

# Understanding the Impact of the Adult Learning Grant (ALG) 2010: Executive Summary

November 2010

**i** For information

# 1 Acknowledgements

This research was managed by the Young People's Learning Agency and carried out by IFF Research Ltd. The fieldwork for this research was undertaken before the new UK Government took office on 11 May 2010. As a result the content may not reflect current government policy.

We would like to thank all those who gave their time to participate in this research and shared their experience and insight with us.

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## 2 Executive Summary

- 2.1 This report presents the findings of the latest evaluation of the Adult Learning Grant (ALG) which sought to develop an understanding of the impact of the ALG on learner participation, retention, achievement and progression in learning. The research was carried out in March 2010 by IFF Research on behalf of the Young People's Learning Agency (YPLA).
- 2.2 The ALG is a key strand of the adult learner support programme, which is designed to remove financial constraints acting as barriers to participation in learning. The grant supports adult learners in covering additional costs associated with their learning, including travel expenses or study materials. Learners must be 19 years or older, on a low income, studying full-time and towards their first full Level 2 or Level 3 qualification. Recipients of the ALG can receive £10, £20 or £30 per week depending on their financial circumstances. In 2008/09 about 30,000 learners accessed the ALG.
- 2.3 The evaluation draws on several research elements, including a review of previous ALG evaluations, analysis of the Individualised Learner Record (ILR) database, a quantitative telephone survey of 1,200 learners who received the ALG in 2008/09, a series of 15 qualitative depth interviews with ALG learners, and a survey of 100 learner providers who deliver ALG to their learners.

### **Learner characteristics**

- 2.4 Analysis of the 2008/09 ILR database provides a detailed profile of ALG learners:
  - Most were aged 25 or under (84%), and two thirds (67%) were under 21;
  - Just over half (52%) were female – slightly lower than the figure among all learners on the ILR (54%);
  - Most (71%) ALG learners were White, though the proportion of Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) ALG recipients has increased in recent years, from 19% in 2006/07, 26% in 2007/08 to 28% in 2008/09;
  - One in six (17%) ALG learners had a learning difficulty, disability or a health problem.

This profile of ALG recipients in 2008/09 is very similar to that of previous academic years.

- 2.5 The learner survey shows that two thirds of ALG learners (66%) live with their parents, either rent free (42%) or paying rent (25%). Overall, more than half (55%) pay rent or a mortgage.
- 2.6 Just before starting their course for which they received the ALG:
  - 20% had been combining learning with work
  - 34% had been studying but not working
  - 29% had been working but not studying
  - 15% had been unemployed and looking for work.

Hence overall half had been in work, and just over half had been studying.

## **Nature of learning and financial support**

- 2.7 Most ALG recipients (80%) were studying for a Level 3 qualification. The most popular courses undertaken by ALG learners continue to be BTEC qualifications (46%, higher at 54% among men), followed by NVQs (15%) and Access to HE courses (13%). As in previous years the top broad sector / subject areas were Arts, Media and Publishing (20%), and Health, Public Services and Care (18%).
- 2.8 Three in five (57%) ALG recipients have or will contribute financially towards the cost of their course, a rise of 3 percentage points compared with the previous academic year. The most common ways in which learners contributed financially were regarding course fees (38% of all ALG recipients, up from 31% in 2007/08), registration fees (36%, up from 30% in 2007/08) and exam fees (22%).
- 2.9 The vast majority of learners (93%) received the maximum ALG payment of £30 per week. In addition, 14% of all ALG recipients were accessing other sources of financial support while receiving the ALG, most commonly help with travel costs, hardship payments, and help with childcare costs. Just over a quarter of ALG recipients (28%) had been receiving the EMA immediately prior to accessing the ALG.
- 2.10 A substantial proportion also continued with paid work, or took it up, while on the course for which they received the ALG: 40% were combining study with work, with this much higher among those working towards a Level 3 qualification (44%) than among Level 2 learners (25%).

## **Learner choices and the influence of the ALG on their decision making**

- 2.11 ALG learners had a variety of reasons for starting their course. When prompted, around nine in ten indicated that developing their career (93%) and gaining new skills (92%) were motivating factors. Helping get a job (78%) and increasing current or future job satisfaction (62%) were other key motives. These were also the top four factors mentioned reasons in 2007/08, although all of them have gained in importance in 2008/09.
- 2.12 A substantial proportion of ALG recipients (37%) had considered either doing something other than studying (23%) or doing a different course (24%). Among this group, two in five (equivalent to 16% of all ALG learners) stated that financial considerations played a role in their decision to undertake the course for which they received the ALG rather than the alternatives they had been considering.
- 2.13 Most learners (68%) found out about ALG *after* they already had decided to go ahead with their course hence clearly for most the availability of ALG was not an influencing factor in the decision to undertake the learning. However, the third (32%) that heard about the ALG before they decided to do their course represents a significant increase from the 2007/08 figure (25%), and among these learners half (51%) felt that the possibility of receiving the ALG influenced their decision 'a great deal' or 'a fair amount'.
- These results are equivalent to 16% of all ALG recipients being influenced a great deal or a fair amount in their decision to undertake their course by the knowledge that they could receive the ALG.
  - When prompted, one in eight (13%) of all recipients felt that they would not have started their course if they were unable to access the ALG. This is slightly higher than found in 2007/08 (11%).

## **Increasing learners' participation, retention and achievement**

2.14 The availability of the ALG impacts positively on the decision making process of many learners by removing financial constraints and encouraging participation in learning. In addition, the ALG also affects the type and modality of learning accessed by its recipients:

- A third (35%) felt that the ALG influenced them in their decision to study full time rather than on a part time basis.
- Around a third (31%) were influenced to study a full qualification, rather than modules or units, as this would make them eligible to receive the ALG.
- Just over a fifth (22%) stated that the possibility of receiving the ALG influenced their choice of the level of learning.
- Another fifth (22%) reported that the ALG allowed them to start their learning earlier than they would otherwise have done.

2.15 One in six (17%) learners that were still on the course or who had completed felt they would have dropped out of the course if it not been for the ALG. The positive impact on learners' retention in learning is confirmed by the ILR data, which shows the completion rates for ALG learners (89%) to be higher compared to the completion rates for all adults on Level 2 and Level 3 courses (76%). Also, overall achievement rates of ALG learners are higher than the average for all adults on Level 2 and Level 3 courses (69% vs. 53%). The impact of the ALG on completion and achievement rates is most pronounced for Level 2 learning: 81% of ALG learning aims are achieved compared to 56% of all Level 2 learning aims.

## **Outcomes of learning**

2.16 The key outcomes for those ALG learners who completed their course include having gained a qualification (98%), skills that help them to do a better job in the future (94%), and skills that will look good to any future employers (94%). Three in five also reported being better paid (61%), and a quarter (28%) said they had found a job as a result of their learning.

2.17 Virtually all learners also reported having gained a variety of 'soft benefits' from doing their course. When prompted, around nine in ten learners reported becoming more confident about their abilities (95%), feeling better about themselves generally (94%), feeling clearer about the range of opportunities open to them (93%), perceiving improved employment or career prospects (91%), and feeling more enthusiastic about future learning (88%).

2.18 Increased appetite for learning is also evident from the intention of nine in ten learners who stated that they would be very likely (65%) or quite likely (25%) to participate in future learning – these are slightly higher levels of interest than recorded in 2007/08 (60% and 23% respectively). The positive perceptions of ALG are reinforced by the fact that a clear majority (60%) of Level 2 learners likely to undertake any future learning would apply for the ALG again. In addition, virtually all ALG learners (98%) would recommend the grant to others in similar circumstances.

## The views and experiences of learning providers

- 2.19 The survey of 100 learning providers adds to the evidence that ALG is delivering a range of benefits for learners, including increased participation, retention and achievement in learning. According to the providers, ALG *frequently* encourages learners to aim for a full qualification (64%), to commit to studying on a full-time basis (67%), and encourages learners to study who would not otherwise have done so. In addition, learners are said to benefit from increased confidence, self-esteem and improved employment prospects.
- 2.20 The ALG also impacts on learning providers directly in a number of ways. An increase in participation rates allows providers to expand their learner base, improves attendance and retention, and the financial support directed to learners via ALG means that providers have more discretion about how they allocate their own student support funds.
- 2.21 Learning providers tend to adopt a very active approach to marketing the ALG to their students: nine in ten (89%) actively raise ALG with their learners, most commonly at the induction stage after the learner has already enrolled, or at enrolment, and virtually all (98%) provide information about ALG through various forms of marketing channels, including websites, prospectuses, student handbooks, posters, or leaflets. Providers also appear to be taking a relatively broad approach to promoting ALG rather than exclusively discussing it just with those they think will be eligible.
- 2.22 The feedback on the administrative aspects of delivering ALG from a provider perspective is largely positive. Nearly all (97%) found ALG systems, processes and procedures to be straightforward or reasonable, and the same proportion were satisfied with the ALG Learner Assessment and Payment System (LAPS).

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