

**A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION INTO
THE FIRST YEAR (PILOT) IMPLEMENTATION
OF THE ADULT LEARNING GRANT**

CRSP 511

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

In July 2003 the Government announced the introduction of the Adult Learning Grant (ALG), as part of its Skills Strategy. The ALG pilot began in September 2003 in ten areas across England and national roll-out is expected from 2005 onwards. The ALG aims to support more adults in learning through the offer of a means-tested monetary allowance. The allowance (up to £30 per week) is paid during term time and is available to learners earning up to £19,000 (or up to £30,000 if the learner lives with a partner in paid employment). The allowance is subject to strict eligibility criteria and is targeted at full-time learners aged 19-30 years of age studying for their first full level 2 or 3 qualification. The allowance is administered by one administrative provider (Manchester City Council) and continued receipt is dependent upon evidence of course attendance. This policy is being evaluated by a consortium of organisations, led by the Centre for Research in Social Policy (CRSP), and comprises both qualitative components and large scale longitudinal surveys of learners in pilot and control areas. This report presents the findings from the first qualitative component of the evaluation.

Study Aims

The study aims to describe and explain the processes involved in implementing the ALG in ten pilot areas across England during its first year of operation. It explores the perspectives of personnel in local Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs), colleges, Information, Advice and Guidance Partnerships (IAG), and Jobcentre Plus. The study seeks to identify the key issues and challenges encountered by personnel and to identify what action, if any, needs to be taken to improve current implementation of the ALG and its wider subsequent implementation.

Method

Four pilot areas (The Black Country, County Durham, Lancashire and London West) were selected as case studies. In each case study area, semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of local LSCs, colleges, IAG and Jobcentre Plus staff with responsibility for the ALG. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with representatives of local LSCs in the remaining six pilot areas (Devon and Cornwall, Humberside, Leicestershire, Luton and Bedfordshire, Shropshire, and South Yorkshire). In addition, college staff in these six pilot areas were surveyed. Interview and survey instruments explored the infrastructures that were emerging locally to set up the ALG, views on publicity materials and approaches taken to raise awareness of the ALG, opinions on the likely impact of the ALG and factors that might encourage or inhibit take up, and experiences of administering the ALG procedures during the first stages of implementation. Interviews were conducted between October 2003 and January 2004, and the survey was administered during March 2004.

Interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim and subject to thematic and 'Framework' analyses.

ALG Pilot areas	Case study	In-depth interviews	Email survey
The Black Country	✓	LSC, 3 colleges, JCP	
County Durham	✓	LSC, 2 colleges, JCP, IAG	
Devon & Cornwall		LSC	All colleges
Humberside		LSC	All colleges
Lancashire	✓	LSC, 4 colleges	
Leicestershire		LSC	All colleges
London West	✓	LSC, 4 colleges	
Luton & Bedfordshire		LSC	All colleges
Shropshire		LSC	All colleges
South Yorkshire		LSC	All colleges

37 individuals were interviewed for the study and 30.4 per cent (21/69) of individuals responded to the survey, representing 42.6 per cent (20/47) of colleges.

Key Findings

The ALG infrastructure

- Colleges strongly preferred local LSCs to take the lead in coordinating the implementation of the ALG and resented being left to get on with it alone.
- Greater direction has been expected from the Department for Work and Pensions, learndirect and the IAG Partnership for implementing the ALG.
- Networking usually consisted of meetings between local colleges, the local LSC and IAG Partnerships. Jobcentre Plus representatives, although invited, were frequently absent from these meetings.
- Attendance by the DfES and Manchester City Council (MCC) at local meetings was seen as helpful to the process.
- Although problems had been encountered with the ALG, Manchester City Council staff were invariably described as helpful and quick to respond.

Marketing and raising awareness of the ALG

- Raising awareness was difficult because of the timing of the introduction of ALG, so near to the start of the academic year. In future, marketing materials will need to be provided a few months before the start of the academic year.
- The emphasis had been on retrospective identification and informing of potential applicants; and many colleges had made strenuous efforts to identify ALG-eligible students.
- A wide range of promotional and awareness-raising mechanisms had been employed. It was perceived that marketing to the general public (e.g. on back of buses) was less effective than targeting college students.
- Despite the eligibility criteria for ALG being available on the website, and in Management Information updates, it was evident that misunderstanding or

misinterpretation of the eligibility criteria had inhibited the awareness-raising process.

- Allied to the above point, there was also a perceived lack of clarity about eligibility criteria in marketing materials.
- The roll-out of the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) and the role of IAG Partnerships were other factors which could contribute to more widespread awareness.
- As far as recommendations of good practice are concerned, the following elements should be encouraged:
 - Thorough briefing and engagement of college staff, especially course tutors
 - Inclusion of details of ALG in all relevant college material (e.g. student handbooks, enrolment and induction packs, student bulletins etc)
 - Early distribution of information leaflets, and appropriate positioning of posters
 - Incorporating presentation of details of ALG, both in handout material and in responding to enquiries, at all appropriate times during college enrolment sessions.

Perceptions of the ALG

- The ALG is a welcome addition to post-19 support.
- It was considered feasible for ALG learners to study full-time (i.e. 13 guided learning hours per week) and work part-time to supplement their income if required.
- At an early stage of roll-out, ALG was misinterpreted as a tool for widening participation in learning. As a result, the eligibility criteria for receiving ALG were often judged in these terms.

- The upper age limit for receiving the ALG was considered unfair¹.
- There was speculation that basic skills courses to prepare some learners for level 2 might subsequently improve take-up of level 2 qualifications.
- The first level 2 or 3 criterion does not help those who wish to retrain to improve their employability, even on courses which would address local skills shortages.
- Learners receiving out-of-work benefits are not eligible for ALG and these are a core group who need skills to improve their employability².
- The full-time criterion does not encourage people with limited time (such as parents caring for young children) to study.

The ALG application process

- Student uncertainty regarding eligibility for the ALG and potential ramifications for receipt of state benefits may be discouraging applications.
- Where possible, the application process should be streamlined and simplified for colleges and students. The requirement to subject applications to rigorous checks needs to be better balanced with user-friendliness.
- The application process must be speeded up to avoid losing 'pending' applicants.
- Varied arrangements have evolved between MCC and colleges for collating documentary evidence e.g. Learning Agreements.
- The application process must successfully accommodate eligible students moving from the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) to the ALG

¹ The upper age limit has been removed for learners studying full-time for their first full level 2 qualification, in accordance with the Skills Strategy.

² It should be noted that learners receiving out-of-work benefits receive full fee remission, and concerns raised regarding support for these groups of learners will be covered in New Deal for Skills.

Systems and resources for administering the ALG

- In some colleges, the ALG systems had been ‘tagged’ onto existing EMA arrangements. There were, however, some reservations about how well EMA approaches would transfer to adult learners in the college setting.
- Colleges tended to rely on paper-based timesheets and electronic reporting systems for collating and reporting attendance data to the administrative provider.
- The lower than expected take up of the ALG meant that systems put in place in colleges were yet to be fully tested. There were concerns that systems might fail when subjected to the large numbers of students expected to receive EMA and the ALG the following year.
- The additional resources required to set up and administer the ALG had been ‘absorbed’ into existing work. This was seen as unsustainable over the longer term.
- Colleges varied in the degree of strictness that they applied to defining and authorising absence.
- Colleges wanted to be ‘kept in the loop’ by the administrative provider so that they could identify students requiring support to conclude their ALG applications.
- Colleges felt there needed to be better clarity regarding the purpose and interfaces between LSF, ALG and EMA. Some colleges were reviewing how they would operate LSF in the light of ALG.

Conclusions

The Adult Learning Grant (ALG) is seen as a welcome addition to post-19 financial support.

A recurring issue in the first year was the expressed belief that ALG was another initiative seeking to widen participation in learning opportunities. This may have been anticipated, given that the widening participation agenda has been prominent

for several years, whereas the Skills Strategy is at the fledgling stage. However, it does highlight the need for college staff to be fully briefed about the aims of the ALG and the reasons for the eligibility criteria. Colleges will need clear instruction about ALG eligibility for recipients of benefits, for example. In addition, it will be important to increase awareness among all stakeholders as to the role of the ALG within the Skills Strategy.

As the ALG enters its second year of piloting local LSCs, and other organisations such as learndirect and IAG Partnerships, will remain important in raising awareness about the grant. Marketing information and materials will need to be made available to colleges several months prior to the start of the academic year in order that they can incorporate them into their marketing strategies and mechanisms.

The application process, although generally sound, will need to find ways of reducing the number of applications that are delayed by queries.

Systems put in place by colleges for monitoring and reporting student attendance will need to be carefully monitored as take up of ALG increases.

Finally, colleges would benefit from greater guidance on how best to manage the interfaces between Learner Support Funds, ALG and EMA.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Policy Background to the ALG

Profound occupational changes have been taking place in the U.K. and will continue to occur in coming years. Job growth over the last two decades has been strongest in the managerial, professional and technical occupational groups, which require increasingly higher levels of skills and qualifications. The overall trend is one of a continuing increase in the skills and qualifications demanded of the workforce. Thus, there is perceived to be an economic imperative to enhance the skills and qualifications of the whole population, in order to satisfy the needs of the labour market, and hence the nation's economic competitiveness (*In Demand: Adult Skills in the 21st Century*, 2001).

The *Skills for Life* survey (DfES, 2003) found that only 18 per cent of survey respondents achieved Level 2 or above in tests for both literacy and numeracy, with lower levels of literacy associated with socio-economic deprivation. For example, adults in the highest professional social class were four times as likely as those in the unskilled class category to reach Level 2 or above in the literacy test³. Good literacy and numeracy skills were also associated with better wages.

A survey conducted by NIACE in 2002 (Aldridge and Tuckett, 2002) found that participation rates in learning tended to be lower among respondents with no qualifications, those with basic skills difficulties and those living in deprived areas. This finding is supported by the 1997, 2001 and 2002 NALS surveys (Beinart and Smith, 1998; La Valle and Blake, 2002; Fitzgerald et al., 2003; respectively). The surveys found that significant proportions of respondents cited financial difficulties as a major barrier to learning (see also McGivney, 1993; Hillage and Aston, 2001).

A number of policy mechanisms have emerged in recent years, including the use of loans, such as Career Development Loans (CDLs), credits, vouchers, and fee

³ Social class categories: 1 Professional, 2 Managerial/Technical, 3a Skilled non-manual; 3b Skilled manual, 4 Partly skilled, 5 Unskilled, 6 Other

remission for adults, discretionary Learner Support Funding, discretionary awards by LEAs, Individual Learning Accounts (ILAs), and most recently, the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA).

The principal governmental response to the perceived skills deficiencies of the workforce has been the introduction of the Skills Strategy, emanating from the publication of the White Paper, “21st Century Skills: Realising Our Potential”⁴, in July 2003. Its aim is ‘to ensure that employers have the right skills to support the success of their businesses and that individuals have the skills they need to be both employable and personally fulfilled.’⁵ Within the Skills Strategy, particular emphasis is placed on promoting achievement in skills up to a full Level 2 qualification,

The Adult Learning Grant (ALG) is one of a number of initiatives, including the Level 2 Entitlement, Employer Training Pilots, the provision of business support services, and improved information, advice and guidance (IAG) support, which form the main thrust of the Skills Strategy. ALG seeks to do this through the provision of a more comprehensive system of financial support. In so doing it contributes to the Government’s Public Service Agreement (PSA) target ‘to reduce by at least 40 per cent the number of adults who lack NVQ level 2 or equivalent qualifications by 2010, with one million adults in the workforce to achieve level 2 between 2003 and 2006.

1.2 The ALG Pilot

In July 2003 the Government announced in its Skills Strategy the piloting of the Adult Learning Grant (ALG) (*Realising our Potential*, 2003). The ALG was described as a new grant for adults aged between 19 and 30 years of age and provides financial support to adults studying full-time for their first level 2 qualification, and young adults studying full-time for their first full level 3 qualification. The ALG contributes to the government’s 2010 target to achieve a 40 per cent reduction in the number of adults in the workforce lacking any qualifications up to level 2.

⁴ DfES (2003), ‘21st Century Skills – Realising Our Potential: Individuals, Employers, Nation’.

⁵ P11 DfES (2003), ‘21st Century Skills – Realising Our Potential’.

In September 2003, the ALG was launched in ten pilot sites across England (The Black Country, County Durham, Devon and Cornwall, Humberside, Lancashire, Leicestershire, London West, Luton and Bedfordshire, Shropshire, and South Yorkshire). The grant offers a means tested allowance of up to £30 per week to eligible adults during term time. Eligibility for the grant relies on learners demonstrating that they meet criteria relating to U.K. residency, age, proposed course of study, level of prior qualifications, and that they intend to study at a designated learning provider. Payments are subject to strict attendance requirements which are monitored by learning providers. Full reporting on learners' attendance is required by the administrative provider (Manchester City Council) before payments can be issued to learners. The administrative provider provides application packs to learners and colleges, a telephone helpline, assesses eligibility for the grant and issues weekly term-time payments to learners, subject to confirmation of full attendance by students' learning providers.

The Learning and Skills Council National Office took lead responsibility for publicising and marketing the new grant.

The DfES, in conjunction with the administrative provider, provides weekly management information (MI) relating to the status of grant applications to the LSC National Office, and all LSCs and colleges participating in the pilot. Updates include data on the number of applications in process: numbers awarded, rejected or those pending a decision. In addition to MI, communication has been facilitated via face-to-face meetings between members of the DfES ALG project team, LSCs and colleges in pilot areas across England. In addition, a learning provider-only website was set up by the DfES to encourage feedback on implementing the grant. Learning providers have been represented at steering/working groups and at events and conferences about the ALG.

Although take-up of the ALG was initially slow, over 2000 learners have subsequently been awarded ALG and payments worth £900,000 have been issued by the administrative provider.

Table 1.1 Cumulative ALG Applications and Awards

Period ending	Applications	Awards
23.10.03	1553	279
13.11.03	1817	640
12.12.03	2361	930
08.01.04	2683	1149
05.02.04	3037	1495
04.03.04	3312	1752
08.04.04	3660	2002
06.05.04	3748	2096
03.06.04	3882	2177
29.07.04	4001	2235

Nearly three-quarters of ALG recipients are aged between 19 and 21 years of age and over three-quarters are studying for their first full level 3 qualification. 94 per cent of learners have qualified for the full £30 per week allowance, indicating that most learners receiving the ALG fall within the lowest income ranges.

As at 29 July 2004, local LSCs had received on average 400 ALG applications, with 223 subsequently awarded.

Table 1.2 ALG Applications Received and Awarded by Local LSC (as at 29.07.04)

	No. of ALG applications received	No. of ALGs awarded
Bedfordshire	201	112
Durham	245	150
Devon & Cornwall	659	384
Humberside	350	215
Lancashire	670	363
Leicestershire	359	196
London West	429	220
Shropshire	134	72
South Yorkshire	570	348
Black Country	330	173
No college ¹	8	0
Out of scheme ²	46	2
Total	4001	2235
Average	400	223

¹ Application has not named learning provider

² Named learning provider not an ALG designated learning provider

1.3 The Evaluation Design

The ALG evaluation is being conducted by a consortium of organisations. The consortium is led by the Centre for Research in Social Policy (CRSP) at Loughborough University, and includes the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen), the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) and the National Institute for Careers Education and Counselling (NICEC). The evaluation aims to:

- 1 Evaluate the impact of the ALG on retention, attainment and progression of learners.
- 2 Examine the effect of the ALG on the level of qualification, type of learning and working patterns of learners.
- 3 Explore implementation of the ALG at local level.
- 4 Identify good practice

The evaluation design has both qualitative and quantitative elements. Quantitative techniques, comprising large scale longitudinal surveys of learners in pilot and control areas, will be undertaken to address aims 1, 2 and 4. Surveys will take place in 2004, 2005 and 2006. Qualitative techniques are being adopted to address aims 3 and 4.

The first qualitative study has been undertaken by CRSP and NICEC and is the basis of this report.

1.4 Outline of the Report

This report describes a qualitative investigation into the processes involved in implementing the Adult Learning Grant (ALG) in ten pilot areas across England. It outlines findings from an email survey of Further Education college staff and semi-structured interviews with personnel from local Learning and Skills Councils, colleges, Information, Advice and Guidance Partnerships and Jobcentre Plus. A wide range of issues were addressed relating to the initial development and implementation of the ALG. A detailed description of study methods is included in Chapter 2. Study findings are summarised in five sections which each include a summary of principal findings. The five sections address the following issues:

- The infrastructure that has evolved within each pilot area to coordinate the setting up and implementation of the ALG (section 3.1).
- The marketing of the ALG locally and other approaches adopted to raise awareness of the ALG (section 3.2).
- Perceptions held about the ALG, including views on the rules of eligibility and expectations of its likely impact (section 3.3).
- Experiences of the application process (section 3.4).
- The systems put in place to operationalise the ALG and their resource implications (section 3.5).

Findings are reported in a generalised format because it became apparent during the analysis of the data that the views expressed in case study areas were not

sufficiently dissimilar to each other or other pilot areas. For this reason we did not feel the interviews conducted in case study areas warranted separate presentations of findings.

Chapter 4 outlines the authors' interpretations of the findings, draws conclusions on the early implementation of the ALG and, where appropriate, identifies policy implications for further roll-out of the ALG.

2 METHOD

2.1 Methods Adopted

The implementation study used a combination of methods for collecting qualitative data across the ten Adult Learning Grant (ALG) pilot sites. Firstly, four of the ten pilot areas were selected, in consultation with the DfES steering group, for in-depth case study. These four areas, The Black Country, County Durham, Lancashire and London West, were chosen because they represent a range of rural and urban locations across England. Secondly, within the four case study areas semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives from the local Learning Skills Councils, a selection of FE colleges, and Jobcentre Plus (JCP) and Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) Partnerships personnel. In the remaining six pilot areas (Devon and Cornwall, Humberside, Leicestershire, Luton and Bedfordshire, Shropshire, and South Yorkshire) semi-structured interviews were conducted with personnel from the local LSCs. In addition, key contacts within all the FE colleges in each non-case study pilot area were surveyed via email.

Table 2.1 Implementation Study Design

ALG Pilot areas	Case study	In-depth interviews	Email survey
The Black Country	✓	LSC, 3 colleges, JCP	
County Durham	✓	LSC, 2 colleges, JCP, IAG	
Devon & Cornwall		LSC	All colleges
Humberside		LSC	All colleges
Lancashire	✓	LSC, 4 colleges	
Leicestershire		LSC	All colleges
London West	✓	LSC, 4 colleges	
Luton & Bedfordshire		LSC	All colleges
Shropshire		LSC	All colleges
South Yorkshire		LSC	All colleges

2.2 Case Studies

Names and contact details of relevant LSC and college representatives were provided by DfES. Representatives, ranging from student support managers and finance advisors to college registrars, of up to four colleges were interviewed. During the initial interviews which were conducted with representatives of the local LSCs in each of the selected case study areas, respondents were asked to identify appropriate interviewees in IAG Partnerships and JobcentrePlus

The objective of the interviews was to explore the processes involved in implementing the ALG in the four case study areas and across the ten local LSCs at a very early phase in the development of the policy. The interviews sought to identify the key issues and challenges that had been encountered by interviewees in setting up and administering the ALG. In particular, the interviews aimed:

- 1 To identify implementation processes that could explain variations in take-up of ALG.
- 2 To identify what action, if any, needs to be taken to improve current implementation of ALG and wider subsequent implementation.
- 3 To inform the quantitative impact analysis.

A general topic guide, designed for interviews with individuals in local LSCs, colleges, IAG Partnerships and Jobcentre Plus, covered a broad range of areas, and had four main sections:

- a discussion of the interviewee's role in implementing the ALG and any local infrastructure that had developed around it;
- views on the publicity materials and marketing approaches adopted locally;
- opinions about the likely impact of the ALG, including factors that might affect its take-up; and
- experiences of administering the ALG, such as procedures that had been developed for monitoring attendance. The topic guide was designed to prompt the interviewer to investigate the topics whilst simultaneously allowing exploration of any appropriate new issues as they were raised.

2.3 Conducting the Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted between October 2003 and January 2004. Interviewers maintained contact with each other to discuss progress and any issues raised by the interviews. The interviews were conducted on a one-to-one or group basis (the largest group was three interviewees). Interviews lasted between 40 and 90 minutes, with most lasting about one hour. Each interview was tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

In addition to the local interviews, the research team met with a representative from Manchester City Council, the administrative provider, in November 2003, and the National LSC, in January 2004, to collate further background information regarding the development of processes and structures for implementing the ALG at the national level.

Table 2.2 Breakdown of Interviewees by Organisation

Organisation	No. of interviewees	No. of interviews
Learning and Skills Councils	15	11
FE Colleges	19	14
IAG Partnerships	1	1
Jobcentre Plus	2	2
	37	28

2.4 The Email Survey

The email survey aimed to complement the case study research by asking college staff with responsibilities for administering the ALG (for example, FE College Student Support Managers) in the remaining six pilot areas to comment on the range of topic areas explored during the semi-structured interviews. The email questionnaire consisted of 18 open questions comprising the same four sections as in the semi-structured interview topic guide: (1) agencies involved locally in delivering the ALG; (2) raising awareness about the ALG; (3) the likely impact of the ALG including views

on the criteria determining eligibility for the ALG; and (4) experiences of administering the ALG. Recipients of the questionnaire were not expected to answer every question and were instead asked to comment only on issues which most closely related to their area of work or college context. It was not, therefore, intended to quantify or prioritise the issues identified via the case study research, but rather to provide an additional means of consulting with college staff across all ten pilot areas.

A total of 83 individuals, representing 48 colleges across the six pilot areas, were identified by the DfES.

The questionnaire was emailed to the named contacts in colleges across the six pilot areas on 15 March 2004. A covering email (see Annex) explained the aims of the study and reassured recipients that responses to the survey would be treated confidentially and that they would not be named in written or oral reports.

The email was undeliverable to 13 addresses and one respondent felt his college was unable to respond due to the very small numbers of students receiving the ALG. This left 69 individual college contacts across 47 colleges.

30.4 per cent (21/69) of individuals responded to the survey, representing responses from 42.6 per cent (20/47) of colleges (two responses were forwarded from one college). These responses were of a high quality, being full and informative.

Table 2.3 Responses to the Survey by Pilot Area

Pilot area	Individual responses	College responses
Devon & Cornwall	5 (33 per cent)	46 per cent
Humberside	3 (14 per cent)	33 per cent
Leicestershire	2 (13 per cent)	20 per cent
Luton & Bedfordshire	2 (33 per cent)	67 per cent
Shropshire	4 (40 per cent)	50 per cent
South Yorkshire	5 (33 per cent)	63 per cent

2.5 Data Analysis

Initially, a sub-sample of the transcripts was read, in order to identify broad themes from the data (Fitzpatrick and Boulton, 1996). The main themes and a common coding framework (see Annex) were then agreed. Themes were allocated to team members for further analysis. Each member coded the text from 25 interviews which related to their theme (three taped interviews could not be transcribed due to poor quality recording, although copious notes had been taken, and therefore the essential information was captured). Researchers used either NUD*IST (QSR N5, 2000) or manual methods for coding text. Some data (including survey data) were subjected to further analysis to 'map' the range of opinions across the sample using the 'Framework' approach to qualitative data analysis (Ritchie et al., 1994).

3 FINDINGS

This chapter describes the range of opinions expressed by interviewees and survey respondents. As explained in the previous section, both the interview topic guide and the survey instrument were qualitative in nature and the purpose of the analysis was to ascertain the breadth of opinion across both samples. For this reason, the key themes which emerged are a synthesis of analyses of both survey and interview responses. Where survey and interview responses were found to diverge, this is highlighted in the text.

3.1 ALG's Infrastructure

Interviewees and survey respondents were asked about the type of infrastructure and networks either formal or informal that had grown up during the early implementation stage of the ALG within their own pilot area. The type of infrastructure and in particular, the existence of a lead organisation to coordinate agencies and circulate guidance was described as very important in helping colleges to establish systems for marketing and administering the ALG. The late arrival of guidance and publicity materials across the pilot sites (see Section 3.2) heightened the need for lead organisations to act quickly in disseminating material.

3.1.1 Learning and Skills Councils

The local LSC was identified as taking the lead in facilitating the implementation of the ALG in most of the pilot areas. LSCs coordinated meetings between colleges, Information, Advice and Guidance Partnerships (IAG), and, on occasions, representatives of the DfES ALG team. Meetings were usually monthly during the early phase of implementation. LSCs also acted as a conduit between colleges and the DfES, for example, by requesting clarification on operational aspects of the ALG on behalf of colleges. A few LSCs, however, limited their involvement to distributing marketing materials and guidance information to colleges. LSCs were undergoing a restructuring exercise when the interviews were being conducted and some LSCs highlighted the difficulties in taking on a leadership role for the ALG during a time of staff shortage and organisational uncertainty. Where LSCs had taken on a leadership role, this was appreciated by colleges. In those areas where the local

LSCs had taken on a lesser role, colleges often felt they were left floundering. For one college, the lack of local leadership signified a low priority attached to the ALG.

A few LSCs questioned whether the LSC is the most appropriate organisation to lead implementation of the ALG. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), learndirect and the IAG were all identified as organisations that could potentially provide the implementation of ALG with greater direction.

3.1.2 Networks

Networking usually consisted of monthly meetings between the LSC, local colleges, IAG representatives, and, on occasions, representatives from the DfES and the Manchester City Council (the administrative provider). Attendance by representatives from the DfES and Manchester City Council was seen as being very helpful to the process of implementation because it provided organisations with opportunities to discuss and clarify operational aspects of the ALG. Representatives from Jobcentre Plus were also invited to meetings, and, although they had attended initial meetings, they often failed to attend any subsequent meetings. There was a widely-held view among LSCs, colleges and the Jobcentre Plus interviewees themselves that the ALG did not fit well with the Jobcentre Plus agenda of moving benefit recipients into paid employment and, although Jobcentre Plus staff needed to be aware of the ALG, it was not the type of product Jobcentre Plus staff would actively promote to their clients.

In addition to local meetings, some regional conferences had occurred or were scheduled to take place and interviewees valued such events because they facilitated the sharing of good practice. A two-day national conference has taken place since the interviews took place (April 2004).

Email survey respondents, who were all from colleges and held posts similar to those of college interviewees, were more likely to comment that they were unaware of other agencies involved in implementing the ALG locally and that they frequently operated in isolation, liaising only with Manchester City Council. In a few cases the local LSC did organise meetings and there were two examples where links with other agencies, such as the IAG Partnership had been established. One respondent felt

the student union, Jobcentre Plus, New Deal advisors, Welfare Rights, the Citizen Advice Bureau, learndirect, the local library, and Connexions should all contribute to the local implementation of the ALG. In this example, the respondent felt the college was operating alone.

3.1.3 Manchester City Council

On the whole, colleges had developed good working relationships with the administrative provider. Early ‘teething problems’ had often led to administrative problems for colleges but these were either being, or had been, resolved.

Manchester City Council staff administering ALG applications were invariably described as ‘friendly’, ‘helpful’ and quick in responding to college queries. However, there were still some problems relating to the application process that were yet to be resolved at the time of the research. These included on-going difficulties in providing documentary evidence of income or prior qualifications and the provision of learning agreements (see Section 3.4).

Box 1 Summary of ALG Infrastructure

Colleges strongly preferred local LSCs to take the lead in coordinating the implementation of the ALG and resented being left to get on with it alone.

Greater direction has been expected from the Department for Work and Pensions, learndirect and the IAG Partnership for implementing the ALG.

Networking usually consisted of meetings between local colleges, the local LSC and IAG Partnerships. Jobcentre Plus representatives, although invited, were frequently absent from these meetings.

Attendance by the DfES and Manchester City Council at local meetings was seen as helpful to the process.

Although problems had been encountered with the ALG, Manchester City Council staff were invariably described as helpful and quick to respond.

3.2 Marketing and Raising Awareness of the ALG

A key element in the introduction of ALG was the process of raising awareness, especially in terms of the range of promotional activity and the mechanisms by which information was disseminated.

3.2.1 Timing of the implementation

There was widespread agreement that the timing of the announcement of the implementation of ALG, coming so near to the beginning of the academic year, had made it extremely difficult to generate awareness among individuals who may have been thinking about participating in learning, but had not made contact with a college or attended enrolment sessions.

'It was after the prospectuses, marketing literature, application forms, enrolment forms etc had been produced'

(College respondent)

Therefore, rather than seeking to attract 'new' learners, the emphasis had been on targeting those who had already made the decision to learn, by enrolling on a course, and who might be eligible. Thus, there was a retrospective element to much of the awareness-raising activity. This is not to say that the same will be the case in future years, where there will be the opportunity to introduce information about ALG into all relevant college literature. Indeed, details of the ALG had already been incorporated in both internal and external college documents across the board.

It was also the case that the local LSC representatives were looking to a more planned programme of awareness-raising over the coming year.

Although take-up of ALG continued to rise throughout the first year, there was no evidence that take-up was higher in colleges which had significant numbers of courses with January enrolments. Rather, the continually rising number of applications tended to be due to retrospective identification of eligible students. An additional factor was a policy change in October 2003, which allowed learners turning 19 years in the academic year to apply for ALG. However, at a college where there was a 'big adult enrolment' in June, they were hopeful of there being a positive effect on take-up from a raft of awareness-raising activity.

Because of the timing of the implementation, it was felt that some of the resources invested in marketing material had effectively been wasted, in that there had been little opportunity to use the material prior to college enrolments. Nonetheless, most colleges recognised the supportive role which LSCs had played in the provision of information about ALG.

3.2.2 Eligibility criteria

All colleges visited had made efforts to identify those who might be eligible, in order to inform them of their possible entitlement to ALG as part of their retrospective trawl of enrolled students. However, this had often resulted in little return for considerable effort, partly because of the relatively small numbers who were felt to be eligible according to the college's interpretation of the eligibility criteria, and partly because some of those identified had made applications which were subsequently rejected.

Some colleges had spent large amounts of time and effort in order to unearth potential ALG recipients, although some of this effort may have been misdirected, or may have been founded on a misinterpretation of the eligibility criteria. For example, although ALG is available for full-time students, one college had distributed letters to all 2,000 part-time students, only to find that there was just one student who was eligible.

3.2.3 Awareness-raising mechanisms

Despite the short lead-in time from the announcement of ALG to the start of the academic term in September 2003, strenuous efforts had been made to incorporate information about ALG into a wide range of materials, notably college literature (including induction packs) and websites, posters, leaflets etc. Evidence of this was apparent at many colleges visited, and enrolment was specifically mentioned as a key event at which these were displayed. Therefore, it is important that colleges have the necessary marketing materials well in advance of the main enrolment dates (September is the key month for enrolment). With this in mind, it is clearly essential that those involved in the college enrolment process fully understand the criteria pertaining to ALG when they are preparing marketing materials and awareness-raising strategies.

One college respondent specifically mentioned the inclusion of information about ALG in the students' financial handbook, which had been produced by the student services section, which had featured in the 'Age 19 plus' section. Information was also included in every enrolment pack. Perhaps the most important mechanism for this first year, however, had been to ensure that those college staff involved in the enrolment process were properly briefed so that they were able to impart information to potential students attending the enrolment sessions.

'We modified the enrolment briefing at the start of the year, and did a big sell on ALG at departmental meetings and with support departments'

(College respondent)

LSCs were involved in the distribution of marketing material for use by colleges at their Open Days, as part of their overall promotion of ALG. In one instance, the LSC's marketing department was drawing up a plan which included the use of leaflets and posters in bus shelters. LSCs were allocated £15,000 for marketing. One LSC decided that best use could be made of this money by using it as a contribution to a wider marketing campaign promoting adult learning. The use of posters on public transport, such as on the back of buses, was also felt to be a good way of getting messages across to current non-learners to encourage them to think about returning to full-time education. It has to be said, however, that there was little or no evidence of any particular activities being successful in relation to ALG. For example, one attempt at advertising on buses, with posters stating "I'm an intelligent person, get me out of here" appeared to have met with little success. There had been insufficient time to implement an awareness-raising strategy before enrolment in 2003, and therefore the mechanisms mentioned tended to be part of future plans.

A common suggestion was that more understanding about, and interest in, ALG would be generated by a sustained media campaign. While this may be true, the difficulties of mounting such a campaign for an entitlement which is only available in specific locations during the pilot stage are all too apparent. Principally, a disproportionate level of resources would be needed to respond to enquiries from individuals who live outside the boundaries of the pilot areas. This is not to say that some highly localised media channels, such as the local press and local radio, could not play a part. Indeed, examples of such initiatives were found in the course of the

research. For example, in one pilot area where the Asian community had been targeted, adverts had been placed on the local Asian radio station, albeit with little response being elicited.

Taken together with the example given earlier, of the lack of success of a campaign involving posters on buses, this suggests that, in order to be effective, awareness-raising should be targeted at specific student groups or applicants, rather than being aimed at the general public.

There were varying views about the quality of the materials which had been produced to publicise ALG, although it was felt that this variability would be less evident during the second year, due to the revisions which had been, and were being, made. A particular concern was a perceived lack of clarity about eligibility criteria in marketing materials.

'The publicity material has been excellent – very supportive and realistic. The DfES have taken things on board and amended things'

(LSC respondent)

'I think the posters are pretty good and I think they are pretty eye-catching and I think we have had some responses off those. But I don't think there has been enough, not in college anyway, and also, like I say, I have not seen anything sort of outside'

(College respondent)

'They were very basic. They were very glossy and I'm sure they were very expensive, but in terms of actually answering questions, my recollection is that it's basically you could be entitled to this, either speak to your college or contact this number.'

(College respondent)

One college respondent expressed concern about the ALG publicity leaflet being difficult to understand for those students who did not have English as a first language, while another singled out the 'Earn as you learn' leaflet as being unhelpful, as it did not fully explain the impact of receipt of ALG on benefits. This was also mentioned by a Jobcentre Plus representative.

'If I remember right, it said something like 'go back and learn for £30', but that is not the same for everybody and I think that one of the things where we are very

realistic in our Jobcentres is that people want to know pounds, shillings and pence, they want to know what does this mean.'

(Jobcentre Plus respondent)

The work of Catherine Shovelin who had developed the ALG marketing materials was considered to have been extremely helpful. The materials produced, notably that relating to strategies for increasing awareness, were regarded as being of "exceptionally good quality".

3.2.4 Emerging issues

As asserted earlier, respondents were confident that, for the second year of the pilot, promotion and publicity of the initiative would be more firmly embedded in the literature and dissemination processes of colleges. Certainly, colleges were geared up to impart information about ALG at Open Days and as part of other college activities, and to incorporate it into their guidance to potential students, especially from August onwards. Two elements of raising awareness of ALG which were considered to be especially important were the use of word of mouth dissemination, and the role of college tutors.

It was felt that knowledge of the existence, and potential availability of ALG would become more widespread purely on the basis of word of mouth recommendations. Importantly, this would lead to an understanding of ALG being a factor in the decision-making process of those contemplating or considering enrolling at a college. This would offset the current over-reliance on identifying and 'converting' those who had already made that decision, and acted upon it by enrolling on a course.

'Word is getting round – especially when people realise they can have a part-time job and claim'

(College respondent)

At the same time, the role of individual tutors in making students aware of their potential entitlement to ALG was considered vital. Clearly, carrying out this role effectively would be contingent on the tutors having an accurate and thorough understanding of the regulations governing ALG, especially in terms of eligibility criteria. This, in turn, requires great clarity about the eligibility criteria, as well as consistency in their implementation. It was also evident from the interviews that

tutors had differing degrees of enthusiasm for informing students about ALG, with some being more proactive than others. Nonetheless, there is clearly a need for colleges to use existing mechanisms, or to introduce new ones, for the purpose of ensuring that all tutors are fully aware of the availability of ALG, and of the accompanying eligibility criteria and regulations.

For many colleges, 2004 would also see the introduction of Education Maintenance Allowances (EMA). This was seen to offer the potential for joint messages about entitlements to EMA or ALG being mutually reinforcing.

Despite this anticipated increase in promotional activity in the second year of the pilot, promotion of the initiative to generate more widespread awareness of ALG's existence was still of concern, especially in the light of the need to generate a significant increase in the numbers in receipt of ALG.

'Despite our attempts, public perception is low. The problem is that it is a small pilot and therefore not widely known about'

(College respondent)

Having reviewed their experience from the first year of the implementation of ALG, one college was initiating a combination of methods for generating awareness, including:

- a fortnightly student bulletin, which is emailed to all students, sent to all personal tutors, and which makes regular mention of ALG
- targeting students on Community Education courses
- writing to all students in the appropriate age range
- distributing leaflets, posters etc from the LSC
- ensuring that ALG is flagged up at enrolment
- offering a £100 prize for the best design of a poster for ALG (this had been tried, but there were no entrants)
- items on ALG in the bulletin which is distributed to all part-time students five times a year

As far as recommendations of good practice were concerned, it would seem that the following elements are essential and should be encouraged:

- thorough briefing and engagement of college staff, especially course tutors
- inclusion of details of ALG in all relevant college material (e.g. student handbooks, enrolment and induction packs, student bulletins etc)
- targeted distribution of information leaflets to students, and selective siting of posters
- incorporating presentation of details of ALG, both in handout material and in responding to enquiries, at all appropriate times during college enrolment sessions

Box 2 Summary of ALG Marketing and Awareness Raising

Raising awareness was difficult because of the timing of the introduction of ALG, so near to the start of the academic year. In future, marketing materials will need to be provided a few months before the start of the academic year.

The emphasis had been on retrospective identification and informing of potential applicants; and many colleges had made strenuous efforts to identify ALG-eligible students.

A wide range of promotional and awareness-raising mechanisms had been employed. It was perceived that marketing to the general public (e.g. on back of buses) was less effective than targeting college students.

Despite the eligibility criteria for ALG being available on the website, and in Management Information updates, it was evident that misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the eligibility criteria had inhibited the awareness-raising process.

Allied to the above point, there was also a perceived lack of clarity about eligibility criteria in marketing materials.

The roll-out of the Education Maintenance Allowance and the role of IAG Partnerships were other factors which could contribute to more widespread awareness.

As far as recommendations of good practice are concerned, the following elements should be encouraged:

- Thorough briefing and engagement of college staff, especially course tutors
- Inclusion of details of ALG in all relevant college material (e.g. student handbooks, enrolment and induction packs, student bulletins etc)
- Early distribution of information leaflets, and appropriate positioning of posters
- Incorporating presentation of details of ALG, both in handout material and in responding to enquiries, at all appropriate times during college enrolment sessions.

3.3 Perceptions of the Adult Learning Grant

Despite low take up of ALG, perceptions of the grant among interviewees and email survey respondents were favourable and the new grant was universally welcomed. In particular, the ALG was seen as a useful addition to post-19 support and, by some respondents, as an important element in the Skills Strategy.

3.3.1 Eligibility criteria

On the whole, it was considered appropriate to apply strict eligibility criteria to receiving the ALG. However, reflecting concerns that the Skills Strategy should encourage as many people as possible to improve their skills, a range of suggestions were made for widening eligibility to ALG:

First full level 2 and level 3 qualifications

Eligibility for the ALG is limited to adults studying for their first full level 2 or 3 qualification. Full level 2 is 5 GCSEs (A*-C) or equivalent or a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) at level 2. Full level 3 is two A levels or equivalent, or a NVQ at level 3. Learners who are 'part qualified' may be eligible for the ALG if their studies enable them to attain a full level 2 or 3 qualification for the first time and if they have an appropriate Learning Agreement. Learning providers are expected to use their discretion in such cases.

On the whole, eligibility for level 2 and 3 qualifications was considered appropriate for promoting pathways into Further and Higher Education. Concerns regarding the level of qualification centred on:

- **Level 2 qualification**

It was felt that Level 2 is too high for learners with basic skills needs. Despite existing provision for those with basic skills needs such as free tuition, the view was commonly expressed that such learners need greater encouragement to persuade them to apply for courses at their local FE college. These learners were perceived to lack the confidence in many instances to move immediately towards a full level 2 course. ALG-supported basic skills courses and the

extension of ALG eligibility to level 1 courses were suggested as possible ways of encouraging more learners to move onto level 2 courses.

A number of colleges have mentioned ..say, in the first term, an extended induction to look at skills, to look at what might be needed to support learning and then you have two and half terms to get to your level ...getting them onto that first level is the hardest task.

(LSC interviewee)

- **First full level 2 or level 3 qualification**

Learners wishing to retrain for the employment market at their previous level of vocational/academic qualification are not eligible for the ALG. It was felt that more flexibility should be built into the application process to enable such individuals to re-skill using the ALG for financial support.

- **Eligible courses**

Some respondents felt making the ALG available to learners on courses identified as addressing local skill shortages should be introduced.

Full-time study

Learners in full-time learning (as defined by the Learning and Skills Council) are eligible for the ALG. In practice, this means that learners must be enrolled on courses requiring at least 450 guided learning hours over a 12 month period, or at least 150 guided learning hours per term in the case of full-time part-year courses. Guided learning requires that a member of staff is present, at a lecture or during NVQ assessments, for example. A learning agreement stating that the course is full-time is required for the application and the learner's attendance is monitored and reported on a weekly basis to the administrative provider.

It was felt that the full-time criterion could put some learners off unnecessarily, as they may misinterpret full-time learning to mean 9 a.m. – 5 p.m. study during the week. In reality, full-time study entails 13 guided learning hours per week, and it was considered entirely feasible for ALG learners to study full-time on this basis and to work part-time to supplement their income if required. There are clearly difficulties in informing and marketing ALG to potential learners who may be put off by the idea of full-time study in the first instance (see Section 3.2).

However, situations were mentioned where full-time study, however defined, could put potential learners off for valid reasons:

- Some learners may choose to study for a NVQ because they can progress at their own pace. In these cases, the ALG restrictions would be inappropriate to their style of learning.
- For learners receiving out-of-work benefits such as Income Support or Job Seekers Allowance, the move to full-time study would leave them ineligible to receive out-of-work and other passported benefits. It is doubtful that the ALG would financially compensate learners for loss of these benefits and it is, therefore, unlikely that the ALG would be an attractive option in such circumstances. There was some debate as to whether such learners should continue to receive out-of-work benefits whilst receiving the ALG for full-time study (see further below). It should be stated that ALG is targeted first and foremost at those undertaking full-time study, and is not necessarily intended for benefit recipients.
- For learners in full-time work, ALG is unlikely to compensate for their loss of earnings caused by reducing the number of hours worked in order to fulfil ALG's guided learning hours rule. Again, in such circumstances the ALG may not be an attractive option⁶.
- ALG's full-time study restriction fails to address a key barrier to learning, that is, lack of time. Interviewees often cited mothers with childcare responsibilities as most likely to fall into this category.

Some respondents treated guided learning hours as a 'moveable feast'; one interviewee admitted to 'adding something extra in' to make sure the learner met his/her guided learning hours target.

⁶ It should be noted that the needs of full-time workers might be better met by initiatives such as the Employer Training Pilots, which provide for paid time off work.

Age limit

At the time fieldwork was conducted, eligible learners were required to be aged at least 19 and no more than 30 years⁷. Learners aged 18 can apply for the ALG one month before their 19th birthday. Proof of age, such as a birth certificate, is required for the application form.

No-one questioned the lower limit on eligibility for the ALG, although some welcomed the lowering of the age limit to enable learners to turn 19 years during their studies. There was a generally-held view that a range of financial support (such as the Education Maintenance Allowance) and training schemes (such as New Deal) were already available to younger age groups and ALG was clearly perceived as a grant for adults only. However, it was considered essential to make sure that a smooth transition operated for those learners wishing to move straight from EMA to ALG.

Limiting the eligible age to 30 years was perceived as unfair (for example, this was seen by some as mirroring 'ageist' employment practices), and particularly restrictive for level 3 learners who were commonly perceived to be 35 years plus. One interviewee noted that the ALG simply added to an existing array of post-19 provision which has confusingly varied upper age limits. Nevertheless, there was a clear expectation that the upper age limit would be lifted in subsequent years, resolving many of the problems associated with the upper age restriction.

Out-of-work benefits

Nearly all the interviewees commented on the inability of learners receiving out-of-work benefits to claim the ALG. Many felt the level of the grant would need to be increased to at least £50 per week if the ALG were to act as an incentive for benefit recipients to move into full-time learning. The maximum payment available to ALG learners of £30 per week was seen as an arbitrary amount, with some interviewees unclear about what elements of learning the grant was intended to cover. Such comments were often made in the context of drawing new learners into further education. At present, the ALG would most likely attract learners already working

⁷ The upper age limit has subsequently been removed for learners studying full-time for their first full level 2 qualification, in accordance with the Skills Strategy.

part-time or dependent on another individual for financial support (a parent or partner, for example). In this respect, the criteria were seen as restricting the ALG's ability to widen participation in further education (see Section 3.3.2 below).

Responses to the email survey reflected the semi-structured interviews with comments that stressed the importance of allowing those receiving Job Seekers Allowance or Income Support, to access the ALG as a 'training allowance' in order not to exclude the unemployed from benefiting from the grant.⁸

3.3.2 Perceived impact of the Adult Learning Grant

Interviewees were asked to comment on the likely impact of the Adult Learning Grant (ALG) on areas such as pathways into higher education, retention rates and on widening participating in further education (FE). The capacity of the ALG to impact on such areas was seen as difficult to predict at the time of the interviews because of the lower than expected take up of the grant. Take up was expected to increase in 2004, although this view was tempered by some who felt much more needed to be done in order to inform potential learners about the ALG. The ALG was therefore viewed in terms of *potential* and many felt the current eligibility criteria imposed an over-restrictive limit on the grant's 'true' potential to widen participation in FE.

Pathways to higher education

The ALG could act as a useful adjunct to the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) in encouraging 19 plus learners to study to level 3 and beyond. However, it was highlighted that access to higher education (HE) courses already existed for learners and the ALG simply provided a second means of studying full-time for HE entry. In addition, access to higher education may not be a high priority for learners living in low skill, low wage geographical areas.

Impact on student decisions and behaviour

Because of low take up of the ALG, the impact of ALG on retention rates is unlikely to be known until 2004. Interviewees and survey respondents felt ALG might provide

⁸ It is important to note that New Deal for Skills will address the concerns raised during the interviews and by survey respondents.

useful continuity in financial support for 19 plus learners leaving the EMA scheme. There was a widely-held view that the 2003 in-take of ALG learners had already decided to study; the ALG was 'an added bonus' for learning rather than the 'trigger' for it. Respondents to the email survey, for example, commented that the 2003 in-take often applied for the ALG once they had enrolled on their course and therefore it was too early to know whether the ALG could influence students' decisions about whether to study full- or part-time. Interviewees were also ambivalent about commenting on the potential of the ALG to influence a reduction in drop out rates. Some felt that in circumstances where learners faced financial hardship, £30 per week could 'tip the balance' in enabling a learner to complete his/her studies. Some survey respondents commented that they had observed improvements in attendance and retention as a result of the ALG. However, most felt the small numbers of ALG recipients at their colleges prevented an assessment of the ALG's impact on student behaviours.

Widening participation in further education

ALG learners were often referred to as a 'niche client group' because of the eligibility criteria attached to receiving the ALG and because it sits within a range of other schemes and initiatives already available to learners such as New Deal, Social Regeneration Funds and Learner Support Funds. There was a widely-held view that the DfES had broadened the eligibility criteria during the first year of the ALG's implementation in order to make the grant more widely available among the existing student population. This was perceived by some as the DfES simply attempting to massage the take up figures upwards, whilst failing to address the reasons for low take up among non-traditional learners. Some interviewees suggested community-based approaches would be necessary for widening participation in FE. Others felt closer working between the DfES and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) would be helpful in planning for greater coherence between the education and benefit systems for out of work and low-income learners. Many felt that the ALG in its current form provides a subsidy for learners who had already decided to learn, rather than an incentive to learn.

Again, this reflects a misinterpretation of the aims of the ALG, for the principal goal of ALG is to provide support for those seeking to achieve first, full Level 2 qualifications.

Therefore, the fact that they were already committed to undertaking a course is not necessarily an indication of policy failure.

Responses to the email survey reflected the opinions expressed by interviewees, with many commenting that the grant amount was too little to persuade individuals to move into full-time study. Many felt the eligibility criteria would need revision (for example, raising the upper age limit, extending the ALG to individuals on out-of-work benefits) before more diverse groups of students could be attracted into full-time learning via the ALG. Better targeted and timely publicity would also be required.

Box 3 Summary of Perceptions on the ALG

The ALG is a welcome addition to post-19 support.

It was considered feasible for ALG learners to study full-time (i.e. 13 guided learning hours per week) and work part-time to supplement their income if required.

At an early stage of roll-out, ALG was misinterpreted as a tool for widening participation in learning. As a result, the eligibility criteria for receiving ALG were often judged in these terms.

The upper age limit for receiving the ALG was considered unfair⁹.

There was speculation that basic skills courses to prepare some learners for level 2 might subsequently improve take-up of level 2 qualifications.

The first level 2 or 3 criterion does not help those who wish to retrain to improve their employability, even on courses which would address local skills shortages.

Learners receiving out-of-work benefits are not eligible for ALG and these are a core group who need skills to improve their employability¹⁰.

The full-time criterion does not encourage people with limited time (such as parents caring for young children) to study.

⁹ The upper age limit has been removed for learners studying full-time for their first full level 2 qualification, in accordance with the Skills Strategy.

¹⁰ It should be noted that learners receiving out-of-work benefits receive full fee remission, and concerns raised regarding support for these groups of learners will be covered in New Deal for Skills.

3.4 The Application Process

When considering the findings concerning the application process, and perceptions of respondents, it is important to remember the timing of the fieldwork, the bulk of which was carried out in the first half of the academic year. Given that changes were made to the procedures, as a result of DfES or MCC responding to requests from stakeholders, in the hope of improving the system, the extent to which this could be picked up in the fieldwork was limited.

3.4.1 Pre-application enquiries

Some concern was expressed regarding the pre-application stage when students make initial enquiries about the Adult Learning Grant (ALG). Colleges felt that student advisors were frequently unable to state clearly whether a student would be eligible for the ALG or not, where the student was receiving some form of state benefit. There was a perception that these students would be unlikely to apply for the ALG if they felt they would risk losing other income on which they relied, and would therefore be put off making any further enquiries about the grant. Where colleges had high numbers of students receiving state benefits, some felt the ALG posters raised expectations among this population of students, only to be told by the student advisor that they were not eligible for the grant. Some interviewees suggested that one point of contact should be provided for students to check their eligibility for the grant and, where relevant, check any ramifications for receipt of state benefits before any formal application was processed.¹¹

3.4.2 Application form and evidence requirements

The application process itself was generally seen to be working well and the ALG application form was considered by most to be appropriately designed for students. Manchester City Council (MCC) was nearly always described as very helpful, efficient and responsive by both interviewees and survey respondents. There was a clear understanding that it was essential to have systems that could identify fraudulent applications, and many references were made to the lessons learned by

¹¹ The DfES and MCC are currently in discussions regarding the provision of an advisory service for learners in receipt of Housing Benefit.

what was described as the ‘Individual Learning Account fiasco’. But there was a strong sense that the DfES and MCC may have gone into ‘overkill’. Colleges felt they should be better trusted to certify information relating to student applications, and highlighted their own auditing procedures as evidence of good practice.¹² The key issues identified by interviewees fell into the following categories:

- It was not always apparent why certain pieces of documentary evidence, for example, bank statements and payslips, were required by the administrative provider. The information contained on the document, such as bank account numbers, were often the only piece of information required. Colleges felt there was need for more clarity about what evidence was required by the administrative provider and for what purpose.
- Students were not always keen to send originals such as birth certificates through the post. Colleges were often perplexed as to why certified copies could not be sent instead.
- Proving ‘no income’ or ‘no previous qualifications’ is problematic and caused confusion for some students in terms of what type of evidence would be acceptable.
- The language used on the application form is legalistic in places and may put some students off.
- The application form should include ‘not applicable’ boxes for greater clarity – there were examples of forms being returned as incomplete when students had in fact answered all the questions as set out.
- A simple checklist of application requirements should be included with the application pack to simplify the process for students and colleges.
- For the future, the application process must successfully accommodate eligible students moving from the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) to the ALG.

3.4.3 Length of the application process

A key concern among interviewees was the timescale involved in processing applications. Many felt the timescale was too long and the number of pending

¹² From September 2004, certified copies of documentary evidence supporting applications will be accepted by MCC and DfES.

applications too high (i.e. where applications are subject to on-going queries). There was a perception that students were more likely to give up, go elsewhere or simply assume they had not been accepted for the grant when they had not heard from the administrative provider for a prolonged period. There were a small number of examples where students were said to have dropped out of college because of the long drawn out nature of the process. The length of time it took to process student applications often meant large backlogs of attendance data for colleges to sort out once students were accepted for the ALG. For colleges the backlog was seen as avoidable and caused some degree of frustration among college staff.

3.4.4 Appeals

At the time of the interviews, most colleges had no experience of ALG appeals procedures. Among the few that had experienced the procedure, there was a perception that appeals were often successful. For this reason, appeals were often perceived as further adding to the long timescale of the application process.

Some colleges felt that rejected applicants and students whose appeals had failed should be directed automatically by MCC to IAG Partnerships and learndirect to enable them to look for other forms of financial support for which they might qualify.

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3.4.5 Learning Agreements

Manchester City Council (MCC) had originally requested Learning Agreements (LAs) from students as evidence of the qualification level being studied and the number of guided learning hours associated with the course.

There was frustration among colleges that MCC had not designed and enclosed a form with the application pack for this purpose. In practice, MCC accepted the colleges' own LAs where these were available, or enrolment forms. However, because students frequently lost copies of their LAs and enrolment forms, MCC

¹³ For 2004/5 MCC will ensure letters to rejected applicants refer the learner to either IAG partnerships and/or learndirect.

would frequently request copies of the relevant documents from the colleges themselves. Some colleges felt this placed an unwarranted burden on college staff and added to college administration costs. In one case, MCC had agreed that college confirmation that an appropriate LA was in place for a student would be sufficient evidence for ALG applicants. What is apparent from the interviews is that varied arrangements for documentary evidence have evolved as MCC has attempted to accommodate each college's circumstances over time. Some colleges reported that MCC had initiated payments to students prior to receiving LA documentation as a way of speeding up the payment process for students.

Box 4 Summary of the ALG Application Process

Student uncertainty regarding eligibility for the ALG and potential ramifications for receipt of state benefits may be discouraging applications.

Where possible, the application process should be streamlined and simplified for colleges and students. The requirement to subject applications to rigorous checks needs to be better balanced with user-friendliness.

The application process must be speeded up to avoid losing 'pending' applicants.

Varied arrangements have evolved between MCC and colleges for collating documentary evidence e.g. Learning Agreements.

The application process must successfully accommodate eligible students moving from EMA to the ALG

3.5 Systems and Resources for Administering the ALG

3.5.1 Monitoring attendance

Setting up systems for monitoring student attendance appeared to create most problems for colleges. Many felt that the systems that were in place were yet to be fully tested because of the low take up of the ALG among their student population. Where colleges had experience of the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) systems for monitoring attendance for the ALG were often ‘tagged’ on to existing systems for monitoring attendance for EMA. Some felt that colleges with no experience of the EMA would be more likely to struggle to set up systems for the ALG quickly. Colleges without experience of the EMA requested resources for setting up and running the ALG, whilst for colleges already administering the EMA, staff time for administering the ALG had often become ‘absorbed’ into the work of the individual(s) responsible for the EMA. There were concerns, however, that although workable at present, when student numbers for EMA (and the ALG) increased this arrangement would no longer be manageable. Some interviewees highlighted the fact that colleges receive £70 per EMA student from the government but nothing for ALG students. One interviewee stated that s/he did not wish to devote too much time and energy to administering the ALG because college resources were not paid for.

For colleges with experience of operating the EMA, there were some reservations that a system that worked well in schools would not necessarily work well for adult learners or transfer easily to the college context:

- College days are more complex than the average school day requiring more than morning and afternoon registrations. College students may attend a dozen or so classes in one day and need to obtain tutor’s signatures for each one, creating larger amounts of data for central records.
- Adult learners may feel insulted at being asked to collect signatures for attendance, some college staff felt embarrassed asking adult learners to complete timesheets. Adult learners unused to the college context, such as the

long-term unemployed, may find the adjustment to 100 per cent attendance difficult at first.

- Adult learners may have good reasons for absences, such as parental leave when a child is off school. There appeared to be a need for greater clarity in defining authorised absences for adult learners. There were examples where greater leniency was considered appropriate for older students, such as where students were permitted to self-certify sickness and where a minimum attendance record (i.e. less than the 100 per cent attendance stipulated by the administrative provider) was considered acceptable. This latter approach may reflect the view held by some that it was unfair to penalise a student the full week's payment for missing just one session during a week.

In addition, discrepancies between the two schemes were highlighted. For EMA students, for example, attendance, behaviour and progress are monitored whereas for the ALG, only attendance data are collated.

Most difficulties lay in relaying attendance data back to the college's centralised (often electronic) reporting system. The collation of course registers was considered not feasible. Registers are working documents and are, therefore, very rarely available at one central location. As a result, systems for monitoring attendance relied on paper timesheets, which students would ask tutors to sign as evidence of their attendance. Students were expected to deliver their completed timesheets to the college by the end of each week. Some colleges admitted this could be difficult for students based on sites geographically remote from the central administration block. In one case, a nearby college was known to be operating an 'honesty box' where timesheets did not require tutors signatures and were instead subject to random checks against central registers. No college had established fully electronic attendance and reporting systems, although some interviewees did discuss the potential benefits in doing this.

During fieldwork colleges appeared to be taking very similar approaches to monitoring and reporting student attendance although it should be noted that due to the newness of the grant and the low level of take up, in many cases the approaches

being adopted by colleges could not be described as fully operational and tested systems.

There were broadly two approaches for authorising absences:

- A student would contact the relevant course tutor and the tutor would use her/his discretion in authorising the absence. Colleges operating this system commented that it could be time consuming in collating authorised absences from each tutor.
- A student was expected to contact a central telephone number and a member of the college ALG administration team would make a decision, and make a record of the authorisation on the student's weekly return.

Colleges felt that as the numbers of students for both EMA and ALG increased, the use of timesheets and the need to meet tight weekly deadlines would become increasingly problematic for them, given current staffing levels and technology.

3.5.2 Student advisory support

Colleges provided a variety of support for students including email and telephone helplines, lunchtime drop-in sessions and access to student advisors. Where college staff had provided support to students, this tended to involve helping students determine their eligibility for the ALG, completing application forms, and dealing with queries from MCC. A few interviewees stated that their colleges had insufficient resources available to help students with the ALG and that it was unreasonable of MCC to expect college staff to chase up queries on the MCC's behalf.

Generally, the ALG was seen as 'carrying itself' and students often liaised directly with the administrative provider. Although this was seen in positive terms, it was sometimes described as creating its own 'glitches'; where students dealt directly with MCC they were often unaware of who in the college to contact when things went wrong, most commonly when MCC responded to applications with queries and where payments had not been activated. Colleges felt it was important for MCC to

keep colleges updated on student progress throughout the application process to enable colleges to maximise their student support efforts.

Although college student support staff were happy to help learners wishing to apply for ALG there was a perception held by some college staff that they were at times expected to do the administrative provider's job. Better clarity in the student support function would benefit MCC, colleges and learners.

3.5.3 Interface between the ALG and other forms of financial assistance within colleges

The ALG was generally seen as complementing other forms of financial support currently available to students, and as relatively easy to administer alongside other schemes operating within colleges. There was some variation between colleges, however. For example, fee remission was not available to ALG students in every college consulted as part of the study.

Interviewees perceived ALG and Learner Support Funds (LSF) as very different forms of support serving very different purposes. LSF was seen as necessarily being at colleges' discretion because it enabled colleges to respond quickly to difficulties in learners' financial circumstances. ALG was not perceived as serving this purpose. Overall, the ALG had not appeared to have impacted on LSF, and ALG and LSF were not seen as being mutually exclusive. Some colleges, for example, had felt that ALG might enable them to better target LSF throughout the academic year. However, this had not happened, There was a perception that students had often already applied for LSF before they were aware of the ALG. Some colleges had highlighted the existence of the ALG to LSF applicants as a means of raising awareness of the ALG. To varying degrees, colleges reported that ALG learners also benefited from LSF. In a few cases, students had received LSF as they awaited their first ALG payment. It does not appear, therefore, that the ALG has reduced the financial burden on LSF. However, some college staff said they were intending to review entitlement for LSF in the light of ALG.

There was a perception that ALG would mean shifting money away from LSF and there were concerns therefore that LSF would fall in the future with the introduction

of the ALG and EMA. Colleges felt because ALG, EMA and LSF served different purposes there needed to be greater clarity regarding the interfaces between all three. Some colleges commented that they were keen to keep discretionary powers over schemes such as LSF which are designed to respond immediately to urgent financial hardship, which the administrative provider had demonstrated it was less well-equipped to deal with.

Box 5 Summary of Systems and Resources for Administering the ALG

In some colleges, the ALG systems had been ‘tagged’ onto existing EMA arrangements. There were, however, some reservations about how well EMA approaches would transfer to adult learners in the college setting.

Colleges tended to rely on paper-based timesheets and electronic reporting systems for collating and reporting attendance data to the administrative provider.

The lower than expected take up of the ALG meant that systems put in place in colleges were yet to be fully tested. There were concerns that systems might fail when subjected to the large numbers of students expected to receive EMA and the ALG the following year.

The additional resources required to set up and administer the ALG had been ‘absorbed’ into existing work. This was seen as unsustainable over the longer term.

Colleges varied in the degree of strictness that they applied to defining and authorising absence.

Colleges wanted to be ‘kept in the loop’ by the administrative provider so that they could identify students requiring support to conclude their ALG applications.

Colleges felt there needed to be better clarity regarding the purpose and interfaces between LSF, ALG and EMA. Some colleges were reviewing how they would operate LSF in the light of ALG.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The Adult Learning Grant (ALG) is seen as a welcome addition to post-19 financial support and the evaluation has provided a useful opportunity for professionals to feedback on the successes and challenges thus far. A recurring issue in the first year was the prevalence of a view that the mechanisms for implementing ALG, and especially the eligibility criteria, were inappropriate. However, this view appears to have been predicated on a belief that ALG was being introduced to address issues other than those encapsulated in the Skills Strategy. More often than not, ALG was perceived to be another initiative seeking to widen participation in learning opportunities. This may have been anticipated, given that the widening participation agenda has been prominent for several years, whereas the Skills Strategy is at the fledgling stage. Nonetheless, it can allow a somewhat skewed appreciation of ALG to develop.

It is important to take this point into account when assessing respondents' views of ALG. Certainly, during the second year of the evaluation, it will be necessary to explore, in greater depth, respondents' understanding of the aims of the initiative. While this tendency to locate ALG within the context of widening participation, rather than that of the Skills Strategy, may have been understandable during the first year of the implementation, given the relatively recent introduction of the Skills Strategy, it could be expected that the aim of the policy initiative would be better understood in the second year.

Most local LSCs have taken a lead role in coordinating the setting up of the ALG in their pilot areas, a role generally appreciated by colleges. As the ALG enters its second year of piloting, any impetus for networking and coordination should be maintained. Colleges in particular are clear that they cannot raise awareness about the ALG single-handedly: other organisations such as Jobcentre Plus, IAG Partnerships, and learndirect will also need to participate in the process.

It is generally accepted that recipients of the new grant are smaller in number than originally anticipated. Reasons for this may be the tardiness of the publicity in 2003, difficulties associated with raising awareness about a new and complicated initiative,

or because eligibility criteria were set too narrow to achieve the levels of take up initially envisaged. It is essentially because the ALG is viewed in positive terms that issues of access and eligibility should be reviewed prior to national roll-out. For example, this will mean making sure that publicity materials are made available early (colleges are likely to need materials and guidance *at the latest* by the Spring of 2005 for the September in-take).

In addition, it is important that the eligibility criteria are appropriately defined to encourage and support learners entering into further education. The study has demonstrated that there are concerns regarding the eligibility criteria, for example, relating to the imposition of an age limit, and the interfaces between ALG, LSF and state benefits. Colleges will need clear instruction about ALG eligibility for recipients of benefits.

For any application process it is, of course, a difficult challenge to find a suitable balance between rigour and user-friendliness. The application process is generally seen as sound; subject to a few 'teething problems', which the administrative provider has been keen to resolve. Identifying systems that can reduce the number of applications stalled by queries remains a key area to address, and the support that college staff can give students when applying for the grant could be enhanced by improving the administrative interfaces between colleges, Manchester City Council and students. In addition, for those EMA students who wish to stay on in post-19 education, it will be essential to find ways of moving eligible students onto the ALG as smoothly as possible.

Systems for monitoring and reporting attendance are often cumbersome and resource intensive, and are likely to be seriously stretched as more students receive grants and allowances requiring such modus operandi. To date, ALG administration has been 'absorbed' into existing workloads but a large expansion in ALG student numbers will require additional resources. Whilst the EMA has provided, in some colleges, useful groundwork for developing systems for monitoring and reporting attendance, the applicability and wholesale 'transplant' of the EMA approach to adult learners within college settings should be carefully monitored.

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ANNEX A

Interviewee information sheet

Interview Topic Guide

Coding Framework

Email Questionnaire

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INFORMATION SHEET
(30 October, 2003)

'Evaluation of the Adult Learning Grant – implementation study'

What is the evaluation about?

The evaluation aims to investigate the impact of the Adult Learning Grant (ALG) on those who are eligible for it and to describe and explain the processes involved in implementing it from the perspectives of those individuals directly involved in local delivery during the pilot phase. A primary objective of the study will be to identify the challenges involved in implementing ALG and to inform its wider subsequent national roll-out. The evaluation process comprises two parts: an *impact study* consisting of a survey of young adults and an *implementation study* involving case studies in the pilot areas.

Who is conducting the evaluation?

The Centre for Research in Social Policy (CRSP) at Loughborough University, in conjunction with the National Institute for Careers Education and Counselling (NICEC) and the National Centre for Social Research (NatGen) are conducting the evaluation on behalf of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES).

What will the implementation study involve?

The case studies will be carried out by CRSP and NICEC between November 2003 and January 2004 and will involve interviewing a range of individuals with knowledge and experience of implementing ALG. Face-to-face interviews will cover a range of topics such as interviewees' views on the factors that help or hinder take up of ALG, and their experiences of administering ALG. The interviews should take no longer than one hour.

The interviews will be tape-recorded for analytical purposes. Any information provided will be treated in the strictest confidence, and the tape recording and transcript of the interview will only be made available to research team members. All confidential material will be stored securely. Oral and written presentations of findings from the study will neither name interviewees nor provide material that could lead to their identification.

We greatly appreciate your willingness to participate in this study. If you have any queries regarding the above, please contact a member of the research team.

Contacts for further information

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EVALUATION OF THE ADULT LEARNING GRANT IN-DEPTH CASE STUDIES

TOPIC GUIDE, 30 OCTOBER 2003

Individual interviews with key informants based in Learning Centres (FE College Student Support Managers and Senior Managers), local LSCs, IAG Partnerships, JobCentre Plus. Eight individuals across the range of organisations listed above will be interviewed in each in-depth case study pilot area. Overall, a ‘snowballing’ approach will be adopted in order to select individuals with relevant knowledge and experience to inform the evaluation. Individuals with similar job roles across the pilot areas will therefore be approached for interview and it is envisaged that in many cases this will be reflected in the job titles held by those individuals.

Context: Four ALG pilot areas across England covering rural and industrialised settings and reflecting variations in ALG take up.

Aims of the interviews:

1. To describe and explain the processes involved in implementing ALG in four LSCs; in particular, to identify the challenges encountered and solutions employed, and any unintended outcomes associated with implementing ALG in those areas. Where possible, transferable good practices will also be identified.
2. To identify implementation processes that could explain variations in take up of ALG.
3. To identify what action, if any, needs to be taken to improve current implementation of ALG and wider subsequent implementation.
4. To inform the quantitative impact analysis.

Introduction:

When approaching an individual for interview, the researcher will explain the remit of the evaluation, indicate broadly the areas the interview will explore, and explain that the interview will be tape-recorded for analytical purposes. The researcher will reassure the individual that the tape-recording and transcript will only be made available to the research team, will be stored securely and then destroyed once the evaluation is complete. Oral and written presentations of findings will not name nor allow identification of research participants. It is envisaged that interviews will take place at the individual's place of work, in a private room and will take approximately one hour.

At the interview, the researcher will briefly reiterate the areas described above and confirm that the individual gives consent for the interview to proceed.

At the end of the interview, individuals will be thanked for their time. The researcher will seek permission from the individual to be contacted again should a follow-up interview be necessary.

TOPIC HEADINGS AND SUB-HEADINGS

Section 1: Background and structure of ALG

Brief overview of interviewee's role within organisation, with reference to implementing ALG.

Involvement in planning, setting up local ALG arrangements

- courses appropriate for ALG

Local structures that are in place for implementing ALG, and how interviewee's organisation interfaces with other stakeholders e.g. local LSC, LCs, JobCentre Plus, IAG Partnerships.

- examples of networking arrangements

Expectations of ALG:

- aims and desired outcomes (nationally, locally – are they doing anything differently as a result of ALG?)
- administration
- guidance (DfES, LSC)

Role of Local Strategic Partnerships, Learning Partnerships.

Section 2: Raising awareness about ALG

Local marketing and publicity strategies for maximising take up of ALG:

- responsibilities for design, development and implementation (including distribution of application forms/contact details)
- timing (including, what could or will be done differently)
- examples of successful approaches
- guidance (DfES, LSC)

Describe any groups of adult learners that are especially targeted via marketing and publicity, the reasons they are targeted and how:

- examples of successful approaches

Role of national LSC in raising awareness about ALG (current/planned campaigns)

Perceived impact of publicity on local take up:

- among different groups of adult learners (e.g. ethnic groups, ages, gender)
- groups of learners that should/will be targeted for publicity
- systematic evaluations/audits of effectiveness
- lessons learned
- future planning

Section 3: Perceptions of likely impact of ALG on student numbers and diversity of student population

Factors influencing take up of ALG

Factors that promote/inhibit take up of ALG, and reasons:

- level of awareness
- application process
- take up by different groups (e.g. women returners)
- benefits such as JSA, IS
- part-time study
- monitoring arrangements
- qualification targets (L2 and L3)

Take up of ALG among current students

Perceived knowledge of ALG and eligibility criteria among learners, LCs, JobCentre Plus, IAG providers

- interpretation of DfES guidance (i.e. study aims)
- further guidance

Role of Manchester CC in promoting take up

Mechanisms for providing guidance and advice about ALG to adult learners:

- IAG Partnerships
- JobCentre Plus
- LCs

Views on most effective ways of communicating with adult learners.

Factors affecting participation, retention and achievement

Views about ALG mechanism for improving participation, retention and achievement among different adult groups.

- impact on college teaching and administration

Views on role and impact of ALG in promoting pathways into HE, in particular, foundation degrees.

Current or planned procedures for monitoring learners who withdraw from ALG

- forms of communication with learners who withdraw from ALG
- examples of approaches used by LCs to draw learners back in

Current or planned procedures for monitoring destinations of learners who successfully reach L2 or L3 via ALG route

Explain how ALG fits in with other education, training, or employment initiatives (e.g. New Deal, Modern Apprenticeships, employer sponsored training, local employment opportunities)

- problems encountered/solutions employed

Explain how ALG fits in with discretionary financial support such as Learner Support Funds and fee remission

- exclusion criteria
- impact of ALG on take up and usage
- problems encountered/solutions employed

Section 4: Experiences of administering ALG

Experiences of ALG application procedures

Resources and staffing levels required to administer ALG application forms

Procedures and timescales for submitting applications (including appeals)

- entitlement documentation requirements
- checking individual eligibility
- deciding which qualification aims are eligible
- guidance from DfES
- communication between LCs, local LSC and Manchester CC.

ALG and benefits

- interpretations of benefit eligibility criteria

Decision making and Manchester CC

- responsibilities of Manchester CC and LCs
- issues / problems encountered
- views on entitlement criteria (too broad/narrow)

Key challenges in ALG application administration, and good practice

Learning Agreements

Describe involvement of LCs in completing LAs

Describe arrangements for:

- submitting LAs
- changing LAs
- dealing with broken LAs
- learners perceptions of LAs

Impact of ALG on:

- course decisions
- level or type of qualification sought
- full- or part-time study

Experiences of monitoring attendance

Procedures (current, planned) for monitoring attendance:

- requirements of Manchester CC
- reporting (non)attendance
- DfES guidance
- problems encountered

Definitions for legitimate non-attendance:

- religious holidays
- holidays
- DfES guidance (received, further)
- application of 'non-authorized absence' criteria

Resource and staff requirements for monitoring attendance

Communication arrangements between LCs, local LSC and Manchester CC for processing attendance records

Key problems encountered and any solutions employed

Payment of ALG

Methods and arrangements for paying ALG

- bank accounts
- 1 or 2 week in arrears
- planned changes/lessons learned

Delays in payments:

- reasons for delays
- solutions

Procedures for suspending or terminating payments

Arrangements for appeals against non-payment

Good practice in processing ALG payments

Further information:

- copies of relevant documentation relating to the administration of ALG e.g. application forms, learning agreements
- copies of relevant marketing material

EVALUATION OF THE ADULT LEARNING GRANT

QUALITATIVE IMPLEMENTATION STUDY

CODING FRAMEWORK

1 ALG infrastructure

- 1.1 Local lead agency incl. Role
- 1.2 Networks and steering groups (other agencies)
 - 1.2.1 Absent agencies – local/national (e.g. JobCentre Plus, DWP)
 - 1.2.1.1 Theories about absence
 - 1.2.1.2 Implications of absence
- 1.3 Roles of national bodies
 - 1.3.1 Manchester CC – positive/negative comments
 - 1.3.1.1 MI
 - 1.3.2 National LSC – positive/negative comments
 - 1.3.3 DfES – positive/negative comments

2 Raising awareness about ALG

- 2.1 Definitions of ALG objectives
- 2.2 Views on marketing materials – positive/negative comments
- 2.3 Descriptions of local marketing strategies
- 2.4 Descriptions of adults targeted
 - 2.4.1 Current learners - rationales
 - 2.4.2 Non-current learners – rationales
 - 2.4.2.1 Local employers
 - 2.4.3 Plans for next year
- 2.5 Perceived impact of publicity
- 2.5 Descriptions of mechanisms for providing guidance and advice about ALG to adult learners

3 Likely impact of ALG on student numbers and diversity

- 3.1 Views about eligibility criteria
 - 3.1.1 Level 2
 - 3.1.2 Level 3
 - 3.1.3 Age limit
 - 3.1.4 Full time study
 - 3.1.5 Means test
 - 3.1.6 Exclusions (e.g. benefit recipients)
- 3.2 Comments about applying for ALG
 - 3.2.1 Process issues
 - 3.2.2 Application forms
 - 3.2.3 Evidence requirements
 - 3.2.4 Role of Manchester CC
- 3.3 Views about impact of ALG
 - 3.3.1 Take up in first year – reasons and implications for roll-out
 - 3.3.1 On pathways to HE
 - 3.3.2 On retention rates within colleges
 - 3.3.3 On widening participation
 - 3.3.3.1 Implications
- 3.4 Monitoring arrangements
 - 3.4.1 Agencies responsible
 - 3.4.2 Monitoring successful learners
 - 3.4.3 Arrangements for dealing with learners who withdraw
- 3.5 Comments about ALG and other programmes/types of support
 - 3.5.1 Modern Apprenticeships
 - 3.5.2 New Deal
 - 3.5.3 Fee remission
 - 3.5.4 Learner Support Funds
 - 3.5.5 Other

- 4 Experiences of administering ALG**
 - 4.1 Staff resource implications
 - 4.1.1 Monitoring student attendance
 - 4.1.2 Student support
 - 4.1.3 Other resource implications
 - 4.2 Issues relating to the application process
 - 4.2.1 Data/evidence requirements
 - 4.2.2 Timescale
 - 4.2.3 Appeals
 - 4.2.4 Learning agreements
 - 4.3 Benefit claimants
 - 4.5 Payments – key issues

**EVALUATION OF THE ADULT LEARNING GRANT
EMAIL SURVEY (FE COLLEGES)**

QUESTIONNAIRE, 10 March 2004

Questionnaires will be emailed to key informants based in Learning Centres (FE College Student Support Managers and Senior Managers).

Context: Six ALG pilot areas across England.

Aims of the survey:

- 1 To complement the in-depth qualitative study by 'testing' the range of opinions expressed about the ALG in the four in-depth case studies against the remaining six pilot areas.
- 2 To identify factors that could explain variations in take up of ALG.
- 3 To identify what action, if any, needs to be taken to improve current implementation of ALG and wider subsequent implementation.
- 4 To inform the quantitative impact analysis.

Introduction:

The researcher will reassure the individual that all survey responses will be treated confidentially. Oral and written presentations of findings will not name nor allow identification of survey respondents.

Covering email:

Dear colleague

The Centre for Research in Social Policy has been commissioned by the DfES to evaluate the Adult Learning Grant now in operation across the ten pilot sites in England. Part of the evaluation involves a survey of FE colleges to record the views and concerns of staff in these organisations. The DfES has provided us with your name because you have some responsibility for the Adult Learning Grant (ALG) in your college.

Attached is a list of open questions. You may not feel able to answer every question on the list but may instead prefer to focus on just those areas that most relate to your role in administering the ALG. In most cases the attached list is being emailed to more than one individual in each college.

Please save the attached file to your hard drive. Once you have typed your answers into the document, please email the document as an attachment to Elspeth Pound (e.pound@lboro.ac.uk).

Your answers will be treated in strictest confidence and individuals will not be named in any written or oral presentation of findings.

Please return your answers by Wednesday 31 March 2004.

Your views and opinions of the ALG are very important to us. We hope you will be able to find the time to respond to this survey.

Many thanks

Elspeth Pound

SURVEY QUESTIONS

FE COLLEGES

Section 1: Background and structure of ALG

- (1) Which agencies are involved in delivering ALG locally? *(Do these agencies meet regularly? Are there any agencies that are not already involved that should be?)*

Section 2: Raising awareness about ALG

- (2) What materials have been used to create awareness of ALG e.g. leaflets, posters? *(How useful have these been? Would you want to change anything next time?)*
- (3) What arrangements have been used for providing guidance and advice about ALG to adult learners? *(Could these be improved?)*
- (4) What are your views on the local strategy used to market ALG? *(Would you modify anything about the strategy?)*

Section 3: The likely impact of ALG

- (5) Do you feel the eligibility criteria for receiving ALG are too narrow, too broad or right? *(Which criteria, if any, would you change and why?)*

The eligibility criteria state that the learner must have been normally resident in the UK three years prior to academic study, is aged between 19 and 31 years of age, and is studying full-time (full-time full-year or full-time part-year) for up to three years to achieve his/her first full Level 2 or 3 qualification. Learners will not be able to receive ALG if they are in receipt of Job Seekers Allowance or National Insurance credits. However, they can receive Housing Benefit, Council Tax Benefit and Second Adult Rebate and claim ALG.

- (6) Are any groups of adults in your pilot area especially targeted for the ALG? *(If so, why is this?) (How successful, in numbers terms, has this targeting been?)*
- (7) Are the application form and process involved appropriate for potential applicants? Yes/No *(If no, what are the problems and how could they be resolved?) (What, if anything, would you like to see changed about the application process?)*
- (8) What do you see as being the key factors that might inhibit take-up of ALG? *(Why do you think that this is the case?)*
- (9) How does ALG cohere/interrelate with other initiatives such as Modern Apprenticeships? *(Does it provide opportunities for new groups of adults, additional opportunities for existing learners or both?) (Does ALG complement or confuse adult learning support?)*
- (10) What impact, if any, has ALG had on Learner Support Funds? *(What are the relationships between ALG and LSF? What percentage of ALG recipients have also had LSF funding? What was the LSF for in these situations? Have there been instances where LSF have been to support the learner until their ALG funding came through?)*
- (11) Do you feel ALG will be successful in encouraging more diverse groups of adults into learning? *(If not, what factors might hinder its success?)*
- (12) Do you feel that ALG has had an impact on the decisions students make about what to study, what type/level of qualification to pursue or whether to study full- or part-time? *(If so, in what way(s) have students' decisions been influenced by ALG?)*
- (13) What impact, if any, has ALG had on student attendance and retention rates?
- (14) What measures, if any, would you like to see taken to improve ALG?

Section 4: Experiences of the administration of ALG

- (15) What has been your experience of dealing with the external administration provider?
- (16) What are the resource implications of the delivery of ALG for your organisation in your monitoring role? *(It would be helpful if you could state how you have calculated your resource implications).*
- (17) What have been the key challenges for your organisation in delivering ALG to date?
- (18) What do you foresee as being the key challenges for your organisation in delivering ALG over the next 12 months?

Elsbeth Pound
Malcolm Maguire
10 March 2004