

SUPPORTING LEARNERS THROUGH THE ADVANCED LEARNER LOANS PROCESS

January 2016

Learning and Work Institute

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About Learning and Work Institute

Learning and Work Institute (L&W) is an independent policy and research organisation dedicated to promoting lifelong learning, full employment and inclusion. We strive for a fair society in which learning and work helps people realise their ambitions and potential throughout life. We do this by researching what works, influencing policy and implementing new ways to improve people's experiences of learning and employment. We believe a better skilled workforce, in better paid jobs, is good for business, good for the economy, and good for society.

L&W brings together over 90 years of combined history and heritage from the 'National Institute of Adult Continuing Education' and the 'Centre for Economic & Social Inclusion'.

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FOREWORD

This report shows that we are fortunate in the further education sector to have scrupulous and high-integrity organisations who care about their learners. The support that colleges and independent providers offer to learners who are considering loan financing is good and taken seriously. The Skills Funding Agency, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) and Student Loans Company (SLC) has worked hard to provide resources which have been used to help learners make informed choices.

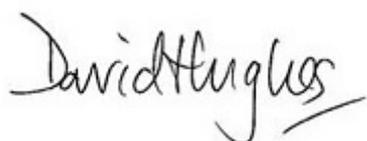
Of course there are some simple recommendations which build on the information and resources already in place and it is important that we continue to review the effectiveness of the advice and guidance provided. But overall, it is re-assuring that we found good practice amongst our sample.

It is clear that more needs to be done to increase the numbers of adults able to benefit from learning at Levels 3 and 4 in order to help meet the needs in the economy for more skilled people. There are two themes emerging which need further consideration.

The first is that general awareness amongst potential learners and employers of the loans programme needs to be developed further. More work is needed to understand how best to ensure that more adults understand the benefits they have available to them to learn and have that learning funded through income-contingent loans. It may, for instance, be that prospective learners would respond to more direct understanding of the jobs which qualifications might open up and the associated pay levels. Raising levels of awareness may help to increase participation in skills provision at Level 3 and 4, which is eligible to be funded with a loan.

The second theme is about the supply side and the structure of the learning which the loans support. More work needs to be carried out to understand which changes to delivery of learning would attract more learners. A loans programme which supported modularised learning, continuous professional development and blended learning with increased use of technology might all help. We simply don't know, so trialling and testing are needed as well as more market-research.

The loans programme looks set to be an important part of the financing of education and training for many years to come; it is imperative that we understand more about how we can make it work effectively.



David Hughes
Chief Executive, Learning and Work Institute

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The government introduced Advanced Learner Loans in further education in 2013/14. At the time this study was undertaken – in early 2015 – they were in their third year of implementation. This study, commissioned by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) and the Skills Funding Agency, explores providers' and learners' experience of loans since their introduction. In particular, it examines the effectiveness of the support available to learners during the loans process, and advises on where learners might be better supported.

It was conducted through structured telephone interviews with learning providers and intermediary bodies, and focus groups and individual interviews with learners. This report reflects the key themes emerging from the data. It identifies the effectiveness of current resources in supporting the learner through the loans process, and highlights where better support is needed.

The loan experience for providers, learners and intermediaries

Information and support for learners

Providers took broadly similar approaches to informing learners about the funding options for their qualification and accessing funding through Advanced Learner Loans. They used a range of methods to support and inform learners, including written materials, online resources, signposting and face-to-face support. These resources were, in many cases, adapted from Skills Funding Agency and Student Loans Company materials on eligibility for loans and how to access them. Feedback from providers on the quality and usefulness of these materials was generally very positive.

Information is provided to learners and prospective learners at every stage of the learner journey, including on enquiry, application and enrolment. Colleges also provide face-to-face information about loans at open days and briefing sessions, and try to increase awareness pre-enrolment through a range of other methods, including fact sheets, promotional leaflets and internal and external advertising. One college formed a task-and-finish group on internal and external communications and invested in local print and broadcast media advertising to promote the availability of loans. Another provider employed a Level 3 adviser to talk to Level 2 learners at the end of their course and discuss the options available to them, including Advanced Learner Loans.

Learners were generally very positive about the information and support given by their provider about loans and other sources of funding. This was often in the form of detailed information packs, including information about the application process and factors to consider in taking out a loan, and the Learning and Funding Information Letter, setting out course details and fee, and options for financing their studies. Usually, a professional advice and guidance team is available at the start of the learning journey and thereafter. Learners are able to access face-to-face advice and guidance on financial support options at any stage of that journey, and often pre-enrolment. This work is supported through awareness-raising and staff development activities for teachers and support staff. Ongoing support and guidance for learners is also sometimes offered through college virtual learning environments.

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All the learners who took part in the research found out about Advanced Learner Loans through their provider. In every case, this was either at the point at which the learner had decided on a course of study and had contacted the provider to enquire about it or to enrol, or when they were completing another course and information on progression was passed on. Most of the information offered by providers was aimed at learners who had already made the decision to return to study. Some providers used media campaigns and targeted advertising – for example, through Facebook – to reach a wider audience.

Work with key partners

Providers agree that links with key partners are important in getting the message about Advanced Learner Loans across to learners, but the strength of those links varies among providers and between providers and different types of partner. Most providers report good working relationships with Jobcentre Plus and the National Careers Service, with a number delivering National Careers Service contracts, or providing services through sub-contracts. Most also reported informing employers about Advanced Learner Loans as a potential method of funding eligible provision for their employees. However, none of the providers were able to give an example of where this had been successful. In the main, providers reported that employers have not been responsive to Advanced Learner Loans, with many reluctant to involve themselves in a decision that is their employee's to make.

What works in supporting learners to make informed decisions?

Staff development is a critical factor in ensuring learners get the support they need to make informed decisions about Advanced Learner Loans. All providers reported that information about Advanced Learner Loans forms a part of regular staff development. This includes sales, learner support and teaching staff and takes different forms, such as staff guides to loans, based on information provided by key agencies, and regular training and updating sessions in teams as part of staff development programmes. Smaller providers, in particular, reported how important it was for them to ensure that their 'front-of-house' and sales teams were fully informed about loans and were able to answer questions from potential learners. Larger providers made the same point about their learner support staff and curriculum teams, who have a particularly important role in supporting learners who are thinking about progression.

All providers thought that a mixed approach to communicating with learners was best. This included online promotion and information and the use of virtual learning environments to update learners on Advanced Learner Loans, as well as the provision of paper-based resources and face-to-face and telephone support. A number emphasised face-to-face support as particularly important in offering ongoing, proactive engagement with learners. One large further education college, with a number of campuses across its county, trains 'loans champions' at each centre to be Advanced Learner Loans experts at their site.

There was general concern, from learners, providers and intermediaries, about the level of public knowledge and understanding of Advanced Learner Loans. A number of interviewees felt that more needed to be done to get the message to a wider public, with a few suggesting the language of 'loans' and 'debt' was not particularly helpful when it came to communicating the potential benefits to learners. Some communities were stubbornly debt averse and had difficulty thinking of the loans as an investment. A number of providers thought a national campaign to raise awareness of Advanced Learner Loans would be useful. The learners confirmed that they had no knowledge of Advanced Learner Loans before they decided on a course of study and made initial contact with a provider.

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Supporting learners through the loans process

Many providers reported that the Student Loans Company (SLC) had been very efficient in resolving issues and there was generally positive feedback about the SLC's effectiveness.

Communicating with the learner throughout the learning process, and ensuring they can access support when they need it, was important to all providers. However, providers generally found it easier to work with learners who had progressed with them from Level 2. This was because the mechanisms of support around the Advanced Learner Loans process could start early. However, in many cases, learners were new to the concept of Advanced Learner Loans and this made the journey more difficult. These learners can require a lot more support, in gathering evidence or completing the application form, for example, and this can slow down the whole process.

There was considerable variation in learners' level of understanding regarding repayment of loans. Some learners were unsure what would happen in the event of their leaving their course of study early. A number were unclear about how the repayment process works for learners who have both an Advanced Learner Loan and a Higher Education (HE) loan.

While providers were generally positive about the technical administration systems, some felt that more assurance could be provided to learners once their application has been received and they are in the system. In some cases, providers have been able to overcome these issues by ensuring the right staff development is in place, using trained advisers and by recommending the use of telephone help lines, factsheets and other resources from the Student Loans Company and the Agency.

What further support would be useful?

Providers were generally happy with the quality and usefulness of information provided by the Skills Funding Agency and the Student Loans Company and most found it easy to adapt the material for their own use. There was positive feedback on the Learning and Funding Information Letter, with learners and providers generally finding it clear and succinct, though some felt it could be shorter and more 'streamlined'. Some providers suggested more variation in the types of resource available to learners. One called for more interactive demonstrations for learners applying for a loan, explaining what a loan is, how it might benefit them and how it will affect them later in life.

The impact of Advanced Learner Loans

The impact on learner participation

Providers confirmed that, overall, numbers are comparable with first year of delivery and certain types of provision are doing well among some providers. For example, a number of providers reported that Access to HE recruitment was performing well, attributing this to the policy of writing off Advanced Learning Loans on the completion of a higher education qualification. Professional qualifications for career-changers also remain relatively popular, with some providers reporting big shifts in learner engagement towards these sorts of courses and away from courses designed primarily for personal development, with no necessary financial return. This shift is seen as being a positive intended outcome, of current policy.

No provider was able to provide information on whether the introduction of Advanced Learner Loans had resulted in any marked change in retention, achievement or success rates although in many instances providers had not looked into this.

The impact on organisations

Most providers had responded positively, with some re-evaluating their Level 3 offer to target those learners most likely to take out loans. A few are looking at how they can promote progression to eligible Level 2 learners through the availability of Advanced Learning Loans. Several others said they were moving towards delivering a far more commercial market-sensitive strategy for Level 3 provision, particularly for professional qualifications and in regulated sectors such as care and accountancy. They observed that learners with a clear sense of career progression and who could identify an obvious financial reward were most likely to access a loan. More emphasis was being placed on qualifications needed to get a job and on marketing them more effectively.

The impact on learners

Providers noted that the learners most likely to fund their learning through an Advanced Learner Loan were those interested in career change or in progressing to higher education. Consequently, providers were shifting provision to focus more closely on courses that delivered professional and vocational qualifications for which there was local demand. Learners without a clear sense of career progression and the financial rewards associated with a particular professional qualification were less likely to take out a loan.

Impartial advice was mentioned as being particularly important to learners considering taking out an Advanced Learner Loan. Intermediary organisations stressed the importance of supporting learners in considering their wider financial circumstances when contemplating taking out a loan. Adult learners tend to have more financial commitments and existing debts and the decision to take out a further loan can often be a complex one.

Most providers reported that Advanced Learner Loans had encouraged learners to expect more of their courses and to put pressure on providers to deliver a high quality learner experience. Learners who were funding their learning through a loan were more likely to think of themselves as consumers and, consequently, to demand more. An intermediary stressed the importance of independent, impartial advice in such an environment and the need for learners to have support when things go wrong, as well as a space for redress.

Recommendations

- Providers should be encouraged to share best practice in informing and supporting learners with regards to financing their learning. This could include the development and dissemination of provider case studies, sharing of resources and opportunities for networking and CPD. Providers should also be encouraged to share best practice in staff development and training.
- Tailored information about Advanced Learning Loans should be developed, distributed to and embedded within key referral agencies including Jobcentre Plus, National Careers Service and professional and employer bodies.
- In order to stimulate demand for learning among working adults, providers should seek to raise awareness among employers and employer bodies of the support available through Advanced Learning Loans.
- Consideration should be given of how to raise levels of public awareness of Advanced Learning Loans. There is significant potential to increase the visibility of loans through strong messaging within other high profile national events and campaigns such as Adult

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Learners' Week/Festival of Learning, Skills Show etc, as well as at local and sector level.

- Further research should be undertaken to help us better understand how changes to the delivery of learning would attract more loans-funded learners. Key elements to be tested could include support for modularised learning, continuous professional development and blended learning with increased use of technology.
- Provider and learner resources should be reviewed on a regular basis to ensure they best meet the needs of their audience. Where possible, resources should be developed in a range of formats, including the use of video and interactive material. The interactive key facts document for prospective loans-funded learners, developed as part of this work, should be made widely available.
- Key information gaps that need to be addressed include: further help for learners to weigh up the costs and benefits of financing their learning through a loan; greater clarity in relation to eligibility for dual nationals and EU citizens, and in relation to repayment terms and conditions.
- It is recognised that the development of a sharia-compliant loan product for Muslim Learners is needed for both further and higher education. There is a need to make progress in this area.
- A small number of Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) based pilots should be commissioned to explore how provision could be developed to better meet the needs of local economies through the matching of Labour Market Information (LMI) with local demand for skills. Sectors such as health and social care, or accountancy, should be encouraged through their representative bodies to promote the availability of loans, particularly to prospective learners qualified to level 2 and looking for career development.

INTRODUCTION

About Learning and Work Institute

On 1 January 2016, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) and the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion joined together to become the Learning and Work Institute. Building on the expertise of both organisations, Learning and Work Institute strives for a fair society on which lifelong learning, support and work help people realise their ambitions and potential throughout life. We do this by researching what works, influencing policy and implementing new ways to improve people's experience of learning and employment.

Aims and objectives

In early 2015, the Skills Funding Agency commissioned NIACE to conduct research into the effectiveness of support available to learners during the Advanced Learner Loans process, and to advise on where learners might be better supported.

The work builds on consumer protection research undertaken by NIACE for the Agency in 2012, published as *Protecting the consumer during and after implementation of 24+ Advanced Learning Loans* (NIACE, June 2012). This initial study was used by BIS and the Agency to inform ongoing policy development and implementation, and as a basis for the development of learner information and provider toolkits. The report was published by the Agency to support the sector in engaging with 24+ Advanced Learning Loans, from which NIACE was then commissioned to develop and deliver a range of CPD activities for providers.

This new study explores providers' and learners' experience of loans since their introduction in 2013. As with the previous study, it is intended to inform the future development of loans policy and implementation. The objectives are:

To consult with providers, learners and intermediaries about their experience of loans;
To identify the effectiveness of current resources in supporting the learner through the loans process, and highlight where better support is needed; and

To produce an updated report for the Agency, including a 'key facts' document for learners and scoping out the resources and support needed for providers to engage successfully with learners.

The research was conducted between January and March 2015. Data were collected through structured telephone interviews with learning providers and intermediary bodies, and focus group and individual interviews with learners. This is the final report of the project. It is structured to reflect the key themes emerging from the data. The research tools used within the study are provided in Appendix 1.

Policy background

In November 2010, the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government published a new skills strategy, *Skills for Sustainable Growth*, and a funding plan, *Investing in Skills for Sustainable Growth*, which, together, set the policy direction for the period from 2011 to 2015. Among these reforms was a proposal for Advanced Learner Loans for adults aged 24 and over looking to study a qualification at Level 3 or Level 4. It was the first time in England that income-contingent loans had been made available for further education qualifications.

About loans

Advanced Learner Loans are currently available to learners:

- Aged 24 and over;
- Studying at Level 3 or 4; and
- At a Skills Funding Agency approved college or training organisation.

Learners start to repay once they have left the course and are earning over £21,000 per year. Learners make repayments at nine per cent of annual earnings above £21,000. Any outstanding balance remaining after 30 years will be written off.

If a student progresses to higher education after taking out a loan for an Access to HE diploma, their Advanced Learner Loan balance will be written off, on completion of their HE course. The minimum loan a learner can access is £300.

Methodology

The aim of this three-month qualitative study was to carry out detailed research focused on protecting the consumer in the further education loans market and ensuring they have the support they need at every stage of the process.

In order to address the research questions outlined above, NIACE drew on a range of different sources of evidence and expertise, including learner voice, provider leadership, and learner representatives and other intermediary bodies. The approach was based on that used in the 2012 study and comprised:

- Telephone interviews with 14 learning providers. Eight of these providers participated in the original study, which enabled us to compare their responses to their interview in 2012. Other providers were successful or new loans providers.
- Some provider interviews included a number of different college staff to provide a fuller response and address different perspectives;
- Telephone interviews with four intermediary organisations; and
- Focus group sessions and individual interviews with 12 learners who are funding their learning – in part or in full – with an Advanced Learner Loan. Learners from three institutions took part in the study. They were a diverse group in terms of demographic profile, motivation to learn and course of study. Six learners were studying an Access to Higher Education course. Five were studying for a Level 3 diploma.

The research tools can be found in the appendices.

In researching the need for a new 'key facts' document for learners, a review of all the associated documentation on the Skills Funding Agency website, National Careers Service website and SLC Practitioner Site was undertaken to establish the information 'landscape' the new document would inhabit and also to suggest how to make the 'voice' of the document both different and compatible. A review was also undertaken of a range of consumer initial information documents, including guidance from the Financial Conduct Authority, sample documents from financial services providers, and comparable information from utility providers.

Providers were asked whether they thought a new 'key facts' document would be a useful addition, and what they thought the benefits and risks of such a document would be. Learners also had a chance to comment on the usefulness of the document, and the most desirable format.

About the participants

Interviews were conducted with staff from 14 learning providers, including general further education colleges, private training providers, an adult education institute and a large voluntary-sector provider. The project team also carried out interviews with intermediary bodies, namely the National Union of Students, UNISON, the University and College Union and the Money Advice Service, and held focus group sessions and individual interviews with learners in receipt of an Advanced Learner Loan.

The providers

Most of the participating providers were further education colleges, which account for four out of every five learners in receipt of loans. The colleges taking part ranged in size and focus, and offered a range of different kinds of provision and modes of study. Numbers of learners in receipt of loans varied from 264 to 620. Most of the learners were taking Level 3 diplomas in vocational courses such as Supporting Teaching and Learning in Schools and construction, or on Access to HE courses, including many focused on health. All colleges reported fairly strong (though not always increasing) take-up in at least one of these two areas.

Provision was generally split fairly evenly between full-time and part-time learners, with many combining both work and study. All participating colleges reported a strong vocational flavour to the qualifications taken, with most learners having a clear sense of career progression at the outset of their course. Most learners were engaged in vocational courses leading to a professional qualification or higher study. The voluntary sector provider had around 50 learners funded through loans, all on a Level 3 programme on advanced community interpreting. Around half the learners on this course paid their fees upfront. The adult education institute had around 120 learners on Level 3 courses, between 70 and 80 per cent of whom have accessed loans.

Private provision varied considerably in scale, with one provider reporting around 150 learners with Advanced Learner Loans and another reporting more than 1,000. Most learners funded by loans with private training providers were studying for Level 3 diplomas.

Intermediary bodies

The intermediary bodies included unions, a student representative body and the Money Advice Service. They were able to offer feedback from learners and teachers, and give an insight into learner attitudes to debt, as well as the quality and usefulness of the information and support available to them.

The learners

Focus group sessions and individual interviews were held at three institutions, engaging a diverse group of learners, both demographically and in terms of their course of study, motivation, and prior experience of learning. Some reported having been out of learning for some time, while others had progressed through lower-level courses with the same provider. Motivations to learn included career change, career development, progression to higher learning and personal development. Twelve learners took part in the research.

THE LOANS EXPERIENCE FOR PROVIDERS, LEARNERS AND INTERMEDIARIES

Information and support for learners

Our initial study, undertaken in 2012, identified a range of information that learners, providers and intermediary organisations said could be usefully provided to support the successful implementation of loans policy. This research was subsequently used by the Agency, SLC and BIS to develop learner information, provider toolkits and CPD activities for practitioners. This latest study shows that the Skills Funding Agency, BIS and SLC has worked hard to provide resources for both individuals and providers to help learners make informed choices with regards to financing their learning.

'[We have] a range of colleagues who are experienced and up to date with funding methodologies ... who work closely with our heads of departments and their school management teams to share that consistent method [and] to provide support in terms of the way that we set our courses up and the associated course information ... it's a multi-faceted approach that we have throughout the organisation and ... that's led to a relatively high level of staff awareness of loans. I feel that that's had a really positive effect on our recruitment as well, which seems to be ... bucking the national trend around the volume of learners taking out loans.' (Provider)

All providers reported broadly similar approaches to informing their learners about the funding options for their course and accessing funding through Advanced Learner Loans. A range of methods are commonly used to support and inform learners at every stage of their learning journey.

'Some of what we have on our website has been produced by BIS and the SFA. I've got to say ... we reckon as a college, [it's] some of the best materials that we've ever seen. So we do use them and then we'll signpost to them ... from the web.' (Provider)

All of the providers interviewed offered information about Advanced Learner Loans on their website. Information from BIS, the Skills Funding Agency and the SLC on eligibility for loans and how to access them is often used by providers who tailor the information for their own audiences in order to produce web pages and downloadable factsheets, often with further links to Agency sources and other sources of information, such as the Money Advice Service (which provides information on loans primarily through its digital channel, and seeks to encourage people to make a decision in the context of their wider financial situation). Some providers have a link on the home page of their website which takes learners and prospective learners to further information on the site.

The providers' online resources often include telephone contacts for their own in-house advisers, who can offer career and other kinds of guidance, sometimes as part of a National Careers Service contract, as well as their own information and support material. Social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, are used to direct traffic to the site and to raise awareness of the options available to adults aged 24 and over. Some providers use targeted advertising on Facebook to engage particular audiences.

'Having someone on the ground to ... advise them and support them in their decision-making and communicate, that's probably the best thing for learners in terms of their views of how they make that decision.' (Provider)

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Information is provided to learners and prospective learners at every stage of the learner journey, including on enquiry, application and enrolment. Colleges also provide face-to-face information about loans at college open days and try to increase awareness pre-enrolment through a range of other methods, including fact sheets, promotional leaflets and internal and external advertising. Providers usually produce these materials themselves using key information from Skills Funding Agency and SLC resources. The learners were generally very positive about the information and support they had been given by their provider about loans and other sources of funding.

'They're so good at giving out that information. As soon as you've got a course or you're thinking about a course that is covered by the 24+ loan, they let you know this is covered under the 24+ loan. "Do you know what that is? Okay, if not, let me give you the information."' (Learner)

A number of providers produce detailed information packs for learners. These packs typically include:

- Information about the application process, often drawn from Skills Funding Agency and SLC material;
- Information about factors to consider when thinking about taking out an Advanced Learner Loan;
- Information about repayment;
- A preview of the application form and process; and
- Frequently asked questions.

The packs are usually given out at the point at which the student is accepted on the course and receives the Learning and Funding Information Letter setting out course details and fee, and options for financing their studies.

One provider reported holding a briefing session for prospective learners some two or three months before the course begins. Learners who attend the session are provided with an information sheet, which is tailored to the course for which they are applying and includes information about accessing an Advanced Learner Loan. One college formed a task-and-finish group on internal and external communications and invested in local print and broadcast media advertising to promote the availability of loans. Another provider employed a Level 3 adviser to talk to Level 2 learners at the end of their course and discuss the options available to them, including Advanced Learner Loans.

Most providers offer a blend of online, paper-based and face-to-face information and support. Usually, a professional advice and guidance team is available at the start of the learning journey and thereafter. Learners are able to access face-to-face advice and guidance on financial support options at any stage of that journey, and often pre-enrolment. Learners usually have little prior knowledge of Advanced Learner Loans and need to be carefully guided through their funding options, including loans. In some cases, the provider has to give the learner access to a computer in order to apply. This work is supported through awareness-raising and staff development activities for teachers and support staff. Ongoing support and guidance for learners is also sometimes offered through the college's virtual learning environment.

'I found the information literally the day I came in. It was the advice shop that talked about the loans. I really feel that up to that point I'd never heard of it. I knew nothing at all about the 24+ loan. Obviously, there's a lot of information in the press about student

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loans and how they affect people ... but the 24+ loan I feel is not advertised enough.'
(Learner)

All the learners who took part in the research found out about Advanced Learner Loans through their learning provider. In every case, this was either at the point at which the learner had decided on a course of study and had contacted the provider to enquire about it or to enrol, or when they were completing another course and information on progression was passed on. One learner had assumed the course would be free and was 'a bit shocked' to discover they would have to pay £3,000 for a year's study.

Most of the information offered by providers was aimed at learners who had already made the decision to return to study, although some held open days at which prospective learners were able to access information about Advanced Learner Loans and learn about the support available to them in weighing up their options. A few also used targeted advertising – for example, through Facebook – to reach a wider audience. Some signposted sources of information about loans in other media campaigns. Most provider advertising was, however, internal, and often aimed at Level 2 learners studying with them. Efforts to work with partners to promote the loans were also limited, with little engagement about loans with employers, in particular.

Work with key partners

The 2012 study recognised that successful implementation of loans policy would involve a co-ordinated approach to involving a wide range of organisations, and suggested that appropriate information about loans was made available as widely as possible.

In this study, all providers agree that links with key partners are important in getting the messages about Advanced Learner Loans across to learners, although the strength of those links varies among providers and between providers and different types of partner. Most providers report good working relationships with Jobcentre Plus and the National Careers Service. A number deliver National Careers Service contracts, or provide services through sub-contracts, and report this as a useful tool in informing learners and prospective learners, particularly unemployed people, about Advanced Learner Loans. Some have worked with Jobcentre Plus to ensure proper training and development around loans is in place so that advisers can support learners in finding appropriate funding for their studies. One provider reported that, with Access to HE courses performing strongly, its relationship with the local higher education institution had become more important in ensuring a smooth pathway for learners from FE into HE.

Most providers interviewed reported informing employers about Advanced Learner Loans as a potential method of funding eligible provision for their employees. In the main, providers reported that employers have not been responsive to Advanced Learner Loans. A number of reasons were suggested for this, including:

- Employer knowledge of the loans programme is low, though some providers had attempted to engage employers on the issue, through employer consultative groups and other local forums;
- The reinstatement of apprenticeships within the adult skills budget meant that providers and employers were incentivised to train employees via the apprenticeship route rather than through provision eligible for loans; and
- Some employers, in line with government expectations, prefer to continue to fully fund courses themselves rather than ask or expect their employees to take out a loan. The

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loans, of course, are not intended to replace provision employers are currently prepared to pay for.

Some providers reported that since Advanced Learner Loans are essentially a relationship between the learner and the Student Loans Company, employers often feel there isn't a role for them in the scheme, and that it is a matter solely for the individual learner and the SLC. One provider said it was difficult to engage employers in Advanced Learner Loans as they did not want to involve themselves in a decision that was the employee's to make. For that reason, one private provider said, employers often felt uncomfortable encouraging employees to take out a loan. A number commented that employers were more focused on the apprenticeship route, with its more familiar and straightforward funding relationship. One private-sector training organisation, which reported zero take-up of Advanced Learner Loans, said that where courses were not funded by government employers tended to fund them. They had no interest in engaging with Advanced Learner Loans.

What works in supporting learners to make informed decisions?

'The key thing is we are very proactive right the way through the learner journey... right from the promotion of our courses, down to actually ensuring that we receive the fees when the loans have been approved.' (Provider)

Staff development is a critical factor in ensuring learners get the support they need to make informed decisions about Advanced Learner Loans. Following the initial research in 2012, the Skills Funding Agency and SLC offered a range of information, activities and support for providers. All providers participating in the 2015 study reported that information about Advanced Learner Loans forms a part of regular staff development. This includes sales, learner support and teaching staff and takes different forms, such as staff guides to Advanced Learner Loans, based on information provided by key agencies, and regular training and updating sessions in teams as part of staff development programmes. One large FE college organised a road-show to support staff development on loans. This was videoed and uploaded to the college website so the messages could be communicated more widely among staff. It proved an effective way of communicating key information about loans – far more effective than sharing written documents with colleagues.

Smaller providers, in particular, reported how important it was for them to ensure that their 'front-of-house' and sales teams were fully informed about loans and were able to answer questions from potential learners. Larger providers made the same point about their learner support staff and curriculum teams, who have a particularly important role in supporting learners who are thinking about progression. This was confirmed by learners involved in the study who reported getting useful support from support staff in completing their forms.

'Student services said that there's a hub [at one campus] that can help you do it online if you're not sure on how to do it. They just did it for me because I wasn't really sure how to do it. I'm sometimes not that good online so I thought I needed a bit of assistance and guiding.' (Learner)

'She was really good. I think she picked up on the fact that I needed to do it there and then and, basically, said, "We can do this now if you like. We can go to the computer now if you've got time".' (Learner)

Feedback about the quality of resources available to providers from the Skills Funding Agency and the SLC was generally very positive. A number of providers felt they had a good

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working relationship with the SLC in particular and valued the information provided by them, through its website and other communications.

A number of providers reported that the development funding provided in the first year of implementation was very useful in supporting the development of effective information and guidance for learners on Advanced Learner Loans. The funding had been used by providers to adopt innovative and creative methods and resources, including explanatory materials tailored to particular courses and advertising in the local press.

All providers thought that a mixed approach to communicating with learners was best. This included online promotion and information and the use of virtual learning environments to update learners on Advanced Learner Loans, as well as the provision of paper-based resources and face-to-face and telephone support. A number emphasised face-to-face support as particularly important in offering ongoing, proactive engagement with learners. One large further education college, with a number of campuses across its county, trains 'loans champions' at each centre to be Advanced Learner Loan experts at their site.

'In terms of methods of communication ... the learners prefer to come into college and speak with staff rather than use the Advanced Learner Loans helpline. We explain the process in more detail a lot better and give the learners more time to ensure they understand and have product knowledge. They can ask relevant questions at the time.'
(Provider)

There was some concern about the level of public knowledge and understanding of Advanced Learner Loans. A number of interviewees felt that more needed to be done to get the message to a wider public, with a few suggesting the language of 'loans' and 'debt' was not particularly helpful when it came to communicating the potential benefits to learners. Some communities are stubbornly debt averse and have difficulty thinking of the loans as an investment.

A number of providers' however, thought a national campaign to raise awareness of Advanced Learner Loans would be useful, especially for those adults interested in learning, but for whom an up-front fee would be a barrier. One vice-principal felt that learners accessing information about loans had generally already made the decision to return to education. Public awareness, he felt, was limited.

'If you went out into the street and asked people about Advanced Learner Loans I don't think many people would know what you were talking about.' (Provider)

The learners interviewed confirmed this. All of them first heard about Advanced Learner Loans once they had decided on a course of study and made contact with a provider. In most cases, the decision was based on a desire to progress into work, change career or to fulfil an ambition to go to university – or in several cases to build confidence and self-esteem. A number suggested that time of life was important and that it was changes in work or family commitments that prompted them to return to study. Although the learners were generally positive about the availability of loans, it played no part in their initial decision.

'My reasons are twofold. One was to help me fulfil a long-held ambition to go to university and do a degree. Having a family, working, made all of those sorts of things quite impossible. [Having to leave a successful career through illness] forced on me a change in career and, really, the realisation that without formal qualifications at a higher

level, it would be very hard for me to re-enter the labour market at the equivalent level that I left it.' (Learner)

Supporting learners through the loans process

Many of the providers interviewed in 2015 reported that the SLC has been very efficient in resolving issues. There was generally positive feedback about the SLC's effectiveness and a number of providers highlighted the value they attached to their working relationship with the SLC.

Communicating with the learner throughout the loans process, and ensuring they can access support when they need it, was important to all providers. However, providers generally found it easier to work with existing learners who had progressed with them from Level 2, rather than with new learners, as this afforded them greater lead time to offer support. However, in many cases, learners were new to the concept of Loans and required more support, in gathering evidence or completing the application form, for example, slowing down the process.

What further support would be useful?

'The Learning and Funding Information Letter] was laid out nice and plainly. It gave me quite a lot of information really. Everything was on there.' (Learner)

Providers were generally happy with the quality and usefulness of information provided by the Skills Funding Agency and the SLC and most found it easy to adapt the material for their own use. There was positive feedback on the Learning and Funding Information Letter, with learners and providers generally finding it clear and succinct, though some felt it could be shorter and more 'streamlined'. One provider stressed the importance of following up the letter with face-to-face contact with the learner to make sure they have all the support they need. Most learners recalled receiving the letter in their information packs and gave positive feedback on its content and layout. As reported elsewhere, many learners had unanswered questions about loans, particularly concerning repayment arrangements and the impact of leaving their course early. The letter may be an appropriate place in which to include some of this information.

THE IMPACT OF ADVANCED LEARNER LOANS

The impact on organisations

'We've tried to introduce new courses where we think there should be loan demand [based on the] idea that if you need something for a job or for a promotion or for a huge career change or to get to university you might want to purchase that sort of thing. We've looked particularly at the professional market ... and those qualifications ... that are important for getting jobs.' (Provider)

Most providers had responded positively, with some re-evaluating their Level 3 offer to target those learners most likely to take out loans. A few are looking at how they can promote progression to eligible Level 2 learners through the availability of Advanced Learner Loans. Several others said they were moving towards delivering a far more commercial market-sensitive strategy for Level 3 provision, particularly for professional qualifications and in regulated sectors such as care and accountancy. They observed that learners with a clear sense of career progression and who could identify an obvious financial reward were most likely to access a loan to pay for a course. More emphasis was being placed on qualifications needed to get a job and on marketing them more effectively.

'The current government seems to be offsetting this apparent allocation of funding [through loans], which is not an allocation, against the other adult funding cuts. For instance, the recent announcement [of a] 24 per cent reduction in other non-apprenticeship adult funding [seemed to be off-set by] a 25 per cent increase in 24+ adult learner loans. To the layperson ... there's no impact. The reality is [even] if there's more money available for Level 3 loans, the college still has to attract the learners and invite the learners in to sell them ... in order to get that benefit for that income.' (Provider)

'There's been a big learning curve for staff in the last two years, because, obviously, [while] you can't sell a loan ... you have to have good information about loans. We're continually looking at that journey and trying to improve it all the time to make sure that that message is consistent through whichever team they're talking to.' (Provider)

Providers stressed the need to change their systems to reflect the more central place of loans and the important role of staff development in preparing for the change. Teaching and support staff have been trained and a number of providers noted the importance of ensuring a consistent message across an institution. Smaller providers talked about the importance of training 'front of house' staff while larger providers had looked at training their support teams and introduced a number of innovations, such as 'loan champions'.

The impact on learners

'I don't think there is enough information in the public domain. I think if more people knew the options then obviously there would be more people going into education ... If you know what your options are then you can make an informed choice.' (Learner)

'There is not enough information out there in the wider world that these things exist. If it was available and more widely known, I think that there would be far more people, of my age range particularly, that would be considering going back into education.' (Learner)

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Providers noted that the learners most likely to fund their learning through an Advanced Learner Loan were those interested in career change or in progressing to higher education. Consequently, providers were shifting provision to focus more closely on courses which delivered professional qualifications for which there was local demand. Learners without a clear sense of career progression and the financial rewards associated with a particular professional qualification were less likely to participate. Courses for personal development were dwindling, providers said. Debt aversion remained a strong disincentive to some adults when it came to considering funding a course of study with a loan and this was reflected in the strong performance of qualifications leading to jobs.

Impartial advice was mentioned as being particularly important to learners considering taking out an Advanced Learner Loan. Intermediary organisations stressed the importance of supporting learners in considering their wider financial circumstances when contemplating taking out a loan. Adult learners tend to have more financial commitments and existing debts and the decision to take out a further loan can often be a complex one.

Most providers reported that Advanced Learner Loans had encouraged learners to expect more of their courses and to put pressure on providers to deliver at a high level. Learners who were funding their learning through a loan were more likely to think of themselves as consumers and, consequently, to demand more. An intermediary stressed the importance of independent, impartial advice in such an environment and the need for learners to have support when things go wrong, as well as a space for redress:

‘There isn’t an independent ombudsman for further education ... obviously we’re in a space where a loan has been taken out in a similar way to higher education, but there isn’t much space for redress for learners.’ (Intermediary)

CONCLUSIONS

Providers took broadly similar approaches to informing their learners about the funding options for their course and the availability of Advanced Learner Loans. All offered information on Advanced Learner Loans on their website, making use of information produced by the Skills Funding Agency, the SLC and BIS. They usually combined online material and signposting with paper-based resources and face-to-face advice, support and guidance, ensuring information was provided at every stage of the learner journey, including on enquiry, application and enrolment. Some engaged in promotional activities, sometimes using social media to target particular audiences. Learners also had opportunities to find out about loans through open days, peer support – one college trained ‘loans champions’ to offer support at each of its sites – and local media advertising.

It was evident that providers had engaged actively, and often highly imaginatively, with the loans agenda, despite, in many cases, early misgivings. All had put a strong emphasis on staff development, with most recognising that it was necessary to support not only specialist finance staff but also teachers, support staff and front-of-house staff in developing the skills and knowledge to help learners through the loans process. There was general agreement that face-to-face support worked best, though as part of a wider, blended approach that also included paper and online resources.

One large college held a staff road-show to raise awareness among staff, editing a video of proceedings for use as a staff development tool. Another college, with a county-wide reach, trained loans champions to offer promotion and learner support at each of its sites. All providers had created their own promotion and information materials, usually making use of resources produced by the Skills Funding Agency and the SLC. There was positive feedback on these resources, and providers were generally very happy with the quality of service offered by the SLC.

Access to HE diploma courses remained popular because of the prospect of the balance of the loan being written off on completion of an HE course. There was evidence of providers changing their course strategies and focusing on provision leading to a professional qualification, in health or teaching, for example. Provision was becoming more ‘market sensitive’. Some reported a perception among employers that loans were a relationship between the student and the SLC and, consequently, none of their concern. One intermediary suggested that prospective learners should be encouraged to talk to their employers about support when undertaking a course that is clearly vocational and will improve workplace performance.

KEY MESSAGES

The loans experience for providers, learners and intermediaries

- All providers reported broadly similar approaches to informing their learners about the funding options for their course and accessing funding through Advanced Learner Loans. A range of methods are commonly used to support and inform learners at every stage of their learning journey, including written materials, online resources and face-to-face support. Resources were often adapted from Skills Funding Agency and Student Loans Company materials. Feedback about the quality of the resources available from the Agency and the Student Loans Company was generally very positive.
- There was concern that learners and prospective learners need better, more contextualized and independent financial advice and support, and that they were not always sure where to access it. The Money Advice Service stressed the importance of taking into account wider financial circumstances in making informed decisions about loans.
- Employers have in general not engaged with Advanced Learner Loans, for a number of reasons, among them low awareness, alternative financial incentives such as apprenticeships routes and traditional methods of supporting their learners by paying the fees for them. Many employers, it was suggested, saw the loan commitment as an exclusive relationship between the learner and the Student Loans Company.
- Effective professional development on Advanced Learner Loans was seen as an important factor in supporting learners to make informed decisions. This involved not only specialist finance staff but teachers, curriculum leaders, support staff and front-of-house staff. The latter were particularly important in the case of smaller providers.
- The general view of providers was that the Student Loans Company delivers well operationally and is efficient at resolving issues.

The impact of Advanced Learner Loans

- Certain types of provision are doing well among some providers. For example, a number of providers (though not all) reported that Access to HE diploma courses recruitment was performing well, which they attributed to the policy of writing off Advanced Learner Loans on the successful completion of an HE course. Professional qualifications at Level 3 for career-changers are also relatively popular, with some providers reporting shifts in learner engagement to these sorts of subject.
- The introduction of Advanced Learner Loans appears to have had a positive impact on learner expectations. Providers say that learners who have paid for their course with a loan tend to think of themselves more as customers, and to have higher expectations of the quality of their course and the teaching and learning they experience.
- A number of providers reported adopting new ways of working in response to changing patterns of participation. In many cases, they were moving towards a more commercial strategy aimed at recruiting learners to courses leading to professional qualifications with clear financial rewards.

APPENDIX 1: QUESTIONS FOR PROVIDERS

Introduction

Please can you:

- Introduce yourself and your job role.
- Provide brief details about your Skills Funding Agency provision at Level 3 and 4 – subjects, qualifications and learner profile.

Information and support to learners on funding

- 1. Please provide details of the information and support you provide to learners about funding.**
 - What information and support is provided, and in what ways, at the different stages of the learner journey?
- 2. What work, if any, have you undertaken with your key partners on Advanced Learner Loans?**
 - E.g. JCP, NCS, local authorities, employers
- 3. What have you found particularly effective in supporting learners to make informed decisions about Advanced Learner Loans?**
 - Student Loans Company Practitioner Site
 - Other resources/ support from the Agency e.g. development funding, learner resources
 - Any resources you have developed for your staff and/or learners
 - Staff development activities
 - What methods of communication have worked best for learners?
- 4. There is already a range of information available to prospective learners about the facts and features of courses and loans. The Agency is considering creating a document for prospective learners to help them understand and consider the broader issues around making the decision to start a course of learning. The aim of this would be to empower the learner by treating the decision as a purchase by a consumer and also setting it in the context of their wider lives and their plans for the future. This could include such themes as considering the learning as an “investment” with a suggestion to consider the risks as well as the rewards; it could also spell out the roles and responsibilities of the parties involved. Do you think this type of document would be a useful addition?**
 - What might be the benefits?
 - What might be the risks?
 - What would be the best format?

Our thinking is that the document should be available at the early stages when a prospective learner is considering a “course of action” rather than a specific “course”. It could also be issued to them again by the Student Loans Company with the loan offer documents.

 - Do you agree?
- 5. What issues, if any, have you encountered in supporting learners through the loans process?**
 - Have you been able to overcome these issues?
 - What helped? What would help?

6. To what extent does the Learning Provider Portal support you in the operational delivery of loans?

- Does the information on learners and payments support your business processes?
- Do you have any feedback about the portal with regard to learners who leave their course early? Do you feel you get sufficient assurance that they are no longer incurring debt?

7. What further support, if any, would be useful in supporting learners through the loans process?

- At what stage in the learner journey should this support be available?
- Would this support be targeted at learners, or to support providers in their work with learners?
- Do you have any specific feedback on the Learning and Funding Information Letter?

Impact of Advanced Learner Loans

8. In your experience, what has been the impact of Advanced Learner Loans on learner participation?

- Have you found some adults more likely to take out a loan than others?
- How are you monitoring impact?
- Do you keep records of individuals who receive a Learning and Funding Information Letter and use this data to monitor take up of learning? (E.g. comparing this data against ILR data)? Do you do any follow up activity with individuals who receive a letter and do not enrol?
- What has been the impact on retention, achievement, success rates?
- Thinking about loans learners who have left their course early, do you capture their reason(s) for not completing their course? Do you have any evidence that this is loans related?
- Do you think the introduction of loans has had any impact on learner expectations of their course?

9. What impact has the introduction of loans had on your organisation?

- How, if at all, has your provision changed since the introduction of loans?
- Has the introduction of loans had any impact on how you plan your adult provision?
- Are there any areas of the curriculum that work particularly well for loans? Why is this?
- What systems/processes/ resource have you introduced or changed as a result of loans?
- In what ways, if any, have you adapted your staff development programme to take account of loans?

Your key messages

10. For the Skills Funding Agency?

11. For the Student Loans Company?

12. For other key stakeholders? (e.g. National Careers Service)

APPENDIX 2: QUESTIONS FOR INTERMEDIARIES

These questions provided a basis for interviews with intermediary organisations, and were tailored as required.

1. **Please can you introduce yourself and your organisation.**
2. **What work do you undertake in relation to Advanced Learner Loans?**
 - What information and support, if any, do you provide to learners and/or providers about Advanced Learner Loans?
 - Do you signpost learners and/or providers to information and support on Advanced Learner Loans?
3. **What information do you access in relation to Advanced Learner Loans?**
 - What links, if any, do you have with the Skills Funding Agency around Advanced Learning Loans?
4. **Is there any further information or support that you require in relation to Advanced Learner Loans? Please provide details.**
5. **What feedback, if any, have you gathered on the experience and/or impact of loans for learners and for providers? Please provide details.**
6. **Is there any further information or support that learners and/or providers require about Advanced Learner Loans? Please provide details.**
7. **There is already a range of information available to prospective learners about the facts and features of courses and loans. The Agency is considering creating a 'key facts' document for prospective learners to help them understand and consider the broader issues around making the decision to start a course of learning. The aim of this would be to empower the learner by treating the decision as a purchase by a consumer and also setting it in the context of their wider lives and their plans for the future. Do you think this type of document would be a useful addition?**
8. **What are your key messages for the Skills Funding Agency?**
9. **Do you have any other comments you wish to make about Advanced Learner Loans?**

APPENDIX 3: QUESTIONS FOR LEARNERS

Introductions and ice breaker activity

Please can you:

- Introduce yourself
- Give details of the course you are studying and the length of your course.

Triggers to learning

1. Why did you choose this course?

- What is your main motivation for learning?
- What are you hoping to gain?
- Why did you choose to study here?
- Did you consider other courses/ learning providers?

2. What helped you to take up this learning?

- How important was funding – and specifically the option of an Advanced Learner Loan - in your decision to take part?
- Would you have enrolled on the course if the option of a loan had not been available?

Funding your learning

3. What information and support did you receive about your funding options, including Advanced Learner Loans?

- Who provided it? Or did you source it yourself? (learning provider, National Careers Service, www.gov.uk, Money Advice Service)
- At what point in your learning journey did you receive the information (when you started to look into courses, once you had decided on your course)?
- In what format was the information?
- Did the information cover other course costs, in addition to fees?

4. How helpful was the information and support you received about funding?

- What did you find most helpful?
- Did you feel you received sufficient information to make an informed decision about how to pay for your course?
- Was there anything missing that you would have found helpful?
- Were you signposted to the Money Advice Service?

5. What reservations, if any, did you have about taking out a loan?

- What factors influenced your decision to take out a loan?

The loans process

Check whether learners applied for their loan online or by post.

6. How did you find the application process?

- Who – if anyone – supported you with your application?
- What issues, if any, did you encounter during the application process? How did you overcome them? Who helped and how?
- What further information and support would you have found helpful?

7. Do you have any feedback on the Learning and Funding Letter?

- Did someone explain the letter to you?
- Was the letter clear/ easy to understand?

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- Did it include all the information you needed for your loan application?
- Would you have found any additional information useful?

8. Do you feel you have a good understanding about the repayment process?

- Can you talk me through how and when this happens?
- Is there any further information and support that you would find helpful now or in the future?
- What, if any, outstanding questions do you have about your loan?
- Do you know who to contact if you have any questions/ issues regarding your loan?

A 'key facts' resource for learners

9. There is already a range of information available to prospective learners about the facts and features of courses and loans. We are now considering creating some information for prospective learners to help them understand and consider the broader issues around making the decision to start a course of learning. The aim of this would be to empower the learner by treating the decision as a purchase by a consumer and also setting it in the context of their wider lives and their plans for the future. We have two approaches to this, which tackle the issues in quite different ways. We would like to get your feedback on these. [Give out copies of draft 'key facts' documents]

- Do you think these documents would be a helpful addition to the information currently available?
- Do you have a preference between the two different approaches?
- What would be the best format for presenting the information? e.g. written document, video
- When should the information be issued to learners?

Learning now and in the future

10. What impact, if any, has taking out a loan had on you?

- Has it made a difference to your expectations of the course?
- How might you evaluate whether or not your course provides value for money?
- Do you feel you're receiving good value for your investment?
- Do you know what to do if you are not satisfied with the quality of your course?
- Has taking out a loan had any kind of financial impact on you?

Any other comments?

APPENDIX 4: FUNDING YOUR LEARNING – WHAT TO THINK ABOUT AND WHERE TO FIND HELP

A guide to financing your learning and use of financial products such as the Advanced Learner Loan

Step 1: Is training right for me?

- What outcome am I looking for and what will be the benefits?
- Will training help me progress to further study or to employment?
- Is this something I really want to do?

Getting help

- Talk to your employer (where relevant) – do they need higher skilled people?
- Talk to trade unions for their experience of the wider sector.
- Check local vacancies to see what skills are in demand.
- The [National Careers Service](#) can help you think through your options.

Step 2: Choosing a course

- Am I ready for this course? Do I have the knowledge to manage it?
- Does the course equip me to further my career?
- Does the delivery of the course suit the way I learn and my lifestyle?

Getting help

- The [National Careers Service course search](#) can help you find courses delivered in your area.

Step 3: Choosing a training provider

- Are they convenient to access?
- Do they deliver high-quality training? You could view their [Ofsted](#) report online.
- Do they support their students well?

Getting Help

- Does the training provider offer a range of payment options?
- Is the provider the right one for you? - Visit a number of providers e.g. open days. Ask about the services and details of the courses.
- Your training provider will ask you to sign an agreement before you start. Make sure you understand it before signing.

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Starting on the course

- When you start your course, you need to make sure that it is the right programme of study for your training needs?
- Does the qualification meet your long term goals?

Step 4: Payment options – the main choices

- Use your own money to pay upfront, but consider all of your financial needs first.
- Take out an Advanced Learner Loan if you are eligible. Your provider will give you information about their fee and the maximum Advanced Learner Loan available in a Learning and Funding Information Letter to help you make your decision.
- Take out a commercial [Professional and Career Development Loan](#) if you are eligible.
- Borrow the money from a bank or other credit provider.
- Remember the training provider may allow payment in installments.
- Always consider your full financial needs before deciding on the best option for you.

Getting Help

- The [Money Advice Service](#) can help you compare the options.
- [Citizens Advice](#) provides information and advice on money issues.

Step 5: Taking out an Advanced Learner Loan

- If you decide that you would like to finance your learning through an Advanced Learner Loan, then you can find out more information about this at [GOV.UK](#). This will provide you with the necessary terms and conditions to taking out this product and what you need to do regarding repaying that loan.
- Your loan will be administered by the [Student Loans Company](#).

What if my circumstances change?

- Circumstances can change and you may need to either change your course, change your provider or leave the course before the end. In the first instance you will need to notify your provider that there is a change, they can help you with this change.
- If you have taken out an Advanced Learner Loan then it is your responsibility to notify your provider and the Student Loans Company of any changes and to make repayment of the outstanding loan.

Help if things do not go smoothly

- If you wish to make a complaint about your training provider, first discuss it with them. They will have a procedure for dealing with complaints but, if you cannot resolve the issue this way, you can contact the [Skills Funding Agency](#).
- If you have a problem with how an Advanced Learner Loan is administered, contact the [Student Loans Company](#).

WEBSITES

National Careers Service:

<https://nationalcareersservice.direct.gov.uk/Pages/Home.aspx>

Ofsted reports on training providers:

<http://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/>

Money Advice Service:

<https://www.moneyadviceservice.org.uk/en>

Citizens Advice:

<http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/>

Skills Funding Agency: procedure for complaints about training providers:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sfa-complaints-procedure-about-providers>

Student Loans Company:

<http://www.slc.co.uk/services/further-education.aspx>

Student Loans Company complaints procedure:

<http://www.slc.co.uk/contact/making-a-complaint.aspx>

Professional and Career Development Loans:

<https://www.gov.uk/career-development-loans/overview>

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COMPARING DIFFERENT WAYS OF FUNDING YOUR LEARNING

	Advanced Learner Loan	Commercial lending (e.g. bank loan, credit card)	Paying from your own money
How much can I afford to pay?	The amount you can borrow is not dependant on your income other circumstances. The maximum amount of loan you can apply for is dependent upon the qualification you are undertaking – your provider will provide you with further information about this.	Banks and other lenders will assess this by reference to your income and your credit record.	Depends on how much money you have and whether you want to reduce your capital to pay for learning.
What costs are there?	Interest rates are the same for all sizes of loans. Rates are linked to price inflation and are generally less than commercial rates.	You will pay a commercial rate of interest. Smaller loans often pay a higher interest rate. For Professional and Career Development Loans, the government will pay your interest charges while you complete your course and up to one month after.	You will no longer have this money available for spending, emergency fund, saving etc.
How will the course be paid for?	The Student Loans Company pays your provider monthly, in line with the start and end dates of your course.	You may need to pay the full cost of the course to the provider before it starts, or the provider may offer you the ability to pay in installments.	You may need to pay the full cost of the course to the provider before it starts, or the provider may offer you the ability to pay in installments.

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	Advanced Learner Loan	Commercial lending (e.g. bank loan, credit card)	Paying from your own money
How much will my repayments be?	You make no repayments unless your income exceeds £21,000 p.a. at which point you repay 9% of the portion of your income over £21,000. Repayments start in the April after you complete your course.	Loan repayments will depend on the amount borrowed and the time set for repayment. Payments to a credit card can be variable, subject to a monthly minimum.	Not applicable
How are repayments made?	Your employer will calculate payments and deduct them from your salary. If you are self-employed repayments are made through the tax self-assessment process.	Loan repayments usually by direct debit from a bank account. Credit card payments by direct debit, cheque, internet transfer or cash payment at a bank.	Not applicable
How long will it take to repay the loan?	You make payments if your income exceeds £21,000 until the loan and the interest are repaid. But any outstanding loan not fully repaid after 30 years is written off.	Your loan term will normally be fixed at the outset. Credit card borrowing has no set term and you can repay over any period subject to meeting minimum monthly repayments.	Not applicable
Can I repay early?	You or a third party, such as a family member or your employer, can make additional payments to your loan account at any time. This will have the effect of repaying the loan earlier.	With credit cards and most loans you can repay at any time. With some loans you may be charged for repaying early.	Not applicable

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	Advanced Learner Loan	Commercial lending (e.g. bank loan, credit card)	Paying from your own money
What happens if my circumstances change for the worse?	If your income falls below £21,000 your repayments will stop until your income again reaches this figure.	You must still make loan or credit card repayments. If you do not keep up with repayments, it will affect your credit record and your lender can take you to court.	You will no longer have this money to fall back on.
What can I do if I have a complaint about the provider or the course?	Any complaints you have about the provider, the course or the way it is delivered should be addressed to the provider according to their complaints procedure. If you are not satisfied with the outcome of the complaints process, you can refer your complaint to the Skills Funding Agency's formal complaints procedure. If they uphold your complaint they can consider taking action against the provider. If you are still not satisfied with the outcome of the complaints process and you think you have suffered a financial loss, you can take your complaint to the civil courts.		
What if I have a problem with the loan provider?	Contact the Student Loans Company and follow its complaints procedure. If you are not satisfied with the outcome, you can refer your case to the Parliamentary and Health Ombudsman. If you are still not satisfied with the outcome, you can refer it to the Financial Ombudsman Service. Their decision is binding upon the lender but not upon you so you can still take your case to a court if you need to.	Use the lender's complaints procedure first. If you are not satisfied with the outcome, you can refer your case to the Financial Ombudsman Service. If you are still not satisfied with the outcome, you can refer it to the Financial Ombudsman Service. Their decision is binding upon the lender but not upon you so you can still take your case to a court if you need to.	Not applicable

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