

Access and Participation Evaluation



UNIVERSITY OF
BATH

Bath Bursary Research and Impact Evaluation Summary Report

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October 2025



Access and Participation Plan 2024-28

The University's Access and Participation Plan (APP) sets out the University's strategic commitments to reducing barriers, improving equality of opportunity and ensuring that all students, regardless of background, can access, succeed in and progress beyond Higher Education (HE).

To help meet these goals, the APP includes four intervention strategies outlining interventions, programmes and policies designed to address the nine risks to equality of opportunity faced by student groups at Bath (Figure 1). Ten research projects have been identified to support the evaluation of the intervention strategies and risks to equality of opportunity identified in the APP.

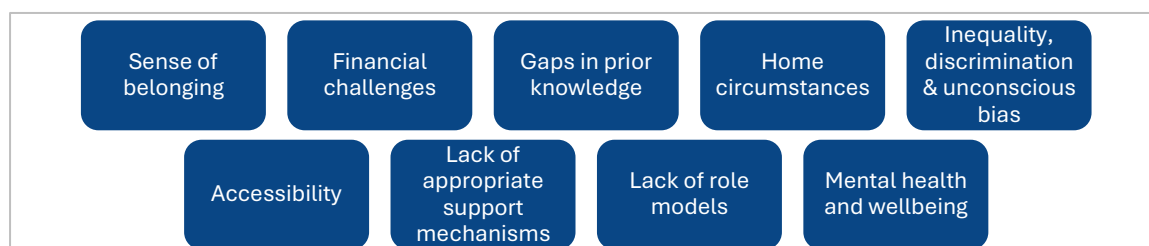


Figure 1: University of Bath's key risks to equality of opportunity across the student lifecycle.

The main associated risk that this evaluation is designed to address is:

- Financial challenges

Project Background

The Bath Bursary is an automatically awarded financial scheme, provided to students from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds. The Bursary supports not only Year 1 Undergraduate study but continuing years too. The Bursary aims to allow students to participate in university life fully. By reducing the financial need for students to carry out additional part-time work, students can partake in university activities without undue financial pressure.

A mixed-methods approach, utilising the OfS Financial Support Evaluation Toolkit, was implemented. Statistical analysis on 2020/21-2023/24 cohorts, survey analysis of those studying in 2023/24 and conducting interviews with those in receipt of the Bursary in 2023/24 and 2024/25 were compiled to inform this evaluation.

Key findings

- The Bursary eased financial pressure for most, enabling coverage of essentials, and in some cases, reducing reliance on family contributions or part-time work. For some, this included the financial independence to save money and build their financial strength to plan for future goals or anticipate potential challenges.
- Reduced financial strain supported academic focus and provide opportunities to explore extra-curricular activities and support social connectedness.
- Sense of belonging among Bursary recipients showed positive trends in survey responses, with strong peer connections and growing community integration, though the interview data offered limited direct insights. These findings suggest financial support may facilitate inclusion, but deeper cultural and social barriers may remain.
- Students were generally aware and confident in explaining governmental financial schemes but were less aware of university-specific initiatives.
- Bursary students had statistically significantly lower continuation rates than middle-income peers, indicating that bursaries may not fully offset underlying disadvantage, or that wider factors need to be considered.

- Views on the 2024/25 University credit introduction were mixed, with some concerns about reduced choice and off-campus logistics.

Considerations

- Extrapolating the impact of financial schemes on student success is complex, and this analysis does not account for university engagement and many behavioural/attitudinal factors that may support continuation rates.
- Surveys and interviews were delivered by members of University staff, and the positionality may have introduced potential social-desirability bias within responses.
- Statistical analysis was conducted with a pooled sample, whereby multiple cohort years were combined to complete the analysis. Although many variables were controlled for within the analysis, some of the nuance in student groups and years are not evident.

Conclusion

The evaluation shows the Bath Bursary reduces financial strain, supports wellbeing, and enables students to continue their studies with greater focus and independence. Many recipients budgeted strategically, limited reliance on part-time work, and engaged more fully in university life. However, continuation gaps remain, suggesting financial aid alone cannot address structural disadvantage. Bursaries are most effective when paired with pastoral, academic, and social support, delivered flexibly and inclusively. Future refinements should align the scheme with wider initiatives to strengthen equity and long-term student success.

Stakeholder Reflections

Liz Simmons, Student Success and Inclusion Manager said:

It is positive to see that the findings of the research support our team's analysis and insights that the financial support provided by the Bath Bursary plays an important role in supporting the student experience of recipients from low-income backgrounds, particularly in the current context of increasing financial pressures on students.

The experiences of students from under-represented groups at Bath are complex and there are many factors that will influence whether they choose to continue their studies at Bath. As there is no direct control group to the Bursary cohort, it is particularly difficult to draw valid comparisons. It is important to note that the cohorts examined in the statistical analysis were particularly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and our own insights, as well as national research, indicate that under-represented groups were disproportionately impacted by this.

We value the findings of the report that suggest that the Bursary plays an important role in reducing financial pressure and enabling recipients to focus on their studies and engage in extra-curricular activities. Equally, we recognise financial support alone may be insufficient in fully overcoming the educational inequalities of financial disadvantage. The Gold Scholarship Programme (GSP) (created in 2017) and the newly created Claverton Scholarship Programme (CSP) provide a more wholistic package of support and opportunities designed to address wider factors. It is hoped that further philanthropic support could enable us to offer this to more students in the future.

Furthermore, this year, a new newsletter has been introduced for Bath Bursary recipients, providing information and guidance on a wide range of topics, including financial management, and signposting to support and opportunities. Support for Bath Bursary recipients is being developed by professional services across the University, including Student Support, Careers, Skills and Placement Teams.

We will continue to carefully monitor and evaluate our funding packages, including the new Bath Bursary package once fully established - to assess the impact of the changes to the support offered and to explore the impact on a different generation of Scholars. It is important to note that while the structural changes made to the Bursary have decreased the overall support to an individual student, the changes have enabled support to a significantly bigger cohort (approximately 480 students in 2024-25 compared to approximately 300 students on average in previous years).

In response to this report, the Scholarships, Bursaries and Enrichment Team will:

- *Continue to work with the Advancement Team to seek further funding to support CSP, to enable the University to offer this package to more eligible students.*
- *Showcase the effectiveness and impact of the wider support initiatives implemented through GSP and CSP and work with colleagues in services and departments across the University to explore where learnings could be extrapolated and implemented.*
- *Evaluate the impact of the newly introduced Bath Bursary newsletter.*
- *Explore ways to further market the Bath Bursary and other financial support packages through social media.*

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