

Evaluation of Learner Support Funds: Executive Summary 2003

Prepared by The Institute for Employment Studies



Foreword

The Government is committed to increasing participation and achievement in post 16 education and training. We are introducing reforms that extend opportunities, raise standards and make learning more attractive. We have published the National Skills Strategy to provide a basis for reforming training for employers and individuals. Both initiatives include new forms of support for learners but continue to rely on the Learner Support Funds to help individuals facing financial hardship. For young learners, the Funds will form part of a much improved system of student support together with the national roll out of the Education Maintenance Allowances and significant improvements to childcare funding and co-ordination under our new “Care to Learn?” scheme.

Research shows that financial issues can be a major barrier to participation in post-compulsory learning. I therefore welcome this very positive evaluation of the Learner Support Funds that shows that the Funds provide an effective and sensitive response to learners’ needs. They are helping students to overcome financial barriers to learning and supporting students from all backgrounds, particularly those with more difficult personal circumstances and responsibilities. The evaluation shows that the Funds are reaching the most disadvantaged. They provide significant help to:

- disabled students;
- those with learning difficulties;
- individuals living in high deprivation areas, and
- students from ethnic minority groups.

I commend the report to you. I would also like to thank all of you for your efforts to make the Funds successful. I look forward to seeing progress in the areas where the evaluation has identified weaknesses, e.g. allocation and marketing. This will provide even better support for students.



ALAN JOHNSON MP

Department for Education and Skills

Minister of State for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education

Executive Summary

Key findings

There is a large and growing further education (FE) sector in England, with a wide range of courses on offer at a variety of different institutions. It is a priority for the Government to foster a culture of lifelong learning and to widen participation across the whole of education, and financial support for students in FE forms an important part of this agenda. The Learner Support Funds (LSF), worth £112 million in 2001/02, act as a targeted safety net, focussed on the most disadvantaged and socially excluded students, to provide assistance to those experiencing financial hardship in learning.

This study has found that:

- Approximately eight per cent of all students in FE receive some sort of assistance from the Learner Support Funds.
- More than 15 per cent of students aged 16 to 18 receive Learner Support Funds, as do over nine per cent of students aged 19 to 24, and four per cent of students aged 25 or more.

Since new Learner Support Fund arrangements were introduced in 1999, the funds have provided effective financial support for:

- disabled students
- those with learning difficulties
- individuals living in high deprivation areas, and
- students from ethnic minority groups.

Students with these characteristics are more likely to receive Learner Support Funds than students who do not. Learner Support Funds to help with the cost of childcare have also been successful in supporting students with dependant children, particularly female students. Residential Bursaries, available through the Learner Support Funds, have helped individuals from low-income families to study at residential and specialist colleges. Essentially, the Learner Support Funds are reaching the student groups at whom they have been targeted.

The Learner Support Funds are also having a significant impact on student retention. This research has found that students who receive help from the Learner Support Funds are more likely to be retained within further education than students who do not.

Just under 20 per cent of students who do not receive Learner Support Funds withdraw from their course, compared to between ten and 13 per cent of students in receipt of Learner Support Funding.

About the research

This report is the culmination of a two year evaluation of the Learner Support Funds for the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). These funds are available to students across the FE sector and are designed to support disadvantaged individuals with the additional costs of studying (eg books, equipment, transport, childcare and the costs of residential study) in order to encourage participation, retention, achievement and progression.

The research involved a review of relevant literature, analysis of the Individualised Student Record and statistical returns from the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), surveys of FE institutions, Local Education Authorities and students, and area based case study work. The aim of the study was to determine the effectiveness of the Learner Support Funds in relation to improving access, retention and participation in further education.

Policy context

There were just over 3,460,000 students in LSC-funded FE provision in 2000/01, of whom over 80 per cent were studying within a general FE college. The majority of further education students are aged 18 and over, female and studying on a part-time basis. Within this huge and varied sector of education, there has been increasing emphasis on widening participation and improving achievement. Following a critique of the earlier system of student support, the financial support arrangements for students in FE were revised, with a number of changes being introduced in 1999. These new arrangements - the Learner Support Funds - were more focussed and targeted on the basis of need. The funds extended support for the first time to students aged 16 to 18, students in school sixth forms, part-time students and those in external institutions.

The Learner Support Funds sit alongside other financial support packages (Education Maintenance Allowances and the Connexions Card for younger students, and Career Development Loans, for example) and provide a financial safety net to cover a range of study costs. Learner Support Funds provide support with the costs of books, equipment and transport. Childcare Support is available to help students with children to meet the costs of their childcare; and Residential Bursaries offer financial support to meet (or contribute towards) the living costs of students in specialist further education institutions.

The Learner Support Funds are managed and distributed to students at the level of the (FE) institution, within set national guidelines. Learners are required to apply to their institution for funding, and the institution then assesses the individual claim against their own locally determined criteria. Whilst there are a number of high priority groups at the national level (eg those in receipt of benefit, lone parents and disabled students) local priorities can also be identified and set at an institutional level.

Coverage

The £112 million distributed through Learner Support Funds in 2001/02, reached around eight per cent of the 3.5 million students studying LSC-funded courses within FE. The majority of students received support from general Access Funds (6.9 per cent of students received this type of support) but around one per cent of students received childcare support, and 0.1 per cent received a Residential Bursary award.

This study has found that:

- Within two of the three different funding streams, the majority of LSF recipients were students aged 19 and over; almost 60 per cent of Access Fund recipients and 90 per cent of childcare support recipients were aged 19 or more. It is only recipients of Residential Bursaries who were more likely to be younger students aged 16 to 18 (65 per cent of Residential Bursary recipients were in this age group).
- Within the different age groups, however, LSF was much more likely to go to students under the age of 19. More than 15 per cent of students aged 16 to 18 received help from the Access Fund, compared to just over nine per cent of students aged 19 to 24, and just over four per cent of students aged 25 or more.
- Female students are generally more likely to receive LSF than male students, which is likely to reflect the greater proportion of female students in FE more widely, and also the targeting of the funds towards those with childcare needs. However, male students are more likely to receive financial assistance through a Residential Bursary award, reflecting the fact that courses with a residential element are often male dominated.
- Students from ethnic minority groups are more likely to receive LSF than their white counterparts.
- Disabled students and individuals with learning difficulties are more likely to receive LSF than those without disabilities or difficulties.
- Full-time students are proportionally more likely to receive Learner Support Funds, as are those studying NVQ level three courses or equivalent.

In essence, the Learner Support Funds have been successful in targeting those in greatest need, and in reaching the priority groups. Having said this, the study has identified a number of examples where students' needs for support were not being met by the funds. Asylum seekers were commonly reported to be beyond the scope of LSF, although from September 2003, asylum seekers who are aged 16 to 19 will be eligible to receive this additional support. However, there are a number of other students who currently lie outside the scope of LSF, for example, students whose (family) incomes are just above the income threshold, or 'estranged' students under 19 years of age who live independently (or without parental support), for whom the safety net does not exist, or is insufficient to meet their needs. It is likely that new student groups, who are not at present eligible for LSF, will be identified as requiring financial support as more and more people begin to take up learning opportunities.

Impact

When assessing the impact of the Learner Support Funds, it is important to remember that LSF recipients are not a random selection of students, but are much more disadvantaged on average. Comparing their performance with that of the general student population has the potential to underestimate their true performance in terms of 'distance travelled' towards learning outcomes.

Overall, LSF has been particularly successful in relation to its impact on retention and attendance. LSF recipients are less likely to withdraw from their course than non-recipients, and colleges strongly feel (through the monitoring of attendance data) that there is also an impact on attendance. The withdrawal rate for students in receipt of Learner Support Funds is significantly lower, at 10 to 13 per cent, when compared to a withdrawal rate of almost 20 per cent for students who are not in receipt of Learner Support Funds. The situation is less clear with respect to achievement, however, as LSF recipients have slightly poorer achievement rates than those who are not in receipt of support. Amongst Access Fund and childcare support recipients, older students have higher achievement rates than their younger counterparts, reflecting the trend towards higher achievement amongst older learners more generally. Evidence from colleges suggests that those with the greatest financial support tend to have a variety of different pressures from those not in receipt of support, which quite likely affects their different learning outcomes and performance.

This study has found little evidence to suggest that access to FE has improved, nor necessarily that participation in FE has widened, as a result of the Learner Support Funds. Rather, the study has found that students have very limited, and often non-existent, knowledge or understanding of the funds prior to coming to college. Students also appear to have a poor understanding of the costs associated with studying, for example, the costs of books and equipment. Marketing approaches for the Learner Support Funds varied by institution, and whilst some colleges actively promoted the funds, others were concerned that any marketing activity would stimulate demand for the funds, that could not be met.

Conclusions and recommendations

The Learner Support Funds have proved to be an effective form of support for many students, particularly with regard to students facing various forms of disadvantage, for example, disabled students and students with learning difficulties, students from areas of high deprivation, and those from ethnic minority groups. The Learner Support Funds have also been found to have a positive effect on retention, with students in receipt of the funds being less likely to withdraw from further education than those who do not. Coupled with additional forms of support, and particularly Education Maintenance Allowances for younger students, the Learner Support Funds provide a comprehensive package of support for individuals most in need. However, the study has found that some students continue to fall outside of the scope of the Learner Support Funds, and as participation in FE continues to grow, there may well be new demands for LSF from students for whom the funds were not originally designed. These students will need assistance and it is important that the funds are responsive enough to meet these new needs. In order to do so, it is important that the Department for Education and Skills, the Learning and Skills Council and the FE sector as a whole, work together to identify student needs as they arise, to inform the development of future learner support policy.

Furthermore, whilst the Learner Support Funds appear to work well for those who receive them, there appears to be a general lack of knowledge or understanding about potential sources of financial support, including the Learner Support Funds, for those thinking about taking up further learning, ie pre-enrolment. This is compounded by a general lack of awareness amongst students of the costs associated with studying. There is a need for more effective and targeted marketing to address these issues, particularly in relation to marketing the availability of the funds. As such, we recommend that effective and timely marketing of the Learner Support Funds (via leaflets, and importantly face-to-face contact between college staff, Connexions advisors, family members and peers, for example) is undertaken early enough in the decision-making process, for the funds to influence and impact on improving access to, and widening participation in, the further education sector.

In order to do this, further education institutions need early notification of their LSF allocation, to assist them in planning and marketing the funds.

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