

Widening participation?

Exploring the effect of financial support and outreach on the choices and experiences of students in Bristol

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1 Executive Summary

This report summarises the findings of a three-year project undertaken by the Personal Finance Research Centre on behalf of the University of Bristol, looking at the impact of outreach and financial incentives on students' universities choices as well as their sense of belonging as members of the University.

The research is informed by and provides evidence for an understanding of widening participation that is not just about diversifying intakes but is also about supporting inclusion in the wider University community and the opportunities that extend from it. As such, we question a suggestion that universities should act to switch expenditure from bursaries and fee waivers to outreach programmes. Although our findings agree that the current bursary system has little influence on the university choices prospective students make, that may be because the system is complicated and uncertain: eligibility for a bursary may only be confirmed once a student has been admitted to a university and begun their study. So even if a student is able to gather the information they need to compare what is available, there is no necessary guarantee that she or he will qualify for it.

What the report highlights is the value of greater certainty. The University of Bristol's Access to Bristol scheme is attractive because it provides the guarantee of an admissions offer (in most circumstances). It also offers a generous financial package to those who are admitted from it. Bursaries (including those that do not fall under the Access to Bristol scheme) provide greater certainty in helping a student to manage their finances, to participate more fully in the life of the university, and to provide a cushion from unexpected and unplanned expenses, especially in a city that is regarded as expensive. They enhance the student experience. Outreach provides greater certainty about what a university is like and what the university experience will be.

Ultimately the matter should not be one of choosing between bursaries or outreach programmes, or of switching expenditure from one to the other. It is about establishing ways of supporting students over the educational life course from school to graduation (with other intermediate stages in the case of mature students), thereby allowing those from less advantaged backgrounds to have the same opportunity to enter and to participate in university life as those from more traditional intakes. Both outreach and bursaries help to facilitate a reciprocal 'bond' between the university and the student; the evidence is that those who benefit from such schemes are willing to 'give back' in their support to other students. Bursaries and outreach are not an either-or. They are complementary tools that can widen intake and participation within a university.

Key findings

- Prospective students value certainty. An attraction of the University of Bristol's Access to Bristol scheme is that it normally provides the guarantee of an admissions offer.
- Running the scheme during the school day can, however, be disruptive. One pupil declined to participate because she was concerned about the impact upon her A-level study.
- Bursaries support students by helping them to manage their finances in a city that is regarded as expensive, and to participate more fully in the life of the university.
- Specific costs create barriers. At the University of Bristol, the cost of a sports pass is regarded as high, limiting participation in sports activities.
- Outreach activities and bursaries facilitate a reciprocal bond between the university and the student. Some of those involved become student ambassadors, generating a virtuous cycle of peer support.
- However, not all 'widening participation students' fit comfortably into the existing culture of what is regarded as a 'posh university'. This highlights the importance of improving the inclusivity of the university culture.

Policy implications

- The bursary and fee waiver system across the university sector is complicated and uncertain – eligibility may not be confirmed until a student is enrolled at a university. This complexity should be reduced to allow for bursaries to influence university choice.
- Although the existing bursary system may have little effect in widening access to universities, it does not follow that outreach programmes alone will do any better. Bursaries should not be replaced by outreach programmes, as is proposed, without further evaluation.
- The effect of cutting back on bursaries and financial support would be to leave students from less advantaged backgrounds more vulnerable to financial uncertainty and less well equipped to succeed at university. It would limit the opportunity for those students to participate fully in the life and community of the university. Removing bursaries would diminish the student experience.
- The pool of school pupils who are from less advantaged backgrounds, who can meet the grade requirements of an elite University and who live nearby may not be large. Local outreach programmes will therefore struggle to diversify intakes. Contextual

offers that make lower grade offers to the higher-performing students from more deprived neighbourhoods can help.

- Bursaries and outreach programmes should not be viewed in the context of an either-or. They are complementary tools that can widen intake and participation within universities and should operate alongside one another to widen access to and participation within universities.

2 Background and methodology

2.1 Background

The University of Bristol is obliged by its Access Agreement, approved by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), to expand its investment in outreach activities by £1.75 million, from £850 000 in 2011/12 to a steady state of £2.6 million in 2016/17 (a threefold increase). The Access to Bristol scheme forms an important component of Bristol's outreach strategy: the University is committed both to expanding the scheme and increasing the application to intake conversion rates for participating students.

The Access to Bristol scheme is designed as a curriculum enrichment opportunity for students studying A-levels or equivalents and is open to all students in the first or second year of A-level study (with some differences for the Law Stream). Priority for places is given to local students, those with the academic ability to study at the University, those who would be the first in their family to go to university, and to those living in a low participation area. The University makes the commitment that 'graduates' of the scheme who firmly accept an offer to study at the University of Bristol will be considered for its enhanced financial support package, if they have a residual household income of £25,000 or below. This package consisted of a full tuition fee waiver, plus an annual maintenance grant valued at £3,750¹.

The Access to Bristol scheme is a form of outreach with a clear financial inducement. Yet, the effectiveness of such inducements as a means to meet Widening Participation (WP) objectives has been strongly questioned and is counter to some recent national policy recommendations. Specifically, in his progress report as Independent Reviewer on Social Mobility and Child Poverty, Alan Milburn (2012) makes the explicit recommendation that "*Universities should now act to switch expenditure [...] from bursaries and fee waivers*" to outreach programmes (p.38 of the report, emphasis added).² He makes this recommendation by drawing on the 2010 Office for Fair Access (OFFA) report – 'Have Bursaries influenced choice between Universities?' – to which question the answer is seen as a clear 'no':

- "Bursaries have not influenced the choice of university of disadvantaged young people."
- "Applications from disadvantaged young people have not changed in favour of universities offering higher bursaries."

¹ The Access to Bristol bursary currently only provides a fee waiver for the 1st year of study

² Milburn A (2012) *University Challenge: How Higher Education Can Advance Social Mobility. A progress report by the Independent Reviewer on Social Mobility and Child Poverty.*

- “Since bursaries were introduced most of the increase in participation of disadvantaged young people has been in universities offering lower bursaries” [i.e. not Russell Group] (Milburn, op. cit., after OFFA, 2010).

Given the focus on expanding outreach, both within the University’s own WP strategy and in the Milburn report, and with particular consideration to the bursary/enhanced financial package offered, it is timely to explore the relative effect of bursaries in comparison with outreach on participation at the University of Bristol.

An important finding of the research that also informs the meaning of widening participation that we employ here is that it goes beyond the idea of simply access to university to also consider how those who enter higher education experience student life. The report explores to what extent those from less traditional intakes are able to participate fully in the life and community offered by the University, and whether bursaries and outreach may contribute to this.

2.2 Aims and objectives

The research has two main objectives. Firstly, to understand the role that outreach activities or financial support play, relative to other considerations, in encouraging applications to university generally and to the University of Bristol in particular from students with Widening Participation (WP) backgrounds.

The second objective is to evaluate, from the perspective of these students, any longer term impacts of attending outreach schemes, and/ or receiving a bursary on the students’ attitudes towards the University, their desire and ability to learn, the extent to which they participate in the life of the University and in their overall sense of belonging to the university community. We are especially interested in the role of the bursaries: do they create a reciprocal bond with the University that leads to higher levels of personal and academic commitment?

2.3 Literature Review

Since the Higher Education Act (2004), the bursary landscape has continued to be an uneven and changeable landscape, the complexity of which has been noted (Mitton 2007, Smith 2010,). Bursaries have been part of a financial support system that sought to moderate any negative effect the increase in fees may have caused³, and, as such, have been positioned as a means of furthering the widening participation agenda (Harrison and Hatt 2011). There has, however, been an ongoing debate around the effectiveness of bursaries in this context, and evidence to suggest that, as a tool for widening access to university, bursaries are not succeeding (OFFA 2010, Harrison 2011). This is the position adopted by the Independent

³ Charles Clarke: House of Commons, debate, 8.1.04, col 419 (quoted in Callender 2010 p. 4)

Reviewer on Social Mobility and Child Poverty, informed by the 2010 OFFA report.

Research in this field has cited a number of reasons why bursaries may have failed to influence choices. Amongst them is the complexity of the bursary system that doesn't allow for easy comparison of what is being offered (Davies 2008, Maringe et al 2009, Callender 2010). In an examination of bursaries, Callender (2010) noted that "the way bursaries are designed and promoted acts to counter the notion of 'fair access'" (p. 59) citing the complexity of the system as one of the reasons why. Prior to arriving at university, students may not be aware of the level of bursary (if any) that they may be entitled to, making it difficult for that bursary to influence their choice. More recently, the Complete University Guide has tried to address this lack of information by publishes a guide summarising the information available from English universities.⁴ Even so, this guide still does not clarify the exact eligibility criteria for each bursary. The evidence that bursaries do not influence choice may owe less to the bursaries themselves and more to a lack of effective information and communication.

An alternative view is that choice of university and course is a complex decision involving predicted attainment at school, preferred course and location, the experience of friends and peers, whether to live at home, previous contact with a university and other considerations, amongst which bursaries do not play a dominant role (Davies 2008, Adbett and Tuplov 2010, Purcell 2008, Harrison and Hatt 2011, Whitehead et al 2006, NUS 2011). However, financial support still is one of the factors that can influence choice (Callendar and Jackson 2008a, Davies 2008) and, for some students, fear of debt, the need to work to supplement finances and other financial concerns do affect choices when considering higher educations (NUS 2011).

Furthermore, it is not clear that HE institutions are, in fact, structuring their bursaries in order to widen access to the largest number of students. A number of authors have noted the 'quasi-market' that exists in higher education (Smith 2007, Adnet & Tuplova 2009, Callender 2010, Harrison and Hatt 2011) and how this marketisation has been reflected in the way bursaries are used by institutions to attract the type of student that is most beneficial to their needs. Universities are free to provide the level of bursary they choose, and to target the bursary at the students that they feel are most appropriate (Harrison and Hatt 2011). There is a wide variation of the level and number of bursaries granted (Callender 2010, McCaig and Adnett 2009). Broadly speaking, prestigious universities have offered fewer, higher value bursaries in comparison with a greater number of low value bursaries

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http://www.thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk/media/2156425/b_s_grid_england_2015_enty.pdf

distributed from lower ranked institutions. This may suggest that bursaries are being used as a competitive marketing tool rather than for the stated policy purpose (Harrison & Hatt 2011, McCaig 2014). If so, then the limited success of bursaries in widening participation is unsurprising.

In recent years, however, attention has been given to the effect that financial support and bursaries generally may have on a fuller understanding of the participation aspect of HE; to better understand the role that they may play in the experience whilst at university, in terms of retention and success, and not just how they affect the initial choice. Currently the evidence is mixed; on a national level, HEFCE (Bowes et al 2013) and OFFA (2014) have found little to suggest that bursaries do increase retention amongst recipients. However, a number of single institution studies (Harrison et al 2007, Chetwynd and Diggle 2013, Byrne and Cushing 2015, O'Brien 2015) found some indications that financial support can positively affect retention rates. While the numbers involved in each study were relatively low, the suggestion was that financial support could be one of a number of factors that increased retention.

In any case, a focus that is only on retention is, like a focus on admissions, more concerned about whether widening participation students are in and at a university and less about the experience they have whilst they are there. A more rounded consideration of the effect of financial support needs to incorporate all the factors that can contribute to feelings of belonging or inclusivity of WP students. Those may, in turn, contribute to a higher retention rate but that is a positive outcome not an end in itself. O'Brien, for example, found that based on the comparative retention rates of 'in-receipt' students and 'near-miss' ones in high retention vs low retention departments in the University of Liverpool, "we can see financial support itself as an 'inclusivity factor'" (2015, p.85). Byrne and Cushing's research finds that a combination of financial support alongside pastoral care can result in "a notable and positive impact" (2015, p.56) on student retention.

2.4 Research methods and sample design

We undertook qualitative research to address our research questions. To achieve the first aim of understanding the factors considered when contemplating higher education, and the interplay between them, we interviewed school students aged 16 to 18, across three different groups. The intention was to interview students who had the academic capability to be accepted onto Access to Bristol. We conducted in-depth interviews with 53 school students in Years 12 and 13, 20 who took part in outreach activities in 2013, interviewed during those activities; and 33 students who we interviewed at their schools. We visited five schools, based in South, North, North East and East Bristol. We interviewed a mixture of students who had successfully applied to Access to Bristol, those who had been

unsuccessful in their application, and those who had not applied. We also interviewed members of staff in each of these schools.

Secondly, to evaluate the longer-term impacts of outreach schemes and especially the provision or otherwise of a financial package we are able to exploit a quasi-experimental research design. Specifically, we conducted in-depth interviews with three groups of University of Bristol first year undergraduates in the 2013/14 cohort. These were:

1. Outreach attendees with bursaries and fee waivers
2. Outreach attendees without bursaries and without fee waivers
3. Students with a BS (Bristol) or BA (Bath) home postcode who did not attend an outreach course but who do receive a University of Bristol bursary.

We conducted in-depth interviews with 21 undergraduates who took part in outreach and received an Access to Bristol Bursary⁵ (Group 1) of whom we re-interviewed 16 in year 2, and 6 took part in focus groups in year 3 (19 of the 21 were Access to Bristol students; two had participated in a Sutton Trust Summer School); 10 undergraduates who took part in outreach but did not subsequently receive financial support (Group 2) of whom we re-interviewed 8 in year 2, and 4 took part in focus groups in year 3, (eight Access to Bristol; two Sutton Trust Summer School); and 19 undergraduates who did not take part in outreach but receive a University of Bristol bursary (Group 3), of whom we re-interviewed 13 in year 2, and 7 took part in focus groups in year 3.

To ensure that the findings were not cohort specific, we interviewed 20 first year undergraduates from the 2014/15 cohort, of whom 13 participated in focus groups in their second year.

In the following findings, particularly those exploring the student experience while at university, we have focused on the data from the initial cohort of undergraduates that we followed over three years. The data from the 2014/15 cohort did not reveal any major differences.

⁵ The two Sutton Trust Summer School attendees received University Of Bristol bursaries

3 Choice of university

3.1 Factors important when applying to university

Overall, the most important factors that influenced these students' university choices were the course or subject they wanted to study and how far away (or not) from home they were prepared to go. In respect of the universities that school students were considering, the University of Bristol and the University of the West of England (UWE) were most commonly mentioned. While a few students definitely wanted to stay in Bristol, at either of the universities, it was usual for students to be looking at these along with two or three that were within a certain distance, described by one student as "*close, not miles away*". These other universities included Cardiff, Bath, Exeter and Warwick. A small number of students had firm intentions to leave Bristol, either because the course they hoped to study was only available at other universities, or because moving away from home was part of their motivation for going to university.

Most of the students we interviewed had at least some idea of the subject they wanted to study. The interest in the subject was generally the main motivation for going to university, and many students had chosen 'A' levels on the basis of interest and aptitude for the subject. This could be more of an influence on university choice than geography. For example, one Access to Bristol attendee indicated she would probably not apply to the University of Bristol, as she hoped to do a very specific pharmaceutical science course that Bristol does not offer. For subjects such as Maths or History, there was a greater choice, and other factors came into play.

The reputation of the university was one such factor in the process, helping students to narrow down their choices. Generally speaking, students aimed for the best universities that they were likely to be accepted at. Students did broadly categorise universities and a few stated that they were aiming for a 'Russell Group' university.

Overall, the decision-making process that school students went through to make their university choices tended to be one of iterative elimination, until they ended up with one preferred and one 'back-up' option. Personal circumstances could also influence choice. For example, students mentioned factors such as familiarity with a university because a sibling or friend had attended or because of some connection between the university and the school; a need to stay locally because of caring responsibilities; clear eligibility for a bursary; or just really liking the feel of a particular university on an open day. Students were aware of the need for flexibility, as some factors were outside of their control.

“I really want to go to one in Bristol, so I was thinking of UWE, yes because I want to be close to home, but then if I can't find any universities, like if they don't let me then I'm going to have to go to ones in London or Birmingham” (F, Year 12, A2B Non-applicant)

3.1.1 Financial considerations in the decision process

The interview data shows that school students (and their families) make decisions about whether or not to go to university before any concrete concerns over finance are considered. However, this does not mean that a general worry about the cost of going to university is not a barrier for some students, who potentially rule out university at an early stage as a result. A few of the teachers we spoke to expressed concern that some capable students may be choosing the path of apprenticeships or employment to avoid debt.

“The biggest factor without a doubt now is perception of debt... that's the single biggest reason why the number of our students applying has decreased. And you can talk as much as you like about the support that's in place and, you know, the bursaries that are available and the different supports for different cohorts of students, but the message they hear and their parents hear and that they read about is the debt and that's the short term factor that will put them off” (North Bristol School)

Some school students did express concern over the level of debt involved in going to university, even amongst those who were likely to apply. Overall, however, most felt the positives outweighed the negatives; that getting a university education will be beneficial to them: *“I want to come to university more than I don't want the debt” (M, Yr12, Sutton Trust Summer School)*. Another reason for not being put off by financial concerns was the perception that *‘everyone is in the same boat’*. So while the level of debt talked about is large, as long as school students felt that their peers would accrue similar amounts, it appeared less disconcerting.

Bursaries, or other financial support offered by universities, weren't particularly part of school students' decision-making process, unless, as in the case of Access to Bristol, there was clear signposting to a substantial bursary that students were aware they would be eligible for. A few students we spoke to, often those who had older siblings who had already been through the university application process, and who had received some form of bursary themselves, or others living in low-income households, were aware that they were likely to qualify for extra financial support, and had factored this into their decision-making. For these students, the possibility of receiving a generous bursary and fee waiver was very influential in how they chose which universities to apply for.

“I just settled on Bristol and I've decided like if I don't get my grades this year that I'll retake a year and try again, because I

really want to go there... I think if that offer wasn't there and the money wasn't there then I'd look at other places as well." (M, Year 13, A2B Biology)

It should be noted that school students didn't generally distinguish between cash bursaries and fee waivers in discussions, and in fact, all were talking about receiving a cash sum when discussing financial support or bursaries.

The majority of undergraduates we interviewed had researched bursaries prior to, or around the time of application to university, but it is unclear exactly where in the process the search for information had come. As with the school students, many from low income households saw a high possibility that they would qualify for some form of financial help at university. Those who had attended Access to Bristol and were eligible for the bursary, however, generally became aware of this during the Access to Bristol course, and this information *did* influence their choice and decision on universities. This implies a process whereby outreach generated awareness of the bursary and that knowledge subsequently informed choice.

The other key consideration in terms of the cost of attending university was the variability of living costs. Some students were considering a local university, either UWE or University of Bristol, to reduce their living costs, although they could also see the advantage of moving away to have the 'halls experience'. One student, who was confident of qualifying for the Access to Bristol bursary, if accepted, would move into halls for that reason. For another, unlikely to qualify for any bursary, the idea of minimising his living costs and therefore his student debt was one of the key factors in choosing between his preferred universities.

"Moving away and making new friends but having the expense of somewhere further afield, but staying here and living at home possibly not making as many new friends as you would in Halls but in the long run saving money and probably being in less debt for the rest of your life."(M, Year 13, A2B Non-applicant)

Where undergraduates did have concerns about the cost of university at the time they were thinking about applying, these tended to be general concerns about tuition fees, living costs and the amount of debt they would accumulate as an undergraduate. A few students were worried because their parents were not in a position to help them financially or because their parents' own financial situation was difficult. Most of the students who reported being worried about money and finances had gone on to receive a bursary.

3.2 Barriers to university

The majority of school students we spoke to were generally quite sure that they would be going to university or at the very least, giving it strong

consideration. Their biggest worry in terms of potential barriers to university was not getting the grades they needed to get to on the course that they wanted. There was a strong awareness of how competitive it is to get on sought-after courses, or into prestigious universities, and how easy it could be to miss the grades to get in. While it was not frequent, it is possible that some were deterred from even applying. One school student (who hadn't applied for Access to Bristol), hoped to study Law and believed, rightly or wrongly, that she would need three As to be accepted at Bristol, but only expected to achieve two As and one B: *"the little gap is the gap I need, but I don't think I'll be able to get it"*.

For students who planned to attend a local university and for whom the University of Bristol offered a suitable course, the biggest barrier to applying was the grade requirements.

"no one's going to apply unless you're Einstein" (F, Year 12, A2B Non-applicant)

Other comments such as it being *"full of really clever people, those with A*s"* (F, Year 12, Non-applicant), and one of *"that group of them [Russell Group]"* suggest that many students didn't feel that the University of Bristol would be suitable for them or that it was worth them applying. However, one staff member disagreed with this: *"If they have the grades they've got no qualms about applying"*. Overall, this does suggest that only those who are confident in their likely academic success are likely to actively pick the University of Bristol as one of their choices.

This was reflected in the views of University of Bristol first year undergraduates. A number of them had found it hard to gauge the sorts of university they should be applying to, and some had been discouraged from applying to the University of Bristol, or for a particular course by their teachers.

"it is a little bit harder I think because when you don't know how high you need to be aiming, it's not really that easy is it to aim for things" (F, Bursary, Cellular and Molecular Medicine)

For those school students for whom staying in Bristol was a key criterion, many felt a greater connection with UWE. Students were more likely to have friends or family members who had studied there, and the majority had visited UWE at some point. Events held at UWE such as careers fairs or open days were mentioned frequently. Some students were participating in the Heading Higher Passport scheme, which involved being allocated a mentor who is a current student at UWE. All of these factors seemed to result in a stronger relationship generally between Bristol sixth form students and UWE.

Overall, there was no evidence among the students we interviewed of lack of ambition towards university generally, as one staff member commented: *“if the academic ability is there, there is natural transition to university”*.

The situation was different for the mature undergraduates we interviewed who had come to Bristol via Access to HE. For one thing, the scheme is generally only one year full-time rather than two years, which was a big motivator for at least one student we interviewed. Equally the GCSE requirements for acceptance on the course (typically Maths and English grade C or above at GCSE, plus basic IT skills) differed from most post-16 centre requirements for A levels. It was not entirely clear whether the Access to HE has an exact equivalence to A level grades, in terms of the grades needed to be accepted at the University of Bristol; there was some suggestion that it was easier to obtain the grades needed via Access to HE.

3.3 School and student participation in outreach

Overall, there was a high participation in outreach activities amongst the schools and the students that we interviewed. All of the schools had some level of engagement with Access to Bristol, some with more enthusiasm than others. Schools were also participating in other outreach schemes such as Aim Higher and Heading Higher Passport Plus (HHP Plus) at UWE, as well as one day events, which were the most commonly attended.

The one day events were often held from year 9 onwards. The staff at some schools were more positive about outreach with students in the years before sixth form, as some schools are starting to work with students in year nine or earlier, in terms identifying their potential, and giving them information about post-school options. Some also felt it was better at that stage if the activity was open to all.

“so everybody could actually be part of it and everybody could feel they were a part of the university and everybody could feel that it wasn't something you stood away from”(South Bristol School)

3.4 Access to Bristol

The Access to Bristol scheme is a programme of eight academic sessions designed to give local year 12 and 13 students a taste of studying at university. It is run twice in a year, once starting in October, and once starting in January. Students need to demonstrate the grades and motivation to go on to university, and priority is given to those who will be the first in their family to go to university and come from low participation areas. Students who attended Access to Bristol and the Sutton Trust Summer School had often been identified as higher achieving, ‘gifted and talented’ students or having shown some particular aptitude for their subject.

As to reasons for applying to Access to Bristol, many students were motivated by a general desire to gain a better understanding of what university entails, either to learn more about the subject that they hoped to study, or university life generally. Others were undecided about the course they were considering and hoped that a deeper knowledge of the type of subject matter covered would enable them to make an informed choice.

For others, the more concrete benefits were of greater appeal, such as the guaranteed offer, or that the offer was contextual, or even having something to write on their UCAS application personal statement. Not all of those who applied were hoping to study at Bristol, but still saw a potential advantage in attending “*sort of work experience at the university*” (F, Year 13, Unsuccessful application to A2B). The guaranteed offer was mentioned by some as a big draw, but by fewer than may be expected as this was not always made clear by the schools. One attendee felt that students may not have been aware of this benefit as “*it was only mentioned at the end*” [of a school presentation].

The depth interviews with undergraduates confirmed that gaining familiarity with what university would really be like was a main impetus to attend Access to Bristol, and an advantage once they started at university. A number of students at university, those still at school and school teachers all noted that Access to Bristol offered a far more realistic experience of the university than attending open days (where university staff aimed to impress and encourage potential students, and where there may be less opportunity to speak to current students). Students now at university also felt that Access to Bristol familiarised them with the university style of teaching.

3.5 Barriers to Access to Bristol

While the reasons for applying to Access to Bristol were relatively straightforward, there were a far greater number of reasons why students didn't apply.

From the schools point of view, the biggest barrier to students attending Access to Bristol was often the low likelihood of being accepted on the basis of their GCSE grades. The grade requirement was a particular disappointment to a few of the staff we spoke to and one of the main barriers to engagement. One teacher talked about how, when Access to Bristol was being described to his students, at the point where they were told they would need As and Bs at GCSE, “*the energy of the students dipped massively, as did ours*” (East Bristol School).

For low performing schools, this means that few of their students are eligible to apply for Access to Bristol. School staff also made the point that their high-performing students often move schools to better performing post-16 centres, making it even less likely that they can find eligible

students to take part in Access to Bristol. For staff, it can seem like a waste of resources to focus effort on Access to Bristol that fewer students will benefit from, when there are other schemes, notably HHP Plus, which awards up to 70 UCAS points to those who are offered a place on a UWE undergraduate programme, which will benefit more of their students.

From the students' perspective, lack of information and the timing of the information was one barrier, as described above. A number of school students were only told about Access to Bristol very close to the application deadline, and therefore felt they did not have time to apply. And while the scheme is run after Christmas (as well as in the autumn term), there was less awareness of this session. One staff member suggested that Access to Bristol generally may be most appropriately aimed at year 13s, as it may be too early in the A level period to garner the interest of year 12s.

A general inertia among students could also be a barrier to applying; by their own admission some students just simply 'didn't get round to it'. This reason may have masked a number of other barriers, however, such as a misunderstanding of what is on offer, or a belief that they wouldn't be accepted. It was suggested by one staff member for example that some students wouldn't understand what an 'offer' was (East Bristol School). Overall, however, the more proactive the member of staff was in encouraging applications, the more likely the students were to actually apply.

The logistics of Access to Bristol could also play a part in discouraging participation. For the majority, they were told about it at the beginning of Year 12, and university was something they hadn't given much thought to at that point *"I wanted to get more sure about what I wanted to do after A levels"* (M, Year 12, Non-applicant). The timetabling of Access to Bristol for Wednesday afternoons was a problem for some students, and quite a number of those who had attended Access to Bristol had missed lessons as a result, or had needed the school to re-timetable them. This was the case for both those still at school, as well as a number of first year undergraduates. One undergraduate had missed between 12 and 14 Maths lessons, ended-up with a lower A level grade as a result, and had to re-sit.

The situation was even harder for some mature students. A number of undergraduates had had difficulties attending Access to Bristol because they were in work. One student ended up losing her job as a result of missing Wednesday afternoon shifts, and another had to use all her annual leave to be able to attend.

Some school students had concerns over the level of commitment required to take part in Access to Bristol, and the effect that this may have on their studies *"I was doing 5 A levels and I didn't feel like I had time to do it"* (M, Year 13, A2B Non-applicant). A number of those who did attend thought

that some friends had been put off for this reason. *“A lot of people prefer to work in the free hours they get”* (F, Year 12, Non-applicant). Paradoxically, this could mean that some of the higher achieving students may choose not attend, because of their commitment to study.

The consistency in the amount and accuracy of the information provided (or at least recalled by students) varied greatly, and could have deterred some from applying. A number of students, among both those who had not applied and those who had applied or attended, were unaware at the time of application that attendance on Access to Bristol resulted in a guaranteed offer, or of the bursary (until attending in the case of those who did go on it). Two students who were considering the University of Bristol had not applied for Access to Bristol, as they had mistakenly understood the eligibility criteria for a bursary to be the criteria for acceptance on Access to Bristol.

“retrospectively I think it would have been quite a good experience to do it now, but we were told that I think you had to have income lower than £25,000 to go and obviously I didn't qualify so I just completely disregarded it” (M, Year 13, A2B Non-applicant)

3.6 Effect of outreach on university choice

A number of undergraduates at the University of Bristol appeared to have been influenced in their university choices by attending Access to Bristol. The effect of the outreach was hard to disentangle from other factors, and for many, it appeared as though the Access to Bristol Bursary was as important to their decision as the outreach. Nonetheless, it was clear that, for some, experiencing Access to Bristol had been influential in their choice to apply and then come to Bristol. One effect of Access to Bristol was that it encouraged students to believe that they were ‘good enough’ to attend Bristol.

“telling people to aim higher, to aspire to be better and gave me the confidence that I guess I'd lost through college, that I could, I was able to apply to Bristol and, you know, it was something that was possible.” (F, Year 1, A2B bursary)

The guaranteed contextual offer from University of Bristol as a result of attending Access to Bristol meant that it would actually be more attainable to many. The experience of one or two of undergraduates also suggests some flexibility is shown to those who have come via outreach, as one or two had in fact missed their grades, but were still accepted. Conversely, there was the potential for school students who applied unsuccessfully to Access to Bristol to be put off selecting the University of Bristol as one of their university choices.

“if I can't get onto that then I probably can't get onto the [course]”
(F, Year 13, A2B Unsuccessful applicant).

The majority of school students we interviewed who had applied unsuccessfully to Access to Bristol, however, did not appear to have been deterred from applying to university, or even reapplying for Access to Bristol.

For some mature students, in particular, Access to Bristol really was significant in helping them choose the University of Bristol as an option, initially, then making it their first choice. For these students, and for a few coming straight from school, Access to Bristol gave them the belief that they were capable of getting in to the University of Bristol, which many didn't have prior to attending Access to Bristol.

"it sounded interesting just to find out more about it. I still wasn't really thinking that Bristol was a possible option... as it went on I kind of, and it did begin to seem like perhaps it was a possibility or something that I could consider... so you just sort of realised that actually if I only need to do this, this, this and this it's not quite, there's not the barriers that perhaps I put up" (F, Year 1, A2B Bursary)

For another, the fact that Access to Bristol gave him a guaranteed offer to a prestigious university was the most important benefit of attending.

"I knew it would give me the opportunity to get into Bristol, like I personally don't think I would have had, if not [attended]... it's given me the opportunity to jump straight to the top of the workforce" (M, Year 1, A2B bursary).

However, he also felt that the bursary would also give him an advantage once he was actually at university.

"The finance they give you is a great benefit, that's such a, you know, weight off my mind... I don't know quite how stressful Uni would be if I was thinking about like, you know, I've got to work 8 hours a week just to get £60 a week to put food on the table ...it puts you at a sort of level pegging of what you should be able to then achieve..."(ibid)

The majority of the undergraduates we interviewed who attended Access to Bristol also qualified for the bursary and most felt that the bursary was as influential in making their choice as the outreach. The undergraduates we interviewed who were not eligible for the bursary had a number of different reasons for coming to the University of Bristol. Generally, it appeared to be a combination of factors that influenced the final choice of University of Bristol, including wanting to stay close to home, or Bristol being the most prestigious university they were accepted at.

4 Experience at university

4.1 Financial situation of students

The undergraduates in receipt of the Access to Bristol bursary received £3,750 per year, in three instalments, as well as a full fee waiver while studying. Those in receipt of the University of Bristol bursary mostly received a £2,000 cash bursary along with a fee part-waiver typically worth £3,000 or £3,500.

Reflecting their relatively low household incomes, almost all the undergraduates in receipt of an Access to Bristol or University of Bristol bursary also had a non-repayable Maintenance Grant⁶ for living expenses (typically £3,000-£3,500). In contrast, only two undergraduates who were *not* in receipt of one of the two Bristol bursaries had a Maintenance Grant.

Repayable maintenance loans were also very common among the undergraduates we interviewed. It was notable that several undergraduates who had both an Access to Bristol bursary and a Maintenance Grant did not have a Maintenance Loan. Most, however, had loans in the region of £3,000 to £5,500.

There was little change among the undergraduates in terms of sources of income over the course of their studies; the majority were still in receipt of bursaries, grants and loans. Paid work, either in term time or in the holidays was relatively common, and generally stable over the course of the degree. Those who had been working in the first year were usually still working in the second year, and vice versa, although many had intentions to drop hours, or stop altogether in their final year.

Those who were not in receipt of bursaries had generally taken out the maintenance loans, at levels ranging from £5,000 to £10,000 and many also received financial help from their parents, although this was not universal. In the few cases where help was not received from parents, this could be a source of worry for the students, and while not generally a cause of financial difficulty, it did cause a change in spending habits. Levels of paid work were broadly similar in our study groups among those who didn't receive a bursary as those who did. It is likely that those levels are higher than is typical for a University of Bristol undergraduate but we have not the data to confirm this.

4.1.1 Financial difficulties

Given the general stability of income over the course of their studies, it is perhaps unsurprising that the majority of students felt that they were

⁶ For students starting after 1 Sep 2016, the non-repayable grant has been converted to a repayable loan

managing well financially. There was little evidence of any consumer borrowing and in fact many bursary recipients believed they were in a better financial situation than some of their peers who were not receiving bursaries. Their level of contentedness with their financial situation also seemed to grow during their time at university, as they become more confident that they had enough money to be able to manage.

Those who were struggling financially tended to be mature students, whose finances were tied up with supporting a partner or family, and the financial difficulties were related to external circumstances. In these instances, the financial issues did not appear to worsen over time, and for some, they were able to make changes to improve these situations, such as moving to cheaper accommodation, or to accommodations to save on transport costs, or ensuring that they were claiming all benefits that they were entitled to.

4.1.2 Cost of living

The biggest single cost incurred at university was that of accommodation and this cost was a key factor in the choices of the students in all years of study. As we discuss later, accommodation is one of the most important aspects in how university life is experienced.

What also emerged from the interviews, however, was that the cost of living in Bristol was often far higher than anticipated. The high cost of student hall accommodation at the University of Bristol (relative to other universities) had been noted in the first wave of interviews, particularly among those who had not been allocated their first choice of accommodation. Many had chosen the cheaper priced, self-catering halls. However, there was also a general expectation that their outgoings would drop once they had moved into private accommodation, though this did not always prove to be the case. By the second and third wave of interviews, the high cost of rent in Bristol was often raised.

Many undergraduates had friends in other cities and were therefore aware of the cost differential to Bristol, and some wished that they had known this before applying to university, as it may have affected their decisions.

“My stepdad said ‘Bristol is so much more expensive than Sheffield’ and I was weighing up the two for Uni’s and I didn’t really get it: ‘what do you mean, more expensive, what like a fiver more a week or something?’ and in reality it’s probably more like £40 a week or something and I just didn’t understand that that money is like a whole day’s work on minimum wage,” (Year 3, A2B bursary)

The fact that the loan is the same regardless of city, other than London, was also seen by some as inequitable.

Mature students were, by and large, living in private accommodation from the outset, often in cheaper areas such as Old Market or Stokes Croft, and besides, were more used to the expense of living independently.

4.2 Key Drivers of participation whilst at university

4.2.1 Accommodation choices

As noted above, one of the biggest influences on undergraduates' experience of university life was where they lived, and in particular, whether or not they lived in university accommodation (which for most of them meant living in university halls). Most of the students, whether resident in halls or not, agreed that the friendships they made during the first term tended to be with people they lived with, rather than others on their course. Living in halls was often described as being part of the 'uni experience' and those who didn't live in halls often felt that they had 'missed out' on the social side of university, or on friendships, as a result: *"I feel a lot more of a recluse than I expected"*. Another mature student living at home with his parents noted that *"it's clear that a lot of people have made friends at halls rather than their course, but I've still made a few friends through the course"*. By the second term, when we interviewed undergraduates, it appeared that the 'halls effect' was starting to be mitigated, as students became friendlier with others who were on their course, and generally were starting to settle in more.

The choice of whether to stay in halls depended on a number of factors, but cost was clearly one of them. A few of those who were living at home for cost reasons would have chosen to live in university halls if they had been in receipt of a bursary, and a few who were in halls said that they would have stayed at home if not for the bursary. Some undergraduates whose family were fairly local intended to move home after the first year to save money, having been able to have the 'halls experience' for the first year.

Cost continued to be a factor in choice of accommodation in later years when undergraduates were making the transition to private accommodation. Some of those interviewed spoke of having to persuade their friends to set a limit on how high the rent they paid should be, when looking for accommodation, and one or two felt that they wouldn't have been able to live with their current housemates in their current house if they hadn't been in receipt of a bursary.

"My flatmates are all quite well off, and all get their rent paid by their parents ...I probably wouldn't have been able to live with them had I not had the bursary because the rent would have been too much" (Year 3, UoB Bursary).

However, there were also implications in not taking the traditional halls/private rental route: choosing to live at home, or in a cheaper area could

result in an increase in travel costs, and in the level of effort needed to get to university, which on occasion, could impede studying.

“There were days when I actually, I didn't come into university because if I had 1 or 2 lectures I'd say well I'm not paying the train fee because I can't really afford this” (UoB Bursary, year 2)

One or two who were living in the family home in their first year chose to move out in their second. While living at home was financially beneficial, some found that they were wasting valuable time travelling to and from university, time which could have been better spent either studying in the library or socialising with other students

“living at home was a bit of a struggle, I didn't realise how exhausted I was until I like, until I moved out and realised that it was just I was getting up at 06.30 in the morning to get the bus.” (Year 2, A2B bursary)

4.2.2 Paid work

A significant number of the undergraduates we interviewed had a paid job in term time, and others took on paid work during the summer holidays. This ranged from occasional work as a University of Bristol Student Ambassador, zero-hours contracts in health care through to regular hours in paid work in restaurants or supermarkets. Undoubtedly the money earned from paid work helped supplement undergraduates' income from loans, grants and bursaries. But for some, paid work was also a way of gaining work experience generally or in relation to their degree subject; for example one student was doing private tutoring, and intended to train as a teacher once she had completed her undergraduate degree.

Where mentioned, the reasons non-employed undergraduates gave for not working focused on concerns about the negative impact on their degree course, the heavy workload for their subject or simply because they were managing okay financially at the present time without paid work.

For the most part, undergraduates were able to combine some paid work with study without feeling that it was detrimental to their university career. While few felt that their decision to do paid work was wholly a choice, in the sense that they did feel they needed a further source of income, those with a bursary believed it enabled them to feel they had control over the level of paid work they were doing. One or two admitted that they had been overdoing paid work at the expense of their studies and had cut back to rectify this, or were intending to do so soon.

Overall, the factor that was most important in enabling students to balance work and their studies was flexibility, enabling them to cut back on hours during exam time or when an assignment was due. As a result, one of the most successful examples of combining paid work with studies was that of

working as an ambassador or peer mentor for the office of widening participation.

4.2.3 Extracurricular activities

Most of the undergraduates we interviewed participated in various forms of extracurricular activities, with involvement in societies as varied as the Christian union, the university jazz club, the expedition society, the gliding society and the Panto club. Finances were rarely the reason for non-participation for those who took part in few or none; the costs for the clubs that were mentioned cost from £3 annually upwards. Some of the students were already struggling to manage the competing demands of their course, paid work and other commitments; a few had not joined clubs or societies in the first year, and now felt it was too late to join in.

Involvement in sports was the main area where cost did have an effect on participation. The prohibitive cost of the *'ridiculously expensive'* university Sports Pass, which is a prerequisite for membership for the main university sports teams, was commonly mentioned. Others had thought about taking up sports such as basketball or badminton, but decided against it because of the cost. Bursaries could enable students to participate in sports, and some of the recipients felt that they wouldn't have been able to do so without the bursary.

"I thought if I could get a bursary I could get my gym pass for £150 or whatever it is and then get to do that, because I got sort of into running just before I came to Uni, and yes it's just nice to not have the pressure of where is it all coming from and I think it has helped me" (F, Year 1, UoB Bursary)

Undergraduates who lived some way from the centre of Bristol and the university precinct often found that this impeded their participation in extracurricular activities. Those who lived further out may only come in for lectures, for example, and then go home again, and so weren't really aware of what was going on in the university more widely. Similarly, if clubs or societies met in the evenings, undergraduates were sometimes reluctant to stay at university all day and then on into the evening, or to come back to the university after having gone home.

"it's such a pain to have to travel in and out the city, it takes about an hour to get from mine to Uni. So to have to go home and come back or I have to hang around the Uni and then I get back at 11 at night, it sort of makes it a bit harder to do" (F, Year 1 UoB Bursary)

Depending on where the person lived, this could involve a long journey by bus, or having to pay for car parking all day. This was another way in which not being resident in university accommodation could be a barrier to fully integrating into university life. However, it was not necessarily perceived as

a negative as for some it was a reflection of their individual circumstances or choices.

The biggest barrier to participation overall, however, appeared to be age. The majority of mature students that we interviewed, even those who were in the mid-twenties, believed that their age set them apart from the majority, and that they were having a different experience (for good or bad) compared with those students who had come straight from school or after a gap year. Some of this difference stemmed from accommodation choices, as described above, but there was an overall feeling among mature students that they had less in common with their peers. *“Being older I don’t really click” (M, year 1, A2B Bursary).*

The fact that they had less time to socialise, with the added pressures of partners, children, and friends outside university could also affect the ease with which mature students made friends. Some of those we interviewed had befriended other mature students, and this seemed to decrease the feeling of isolation. One of two felt that the university could offer better social support for mature students, although the mature student coordinator was praised by many for her help and support.

This effect, however, did lessen as their course progressed; they had had an opportunity to get to know the other students on their course, and had deepened the friendships with those who they had more in common with. The position of non-mature students had also changed, as they were often living with students from outside of their course, so their relationships with their course peers was less affected by accommodation choices than it had been previously.

The level of disengagement felt by mature students was not directly related to finances, although there were often greater calls on their money due to supporting families or partners. However, this does raise questions about how to ensure that those students who don’t enter university immediately after school (or after a gap year) can fully participate in university life. There was generally a perception from mature students, as well as some under 21 that the University of Bristol life was set up for “18 year old drinkers” and that could be off-putting to those who were not in this category.

One of the barriers to understanding the needs of mature students was that, by their nature, they are a more heterogeneous group than the majority of students and therefore the exact nature and structure of the most appropriate help will vary from one person to another.

4.3 The Bursary Effect

Overall, the bursary was positively received, and most strongly believed that they would not have been able to manage at university without it, although a significant number weren’t actually aware of the bursary when they applied for university. While it is hard to pinpoint the exact use of the

bursary, as distinct from other forms of income, there were a number of areas that the undergraduates we spoke to thought would have been different without receipt of a bursary.

In the first year, the bursary was usually paying for day-to-day living expenses, as accommodation costs could swallow the majority of the other income received.

“You’ll be surprised at how much like random costs come up at university, because I thought it was initially a lot of money but then it’s been so useful in helping me pay for rent, deposits and stuff like that, just to help me get by” (M, Year 2, UoB bursary)

As studies progressed, some were using the bursary to fund unpaid internships or voluntary work abroad that would give them experience that they felt would be beneficial to their future careers; for example, one biologist was able to travel to Costa Rica to undertake conservation work. In some cases, the bursary helped to meet the costs of a professional placement required as part of the training.

For mature students, as a general rule, their bursary filled the gap in their households’ finances that would otherwise have been filled by undertaking paid work. They may not have been able to afford to spend the three years at university, if not in receipt of the bursary.

While many of those interviewed were undertaking paid work whilst at university, there was also a view that the bursary gave them more control over the level of paid work that they undertook, enabling them to cut back on working hours where necessary.

“At the end of the first year I was talking to them about reducing the hours I was working anyway, so I definitely couldn’t have done more but without the bursary it might have been harder to reduce the hours.” (F, Year 3, A2B Bursary)

Overall, appreciation for the bursary grew over the duration of the course; in the first year many of those in receipt of the ordinary University of Bristol bursary were not aware that they would qualify for it, and when interviewed, had not been able to articulate or understand the implications of what difference the money would make to them. By years two and three, however, a greater understanding of how their experience of university would have been markedly different without the extra finance had emerged. There was a sense that they wouldn’t have been able to *enjoy* their time at university fully without the bursary. For some the bursary enabled them to live comfortably without having to ‘penny-pinch’ (*A2B Bursary, year 2*); they wouldn’t have enjoyed their time as much, as they would have needed to curtail some social activities, either through lack of money, or through lack of time. Some did display a slight sense of guilt that

the bursary was being spent on activities that could be perceived as unnecessary or indulgent:

"I am going on the ski trip and I guess I wouldn't be able to without the bursary... I'd kind of defend it as in I saved up some money from when I was working at the same time..." (M, Year 3, A2B bursary)

However, the importance of being able to participate fully in university life; to be able to live like a 'normal' student was not lost on one mature student

"As a much older student I think it's very important that the younger graduates are able to participate, I mean it's important to be involved with your peers at that age and so, you know, I just say well the bursary is paying for the bills and the money I've saved to go on holiday, you know, just direct it that way. But I think it's vitally important if you're first time away from home, your first time at Uni that they have the opportunity to be involved with their friends, because this is where you can build, you know, friendships for life." (M, Year 3, A2B bursary)

This was echoed by another younger undergraduate, who illustrated how the road to getting to university may be harder for those who qualify for bursaries, and was therefore hoping that the bursary would allow her to change her working commitments once there.

"I've had to work since I was like 16 so I didn't want to work during university, I've had enough of part-time work so I wanted to take a break during Uni and study and just focus on my studies and do extracurricular as well" (F, Year 3, UoB bursary)

There were also greater calls on money after their first year. The students mentioned the need to pay deposits on rentals accommodation, opportunities for internships and work experience, and there were areas where many were able to palpably see the difference in their own financial situations (and that of their families) compared with many of their wealthier peers.

"the majority of students are quite obviously privileged ...with Anthropology obviously travelling is quite a big ...a girl the other day was saying that her parents have bought her trip to Poland and a trip to Thailand for her birthday and I'm sat there going, well I went to Wales yesterday. Wales is brilliant but you know, like there's a bit of competitiveness..." (F, Year 2, UoB bursary)

One of the students, even when in a receipt of a bursary, had to turn down a three week internship in London, as she was unable to afford the accommodations costs. This decision may well affect her future job prospects.

"...at the end of those 3 weeks they interview you so that you'd, to know whether they want you to do a training contract after your Degree" (F, Year 3, UoB Bursary)

By the final year, the bursary was being used by some to help them prepare for life after university, funding travel to job interviews.

The bursary also served as a financial back-up, as many of the recipients had come from families who were unable to provide this. Some third year students kept as much of the bursary back as they could, in case of an unexpected event, and that, as a result, the lack of worry resulting from this 'safety net' was the biggest benefit of the bursary.

"I don't feel as stressed about money constantly, I don't worry as much, just by knowing that I've got a few months there will be another £1000 coming in" (F, Year 3, UoB Bursary)

4.4 Bursary and the relationship with the University

As well as affecting the material experience, receipt of a bursary appeared to alter the experience of less tangible aspects of university life, both in terms of the recipient's perception of themselves as a Bristol student, and their relationship with University.

Receiving a bursary from the university, whether the ordinary University of Bristol bursary or from Access to Bristol, was taken by many as a clear statement that the university wanted them to come, and wanted to support them through their time there. Particularly for mature students, who may have come through a less traditional route, this could help foster a belief in their worthiness to be at the university. There was a level of gratitude towards the university that perhaps confirmed that the choice to come was the right one.

"if they're willing to give you that money and knock money off your tuition it shows that they, yes, that they want you to come to Uni" (M, Year 2, UoB Bursary)

As already noted, the bursary had allowed them to buy the freedom and choices that other students had, which resulted in them believing that they were equal to them in the eyes of the university; that they *deserved* to be there.

The fee waiver could also alter the relationship between the student and their education, changing something that was viewed as transactional, to allowing the student the luxury of studying for the sake of studying.

"it probably sounds weird but not having the fees almost takes the pressure off a little bit. Say I did come out and I didn't do something relevant to the course, I didn't even use it at all, which I do plan on doing but I don't know why, it just takes the pressure off a little bit" (F Year 3, A2B Bursary)

Some of the undergraduates were aware that the introduction of higher fees had changed the perception of student satisfaction with courses, but the fee waiver moderated that effect:

“it's been given a monetary value and I think that's kind of slightly distorted the view of the delivery of the course which is actually, very, very good... speaking to my cohort, you hear conversations, this £9000 always comes up as being why aren't they doing this for us, why aren't they doing that for us” (M, Year 3, UoB bursary)

This was a very common position for those who received the full fee waiver, but even for those with a partial waiver, there was a noticeable change to their feelings about the course.

“I think it's kind of brought down the price of tuition to what it should be” (F, Year 3, UoB bursary)

Those who were not in receipt of the bursary did talk about their degree in terms of ‘value for money’, and mostly in terms of how they did not feel they were getting that; the value of the education for its own sake had been lost.

“I know with my course I'm never going to get value for money no matter, I've missed no lectures, no seminars and I'm still paying more than what they're providing me as a service, so for me I'm thinking of it as what it's going to look like for employers, it's just kind of a stepping stone for me rather than I want to get my 9 grand's worth, because I'm not going to” (F, Year 3, A2B, No bursary)

4.5 Impact of outreach on experience at university

Few of the first year undergraduates we interviewed who had attended either Access to Bristol or the Sutton Trust Summer School believed that attendance had any particular effect once they started at the University of Bristol. Some undergraduates could see that the level of familiarity they had with the department was helpful, but within a short timeframe any advantage they may have felt disappeared. A few were glad to be able to recognise the staff, and occasionally other students. The two students who had attended the Sutton Trust Summer School were more positive about the benefits, as they had stayed in university halls, and so knew their way from Stoke Bishop to the University, and could then ‘take the lead’ with other students: *“it sort of, it helped make friends.... Well I looked more confident than I was” (M, Year 1, ST, No Bursary)*. The benefit in both of these cases was a social one, in that it eased their passage through their first days at Bristol.

However, when re-interviewed further along in their course, some of the outreach participants were better able to reflect on how a central support

may have eased their transition somewhat, particularly those who hadn't lived in halls in the first year.

"I found them to be really helpful, especially Alex [A2B Co-ordinator] who was helping me like during Access to Bristol and during the first and second year I was emailing him loads of times just for like certain questions that I had whilst at university" (F, Year 3, A2B bursary)

Overall, the most concrete way in which outreach affected the experience while at university was by employing outreach alumni as Student Ambassadors. Student Ambassadors are employed to help run outreach activities and events for students from local schools. The undergraduates who were Student Ambassadors were very positive about the experience, particularly those who were not in receipt of bursaries, as they were grateful to be able to earn extra money. The flexibility meant that they had the extra income necessary to participate more fully in university, but could do less paid work when their university work load was higher.

"you can do as little or as much as you want being Student Ambassador, so if I'm like at a particularly busy time I can easily scale back the Ambassador work and when it's quieter pick it up again" (M, Year 1, A2b, No bursary)

The role was viewed extremely positively by those who were involved, for a number of reasons above and beyond the flexibility and income that it offered.

"it was giving something back, letting other people know that the opportunity is there, because like I said before you think, or I thought of Bristol as being quite a stuffy place, I didn't think it was the kind of place that would offer these opportunities and it does, and it does a very good job of doing it." (M, Year 3, A2B bursary)

This suggests that a positive effect of widening participation schemes is the potential to engender a feeling of reciprocity in relation to the scheme and also the university. Indeed, one student volunteered as a peer mentor before realising that it was a paid position.

Involvement with the widening participation office also exposed another side of university life to an undergraduate who was having difficulties with accommodation, and her flatmates, allowing her to have a wider involvement with the university than she would otherwise.

"I think last year if I didn't have this job, I don't think I'd have stayed at Uni either... It's the only thing that did keep me sane" (F, Year 2, ST, No bursary)

However, one or two students had expressed an interest in becoming a Student Ambassador, or had applied, but had not heard anything in

response. Overall, most were very complimentary about the staff in the Widening Participation office and those who organised and ran Access to Bristol, although quite a few had had no contact with any of these staff once they arrived at Bristol. This was the main improvement suggested by the students, that there may be scope for the Widening Participation office to play a more active role in settling students in to university:

“Just things to make sure that students are being properly integrated with the wider student body within whichever department they're in, obviously they're not responsible for changing like contact hours or the way lectures are taught, but just generally making sure that students are comfortable and, have that port of access if they need someone to ask questions. Maybe there's an office available or there's like weekly or monthly things that they do together and that way those students from different backgrounds have that.” (F, Year 2, A2B, No bursary)

“I think it would probably have been helpful to get people who are similar situations to kind of meet up more, it's the first time I've ever met anyone [with a bursary] apart from one person on my course” (M, Year 3, A2B bursary)

5 Conclusions

The results of our research broadly support what others have shown: bursaries generally do not influence choice of university. From the perspective of school students in Years 12 and 13, financial considerations were generally not a big part of their university choices, at least not until they had narrowed down their choices prior to completing their UCAS application. Only at this point did students typically begin to consider the types of financial support they might be eligible for (other than Student Finance England), such as bursaries, although some low-income students did assume they would qualify for extra financial support. Even then, students did not always know to look for such information or where to find it.

Our research therefore confirms previous research findings (Davies 2008, Maringe et al 2009, Callender 2010) whereby any information that is found regarding eligibility for bursaries is often found too late in the process, if at all. However, we do not see this as a justification for preferring outreach instead. The failure appears to be one of information and communication. For the Access to Bristol bursary, where eligible students knew in advance of becoming undergraduates at the University that they could receive the extra financial support, it does seem to influence choice. This contrasts with the (standard) University of Bristol bursary for which information about likely eligibility can be accessed but cannot be confirmed until the students takes up a place at the University. For this, the bursary exerts less influence.

In any case, our research suggests that students, as a whole, are not convinced that financial considerations should play a big role in their choice at university. Location, reputation, the course offered and, most particularly, the grade requirement are equal if not greater factors. It is therefore probably correct to say that a bursary system for which eligibility is conferred post-admission to the university has only a marginal effect on student choices and therefore on widening the social composition of the intake. But that may add up to an argument for making the bursary system clearer and less uncertain, rather than regarding it as necessarily ineffective.

In any case, our research also supports a more rounded view of widening participation, which is not just about diversifying intakes at the point of admission. It is also about helping those from less traditional backgrounds to participate fully in the life, community and opportunities offered by a university, many of which are extra-curricula. The impact of receiving a bursary on the experience, and the level of participation that eligible undergraduates had while at university was very clear from the findings.

This was the case both for those who received the University of Bristol bursary and those who received the Access to Bristol bursary; the difference in the cash amount of bursary received did not appear to make a tangible difference to either the views or the experiences of the undergraduates. In part, this was due to the cumulative effect of the bursary together with the non-repayable maintenance grant, which left the majority of those who received both in a manageable financial position.

The evidence is that cash bursaries help give undergraduates the opportunity to integrate into a university with a student body that is broadly from higher income households. It also highlights how bursaries can take a key role in the complex financial decisions that undergraduates make in order to balance study, social life and paid work. In these, bursaries give lower income undergraduates more choice and flexibility; they give the recipients the time and resources to enjoy their experience of university as they wish to, in the same way as many of the rest of the student body are able to.

In contrast, the tuition fee waiver makes little concrete difference while the student is still at university, but does play a part in informing the views the students hold on the education they are receiving. Again, our research suggests that this financial support gives the students more freedom and choice than they would otherwise have.

In both cases, the appreciation of the financial support affects the students' perceptions of the University of Bristol. It engenders a greater sense of belonging and deepens the relationship with the widening participation office, if not the university as a whole.

Outreach played a very different role in the experiences of the students we spoke to, in choosing a university and once there. The biggest barrier to school students from low-performing schools is the high academic performance at both GCSE and A levels that is required. The research brings into sharp focus the fact that there is only a small pool of students who are both eligible for support as part of Bristol's widening participation activity and are likely to achieve the grades required for the University. Outreach programmes that focus on the local vicinity of the University will be fishing in an under-stocked sea for so long as the grade requirements are maintained. The interviews with undergraduates at Bristol who had taken part in Access to Bristol or other outreach also highlighted that many of them had been identified by their schools as high achievers, so it is difficult to argue that the Access to Bristol alone is having a strongly influential effect on increasing the participation of non-standard students within the University of Bristol. Rather, that is a joint outcome of what happens in schools and how the University reaches out to those pupils. What Access to

Bristol does facilitate is the entry of high attaining students to the University from nearby communities, some of whom might otherwise not attend.

The interview data indicates that Access to Bristol plays a broader role in influencing the university choices that students make, even if they decide not to choose the University of Bristol. The data both from school students and from undergraduates showed that gaining subject experience at university level was invaluable to students. It also showed that a number of Access to Bristol attendees did not go on to study the same subject as they had under the access scheme. Paradoxically, this may be regarded as a success: it suggests that the scheme is helping to make the students make an informed choice about what it is they want to study (which decreases their chances of dropping out or switching courses whilst at the University).

The research also highlights a group of people who benefit from widening participation but have, to date, received less attention: mature students. Mature students had generally come to Access to Bristol through the Access to Higher Education scheme, which does not have the same prerequisites as A level study. The benefits of attending Access to Bristol in terms of giving mature students the confidence to apply came through strongly, although again the bursary was a key factor in their decision to come to Bristol rather than another university.

The effect of attending outreach, however, wears off very quickly once at university. Any benefits that have been gained from participating in outreach, such as familiarity with the geography of the university, are realised in the first term and do not appear to make any difference to the ways in which students interacted with staff or experienced lectures. The main longer-lasting impact of outreach is for undergraduates who go on to become Student Ambassadors. This provides the opportunity to earn money while not having to commit to a regular paid job and has a significant effect on many students' experience and quality of life whilst at university. Appreciation for the wider role that Access to Bristol and Sutton trust play in assisting students such as themselves grew over the course of study and is reflected in a desire to give back.

In conclusion, our report does not provide evidence to support switching the emphasis of widening participation from bursaries to outreach. It suggests that outreach can help to support the recruitment of higher attaining students from more disadvantaged backgrounds but drawing from local communities whilst at the same time maintaining the grade requirements will always be limited by the relatively low number of people who can meet the various criteria for entry. Through outreach programmes, information about bursary eligibility can be better communicated and that, in turn, can influence the decision to attend the University of Bristol.

What appears to be key is the value of greater certainty. The University of Bristol's Access to Bristol scheme is attractive because it provides the guarantee of an admissions offer (in most circumstances). It also offers a generous financial package to those who are admitted from it. Bursaries provide greater certainty in helping a student to manage their finances, to participate more fully in the life of the university, and to provide a cushion from unexpected and unplanned expenses, especially in a city that is regarded as expensive. Outreach provides greater certainty about what a university is like and what the university experience will be.

Ultimately our findings do not support an either-or view of outreach and bursaries. A rounded view of widening participation will consider both as complementary for both diversifying intakes and enhancing the quality of the student experience.

6 Policy implications

The findings from the research makes clear the importance of policy makers distinguishing, when formulating Higher Education strategies, between widening access and widening participation. In the University of Bristol's Widening Participation Strategy 2009-2016⁷, the strategic aim 6 is explicit in stating that "The University must ensure that students from non-traditional backgrounds are appropriately supported financially and in making the transition to higher education". However, we would argue that the importance of providing support, particularly financial support, needs to be paramount throughout the time of study (not just during a shorter period of transition). Our findings build on previous research (Harrison et al 2007, Chetwynd and Diggle 2013, Byrne and Cushing 2015, O'Brien 2015) that bursaries play an important role in *participation*, rather than access, among those from non-standard background.

The current policy of the University of Bristol to offer cash bursaries, rather than focus on fee waivers, would appear to be an effective and appreciated policy. While the findings suggests that there are also some benefits to fee waivers, they are perceived as secondary to that of a cash bursary, evidence backed up by previous University of Bristol research⁸, which also found that students would prioritise cash bursaries over fee waivers. While the overall value of both the ordinary and access to Bristol support packages has decreased⁹, the level of cash bursary received has remained constant.

The delivery of the bursary in termly instalments, received later in the term than the governmental loan or grant, was also a way of ensuring that bursaries were able serve the purpose of smoothing 'lumpy expenditure', such as rental deposits, or covering unpaid internships. In terms of the level of bursary needed to be effective, there appeared to be no fundamental difference in the practical effect of receiving £2,000 rather than £3,750. However, underlying this benefit was a need for a termly amount substantive enough, for example, to pay a deposit on a rental property.

It is important to note that that the research was conducted with students who began their studies in 2013 or 2014, and that those who were eligible for financial support received a non-repayable maintenance grant of £3,500 as well as the cash bursary and fee waiver. Undergraduates starting at the

⁷ <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/sraa/documents/Updated%20WP%20Strategy%202009-2016.pdf>

⁸ <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/sraa/documents/Student%20financial%20support%20survey%20report%202013-14.pdf>

⁹ Since the project started the maximum total amount received as a UoB bursary dropped from £5,500 p.a. fee waiver with up to £2,000 of this available as cash bursary to £2,000 cash bursary only. Similarly the Access to Bristol bursary has dropped from a full fee waiver each year of study to a full fee waiver for first year only, supplemented by a £3,750 cash bursary each year.

University of Bristol (or any English university) in autumn 2016 will no longer receive a non-repayable maintenance grant; all maintenance monies will be in the form of a loan. The removal of this grant will clearly effect the overall financial position of students from low income backgrounds coming to the university, and may negate some of the positive effect of bursaries that we have documented – not because the bursaries are no longer important (if anything, they will become more so) but because their financial value is insufficient to offset other financial cuts.

As far as how bursaries may affect access to university, it is clear that they play only a small role in influencing decision over university choice, and that for them to hold more sway would not necessarily be a desirable outcome. This is not to say that bursaries are not having any effect on influencing decisions to come to university; some of the students we spoke to assumed that all universities would provide some form of support to low income household, and therefore a lack of any level of cash bursary could ultimately be a disincentive to apply to that university. The need for clear and easily found information also emerged, about both amount offered and likely eligibility, in order that potential undergraduates can factor this into their decision making.

In terms of successfully widening access to university via outreach activities, the policy implications are less clear. The findings suggest that the current outreach scheme, Access to Bristol, is successful within its own parameters; for students that live within an hour, and have achieved good grades at GCSEs, the scheme was well received, particularly by those who went on to study at Bristol. However there is clearly a limited number of eligible students in the area, and as living at home can be a barrier (as well as an incentive), the broadening of the geographical reach of Access to Bristol can only be a positive. The university has already trialled this during summer 2016, with the Insight to Bristol residential course, for post 16 students from London.

Overall, the biggest barrier to widening access was achieving high enough grades to be accepted at the University of Bristol, and it is important that higher education institutions generally recognise the difficulties in achieving grades that students coming from low participation schools can have; for example, some schools could prioritise teaching qualifications equivalent to GCSEs grades A*-C, such as BTECs or NVQs, to improve their league table standing, which may therefore make it harder students when applying it university. Equally, there is concern over how the changes to AS levels (no longer an interim qualification to A level) may affect the ability of

universities to assess the potential in candidates^{10,11}. Our findings did show that recognition of Access to Higher Education Diploma had been effective in facilitating access for mature students.

There are ways in which Bristol is already trying to offer more certainty to those from non-traditional backgrounds, or at least implementing policies that may help applicants believe they have a reasonable chance of success. The policy of contextual offers to those from low participation schools appears to partially mitigate the attainment barrier to attending, and the guaranteed offer of a place at Bristol for those who completed this course also encouraged applications to Bristol, in particular for oversubscribed courses. If Access to Bristol participants will have priority for available places for near miss candidates, then this should be communicated during the course.

The local post-16 landscape also needs to be considered when developing policy. For example, if the University's Bristol Scholars Scheme is extended to all Bristol schools, there needs to be consideration on how to this will aid pupils from low performing school where there is no post 16 provision.

Finally, it is important to recognise that the University of Bristol, and perhaps all research intensive universities, convey a particular culture to potential students, and more so once they arrive. The experience of the widening participation students, especially mature students, demonstrate that widening both access and participation may require some **change of culture** within the university too; the remit cannot be only to allow non-standard students to fit within the existing culture of the university, but to expand that culture to include a broader range of experience of higher education at university.

¹⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/sep/08/university-admissions-as-levels-sixth-form-exams>

¹¹ <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2014/07/30/replicating-government-commissioned-research/>

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