

Response to the Imperial Bursary Survey 2019

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Executive Summary

The Imperial College bursary continues to greatly benefit home students who are in the greatest financial need, allowing many to afford to study at Imperial College who couldn't otherwise. The bursary assists with essential living costs, as well as improving access and engagement with crucial parts of the wider student experience. There were in total 703 bursary recipients who responded to at least one question in the 2019 bursary survey from which Imperial College Union makes the following key recommendations:

- i. To extend the bursary to fully fund MBBS students in their 5th and 6th years.
- ii. To improve the visibility of the Imperial Bursary to students before they apply to Imperial.
- iii. To consult with current students to create a more holistic suite of support for disadvantaged students starting at Imperial.
- iv. To explore different funding models and means testing methods to better support students who need it the most.

The Union will continue to work with Student Financial Support and the Strategic Planning Department to deliver on these recommendations and continue to explore ways to financially support students and attract students from disadvantaged backgrounds to Imperial.

1. Introduction

The Imperial College bursary offers financial support to Home Undergraduate students on a sliding scale dependent on household income (HHI) up to £60,000. Bursary awards range from £5,000 per academic year for those with the lowest HHI, to £2,000 with the highest HHI; this makes the Imperial bursary one of, if not the most, generous bursary schemes in the sector. Every year, the College surveys recipients of the bursary survey to find out more about the ways it helps students, how students are funding their studies and perceptions around the communication and administration of the bursary.

There were 703 (non-empty) responses to the survey this year, each containing demographical data (such as year of study, HHI band, department), on which the Union has conducted analysis to draw out potential areas for further exploration and improvement.

2. General findings

"Literally couldn't study in London without it (or at any uni with such demanding courses). I am extremely grateful for the bursary"

Quote – Department of Civil Engineering

The Imperial College bursary is, in general, very welcomed and appreciated by its recipients. Numerous respondents offered their thanks for the bursary, with many stating that they wouldn't

91% of students said they felt they could engage in activities more after finding out about the Imperial bursary

Key stat

have been able to study at Imperial without it. Students across all HHI bands and academic departments reported that the bursary helps them engage in many activities that form the student experience; living costs, accommodation, educational essentials, social activities, and clubs & societies are all assisted by the bursary. What's more, perhaps, is that a majority of students reported that the bursary helps them balance commitments, feel more comfortable and avoid having to undertake part-time work during term time to fund their studies.

Students indicated that the bursary was most important for living costs and accommodation with 69% and 55%, respectively, saying it's essential. However, the bursary is also between helpful and essential to help recipients engage in a university social life and the Union's clubs & societies. Generally, recipients are using tuition fee loans rather than the bursary to cover tuition fees, with 97% indicating they took out 100% of the tuition fee loan.

The survey asks questions to explore how well students were aware of and understood the Imperial bursary at various points throughout their Imperial journey. In general, students indicated they understood the bursary currently, with 99% indicating a good or excellent current understanding. However, there is room for improvement with awareness amongst prospective students as only 57% said they had a good or excellent understanding before applying. Related, 67% of respondents indicated that the bursary was important in considering coming to Imperial. This shows that the bursary is having a positive effect on access to Imperial working as an attractant to prospective students. Sections 4 and 5 explore awareness and perceptions more.

67% of students said that knowledge of the Imperial bursary was important when considering coming to Imperial

Key stat

3. Support for MBBS students

"Why does Imperial choose not to fund these last 2 years? If anything, we need it in these years more than ever. This is the reason my housemates have all taken up part time jobs this year- I chose my BSc because it had less contact hours to allow for this"

Quote – MBBS student

The Imperial bursary offers support for up to four years of an undergraduate degree – this means that MBBS students, who study for 6 years, do not receive financial support for one third of their course. Many students commented on the financial difficulty this puts them into in their final years as the NHS bursary does not cover the lack of Imperial bursary and government maintenance loan.

There is a noticeable difference in the part-time work patterns of medical students compared to non-medical students; 42% of non-medical students indicated they've undertaken part-time work compared to 49% of medical students. Delving deeper, there does not appear to be a large difference between the proportion of medical and non-medical students who work during term time (25% vs 21%), however a much larger proportion of medical students (49%) indicated that the reason they worked was to cover essential costs compared to non-medical students (35%).

The College should extend the Imperial bursary to cover the 5th and 6th year of the MBBS course to the same level as other years. This should be applied to existing students as well as incoming students.

Imperial College Union recommendation

4. Perceptions and awareness

The survey explores students' awareness and perceptions of the bursary at different points in the student journey – from pre-application to currently in time. In previous ICU Bursary Survey responses, recommendations have been made to improve communications to current and prospective students to increase understanding levels. Figure 1 compares the understanding levels before applying, before arriving and currently for students broken down by their current year of study. Understanding levels are generally good at the point of arrival, but there could be improvements to levels of understanding before applying. Furthermore, there does not seem to be any improvements in pre-application understanding for first-year students suggesting that more work is needed to improve the awareness of the bursary to prospective students. Naturally, this must be caveated with an understanding that the nature of this question (asking students to remember how well they understood something years in the past) cannot be taken as an absolute indicator, but the dip in pre-application understanding for first years suggests that more progress needs to be made.

The survey asks students if the Imperial bursary was important when considering coming to Imperial. Figure 2 compares the percentage of students who said 'Yes' broken down by their reported understanding of the bursary before applying. Clearly, an increased understanding before applying results in the bursary playing a more important role in the (positive) decision a student makes to study at Imperial. It stands to reason that an increased understanding of the bursary before applying increases the likelihood that a student will choose to study at Imperial and that improving communications to prospective students about the bursary will lead to more bursary-eligible students (many of whom are APP-countable) choosing to study at Imperial.

The College should review its communications to prospective students around the bursary with a view to improve understanding of the bursary amongst students before they apply.

Imperial College Union recommendation

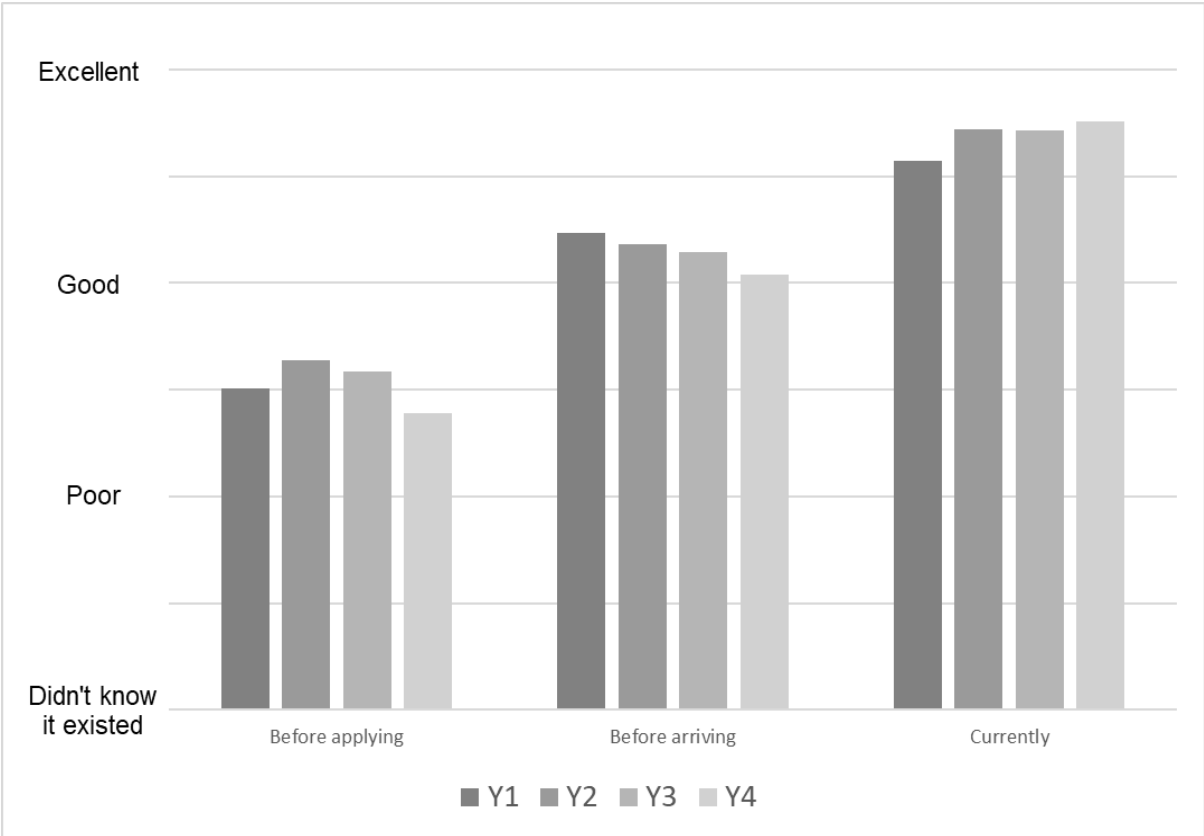


Fig 1: understanding of the Imperial bursary before applying, before arriving and currently broken down by current year of study

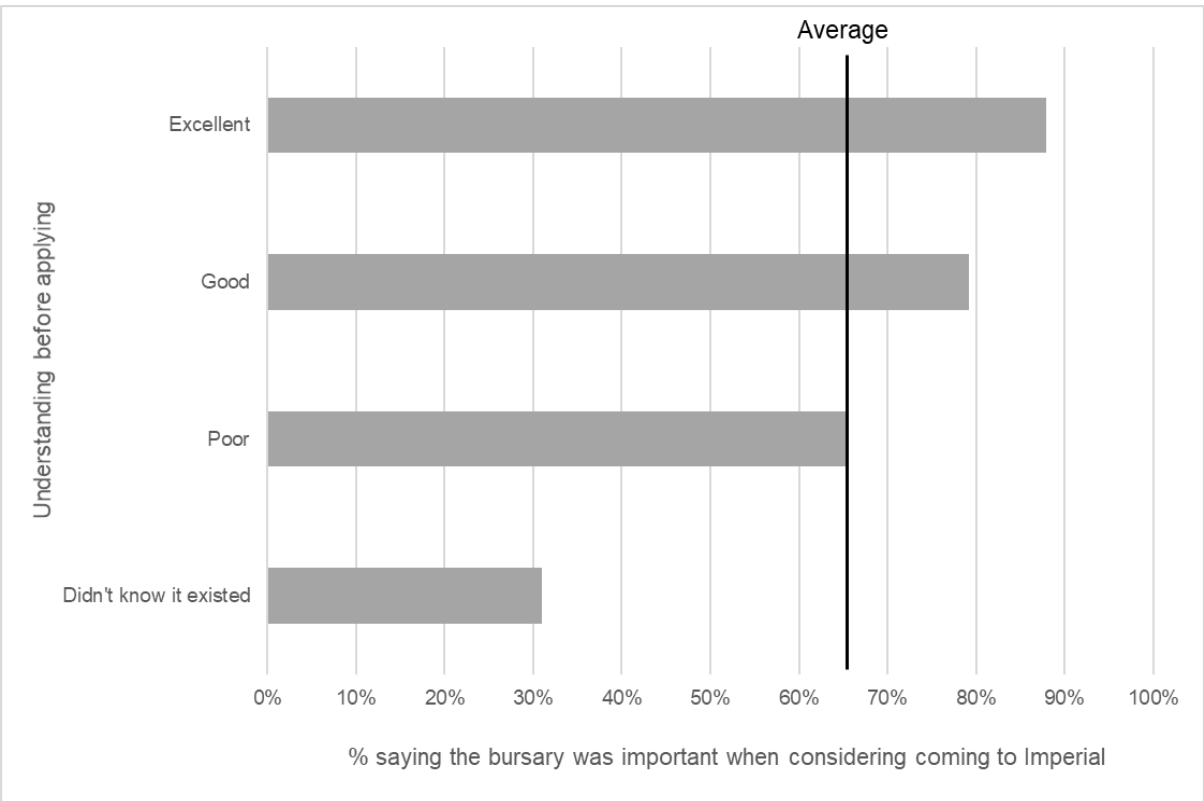


Fig 2: percentage of students indicating 'Yes' to 'Was knowledge of the Imperial Bursary important when considering coming to Imperial' broken down by level of understanding before applying

5. Further support

69% of students said that they would find it helpful to have access to online tools and guidance relating to money management skills

Key stat

It is clear that the material financial support for students has a deeply felt impact on many enabling them to study at Imperial, engage in activities they couldn't otherwise and concentrate on their studies. However, there is a need to look at further holistic support for bursary recipients – particularly widening participation-flagged students. When asked if they would find it helpful to have access to online tools and guidance relating to money management skills, 69% of students answered positively – this did not differ significantly across any demographic of student. As this was a simple 'Yes/No' question, more investigation and consultation is needed to establish what would be the most effective finance management support. This support would be beneficial in advance of receipt of the bursary in order to help students better plan its use.

While an analysis on outcomes for the cohorts of students who responded to the 2019 bursary survey is not yet available, the Strategic Planning department have run the OfS data toolkit to evaluate the effectiveness of the College's financial support package on the three cohorts between 2012-2014. Statistically significant differences in outcomes were identified between APP-countable bursary recipients and non-bursary recipients for degree completion within five years of entry, achievement of a 1st or 2:1 degree, and achievement of a 1st within five years of entry. The reasons behind this are still unclear. The 2019 bursary survey does little to shed any light on this – in fact, many indicators that could potentially explain these differences suggest the opposite. For example, APP-countable recipients were far less likely than non-APP-countable recipients to undertake part-time work (40% vs 56%), and there were no significant differences in the number of students who said they felt more able to concentrate on their studies and not worry about finances. It can be reasonably concluded that the causes of attainment gaps are not directly financial and need to be better understood.

The College should conduct further work on improving non-direct financial support – e.g. money management resources – for bursary recipients. This support should come in advance of receiving the bursary.

Imperial College Union recommendation

The College should conduct further research into the educational and more holistic needs of APP-countable students to ensure that they are able to access appropriate support to achieve academically and engage in the wider student experience.

Imperial College Union recommendation

6. Analysis across bands

As stated above, the Imperial bursary offers support on a sliding scale up to a HHI of £60,000. The bands in the following analysis are defined in the table below. Students were asked to state their other sources of income out of a list including family/friends contribution. Where they indicated such a household contribution (HHC), they were asked to estimate what this is monthly. The table below indicates, where the household contribution is taken into account, how many respondents had a total income (only considering maintenance loan, Imperial bursary and HHC) available to them above the 39-week and 52-week cost of living.

Household income	Band	Expected HHC (top of band)*	% of students receiving any HHC	% of students above 52-week CoL	% of students above 39-week CoL
Up to £16,000	A1	£0	20	100	100
£16,001 - £25,000	A2	£0	21	100	100
£25,001 - £30,000	B	£653	30	28	100
£30,001 - £35,000	C	£1,305	33	27	100
£35,001 - £40,000	D	£1,958	25	13	100
£40,001 - £45,000	E	£2,611	38	30	100
£45,001 - £50,000	F	£3,264	38	8	100
£50,001 - £55,000	G	£3,916	30	5	25
£55,000 - £60,000	H	£4,569	56	9	41

*Expected HHC based upon Student Finance England maintenance loan entitlement guide 2019-20

Taking definite conclusions from this would be inadvisable due to the self-reporting nature of the data and other unknown factors that could be considered (e.g. scholarships), however it reveals some areas of further exploration. While generally the College and government student finance support aim to cover living costs during the 39-week term time, considering the 52-week cost of living is valuable as many students rely on these sources of support for all 52 weeks of the year. This is particularly true at an academically challenging institution like Imperial where part-time work can be impractical alongside studies. As soon as a HHC is expected (in band B) the number of students above this cost of living mark drops from 100% to 28%, and falls further for subsequent bands.

A majority of bursary recipients are reporting that they do not receive the expected HHC where there is one. For 39-weeks, 100% of students up to a HHI of £50,000 are above the cost of living line – this coincides with the band where the bursary level drops. Curiously, around 20% of recipients in band A1 and A2 are reporting to receive a HHC (approximately half of whom state this is at least £100 a month), despite the maintenance loan and Imperial bursary exceeding the 52-week cost of living. One could conclude from this that redistribution of the bursary is necessary to maximise the number of recipients above the cost of living line, however this would be a very simple-minded approach. The bursary should continue to attract students from disadvantaged backgrounds and enable them to study at Imperial. Many other factors such as additional start-up costs (e.g. to cover the purchase of new technology to study) and the need to support family (as a number of students mentioned in free text comments) are more prevalent amongst students from the lowest HHI families, therefore the ‘cost of living’ for an individual is perhaps not constant across all HHIs. Furthermore, despite apparently having more ‘money in their pockets’ than students with higher HHIs, students from the lowest income brackets are not statistically significantly more or less likely to have responded ‘Yes’ to the bursary being important when considering Imperial, or to questions gauging how much the bursary has helped engage in various activities. Distributing funds away from these brackets of income could, potentially, cause the bursary to be less of an

attractant and provide less of a helping hand to help students to engage in all aspects of the student experience.

The College should investigate different bursary funding models that bolster support for students above the lowest HHI brackets, without causing a detrimental effect on students in those brackets.

Imperial College Union recommendation

7. Conclusion

The Imperial bursary survey is an important method of annually checking that the bursary is achieving its objectives of attracting disadvantaged students to Imperial – enabling them to study at Imperial and helping them achieve when they arrive. It is clear from the 2019 survey that the bursary continues to greatly benefit many students and did not uncover any serious issues with the provision, administration or communication of the bursary. The recommendations in this response aim to improve the impact from the bursary and the Union welcomes the chance to work with the College in the coming year to address these.

Going forward, to allow more analysis from the survey, the College should consider how a population control set of data could be established to compare data between bursary recipients and non-bursary recipients. Until this is established, there is a limit to the amount of analysis that can be done and it would help to show how much the survey benefits students. The Union would also welcome the opportunity to review the survey before distribution to students on a yearly basis to ensure the respondent experience throughout is smooth.