw Associates have expertise in the field of widening participation and access, including leading institutional financial support schemes.

18. This literature review looked at:

- **Peer reviewed published research that primarily focuses on the impact of financial support on the student experience**

The research concentrated on work published subsequent to the implementation of the 2004 Higher Education Act. However, the search was not limited to this timescale and in some discussions of specific schemes earlier studies or evaluation evidence has been included. This distinction was made where it was felt there was seminal research or limited current research.

- **Institutional research and evaluation**

This was voluntarily submitted directly to the consultant by universities and colleges in response to a call for evidence from OFFA in December 2014. The institutions were told they would remain anonymous to OFFA and within the report in order to encourage a wide range of submissions and findings.

19. This review sought to identify research related to financial support in England and its impact on access and the student experience. Whilst the review was primarily limited to England there were a couple of studies highlighting findings from other countries. These have been included as they were of particular interest to the experience in England.

20. The search strategy involved searches of a number of electronic bibliographic databases, web-based publications, lists from a range of organisations and organisation types and web search engines. The key research journals examined included the *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, *Oxford Review of*

*Education, Research in Post-Compulsory Education and Studies in Higher Education.* Reports from reference lists of key papers identified through the electronic searches and those of systematic and non-systematic reviews were also followed up. For each database and journal an inclusive statement of search terms and synonyms was applied. The terms were tested against known studies, and adjusted to ensure that as few relevant materials as possible were missed. Search terms used were: financial support, finance, scholarships, bursaries, fee waivers and debt. In the main the research focuses on the period following the introduction of variable tuition fees and bursaries in 2006; this is in the expectation that a more stable approach to bursaries and financial support is in place. The research considered was not exhaustive but it does represent the main findings in this area, providing a good understanding of the impact of financial support on students.

21. When responding to the call for evidence, universities and colleges were encouraged to submit evidence demonstrating the impact of financial support on full-time or part-time undergraduate students, and to report on any impact of financial support on access, student success, and progression. The aim of the call was to identify the evidence institutions have on the impact of financial support and to achieve an understanding of the approaches taken by different institutions across the sector; the call did not require responses from all institutions. The response to the call provided 19 responses, which represents 14 per cent of the institutions who have access agreements and met the original aim as the responses covered a representative sample of institutions that have access agreements (high, medium and low tariff institutions, specialist institutions and further education colleges) and a range of methodologies and approaches.
22. Having reviewed the evidence this report synthesises the findings into key areas and highlights a number of gaps in the research to date.

## **4. Findings from the literature**

23. This section summarises findings from the published research considered in this review. Predominately the review focuses on published research investigating the effects of variable tuition fees in England, which came into operation in 2006-7.

24. Over 30 different research papers were considered for this review. This represents the majority of the available research in this area. This level of research provides a broad picture of the effect of financial support but is modest in scale, particularly given political importance and the levels of expenditure both by Government and by institutions. Furthermore, there was limited research that related to the post-2012 arrangements. This is, in part, due to the fact that there has been insufficient time for the new arrangements to embed and any evidence of the impact on degree success and progression will not be available until 2015.

25. The published research grouped into the following six categories:

- The effect on access to higher education
- Attitudes to debt and fear of debt
- Wellbeing
- Retention and developing a sense of belonging
- Academic outcomes
- Responses to specific groups.

26. This section looks at each of these six categories of research available.

### **4.1 The effect on access to higher education**

27. Within this section we consider the research that looked at the impact of financial support on an individual's decision to attend higher education and whether it affects their choice of destination.

28. Some institutions use their financial support offer as a means by which they can increase the number of students they recruit from under-represented and

disadvantaged backgrounds. When the tuition fee system was initially introduced the biggest concern from some policy makers was that it would affect the numbers of students attending higher education, particularly those from low socio-economic backgrounds. As a result, a system of bursaries, loans and other financial support was introduced. Those institutions that do not meet their Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) performance indicator benchmarks for students from low socio-economic backgrounds have, therefore, assumed that fees are a factor and often offer the greatest amount of financial support to individual students. It is not surprising, therefore, that the majority of the research into the effectiveness of financial support has been focussed on the impact on access.

29. The research identified considers the views and behaviours of prospective students in post-16 study or students in higher education. We could not find research that looked at the attitudes or decision-making process for young people under the age of 16. It could be argued that those in post-16 study have already made the decision to attend higher education and have already considered financial matters, or for those for whom financial concerns are paramount they may have already excluded themselves and chosen alternative pathways.
30. In considering a student's decision to enter higher education Bowes et al's (2014) evaluation of the NSP found that: "57.7 per cent of applicants to HE for 2014-15 report that the possibility of receiving the NSP had no influence on their decision to apply. A similar proportion reports that it had no influence on their choice of institution (56.6 per cent)". Yet their research also shows that 68.8 per cent of current students report that it had "some influence over their decision to study a programme of HE and almost three-fifths perceive that it influenced their choice of institution (58.3 per cent)". Bowes et al (2014) suggest that this change could be due to post-hoc rationalisation with students who have received financial support rating it more highly within their decision-making. The report concludes that "although the cost of HE is an important consideration, the extent of its influence is often outweighed by other factors such as the appropriateness of the

programme of study, the likelihood it will lead to a job, the location of the institution and/or the possibility to remain living at home”.

31. There is more research on whether a bursary influences choice of destination. Many universities see financial support as part of their competitive offer, benchmarking their level of financial support against that of their competitors. McCaig (2014) suggests that in the post 2012 fees regime financial support is focused on the “brightest poor students at the expense of the generality of poorer students since the new support programme came into place”. He sees this as a shift away from widening participation to a more general recruitment initiative to increase numbers and entry qualification levels. Yet Callender and Wilkinson (2013) found that most students do not think bursaries affect their choices. Callender, Wilkinson and Hopkin (2009) in a study for OFFA found that only 12 per cent of students’ surveyed said that decisions between universities were affected by bursaries. A higher proportion (29 per cent) felt they were important in the wider decision to attend higher education although these were not necessarily students from lower socio-economic groups.
32. It may be that students from different backgrounds are affected differently. Callender and Jackson (2008) found from a survey of 2,000 prospective students that financial issues constrain the choice of university for a student from a low socio-economic group more than those from other social classes. It showed that fear of debt is related to two key financially driven decisions – applying to a university with low living costs and applying to one with good term-time employment opportunities – but only for students from low-income families. Yet, concerns about debt did not influence their choice of subject. It concludes that low-income students are more likely than their wealthier peers to perceive the costs of higher education as a debt rather than an investment. This difference is echoed by Lawton and Moore (2011). In their research with 270 prospective students they found: “The majority of participants were concerned at some level about supporting themselves at university, however the students on EMA<sup>4</sup> were

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<sup>4</sup> The Education Maintenance Allowance was a weekly payment to young people from low-income households who were studying further education courses. The scheme is no longer in operation in England.

twice as likely to be strongly concerned than those from middle class backgrounds (15 per cent of this group were extremely worried, compared to 7 per cent of the non-EMA group)".

33. The only England-wide study examining the impact of bursaries on application choice (Corver, 2010) found that bursaries have no significant effect on the decisions of students. Students were in fact more likely to choose an institution with a low bursary than a high one. The report concluded that there has not been "any material reduction in young participation in higher education – especially so far those from disadvantaged backgrounds - either overall or at particular types of institution". It goes on to say that:

- "The introduction of bursaries has not influenced the choice of university for disadvantaged young people.
- Applications from disadvantaged young people have not changed in favour of universities offering higher bursaries.
- Disadvantaged young people have not become more likely to choose conditional offers from universities offering higher bursaries.
- Since bursaries were introduced most of the increase in the participation of disadvantaged young people has been in universities offering lower bursaries."

34. Whilst this review concentrates on the work done within an English context it is interesting to note that when Australia permitted universities to increase their fees by up to 25 per cent there was "no apparent correlation between the fee level and the impact on enrolment" (Stuart, Layer and Evans, 2005).

35. Some researchers suggest that the impact of financial support on an individual's decision to attend higher education and their choice of destination may be limited due to the way in which it has been implemented. Callender and Wilkinson (2013) argue that the diversity of financial support has led to a lack of clarity that has resulted in students not factoring in bursaries in their decision making process. This lack of clarity is supported by Bowes et al (2013b, 2014) who have been evaluating the NSP. This research highlights that most potential scholarship

holders do not know prior to starting their studies they will receive an award, how much they will receive and in what form. It concludes that “the extent to which the NSP can be used as a tool to support widening access as well as retention and success is limited as a result. These issues have serious implications for the level of effectiveness of the programme and its eventual impact on students, institutions and wider policy objectives”.

36. Harrison and Hatt (2012) in their review of the evidence suggested that students are “unresponsive to financial inducement, and place a high priority on provision that is local and socially comfortable”. They concluded that “if bursaries are to continue, their purpose needs to be reconceptualised and extended beyond competitive recruitment to encompass the whole student experience. Bursaries have the potential to build strong motivational bonds between universities and their student, relieving financial anxiety, legitimising the learner and promoting retention and academic success”.

37. The breadth of research examined for this review found financial support had little, if any, effect on influencing students’ decisions to attend higher education and on destination choice. However, the research did find that some discrete groups of students might be influenced by financial support. Further research is needed to understand who these groups are, so that institutions are able to target those likely to be attracted into higher education by financial support.

## **4.2 Attitudes to debt and fear of debt**

38. Attitudes to debt and, in particular, fear of debt, have been an area for research in light of the introduction of fees in 2006.

39. Research carried out prior to tuition fees being introduced voiced concern about the impact of the debt (or perceived debt) on students from low socio-economic groups. Callender and Jackson (2005) concluded that “debt aversion is a class issue. Students from poorer backgrounds are more debt averse than those from

- other social classes”<sup>5</sup>. Gorard et al (2006) found that “fears of debt and financial constraints appear to be more prevalent amongst those groups with relatively low participation rates”. They suggest that “prospective students from these groups already appear to have problems in interpreting the information provided on bursaries and other financial assistance”.
40. However, more recent research has shown that debt is becoming more acceptable than previously anticipated.
41. Harrison et al (2015) found that many undergraduate students from lower social-class backgrounds showed a “positivity about debt as a means of enabling them to access higher-level careers”. They found “more generally, the mainstream of student attitudes appears to fall between the ‘debt-savvy’<sup>6</sup> and ‘debt-resigned’<sup>7</sup> types with students being relatively well-informed about repayment terms and accepting large-scale indebtedness as normal”.
42. This is supported by Esson and Ertl (2014) who in their research using data from students in year 13 found that the primary response to study-related debt is that “there is no point worrying”. This is because in the short term a higher education degree was considered vital to securing employment in a competitive labour market.
43. Bachan (2013) found that having financial support “has no significant effect on reducing student expected indebtedness”. While “students in receipt of financial support from their parents and those with part-time jobs anticipate a lower level of debt”, they found that the “more risk averse a student the lower the expected debt”. Bachan did go on to say that this “may be indicative of the fact that the

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<sup>5</sup> Their findings were based on students studying vocational qualifications; the sample size was not significant enough to consider those studying A-levels.

<sup>6</sup> Harrison et al (2015) define debt savvy as those who know how the loan system works and are well acquainted with interest rate, repayment threshold, and repayment size.

<sup>7</sup> Harrison et al (2015) define debt-resigned as those who saw their debt as necessary in order to undergo contemporary higher education.

current levels of financial support are inadequate and ineffective in reducing anticipated debt”.

44. Bowes et al (2013b) showed that concerns about finance are not sufficient to deter students from low-income families<sup>8</sup>. It concludes that raising aspirations towards higher education and educating potential students about the student finance system and the support that is available is, therefore, likely to be more effective than financial aid alone at widening access.
45. In short, the research considered shows that there may be an increasing acceptance towards debt. Research conducted in 2006 and earlier showed that students from lower socio-economic groups were more debt averse. More recent research suggests that there is an acceptance of debt and that is necessary part of higher education.

### **4.3 Wellbeing**

46. This report considered wellbeing in terms of the World Health Organisation’s (1986) definition, which is in its widest sense of equipping people with the resources and skills to make a meaningful contribution to society, a “state of wellbeing in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community”.
47. There is very little research on the effect of financial support on students’ wellbeing. The most substantial research was completed by the National Union of Students (NUS) in 2012, in The Pound in your Pocket report. However, this area of inquiry has proved difficult due to the multiple factors that can affect a student’s wellbeing and the difficulties in identifying causality.

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<sup>8</sup> Within Bowes et al (2013a) this is defined as those recording a household income of up to £27,999

48. The Pound in your Pocket research identified ten key findings:

- “There are clear associations between financial support policy and practice, student wellbeing, socio-economic background and retention
- Financial difficulties are pushing many students to the brink of ‘dropping out’
- Around a third of students across all groups report negatively on their wellbeing, on key indicators such as ‘ability to meet the cost of basic expenses like rent and bills’ and ‘ability to concentrate on studies without worrying about finances’
- Even relatively small levels of debt (over £1000) in the form of bank loans, credit cards, or high risk borrowing like ‘pay-day lenders’ and ‘cheque cashers’ are strongly associated with poor student wellbeing
- Excessive working hours are associated with poor wellbeing and with origination in areas with low higher education participation rates
- Access to financial support from the family has a significant association with both wellbeing and progression to further study
- Students across all groups want more cash support such as loans, grants and bursaries, with a high frequency of payments, either weekly or monthly depending on the level of study
- Course related costs are prevalent, expensive, and often concealed; there is a clear association between high course costs and low wellbeing
- High levels of accommodation and transport costs are associated with reduced wellbeing
- Adults (19+) in further education, older students (21+) in higher education, NHS supported students, student parents and disabled students appear to be under particular financial strain.”

49. Harding (2011), however, found that “many students were coping with their day-to-day living costs more comfortably than they had expected to in the first year” of study. Although those in a “difficult financial position at the start of their period of study were likely to face greater problems in the course of their first year”. The students had difficulty in meeting day-to-day living costs and achieved less favourable academic results. Harding (2011) suggests that measures should be introduced to improve the financial management skills of young people as it “may be one means to ensure that fewer arrive at university already behind with their bills”. Harding identified two difficulties “having missed payments at the start of

- the academic programme and having to wait for the first student loan payment – were shown to have a damaging effect on academic performance”.
50. Bowes et al (2014) found that 66.5 per cent of NSP recipients reported that there is less need to undertake part-time work as a result of their financial support. The report concludes that: “The benefits of financial aid are, therefore, broader than directly helping students to meet the costs of HE and/or alleviate debt; financial aid also helps to create the time and space for recipients to fully engage in academic and wider student life by, for example, reducing the amount of time spent undertaking non-HE related activities such as part-time employment which can detract from an individual’s studies and limit their ability to engage in extracurricular and wider social activities. It is possible to infer that it could also contribute to recipients’ overall sense of wellbeing by reducing financial anxiety, ensuring they are able to participate in activities that enhance their enjoyment of student life as well as their academic success, and reassuring them that their institution values them and believes they are worth investing in”.
51. This is a difficult area to draw general conclusions, with many factors affecting a student’s wellbeing. From the research reviewed it appears that financial support can help a student to participate more fully in university life thus allowing them to build social networks and enhance a sense of wellbeing.

#### **4.4 Retention and developing a sense of belonging**

52. Wellbeing and developing a sense of belonging are closely inter-related. Building on the previous section’s focus on wellbeing, this section considers the evidence of the impact of financial support on retention and developing a student’s sense of belonging.
53. OFFA’s research, which analysed HESA data to investigate whether bursaries have an effect on continuation rates reported that: “We have not found any evidence that institutional bursary schemes in operation between 2006-07 and 2010-11 had an observable effect on the continuation rates of young full-time first degree students” (OFFA 2014). The analysis did not seek to consider the exact

amount of financial support each student received, nor did it seek to provide a complete picture of the total support available to students.

54. OFFA's findings are echoed by Wray et al (2014), which demonstrated that students continued with their studies despite financial challenges. Wray et al (2014) suggested that students explicitly factor financial considerations into their decision to attend higher education and are therefore more able to handle difficulties as they arise. The research stresses the need for higher education institutions to make applicants aware of financial pressures and have advice for students in difficulty.
55. Much of the research into retention highlights the importance of developing a sense of belonging for the student to improve rates of continuation. Thomas (2012) in the summary of the findings of the *What Works? Student Retention and Success* programme found that: "At the heart of successful retention and success is a strong sense of belonging in HE for all students. This is most effectively nurtured through mainstream activities that all students participate in". It suggests using financial support to nurture that belonging and create a relationship between the student and the university and department, for example, by offering books and other materials.
56. This nurturing was demonstrated in a five-year longitudinal study of a cohort of full-time students from low-income backgrounds holding the Opportunity Bursary<sup>9</sup> and similar institutional bursaries at a post-1992 university (Harrison et al, 2007). Students holding the Opportunity Bursary and similar institutional bursaries were found to have relatively higher levels of retention and success, and particularly positive attitudes towards their studies and their institution as compared to those not in receipt of this funding. Yet many students do not know that their institution is providing their financial support so the sense of nurturing cannot be reinforced.

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<sup>9</sup> Opportunity Bursaries were introduced in 2001-02 academic year. This additional financial support was targeted at full-time students who were aged 21 or less, from families with a household income of less than £20,000 and who had attended a school or college within an Excellence in Cities consortium.

Callender, Wilkinson and Hopkin (2009) found that a majority of students (56 per cent) did not appreciate that their university was providing their bursary.

57. Most recently Bowes et al (2014) found that 79 per cent of respondents state that the financial support they receive means they are more likely to continue and complete their studies. Yet Bowes et al (2014) go on to suggest that financial difficulties are not necessarily the primary cause for students' withdrawal.
58. Reed and Hurd (2014) investigated the impact of a scholarship programme for students from disadvantaged backgrounds at Macquarie University, Sydney. They found evidence of improved retention rates and a number of other positive outcomes, such as belonging, security, independence, motivation, engagement and confidence. The authors concluded that it added "weight to emergent arguments that financial support schemes need to be seen as more than tools for incentivising enrolment and instead as key institutional or sectoral mechanisms for encouraging and supporting the successful participation of disadvantaged students in higher education".
59. One of the elements Reed and Hurd (2014) found was that students receiving a scholarship reported having more time for their academic studies. The Pound in your Pocket research (NUS, 2012) found that "there was a significant relationship between the socioeconomic background proxy and number of hours worked in employment during study. Those from low-participation neighbourhoods were more likely (35.6 per cent) to work over 16 hours per week than their peers from high-participation neighbourhoods (30.2 per cent)".
60. It appears from the research that financial concerns have a limited direct impact on retention. However, financial support may have a tangential effect, as it could influence the role of other stressors, such as juggling part-time work with study and ability to engage with the institution, on students' lives.

## **4.5 Academic outcomes**

61. The review could not identify any national research regarding the effect of financial support on academic outcomes.
  
62. However, the Economic and Social Research Council is currently funding research led by Dr Gill Wyness that is investigating the impact of financial support using individual-level data on undergraduate students collected from higher education institutions. The research team have access to individual-level data on UK and EU undergraduate students (that is those eligible for bursaries), including the bursary they are awarded each year, their annual examination scores, subject studied, number of years of university attended, and their final degree classification, as well as demographic information. This has been collected for two or more cohorts (those commencing their studies in 2006-7 and 2007-8) from 22 UK institutions in total. This research will describe the relationship between bursary spend and student outcomes (annual module scores, likeliness to drop out and degree classification), controlling for prior academic attainment and a range of background characteristics. Exploiting variation in bursary spend across institutions, as well as controlling for characteristics and prior attainment will make this study unique in the UK. The findings are due to be published in Autumn 2015.

## **4.6 Responses to specific groups**

63. There is very little research on the impact of financial support on specific groups of students within the widening participation population.
  
64. Moore et al (2013) summarised the research available that focussed on particular groups of non-traditional students, see below:

“Summary of evidence about situation of different widening participation groups

Part-time students	<p>Extending loans to part-time students reflects a policy commitment to part-time study (Callender and Wilkinson, 2013a). Callender (2011) assessed the nature and scope of financial support for part-time undergraduates, identifying limitations in the financial arrangements which do not incentivise part-time provision. Issues include restrictive loan eligibility criteria (two-thirds of part-time learners excluded); financial returns to graduates of part-time study tend to be lower than those for full-time students; these students may already have considerable financial commitments. By February 2013, only 31,700 or 21 per cent of part-time entrants had taken out a loan while the government predicted that a third would benefit from loans (Callender, 2013).</p>
Mature students	<p>The evidence about the situation for mature students tends to relate to their circumstances as a whole in HE, rather than purely financial concerns. McVitty and Morris (2012) point to the need for holistic improvement in the quality of mature students’ experience and engagement with HE, seeing re-consideration of student finance provision as part of a wider package.</p> <p>Mature students in HE have been found to have more anxieties about finance and be in greater debt than younger students, and have fewer sources of information available about finance (NUS, 2013a). Falls in mature HE applicants and acceptances in the last two years have been linked to concerns over the cost of HE (ICOF, 2013).</p> <p>The theoretical materials include identification of a disjuncture between the current funding regime and the motivation and circumstances of some groups of mature learners. For example, a team at the University of Hull undertook research with mature student carers, with the conclusion that framing participation in HE as an individual financial investment presupposes that candidates are highly individualized, instrumental, and economic actors, whereas these students’ life choices are based on their caring responsibilities (González-Arnal and Kilkey, 2009)</p>

	Information on costs and financial support is felt to be of particular importance in HE-related IAG for mature students. Research with stakeholders suggests that first generation mature students want to know how much it would cost to study and whether they could afford it (Oakleigh Consulting and Staffordshire University, 2010).
Work-based learners	The costs of HE have been found to be a particular barrier to participation by employed people where employers are unwilling to cover the costs (Hotham, 2009). Proportionally more than the average amongst employed students who leave HE early give finance as a contributing factor (Rose-Adams, 2012).
Disabled students	Disabled students are identified as one of the student groups facing particular financial anxiety (NUS, 2013b). Disabled students require additional support to negotiate the disability benefits.”

65. From the review the only additional research identified was from See et al (2012), which looked at the interventions into improving the post-16 participation of minority ethnic students from disadvantaged backgrounds. See et al (2012) “did not find any research which supported the use of monetary rewards for ethnic minority students within higher education. [The] research at higher education level highlighted adult (staff/faculty) mentoring as having the most effect”. See et al (2012) highlighted not only the lack of evidence but that monetary reward had limited impact with direct engagement (such as mentoring) having a greater effect.

66. It is difficult to draw conclusions, as there is such limited research on the impact of financial support on different student groups within the widening participation population. From the research on recruitment to higher education there is a suggestion that different student groups may respond to financial support in different ways. Further research is needed on the impact of financial support on different groups so it can be effectively targeted.

## 5. Institutional programme evaluation

67. In response to OFFA's call for evidence, information regarding institutional evaluations was received from 19 institutions, who between them through their access agreements plan a total spend on financial support of just over £100m<sup>10</sup> in 2018-19, representing over a quarter of the annual total planned spend on financial support by the sector.
68. Information was received from a representative sample of institutions that have access agreements. This included information from seven high tariff, five medium tariff, and five low tariff institutions and one each from a further education college and a specialist institution. They represent a range of institutional size and provenance from urban through to rural locations.
69. The aim of the call was to identify the evidence institutions have on the impact of financial support and to achieve an understanding of the approaches taken by different institutions across the sector.
70. Of the 19 that submitted evidence, nine had substantial evaluation programmes in place. These evaluations either combined qualitative and quantitative methodologies, used control groups or evaluated the behaviours or perceptions of prospective students (as well as their current students). The remainder either surveyed their current students or analysed their retention statistics.
71. This section looks at:
- areas under investigation
  - research methods used
  - key findings from the institutional programme evaluation
  - innovative research questions and techniques adopted.

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<sup>10</sup> The figures relate to planned expenditure in 2018-19 in steady state, as reported in the 2015-16 access agreements. It includes all access agreement eligible financial support such as bursaries, fee waivers, and hardship funds.

## 5.1 Areas under investigation

72. The institutions were investigating three main areas:

- the impact of the institution's financial support on recipient students
- how prospective and current students perceive and understand the financial support offered by higher education in general and the particular institution
- how the institution's financial support should be structured and presented to effectively support current students and encourage participation from those students most likely to benefit from it.

73. Research into the impact of an institution's financial support on its students covered a range of areas. It included the sources of financial support available to the student, the take-up and need for part-time work, living costs, whether a student had considered withdrawing (and reasons for it), non-continuation rates, anxieties and concerns, participation in university life and academic success including annual examination performance and degree outcomes. No single institution covered all of these areas in the evaluations submitted.

74. Many institutions surveyed their students post enrolment to determine the impact the financial support offer had on both the decision to progress to higher education and to apply to a particular institution. This included influencing factors in deciding to apply to higher education and in university choice, the awareness of the financial support package in the institution before applying and, the students' understanding regarding who provides the financial support.

75. Many of the institutions used the surveys as an opportunity to glean information to enhance the administration of their scheme. They sought feedback on the preferences for type of financial support and its uses, timing and level of payments and number of instalments.

## 5.2 Research methods used

76. As part of this review the research methodologies that institutions used were considered. This was to determine whether there was any commonality of approach and also the types of the evaluation, for example, did they evaluate the

reactions/opinions of current or prospective students, did they evaluate the impact on behaviour or did they use a combination of these approaches.

77. The majority of institutions conducted surveys. Typically, this was to their first year students who had received financial support. The exceptions were:
- one institution that had surveyed all first years
  - one had looked at second year students who received financial support and those who had not but had a household income of between £25,000 and £43,000
  - two had completed surveys across two years to understand any change in attitudes or understanding.
78. Many of the surveys used the same or similar questions to elicit the responses in many common areas, for example: “How important were bursaries, scholarships and fee-waivers to you when making your university choices?” and: “Did you know about the university bursary prior to starting your course?” This commonality of approach may provide an opportunity for the development of a standardised series of questions for use by the sector. A standardised approach could provide an opportunity for researchers to build a greater understanding of the impact of financial support at a more nuanced and detailed level.
79. Two universities used control groups. These control groups were identified as students who were not receiving any financial support from the institutions and were from households where the income is less than £43,000. Identifying control groups is often very difficult, due to the need to find individuals who demonstrate the same characteristics as those who are part of the programme. These institutions were only able to do it due to the nature of their financial support arrangements. It may not be possible for all institutions to identify control groups and their identification is often further complicated by the accessibility of other forms of financial support (such as parental support).
80. The next most popular method of evaluation was the use of quantitative analysis for non-continuation rates (undertaken by six institutions). Institutions tested the non-continuation rates of those receiving financial support against those that did not. One institution reported that they had analysed the information by the

amount of institutional financial support a student received. This provided useful information to the institution in setting levels of financial support.

81. Two institutions, in addition to surveys, used focus groups. Two universities used interviews – one of these in addition to surveys. One institution in addition to interviews and focus groups is planning to engage in diary studies<sup>11</sup> over six months. The focus groups and interviews provided a rich source of information to the institutions and enabled them to explore some of the findings from the surveys. They used this information to look at a student's engagement in the wider university and the impact of other forms of non-financial support. This enables institutions to explore all the influencing factors on a student's experience during study.
82. Several institutions disaggregated their results by academic subject. This led to one institution identifying lower retention rates in a particular discipline, which they were then able to investigate further.
83. One institution looked at degree outcomes for their scholarship students<sup>12</sup>. It was noted that the scholarship holders performed better than their peers in terms of percentage of students received first class or upper second class honours. However, as the institution notes, further investigation will need to be undertaken to understand if this is related to entry qualification. The scholarship holders also received additional pastoral support, which may have had a positive impact.
84. There was limited investigation into students' wellbeing, with only one institution asking: "Does [financial support] reduce your worry about debt?"
85. The focus of the institutional evaluations was on full-time young undergraduate students. Only one university reported evaluating the effect of financial support on mature students. Institutions will hold more information on all of their students.

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<sup>11</sup> Diary studies are a collection of thoughts, actions and feelings from the participants, recorded as they occur.

<sup>12</sup> All scholarship students were from low-income households.

Exploring the totality of data available to institutions could enable greater differentiation, and a richer exploration of the data.

86. No institution submitted evidence referring to part-time students. This may be due to the greater diversity of part-time students compared to full-time students, the numbers of part-time students within any one institution and the fact that any research methodology for full-time students is unlikely to be transferable (due to different funding arrangements). However, this is an important group of learners for those concerned with widening participation, and it would be useful to evaluate the impact financial support in supporting part-time learners across the whole student journey.

87. No institution submitted investigations into the final outcomes of students following their first degree, such as progress into employment and postgraduate study. This is an important area, and one the sector needs to better understand in order to fully assess the impact of financial support on social mobility.

### **5.3 Key findings from institutional programme evaluation**

88. From the information submitted by institutions some commonality in the findings were identified.

#### **Recruitment**

89. Many of the institutions were interested in this area as it responds to an initial purposing of financial support: to ensure that there was adequate financial support for students from disadvantaged groups to enter higher education.

90. From the information submitted by institutions it is clear that:

- the majority of students (around 60-70 per cent) state that the availability of financial support did not influence their decision to attend higher education
- however, around 30-40 per cent of students said that the availability of financial support did influence their decision to attend university

- of those institutions that considered the influence of financial support on the institution chosen, the majority of students, around 60 per cent reported that it did not make any difference to their final decision
- however, there were a sizeable group of students eligible for financial support (again typically around 30 – 40 per cent) that said it did have an influence on the institution they chose.

91. One institution looked at how influential financial support was on the decision to go to university by household income bracket. They found that access to financial support was more influential for those with lower household incomes. At this institution, 36 per cent of their first year students receiving financial support said it did influence their decision to go to university. This rose to 56 per cent for students with incomes of £15,000 or less.

92. It is clear that for the majority of students the availability of financial support is not a significant factor in their decision to either attend higher education or choose their final destination. However, there are students who are reporting that it does have an impact. What is not fully evident from the institutional research is whether there are any specific characteristics of these students that would allow them to be considered as a group. If this could be achieved it would enable further understanding of the factors that make financial support significant for these students.

## **Retention**

93. Most institutions who analysed retention data found that there was no significant difference in non-continuation rates between students who received financial support and the wider student population.

94. Some institutions looked at specific amounts of financial support they provided alongside retention data and found that there was no correlation between levels of support and withdrawal. This was not standard practice within the evaluations. It could provide useful information if this analysis was completed across the sector.

95. One institution did report higher retention rates in students receiving financial support from the NSP and two institutions reported lower retention rates (one in students receiving support from the NSP and one in their scholarship programme, which supported disadvantaged students).
96. Two institutions surveyed their students and asked if they had considered withdrawing. Both of these institutions found that those receiving financial support had considered withdrawal but at lower rates than those students who did not receive funding. For example, one of the institutions found that 21 per cent of all students reported that they seriously considered withdrawing. For those students who received financial support the figure was 16 per cent. Related to this four institutions asked whether the financial support had helped the students “stay on course”<sup>13</sup>. The majority of students saying that it had. It is interesting that in one institution the perception of whether financial support had helped them “stay on course” decreased as the level of award decreased.
97. From the institutional evidence it appears that financial support has no significant effect on retention rates. The reasons why students withdraw from higher education study are often multi-faceted and further analysis could be undertaken that controls for factors such as entry qualifications.

From the survey responses students state that financial support has helped them stay on their course, and it would be useful to investigate this to more fully understand how it influences a student’s decision to continue at their institution or on their course.

### **Living costs**

98. Students report that financial support was necessary to cover living costs. Of the three institutions that investigated this, all found that the students surveyed

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<sup>13</sup> This refers to whether a student can continue with their studies. The question was often within a wider set of questions regarding their programme of study. However, there is room for confusion here as it could also mean ‘stay on track’.

thought they would have insufficient funds to cover basic living costs if they did not receive a bursary.

### **Part-time work**

99. Most institutions asked about part-time work within their student surveys. All institutions, bar one<sup>14</sup>, found that the majority of students reported that receiving financial support had meant that they either did not need to take up part-time work or were able to reduce the number of hours they worked.

100. Whilst the majority of students with financial support reported that they could work less there was a marked difference in responses across institutions ranging from approximately 60 per cent to 90 per cent. This may be due to different levels of financial support, locational or other institutional factors.

### **Wellbeing**

101. Three institutions asked students whether the financial support had enabled them to engage in 'university life'. This was felt important to the institutions to inculcate a sense of belonging. All institutions found that it enabled students to play an active part in the university and its social life. One institution found that 74 per cent of students who did not receive any financial support reported that financial concerns had limited their ability to participate in extra-curricular activity, this compares to 53 per cent of students who had received support.

### **Postgraduate study**

102. Two institutions investigated the influence of financial support on students' decision to progress to postgraduate study. One study showed that students receiving a bursary were more likely to wish to progress to postgraduate study (67 per cent) compared to the broader cohort (around half). The other study showed that 66 per cent of students felt that the amount of debt would be a "very important" or "important" factor in their decision to progress. The main barrier in both

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<sup>14</sup> This institution found no difference between funded and unfunded students.

evaluations perceived by students to take up this option was funding.

### **Type of support**

103. The majority of reports that considered type of financial support (for example, cash, fee waiver, vouchers or accommodation support) overwhelmingly reported that cash was the favoured option. However, there is a sizeable minority of students who prefer the other forms of support. Understanding if there are common student views on different financial support options, if there are particular institutional factors (such as location) and whether different forms of support suit different types of student may help institutions in the design of their funding packages. Some of this has been captured as part of the NSP research (Bowes et al, 2014).

104. Whilst there was a commonality in the findings, from a very diverse range of institutions, there were also some very localised issues and concerns that contrasted with the general findings. This could be due to a number of factors, such as questions used, institution-type and location. This reinforces the need for institutions to understand their students and evaluate their own programmes. From the research it is clear that there is could be an opportunity to develop some common approaches across the sector. This will help not only to develop a national understanding but also the sector can start to understand individual institutional factors in play.

## **5.4 Innovative questions and techniques**

105. Some of the submissions included different approaches by institutions to understand and improve the impact of their financial support. They are included here as they provide some interesting case studies that other institutions may wish to consider when designing their financial support evaluation.

106. The approaches are:

- **Sources of financial support**

Two institutions investigated the type of financial support students received, for example, parental funding. The information was used to compare the sources of financial support funded and non-funded students accessed. It provided the

institutions with useful information as to the level of support given by parents. Both institutions found that students in receipt of a bursary got less financial support from their parents than students who did not receive a bursary.

- **Effectiveness of outreach**

Two institutions had investigated the opinions and perceptions of those families/young people considering higher education.

One institution used 'before and after' questionnaires to understand how effective their outreach was in communicating the financial support available. They found that 81 per cent of parents/guardians felt more positive about their child going to university after the talk and 91 per cent felt more positive about financing their study.

The other institution surveyed a number of year 13 students from their local schools and colleges. They found a majority of respondents indicated that they were "neither concerned nor confident" about their ability to pay for their living costs. The amount of financial support offered by institutions and the cost of tuition fees were both poorly ranked in terms of their influence on university choice.

With national research indicating low levels of awareness of institutional financial support it is important that outreach programmes that include this area are evaluated.

## **National analysis**

107. One institution had looked at the behaviour across England of a particular cohort of prospective students to see if there were any choice patterns that could influence their institutional financial support package. Understanding the behaviour of particular cohorts of students may help institutions to determine an appropriate offer. It could be provided on a national basis for all institutions to avoid duplication and inform sector-wide approaches.

## **Managing money**

108. One institution used the survey to understand how their students were managing their money. This provided a useful insight into how students could be supported in the future and their key issues. Students reported that the key concern for them was budgeting and would welcome further support in this area.

## **Cost of living**

109. One institution reported that they had appointed consultants to determine the upper and lower range of student expenditure. This would inform their financial support going forward. Whilst a review of student expenditure is likely to be happening at other universities – many student unions keep this under review – it was interesting to see it so closely tied into the institution's review of their financial support package. Understanding the students' financial needs was seen as essential to determining the financial support package.

## **Use of National Scholarship Programme (NSP) survey**

110. One institution had used the national NSP survey to compare their institutional results with the national picture. This provided the institution with some very useful findings about their students. They found that their students demonstrated very high levels of awareness, not only of the NSP, but also of other financial support on offer and importantly their eligibility.

## **Confidence**

111. One institution evaluated the students' confidence at managing their academic workload, how they would perform (their grade at the end of the year) and their confidence at fitting in. This was measured for those that received institutional financial support and those that did not. As the survey was conducted three times over the academic year the research gained some sense of how academically confident students were at the start of the year compared with how much support required at end of the year. They found that students receiving financial support are generally over-confident with twice as many students requiring more support than they initially thought. This has enabled the institution to develop their academic and

personal wellbeing programme building in measures to manage expectations and provide further pastoral/academic support.

## 6. Conclusions

112. It is clear that considering the importance that the higher education sector places on financial support, there remains limited research into its impact. The sector needs to understand more fully where and how to invest in order to continue to improve access to higher education and ensure students are successful in their study (and beyond).

113. Research can be difficult as there is a complex system of financial support with students having to navigate what is on offer from individual institutions (and sometimes even individual programmes). Yet more research is needed, without this we cannot fully understand the role of financial support within widening participation.

114. Alongside national academic research programmes, it is important that institutions continue to evaluate their financial support programmes. Institutions need to understand the impact of their financial support within their own context. It is recognised that there is significant diversity within the sector, and one size does not fit all in relation to financial support, but with over £400 million being invested by institutions it is important that all the key stakeholders do more to understand the effect and impact of financial support on all aspects of the student lifecycle.

115. The findings from institutional evaluations, submitted following the call for evidence, and the review of recent national research conclude that:

- Financial support is not the most significant determinant in the decision to apply to higher education or on choice of institution.  
However, from the institutional findings it appears that there is a sizeable minority of students who feel that financial support does impact on their decision to enter higher education and in choice of destination. This is not fully reflected in the national findings. There may be many reasons for this, such as post-hoc rationalisation, or small cohorts of students getting 'lost' in national data.
- Students receiving financial support have comparable non-continuation rates with students who do not receive financial support.

Yet institutional findings show that students in receipt of financial support report that it has enabled them to stay on course and they consider withdrawing less than their peers. This may mean that there is a difference in thought and action or that financial support provides a levelling effect, enabling students who receive financial support to continue with their studies and have comparable non-continuation rates.

116. Broad overall conclusions do not necessarily reflect the complexity of the impact on individuals or particular groups of students. More research is needed to identify if there are any groups with similar characteristics, and if there is a behavioural impact on these students.

117. The way in which financial support schemes operate within institutions (and nationally) may also be playing its part in, possibly, limiting their impact. This could be due to the complexity of the arrangements, the timing and availability of information and lack of coordination with outreach programmes.

118. Many in the research community believe that bursaries do not affect students' choice due to the students' lack of knowledge and understanding as to what is available. However, there is very limited research into the relationships between outreach activity and financial support. Future research could consider whether early intervention increases the effectiveness of financial support.

119. Much of the research indicates an acceptance of debt. The research shows that there is a sense that "there is no point worrying". However, financial worries are cited in many research findings as contributory factors towards withdrawing and inability to participate in university life. The role financial support plays in a student's wellbeing is an area that has limited research. Understanding the interplay between wellbeing and financial support would be a useful research agenda.

120. Greater understanding of how students manage their money (and any additional support tools they need), what financial pressures they face, and their access to other sources of funding will enable any institutional financial support to be targeted at those areas which will most benefit the students. How students use

and access other sources of funding can help us to understand the role of institutional financial support. There is limited national research into this, with Bowes et al (2014) commenting on the impact of financial support on the take-up of part-time work. The findings of Bowes et al (2014) were echoed in institutional findings that those that receive financial support had not needed to take up part-time work or were able to reduce the number of hours they worked. In order to understand the impact of institutional financial support it would be useful to understand the full range of financial support a student accesses and the differences in level for students with different characteristics.

121. We would encourage a greater understanding of particular student groups' needs. There is very limited research on the effects of financial support on different student groups, for example, part time, mature, specific minority ethnic communities and those from families whose household income is less than £15,000. Not all students will face the same challenges and, therefore, more research into how specific groups of students respond to financial support is suggested. This is encouraged both at a national and institutional level.

122. There was very limited research into the impact of financial support on progression to postgraduate study or employment. For employability outcomes there was no research reported by the institutions. Institutions could be encouraged in the development of financial support evaluation to research student outcomes, including degree achieved, and onward progression to employment or postgraduate study.

123. Institutions are often seeking the answers to the same questions. They have used internal data to understand the relationship between financial support and retention and surveys to investigate students' decision-making processes. Greater consistency in the use of internal institutional data and surveys to understand the impact of financial support on students could enable institutions to compare findings and assist the wider research community.

124. Institutions have reported interesting findings and differences in behaviours when they have used fine-grained and contextualised approaches to evaluation. This is particularly evident when they have considered the impact and compared it

to amount of financial support received. Approaching the evaluation of financial support in this way might be possible for more institutions across the sector, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the area.

125. The review found that institutions are using a wide range of methodologies and approaches to understand the impact of their financial support. Those that have used a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods, control groups or evaluated the behaviours or perceptions of prospective students (as well as their current students) had a rich source of information from which to more fully understand the impact of their offer and programmes.

126. It is anticipated that some of the conclusions from this review will be considered in the research commissioned by OFFA during 2015. However, there is more to be done and it is for all stakeholders who support widening participation to continue to evaluate the impact of financial support on prospective and current students.

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