“Deserving poor? Higher education bursaries and academic performance in England” - Dr. Gill Wyness

Higher education bursaries are the sole form of non-merit based student aid in England that is devolved to institution level. And after the abolition of student maintenance grants in 2016, they will be the major source of non-repayable aid for poor students. Since their introduction in 2006, universities have embraced bursaries, spending some £300m on them in 2015. They have also embraced the relative autonomy the system allows – their approaches to spending vary widely. But what are the consequences of devolving student aid to university level?

In this paper Dr. Gill Wyness shows that, far from reducing income inequalities, the decentralized nature of the bursaries system exacerbates already existing economic inequalities in higher education. Whilst students’ prior A-level attainment is the main driver of their success at university, there is an important interaction between income background and prior attainment – students from the poorest backgrounds perform worse at university within every prior attainment group. This suggests a positive role for means tested aid such as bursaries, particularly when coupled with academic support.

Dr. Gill Wyness is Lecturer in the Economics of Education at UCL IOE. She joined the IOE following post-doctoral research at the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the Centre for Economic Performance at the London School of Economics.

Her main research area is the economics of Higher Education in the UK. Past research includes a quantitative analysis of the impact of tuition fees on participation, and a randomized control trial examining the effects of providing information on HE finance to pupils in London schools on their attitudes towards university.

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UCL Institute of Education
20 Bedford Way, London, WC1H 0AL

If you have any queries please contact Anna Leamon [anna.leamon@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:anna.leamon@ucl.ac.uk)