1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this executive summary is to provide insights into the impact of financial support on student outcomes in relation to success and progression. The summary outlines key insights and recommendations from both elements of the evaluation: the quantitative data analysis analysing the effects of financial support on continuation and attainment, and the qualitative data analysis of survey, interview, and focus group responses exploring student experiences of financial support at Leeds Conservatoire. The summary is adapted from the full Impact of Financial Support Evaluation Reports for 2024-25.

1.1 QUALITATIVE DATA KEY INSIGHTS

The key findings about the students' financial situations are:

- Students rely on multiple funding streams, with earnings from holiday work being the most common personal source (59%, n=26), followed by personal savings (55%, n=24) and non-repayable family/friend contributions (41%, n=18).
- Approximately **half of students (52%, n=23) worked alongside their studies.** Most working students (61%, n=14) balanced employment during both term-time and holidays, while 35% (n=8) limited work to holiday periods.
- **Every working student (100%, n=23) cited essential living costs as their motivation for employment.** Other significant reasons included funding activities outside university (57%, n=13), maintaining a comfortable lifestyle (52%, n=12), and avoiding student debt (30%, n=7). For 86% (n=20) of working students, their job was moderately or very important to continue studying at Leeds Conservatoire.

The key findings about the students' receipt of financial support are:

- There is an **awareness gap that exists regarding financial support** at Leeds Conservatoire. Only 34% (n=15) of students knew they would be eligible for financial support before starting their course, with an even smaller percentage (18%, n=8) knowing the specific amount they would receive.
- The vast majority of students (89%, n=39) received the Leeds Conservatoire bursary, while 9% (n=4) accessed the Hardship fund and 2% (n=1) received a scholarship from an external organization.
- Overall, **students rated the administration process positively**. Communication about support availability received 56% positive feedback, and 59% felt the criteria were well communicated. **Most students (80%) reported receiving support promptly**. While 59% found the application process easy, a significant 39% expressed neutral feelings. This high neutral response is likely related to the Leeds Conservatoire Bursary being automatically allocated with no application

process involved, so students responded neutrally as they had no experience of an application process to fully comment on.
- Financial support proved crucial for student success, with **93% rating financial support as important for continuing their studies**. Nearly half (48%, n=21) of students relied on support for educational equipment.
- There was significant emotional impact reported by students, with **86% reporting reduced anxiety due to financial support**. Most students (82%) felt more satisfied with student life, and 70% could better afford to participate alongside peers.

The key findings relating to the increased cost of living are:
- The **overwhelming majority of students (96%, n=42) reported being affected by the increasing cost of living** during 2024-25, with only two students indicating no significant impact.
- Key themes highlighted were housing costs, food insecurity, academic impact, family impact and mental health.
- **Financial support from Leeds Conservatoire provided crucial assistance.** Key themes highlighted were financial survival, psychological relief, education equipment support and social integration.

1.2 QUALITATIVE DATA RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: Enhance **pre-enrolment communications about financial support**, as only 34% of students knew about eligibility and 18% knew amount of financial support available before starting. Leeds Conservatoire should provide clearer information about all available support options, eligibility criteria, and potential amounts to incoming students. **Targeted communications to Drama students, disabled students, and mature students could be useful as these groups were less likely to be aware of financial support eligibility and the amounts available.**

Recommendation 2: Implement **targeted financial support addressing essential living costs**, as 77% of students would struggle with food, rent, and bills without support. Consider providing larger instalments at term beginnings when rent is due, partnering with local food providers for student discounts, and offering subsidised meals during intensive study periods.

Recommendation 3: Allocate **specific financial support for social integration**, as only 50% felt support helped them feel part of the community and 39% felt it helped with inclusion in activities. This would address reported isolation and enhance the student experience beyond academic support, such as by advertising free events and waiving the costs of paid events for students in receipt of a bursary.

Recommendation 4: Consider **opportunities to provide specific financial support and provisions for target student groups**. Student representatives suggested the Conservatoire could explore obtaining discounts or offers for local hair shops to support Global Majority students, setting up a taxi fund to support women and minoritised students, and improving the accessibility of the hardship fund application process.

<u>Recommendation 5:</u> Some students suggested that **more frequent, smaller bursary payments could benefit students** in managing money over the course of the academic year. Leeds Conservatoire could explore the feasibility of changing their payment schedule to allow for four payments rather than two, as one example suggested by Diversity Reps.

1.1 QUANTITATIVE DATA KEY INSIGHTS

The key findings about the financial support related effects on continuation are:

- **Receiving a bursary increases the likelihood of continuing into a second year of study by nearly 17%**. The amount of bursary has no significant effect.
- Receipt of hardship funds has a significant negative effect. **Students receiving hardship funds have a nearly 19% smaller likelihood of continuing**. A selection effect may explain the observed link between receiving hardship funds and dropping out in the first year – students who need hardship funds likely face greater challenges that affect their continuation outcome. The amount of hardship funds received has no significant effect.
- The **programme of enrolment has a significant effect.** Some programmes had students who appeared to be significantly more likely to continue compared to other programmes.
- Entry tariff and entry qualification are significant predictors of continuation.
- **Household income and POLAR quintile have a significant effect on continuation**. Students from families of low or medium income who do not receive financial support (a bursary) tend to have significantly lower continuation rates.
- Students from lower POLAR Quintiles have lower continuation rates. POLAR Quintile 5 students are 8.3pp likelier to continue into the second year of study than Quintile 1 students.
- **Some ethnicities (Black Caribbean, Indian) appear to have lower likelihood of continuation**, compared to White students, whereas Black African, Bangladeshi, Chinese, and Mixed ethnicity students appear to have better odds of continuing.
- Disabled learners, and particularly those who do not receive DSA allowance, tend to have lower continuation.

The key findings about the financial support related effects on attainment are:

- **53.6% of bursary recipients did not achieve a 'good degree', compared to 61.0% of the students who did not receive a bursary.** Bursary receipt has an overall very small and non-significant effect on attainment (the achievement of a 'good degree').
- Sample size of students with an attainment outcome who received hardship funds was too small, so no effect of the receipt of hardship funds on attainment could be estimated.
- Academic and Demographic Factors are better predictors of Attainment than Financial Support:
  - Programme Effect on Attainment: Choice of programme has a significant effect on attainment outcomes, with some programmes associating with an 8.4% higher chance of achieving a 'good degree' whereas other programmes decrease the chance of a 'good degree' by 22.5%.
  - Entry Tariff and Qualification Effect on Attainment: Higher entry tariffs and qualifications associate with 7.3% higher chance of achieving a 'good degree'. Lower

entry qualifications, on the other hand, associate with 12.8% higher chance of not achieving a ‘good degree’.
  - Gender/Sex Effect on Attainment: Female students are nearly three times less likely to achieve a ‘good degree’.

1.2 QUANTITATIVE DATA RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations relating to continuation:

- Continue bursary programmes – they are effective.
- Enhance hardship funds receipt with academic and personal support.
- Investigate high performing programmes for best practices around support.
- Provide additional support to programmes with lower continuation rates.
- Focus on supporting low entry tariff students with academic skills development.

Recommendations relating to attainment:

- **Close the gender attainment gap** by, e.g..
  - Launching targeted academic coaching and mentoring for female students in at-risk programmes.
  - Employing “nudge” communications related to key study behaviours (attendance, VLE engagement, assessment planning) with weekly progress check-ins.
  - Enhancing belonging and peer-support through targeted development of learning communities and introducing (near-)peer-mentoring in the first year.
  - Developing students’ assessment literacy through workshops or by embedding into regular taught sessions of engagement, exemplars, and exercises around the marking criteria, preparing for assessment, using feedback as feedforward. Time such interventions ahead of high-stakes assessments.
  - Train staff on inclusive pedagogy and stereotype threat mitigation to improve student engagement.
- **Support low-tariff entrants early and systematically** by, e.g.,
  - Conducting pre-arrival/early-Semester or Term 1 diagnostics, e.g., based on student confidence measurement (see SEER’s educational gain approach) in relevant subject knowledge and skills; offer identified target students tailored “booster” support.
  - Employing a mandatory first-term study skills module with supplemental teaching and support for high-fail first year modules.
  - Ensuring that low-stakes formative tasks and structured feedback are incorporated into first-term modules across the levels of study, to set students up for success in subsequent summative assessments.
  - Providing flexible assessment, in terms of format and submission deadline, to students flagged by the diagnostics.
  - Offering targeted tutoring and increasing contact with the personal tutor for at-risk students and in modules with poor attendance and/or high fail rate.
- **Tackle programme-level variation in attainment** by, e.g.,

- Developing, maintaining, and acting on programme heatmaps of module pass rates and withdrawals; implementing action plans for bottom-quartile modules in terms of pass rates.
    - Redesigning high-risk assessments or student preparation for them through, for example, incorporation of more formative scaffolds, making marking rubrics clearer, minimising the bunching of assessment submission deadlines.
    - Sharing best practice from top-performing programmes via design sprints and peer observation.
    - Establishing regular programme-level retention meetings (2–3 times per term) to triage students flagged by an early-warning system.
- **Consider redesigning financial support to drive academic behaviours and outcomes**, e.g.,
    - Replacing broad bursaries with micro-grants tied to behaviours that are likely to enhance academic performance, like consistent attendance, engagement with personal tutors, submission of formative assessments.
    - Scaling emergency hardship funds with case-management (financial advice + academic support plan).
    - Reducing perceived stigma of applying for financial support through proactive outreach to at-risk student groups.
- **Consider contextual and inclusion levers related to Ethnicity, Disability, Socioeconomic Status** (as judged by POLAR Quintile, or Household Income), e.g.,
    - Enhancing student awareness of DSA and how to apply for it, fast-tracking reasonable adjustments, ensuring lecture capture and accessibility of learning resources, and providing access to assistive technologies.
    - Implementing inclusive assessment design through, e.g., expanding choice of assessment format and reducing reliance on single high-stakes exams.
    - Examining effect of commuting, term-time work, care responsibilities on student outcomes, including attainment, and considering approaches to offering commuter/care-responsibility mitigating support, like travel bursaries, hybrid teaching, study groups, timetable clustering.
- **Use data to drive continuous improvement**, e.g.,
    - Developing an early-warning dashboard that combines student attendance, VLE activity, completion of formative tasks, etc., and produces weekly alerts on at-risk students to their programme lead/personal tutor.
    - Implementing an intervention registry with student-level tagging and evaluating the impact of interventions deployed in a stepped-wedge manner (staggered rollout where students are grouped into intervention- / not-yet-intervention clusters, which helps comparison of the treatment-control kind) or A/B rollout (some of the at-risk students are randomly assigned to the intervention whereas the rest receive another form of support; the two kinds of support are compared in terms of effectiveness).
    - Reviewing quarterly in-year attainment gaps and module performance with programme teams and student reps.