

# Are The University of Manchester Bursaries Levelling the Playing Field?

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## Background- The University and OFFA

The University of Manchester provides a bursary for students from Widening Participation (WP) backgrounds. Students can be classified as WP for many different reasons, but key amongst them is the student being from a low-income family. The handing out of these bursaries is a requirement placed upon the university by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) who stipulate that the university must spend a certain amount of the money it receives from tuition fees on aiding those from WP backgrounds throughout their time at university. The amount that will be spent and breakdown of how the bursaries are distributed is summarised by each university's 'access agreement' which is submitted yearly to OFFA. Should the university fail to achieve these aims they will then be unable to charge the maximum amount for tuition fees at their institution.

Recently, however OFFA has become much more concerned with the success rates of those WP students once they were at the university and afterwards in further education or employment, and to examine this they designed a study for universities to carry out. It is that methodology (with some adjustments) that was performed during my placement. The ultimate aims of my report were to provide senior members of staff within the university with insights regarding the effectiveness of the bursary scheme at the University of Manchester in aiding WP students, whilst simultaneously providing OFFA with the information they requested about the university. During the 8 weeks of my placement I spent time in both the Directorate of Planning as well as the Careers Service and worked with many staff chiefly, Daniel Swain and Becky Lovelady without which the publishing of my report would not have been possible.



## Methodology

The data used for my report focused on students at the University of Manchester from 2009-2014 and their academic career at the university which allowed the research to cover a period of time before and after the tuition fee increase and thus allowed us to examine whether an increase in the amount of bursary a student received made a tangible impact with respect to student success rates. The 4 measures of student success we used were:

1. If the student was retained after their first year.
2. Whether or not they completed their degree in 5 years.
3. Their attainment of a 'good' degree (2:1 or higher)
4. The graduate outcomes of the student.

With regards to the measurement of the bursary amounts themselves we used the average amount of bursary each student received (or the initial amount received in the case of the retention models); as well as a measure examining the student's household income by category alongside their average bursary. This was to avoid misleading averages potentially appearing in the final data set. To try and make sure any differences observed were due solely to the bursary there were a large amount of control variables in the data set looking at for example, the student's age when starting university or their ethnicity.



## Findings and Conclusions

The findings of the report were that there were no significant differences with respect to any of the 4 outcomes between WP students and higher income students. We took this to mean that the bursaries provided by the university did indeed help to bridge the gap between WP students and those with higher income allowing them to achieve similar results across a range of success measures. There is however a problem with any results that were obtained from this research and that is the only way to measure household income is by

those who applied for student finance and all those eligible for a bursary via this method were given a bursary. This meant we did not have a true control group of low income students without a bursary and thus even negative results could be given a positive slant; that is even if low income students did significantly worse than high income students we would have no way to say that they wouldn't be doing even worse without the bursary provided.

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