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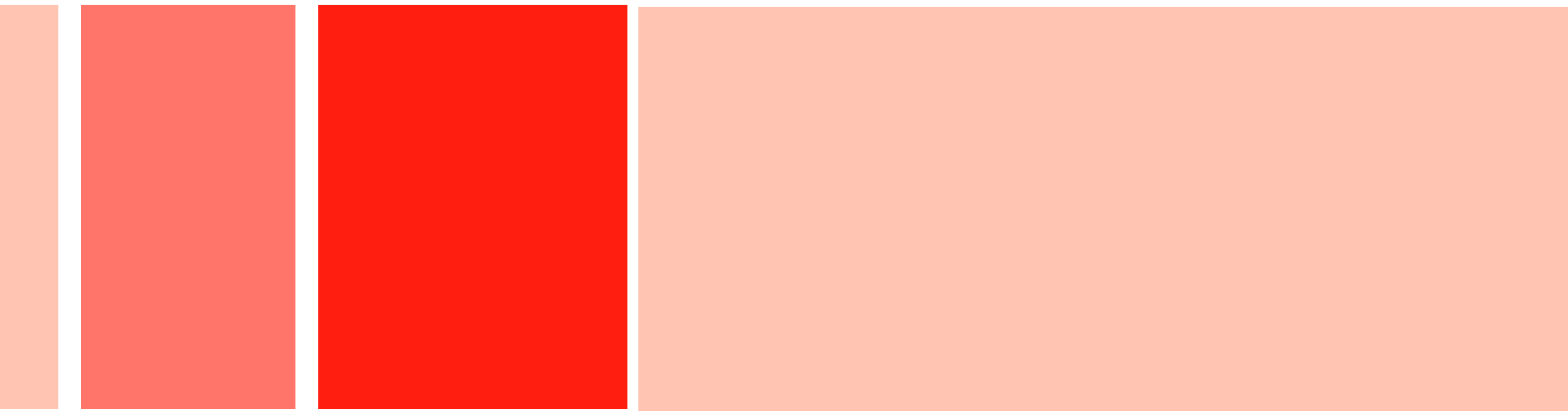
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# Evaluation of the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) Report



# **Evaluation of the Education Maintenance Allowance**

## ***Final Report***

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**Old Bell 3 Ltd and Cardiff University**

Views expressed in this report are those of the researcher and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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## Table of contents

<b>LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1 BACKGROUND .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>2 KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>3 AN OVERVIEW OF THE EMA SCHEME IN WALES.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>4 EMA AND OTHER FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR 16 – 19 YEAR-OLDS IN THE UK.....</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>5 RATIONALE AND NEED .....</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>6 EMA DESIGN AND OBJECTIVES.....</b>	<b>77</b>
<b>7 EMA ADMINISTRATION.....</b>	<b>90</b>
<b>8 THE IMPACT OF ENGLISH FE STUDENT FINANCE IN WALES .....</b>	<b>105</b>
<b>9 DIFFERENCE MADE .....</b>	<b>111</b>
<b>10 VALUE FOR MONEY .....</b>	<b>138</b>
<b>11 FUTURE.....</b>	<b>141</b>
<b>12 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....</b>	<b>146</b>

## List of tables and figures

TABLE 3.1: EMA APPLICATIONS BY ACADEMIC YEAR .....	32
TABLE 3.2: EMA AWARDS BY ACADEMIC YEAR.....	33
TABLE 3.3: APPROVED EMA APPLICATIONS BY ACADEMIC YEAR AND LEARNING CENTRE TYPE (£30 PAYMENT ONLY) .....	34
TABLE 3.4: EMA AWARDED BY NUMBER OF STUDENTS WITHIN EACH LOCAL AUTHORITY (2011/12 - £30 PAYMENT ONLY).....	36
TABLE 3.5: APPROVED EMA APPLICATIONS BY AGE AND ACADEMIC YEAR (£30 PAYMENT ONLY).....	38
TABLE 3.6: CHARACTERISTICS OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE WIDENING ACCESS DATABASE (AGED 16 AT 31 <sup>ST</sup> AUGUST 2005, 2006 OR 2007) 41	
SOURCE: ANALYSIS OF SLC EMA RECIPIENT DATABASE AND WIDENING ACCESS DATABASE (2005, 2006 AND 2007).....	42
TABLE 3.7: STUDENTS IN THE WIDENING ACCESS DATABASE – POST-COMPULSORY ROUTES TAKEN AND EMA RECEIPT .....	44
TABLE 3.8: ANNUAL EMA SPEND .....	46
TABLE 9.1: RATES OF NON-PROGRESSION FROM AS-LEVELS TO A-LEVELS.....	122
TABLE 9.2: A LEVEL ATTAINMENT BY EMA RECEIPT .....	125
TABLE 9.3: TIME SPENT WITHIN FURTHER EDUCATION (EXCLUDING AS/A-LEVEL STUDENTS) .....	127
TABLE 9.4: ATTAINMENT WITHIN FURTHER EDUCATION (EXCLUDING AS/A-LEVEL STUDENTS).....	129
TABLE 9.5: YEAR 11 CHARACTERISTICS AND SUBSEQUENT ENTRY TO HE.....	134

**TABLE 9.6: COMBINED FSM/EMA STATUS AND SELECTED OUTCOMES**  
..... 136

**FIGURE 3.1: APPROVED EMA APPLICATIONS BY GENDER (£30  
PAYMENT ONLY) .....37**

## **Glossary of acronyms**

ALG (FE)	Assembly Learning Grant – Further Education
ALN	Additional Learning Needs
BTEC	Business and Technology Education Council (Qualification)
EMA	Education Maintenance Allowance
ESF	European Social Fund
FCF	Financial Contingency Fund
FE	Further Education
FEI	Further Education Institution
FSM	Free School Meals
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
GNVQ	General National Vocational Qualification
LC	Learning Centre
NEET	Not in Education, Employment or Training
NFER	National Foundation for Education Research
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
PTA	Pathways To Apprenticeships
SFW	Student Finance Wales
SIMS	School Information Management System
SLC	Students Loans Company
UCAS	University and Colleges Admissions Service
UK	United Kingdom
VSB	Vulnerable Student Bursary
WGLG (FE)	Welsh Government Learning Grant – Further Education
WISERD	Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research, Data and Methods

# 1 BACKGROUND

## Introduction

- 1.1 Old Bell 3 Ltd, in conjunction with the Wales institute of Social and Economic Research, Data and Methods (WISERD) and Dateb, was commissioned by the Welsh Government to undertake an independent evaluation of further education (FE) student finance across Wales with a particular emphasis upon reviewing the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) and the Assembly Learning Grant (Further Education) (ALG (FE)<sup>1</sup>) funding Schemes.
- 1.2 This report is the first of three reports prepared as part of this evaluation and focuses upon the EMA. The second report will focus upon the ALG (FE) funding Scheme and the third will provide an overarching strategic report covering FE student finance across Wales.
- 1.3 The EMA is an administrative Scheme (i.e. a Scheme not set out in regulations but which nevertheless has a statutory basis), first introduced during 2004/05, to support young people to continue in education after school leaving age. A weekly allowance of £30 per student is made available to Welsh domiciled full-time students aged 16, 17 and 18 years old studying at a school or a further education institution. The EMA is a means-tested allowance which takes household income into consideration and during 2012/13, 30,271 students were supported via the Scheme with two-thirds of these coming via FEIs and the remaining third via schools. In all just under half of all full-time students aged 16-18 years old in Wales are supported via the Scheme<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> From Academic Year 2014/15 it will be known as the Welsh Government Learning Grant (WGLG) Further Education

<sup>2</sup> Data available via: <https://statswales.wales.gov.uk/Catalogue/Education-and-Skills/Post-16-Education-and-Training/Lifelong-Learning/Participation-of-Adults-and-Young-People/ParticipationOf1630YearOldsInEducation-by-Sector-Mode-Age-Year> Accessed 8 July 2014.

## Evaluation Aims and Objectives

1.4 The overall aims of the evaluation were to review:

- The efficiency and effectiveness of the EMA and ALG (FE) Schemes;
- Whether the current schemes contribute towards Welsh Government policy commitments;
- The extent to which the package of FE student support (including the Financial Contingency Fund) contributes towards the widening participation agenda.

1.5 The specific objectives of relevance to this report, paraphrased from the research specification, were:

- Reviewing the implementation of the EMA Scheme including the appropriateness of allowance levels, eligibility criteria and the use of learning agreements;
- Evaluating the contribution made by EMA towards widening participation and increasing retention rates;
- Assessing the impact of EMA on student attainment rates, progression routes and destinations;
- Exploring the achievements and dropout rates of EMA supported students;
- Exploring how the EMA could be targeted more effectively;
- Exploring the impact of withdrawing EMA;
- Exploring what would have happened in the absence of the EMA;
- Reviewing how EMA fits with and contributes to Welsh Government policy;
- Exploring the impact of recent changes made to the EMA funding Scheme and changes in take-up over time;
- Reviewing the value for money offered by the EMA;
- Reviewing student finance support in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland with a view to exploring alternative methods to the EMA;



- Making recommendations for the future delivery of student finance support in Wales.

## Evaluation Methodology

1.6 The research for this report was carried out between December 2013 and June 2014. The methodology and work programme are presented in detail in Annex A of the Technical Appendix. They included:

- An inception and scoping stage, which included accessing key documents, administrative data and Student Loans Company (SLC) student datasets and agreeing upon an Inception Report with the Evaluation Steering Group;
- Desk research which included reviewing UK and Welsh Government policies, reviewing other FE student financial support provision and reviewing other FE student finance evaluation reports;
- Matching SLC student records to the Widening Access Database<sup>3</sup> and undertaking a comprehensive descriptive analysis and modelling of the data. Full details of the methods employed and the findings from this exercise are presented in Annex C of the Technical Appendix;
- Developing research instruments to use with stakeholders, learning centres and students as well as policy interviewees in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. These research instruments are presented in Annex D of the Technical Appendix;
- Undertaking a package of fieldwork at 12 Welsh further education Institutions (FEIs) and 11 schools which involved interviews with staff and various focus groups with EMA recipients and non-EMA recipients;
- Interviewing key stakeholders and a further two FEIs which did not have any EMA recipients<sup>4</sup>;

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<sup>3</sup> A linked database of school, further education and higher education data constructed by WISERD and used in an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)-/Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW)- funded project that aims to chart the progression of students from compulsory education to higher education.

<sup>4</sup> The FEIs without EMA recipients were the Workers Educational Association (WEA) and the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) Community College. No EMA recipients were

- Undertaking a qualitative telephone survey of 30 previous EMA recipients (20 from FEIs and 10 from schools);
- Undertaking a qualitative telephone survey with 16 parents of current EMA recipients;
- Undertaking visits to three English border institutions and interviewing staff as well as EMA recipients and non-EMA recipients.

### **Limitations of the study**

1.7 The data matching and quantitative analysis that formed part of this study allowed a detailed descriptive analysis of students, and a comparison between the characteristics, enrolment and length of study amongst and between EMA recipients and non-recipients. However, recipients of EMA differ significantly in their characteristics compared to non-recipients (see chapter 3), and it is therefore only possible to compare their characteristics and outcomes in relative terms. Such analysis is limited in its usefulness as it is not possible to assess the effectiveness of EMA in incentivising and supporting students. To assess this, a control group would need to be derived, in order to accurately reflect the ‘counterfactual’ position of EMA recipients; i.e. what outcomes would we expect EMA recipients to have achieved in the absence of EMA. Such a control group might include students before the introduction of EMA or, in the case the original evaluation of EMA conducted by the Department for Education, exploit the groups created by a geographically phased roll-out of EMA so that the outcomes of those students living in areas where EMA was first introduced could be made with comparable students living in comparable areas where EMA had yet to be rolled out<sup>5</sup>.

1.8 The accuracy of the quantitative analysis was undermined by the difficulty of determining unequivocally whether or not a student was

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based at these FEIs as they tended not to satisfy the eligibility criteria in terms of age and/or minimum hours of study per week.

<sup>5</sup> See: <http://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/2623>

actually in receipt of EMA. This was due to the issues surrounding the coverage of EMA data (not all EMA recipients provide consent for their data to be used for the purposes of research) and the fact that it was not possible to match the records of all individuals recorded as being in receipt of EMA to the WA Database. However, the match rate achieved was acceptable, at 66% (see Technical Appendix for a full discussion of the issues encountered in the matching and analysis of data).

## **Structure of this Report**

- 1.9 In this report we firstly (in Section 2) present the key findings of the research and our recommendations for the future of the EMA Scheme. We then (at Section 3) present an overview of the EMA Scheme in Wales and the policy context within which it has been operating as well as outlining the key changes that have been implemented to the Scheme since it was first introduced. In Section 4, we present our review of evidence relating to student finance support outside of Wales for students aged 19 and under, before setting out in Section 5 the evidence and findings regarding the rationale and need for the EMA Scheme.
- 1.10 We then present and discuss findings in relation to the overall design and objectives of the Scheme in Section 6. Section 7 then moves on to set out and discuss evidence about the administration of the EMA Scheme before we turn to present findings about the position of English border institutions (Section 8) including the impact of removing the EMA in England. In Section 9 we present the evidence that was gathered as to the difference made by the EMA Scheme in Wales and the value for money provided (Section 10) before turning to discuss (in Section 11) the views we collected through the fieldwork on the future of the EMA Scheme in Wales. Finally (in Section 12) we present our conclusions and recommendations.

## 2 KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Key Findings

- 2.1 The EMA Scheme is a well-established scheme having been introduced for the 2004/05 academic year onwards. Around half of all full-time students who fall within the EMA age criteria are supported via the EMA, with this proportion varying from a third within schools to two-thirds in FEIs. Our analysis found that EMA recipients are more likely to be female and to have been entitled to Free school meals (FSM) as well as less likely to have achieved relatively high levels of attainment at GCSE. 40 per cent of EMA recipients enrol for A-levels whilst 47 per cent enrol for vocational qualifications<sup>6</sup> - 13 per cent for vocational qualifications at level 3 or 4 and 30 per cent for qualifications at Level 2 or below<sup>7</sup>.
- 2.2 £25 million was spent on the EMA Scheme in Wales during the last academic year (2012/13) supporting just over 30,000 recipients, equating to £826 per student supported.
- 2.3 Our review has found that the EMA supports and contributes towards a range of Welsh Government policies which are geared towards widening access to education, reducing the rate of young people who are NEET and addressing the current link between poverty and educational attainment. It is less well-aligned with the Welsh Government's objective of improving progression into higher education.
- 2.1 In spite of the limitations surrounding the scope of the quantitative analysis as outlined in sections 1.7 and 1.8, the analysis of the matched

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<sup>6</sup> Due to limitations of the data matching exercise for the study, the course of study could not be identified for most of the remaining 13% of recipients.

<sup>7</sup> The remaining students studied sixth form vocational or other vocational combination courses.

SLC and Widening Access database has provided, for the first time, a detailed picture of the characteristics and educational outcomes of EMA recipients. At the outset, being in receipt of EMA would in itself be expected to be a marker of economic disadvantage. In the same way that eligibility for Free school meals is associated with lower educational performance among children attending compulsory education, recipients of EMA would also be expected to exhibit lower levels of educational performance than those who do not suffer such economic disadvantage. This is confirmed by the findings of the quantitative analysis summarised below:

- Recipients of EMA were more likely than non-recipients to enrol in further education (school or FEI) in the September following their year 11 year. Non-recipients were more likely to enrol after some time out of education;
- AS level students who received both FSM and EMA were less likely to progress to A-level than students who received neither of these allowances. Students who received EMA but who were not eligible for FSM occupy an intermediate position between these two groups, reflecting their relative economic circumstances. The same pattern is also observed in terms of attainment at A-level;
- Amongst students who undertook qualifications other than AS/A-Levels within FE, EMA recipients continued their FE studies for longer than non-recipients. In this non-A-Level group, students who were in receipt of EMA but who were not eligible for FSM again occupy an intermediate position between these two groups;
- EMA recipients who undertook qualifications other than AS/A-Levels within FE were more likely to achieve a Level 3 or higher award than non-recipients. Similarly, EMA recipients who undertook qualifications other than AS/A-Levels within FE were

more likely than non-recipients to achieve qualifications beyond their original entry aim;

- Amongst students undertaking A-levels, EMA recipients were less likely to participate in higher education than non-recipients, again reflecting their relative economic circumstances.

2.2 Our qualitative fieldwork revealed an overwhelming view that there was a definite need for the EMA Scheme to provide financial support to students from low income families in post-compulsory education. There was also a strong call for the continuation of the Scheme in the future, although this was mixed with a view from some research participants that a discretionary system based on the assessment of individual needs would be preferable (and a view from some students that EMA should be universally available). It was felt that only a very small proportion of students were enrolling onto their courses solely to receive EMA, rather than to enable them to learn. A few of this group were thought to be disruptive to other students.

2.3 Whilst the EMA Scheme was thought to be well-aligned with other further education financial support on offer there was a strong call from the sector for the alignment of household income thresholds for Schemes such as EMA and ALG (FE).

2.4 The changes implemented to the EMA Scheme in Wales over the last few years (notably the removal of the lower allowances and the bonus payments) were not thought to have had a significant impact upon student participation in post-compulsory education. Contributors did however convey mixed views about the removal of the bonus payments previously available.

2.5 In the main we found that those students who are most at need were being supported via the Scheme although there is evidence to suggest that the Scheme could be better targeted in the future given some use of the funds towards non-essential purposes. Whilst there was a strong call within the sector for the funds to be allocated via a more

individualised assessment approach, it was widely recognised that household income means-testing was a practical and efficient method of allocating financial support.

- 2.6 Our fieldwork revealed that the current single rate of allowance of £30 was reasonable and there was no appetite to see this rate reduced in the future.
- 2.7 The research found that there was generally a good level of awareness of the EMA Scheme across both the school and FE sector and that appropriate promotional efforts had been deployed by learning centres to promote the Scheme. The application process was in the main deemed to be fairly straightforward, albeit that parents and guardians appeared to take on most of the responsibility for the EMA application itself. The submission of original evidence to support applications however posed more difficulties for EMA applicants.
- 2.8 We found that the EMA learning agreements signed between learning centres and EMA recipients were not regarded as particularly meaningful. Whilst attendance requirements to qualify for payments were felt by the majority of stakeholders, practitioners, students and parents to have a positive impact upon improving attendance and punctuality amongst recipients, we encountered significant differences between learning centres in terms of the attendance requirements set for students in order receive payments. Furthermore learning centres adopted different attendance monitoring processes. For instance not all students involved in our research were able to access their attendance records in advance of payments being made or withheld. Issues relating to lesson registrations (where this led to non EMA payment) were the biggest source of discontent for EMA recipients who participated in our research. Conversely learning centres identified the pressure put on them by EMA recipients and their parents to approve EMA payments despite issues of absenteeism.

- 2.9 Whilst EMA funds were found to be used for educational purposes in the main we did encounter some use of the funding for non-essential purposes, suggesting that the support can be a 'nice to have' for some students.
- 2.10 In terms of the difference made we found that whilst the potential offer of EMA was an important consideration for students, the majority of EMA recipients who contributed to this study (80%) would have enrolled on their course anyway – with those in sixth form more likely to have done so than those in further education. Contributors also thought that the EMA was having a positive contribution to widening participation (given its focus on those from low household incomes) and improving retention rates as well as having a positive impact upon attendance and punctuality. More mixed views were conveyed as to whether the EMA was making a difference to student attainment and achievement – whilst our qualitative work did not present much concrete evidence in this respect practitioners were keen to highlight the fact that existing research across the student population more generally showed that higher attendance led to better achievement.
- 2.11 Finally a third of EMA recipients are known to progress into higher education. There was no evidence from either the qualitative fieldwork or the quantitative analysis for this study, to suggest that the offer of the EMA impacts upon progression into higher education.
- 2.12 Our review of financial support for 16 to 19 year-olds outside Wales, including key findings from robust evaluations conducted across England<sup>8</sup>, Scotland and Ireland reinforces our main findings within this evaluation. These evaluations from elsewhere in the UK suggest that:

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<sup>8</sup> E.g. Research Report 678: Evaluation of Education Maintenance Allowance Pilots: Final Report of the Quantitative Evaluation. Centre for Research in Social Policy (CRISP) and Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) for the Department for Education and Skills (2005), also EMA Evaluation of the East Ayrshire Pilot. Centre for Educational Sociology (CES), University of Edinburgh for Scottish Social Research: Summary (2002).



- EMA had a positive impact upon participation rates, increasing participation by between 4 percentage points and 9 percentage points, depending on the year group and study. The lower (e.g. £20 or £10) rates were generally not effective at incentivising participation;
- EMA is an essential source of financial support for only a minority of students who receive it. A high proportion of recipients would have enrolled in post-compulsory education anyway, particularly within the school sixth form setting. In fact EMA acts as a perverse incentive for a small minority of students (i.e. they appear to attend further education only for the purpose of receiving the allowance, rather than claiming the allowance for the purpose of supporting their education);
- EMA Schemes generally make a positive contribution to student retention rates, and there is no suggestion that there is any stigma attached to receiving the EMA allowance;
- The evidence of the impact of EMA on attainment levels is inconclusive, and there is no evidence to suggest that the EMA leads to higher rates of participating in higher education, however the allowance does tend to reduce the need for recipients to work part-time while studying.

## **Recommendations**

2.13 The report makes a series of eight recommendations namely:

### **Recommendation 1**

That the EMA Scheme be maintained but that financial funding be better targeted at those students who are most in need. This could be achieved by lowering the household income threshold eligible for EMA support, in line with the income threshold for the WGLG (FE) Scheme<sup>9</sup> (currently £18,371, nearly £2,500 lower than the EMA threshold). We recommend that the two-tier

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<sup>9</sup> The Welsh Government Learning Grant (Further Education) Scheme which has replaced the Assembly Learning Grant (Further Education) (ALG (FE)) Scheme from September 2014 onwards.

income threshold to account for siblings within the EMA Scheme be maintained but that this threshold be reduced in line with the overall drop. We also recommend that the financial savings incurred as a result of these changes be maintained within the student finance system, and distributed via a more individualised assessment approach, thereby retaining expenditure at its current level, yet allowing the targeting of the allowance to be improved. The Welsh Government should conduct impact analysis to identify the number of recipients that would be affected by this change, and the sum of money that would be released;

### **Recommendation 2**

That the EMA Scheme continues to be made available to students across school and further education settings to maintain an equitable offer in both settings;

### **Recommendation 3**

That the EMA allowance level be maintained at its current level of £30 per week and that this single rate of allowance be based upon both satisfactory attendance levels as well as the achievement of agreed learning objectives as set out in learning agreements;

### **Recommendation 4**

That the application process for a range of student finance funds available across further education, in particular the EMA and FCF, be streamlined. We suggest that the application processes for FE student support be simplified so that an application as well as any supporting evidence submitted for any one scheme can be shared and automatically passported to others available across the FE sector. We further recommend the adoption of an on-line application process and that consideration is given to how the SLC can share information relating to the status of a student's application with their learning centre.

### **Recommendation 5**

That learning agreements are strengthened and made more meaningful. This would involve identifying what role each learning centre should play as part of the agreement and how the learning agreements relate to institutional codes of conduct. Learning agreements could also be strengthened by setting out the requirements for attendance within the documents.

### **Recommendation 6**

That learning centres adopt more consistent policies in relation to EMA recipient attendance requirements as well as greater consistency in their practices to monitor attendance. This would result in a more equitable provision to EMA recipients, particularly around non-attendance resulting from illness. Furthermore we believe that there is further scope for learning centres to draw upon some of the good practices that currently exist within the sector in terms of attendance monitoring;

### **Recommendation 7**

That the performance indicator(s) associated with the EMA Scheme be re-examined and that future indicators better reflect the outcomes intended to be achieved by the Scheme – primarily in terms of completion and attainment rates for recipients. In turn we would expect learning centres to be required to monitor and collect these outputs in order to be able to report upon EMA recipient completion and achievements in post-compulsory education;

### **Recommendation 8**

That issues surrounding making greater use of EMA data for the purpose of monitoring and research - including the possibility of requiring receipt of EMA to be flagged up directly in FE or school based administrative record - should be examined further.

### **3 AN OVERVIEW OF THE EMA SCHEME IN WALES**

#### **Introduction**

3.1 This chapter firstly presents the background to the EMA Scheme in Wales as well as its overall aims and objectives. It then goes on to discuss the Welsh policy context within which the scheme has been operating as well as an outline of the key developments since it was first introduced. The chapter then presents an overview of the Scheme's take up, financial spend and the delivery model adopted for its administration.

#### **Background**

3.2 The EMA is a financial allowance available to 16, 17 and 18 years olds living in Wales to incentivise them to continue in education after compulsory school leaving age. It was first introduced for 16 year-olds in 2004/05 and was extended to include 17 year-olds in the following year (2005/06) and 18 year-olds during 2006/07. It is currently a weekly allowance of £30 per student, linked to satisfactory attendance and achievement of agreed learning goals, paid fortnightly to eligible students attending recognised schools or further education institutions (FEIs) in Wales or elsewhere in the UK.

3.3 In order to be eligible for the EMA, students must satisfy the following criteria:

- Be aged 16, 17 or 18 years old on the 31 August prior to starting the academic year;
- Meet the national residency criteria i.e. normally live in Wales;
- Be studying full-time at a school or for at least 12 guided hours a week at a recognised FEI;

- Be studying an academic or vocational course up to and including level 3 (such as GCSEs, A Levels, BTEC, NVQ, GNVQs and Basic Skills courses);
  - Be studying an eligible course that lasts at least 10 weeks.
- 3.4 Household income is also a criterion for awarding EMA support and students are currently only able to receive funding if their household income is £20,817 or less (if they are the only dependent child in the household) or £23,077 or less if there are one or more additional dependents aged 16 or under or aged 20 or under and in full-time education or training and eligible for child benefit in the household. The EMA was designed so as not to affect household benefits - it is paid in addition to benefits such as Child Benefit and Tax Credits, Income Support or Jobseeker's Allowance.
- 3.5 The EMA was introduced in Wales to coincide with its introduction in the other three countries of the UK and it was agreed by representatives of the UK Government and all the devolved administrations that support from the EMA Schemes would be open to students from across the UK according to where they study, not where they were ordinarily resident. However the UK Government announced in 2010 that the English Scheme would be closed at the end of August 2011 (although it is still available in Scotland and Northern Ireland).

### **EMA Aims and Objectives**

- 3.6 The original aim of EMA was 'to address the link between low income, and low participation by providing a financial incentive to young people from low-income households to remain in full-time education beyond compulsory education'<sup>10</sup>. A review of key documents shows that it was intended that the EMA 'would play a significant role in widening access to both further and higher education, by encouraging more young people

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<sup>10</sup> Welsh Government (2009) 'Investing in Skills: Sector Priorities Funding, Fees Policy and Financial Support for Learners' Consultation Document, p. 33

from lower income backgrounds to enter academic or vocational post compulsory education that might otherwise have dropped out'<sup>11</sup>.

3.7 The original design of the EMA Scheme in Wales was largely influenced by the lessons learnt from the delivery of pilot schemes across England and Scotland between 1999 and 2004. However since it was first introduced in Wales, the EMA Scheme has undergone considerable change in light of various enquiries and reviews as well as changes to the scheme in England. These are discussed below.

### **The Welsh Policy Context**

3.8 The Welsh Government has been committed since the creation of the National Assembly in 1999 to widening access to learning and to tackling barriers which prevent those from disadvantaged backgrounds from embarking upon and progressing through post compulsory education. These commitments were set out in the One Wales Manifesto (which set the agenda for the Welsh Government from 2007 – 2011) as well as the Welsh Government's 'Skills That Work for Wales: A Skills and Employment Strategy and Action Plan' (2008) which stated that the Welsh Government would 'create a coherent system of financial support and ensure that all young people aged 16-19 have the support and incentives they need to participate'.

3.9 In its current Programme for Government, the Welsh Government has a clear aim of improving further education and in relation to the EMA has set an outcome indicator relating to the percentage of EMA recipients who progress to Higher Education.

### **Key developments to the EMA Wales Scheme**

3.10 Since the EMA Wales Scheme was first introduced a number of developments have taken place. For instance the Welsh Government

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<sup>11</sup> Welsh Assembly Government Enterprise and Learning Committee, 30 April 2009

implemented some initial changes to the Scheme during the first four years of its existence which included:

- Offering an in-year re-assessment facility using current year household income level;
- Annual assessment of level of qualifying income;
- Increasing the application deadline for back-payment of the allowance to an individual's start date, to a period of eight weeks between his/her start date and applying for EMA.”;
- Extending the Scheme closing date to 31 August to mirror the academic year, and
- Automatic full EMA award for children in care and care leavers and for young offenders on release from custody.

3.11 A review of the EMA in Wales was conducted during 2008<sup>12</sup> and whilst the main purpose of that study was to develop a set of recommendations for a potential large scale full evaluation of the Scheme<sup>13</sup> it does provide some initial findings on the effectiveness and impact of the EMA at the time.

3.12 The review found that there was a good level of awareness of the EMA amongst Welsh students although students had a lower level of understanding about how the Scheme was administered. Whilst the EMA was seen to be delivered effectively, the main source of concern related to the inconsistent use of learning agreements and the fact that they were not universally enforced, particularly within the FE sector.

3.13 The review concluded that whilst the EMA had had a ‘positive impact on student attendance’ it was impossible to gauge its success in influencing students’ decisions to stay in education post-16 or in terms of academic

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<sup>12</sup> Arad Consulting and CfK NOP Social Research (June 2008) ‘First Stage Evaluation of the Education Maintenance Allowance in Wales. A report for the Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills’

<sup>13</sup> Undertaken via this evaluation.

attainment. It was also difficult for the evaluators to come to a clear conclusion about the effectiveness of the EMA in terms of student retention given the contrasting views of practitioners (who thought the allowance had had a positive impact upon retention) and students (who did not think this to be the case). The review did however suggest that the EMA had impacted positively upon students in a social sense in terms of enabling greater independence and widening their choices as to how they used their free time.

3.14 Some more recent changes have been made to the EMA Scheme – largely arising from the proposals presented within a consultation document published by the Welsh Government during 2009 ‘Investing in Skills: Sector Priorities Funding, Fees Policy and Financial Support for Learners’<sup>14</sup>.

3.15 At the time of the ‘Investing in Skills’ consultation in 2009, weekly EMA payments for £10, £20 and £30 were available to students. The value of the payment was determined by household income: students from households with the lowest incomes (e.g. £21,885 or below during 2010/11) received £30 per week and students from somewhat better off households received the lower levels of EMA: thus, in 2009/10 students from households with incomes of £32,400 or below were entitled to EMA at the lower rates. The Scheme also made available bonus payments to students – two payments of £100 each during the academic year in January and July and a further £100 payment for those returning to their course for a second or subsequent year of study.

3.16 Given that some 82 per cent of EMA recipients at the time qualified for the maximum £30 award, the consultation document proposed that the lower EMA payment bands of £10 and £20 be phased out on the basis that financial support would be targeted at those students who were

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<sup>14</sup> Welsh Assembly Government (October 2009) ‘Investing in Skills: Sector Priorities Funding, Fees Policy and Financial Support for Learners’ Consultation Document



most at need. The report stated that previous research indicated that where lower rates of support had been removed there had been little impact on student participation rates. It was also argued that targeting support in this way would have the 'greatest impact and support progression into higher level learning'.

3.17 It is interesting to note that the 'Investing in Skills' consultation document, on the basis of previous research undertaken in Wales and other parts of the UK, suggests that the two achievement bonus payments were 'an effective component of the EMA scheme'<sup>15</sup>, even though it was subsequently decided to remove them, whilst the returning bonus was not.

3.18 In all, the 'Investing in Skills' consultation document proposed six amendments to the EMA Scheme, namely:

- 'use entitlement to an EMA as a means of guaranteeing a minimum level of maintenance support for eligible students who progress into higher education to act as an incentive for participation in higher education;
- introduce a sibling disregard in the income assessment for EMA on the lines of the one operating for HE assessments in order to take account of the costs of having other dependent children;
- ... look into whether the income thresholds for student support schemes in Wales could be better aligned;
- remove the returners bonus since the evaluations indicate that this is unlikely to have a significant effect on retention;
- phase out the lower EMA payment bands (£10 and £20 per week) thereby focussing resources on the least well off; and
- aligning income thresholds for student support across schemes where possible to remove complexity and ensure effective transition.'<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p. 34

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, pp.28-9

3.19 The 'Investing in Skills' consultation document also proposed to remove the inconsistencies in the support available to students aged 16-18 as young people not in employment who were enrolled on work-based learning programmes received a training allowance of at least £50 a week at the time. The consultation document offered three options for the future namely (a) applying the EMA to 'all unemployed young people undertaking work-based learning' – the preferred option; (b) applying the EMA to the 'preparatory learning undertaken by unemployed young people in work-based learning (learning at a level below Level 1)' or (c) to maintain the existing system as it was.

3.20 A summary of the responses received from the 'Investing in Skills' consultation<sup>17</sup> showed that there was:

- An agreement to endorse the proposed reforms to the EMA and focus resources on those in most need;
- Broad support for the alignment of thresholds and parity of esteem across financial support measures and for encouraging progression into Higher Education – although respondents were split between Options (a) and (c) outlined above;
- An acceptance that mechanisms for providing financial support to learners ought to be simplified and streamlined;
- A view that any changes to EMA should not lead to any overall reduction in funding levels;
- A call for the Financial Contingency Fund (FCF), a discretionary funding Scheme available to students in both further and higher education settings, to be retained.

3.21 Over the same timeframe as the 'Investing in Skills' consultation process the National Assembly for Wales Enterprise and Learning Committee undertook an inquiry into EMA during 2009 which included receiving oral

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<sup>17</sup> Welsh Assembly Government (2010) 'Response to a consultation on Investing in Skills: Sector Priorities Funding, Fees Policy and Financial Support for Learners'

and written evidence – leading to the publication of a report which proposed recommendations to Welsh Ministers<sup>18</sup>.

3.22 The evidence presented to the Committee included a petition by an individual that young people over 16 years of age should be assessed on the basis of their own income rather than that of their parents. However evidence presented by fforwm<sup>19</sup> suggested that should such a change be adopted then ‘virtually all young people would be eligible ... which would cost some £57 million a year’<sup>20</sup>. fforwm went on to argue that the EMA ought to be directed as far as possible towards those most in need and the Committee broadly agreed with this, thus recommending that:

‘given the limited resources available, the Education Maintenance Allowance should be focused on those students who come from the lowest income households. We do not therefore support the call for the Allowance to be spread thinly across the board but targeted effectively where it can make the greatest difference’<sup>21</sup>.

3.23 The Committee further recommended that:

- Attempts should be made to redress anomalies in the calculation of household income to remove any unfairness in the system;
- A full evaluation of the EMA be conducted.

3.24 The [then] Welsh Assembly Government responded to the Committee’s report in July 2009, accepting all of the recommendations made. In particular the response noted that further consideration needed to be given to the potential unfairness upon families with more than one child

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<sup>18</sup> National Assembly for Wales Enterprise and Learning Committee (April 2009) various oral and written evidence received <http://www.assemblywales.org/bus-home/bus-third-assembly/bus-guide-docs-pub/bus-business-documents/bus-business-documents-doc-laid.htm?act=dis&id=131726&ds=6/2009> accessed 5th June 2014.

<sup>19</sup> Renamed as Colleges Wales in 2009 – a national organisation representing further education colleges and institutions in Wales.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 7

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 3

in full-time education and it proposed that a proportion of income per dependent child be disregarded for the purposes of calculating EMA eligibility.

3.25 In light of both the consultation process and the Committee's inquiry the Welsh Government announced via a Written Statement a number of changes to the EMA Wales Scheme with effect from academic year 2011/12 onwards<sup>22</sup> taking the view that these changes would ensure a focus on those most in need of support:

- 'the lower EMA payment bands of £10 and £20 per week will be phased out in order to target support at those most in need and for whom the scheme has the greatest impact;
- [the removal of all bonus payments in that] the periodic bonuses of £100 that may currently be paid if learning objectives are met or when a student returns for the second year of a course will be removed;
- we will seek to align better the income thresholds for students across Student Finance Wales products where possible and appropriate in order to remove complexity and ensure smooth and effective transition between products as students progress through their post-16 education;
- in future, the cost of other dependent children will be factored into the assessment of household income for EMA purposes;
- we will encourage participation in higher education by giving younger learners an illustration of the support that could be available to those receiving EMA Wales grant support who subsequently progress on to HE.<sup>23</sup>

3.26 In January 2011 the Minister for Children, Education and Lifelong Learning announced further changes to the EMA Wales Scheme – in response to the UK Government announcement that the EMA Scheme

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<sup>22</sup> Welsh Assembly Government Written Statement (July 2010) 'Changes to the Educational Maintenance Allowances Wales Scheme'

<http://wales.gov.uk/about/cabinet/cabinetstatements/2010/100715ema/?lang=en>

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 2

in England would be abolished and replaced with the Bursary Fund. The announcement clarified that students who were ordinarily resident in Wales (Welsh domiciled) and studying in England (who would no longer be able to apply to the English Scheme) would be able to apply to the Scheme in Wales.

3.27 In July 2011, Estyn<sup>24</sup> published a thematic report on the achievement of learners in further education from deprived backgrounds<sup>25</sup>. Amongst its key findings were:

- That EMA bonus payments were not as important to the participation of learners as their weekly allowance (accepting of course that they had been abolished by the Welsh Government by the time of publication), although they were considered an additional incentive to work hard;
- The EMA had not been a major factor in their choice of college or course and many would like to continue their studies even if the EMA were to be withdrawn;
- The EMA was not large enough to make a real difference to the financial position of students, but gave them some independence and relieved some of the financial strain whilst studying;
- The EMA had encouraged recipients to attend regularly and to work hard on their courses. Learners argued that the EMA had made them more independent and take more responsibility for their learning;
- Learners used the EMA wisely to cover essential personal expenses such as food, equipment, clothing, transport and college trips or educational visits;
- Learners thought that colleges were good at keeping them informed about their own attendance on their courses and provided easy access to this information on their Moodle<sup>26</sup> sites.

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<sup>24</sup> The education and training inspectorate for Wales.

<sup>25</sup> Estyn (July 2011) 'The impact of deprivation on learners' attainment in further education and work-based learning' available at:  
<http://www.estyn.gov.uk/english/docViewer/203630.7/the-impact-of-deprivation-on-learners-attainment-in-further-education-and-work-based-learning-july-2011/?navmap=30,163>,

- 3.28 Estyn also reported that feedback from providers suggested that the EMA helped with improving attendance and punctuality.
- 3.29 The report recommended that the Welsh Government continue to support learners from deprived areas financially to enable them to complete their education or training as well as investigating ways of reducing the cost of EMA Scheme administration. It also recommended that providers should ensure that learners from deprived areas became aware of the support and financial assistance available to them before they applied for programmes, that they should provide learners with easier on-line access to information on their attendance, punctuality and performance as well as making sure that the performance of learners from deprived areas was reported within providers' self-assessment reports.
- 3.30 Estyn has also underlined the link between poverty and low educational attainment, stating, for instance in its annual report for 2010-11<sup>27</sup> that students from poorer families are more likely to attain at lower levels than other students. In its latest annual report<sup>28</sup> Estyn recognised that the Welsh Government continues to offer the EMA to the most disadvantaged learners to encourage them to continue in education. It goes on to state that:
- ‘the success rates of learners who receive the EMA may not be captured at a national level but there is evidence from several colleges that learners in receipt of the EMA do as well as others on the same courses, although these can be at levels below level 2.’<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Acronym for Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment which is a free software e-learning platform

<sup>27</sup> Estyn (2012) ‘The Annual Report of Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales 2010-2011’ available at <http://www.estyn.gov.uk/english/news/annual-report-of-her-majestys-chief-inspector-of-education-and-training-in-wales-2010-2011/>

<sup>28</sup> Estyn (2013) ‘The Annual Report of HM Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales 2012-13) available at <http://www.estyn.gov.uk/english/annual-report/annual-report-2012-2013/>

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 10

3.31 In the summer of 2013 a petition was submitted to the National Assembly for Wales to make the EMA available to all students aged 16 to 19 in full-time education, regardless of their parents' income. In his response to the Chair of the Petitions Committee the then Minister for Education and Skills, reinforced the importance of the EMA Scheme in addressing the link between low income and low participation in post-compulsory education adding that the means-testing approach adopted was 'a fair measure of the resources each household has to meet its needs and is a transparent and practical way of determining entitlement'<sup>30</sup>. The Committee considered correspondence on the petition and agreed to close it as the petitioner was content with the Minister's response.

3.32 The National Assembly for Wales Children and Young People Committee is currently undertaking an enquiry into the educational outcomes for children from low income households<sup>31</sup>. The overall aim of the inquiry is to review the effectiveness of the Welsh Government's policies in addressing the gap in the educational outcomes of children from low income households at all key stages. Of particular relevance to this evaluation is the inquiry's focus upon the costs associated with education and the effectiveness of the Welsh Government's approach in ensuring that children from low-income households are not disadvantaged in this regard.

3.33 The current enquiry builds upon two previous reports prepared by this Committee (during 2008<sup>32</sup> and 2011<sup>33</sup>) in relation to child poverty.

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<http://www.senedd.assemblywales.org/documents/s20245/21.06.2013%20Correspondence%20-%20Minister%20for%20Education%20and%20Skills%20to%20the%20Chair.pdf> Accessed 3 June 2014

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.senedd.assemblywales.org/mglIssueHistoryHome.aspx?lId=6996> Accessed 5 June 2014

<sup>32</sup> National Assembly for Wales Children and Young People Committee (November 2008) 'Child Poverty in Wales: Eradication through Education?'

<sup>33</sup> National Assembly for Wales Children and Young People Committee (February 2011) 'Follow up inquiry into child poverty: eradication through education?'

However neither of these two reports, together with their key recommendations made any specific reference to student financial support or the EMA Scheme in particular – probably due to their focus on compulsory school age education. Having said that the 2011 report dealt with the issue of mitigating the additional costs of education – albeit that the focus was upon the provision and take up of free school meals, making the recommendation that a stigma free-school meal system should be rolled out to all schools during 2011.

3.34 Finally in terms of setting the context for this study it is important to consider some of the key findings presented in the most recent NUS Wales survey of students<sup>34</sup>. Amongst its top ten critical findings the report found that financial difficulties were pushing many students towards ‘the brink of dropping out’ – indeed across the further education sector it was found that just under half of surveyed students who had considered leaving their course had done so because of financial difficulties. The survey also found that that access to financial support from the family had a significant bearing upon student wellbeing, with those who did not receive such support more likely to worry about not having enough money to fund their living costs. It was also the case that family financial support had a significant bearing upon a student’s decision as to whether to progress to their current level of study or not. Finally the survey also found a strong correlation between high course costs and low student wellbeing. The NUS Wales report makes a series of recommendations, including maintaining (as a minimum) the current levels of student financial support in real terms (i.e. after inflation).

### **EMA Take Up in Wales**

3.35 As is shown in Table 3.1 below the number of young people benefiting from the EMA Scheme has increased steadily from just over 14,000 when it was first introduced in 2004/05 to a high of over 36,000 in

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<sup>34</sup> National Union of Students (NUS) Wales (2014) ‘Pound in your pocket’



2010/11. The initial growth in take up over the first three years was due to older age groups becoming eligible for support i.e. the EMA was first introduced in 2004/05 for 16 year-olds with 17 year-olds becoming eligible in 2005/6 and 18 year-olds in 2006/7. Since 2010/11 the number receiving EMA has dropped (as a result of the withdrawal of the £10 and £20 payment) plateauing at its current level of just over 30,000. The number of EMA *applicants* since 2004/05 has followed a similar pattern – peaking during 2009/10 and currently standing at just under 32,000. Application approval rates have generally increased over time since the introduction of the EMA (from around 92 per cent to a current high proportion of 95 per cent) suggesting that the Scheme is being targeted effectively and communicated well to potential applicants.

**Table 3.1: EMA applications by academic year<sup>35</sup>**

Numbers and Proportions	All EMA Applications	All EMA Approved	EMA Approved as proportion of all applications
2004/05	15,205	14,070	93%
2005/06	28,125	25,625	91%
2006/07	32,595	30,370	93%
2007/08	33,295	31,180	94%
2008/09	35,205	32,695	93%
2009/10	38,500	36,185	94%
2010/11	38,365	36,460	95%
2011/12	33,880	32,520	96%
2012/13	31,915	30,270	95%
2013/14 <sup>36</sup>	31,845	30,295	95%

Source: Welsh Government StatsWales<sup>37</sup> Total number of applications for EMA by academic year and workstage

<sup>35</sup> The EMA was available only to 16 year-olds in 2004/05 and was extended to include 17 year-olds in 2005/06 and 18 year-olds during 2006/07.

<sup>36</sup> As at April 2014

3.36 In relation to the number of EMA recipients in receipt of the £30 award, table 3.2 shows there has also been an increase over time – peaking at over 30,000 in 2010/11 but dropping slightly thereafter. It is not surprising that the proportion of EMA recipients receiving the £30 award (as a proportion of all those receiving EMA awards) has increased over time given the gradual withdrawal of £20 and £10 payments from 2011/12 onwards. Not surprisingly data for the last academic year (2012/13) shows that of the 30,271 EMA awards made the vast majority (98 per cent or 29,761) were for the £30 award. Only 510 were for either the £20 or £10 award (84 per cent of these awards were for the £30 rate in 2011/12). The £20 and £10 awards were phased out from 2011/12 onwards.

**Table 3.2: EMA awards by academic year**

Number and Proportions	All EMA Awards <sup>38</sup>	£30 Award only	£30 Award as proportion of all awards made
2004/05	14,072	10,751	76%
2005/06	25,622	20,506	80%
2006/07	30,372	24,905	82%
2007/08	31,181	25,608	82%
2008/09	32,695	27,015	83%
2009/10	36,187	30,217	84%
2010/11	36,458	30,586	84%
2011/12	32,521	29,942	92%
2012/13	30,271	29,761	98%

Source: Welsh Government StatsWales<sup>39</sup> Approved applications for EMA by gender, learning, centre type and type of award

<sup>37</sup> <https://statswales.wales.gov.uk/Catalogue/Education-and-Skills/Post-16-Education-and-Training/Student-Support/Educational-Maintenance-Allowances-Further-Education> Accessed 3 June 2014

<sup>38</sup> The number of EMA Awards presented in Tables 3.1 and 3.2 do not necessarily match due to the rounding of statistics within the different StatsWales tables.

3.37 Focusing upon the £30 EMA allowance only, around two-thirds of approved applications have come via FEIs each year (other than for 2010/11 when this dipped to 56 per cent) whilst schools have accounted for most of the remaining third of applications as shown in Table 3.3 below. As a proportion of all students aged 16 to 18 studying on a full time basis at schools or FEIs, EMA recipients represent 32 per cent of all 16-18 year-olds at Welsh schools and 59 per cent of all 16-18 year-olds at Welsh FEIs<sup>40</sup>.

**Table 3.3: Approved EMA applications by academic year and learning centre type (£30 payment only)<sup>41</sup>**

Number and Proportions	Further Education Colleges	Secondary Schools	Other Learning Centres	Total
2004/05	54%	45%	1%	10,751
2005/06	57%	42%	2%	20,506
2006/07	61%	37%	2%	24,905
2007/08	61%	37%	2%	25,608
2008/09	61%	37%	2%	27,015
2009/10	60%	38%	2%	30,217
2010/11	56%	42%	2%	30,586
2011/12	63%	35%	2%	29,942
2012/13	64%	33%	2%	29,761

Source: Welsh Government StatsWales Approved applications for EMA by gender, learning, centre type and type of award

<sup>39</sup> <https://statswales.wales.gov.uk/Catalogue/Education-and-Skills/Post-16-Education-and-Training/Student-Support/Educational-Maintenance-Allowances-Further-Education> Accessed 3 June 2014

<sup>40</sup> Data available via: <https://statswales.wales.gov.uk/Catalogue/Education-and-Skills/Post-16-Education-and-Training/Lifelong-Learning/Participation-of-Adults-and-Young-People/ParticipationOf1630YearOldsInEducation-by-Sector-Mode-Age-Year> shows that 31,490 students aged 16-18 were enrolled at Welsh schools and 32,300 students aged 16-18 were enrolled at Welsh FEIs for further education full-time study. Accessed 8 July 2014.

<sup>41</sup> Due to rounding totals do not always tally to 100%

3.38 Turning to explore EMA take-up by local authority area Table 3.4 shows that the highest take-up rate by far (as measured as a proportion of all 16-18 year old students within the county) was within the county of Merthyr Tydfil followed by the counties of Blaenau Gwent, Conwy, Cardiff and Rhondda Cynon Taf whilst those in the counties of Torfaen, Monmouthshire and Flintshire were the least likely to receive the EMA. The highest *number* of £30 awards during 2011/12 were issued in the counties of Cardiff, Rhondda Cynon Taf and Swansea whilst the lowest numbers were issued in the Isle of Anglesey, Monmouthshire, Ceredigion and Merthyr Tydfil (at no more than 700 awards in each case). 181 EMA awards were made to students studying at institutions outside Wales during 2011/12. Overall the number of EMA awards made across each local authority tended to correlate with the number of 16-18 year-old students in each authority in that the highest number of 16-18 year old students were found in the counties of Cardiff followed by Rhondda Cynon Taf and Swansea<sup>42</sup> whilst the lowest numbers of students were in Merthyr Tydfil, Isle of Anglesey and Ceredigion. Some care must be taken when interpreting the data<sup>43</sup> as figures for all 16-18 year old students include those studying part-time (only those studying full time would potentially qualify for the EMA).

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<sup>42</sup> The most recent data on student numbers by local authority area available is for 2011/12. Data drawn from Stats Wales for 2011/12 accessed 30 September 2014 <https://statswales.wales.gov.uk/Catalogue/Education-and-Skills/Post-16-Education-and-Training/Further-Education-and-Work-Based-Learning/Geographical-Analysis-of-Participation/Participation-by-LearnerCohort-LocalAuthority-Measure>

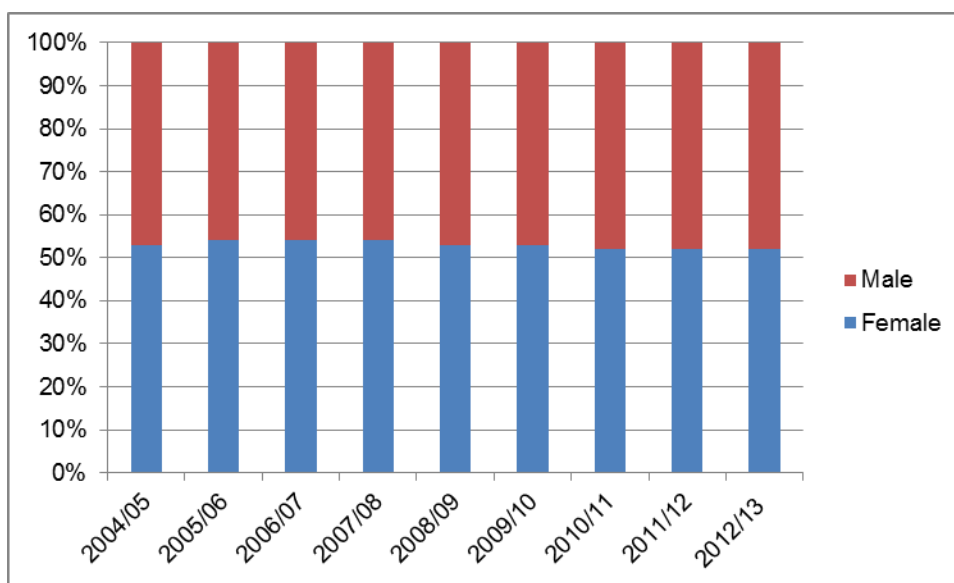
**Table 3.4: EMA awarded by number of students within each local authority (2011/12 - £30 payment only)**

Number and Proportions	£30 Award made in 2011/12	All 16-18 students 2011/12	Awards as % of all 16-18 students
Isle of Anglesey	623	1,830	34%
Gwynedd	1,015	3,220	32%
Conwy	1,282	3,475	37%
Denbighshire	1,047	3,205	33%
Flintshire	1,435	4,990	29%
Wrexham	1,213	3,870	31%
Powys	1,232	3,620	34%
Ceredigion	666	1,915	35%
Pembrokeshire	1,136	3,685	31%
Carmarthenshire	1,750	5,205	34%
Swansea	2,273	6,480	35%
Neath Port Talbot	1,507	4,515	33%
Bridgend	1,303	4,175	31%
The Vale of Glamorgan	1,194	3,850	31%
Cardiff	3,076	8,620	36%
Rhondda Cynon Taf	2,484	6,950	36%
Merthyr Tydfil	681	1,520	45%
Caerphilly	1,799	5,490	33%
Blaenau Gwent	895	2,315	39%
Torfaen	814	3,305	25%
Monmouthshire	659	2,375	29%
Newport	1,548	4,720	33%
Outside Wales	181	n/a	n/a
Unknown	129	n/a	n/a
All	29,942	89,340	34%

Source: Welsh Government StatsWales Approved applications for EMA by LEA and type of award and participation by learner cohort, local authority and measure as well as Number of learners by provider and age group

3.39 Similarly, focusing upon the £30 EMA allowance, just over half of approved EMA applications were awarded to female students and this has been the general trend since the EMA was first introduced in 2004/05, as shown in Figure 3.1.

**Figure 3.1: Approved EMA applications by gender (£30 payment only)**



Source: Welsh Government StatsWales Approved applications for EMA by gender, learning, centre type and type of award

3.40 Focusing upon age and those who receive the £30 payment only, Table 3.5 shows that since September 2006, when the EMA had been fully rolled out students aged 16 year-old have accounted for the large minority of recipients – although this proportion has dropped since 2006/07 to its current 43 per cent. During the last academic year 38 per cent of recipients have been aged 17 and the remaining proportion (18 per cent) have been for students aged 18 and over<sup>44</sup>.

<sup>44</sup> Due to rounding these proportions (and those presented in Table 3.5) do not add up to 100%.

**Table 3.5: Approved EMA applications by age and academic year (£30 payment only)**

Number and Proportions	16	17	18 and over	Total
2004/05	100%	N/A	N/A	10,751
2005/06	56%	38%	N/A	20,506
2006/07	49%	40%	12%	24,905
2007/08	47%	38%	13%	25,608
2008/09 <sup>45</sup>	47%	39%	14%	27,014
2009/10	45%	38%	16%	30,217
2010/11	44%	38%	18%	30,586
2011/12	44%	38%	18%	29,942
2012/13	43%	38%	18%	29,761

Source: Welsh Government StatsWales Approved applications for EMA by gender, learning, centre type and type of award

3.41 In addition to these trends a recent statistical release covering the 2013/14 academic year to date<sup>46</sup> suggests that nearly three-quarters (72 per cent) of all applications made for the EMA allowance were from applicants with a household income of £20,817 or less and a quarter (28 per cent) were from claimants with a household income of between £20,817 and £23,077.

### **Analysis of EMA Recipients**

3.42 The Student Loans Company (SLC) provided the research team with information on young people who were recipients of the EMA between September 2005/06 and August 2012/13, who had consented to their

<sup>45</sup> Does not take into account one 'unknown'

<sup>46</sup> Welsh Government Statistics for Wales 'First Release Education Maintenance Allowances awarded in Wales – Update at end of February 2014) published 12 March 2014

data being shared for the purpose of research<sup>47</sup>. We were able to analyse data for approximately 74 per cent of the population of EMA recipients during this period. The proportion of EMA recipients who have consented for their data to be shared<sup>48</sup> has declined during this period – for example in 2006 the EMA data extract accounts for approximately 84 per cent of the total population of EMA recipients. By 2011, this figure has declined to 60 per cent. This dataset was subsequently matched with the Widening Access (WA) Database<sup>49</sup> on the basis of gender, date of birth and home postcode – and a detailed methodology including limitations of undertaking this exercise is outlined in Annex C<sup>50</sup>. In particular it is worth noting that those students who did receive the EMA but who either a) did not provide consent for their data to be used for research or b) could not be matched to the WA Database have been classified as not being in receipt of EMA.

3.43 Table 3.6 considers the characteristics of EMA recipients compared with non-EMA recipients within the WA Database. EMA recipients are more likely to be female and to have been entitled to free school meals (FSM) in year 11 – although it is interesting, given that both FSM entitlement and EMA are linked to low household income, that only a fifth of EMA recipients fall into this category<sup>51</sup>. There is relatively little difference in the characteristics of EMA recipients and others in terms of levels of attainment at GCSE, with the exception that EMA recipients are less likely to have achieved relatively high levels of attainment (6 per cent

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<sup>47</sup> A detailed methodology for undertaking this data matching and analysis is presented in Annex C

<sup>48</sup> The rate compared with published EMA recipient statistics

<sup>49</sup> A linked database of school, Further Education and Higher Education data constructed by WISERD and used in an ESRC/HEFCW funded project that aims to chart the progression of students from compulsory education to higher education.

<sup>50</sup> See Section 2 of Annex C. Also further information on the work of WISERD can be accessed via <http://www.wiserd.ac.uk/research/data-and-methods/current-projects/administrative-data-research-centre-wales/>

<sup>51</sup> Identifying the reasons why only a fifth of EMA recipients were in receipt of FSM was beyond the scope of this study. One factor to consider is that whilst both allowances are means-tested, eligibility for FSM is based on receipt of welfare benefits rather than household income threshold. Furthermore other studies have shown that the stigma associated with receiving FSM restricts its take up whilst there is no stigma attached to receipt of the EMA.



gaining 71+ GCSE points<sup>52</sup> compared to 10 per cent of non-EMA recipients). This reflects the poorer academic performance of pupils from poorer backgrounds across all key stages of the educational system<sup>53</sup>. It can be seen that levels of EMA receipt are also relatively low among those with the lowest levels of GCSE attainment as these groups will be less likely to continue within post-compulsory education. The net effect of these factors is that the rate of receipt of EMA is actually highest among those with intermediate levels of attainment at GCSE. This data is presented in Table 3.6 as well as in Figure 3.2 below.

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<sup>52</sup> In this context GCSE points are calculated by awarding eight points to each GCSE Grade A\* achieved, seven points for an A, six for a B and so on). Please note the scores used here are not consistent with the points used by the Welsh Government in the average capped wider points score relating to the eight best GCSEs and which forms an important component of the publication of examination statistics.

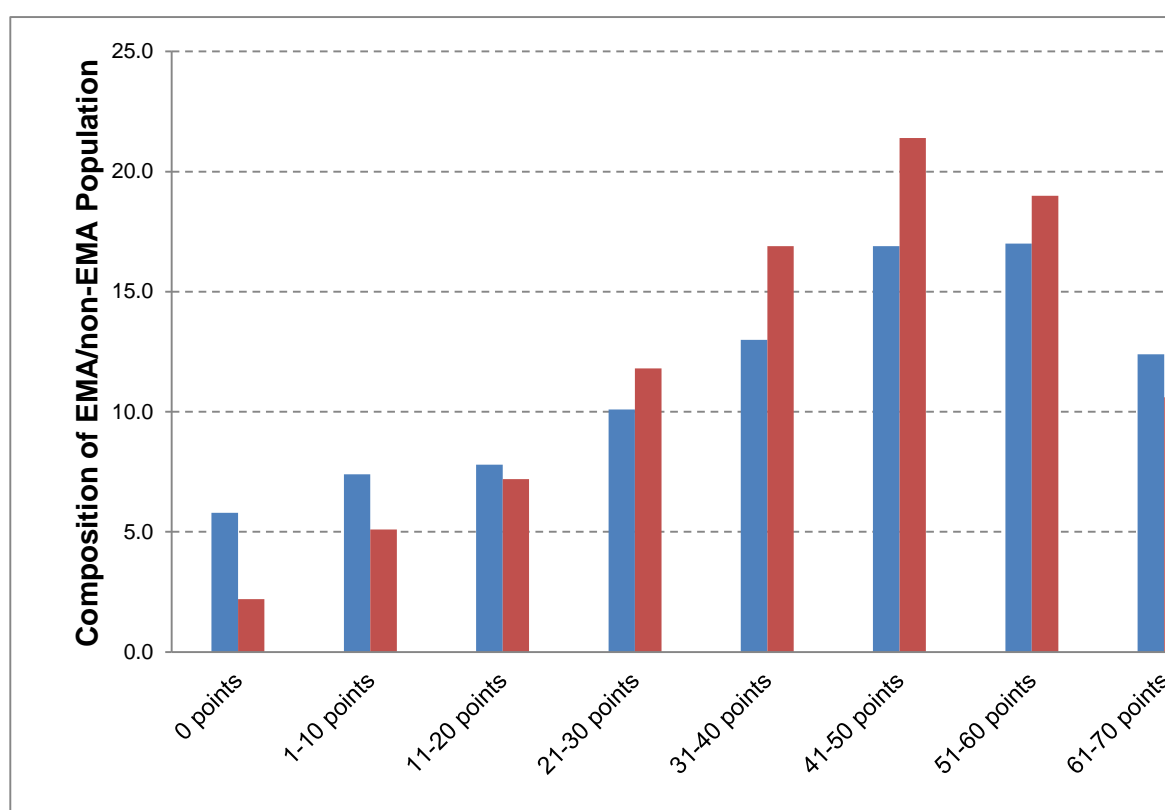
<sup>53</sup> <http://wales.gov.uk/docs/statistics/2014/140122-academic-achievement-free-school-meals-en.pdf>

**Table 3.6: Characteristics of young people in the Widening Access Database (aged 16 at 31<sup>st</sup> August 2005, 2006 or 2007)**

WA Cohort	All			
	Non-EMA	EMA	All in cohort	% EMA
<b>Percentages</b>				
<b>Gender</b>				
Male	51.5	47.9	50.7	22.7
Female	48.5	52.1	49.3	25.3
<b>Free School Meals</b>				
No	88.0	79.6	85.9	22.2
Yes	12.0	20.5	14.1	34.9
<b>Special Educational Needs</b>				
No	84.3	84.9	84.4	24.1
Yes	15.7	15.1	15.6	23.2
<b>GCSE Attainment</b>				
0 points	5.8	2.2	4.9	10.8
1-10 points	7.4	5.1	6.8	17.9
11-20 points	7.8	7.2	7.7	22.4
21-30 points	10.1	11.8	10.5	26.9
31-40 points	13.0	16.9	13.9	29.2
41-50 points	16.9	21.4	18.0	28.5
51-60 points	17.0	19.0	17.5	26.0
61-70 points	12.4	10.6	12.0	21.3
71+ points	9.6	5.8	8.7	16.0
<b>Total</b>	100.0	100.0	100.0	24.0
<b>Sample</b>	84,024	26,511	110,535	

Source: Analysis of SLC EMA recipient database and Widening Access Database (2005, 2006 and 2007)

**Figure 3.2: GCSE Attainment of EMA/non-EMA Recipients**



Source: Analysis of SLC EMA recipient database and Widening Access Database (2005, 2006 and 2007)

3.44 Table 3.7 considers participation in post-compulsory education across the three WA Database cohorts during the first three years following their completion of compulsory schooling<sup>54</sup>. It is important to note, first of all, that around 10 per cent of EMA recipients for whom records could be shared are not observed to be in sixth form or FE within the WA Database. There could be several explanations for this: one is that Welsh EMA recipients who attend sixth forms and FE colleges in England will not appear within the constituent databases that are used to construct the WA Database. Attendance in post-compulsory education within English institutions is not uncommon in particular locations along the Welsh border. It must also be acknowledged that this apparent anomaly could also be related in part to failure to match SLC with WA records, due to errors/inconsistencies in pupil records within LLWR or

<sup>54</sup> Details of the derivation of this schema are available at: [http://www.wiserd.ac.uk/files/9414/0230/5257/Working\\_Paper\\_WAQNCW2014-2.pdf](http://www.wiserd.ac.uk/files/9414/0230/5257/Working_Paper_WAQNCW2014-2.pdf)

possibly differences regarding the timing with which data is extracted from 'live' administrative databases. It is also noted that sixth form participation is recorded via the Welsh Examinations Database<sup>55</sup>. Pupils who attend a sixth form but who do not go on to enter examinations will be classified as not appearing in sixth form or FE.

- 3.45** After careful consideration of the data, the evaluation steering group had no evidence to suggest that the profile of those students whose records could not be matched would be any different to those who could. Therefore abstracting from these anomalous findings, the WA Database reveals that the single largest group of students in receipt of EMA (as a proportion of all EMA recipients) are sixth form students studying A-levels (at 26 per cent). A further 16 per cent of EMA recipients took A-levels either at an FE college, within both a sixth form and FE college or are undertaking A-levels at sixth form at the same time as undertaking vocational qualifications within an FE college. The circumstances reflected in these different categories will be varied and may reflect either resits or the fact that individuals are attending certain courses in both sixth form and FE college at the same time. Overall it can be seen that 40 per cent of EMA recipients have been enrolled for A-levels, while almost 30 per cent are undertaking qualifications at Level 2 or below (somewhat higher than the 26.5 per cent of non-EMA recipients).
- 3.46** However, the highest *incidence* of EMA receipt, i.e. EMA recipients as a proportion of all those students studying various qualifications and levels, (leaving aside the very small numbers studying vocational courses in sixth forms and re-sitting GCSEs) is among students undertaking vocational qualifications at Level 2 (29 per cent of Level 2 learners being in receipt of EMA) or Level 3-4 (33 per cent of Level 3-4 learners being in receipt of EMA).

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<sup>55</sup> The Welsh Government is required under the Education Act 1996 to fund and maintain a Welsh Examinations Database which collates exam results from awarding schools.

**Table 3.7: Students in the Widening Access database – post-compulsory routes taken and EMA receipt**

WA Cohort	All			
	Non-EMA	EMA	All	% EMA
Percentages				
Not observed in 6th Form/FE	21.7	10.2	18.9	13.0
6th Form A levels	26.2	25.5	26.1	23.5
FE A levels	8.5	9.3	8.7	25.7
A levels – both	2.1	2.2	2.1	25.1
6th Form A-levels + FE Vocational	2.3	3.7	2.7	33.0
6th Form Vocational	0.5	1.2	0.7	44.6
FE Level 3/4 Other	8.4	12.8	9.4	32.6
FE Level 2	15.0	19.3	16.0	28.9
FE Level 1	9.1	7.8	8.8	21.3
FE Entry Level	1.2	0.7	1.1	16.8
GCSEs - either setting	1.2	1.8	1.3	32.7
Other Vocational Combination	3.9	5.4	4.3	30.1
<b>Total</b>	100	100	100	24.0
<b>Sample (numbers)</b>	84,024	26,511	110,535	

3.47 The WA Database also contains detailed information about the timing of entry into post-compulsory education. On average, the length time between reaching the end of compulsory schooling and taking up a further education or sixth form place is shorter for EMA recipients than for non-recipients, although this difference is not large. Whilst non-recipients of EMA enter post-compulsory education 1.09 years following the beginning of Year 11, this falls to 1.05 years among recipients of EMA. Similarly, whilst 94% of non-recipients of EMA enter post-

compulsory education in the year immediately following Year 11, this increases to 96% among recipients of EMA. In some respects this finding would be expected, insofar that the receipt to EMA is age related and therefore students who receive it only have three years during which to enter FE. However, students who were observed to enter FE after three years following compulsory schooling would not be recorded via this exercise.

3.48 Although a majority of students enter post-compulsory education quickly, it is nonetheless true that certain groups among the WA Database cohorts do take longer to enter sixth form or FE. Those eligible for FSM, those diagnosed as having a special educational need (SEN) and those with lower levels of attainment at GCSE each take longer to enter post-compulsory education. However, among EMA recipients the differences between subgroups of the WA Database cohorts are smaller. The receipt of EMA is therefore associated with a reduction in the time elapsed between the completion of compulsory education and entry into post-compulsory education, particularly among relatively disadvantaged groups.

### **EMA Spend in Wales**

3.49 As shown in Table 3.8 in terms of annual funding £25 million was spent on EMA learner support during the last academic year (2012/13) which was somewhat lower than previous years possibly due to the removal of lower allowances and bonus payments. This equated to £826 per award made via the EMA Scheme during that year, again lower than previous years primarily due to the removal of bonus payments. Payments were also awarded to individual learning centres up until 2009/10 (circa an annual budget of £1.2m) in order to establish the necessary administrative procedures for the Scheme but these were only intended to be temporary payments.

**Table 3.8: Annual EMA Spend**

<b>Financial Year</b>	<b>Funding Amount</b>	<b>Cost per Award</b>
2009/10	£34.7m	£959
2010/11	£36.6m	£1,004
2011/12	£29.6m	£910
2012/13	£25.4m	£826

Source: Welsh Government based upon EMA awards paid by financial year.

## **Delivery Model**

3.50 The administration of the EMA Wales Scheme is delegated to the Student Loans Company (SLC) via an annual Notice of Appointment with Service Level Agreements agreed between the SLC and the Welsh Government.

Students apply directly to the SLC for the EMA award, with the number of applications tending to peak between August and November. Despite the introduction of the 'apply now' campaign from March onwards during each academic year, potential students tend to wait until August before applying. From 2008/09 onwards, applicants have been asked to submit original documentation (rather than photocopies) to evidence their identity and income in an effort to reduce fraudulent activity.

3.51 Students who are awarded an EMA enter into a learning agreement with their school or college (learning centres) which sets out what the learners need to achieve in order to stay on the Scheme and receive their weekly awards. Learning centres are responsible for establishing and maintaining appropriate monitoring processes, confirming attendance and undertaking attendance monitoring activity.

3.52 According to the evidence presented in 2009 by the Welsh Government to the National Assembly for Wales Learning and Education Committee a change project team is formed on an annual basis (consisting of Welsh

Government and SLC staff) to review system changes and improvements to the Scheme. Annual conferences are also held to engage with stakeholders from schools and colleges, local authorities and other interested parties. These conferences have led to the identification of a number of Scheme improvements over time.



## **4 EMA AND OTHER FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR 16 – 19 YEAR-OLDS IN THE UK**

### **Introduction**

- 4.1 This section considers the provision of financial support to 16-19 year-olds across the UK since the introduction of EMA and the evaluation evidence relating to EMA and other related interventions.
- 4.2 We first consider the overall evaluation evidence relating to EMA. We then consider the relatively minor changes which have been made to EMA in Scotland and Northern Ireland over recent years, the broader context of student support and current thinking on the role of EMA in those countries before considering the more radical changes introduced in England and the emerging evidence relating to the alternative approach now in place.

### **The Evaluation Evidence relating to EMA**

- 4.3 EMA was originally developed as an initiative of the UK Labour Government elected in 1997. The aim was to increase participation rates in post-16 education, particularly for those from more disadvantaged households, recognising the very major variations in staying-on rates between different socio-economic groups, and the significant economic returns to individuals and society of achieving qualifications, particularly at Level 3 and above<sup>56</sup>.
- 4.4 EMA was piloted in England and Scotland from 1999, and the Scheme was rolled out throughout all parts of the UK (albeit by then under the authority of the devolved administrations in Wales, Scotland and

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<sup>56</sup> House of Commons Education Committee Fourth Report of Session 2010 – 2012: Participation by 16 – 19 year-olds in education and training: Vol. 1 (July 2011) p. 36

Northern Ireland) from 2004 onwards. The model of EMA as originally implemented in all parts of the UK was broadly the same, albeit that the initial pilots in England experimented with a range of models (including different rates and paying the allowance to the parents instead of the young people themselves):

- An allowance for young people aged 16, 17, 18 and 19 staying on in education on a full-time basis, regardless of whether that was in school or further education college, but excluding Schemes where a training allowance or wage was paid;
- A means-tested Scheme, related to the household income in the family of the young person (usually the parental home);
- A tapered Scheme, with three levels of allowance (£30, £20 and £10 per week) depending on the level of household income;
- Payment of the allowance fortnightly directly to the young person and exclusion of the allowance from calculations of household income for eligibility related to welfare benefits;
- Payment dependent on fulfilling a number of conditions, notably in respect of signing a learning agreement and attendance (though precise conditions varied not just between home nations but between institutions);
- A system of bonus payments – generally two bonus payments one at Christmas and one at the end of the academic year – to incentivise retention: in Northern Ireland there was also a ‘returners’ bonus<sup>57</sup>;
- No formal link to attainment or the level of qualifications, with the allowance payable in respect of a very wide range of full-time courses.

4.5 There is a significant body of evaluation evidence relating to EMA across the UK, with probably the most important relating to the pilot phase, since this allowed for a robust approach to counterfactual impact

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<sup>57</sup> A Review of the Educational Maintenance Allowance. Price Waterhouse Coopers for the Department of Education and Learning of Northern Ireland (December 2010) p. 15

evaluation, using 'control' areas to monitor the impact of the allowance on participation and retention.

4.6 The evaluation evidence appears fairly consistent. The main findings may be summarised as follows:

- EMA did have a positive impact on participation rates. The most robust estimates appear to be that the introduction of EMA lifted participation rates in England from 65 per cent to 69 per cent amongst eligible 16 year-olds and from 54 per cent to 61 per cent amongst eligible 17 year-olds<sup>58</sup>, while in Scotland, the pilot of EMA in East Ayrshire increased participation amongst the eligible group of 16 year-olds by 9 percentage points<sup>59</sup>;
- As might be expected, the impact was greater in respect of students from poorer homes as well as for young men and for those with relatively poor results at the end of year 11<sup>60 61</sup>;
- However, there was a significant level of deadweight (in other words, many of those receiving it would stay on in education post-16 even without the allowance), which appears more true of school students than those in FEIs:
  - The most authoritative estimate of deadweight in England from NFER qualitative research suggested that 88 per cent of those receiving EMA reported that they would have continued in post-16 education even had they not received the allowance<sup>62</sup>, while a large-scale survey by RCU<sup>63</sup> found that only 6 per cent of

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<sup>58</sup> Research Report 678: Evaluation of Education Maintenance Allowance Pilots: Final Report of the Quantitative Evaluation. Centre for Research in Social Policy (CRISP) and Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) for the Department for Education and Skills (2005) p.ii and IFS: Commentary on Decision to abolish EMA (December 2010) [www.ifs.org.uk/publications/5370](http://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/5370)

<sup>59</sup> EMA Evaluation of the East Ayrshire Pilot. Centre for Educational Sociology (CES), University of Edinburgh for Scottish Social Research: Summary (2002). p. 1

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 1

<sup>61</sup> CRISP & IFS (2005) p.ii and p.23

<sup>62</sup> RR 09. Barriers to Participation in education and training. National Foundation for Education Research (NFER) for the Department for Education (2010), p.45

<sup>63</sup> A company which provide market intelligence, research and consultancy for the further education and skills sector

- learners said they would not have continued with learning, with a further 7.4 per cent saying they would have gone into Work Based Learning: this is entirely consistent with the findings of the counterfactual impact evaluation of the EMA pilots <sup>64</sup>;
- In Northern Ireland, an evaluation by Price Waterhouse Coopers reported that 64 per cent of respondents to a survey disagreed with a statement that they would have left school at 16 had it not been for EMAs, with only 32 per cent of EMA recipients ( of these, one third were in Grammar Schools and two thirds in colleges) agreeing with the statement<sup>65</sup>;
  - A 2007 study in Scotland, using focus groups with EMA recipients found that most EMA recipients said they were always going to stay on at school or go to college<sup>66</sup>.
- In a small minority of cases, EMA may encourage young people to stay on in education simply for the sake of the financial reward or as a holding measure while they consider their options <sup>67</sup>: The study in question found that such students may sometimes be disruptive to others but also noted that there is no evidence of an adverse impact on attainment overall<sup>68</sup>;
  - A further key finding from these studies was that lower rates of allowance were less effective as an incentive to participation<sup>69 70 71</sup>: since the rate has not been adjusted for inflation, it might be argued that the £30 rate might have become progressively less important as an incentive, with the impact on participation reducing

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<sup>64</sup> Evaluation of the EMA National Roll-out Final Report: RCU for the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) (2007) pp. 22- 23

<sup>65</sup> PWC (2010) p. 24 – note however that only 25% of students responded to the survey

<sup>66</sup> Young People's Awareness and Experience of Educational Maintenance Allowances and Their Impact on Choices and Pathways. York Consulting for Scottish Executive Social Research (April 2007) p. 34

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 3

<sup>68</sup> EMA Attainment of National Qualifications in the Scottish Pilots. CES for Scottish Executive Social Research, 2004 p. 4

<sup>69</sup> House of Commons Library Note on EMA Statistics, January 2011 p. 5

<sup>70</sup> RCU (2007) p. 23

<sup>71</sup> PWC (2010) p. 25

correspondingly<sup>72</sup> although the sharp fall in living standards since the 2008 economic downturn has probably countered this to some extent;

- There were mixed views on the effectiveness of bonus payments, but with some suggestion that they are effective in motivating learners<sup>73 74</sup>;
- As a well-established and high-profile programme there have been high levels of awareness of EMA: NFER found in 2010 that 96 per cent of young people were aware of EMA<sup>75</sup>;
- As well as encouraging participation, EMA was generally seen to encourage retention, particularly amongst those from the lower socio-economic groups with the attendance requirements linked to the allowance incentivising high-level of attendance and making it less likely that students drop out from learning<sup>76 77 78</sup>. The RCU study concluded that the in-year retention rate (i.e. the proportion of learners completing their course) was 2.3 per cent higher for those in receipt of EMA than for those who were not. Given that EMA is targeted on students who would normally be more likely to drop out because of financial hardship and lower prior attainment, this represents powerful evidence of a positive impact on retention<sup>79</sup>;
- EMA reduces the perceived need for recipients to work part-time while studying, and in particular to work 'excessive' hours during term-time<sup>80 81</sup>;
- There was some evidence of a positive impact of EMA on attainment, probably related to better levels of attendance and the reduction of part-time working but this was not conclusive: the quantitative

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<sup>72</sup> Educational Maintenance Allowance: Evaluation with Administrative Data. IFS for the LSC (2007) p. 4

<sup>73</sup> PWC (2010) p. 46

<sup>74</sup> RCU (2007) p. 31

<sup>75</sup> NFER (2010) p. 45

<sup>76</sup> CES (2002). p. 1

<sup>77</sup> CRISP & IFS (2005) p.iii and pp. 26 – 28

<sup>78</sup> RCU (2007) p.55 – 56 and p. 86

<sup>79</sup> RCU (2007) p.71 and Should we end the Education Maintenance Allowance? Mick Fletcher for the CfBT Education Trust (2009) p. 13

<sup>80</sup> RCU (2007) pp.33 - 4

<sup>81</sup> Research Report 411: The Reflections of Early Leavers and Second Year Participants on the Educational Maintenance Allowance Scheme. A Qualitative Study. National Centre for Research for the Department for Education and Skills (2003). p. 71

evaluation of the EMA pilots in England did not identify any statistically significant effect<sup>82</sup> although subsequent analyses of administrative data did suggest a modest effect, with the greatest effect observed in the most deprived areas<sup>83 84</sup>;

- EMA appeared overall to improve the labour market position of eligible young people at age 19 but does not necessarily lead to higher rates of participation in higher education<sup>85</sup>;
- There was no stigma attached to the receipt of EMA, though there was some resentment from those who did not receive it, with some young people arguing that the allowance should be universal, rather than means-tested<sup>86</sup>;
- The levels at which the thresholds for EMA were originally set meant that EMA was accessed by a fairly large proportion of the eligible population (32 per cent of the entire cohort and 47 per cent of those in full-time education in England in 2009/10)<sup>87</sup>;
- In line with the findings on deadweight, qualitative research suggests that many recipients use EMA essentially as 'pocket money', either for leisure activities or indeed as a form of savings for future studies<sup>88 89</sup>. In the RCU study only 20 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement that EMA was mainly used to cover course related costs<sup>90</sup>. For a minority (and for higher proportions of those studying at FEIs, of those studying at lower levels and of those from the poorest households), however, EMA was essential to meet additional costs of studying (notably travel and living expenses) and to contribute directly to household income<sup>91 92</sup>. The determinants of whether EMA is essential or a 'nice to have' in individual cases are not simple, but

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<sup>82</sup> CRISP & IFS (2005) p.vii and p.109

<sup>83</sup> IFS (2007) p. 6

<sup>84</sup> RCU (2007) p. 103

<sup>85</sup> IFS (2007), p. 67 and p.87

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p.30

<sup>87</sup> House of Commons Library (2011) p. 2

<sup>88</sup> York Consulting (2007) p.37

<sup>89</sup> PWC (2010) p.31

<sup>90</sup> RCU (2007) p. 35

<sup>91</sup> PWC, p.38

<sup>92</sup> RCU (2007) pp. 35-6

relate to a wide range of economic, social, and relational circumstances within the individual family/household<sup>93 94</sup>;

- EMA has a number of other benefits, including encouraging money-management skills and greater independence on the part of some young people<sup>95</sup>;
- Even taking into account the high levels of deadweight, EMA probably represents value for money, because the lifetime labour market returns to the individuals who are induced to continue in education by the Scheme will far exceed the net costs of each additional student, while the additional income to the exchequer from these earnings and the savings to the taxpayer from preventing individuals becoming NEET outweighs the costs<sup>96</sup>.

## **EMA in Scotland and Northern Ireland**

4.7 The devolved administrations in Scotland and Northern Ireland have introduced a number of adjustments to the Scheme as a result of evaluation evidence and changing political priorities and budgetary pressures over recent years. In both, the lower allowance rates (£10 and £20) have been dropped, with one household income threshold applied (currently £20,500 where there are no additional dependent children and £22,500 where there are in Northern Ireland and £20,351 and £22,403 respectively in Scotland). By comparison the household thresholds adopted in Wales are slightly higher than those in Scotland and Northern Ireland (at £20,817 where there are no additional dependent children and £23,077 if there are one or more additional dependents).

4.8 In Northern Ireland, a review of policy in 2012/13, informed by the evaluation by Price Waterhouse Coopers, led to a decision to retain two bonus payments of £100 each during the year (in contrast to the

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<sup>93</sup> York Consulting (2007) p.28

<sup>94</sup> RCU (2007) p.24

<sup>95</sup> National Centre for Social Research (2003) p. 10 and p.70

<sup>96</sup> IFS (2010)

situation in Scotland and Wales), although it is understood that there was some divergence of views on this within the Northern Ireland Executive. Whilst there was some pressure within the Northern Ireland Assembly for a stronger focus on attainment and outcomes within EMA, in practice this has not been taken forward, because of the perceived difficulty of attaching such conditions to EMA.

4.9 The Northern Ireland Executive has also introduced a number of similar allowances:

- A training allowance for 16 and 17-year-old young people on ESF learning programmes (up to 22 years in the case of disabled young people and up to 24 years for care-leavers) who are NEET of £10 per week for courses involving less than 10 hours study and £25 per week for more intensive courses (introduced in 2012);
- For the same age group, a non-means tested allowance of £40 per week for participants on Training for Success, a pre-employment training programme (introduced in 2008).

4.10 In addition to EMA, further education colleges in Northern Ireland have access to a separate budget, Further Education Hardship Funds, which can provide additional help to students in need. Each institution sets its own rules and criteria and funds are discretionary and cash-limited<sup>97</sup>. The Scheme is only open to those aged 18 or over or becoming 18 in the course of the academic year, and specifically excludes EMA recipients, except in the case of travel costs when a recipient is not eligible for a travel pass<sup>98</sup>.

4.11 In Scotland, the major changes to EMA, following an evaluation by York Consulting in 2007 have been the withdrawal of the lower allowance

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<sup>97</sup> <http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/discretionary-support-funds>

<sup>98</sup> Circular Number FE(06)/13: Hardship Fund (Discretionary) 2013/14, Department for Education and Learning, May 2013 p.11



rates (2009) and bonus payments (2010) and the extension of EMA to cover a wider range of learning, including third sector and community provision, as a result of an even stronger policy focus on NEET, set out in the Scottish Government's policy document '*16+ Learning Choices*' in 2010<sup>99</sup>. Linked to this, the Scottish Government has approved the use of Activity Agreements, where appropriate for vulnerable students, as an alternative to learning agreements: these are individual agreements, linked to both learning and other relevant activities<sup>100</sup>. In general, however, EMA in Scotland is dependent on 100 per cent attendance<sup>101</sup>.

4.12 Besides EMA, there is a range of support available to 16 – 19-year-old students in Scotland. This includes:

- Further Education Discretionary Funds, which colleges may use for any student over compulsory school leaving age to address hardship: this 'is primarily for emergency use' and to support students whose access or continuation in further education 'may be inhibited by financial considerations'<sup>102</sup>;
- Further and Higher Education Childcare Funds which provide a grant of up to £1,215 to all FE students who are lone parents and who have formal registered childcare expenses while studying (through the Lone Parents Childcare Grant which is **not** discretionary) and a discretionary fund to help other students who incur costs with registered childcare and where the criteria and assessment of need are the responsibility of the college<sup>103</sup>;
- Further Education Bursary Funds: Bursaries are available for students aged 18 and over on a means-tested basis (on a sliding scale) and can help fund maintenance costs (at a rate of up to £93.03 per week for those living independently and up to £73.61 per week for those living in

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<sup>99</sup> 16+ Learning Choices, Scottish Government (2010), p. 23

<sup>100</sup> See: Education Maintenance Allowance: the Scottish Model: Northern Ireland Assembly Research and Information Service Briefing Paper 51/12 (February 2012) p.5

<sup>101</sup> See: <http://www.emascotland.com/>

<sup>102</sup> SFC Guidance: National policy: further education discretionary fund Scottish Funding Council (April 2014)

<sup>103</sup> Further & Higher Education Childcare Funds Guidance Academic Year 2014/15, Student Awards Agency for Scotland and Scottish Funding Council, May 2014

the parental home), as well as study costs and travel costs. Students eligible for EMA are not eligible for maintenance payments, but, where colleges allow, students aged 18 and over may opt to receive a bursary rather than EMA<sup>104</sup>. Students aged 18 and under in receipt of EMA may be awarded a bursary for travel and study costs and can also benefit from a maintenance allowance if they have to live away from home in order to study<sup>105</sup>.

4.13 In terms of administration of EMA, it is worth noting that while in Northern Ireland as in Wales, the process is managed by the Student Loans Company<sup>106</sup>, in Scotland administration (including assessment of household income) has always been the responsibility of individual colleges and Education Authorities<sup>107</sup>.

4.14 In both Scotland and Northern Ireland, stakeholder interviewees reported that EMA policy is regarded as settled, with broad political support and is highly unlikely to be revisited in advance of the next legislative elections. In neither country are schools and colleges said to be lobbying in favour of greater devolution of responsibility to themselves.

### **Funding for 16 – 19-year-old students in England**

4.15 In contrast to the other home nations, the UK Coalition Government which came into office in 2010 rapidly took the decision to abolish EMA and to replace it with the 16–19 Bursary Fund. The decision was justified on the basis of<sup>108</sup>:

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<sup>104</sup> York Consulting (2007) p.22-23

<sup>105</sup> SFC Guidance: Award Assessment Guidance for FE Bursaries, Scottish Funding Council (April 2014)

<sup>106</sup> PWC (2010) p. 1

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. 38

<sup>108</sup> House of Commons (2011) p. 36

- The high level of deadweight in EMA and the importance of linking financial support more clearly to individual need.
- A view that schools, colleges and training providers were better placed to evaluate individual need and circumstances.
- The argument that because the Government was moving towards requiring young people to continue to undertake education and training until 18, EMA was no longer required.
- The need to reduce spending on student support within the Department for Education budget: initially the intention was to save £500 million but following representations the size of the Bursary Fund was increased, which resulted in net savings of around £380 million per annum<sup>109</sup>.

4.16 There are two elements to the Bursary Fund. The Vulnerable Student Bursary (VSB) provides a cash payment of up to £1,200 per annum (equivalent to the EMA rate of £30 for 40 weeks) for those in care or care-leavers; individuals receiving Income Support or Universal Credit 'in their own name' and those who are disabled and receive both Employment Support Allowance and Disability Living Allowance or Personal Independence Payments in their own name<sup>110</sup>. This is an entitlement, with the level of funding tied to the length and intensity of the course (with the maximum sum payable for those studying on a full-time course for 30 weeks or more). Funding for the VSB was initially devolved to the providers, but this has subsequently been re-centralised because of a concern that providers were holding on to funds until late in the year to ensure they could meet any late applications, leading to underspends. However, providers are still responsible for identifying vulnerable students, processing applications and making payments to eligible students<sup>111</sup>.

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<sup>109</sup> RR 346 The 16 to 19 Bursary Fund Impact Evaluation – Interim Report. Institute of Education (IoE) and IFS for the Department for Education (April 2014) p. 6

<sup>110</sup> The 16 – 19 Bursary Fund: Your Questions Answered Department for Education (April 2013), p. 4

<sup>111</sup> The 16 – 19 Bursary Fund: Guide for 2014 to 2015 Academic Year: Advice for Institutions, Department for Education (April 2014), p. 6

- 4.17 The Discretionary Bursary Fund is allocated to individual schools, colleges and training providers based on historic allocations in the last year of EMA. In the course of 2013, a consultation was undertaken about whether to replace this with a new formula, which would be based principally on the proportion of students in each institution who had attracted the Pupil Premium in Year 11, with a further adjustment to reflect the higher transport costs in rural areas. However, following further modelling of the potential new system, which revealed it would result in huge changes in allocations, it was decided not to proceed with the change.
- 4.18 Discretionary bursaries are ‘targeted at students who cannot stay in education without financial help for things like transport, meals, books and equipment’<sup>112</sup>.
- 4.19 Each provider is free to set their own eligibility criteria (subject to some core considerations such as compliance with the Equality Act)<sup>113</sup> but are encouraged in all cases to assess need and not to fund ‘blanket’ provisions (such as free transport for anyone from a household with a low income, even if they do explicitly say it is needed to enable them to attend). In particular, the Fund should not be used to secure competitive advantage e.g. by offering block subsidies for transport or canteens<sup>114</sup>. Providers are expected themselves to collect and retain evidence of household income, where this is part of the assessment process<sup>115</sup> and may draw down no more than 5 per cent of the fund to support administration<sup>116</sup>. The Fund is cash-limited.
- 4.20 Providers are also free to determine their own payment arrangements, for example, whether to make payments to third parties on behalf of the

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 9

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 17

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p. 19

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., p. 18

student or to provide support in kind<sup>117</sup> and to determine the frequency of any cash payments – although the guidance suggests that making regular maintenance payments is not favoured by the Government because it is expected that awards should reflect specific individual needs and financial capacity<sup>118</sup>. Providers are also expected to set conditions e.g. in relation to attendance or conduct, though these are not prescribed<sup>119</sup>.

4.21 Guidance suggests that residents of Scotland are not eligible for discretionary bursaries but that residents of Wales may be, though they should be encouraged to apply for Welsh EMA<sup>120</sup>.

4.22 The Bursary Fund is subject to two ongoing evaluations. The first relates to the impact of the Bursary Fund and is based on attempting to model the impact of the introduction of the Fund in terms of participation and attainment of the cohort compared to a counter-factual in which the EMA had been retained, using administrative data for 5.2 million school students in year 11. A first interim report of this evaluation was published in April 2014<sup>121</sup> and suggests that there has been a statistically significant negative net impact on both participation and attainment but that this is relatively small. For participation, the effect is estimated as a reduction of 1.2 per cent in the proportion of those eligible for full EMA continuing full-time study in year 12 and a reduction of 1.75 per cent in the proportion of those eligible for full EMA continuing full-time study in year 13. These students were also disproportionately likely to be from poorer households. Impacts on attainment were most negative for poorer students, with the number of students who would have been entitled to full EMA achieving Level 2 qualifications estimated to be 1.83 per cent lower than would have been the case had EMA been

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<sup>117</sup> The 16 – 19 Bursary Fund: Your Questions Answered. Department for Education (April 2013), p. 5

<sup>118</sup> The 16 – 19 Bursary Fund: Guide for 2014 to 2015 Academic Year: Advice for Institutions, Department for Education (April 2014), p.10 and p.17

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., p.11

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., p. 15

<sup>121</sup> IoE & IFS (2014)

retained<sup>122</sup>. Given the significantly lower costs associated with the Bursary compared to EMA, the provisional conclusions would appear to be that the changes have represented reasonable value for money, albeit that further work will be required as the cohort moves through the education system: the mid-point estimate is that the reform led to 20 fewer participants in full-time education and 12 fewer students achieving a Level 2 or Level 3 qualification per £1m. saved<sup>123</sup>. The researchers warn however, that their figures are likely to prove an under-estimate<sup>124</sup>.

4.23 The second is a process evaluation. An interim report was published in April 2014<sup>125</sup> and concludes:

- 34,600 young people received a VSB and 357,300 received discretionary bursaries in 2012/13<sup>126</sup>: around 25 per cent of the 16 – 18 cohort received a bursary<sup>127</sup>.
- Less than two-fifths of students were aware of the bursary before finishing year 11<sup>128</sup>.
- Most providers used income related criteria, but these varied significantly with some using Free School Meal entitlement, others a household income threshold and others whether the household was in receipt of benefits<sup>129</sup>.
- There was a very large variation in the size of awards from £10 to £6,000. However, discretionary awards were mostly significantly smaller than VSBs or the former EMA: three quarters received less than £780 and one quarter less than £300<sup>130</sup>.

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., p. 7

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., p.10

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., pp. 6-7 and p. 9

<sup>125</sup> RR 345: The 16 – 19 Bursary Fund: Year 2 Process Evaluation. NatCen Social Research for the Department for Education (April 2014)

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., p. 10. This compares to 643,000 young people who received EMA in 2009/10

Source: House of Commons Library (2011)

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., p. 31

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., p. 12

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., p. 11

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., p. 39

- The most common specific uses for funds were transport costs and educational equipment<sup>131</sup>. However, despite the policy intention, more than half of providers awarded bursaries as general cash awards to young people to use as needed<sup>132</sup>.
- Underspends were common: more than half of providers spent less than 90 per cent of their allocations<sup>133</sup>.
- Three quarters of providers felt the Fund was effective at targeting young people facing the greatest barriers to participation and thought it was having a positive impact on participation<sup>134</sup>. Providers providing foundation level training thought that the bursary support was critical in 'motivating and incentivising attendance for a group of young people who might otherwise be NEET'<sup>135</sup>.
- Students responding to the survey and taking part in focus groups tended to attribute greater motivational benefits where bursaries were paid in cash rather than in kind and that motivational effects were strongest for those who otherwise were least engaged<sup>136</sup>.
- Most students (81 per cent) were satisfied with the way in which the bursaries worked but 45 per cent reported problems with late payments<sup>137</sup>: only a quarter of providers made weekly payments with a third only making termly payments<sup>138</sup>.
- The proportion of questionnaire respondents saying that they needed to work to support themselves was the same for those receiving bursaries and those not doing so at 37 per cent<sup>139</sup>.
- Levels of deadweight remained high, however, with only 28 per cent of recipients responding to a survey saying that support from the Fund was 'integral to being able to continue in education'<sup>140</sup>.

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid., p. 12

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., p. 29

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., p. 13

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., p. 14

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., p. 98

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., p. 70

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., p. 80

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., p. 76

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., p. 90

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., p. 14

- At the same time, 35 per cent of those receiving support thought that the financial support available was not enough to make a difference to them, while almost 30 per cent of those not receiving bursaries and 21 per cent of those that did said that they struggled to stay motivated due to money worries suggesting ‘that in some cases the support received by young people may not be at a level to relieve the financial pressure sufficiently’<sup>141</sup>.

4.24 There are no proposals for any fundamental changes to the Bursary Fund prior to the UK General Election. The view within the Department for Education is that the new arrangements have a significant advantage in devolving responsibility to the front-line, which should ensure that funding is not allocated to those who do not need it and in empowering providers. At the same time, it is acknowledged that in some cases, the Bursary Fund may be used as an element in competition between local providers (though the Government is keen to encourage local agreements between providers to establish a level playing field), that some smaller institutions currently lack capacity and confidence to administer the Scheme and that, as with all such changes, the replacement of EMA with the Bursary has led to some confusion and may have resulted in a lack of clarity on the part of potential students about the availability of the Funds to support their needs (and hence, potentially at least, resulted in some potential students choosing not to enrol). At the same time, the impact evaluation is regarded as having suggested that these effects are not large. In terms of the potential for the withdrawal of EMA to result in an increase in the proportion of students from poorer backgrounds working excessive hours in part-time employment, any negative effects are thought likely to have been dampened by the relative lack of employment opportunities for young people in the current economic climate.

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid., p. 90



- 4.25 Besides the Bursary Fund, 16 – 19-year-olds in England have access to a limited number of funds, most notable being the Care to Learn Scheme, which provides funding of childcare costs for students under 20 who are the main carer of a child or children (with payment going directly to the childcare provider)<sup>142</sup> and a means-tested Residential Support Scheme for students taking a Level 2 or Level 3 qualification and who have to live away from home to do so<sup>143</sup>.
- 4.26 Overall, then the review of past experience and current policy in the rest of the United Kingdom suggests that EMA is now a well-known and understood concept which is unlikely to change dramatically in the short-term in Scotland and Northern Ireland; that it does increase participation in post-16 education on the part of young people from less prosperous households (and conversely, that the abolition of EMA in England is having a small but measurable effect on reducing participation); but that as a scheme which is based on an assessment of household income rather than individual needs, it nevertheless necessarily involves relatively high levels of deadweight.

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<sup>142</sup> [www.gov.uk/care-to-learn/overview](http://www.gov.uk/care-to-learn/overview)

<sup>143</sup> [www.gov.uk/residential-support-scheme](http://www.gov.uk/residential-support-scheme)

## **5 RATIONALE AND NEED**

### **Introduction**

5.1 In this section we discuss the findings of our fieldwork in terms of contributors' views about the need for EMA and the fit of the Scheme with Welsh Government policy as well as other statutory and discretionary Schemes, before considering the impact of changes to the Scheme in Wales.

### **Need for EMA**

5.2 Our fieldwork with practitioners, stakeholders, students and parents provided a strong message that there is a definite need for the EMA Scheme to financially support students in post-compulsory education because of the financial pressures that students generally face whilst in further education. It was also strongly suggested that the Scheme was making a positive contribution in terms of overall student numbers in further education, of student attendance generally and of improving retention rates. Practitioners in particular argued that they had seen a recent increase in the number of students who had become financially reliant upon EMA and that the funds were more frequently being considered a part of the household income, with one FEI practitioner arguing that:

'over the last five years it's become something that's changed from something that gives the young person a little extra in their pocket to something that the families rely on... it's not a disposable income anymore which it was a few years ago.'

5.3 Practitioners from those colleges serving deprived communities were particularly eager to emphasise the need for, and importance of, the

EMA in supporting students from lower household incomes to enrol in the first place – for example because EMA had enabled students to pay for their travel costs, without which they would not be able to attend college. Many practitioners also noted that they were aware of students who were no longer being financially supported by their parents now they had turned 16. One such individual noted that they were seeing ‘more and more parents turning their backs on their kids when they get to 16’ often as a result of family break ups and having more children.

- 5.4 Other practitioners and students also argued that there was an increasing need for the EMA in the light of changing circumstances, such as the increasing impact of benefit cuts on poorer families, an increase in the number of looked after students, an increase in the number of students living very complex lives, coming from broken homes, homeless or possibly estranged from their parents as well as students coming from low-income working families (including a growth in those coming from households with one or more parents on zero-hours contracts).
- 5.5 The vast majority of students aged 19 and under who were interviewed (recipients and non-recipients) took the view that the EMA Scheme was required albeit that in several of the focus groups, students expressed the view that EMA should be paid to all those undertaking post-16 education as of right. We suggest that perhaps this sense of entitlement is not surprising given that the funding has been available via the Scheme for ten years and is well known to the student population generally given that just under half of all students are in receipt. A large number of EMA recipients interviewed also argued that they needed EMA support to see them through their education as this financial support was not always forthcoming from their parents. Our fieldwork with students however did reveal a very mixed picture in terms of the extent to which students needed the financial support personally – with this ranging from students who solely relied on the EMA contribution to sustain their living costs right through to those who either saved their

EMA payments for future use (e.g. to use it for University costs) or regarded as a 'nice to have' contribution.

- 5.6 At the same time however a number of practitioners (mostly FEIs) who were interviewed stated that they had seen a recent increase in the number of students who were enrolling at their institution solely because of the availability of the EMA. One such individual noted that: 'there are some people who come to college only to get EMA' often having been encouraged to do so by the parents. It was thought that these students and their families would be financially better off due to being able to claim both the EMA and Child Benefit allowance. Practitioners admitted that the number of students who fell into this category were usually quite low but said that they were often found to be disruptive and lacked any commitment to learning. Other practitioners were somewhat less concerned about this, adding that it was better for even non-committed students to be attending a college and picking up some transferable skills rather than being out of work, training or education.
- 5.7 Students in several of the focus groups also drew attention to this very small cohort of EMA recipients (although none admitted to being included in this category) adding that they disrupted classes and failed to show much effort in their work: 'they just sit around and talk all the time'. The existence of this group, despite being small in number, was often a cause of frustration to other students, particularly non-EMA recipients.
- 5.8 The vast majority of practitioners from FEIs, and staff in around a quarter of the schools visited (notably those based in the most deprived communities and in schools which had the largest number of EMA recipients on roll), thought that the number of students on their roll would drop if the EMA were to be withdrawn. In the main it was thought that it had been right for the Welsh Government to have maintained the Scheme in Wales and the evidence from students and practitioners suggested that EMA recipients would face significant financial hardship should the allowance be removed.

## Fit with Welsh Government Policy

- 5.9 Generally it was thought that the EMA fitted well and contributed significantly towards many Welsh Government policies, particularly in terms of its policy objective of widening access to further education for individuals from low income families. It was suggested that the EMA formed a central plank in the Welsh Government's commitment to this agenda, particularly in light of the UK Government's decision to withdraw the Scheme in England. It was also suggested that the allowance helped to support Welsh Government policies in relation to improving and enhancing skills up to Level 3 amongst young people – largely due to the fact that the EMA was thought to enable more students to complete their courses and obtain a qualification. It was also suggested that the Scheme had a role to play in helping the Welsh Government reduce the number of young people who are NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) in Wales as well as furthering its tackling poverty agenda (given its focus on low income households).
- 5.10 Many school-based practitioners were also eager to stress that the EMA had a key role to play in improving student attendance rates – which was thought to be a very topical objective for the Welsh Government, regional educational consortia and local authorities at the time of our fieldwork. Several school representatives noted that school attendance rates was one of the performance measures now being used by the Welsh Government within the school banding methodology and although it was accepted that the banding methodology was restricted to compulsory aged education it was thought that the EMA had a role to improve the attendance culture more generally across schools.
- 5.11 Feedback from both practitioners and stakeholders however strongly suggested that the EMA did not necessarily contribute towards the Welsh Government's objective of improving progression into higher education. This was a somewhat surprising finding given that the single key indicator currently being used by the Welsh Government to monitor

the impact of the EMA Scheme via its Programme for Government is the 'percentage of EMA recipients progressing to Higher Education'<sup>144</sup>. Data for previous years suggests that around a third of EMA recipients progress into higher education although it is expected that this will increase in the future. Our fieldwork revealed that whilst progression into higher education was thought to be a legitimate and desirable outcome for EMA recipients the awarding of the funding was in no way dependent upon such an outcome. It was suggested that if this HE progression indicator be maintained then further consideration needed to be given to how the EMA could be better aligned to achieve this policy objective. Others suggested that the Welsh Government could explore the adoption of more appropriate indicators for the EMA Scheme – indicators which were more closely aligned with its purpose of increasing participation rates, improving attendance, improving retention, completion and attainment at FE level.

### **Fit with other statutory and discretionary support**

5.12 An overview of FE funding initiatives or Schemes available to students aged 16 to 19 years old across the FE sector is presented in Annex E of our Technical Appendix. It includes pan-Wales provisions such as the Financial Contingency Fund (FCF) as well as other targeted support such as Royal Air Force (RAF) Scholarships or the Early Years Trainee Apprenticeship Bursary Scheme as well as geographically targeted support Schemes such as the Thomas Howell's Education Fund for North Wales.

5.13 Mixed views were expressed by stakeholders, practitioners and students about the extent to which the EMA Scheme fits with these other statutory and discretionary student support provision in Wales. In the main contributors drew upon the ALG and the FCF as comparator Schemes.

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<sup>144</sup> <http://wales.gov.uk/about/programmeforgov/data?code=OU024&lang=en> accessed 10 June 2014

Most took the view that the ALG and EMA generally complemented each other given that they were focused on different age groups – however a small number of contributors would rather see a single Scheme across the further education sector on the basis that it would offer a more equitable provision and simplify what was available to potential students and their parents.

5.14 The main issue raised, mainly by practitioners and stakeholders, related to the different household income thresholds set for these various Schemes (EMA and ALG in particular). Several examples were cited by practitioners of students who had been eligible for EMA support (with its higher household income threshold) yet were ineligible for ALG support (with its lower household income threshold<sup>145</sup>). Indeed several such students (i.e. those who had received EMA but had been turned down for ALG) attended our non-ALG recipient focus groups and expressed a view that the different thresholds seemed illogical and unfair.

5.15 The fit of the EMA Scheme with that of the discretionary support fund FCF, available only to FEI students varies from one FEI to another and as such it is difficult to draw out common messages. For instance in some cases institutions award FCF on the basis of the same household income threshold as that of the EMA so the same cohort of students generally accessed both EMA and FCF support. In other cases FEIs set a different household income threshold which was either higher or lower than the EMA threshold (including thresholds aligned with the ALG Scheme). In further cases FEIs excluded EMA recipients from applying for FCF support, except for very specific provisions such as childcare or transport allowances, so in these institutions there was less of an overlap between students receiving support from both statutory and discretionary funds.

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<sup>145</sup> Students are only eligible for the ALG if their annual household income is £18,370 or lower (with grant values linked to household income levels) compared with EMA where students are eligible if their household income is £20,817 or lower (with only one young person in the household) or £23,077 or lower (if there are other additional young people eligible for child benefit in the household).

- 5.16 Practitioners expressed very contrasting views about whether the same group of students ought to benefit from both the statutory and discretionary Schemes – some believed it was appropriate that financial support was targeted at those most in need and argued that the household thresholds set for FCF ought to be better aligned to that of the EMA. However it was acknowledged that for this to work a common threshold would have to be applied for the FCF Schemes across all institutions and that the funding made available to the FCF Scheme would have to be increased to accommodate the increased demand. Other contributors however argued that it was better to support a wider cohort of students via both Schemes and added that the FCF discretionary fund was particularly useful to support those students who often missed out on the EMA. Several examples were provided of students who came from households with an income just over the EMA threshold (but who had maybe become recently estranged from their family, or who came from families with a large number of children) who had been supported via the FCF Scheme.
- 5.17 Whilst it was accepted that the household threshold criteria for FCF and the type of provisions which could be funded were set by each individual institution there was a general desire amongst students and practitioners for the application process to both Schemes to be better streamlined– with for example an application for one being automatically passported to the other (if eligible) in order to reduce the application work involved.
- 5.18 Many FEI practitioners highlighted the current pressure on their individual FCF budgets and suggested that there may well be a strong case to review the financial allocations for each Scheme – with an increase in FCF budget being offset by a reduction in the EMA budget (possibly through a lowering of the household income threshold).
- 5.19 Our fieldwork with students suggested that there was some link between EMA and other discretionary support e.g. just over a tenth of FEI EMA recipients had received FCF support compared to none of the FEI non-



EMA recipients. However, the difference between EMA recipients and non-recipients in terms of free college transport support was negligible, and likely to be strongly influenced by local authority and FEI transport support policies. Overall the most frequently cited additional support accessed by those students interviewed was free college or school transport, followed by free college or school meals. A large minority (just over two fifths) had not accessed any other type of additional support.

5.20 A second key issue to emerge from our fieldwork related to the provision of school and college transport and whether students aged 16 to 19 received free transport, were expected to contribute towards the cost or were required to fully cover all costs associated with traveling to their place of education. A key determinant was whether local authorities covered all transport costs for post-compulsory aged students (be that for school or college education), whether this was part covered by local authorities and part covered by the FEI or whether students were expected to either partially or fully fund their travel costs individually. Many practitioners and stakeholders took the view that students who were already in receipt of free school or college transport were probably less likely to need EMA allowances compared to those who had to pay in full for transport costs – yet were equally eligible to the same level of financial support as those who had to cover their transport costs themselves. In the same manner it was noted by several contributors that the EMA Scheme made no allowances for the actual cost of travel to school or college (for those who had to pay for it) and this was deemed to be a particularly important issue for those living in rural areas where the cost of transport incurred was considered to be higher than average.

5.21 Feedback from practitioners and students suggested that many local authorities are currently reviewing their transport funding policies in light of the financial cutbacks required across local government and it seems very likely that free transport for 16-18-year-olds (particularly for college goers) may come to an end across several authorities over the next few

years as local authorities do not have a statutory duty to provide it. It was expected that such changes will lead to an increase in the need for EMA (and FCF) support amongst FE students.

5.22 A third issue raised by many contributors related to the fit of the EMA Scheme with that of the Welsh Government's free school meals statutory provision across schools. It was highlighted that some of those qualifying for EMA support (i.e. those on specific benefits) were also eligible for FSM and so it was accepted that there ought to be a significant overlap between students receiving FSM and EMA. However feedback from school practitioners suggested that take up of FSM amongst those sixth form students who would be eligible was lower than it should be – partly due to the stigma attached to FSMs, although several schools noted that they had in the last few years tried to address this issue across the school by introducing non-discriminatory methods of payments such as pre-loaded cards. Another factor however which seemed to have bearing upon the low take up of FSMs particularly amongst sixth form students was thought to relate to the increased freedom awarded to students to leave school premises during their lunch break.

5.23 Our focus groups of EMA recipients and non-EMA recipients revealed very mixed views around this issue. Some took the view that it was right and appropriate that those who were most at need should access both FSM and EMA allowance, adding that the EMA allowance was used for other purposes to lunch costs. Others were more negative in their comments – for instance one school EMA recipient said of his peers who were getting both FSM and the EMA: 'I think if they're getting EMA they can afford to buy school meals'. In another school focus group with EMA students, several noted that those students who received FSM were also the ones who could afford to buy breakfast at the school.

## **Change in take up over time**

5.24 Feedback from our interviews with school and college practitioners supports the data presented in Section 3 of this report in that it was thought that there had been an increase in the take up of the EMA allowance since it was first introduced. Indeed some learning centres presented evidence to show that EMA recipients now accounted for around half of their full time students aged 16-18 years old e.g. at one FEI it was noted that around 3,000 students received the EMA out of a total of 'about seven or eight thousand' students and at another some 1,300 of 2,500 full-time students received EMA.

## **Impact of recent changes to EMA in Wales**

5.25 When asked about the impact of removing the lower EMA allowance payment of £10 and £20 most college practitioners interviewed during our fieldwork thought that it had not impacted their student numbers in any significant way – a couple suggested that their student numbers may have either 'dipped' initially or there had been a 'drop out' amongst existing students – but in the main it was thought that numbers had soon climbed back to their previous levels. Many practitioners argued that so few of their student cohort had been in receipt of these lower payments that they had not felt the effect of the change. They also noted that the simultaneous increase in household income threshold eligible for the higher £30 award had helped to alleviate the impact of this change as well. A couple of contributors also suggested that the economic downturn at the time had led to an increase in the number of students qualifying for the full award which had offset any reduction in eligible students at their institutions.

5.26 School practitioners were more inclined to think that the number of EMA recipients at their institutions had been affected by the removal of the £10 and £20 allowances – possibly due to the household income profile

of students at their schools. However it is worth noting that there was also a drop in the number of EMA recipients receiving the full £30 amount across schools more generally between 2011/12 and 2012/13 so it is difficult to single out this change as the only factor.

5.27 Practitioners and stakeholders generally thought that the removal of the lower EMA payments had been appropriate and regarded the current Scheme as a much simpler system which was better targeted at 'those that really need it'. Indeed many contributors thought that the previous household threshold for qualifying for the lower payment (at around the £30,000 mark) was probably too generous.

5.28 A mixed view was conveyed by practitioners, stakeholders and students alike about the removal of the EMA bonus payments. Some had welcomed this policy change with practitioners in particular arguing that there had been too much subjectivity surrounding the awarding of the bonus. A few contributors added that the bonuses had been 'quite contentious' and often caused friction amongst students and their tutors. Indeed some practitioners had been relieved when the bonuses were withdrawn, with one school practitioner echoing the views of several: 'there were situations where I made the decision that a child didn't deserve their bonus ... [because] they'd not done their work ... I didn't enjoy being put in a position of having to make a decision that could put somebody financially worse off at Christmas ... that was horrific'. Other practitioners believed that the bonus 'was misused ... "Christmas bonus" says it all really' and went on to argue that the funds were often spent by students on the purchase of Christmas presents or summer holidays. Aligned to this other practitioners suggested that students regarded these bonuses as a reward, rather than financial support to help them meet the costs of their education.

5.29 Other practitioners however regarded the removal of the bonus payments in a negative manner, with those from FEIs in particular adding that their removal had led to an additional pressure being placed

upon their already stretched FCF budgets. Some practitioners believed that the bonus payments had been effective in incentivising students to work and study and they had liked the principle of awarding support on the basis of effort and commitment. One such school practitioner said: 'It was a shame they took the bonus away because the bonus was a reward for real achievement – it encouraged students to work at their attendance and their attainment because I was really strict about giving it.'

5.30 The majority of students (and parents) had no previous experience of the previous lower EMA payments and bonus payment elements of the Scheme - other than those students who had older siblings who might have received either of these. As a result the majority of students found it difficult to comment on these options. Some took the view (particularly those who argued strongly that the EMA ought to be universally available to all students as well as non-recipients) that they would like to receive 'something rather than nothing' and others could see the logic of aligning some of the funding to behaviour and achievement.

## **6 EMA DESIGN AND OBJECTIVES**

### **Introduction**

6.1 In this section we explore the findings of our fieldwork in relation to the overall purpose of the EMA, before turning to discuss whether the Scheme is being used to target students who need it most. We then turn to discuss issues of eligibility and availability, appropriateness of the EMA allowance levels and the use of the funding amongst recipients. Finally we briefly explore how the EMA Scheme is perceived by other non-recipient students.

### **Purpose of the EMA**

6.2 During our fieldwork we asked contributors to outline what they understood to be the purpose of the EMA Scheme. Comments made by practitioners and stakeholders suggested that the EMA Scheme was thought to be largely there to achieve the following objectives – which were thought to have remained relatively unchanged since the Scheme was first introduced:

- To incentivise young people from poorer backgrounds to continue in education post-16;
- To incentivise young people to attend their school or course more regularly than they might have done otherwise;
- To help students with the costs of coming to college or school.

6.3 A large number of students gave a broadly similar response during the focus group sessions adding that the purpose of the EMA was very much to help students meet the costs associated with going to college or school – be that direct costs related to attendance at school or college such as transport, lunch, books or equipment, or more generally day to day living costs such as food, bills and clothing.

6.4 Furthermore, as already noted, a fair number of students also regarded the EMA as an entitlement for being in education. Some EMA recipients for instance hinted towards the payments being similar to a salary 'if you were in work you'd be paid ... it's like being paid for coming to college'. Many practitioners expressed their concerns about this attitude questioning indeed whether it was right that students should feel entitled to the allowance: 'they believe if they're coming to study, they're entitled to be paid for it'. Stakeholders also hinted that the Scheme had become part of the 'fabric' of post-16 education. At least two practitioners went further and added their concern about the growing use of the acronym 'EMA' believing this to have led to losing sight of what the Scheme was about i.e. 'an education maintenance allowance' to help students with the costs associated with their education.

#### **Is the EMA targeted effectively?**

6.5 Stakeholders and practitioners generally thought that the right sort of students were being supported via the EMA, while accepting that it would be impossible to achieve a perfect match between those who needed it the most and those who could prove that they lived in households with low income. For instance one school practitioner noted 'I cannot think of any children in need who do not get it [the EMA]' at their particular school.

6.6 Having said this most practitioners, and even some stakeholders, could draw upon some evidence to suggest that relatively small minorities of students were either falling 'through the cracks' and not being supported or were receiving support when they did not really require it. Many contributors added that a means-testing Scheme would always create such situations i.e. there would always be a group of students who fell just over the EMA household income threshold and there would always be a group of students who were able to 'work the system'.

- 6.7 A large number of students (both EMA recipients and non-recipients) made a strong case that all students should receive EMA support, regardless of their household income (with this argument linked to the view that EMA was an entitlement or simply compensation for the fact that by studying full-time, students were not able to work on a full time basis or claim benefits).
- 6.8 Many students (as well as a number of practitioners) also argued that the current statutory assessment process for EMA did not give any consideration to individual issues such as household outgoings, other costs relating to siblings within the family or costs associated with the course selected by the student. Indeed a consistent view emerged across students and practitioners, particularly across FEIs, that a fairer process would be one that would be based upon the assessment of each individual's need although practitioners were realistic that such an awarding process would require significantly more resources to administer than the current one. On reflection, many conceded that the statutory system which was currently in place, despite its shortcomings, was probably the most practical method of supporting those in need – with the FCF Scheme expected to fill the gaps for those studying at FEIs. One contributor explained that whilst 'the system is not sensitive to things like that [i.e. individual circumstances] ... we were able to help out using FCF'.
- 6.9 A few examples of students who were deemed to be in need but not receiving the EMA were provided during our fieldwork – although we accept that some of the examples provided may well in fact be eligible for support. They included:
- Students who were not being financially supported by their parents despite the family income being slightly higher than the EMA threshold;
  - A student who had been refused support on the basis that they had an older sibling earning a relatively good wage and who still lived at home,



yet the combined parental income alone was below the income threshold;

- The friend of a focus group participant who was said not to have applied as her mother feared losing her benefit payments;
- Several students who had become recently estranged from their parents – they did not qualify for EMA support despite no longer receiving financial support from their family;
- Students from families with a parent working on zero contract hours – in these cases it could be difficult to make the case for EMA support yet the families face significant uncertainty in terms of a regular income;
- Students from families whose parents had their own business which wasn't doing as well this year as in previous years;
- Students who were studying on a part-time basis (under 12 hours a week) but who were facing financial difficulties all the same.

6.10 In the same manner, some students and practitioners said they felt that some students who receive EMA probably should not. For instance:

- Students living in households where parents have separated or divorced and are only required to declare the income for the home in which they live. One practitioner cited that they: 'got it because they were living with one parent and that one parent wasn't earning as much as their second parent, but they still got everything from their second parent ... so they didn't really need the EMA.'
- Students who claim to live with grandparents but are also financially supported by the parents;
- Students from households where a parent runs a business and had been 'creative' in their declaration of income for the previous financial year as well as students from families where one parent was known to be in a 'well paid job ... you really question how on earth they get it'.

## **Eligibility and availability**

- 6.11 Whilst far from perfect, and indeed somewhat of a blunt instrument, practitioners and stakeholders generally accepted that the household means-testing approach adopted via the EMA Scheme was probably the fairest way of distributing a limited financial pot of funding to students.
- 6.12 Students on the other hand, who perhaps were somewhat less aware about the pressures on the public purse and the complexities of running a discretionary fund, were more inclined to favour a payment system which would either reward all students or one which took a more individualised approach to their own personal circumstances.
- 6.13 The majority of parents interviewed thought that means-testing was a fair way to determine eligibility for EMA. Only one parent thought that all post-16 students should get some funding, but they still thought the level of funding received should be dependent on income. However, there was a minority of parents who thought there were some people not receiving EMA who really needed the additional financial support including those who were not being financially supported by their parents as well as those students from larger families
- 6.14 In most cases (albeit not all) practitioners and students thought it fair that EMA was available to both school and college based students. One such school practitioner explained: 'it's the same level of study they are expected to do, they are living at home in the same way, us and the college aren't so much separate bodies any more ... we do a lot of collaborative activity ... some of their students come here for a course and some of ours go there for a course so that sense of equality is important'. Indeed many contributors were wary that any decision to remove the EMA from one type of learning institution would create inequality between FEIs and schools when it came to the recruitment of students.

6.15 Very few practitioners disagreed with this view – those that did tended to highlight the difference required of students in terms of attendance e.g. one school based practitioner did not think it fair that college recipients received the same amount of EMA allowance as they did not have to attend as many classes as sixth form students. Conversely a couple of college based practitioners and a handful of FE students noted that the costs associated with academic courses available at sixth form schools were lower than vocational courses at colleges, thus school students had less of a need for the EMA.

### **Appropriateness of allowance levels**

6.16 EMA recipients generally thought that the current allowance of £30 per week was acceptable despite this rate not having been increased at all since the introduction of the Scheme around ten years ago. Those at school generally thought that the £30 allowance was about right, for instance, one EMA recipient commented that the current allowance was ‘reasonable ... not too much and not too little’ and another noted that the allowance was ‘not bad’. One factor which had bearing upon their view was course-related costs and students who were studying expensive courses such as catering and photography were more likely to argue that the allowance was inadequate. In one college for example EMA recipients were eager to stress that a course such as hairdressing could involve costs of around £400 compared to £40 for an A Level course. Despite accepting these predicaments, practitioners advised against making any changes to the EMA Scheme to reflect the actual cost of courses as this would only serve to incentivise students to make inappropriate choices based on financial support.

6.17 Most parents agreed that the current EMA allowance of £30 per week was ‘enough’. However, these comments were later qualified, with two parents saying the allowance should be the same as the amount of money given to people on JSA, and another saying the current allowance was only enough if you were a student still living at home. In

contrast, another parent called EMA 'government pocket money' for his son. The parents who said £30 per week was not enough cited high living costs as one reason why – one parent said their daughter spent £20 per week solely on transport, and they had to supplement her funds. The majority of parents interviewed mentioned they had to supplement their children's EMA money – EMA was enough to support their child in college, but it did not cover general living costs. Another parent added their concerns that they would be unable to support their child once they turned 19 (as child benefit would be stopped) and that they might have to 'pull [name of student] out of his studies' to claim JSA.

6.18 Several stakeholders and practitioners were eager to point out that as full-time post-16 educational courses in Wales were free the £30 allowance was probably about right – it would only be insufficient if students were required to pay for their education. Indeed it was not uncommon to hear feedback from some EMA recipients to suggest that the allowance was somewhat on the generous side, for example, 'if you think about it, £30 a week is £6 a day ... that's quite a lot' or 'because we're only in college three days a week, it's like £10 a day for coming in'. Indeed a few students pointed to the fact that many parents could not afford to 'match' the EMA payment of £120 per month suggesting that the allowance is quite generous compared to parental contribution received by non-recipients.

6.19 Despite this our fieldwork did not reveal much support for reducing the weekly allowance from its current £30 level – although non-recipients and a small number of practitioners took the view that it may be better to spread the funding more thinly to a wider group of students e.g. possibly reducing the weekly payment to £20 or even £15 per-student but making it more widely available to all 16 to 18-year-olds. For instance one such non-recipient student commented 'I think something would be better than nothing' and there was a general feeling amongst many non-recipient focus groups that this would provide a more equitable support landscape.

- 6.20 Many practitioners however aired caution about reducing the weekly payment adding that some students (particularly those from very low household incomes and those who were not getting any financial support from their parents) would struggle to make it to college or school on a daily basis as they simply could not afford the travel costs involved. A number of EMA recipients and several parents echoed this point with students adding that they would struggle to cope with a lower rate of payment and anticipated that they would find themselves unable to come to college every day – either because they could not afford the travel costs or because they would have to take on more part-time work to survive. This view was put forward very strongly by students who were estranged from their parents.
- 6.21 Other contributors suggested that a more suitable model for distributing the EMA funds would be via a slightly reduced weekly payment of £25 per week and a reintroduced performance payment in line with attainment and progression. Overall contributors held mixed views about such a change – often drawing on some of the difficulties that they had experienced in making such decisions at a local institutional level in the past.
- 6.22 Several of the EMA recipient focus group students drew attention to the difficulties that they faced during those weeks when they were not in receipt of an EMA allowance i.e. half term and other leave periods, particularly those who were living independently and thus tending to rely upon the EMA for general living costs.

### **Use of EMA**

- 6.23 Our fieldwork with EMA recipients revealed that students use the allowance for a multiple of purposes, which could be categorised into:
- direct study costs (such as trips, books and equipment);

- related study costs (such as travel and lunch);
- general living costs (clothing, bills and rent) and
- other costs (such as savings, socialising or purchase of a car).

6.24 According to the questionnaires completed by students during our focus groups<sup>146</sup> the EMA allowance was used for the following purposes, ranked in order of importance:

- Course related costs. Nearly all FEI and just under half of school EMA recipients noted that they used at least part of their allowance for this purpose;
- Food costs. Just under half of both FEI and school EMA recipients cited this;
- Transport costs were cited by around a quarter of all students interviewed - school recipients were more likely than FEI recipients to cite transport related costs as the second most common use of the fund after course related costs;
- Other purposes such – in particular school EMA recipients tended to make more use of their allowance for other purposes than their FEI counterparts, particularly for savings. One fifth of school recipients said they used their EMA for savings.)).

6.25 EMA recipients were perhaps more specific and candid in their discussions during the focus groups about how they put the EMA allowance to use and in reality EMA recipients tended to make use of the allowance for a wide range of multiple purposes. The majority of EMA recipients noted that they had used the allowance to cover specific course costs such as the purchase of uniforms, photography materials, printing costs, trips to the theatre for those on drama courses, hairdressing kits, beauty and aromatherapy materials, catering equipment, books, stationary, sports kits, revision guides etc. Indeed it would be fair to say that the vast majority of recipients at the focus

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<sup>146</sup> Participants were asked an open-ended question 'Generally, how are you using your EMA funding?'

groups spent at least some of their EMA money on costs relating to their studies and several of the students interviewed did appear to incur quite significant expenses relating to their courses, particularly at FE colleges.

- 6.26 In addition quite a number of recipients (particularly at schools) noted that they had used their EMA allowance to cover costs associated with attending University open days and interviews.
- 6.27 The extent to which EMA recipients used EMA to support transport costs was largely determined by whether they received free or subsidised transport or not – yet students at a number of focus groups noted that they often opted to use their own personal transport (with EMA allowance being used towards this) as this gave them greater flexibility to attend college or school for their lesson periods only as well as giving them a sense of independence.
- 6.28 Some EMA recipients also admitted to having money ‘spare’ at the end of the fortnight which they tended to put away and save with the intention of purchasing luxury items such as a car or holiday. A minority of students also explained that they saved their EMA allowance (drawing on parental support for costs associated with their education). Indeed half of the students at one focus group in a school admitted to this being the case and hoped that they would be able to use their savings either towards University costs or to purchase a car when they needed one in the future.
- 6.29 The majority of focus groups with EMA recipients contained at least one participant (and often more, particularly at FEIs), who genuinely needed their EMA allowance to survive whilst at college. Amongst these cases was a 16-year-old student living independently in accommodation provided by social services who noted that ‘the £30 EMA is all I have to live on’ with £10 being spent on bus fares and the remaining £20 on food. This particular student also accessed free college meals.

- 6.30 Only a very small minority of EMA recipients agreed that they used their EMA allowance to help contribute towards household expenses and bills. A small number of students explained that they often gave their mother £15 or £10 a month for lodgings whilst others made occasional contributions e.g. 'if my mum's short on electric or for shopping or for petrol ... I'll give her £10'. None of the parents interviewed stated that they expected their children to contribute their EMA towards this purpose – and in the main parents' views on how their children used the EMA was very similar to that conveyed by recipients themselves.
- 6.31 This finding is perhaps surprising given the view of several practitioners who believed that contributing towards household income was an increasingly common use of the allowance. It may be the case however that practitioners come to hear about these instances on a regular basis (i.e. many practitioners stated that they often had to deal with parents who exerted pressure upon them to authorise the EMA payment to their child despite the student having not met the attendance criteria set by the institution, which in their view reflected the households' reliance upon the EMA as a contributing source of income). Indeed several practitioners thought that the evidence that the EMA was being used as a contribution towards family household expenses quite often came from parents - one such practitioner explained that 'sometimes parents ring up and they'll be quite angry' if an EMA payment has been held back.
- 6.32 A very mixed picture emerged as to whether the EMA allowance was a 'nice to have' or an 'essential' financial contribution – it is true to note however that those studying at FEIs were on average more likely than school based recipients to argue that it was an essential financial contribution for them. 11 of the 16 parents interviewed (all 11 were parents of students based at FEIs) thought that the EMA was an 'essential' rather than a 'nice to have' contribution and going without it would cause financial difficulty for the students and their family. Moreover, a number of students who regarded the EMA as a 'nice to have' did make the point that even where EMA was being used to



purchase 'nice to have items' this was only levelling the playing field with what other students could afford. One such student stated that the 'EMA ... helps us get luxuries other kids may already have.' This was often a cause of resentment amongst non EMA recipients who could not afford to spend similar amounts on nice to have things such as driving lessons or the latest mobile phone.

6.33 Overall the proportion of EMA recipients interviewed who spent their money unwisely or failed to make the allowance last for the fortnight to cover essential costs seemed to be small. Practitioners on the other hand were aware of cases where EMA recipients were thought to be wasting their allowance. At one school a practitioner noted 'there are some that just use it to go out at a weekend and others who are just wasting theirs ... if we weren't on their backs all the time they'd abuse it ... that strikes me every week .... that some get it and waste it and others work hard and don't get it'. Indeed a focus group at the same school did reveal that some students were using it primarily for socialising at the weekend whilst others, who found it difficult to manage a budget over a fortnight period, found themselves spending it on 'stuff' and not being able to budget sensibly.

### **Perceptions of the EMA**

6.34 Our fieldwork did not encounter any element of stigmatisation in receiving the EMA allowance, unlike FSM. For instance one EMA recipient commented: 'there's not the same stigma as when you were in school and you'd have free school dinners and everyone would look at you ... that was bad'. Indeed in complete contrast, EMA recipients were more inclined to argue that their peers were often jealous of the fact that they had access to the fund and even in some cases showed elements of resentment that they received support. Non-recipients echoed these views adding that their resentment was often attributable to what they perceived as the inequality of the EMA Scheme and that it was not available to all students. Some of this resentment also stemmed from

the fact that some non-EMA recipients had been unsuccessful with their application and were thus thought to be 'annoyed that they can't get it'. It was also suggested by some students and practitioners that EMA recipients tended to have 'better social lives' than others (either because of it providing a better disposable income or because it meant they had less need of working part-time), which only served to increase resentment amongst non-recipients.

## **7 EMA ADMINISTRATION**

### **Introduction**

7.1 In this section we first discuss how the EMA has been promoted and the effectiveness of these methods, before turning to explore the EMA application process, the role of each learning centre, the use of learning agreements and the processes adopted to monitor attendance for EMA recipients,

### **EMA promotion and hearing about the Scheme**

7.2 A selection of promotional materials prepared by the Student Loans Company were reviewed as part of this evaluation. These were:

- EMA Wales Apply Now Poster
- EMA Wales The little book of EMA
- EMA Wales Next Steps leaflet
- EMA Wales 2013/14 Application Form
- EMA Wales Eligibility Leaflet
- EMA Wales Learning Centre Guidance Note

7.3 Our review suggests that all promotional materials have been clearly branded with both the Welsh Government and Student Finance Wales logos. In our opinion the language used is clear and accessible throughout all documents and significant use is made of visual diagrams and tools to present the information as simply as possible. These techniques include appropriate flowcharts, colour coding the application forms for students and parents, and the use of symbols within the application form to show what evidence is needed to be produced by the form-filler. In our view the guidance note for the learning centres administering EMA is equally as clear, and comprehensively outlines the role and responsibilities of the Learning Centre with regards to

administering EMA. All documents also signpost readers to at least one additional source of information if needed. Practitioners generally took a positive view of these SLC prepared resources and acknowledged making good use of them as appropriate at their own institutions.

- 7.4 A wide range of promotional and information dissemination methods are deployed by both schools and colleges in their effort to promote the EMA Scheme. These have included giving presentations or providing information at open/taster days, interviews, parents' evenings, school assemblies, GSCE results days, outreach activities from FEIs to schools, enrolment days and start of term induction sessions. They have also included direct mail to students, providing information about the Scheme within their prospectuses and website/intranets, as well as ensuring that the Scheme is promoted visually at their campuses via posters, leaflets and information slides presented on TV screens in reception. All schools and colleges also noted that they distribute the SLC application packs to prospective and existing students. A number of practitioners also noted their reliance upon tutors, lecturers, head of sixth forms and teachers to raise awareness of the Scheme amongst both prospective and existing students. It was also clear that learning centres recognise the value of word of mouth techniques in terms of promoting the Scheme adding that a fair few students get to hear about the EMA via older siblings and friends.
- 7.5 In general practitioners thought that there was either good or very good awareness of the EMA allowance across both school and college institutions and most practitioners thought that they were doing all that was realistically possible to promote the Scheme. Indeed one group of practitioners added that the Scheme 'promoted itself' to a large extent. A few practitioners stressed the importance of regularly drip-feeding information to potential applicants at critical stages of the process e.g. open evenings where parents often attend with the potential student right through to the enrolment and induction stage at the start of term. Despite this some added that 'we do all we can to tell them about it. but

you will always get those who choose not to listen!’ Indeed it was not uncommon to hear FEI practitioners state that they had the occasional student approach them during the academic year who needed EMA support but were not receiving it, despite being eligible for it. Indeed in most institutions it was accepted that there would always be a cohort of students who chose only to ‘pick up’ on the EMA after they had enrolled at the institution and realised what they were missing out on. Several practitioners argued that schools were probably well placed to promote the Scheme to a ‘captive audience’ i.e. their own students in years ten and eleven whereas it was considered more of a challenge for colleges to reach this group to the same extent. The experiences of a few non EMA recipients suggested that students whose circumstances change during the academic year may be less aware of the Scheme’s details.

- 7.6 Our focus groups with students revealed that they had come to hear about the EMA via a range of different routes. Several students also suggested that the EMA was now considered part of the norm of the fabric of the sixth form – one such school student commented ‘you just know about it’. In a similar manner college based students claimed to have tacit knowledge of the Scheme with one student saying ‘I just knew it was there’. Hearing about the Scheme via older siblings who had received it previously was highlighted as a popular means of finding out about EMA in several colleges and schools. For instance in one college around three-quarters of the EMA recipients interviewed said they found out about it from an older brother or sister. College based students were also inclined to identify face to face talks and meetings with a college advisor as an effective method of gaining an understanding about the EMA – not least because of the opportunity to ask questions - and at least two groups of students from different FEIs stated this to be the case.
- 7.7 Parents on the whole did not generally believe the EMA Scheme to have been promoted well with several evidencing this by the fact that they had found out about it by word of mouth.

- 7.8 Overall the feedback from students suggests that the EMA Scheme is promoted fairly well but it is fair to note that focus groups at different institutions did reveal mixed views on how well the EMA had been publicised by their institutions. Several focus groups of school students commented that the information provided had been clear, timely and comprehensive and added as in the case of one group 'you really can't miss it – it's up everywhere' and another sixth form student noted 'because we've got a sixth form block it's quite easy to find out about things like that'. On the other hand other groups did not think that the EMA had been publicised particularly well across their school with some of these adding that they had only come to hear about it 'by accident', or 'I didn't know about it until my friend told me' or 'two weeks into the course'. It is interesting that in one of these schools the practitioners admitted that they were careful in the way that they promoted the Scheme for fear of raising expectations given that in reality the majority of their students would not be eligible.
- 7.9 As was the case with schools, the majority of FEI students thought that the EMA Scheme had been well publicised, with students saying 'it's everywhere' and '[it's] common knowledge'. However, at least one group of students in each of four of the FEIs visited said they felt more could be done to promote the Scheme, and a small minority of students felt that some students had missed out on applying for EMA through lack of awareness. It was found that in some FEIs, the fact that departments were spread out over several campuses created a disparity in the promotion of the EMA. We came across more than one instance where students at one FEI campus thought the Scheme had been well-publicised, whereas students at another of the FEI's campuses felt it had not been publicised effectively - with some of these students arguing that they had missed out on EMA support for a period of time at the start of the academic year as a result. It was interesting that practitioners at this FEI agreed that the EMA could benefit from better promotion at the campus in question.

7.10 In terms of specific improvements to the promotion of the Scheme, practitioners suggested that clear messages could be conveyed about the timings of the application process and payment dates as well as possibly exploring greater promotion to young people already out of education – indeed it was noteworthy that only one EMA recipient who contributed to our focus groups mentioned becoming aware of the Scheme via official sources outside of college or school.

### **Application Process**

7.11 The majority of school students who participated in our focus groups had given their EMA application forms to their parents to complete. The majority also agreed the form had been ‘straight forward’ although the submission of evidence had created problems – several students interviewed said they had concerns about sending a lot of important documentation in the post and a minority of students found their applications had been delayed due to problems with providing evidence.

7.12 None of the students interviewed said they had received any help or support from their school in completing the application form. The school staff interviewed generally agreed that no support was given by them in this respect. They also agreed with the students’ viewpoint that the problem with the application process was providing evidence.

7.13 Regarding the application process, the views of the FEI students and staff generally mirrored that of the school students and staff. The majority of students found the application ‘simple enough’ and again, in most cases, got their parents to complete the forms for them. One focus group commented that their parents had experience of filling out the forms for older siblings, and so knew what to do. Of the students that did complete the forms themselves, several said they found the process ‘quite daunting’ and the form ‘quite wordy’. Students from more than one

FEI said they would have welcomed the opportunity to ask someone at the institution for advice on filling out the form.

7.14 A minority of students complained of problems or delays in the application process – it may well be the case that some of these issues had been due to the SLC's sample checking procedures but students were generally unaware of such processes. In some instances, students complained of delays of up to a few months while 'stuff went back and forth'. Several students complained the original documents they had submitted had been lost. A few students also complained of having EMA stopped part-way through the academic year and having to reapply – some of them did not even know why. Several students also complained the system was not flexible enough to cope with 'out of the ordinary' circumstances e.g. where students were estranged from their parents.

7.15 FEI staff opinion on the application form itself was more divided. Some thought it was 'a lot better than it used to be', while others thought it was 'probably a bit too long'. More than one FEI practitioner suggested the application process could be improved by making it an online process.

7.16 Again, FEI staff gave the impression that generally they did not get involved in the application process for the majority of students, although a few learning centres did note that they helped particular students such as those with Additional Learning Needs (ALN) fill out their forms. Only one Learning Centre said they would like to be able to speak to the SLC on behalf of students over the phone, in order to help sort out any problems if need be. This would make it easier to help students who needed support and offer a comprehensive student support service to those students approaching the institution with queries about their EMA application.

### **Role of Learning Centres**

7.17 Our fieldwork revealed that the resources deployed by learning centres to administer the EMA Scheme were generally considered to be



reasonable and several institutions took the view that the benefits incurred (e.g. more students on roll, increased attendance, etc.) from the investment made by their institution was acceptable. One school for instance put the resources at a 'maximum half a day a week' for a school administrator with around 90 EMA recipients whilst an FEI (supporting around 1,300 EMA and ALG students) put the overall cost of administrating both the EMA and ALG Schemes at around £60,000 per annum (i.e. on average £46 per student supported).

7.18 The role that is expected of the learning centres includes the promotion of the EMA Scheme, provision of the application forms and learning agreements as well as the monitoring of student attendance and the submission of this data via the LC Portal.

7.19 The schools visited typically allocate much of the monitoring attendance work to an administrator who takes responsibility for the information collected via electronic registers maintained across the school and submit this data via the Schools Information Management System (SIMS). All schools which were visited as part of this evaluation recorded EMA recipient registration at both morning/afternoon sessions as well as individual lessons. FEIs usually allocated more staffing resource to the attendance monitoring work, due to the larger number of EMA recipients involved, with this resource being housed within student support and student finance departments. In many cases the staff monitoring resource was spread across several campuses.

### **Use of Learning Agreements**

7.20 All learning centres are required to prepare EMA learning agreements for their individual institution which are then required to be signed by students in order to start receiving their EMA payments. At present students must sign their learning agreement within eight weeks of starting their course to qualify for backdated EMA payments (students can of course apply at a later date for the EMA but payment will only be

awarded from the point at which the learning agreement has been signed). Whilst this eight-week duration was considered acceptable in most cases a few practitioners thought it too long – adding that those who were not returning the learning agreements any quicker did not necessarily need the money and that ‘they’re saving it for a Christmas bonus.’

7.21 In addition to the EMA learning agreement students are also required to sign a school or FEI learning agreement (often referred to as Individual Learning Plans or Code of Conduct). By comparison to the EMA learning agreements these school or FEI learning agreements usually contain much more detailed conditions which the student is required to adhere to.

7.22 Practitioners who were interviewed argued positively about the need and potential value of the EMA learning agreements adding that they functioned as useful documents in communicating to students what is expected of them in terms of attendance, behaviour and code of conduct. The degree of importance attached to learning agreements did vary however – in one school for instance a practitioner noted that the learning agreement conditions are read out to students in a face to face meeting and the ‘legal’ obligations of the document clearly outlined to them. It was interesting that at this particular school students had a good level of awareness of the terms outlined in the agreement and acknowledged that the school attached a great deal of importance to it. At a few other schools the EMA learning agreement was seen as less significant with practitioners and students acknowledging that the learning agreements were signed in September but ‘not generally looked at again’. Indeed at one school several EMA recipients thought the learning agreements to be completely irrelevant to them.

7.23 Students across FEIs tended to be fairly dismissive of the learning agreements on the whole with many perceiving the agreements at best a necessity ‘just to get the money’ and at worst ‘a pain’. Indeed several

FEI EMA recipients could not even recall having signed these Learning agreements whilst others added that they had not given the Learning agreements much thought in that ‘you don’t really think about it ... they say “sign this” and you just sign it’ and ‘if you don’t sign it, you don’t get it’.

### **Attendance policies**

7.24 Institutions apply their own policies around what is expected of EMA recipients in terms of attendance – and these expectations are often aligned to the general attendance requirements for all students at the institution. As a result we encountered significant differences across schools and FEIs in terms of the attendance rate that was required of EMA recipients in order to receive the payments – ranging from a low of 80 per cent to a high of 100 per cent, with schools setting on average higher attendance rates than FEIs. The application of this attendance rate however appeared to be complex in that some institutions withheld authorising the payment of the EMA to students until their attendance rate increased to the acceptable rate (e.g. one school code of conduct clearly stipulated that the EMA will not be paid to any student who fails to achieve a minimum of 85 per cent attendance across all sessions) whilst others authorised payments according to whether students had an acceptable attendance record for that specific week.

7.25 Institutions were largely found to be following the guidelines offered by SLC on what constitutes authorised absenteeism (and thus the approval of EMA payment). These included for instance attending funerals, attending university away days and car driving tests – however institutions were not consistent in what evidence they required to prove these type of absenteeism, with some being prepared to accept a verbal notification whilst others insisted on documentation such as proof of an appointment or a parental letter.

7.26 Furthermore policies relating to absenteeism stemming from an illness varied significantly across the institutions visited – some institutions were found to have very clear policies about what was allowed and not allowed whilst others deliberately did not give clear guidelines on how many days of illness were allowed in any one term or year for fear that students would take advantage of any limits given. Even where clear policies were in place, it was only in some cases that these expectations were outlined clearly within the students EMA learning agreements. The various practices on illness policies which we encountered during our fieldwork included:

- One school which allowed up to 10 days self-certified sick leave for students in any one year – after this students were required to submit a doctor's notice to explain any illness in order to report it as authorised absenteeism;
- Another school did not place an upper limit on the amount of time a pupil could take off due to illness, provided it was not a long-term illness (which would be unauthorised absenteeism according to EMA guidelines);
- One FEI expected its students to achieve 100 per cent attendance with only one self-certified sickness absence day allowed each term (further sickness absenteeism required a doctor's note);
- A FEI which expected students to maintain a 90 per cent overall attendance rate stipulated that students could take no more than 10 days' sick leave per year;
- One FEI expected its students to achieve 80 per cent attendance with illness only classed as an authorised absence if a doctor's note was provided.

7.27 Learning centres adopted different approaches in terms of what evidence they required from EMA recipients in order to record any sickness absenteeism as an authorised one. Several schools insisted on written documentation (e.g. a parent's letter or a doctor's note) whereas others were happy to accept verbal explanations. Only a very small

number of FEIs stated that they required written evidence – one such institution for instance required students to complete a standard form. Several FEIs explained that they were satisfied with a phone call or text message from a student (often before a particular time of that day to report any illnesses e.g. 9.30am) to notify them of any absenteeism.

7.28 Policies regarding whether students were required to be at the place of education during ‘free periods’ also varied. At one school EMA students were required to ‘sign in’ with a Post 16 Support Officer during their study periods – yet there was greater flexibility generally being awarded to Year 13 school students to work from home for these sessions at the same school. Also in most schools it was expected that EMA recipients were present for morning and afternoon registration (although there were exceptions to this e.g. in some cases students did not have to attend registration if they did not have any lessons immediately after, while in one school it was explained that Year 13 student could ‘come and go as they wish after this [the end of January] ... provided they turn up for lessons’. FEIs on the other hand were much more flexible in terms of their policy on attendance during ‘free periods’ and in most cases would only insist on EMA recipients having to be present at college for lessons and other contact time e.g. tutorials, practical etc.

7.29 It was noteworthy that we only came across one current example (a school) where consideration was also taken of student behaviour and effort before the EMA payment was authorised. At this particular school attendance was thought to be monitored in a particularly strict manner as well. EMA recipients who were interviewed were highly aware of the focus upon behaviour and effort – indeed several students noted that EMA payments had been withheld for students who had failed to behave appropriately at this school. This approach had also been taken in the past by one of the FEIs, prior to a merger with another institution, although the practice has since been discontinued largely due to a decision by both merging institutions to adopt the EMA processes already in place at the larger one.

## **Monitoring attendance and authorising payments**

7.30 Monitoring the attendance of EMA recipients is one of the key tasks required of learning centres and evidence was found that institutions frequently achieve this using data from computerised registration systems. At least two FEIs referred to the adoption of the Tribal software which automatically tallies attendance registers and produces data that can be sent to the Student Finance Wales (SFW) portal. One such institution noted that the adoption of this particular software at one of its campuses had eased the administrative work involved with authorising EMA payment significantly. Another was in the process of piloting the software and was dealing with some of the glitches at the time of our fieldwork. On the whole schools tended to adopt manual methods of tallying attendance from computerised registration systems (referred to as school SIMS databases) and submitting this data to the SFW portal on a weekly basis.

7.31 Our fieldwork revealed that there was currently inconsistency as to whether or not students can access their attendance records or were informed of the information that would be sent to SFW on a weekly basis. Typically FEIs make this information available via the college's Moodle system. In schools methods for sharing such information varied – we encountered examples such as paper records being put up in the sixth form common rooms, a texting method to notify any student when they had been marked as absent as well as attendance information being provided to Heads of Years and form tutors who then personally liaise with students with any unauthorised absenteeism for that week so that any inaccuracies can be rectified before the data is submitted. Frequently the methods adopted depended upon the number of EMA recipients at the institution – with the most personalised methods only being deployed by those schools with very few EMA recipients. Whilst arguably an efficient method from the school's point of view students did not necessarily regard any 'public' methods of sharing data, such as posting up lists, 'as the best system in the world' adding that this often

proved embarrassing for those students with major issues that affected their attendance.

7.32 In at least one school visited students were not provided with any information about their weekly attendance and were not given any opportunity to rectify or challenge the data before it was submitted to SFW. Indeed the focus group with EMA recipients at this particular school suggested that students generally accepted the school's decisions and added that there was no culture of challenging the school about the data it had provided on attendance.

7.33 Issues relating to lesson registrations were the biggest source of discontent for EMA recipients interviewed – both at schools and FEIs. At one school a focus group of EMA recipients revealed that they did not think that teachers appreciated how important it was for them to sign the register for each lesson to ensure that students received their EMA. At this particular school the main issues related to other educational activities which students participated in i.e. the fact that teachers were not marking them present despite them being on school trips, taking exams or in school based rehearsals. At another school where EMA recipients had experienced similar problems they had found the school office unapproachable and unhelpful when they had raised issues relating to teachers forgetting to complete the school register or conversely, when the teacher had not been present for the lesson (due to illness or on a course) and nobody had registered their attendance. In defence, a school practitioner argued that students were given the benefit of the doubt under these type of circumstances and would automatically be registered as being in attendance if a teacher had not undertaken class registration for that lesson at all.

7.34 Similar issues were observed at FEIs - at one institution, typical of many others, students complained that some tutors did not routinely complete the registration at each session and if a class was cancelled by a tutor it often led to non-payment – these issues were often resolved but it

meant waiting for two weeks for the re-instated payment to be made. At another FEI a swipe card registration process had been recently introduced and was hoped to tackle these issues whilst at a third, the FEI had amended tutors' employment contracts to specify that class registration was a mandatory activity – it was thought that this had led to improvements in the registration data available for all students, including EMA recipients.

7.35 Punctuality was another bone of contention for some EMA recipients, who argued that arriving late at lessons could often have greater bearing upon their attendance rates than 'real' absenteeism. Again policies on punctuality varied e.g. in one FEI the institution operated a policy which allowed students to be up to ten minutes late arriving for a lesson whilst at one school EMA recipients were allowed two late marks on the register in any single week. Quite a number of the EMA recipients interviewed had fallen foul of the punctuality policies set out by the institution. Several students provided examples whereby they had been penalised for poor punctuality - with some of these issues deemed to be outside of their control such as a college bus being late for instance.

7.36 We encountered students across all focus groups who had not received their EMA payment at some point over the academic year and this had created real financial difficulties for several students. Students suggested that the with-holding of payment had been due to institutional issues in some cases (for example, the lack of importance attached to registration by some staff) whilst in other cases it had been due to genuine student absenteeism. The feedback from parents also highlighted non-payment issues in relation to EMA with a group of parents whose students were attending one FE institution particularly critical of the fact that payments had been withheld for their children as a result of failings on the part of poor registration processes, rather than student absenteeism. One important point to emerge during several of the EMA recipient focus groups (and also some practitioner interviews) related to the fact that a full weekly allowance could be lost as a result of



only losing part of a week's education – often just the one lesson. It was suggested by several students that a fairer method would be one based on a gradual removal of funding i.e. if a student were to miss one of five days then only £6 ought to be deducted from their weekly allowance.

7.37 Quite a few practitioners said they were often approached by parents regarding non-EMA payments to students and had felt pressured to award payments as a result. One such contributor noted that 'often it is the parent that speaks to us rather than the pupil'. Indeed others spoke of tutors feeling 'threatened' by students and/or their parents to record students as present when in fact they were not.

## **8 THE IMPACT OF ENGLISH FE STUDENT FINANCE IN WALES**

8.1 In this section we explore the impacts of removing the English EMA upon Welsh learning centres and their students before turning to explore the experiences of English learning centres administering the EMA.

### **The impact of English EMA withdrawal on Welsh learning centres**

8.2 Other than border institutions, Welsh learning centres felt that the withdrawal of the EMA in England had little impact on them and therefore were not really sighted on any resulting issues. One Welsh border institution had experienced a reduction in the number of English domiciled students enrolled at their institution following the change in England but practitioners at the institution did not think that this drop could necessarily be attributed to the EMA policy change alone.

8.3 Other FEIs and schools operating on the English-Welsh border suggested that the withdrawal of the EMA in England had led to panic and possibly some confusion amongst Welsh domiciled students and parents who feared that it could also be withdrawn in Wales at the time.

8.4 Our fieldwork with students suggested that they knew very little about the change in EMA policy across the border but even in cases where they were aware of this it did not appear to have affected their take up of the EMA in Wales.

8.5 The FEIs and schools on the Welsh side of the border had identified a gap in provision for students who lived in England but studied in Wales at their closest learning centre. It was noted that such students could not apply for EMA nor the English 16-19 bursary either, as Welsh FEIs are unable to administer the Scheme. This situation created some resentment amongst the students in question, who were thought to miss

out on funding support particularly as it was also thought that 'in England they are stricter with the money they give out to students'.

- 8.6 The staff at one Welsh learning centre also suggested that they had experienced a trend whereby students formerly domiciled in England had moved to Wales to study at FE level since the funding had been cut in England, but accepted that this was difficult to prove. As well as students accessing EMA, they were also establishing themselves ready for cheaper university tuition fees later on. Interestingly, another campus of the same college did not feel this was a problem. Instead, they had seen an increase in the number of students from England placed in the local area by the care system, and again felt this was at least partly due to the increased levels of support available in Wales.

### **The experience at English border learning centres**

- 8.7 Three learning centres in England that administer both the EMA and the English replacement (the 16-19 bursary Schemes) were visited during our fieldwork. Staff and a small number of students were interviewed at each centre. In all cases the learning centres noted that the Bursary Scheme funding was more than adequate for their requirements; with one having reported a significant underspend during the 2012/13 financial year which they were allowed to carry over to the next. One contributor however did acknowledge that 'I know some schools that have struggled – it depends if they're in a more deprived area'.
- 8.8 It was found that the discretionary bursaries were mainly provided to cover specific provisions across the learning centres visited – although it is known that many institutions do award cash payments<sup>147</sup>. These provisions included:

- Bus/train passes

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<sup>147</sup> See Section 3.23 of this report.

- Other transport costs
- Lunch vouchers
- Kit and materials for courses
- Course-related trips
- Visits to UCAS conferences and university open days
- Examination re-sit fees
- Residential costs (if this was a cheaper alternative than travel)
- Cash allowances for cases of extreme hardship<sup>148</sup>

8.9 The awarding criteria for making available the discretionary bursaries varied greatly across the three English learning centres visited. All used household income as an eligibility criterion, but the threshold was different at every institution visited. One Centre explained that they had adopted the same household threshold as that used for the Welsh EMA, partly for consistency and partly to ‘make things fair’ between the Welsh and English students in the school. A member of staff at one school explained how, when the EMA had been withdrawn in England, all learning centres within the local authority had met to agree upon a common eligibility criteria, but this did not seem to be the case for the other learning centres.

8.10 It was found that one learning centre allocated a budget of up to £1,200 for specific provisions to every eligible student, raising this budget further over the duration of the academic year if there was any ‘underspend’ available. In contrast, another learning centre allocated a budget of up to £800 per year per student if they were in receipt of free school meals, or up to £500 per year per student if the household income was less than £20,817. These funds were allocated at the start of the year, so if any applications came in part-way through the academic year students could miss out.

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<sup>148</sup> This practice had now stopped following a college merger.

- 8.11 Transport costs were highlighted as a major issue across all English learning centres visited, and a significant proportion of the discretionary bursary funds were used to contribute towards students transport costs. Staff across the three institutions agreed that specific provision for transport would be very useful, and this view was echoed by students – the cost of transport meant it was now a large determining factor in their choice of college or sixth form. A significant proportion of English domiciled students who participated in our focus groups said that they would not have been able to attend the college of their choice without the 16-19 bursary, and would have had to enrol somewhere closer to home because they could not afford the transport costs. As is the case across Wales the provision of free transport varied across the learning centres visited – two institutions provided transport for students resident in the county only, and one did not provide any transport.
- 8.12 A member of staff at one of the English learning centres visited did admit that their main focus was upon the 16-19 bursary as the majority of their students were resident in England with the Welsh EMA somewhat of an afterthought. This impression was true of the other two learning centres as well.
- 8.13 The students interviewed also thought it was unfair to have different systems on different sides of the border. English domiciled students at an institution on the Welsh border also held the view that the FE finance support system in England was ‘stricter’ than that in Wales but in contrast English domiciled students in receipt of the 16-19 bursary at one English school suggested that the attendance requirement for payment of EMA was ‘more encouraging’, with one such student stating that ‘my attendance would be a lot better if I had EMA’. Some Welsh students were clearly aware that the EMA system was more generous, saying it gave them ‘bragging rights’ over the English students, as they did not have to work part-time to support their studies.
- 8.14 A number of issues were identified with the introduction of the English bursary Scheme, namely that:

- The resources required of English learning centres to administer the English 16-19 bursary had led to a significant increase in staff workload, compared with the previous EMA Scheme;
- Staff did not always have sufficient knowledge and expertise to be able to make informed decisions in relation to household income assessment, particularly in terms of their understanding of the benefits system;
- Students who were eligible for the 16-19 bursary (at one institution) now received significantly less financial support than Welsh domiciled students who were in receipt of the EMA, and this was deemed to be unfair.

8.15 However, some advantages of the 16-19 bursary Scheme were also identified:

- It was suggested that the new bursary approach was preferable as it was more likely to be spent on specific and justifiable provisions. One member of staff said they preferred the bursary as ‘you know the money is going in the right direction...and not funding socialising’;
- As the Scheme was being managed at a local level it was thought that it could be used more effectively and targeted towards students known to be most at need;
- It was suggested (by one learning centre) that as the average value of finance being awarded to students had reduced by several hundred pounds under the new bursary Scheme the savings incurred by the UK Government were significant.

8.16 Overall a mixed view was conveyed in relation to the impact of the withdrawal of EMA funding in England. Practitioners at the three English learning centres agreed that its removal had had no great impact on student enrolment or attendance at their institutions. However, the policy change had led to a change in the overall number of students being financially supported at the institutions visited: in one learning centre

which had adopted the Welsh EMA threshold for the new bursary Scheme a 30 per cent rise in applicants had been experienced. This was put down in most part to an easier application that was not as 'scary' or as intrusive as that for the EMA. In contrast, another school had seen a significant decrease in bursary applicants. They thought this was due to either a change in the eligibility threshold or an influx of wealthier students.

## **9 DIFFERENCE MADE**

### **Introduction**

9.1 In this section we discuss the difference the EMA Scheme has made to students' decisions to participate and enrol within post-16 education, before turning to explore the extent to which it has widened participation, improved attendance and contributed to making a difference to student completion rates, attainment and progression into higher education. We first consider the qualitative and subjective evidence presented in terms of the views of students, practitioners and stakeholders before then turning to present the findings from the quantitative analysis and modelling of matched SLC and Widening Access data.

### **Findings from the qualitative research - student enrolment**

9.2 Our fieldwork has found that whilst the EMA is considered an important aspect of a student's decision to continue in further education the majority of students (current and previous EMA recipients) would have enrolled on their course anyway – although this was less marked amongst FEI students. Around four-fifths of current FEI EMA recipients who participated in our evaluation thought the availability of EMA was an important consideration in their decision to enrol compared with just under three-quarters of school EMA recipients: a majority (nearly two-thirds) of those who had not succeeded in accessing EMA also reported that the potential availability of EMA had been an important consideration. However around three-quarters of FEI EMA recipients and nearly all school EMA recipients thought that they would have enrolled anyway on their course in the absence of the allowance. Overall therefore only a fifth of current EMA recipients thought that they definitely or probably would not have taken their course without the allowance.



- 9.3 Turning to explore the situation for previous EMA recipients only one of the 30 interviewed said that the EMA was an important factor whilst considering whether or not to enrol on their course. The remaining 29 interviewees thought that the EMA had been “not at all important” and that they would have enrolled regardless. The same was true for the number of previous EMA recipients who would have enrolled anyway in the absence of the EMA – 29 of the 30 interviewees said that they would have enrolled anyway.
- 9.4 Parents conveyed a somewhat more mixed view but two-thirds thought that their child would definitely have enrolled on their course anyway. Only one parent said their child would definitely not have been able to attend college without EMA and a further four thought that their child would probably not have enrolled.
- 9.5 School students were much more likely than FEI students to argue that they would have enrolled regardless of the EMA. However, the picture from one focus group to another varied tremendously – in some cases around half of the students in a group argued that they would not have continued in education without EMA, while in some school based focus groups, none thought this was the case. It was very common to hear both sets of arguments during our visits to both schools and colleges:
- ‘I would have done the course regardless ... I wasn’t drawn by the money’
  - ‘it didn’t make a difference, I’d still want to study what I’m studying ... it’s just a bonus the EMA really isn’t it’.
  - ‘I wouldn’t come ... there’d be no motivation to come to college’
  - ‘I couldn’t afford to be here [without it] ... I just couldn’t afford to get the bus to come in ... it’s as simple as that.’
- 9.6 Practitioners at both schools and FEIs also took the view that the EMA was not a critical factor in the decision of the majority of students to enrol at their institution – indeed a couple of school based practitioners

regarded the EMA as a fairly irrelevant consideration for most of their students when it came to making a decision about whether to continue in full time education.

- 9.7 It is also important to point out that a fair minority of students were unaware that they would qualify for the EMA allowance before taking the decision to enrol on their course so in these cases the offer of the allowance made no difference to their initial decisions. Conversely it is also worth pointing out that several practitioners thought that some students were only enrolling at their institution because of the availability of the EMA – although few students admitted that this was true of themselves in the focus group sessions.
- 9.8 It was very difficult for institutions to come to a view as to whether the EMA had led to any increase in their student enrolment numbers – largely due to the impact of other factors upon student numbers but also because the EMA was now a long-established part of the status quo and had been in place prior to many practitioners taking on their current posts.
- 9.9 For instance at least two schools visited claimed that the number of sixth form students had increased over the last few years but thought this was attributable in part to the introduction of a wider range of subjects for post-16-year-olds – often Level 2 courses which tended to attract young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds who would otherwise not have stayed on at school.
- 9.10 When asked about the impact of a withdrawal of EMA upon student enrolment schools generally conveyed quite mixed views. At least two schools thought that their student numbers would be lower e.g. one suggested that their sixth form numbers would be ‘down about 20 per cent were it not for the EMA’ whilst another suggested a proportion of around 10 per cent. However at least three schools suggested that the absence of the EMA would not have any impact upon their enrolment

numbers while saying they would be concerned about the impact upon other elements such as attendance and punctuality: 'we would lose the stick we've got at the moment to tackle punctuality and attendance'.

9.11 By comparison practitioners at FEIs tended to be more concerned that in the absence of the EMA student numbers would be much lower. One such practitioner commented 'if it wasn't there, we'd have a huge drop' in enrolment numbers. Generally there was also concern that student withdrawals would increase and retention rates would drop. Interestingly a few practitioners suggested that some courses (i.e. mostly vocational ones with higher costs for students and which tend to attract a higher proportion of students from lower household incomes) would probably bear the brunt of lower enrolment numbers in the absence of the EMA.

### **Findings from the qualitative research - widening participation**

9.12 Most of the practitioners and stakeholders interviewed thought that the EMA had a positive bearing upon widening participation within post-16 education – yet could offer very little evidence to substantiate this claim. The main group which was thought to have benefited from the EMA were those which the EMA was intended to target directly i.e. those from low-income families. It was also suggested by quite a few practitioners however that the EMA had been effective in widening the participation of some other specific groups namely care leavers and those living independently who could provide the necessary evidence to satisfy SLC application requirements (although not all such students were thought to benefit from the Scheme). Generally it was not thought that the EMA had been particularly targeted at protected groups such as disabled students or BME<sup>149</sup> students largely because of its statutory rather than discretionary nature which meant that it was open to all who met the eligibility criteria, regardless of these characteristics.

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<sup>149</sup> Black and Minority Ethnic Groups

## Findings from the qualitative research - student attendance

- 9.13 Feedback from stakeholders, practitioners, students and parents points to the EMA as having had a very positive impact upon improving attendance rates as well as punctuality rates amongst EMA recipients. Two critical factors were thought to be at play here – first of all, the fact that the allowance enabled a number of students to attend their place of education in the first place as they used it to cover costs such as transport and second, the threat of missing out on their weekly payment was proving an important motivational consideration in that ‘if they don’t show up they don’t get paid’.
- 9.14 The large majority of both current FEI and school based EMA recipients who were interviewed agreed that receiving the allowance had made a difference to their attendance – with around half taking the view that it had made a significant difference in this respect. Whilst a small proportion argued that it had made no difference at all it is important to stress that these respondents included those who would have had good attendance levels previously. Likewise previous EMA recipients were inclined to agree that their attendance had improved as a direct result of the EMA allowance incentive and interviews with parents of current EMA recipients suggested the same. The EMA was genuinely considered to be a very good incentive for a specific group of students identified as ‘those who aren’t so bothered about being at the college’. Indeed many examples were cited by school practitioners of students with previous poor attendance but who had made a dramatic turn-around during the sixth form as a result of the EMA incentive.
- 9.15 Those who thought that their attendance had improved because of the EMA Scheme tended to comment:
- ‘I wouldn’t be in half as much if I didn’t get it’;
  - ‘I probably wouldn’t bother getting out of bed in the morning’;

- 'I'd find it hard to find £26 a week for the fare ... so yeah, there would be days when I couldn't afford it otherwise';
- 'I think I've got 100 per cent attendance since I got EMA ... I got about 60 per cent before'.

9.16 A few current EMA recipients however did make the point that their attendance levels had always been good, even excellent, and that the offer of the EMA allowance had no bearing upon their attendance at school or college. For instance one commented 'I wouldn't skive anyway ... money or no money ... because I come here to learn'. Students at schools were more likely to make this point, adding that the school culture tended to be stricter than that of colleges.

9.17 It was interesting to observe that some, but by no means all, non-EMA recipients thought that the attendance level of EMA recipients was better than non-recipients, particularly at FEIs. Many non-EMA recipients agreed that their attendance at college would be better if they were receiving the EMA.

9.18 The link with attendance was considered a double-edged sword in some respects. For instance one important point which was discussed at a number of focus group discussions related to the EMA allowance being awarded for 'either all or nothing.' Students occasionally admitted to not bothering to attend because of this if they had missed lessons earlier in the week adding that they would prefer payments to be aligned with daily attendance instead: 'if I miss a day there's no point coming in [for the rest of the week]'. However on the other hand the requirement to satisfy the minimum 12 hours of learning contact per week in order to receive the EMA was thought to be a valuable motivator for others – at one institution it was explained that students would continue with three A Levels 'rather than dropping down to two' because of the EMA. In the same way whilst some school-based EMA recipients viewed the requirement for them to be present at school during free periods in order

to claim the EMA in a negative manner (e.g. because they were unable to access a computer) others viewed this in a positive light. Amongst the contrasting views were:

- 'It's a real pain having to come in just for registration when I don't have any lessons on that day ... I waste a good few hours just travelling in when I could be at home getting on with my work'.
- 'My mum's a childminder so the house is really noisy ... I don't mind coming in as I get more done here [at school]'.

9.19 Interestingly several practitioners commented about the fact that the EMA had helped to sharpen up some parents' attitude towards their children's attendance and this had been a welcome development. Others however were mindful that this change had also resulted in sometimes inappropriate parental pressure upon some students to attend simply in order to receive the weekly payment – particularly amongst those who were financially reliant upon the allowance.

### **Findings from the qualitative research - need for part-time work**

9.20 A fairly high proportion of focus group students (recipients and non-recipients) were also working on a part-time basis whilst studying – although this did vary according to the availability of work locally with those based in more rural areas less likely to be working on a part-time basis. We observed at a few educational institutions that the proportion of non-EMA funded recipients who were working part-time was higher than that of EMA recipients. We also came across some evidence (largely via practitioner feedback) to suggest that those who were not in receipt of the EMA allowance and were just over the household income threshold often had to work longer hours in a part-time job than EMA recipients. Practitioners and non-EMA recipients alike argued that working long hours while studying full-time impacted adversely on some students' performance. One school practitioner noted 'a lot of them work as well and I think that if they felt they had to work longer hours to be

able to stay here than would have a detrimental effect on their performance overall’.

- 9.21 Aligned to this some evidence was presented by several EMA recipients that they would have to either obtain part-time work or increase their part-time working hours in the absence of the EMA allowance.

### **Findings from the qualitative research - retention, completion and withdrawal**

- 9.22 Our fieldwork found some evidence to suggest that the EMA allowance has helped to improve retention and reduce withdrawal rates amongst post-16 students.
- 9.23 Typically at least one EMA recipient in each of the focus groups held at FEIs admitted that they would have left their course and sought employment had it not been for the EMA. One such contributor noted ‘I couldn’t afford to stay in college without the EMA ... I wouldn’t have had enough money to pay for transport and art supplies’. Several other focus group contributors felt this to be true of their peers as well, for instance: ‘People are a lot less inclined to drop out if they are on EMA.’ However this was not mentioned in school-based focus groups. Previous EMA recipients interviewed suggested a mixed picture in that just under half (13 of the 30 interviewed) thought that the EMA had been important for them to continue with their studies – and of these at least five stated that the EMA had been essential at certain times.
- 9.24 Two FEIs could provide data on EMA recipient retention or completion rates compared with those for either non-EMA recipients or for all students at their institution – and the data provided suggests a positive picture. In one case the retention rate for EMA recipients was 97 per cent compared to 91 per cent for non EMA recipients. At another FEI the completion rate amongst EMA recipients was 92 per cent compared to 89.5 per cent for all students. Whilst the quality and accuracy of the data

provided was not audited as part of this evaluation we have no reason to question the reliability of the figures provided to us given that FEIs are required to monitor and report upon their retention rates for various purposes.

9.25 This positive picture however was not always the case and one FEI practitioner expressed their disappointment with their EMA recipient retention rate but added that there were other factors (such as those relating to the course itself or to personal issues) which contributed to this lower than desired rate at their institution. Another FEI placed the retention rate for EMA recipients at 70 per cent although comparative data was not made available and the proportion does appear to be somewhat lower than those quoted above.

9.26 A few practitioners drew attention to the growing emphasis being placed by the Welsh Government upon FEIs to report and improve upon their student completion rates (as opposed to the previous focus on retention rates) yet consistent data segmenting the student population between EMA and non-EMA recipients was not forthcoming from learning centres to enable us to come to a view about the impact of the EMA in this respect.

### **Findings from the qualitative research - unanticipated benefits**

**9.27** Interestingly quite a number of EMA recipients thought that receiving the EMA had helped them develop better financial and budgeting skills – indeed this was an unprompted issue explored by most of the focus groups with EMA recipients. It was thought that the process of managing a budget and having to make the allowance last for a fortnight was a useful experience for many –several examples were cited whereby recipients had learnt these budgeting skills the hard way by running out of money before the end of the fortnightly payment period. Aligned to this many EMA recipients also talked about the benefit of gaining financial independence as a result of receiving their allowances.



## Findings from the qualitative research - attainment and achievement

9.28 In terms of our fieldwork it was interesting that EMA recipients were less likely than practitioners to think that receiving their EMA was having any impact upon their achievement and attainment – although many admitted that without the EMA they would have been unable to purchase the necessary kit or equipment and so would be unable to perform as well on their chosen course. They were also quite ready to admit that receiving EMA reduced the pressure on them to work excessive hours in part-time employment and therefore could devote more time and effort into their studies. Indeed several non-EMA recipients echoed this point with comments such as ‘I can’t focus as much as I would like to’ on college work because of the need to work part-time.

9.29 Non-EMA recipients were specifically asked whether they thought that not getting the EMA was likely to make any difference to the grades or qualifications that they would achieve. The research found that nearly two thirds of those interviewed thought that not receiving EMA had made some difference in this respect whilst the remaining third thought it had made no difference at all.

9.30 Most practitioners and stakeholders argued strongly that the EMA Scheme was making a positive contribution to recipients’ attainment and achievements. One such stakeholder reported upon the recent improvements in completion and attainment rates generally across FE and WBL programmes and whilst it was difficult to attribute this to the EMA it was suggested that it would have been one contributing factor. In many instances the arguments put forward by stakeholders and practitioners were based upon evidence from general academic research which suggests that there is a strong correlation between high attendance and good attainment. Amongst the comments made were:

- ‘If you’re here more, you learn more’;

- ‘A good thing about the EMA is that you have to attend and if you attend you’ll get better results.’
- 9.31 Indeed one school practitioner noted that they had often heard non-EMA recipients say ‘I don’t have to because I’m not on EMA’ and therefore the completion of work and thus what they achieved was better among EMA recipients. In this case the school ‘can use EMA as a sanction ... hitting them in the pocket’ whereas it was accepted that ‘there’s’ no similar sanction for non-EMA pupils’.
- 9.32 Another school practitioner aired some caution however adding that as EMA recipients at their school tended to be more involved in vocational courses it was unfair to compare their attainment with students from more wealthy backgrounds who were regarded as the ‘high achievers’. However even in this school it was thought that ‘lower ability pupils who receive EMA tend to out-perform pupils of a similar ability who do not receive the grant, quite simply because they’re attending ... they’re meeting deadlines’.

### **Findings from the quantitative analysis - attainment and achievement**

- 9.33 Turning to explore the findings of our data matching analysis it was found that the majority of students entering post-compulsory education do so to study AS-levels or A-levels. One measure of progression that it is possible to derive pertains to whether students who enter to study AS-levels then go on to achieve A-levels. Rates of non-progression of AS-level students are shown in Table 9.1. It can be seen that being male, eligible for FSM at Year 11, identified as having special educational needs (SEN)<sup>150</sup> and low levels of attainment at GCSE are all associated

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<sup>150</sup> The Welsh Government has proposed new legislation for children and young people with SEN, in which the term ‘additional learning needs’ would replace the existing term ‘special educational needs’ See <http://wales.gov.uk/about/cabinet/cabinetstatements/2014/whitepaperaln/?lang=en>.

with higher rates of non-progression from AS to A-levels. For example, students who were eligible for FSM are almost twice as likely not to progress from AS-levels to A-levels (32 per cent compared to 17 per cent).

**Table 9.1: Rates of Non-Progression from AS-Levels to A-Levels**

<b>Percentages</b>	<b>Non-EMA</b>	<b>EMA</b>	<b>All</b>
<b>Gender</b>			
Male	17.8	26.2	19.9
Female	15.2	22.4	17.0
<b>Free School Meals</b>			
No	15.7	22.9	17.4
Yes	32.7	31.9	32.3
<b>Special Educational Needs</b>			
No	16.0	23.6	17.9
Yes	25.9	32.2	27.8
<b>GCSE points</b>			
0-50 points	39.8	43.8	41.1
51-55 points	22.4	24.9	23.1
56-60 points	12.3	16.8	13.4
61-65 points	8.0	9.7	8.4
66-70 points	4.8	6.4	5.1
71-75 points	3.2	4.3	3.4
76/max points	1.7	3.3	2.0
<b>All</b>	<b>16.4</b>	<b>24.1</b>	<b>18.3</b>

Source: Analysis of SLC EMA recipient database and Widening Access Database (2005, 2006 and 2007)

9.34 In terms of comparisons between recipients and non-recipients of EMA, it can be seen that 24 per cent of EMA recipients enrolled on AS-levels do not subsequently make the transition to A-levels. Among non-EMA students, this proportion is 16 per cent. Superficially, this might suggest

that EMA is not proving effective at encouraging achievement and progression, but in reality this differential to a large extent reflects the different make-up of the EMA population, and there is some evidence to suggest that receipt of EMA does enhance progression. It is thus noted that the receipt of EMA is associated with a reduction in the differential in AS progression that exists between students who were and were not previously eligible for FSM (a 9 percentage point differential compared to a 17 percentage point differential). Moreover, it is observed that - after taking into account attainment levels at GCSE - the differential in progression levels that exists between EMA and non-EMA students diminishes, particularly among those with the highest levels of attainment. For those with more than 60 points at GCSE, levels of non-progression among EMA students are only 1-2 percentage points higher than non-EMA students. Attainment levels prior to AS-levels are therefore clearly important in terms of understanding rates of non-progression to A-level.

9.35 For those students who progress on to A-levels, Table 9.2 shows average levels of attainment as measured through the achievement of A-level points. The points schema is that used in the Welsh Examinations Database and allocates points on the basis of grade awarded<sup>151</sup>. On average, within this analysis, A-level students acquire 588 A-level points<sup>152</sup>. It can be seen that females exhibit higher levels of attainment than males (a difference of 34 points – approximately equivalent to one A-level grade). However, much wider differences emerge when comparing attainment levels between students based on prior eligibility for FSM and diagnosis for SEN. It can be seen that those students who were eligible for FSM at Year 11 achieve approximately 100 points less at A-level compared to those not eligible for FSM. For a

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<sup>151</sup> Grade A\*=300 points; A=270 points; B=240 points; C=210 points; D=180 points; E=150 points, U=0 points

<sup>152</sup> This differs to published data for average A-level points which is restricted to 17 year-old pupils taking A-levels **in schools only**. For example, in 2006/7, published estimates indicate an average A-level attainment of 619 points (see: <http://wales.gov.uk/statistics-and-research/examination-results/?lang=en>).

student undertaking three A-levels, this is equivalent to a grade per subject studied.

9.36 In terms of comparisons between recipients and non-recipients of EMA, it can be seen that levels of *attainment* at A-level among recipients of EMA are lower than the levels observed among non-recipients (534 points compared to 605). The relative disadvantaged position of EMA recipients compared to their counterparts will be a factor within this. As with A-level *progression*, the receipt of EMA is associated with a smaller difference in A-level *attainment* levels that exist between students who were and were not previously eligible for FSM. That is, whilst students previously eligible for FSM attain a lower level than those not previously eligible, where they receive EMA, this difference is reduced. However, this reduced difference in *attainment* levels (-13 per cent difference between FSM-EMA recipients compared to -15 per cent among FSM-non-EMA recipients) is not as pronounced as the difference between FSM-EMA students and FSM but not EMA students, in A-level *progression* (40 per cent amongst EMA recipients compared to 108 per cent among non-EMA recipients).

**Table 9.2: A Level Attainment by EMA Receipt**

<b>Number of Points</b>	<b>Non-EMA</b>	<b>EMA</b>	<b>All</b>
<b>Gender</b>			
Male	587	508	569
Female	619	553	603
<b>Free School Meals</b>			
No	608	542	593
Yes	515	471	491
<b>Special Educational Needs</b>			
No	608	539	592
Yes	514	426	489
<b>GCSE Attainment</b>			
0-50 points	397	356	384
51-55 points	493	476	488
56-60 points	559	538	554
61-65 points	621	597	616
66-70 points	680	655	675
71-75 points	731	704	726
76/max points	820	791	816
<b>All</b>	<b>605</b>	<b>534</b>	<b>588</b>

Source: Analysis of SLC EMA recipient database and Widening Access Database (2005, 2006 and 2007)

9.37 The points score gained at A-level by EMA recipients was 71 points lower than that gained by non-recipients. (Expressed as a proportion, EMA recipients' points scores at A-level were 13 percentage points lower than non-recipients'). This fact is largely explained by the lower performance at GCSE of the EMA recipient group. Within-group comparisons reveal that recipients of EMA generally achieve 20-30 less points at A-level compared to non-EMA students with similar levels of attainment at GCSE. So at each level of GCSE attainment, there is an attainment gap which averages at 4 percentage points. This differential is observed across all levels of GCSE attainment indicating that the positive relationship between GCSE and A-level attainment is similar among recipients and non-recipients of EMA.

9.38 We next consider the progression and attainment of students within FE colleges. The analysis deliberately excludes students who have undertaken AS or A-levels, either within a sixth form or FE setting. Instead, the focus of the analysis is to examine the progression and attainment of students who are enrolled for other forms of qualification. Progression and achievement in vocational qualifications is more difficult to measure than the relatively straightforward circumstances associated with AS or A-levels where students enrol on a one- or two-year programme of study culminating in specific and comparable outcomes. Students undertaking vocational qualifications may be enrolled on multiple learning activities at a variety of levels in order to achieve the overall aim of a learning programme. It may not necessarily be the case that learning activities are taken in order of level. Furthermore, students may successively enrol on higher level programmes following the successful completion of earlier programmes. Progression through FE can therefore be considered as relatively organic compared to that of AS/A-levels.

9.39 Table 9.3 presents information on the length of time that students from the three WA cohorts (excluding those studying for A-levels) spend attending FE College. It can be seen that, overall, little difference is observed in the average length of time spent in FE College when comparing recipients (1.60 years) with non-recipients of EMA (1.54 years). However, more detailed comparisons reveal that among relatively disadvantaged sub-groups, receipt of EMA appears to be associated with longer attendance within FE colleges. This is most evident among those students with low levels of attainment at GCSE (i.e. less than 20 GCSE points). The right hand side of Table 9.7 presents information on the percentage of students who enrol and leave FE during the same academic year. It can be seen that whilst 19 per cent of non-recipients of EMA attend FE for a single academic year or less, this figure is 13 per cent among recipients of EMA. Once again, more detailed comparisons reveal larger differences among recipients and non-recipients of EMA for particular population sub-groups. For

example, among non-recipients of EMA who were previously eligible for FSM, almost one in four (24 per cent) attend FE for a single academic year or less. Among EMA recipients who were previously eligible for FSM, this figure falls to approximately one in seven (14 per cent).

Sizeable differences again emerge by receipt of EMA among those with low levels of attainment at GCSE, for instance 32 per cent of non-EMA recipients with zero GCSE points attended FE for a single academic year or less compared with 16 per cent of EMS recipients.

**Table 9.3: Time Spent within Further Education (excluding AS/A-level Students)**

Numbers and percentages	Mean Duration in FE (Years)			% Leaving within 1 Year		
	Non-EMA	EMA	All	Non-EMA	EMA	All
<b>Gender</b>						
Male	1.56	1.61	1.57	19.2	13.7	17.8
Female	1.51	1.59	1.54	18.7	12.9	17.0
<b>Ethnicity</b>						
White British	1.54	1.60	1.55	19.1	13.4	17.5
Other	1.53	1.57	1.54	17.6	13.0	16.3
DK/NS	1.62	1.66	1.63	16.6	11.5	15.2
<b>Free School Meals</b>						
No	1.56	1.61	1.57	18.1	13.0	16.8
Yes	1.44	1.58	1.49	23.6	14.2	20.1
<b>Special Educational Needs</b>						
No	1.54	1.58	1.55	18.5	12.9	17.0
Yes	1.54	1.67	1.57	20.4	14.6	18.8
<b>GCSE points</b>						
0 points	1.29	1.74	1.36	32.2	15.9	29.5
1-10 points	1.38	1.53	1.41	27.5	17.9	25.2
11-20 points	1.40	1.56	1.44	25.2	16.4	22.9
21-30 points	1.54	1.61	1.56	21.7	16.2	20.1
31-40 points	1.63	1.67	1.64	17.0	12.5	15.6
41-50 points	1.63	1.61	1.62	12.5	10.2	11.9
51-60 points	1.61	1.54	1.59	9.8	8.4	9.4
61-70 points	1.54	1.48	1.52	9.7	7.4	9.1
71+ points	1.55	1.26	1.49	9.1	10.9	9.5
<b>Total</b>	1.54	1.60	1.56	19.0	13.3	17.4
	31,201	11,929	43,130	31,201	11,929	43,130



9.40 Having considered time spent in FE, Table 9.4 examines the qualifications that are achieved at FE. Firstly, Table 9.4 reports the percentage of students gaining an award at Level 3+. It should be noted that the achievement of an award at Level 3+ does not necessarily imply the successful completion of a learning programme at Level 3+. Learning programmes often comprise of multiple learning activities and therefore multiple awards at multiple levels. It can be seen from Table 9.4 that recipients of EMA are more likely to have achieved an award at Level 3+ (46%) compared to those not in receipt of EMA (37%). Once again, the relatively high levels of achievement of those in receipt of EMA is particularly apparent among those who were previously eligible for FSM, where 35% of EMA recipients achieve a Level 3+ award compared to 20% of non-recipients of EMA. Analysis by GCSE attainment indicates that, as expected, those students with higher levels of attainment at GCSE are more likely to achieve an award at Level 3+. This relationship is present among both recipients and non-recipients of EMA, although relatively high levels of attainment among EMA recipients are observed among students with between 10 and 40 points at GCSE.

9.41 Finally, the right hand side of Table 9.4 considers the issue of progression and identifies those FE students who achieved an award that was at a higher level than the aim of their original learning programme upon entry to FE. The emphasis of this measure is therefore to consider evidence as to the progression of students, irrespective of the aim of their original learning programme. It can be seen that overall, 31% of students in receipt of EMA achieved an award at a higher level than that of their original learning programme. This is compared to 27% of students who were non-recipients of EMA. Differentials in this measure of progression are relatively uniform across population sub-groups. Those with lower levels of attainment at GCSE exhibit higher levels of progression, although it must be noted that these

students are more likely to initially be enrolled on learning programmes with lower qualification aims and will therefore have more opportunity to subsequently enrol on high level learning programmes. It is among those with lower levels of attainment at GCSE where the higher level of progression among EMA recipients is relatively apparent.

**Table 9.4: Attainment within Further Education (excluding AS/A-level Students)**

Percentages	% Gaining Level 3+ Award			% Achieving More than Entry Aim		
	Non-EMA	EMA	All	Non-EMA	EMA	All
<b>Gender</b>						
Male	33.9	40.8	35.7	28.8	32.7	29.9
Female	39.8	52.2	43.5	24.3	28.6	25.6
<b>Ethnicity</b>						
White British	36.4	46.3	39.2	26.8	30.9	27.9
Other	38.5	45.5	40.6	26.8	28.5	27.3
DK/NS	37.4	47.7	40.4	28.0	28.7	28.2
<b>Free School Meals</b>						
No	39.8	50.1	42.4	26.9	30.5	27.8
Yes	19.6	35.3	25.5	26.2	31.4	28.2
<b>Special Educational Needs</b>						
No	40.5	51.2	43.4	26.1	29.3	27.0
Yes	22.4	29.2	24.3	29.3	35.5	31.0
<b>GCSE points</b>						
0 points	5.8	10.5	6.5	25.3	33.1	26.6
1-10 points	8.2	12.7	9.3	25.2	33.0	27.1
11-20 points	12.7	21.8	15.1	27.8	36.2	30.1
21-30 points	23.6	33.4	26.5	31.8	37.2	33.4
31-40 points	40.9	50.9	43.9	31.6	36.6	33.1
41-50 points	59.6	67.6	61.9	23.6	21.9	23.1
51-60 points	70.8	78.5	73.0	18.4	15.3	17.5
61-70 points	77.9	84.6	79.6	13.6	12.5	13.4
71+ points	79.0	76.1	78.4	12.5	11.6	12.3
Total	36.5	46.3	39.2	26.8	30.7	27.9
Sample (number)	31,201	11,929	43,130	30,402	11,794	42,196

Source: Analysis of SLC EMA recipient database and Widening Access Database (2005, 2006 and 2007)

## Findings from our qualitative research - progression and destination

9.41 The most recent data provided by the Welsh Government<sup>153</sup> shows that almost 33 per cent of students who last received EMA in 2011/12 progressed into higher education (with 27 per cent of these doing so immediately in 2012/13 and the remaining 6 per cent doing so during 2013/14). This represented an increase on the 30 per cent who last received EMA in 2010/11 progressing into higher education. So far, 26 per cent of students last receiving EMA in 2012/13 have progressed to higher education and it is expected that the numbers from this cohort will increase further in 2014/15.

9.42 Our fieldwork revealed that learning centres collect very little evidence on the progression of EMA recipients specifically (compared to non-EMA recipients or the general student population) either into higher education or other routes such as employment. Indeed only one school could provide comparative data which suggested that the proportion of EMA recipients progressing into higher education was lower than for non-EMA recipients – during 2011/12, 57.4 per cent of EMA recipients at that school progressed into higher education compared with 83.2 per cent of non-EMA recipients and similarly in 2012/13 the proportions stood at 58.3 per cent compared with 78.6 per cent. Interestingly the proportion of EMA recipients and non-EMA recipients who had *applied* for higher education during 2013/14 at the same school was very similar at 87.1 per cent and 86.0 per cent respectively and school representatives suggested that the data was showing that progression rates amongst EMA recipients was improving.

9.43 The fact that GCSE attainment is so closely associated with later outcomes in terms of progression between AS and A level and with A level attainment suggests that earlier interventions are important to

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<sup>153</sup> See

<http://wales.gov.uk/about/programmeforgov/education/performance?code=OU024&lang=en>  
Accessed 28 August 2014

bridge the gap in outcomes in post-compulsory education between children from the poorest households (who are known on average to perform less well at GCSE) and other pupils.

9.44 Feedback from schools and FEIs suggested that progression into higher education was relatively high amongst A-Level EMA recipients but that this was a reflection of the high progression of A-Level students into higher education anyway. In one school for instance progression into higher education was put at 80 to 85 per cent but the data could not be broken down by EMA and non-EMA recipients. Indeed the school practitioner added that they had: 'never looked to see ... never had the time to look how that breaks down into ones who are on EMA ... that would be an interesting thing to do'. Likewise another school noted that around 90-95 per cent of their sixth formers progressed to higher education but in this case it was not thought that the EMA allowance had any major bearing upon this proportion – largely because the EMA was not thought to have any bearing upon students' decision to undertake A-Levels anyway.

9.45 In most cases EMA recipients did not make any linkages between receiving EMA and progressing into higher education – unsurprisingly, this was particularly true for those studying Level 1 and 2 courses who had no intention of progressing into higher education at this stage. Having said that a very small number of EMA recipients did recognise that were it not for the allowance they would be unable to complete their further education course and so apply for higher education. A small number of focus group participants also argued that receiving EMA meant that they could work harder on their course (i.e. not have to find part-time work to subsidise their education and not have to worry about financial matters) which would probably lead to a better qualification and therefore a better chance of securing a place at university.

9.46 Other practitioners were more upbeat about the linkages between the EMA and progression into higher education. One made the argument

'you can safely say that the EMA keeps people in college and in education and therefore gives them the opportunity to go to university. If it wasn't for the EMA some of them wouldn't be here and therefore that opportunity wouldn't be there'. Another practitioner had observed that many more students from poorer backgrounds and who were likely to also be eligible for EMA from their school seemed to be attending university open days and UCAS fairs than would have been the case a few years ago. Furthermore one school practitioner argued that 'EMA kids are as likely to go to university as any other ... and many are the first generation from their families to go'.

9.47 Our survey of 30 previous EMA recipients sheds some light on further progression. Of those that were surveyed 21 were currently studying – 13 of whom were doing so within higher education (i.e. 43 per cent, slightly higher than the third of EMA recipients progressing into higher education reported at the national level by the Welsh Government<sup>154</sup>). However all of those studying higher education courses implied that they would have done so despite receiving the EMA.

### **Findings from the quantitative analysis – progression into higher education**

9.48 The incorporation of data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency into the WA Database allows us to examine rates of progression into HE among the three cohorts of WA pupils. The main route into HE is via the attainment of A-levels. Clearly, the increased propensity of EMA recipients to study Level 2 qualifications within FE settings (see Table 3.6 above) and their higher levels of non-progression from AS-Levels to A-Levels (Table 9.1) would both be expected to contribute to lower levels of HE participation among this group. To abstract from these issues, Table 9.5 provides information on progression to HE among

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<sup>154</sup> See

<http://wales.gov.uk/about/programmeforgov/education/performance?code=OU024&lang=en>  
Accessed 28 August 2014

those EMA students who actually undertook A-levels. Figures are presented for a) all entrants to HE and b) undergraduate entrants only. For ease of exposition, we focus on those students who enter HE for the purposes of undertaking an undergraduate degree (i.e. excluding those undertaking certificates, diplomas and similar qualifications). It can be seen in Table 9.5 that approximately 69 per cent of students undertaking A-levels go on to participate at HE for the purpose of undertaking an undergraduate degree. Participation in HE is slightly higher among female students (71 per cent) compared to males (67 per cent). However, participation in HE is significantly lower among those previously eligible for FSM (57 per cent) and those who were diagnosed as having SEN at Year 11 (54 per cent).

9.49 In terms of comparisons between recipients and non-recipients of EMA, it can be seen that levels of participation in HE among recipients of EMA is lower than that observed among non-recipients; 60 per cent compared to 72 per cent. Put another way, this 12 percentage point represents a finding that non-EMA recipients are one fifth more likely to participate in HE than EMA recipients. The relative disadvantaged position of EMA recipient compared to their counterparts, culminating in their lower levels of attainment at A-level (534 A-level points compared to 605 A-level points) will be a factor within this. Taking into account levels of educational attainment at Year 11, it is observed that this differential in HE participation is much lower among students with higher levels of prior educational attainment. Among those with 71 GCSE points or above, the differential in HE participation is just 3-4 percentage points. Among those with lower levels of GCSE attainment, the HE participation differential between EMA and non-EMA students widens. For example, among those students with 56-65 GCSE points, the differential in HE participation between non-EMA and EMA recipients increases to 13 per cent. Since the analysis of Table 9.2 above suggested that the gap between non-EMA and EMA recipients in A level attainment was not significantly influenced by prior attainment at GCSE, this suggests that

EMA recipients with lower levels of GCSE attainment are disproportionately less likely to enter HE. The reasons for this are not clear, but they may relate to different family, peer-group and wider social pressures on young people from different socio-economic groups.

**Table 9.5: Year 11 Characteristics and Subsequent Entry to HE**

Percentages	Participation in HE			Participation in HE - undergrad		
	Non-EMA	EMA	All	Non-EMA	EMA	All
<b>Gender</b>						
Male	80.5	69.7	78.0	70.2	57.9	67.4
Female	82.6	72.8	80.2	73.6	62.3	70.9
<b>Free School Meals</b>						
No	81.9	72.4	79.8	72.4	61.4	70.0
Yes	74.1	64.3	68.8	61.4	53.5	57.1
<b>Special Educational Needs</b>						
No	82.0	72.2	79.7	72.6	61.4	70.0
Yes	73.5	57.2	68.9	58.9	42.8	54.3
<b>GCSE Attainment</b>						
0-50 points	60.9	51.1	57.8	45.3	37.0	42.6
51-55 points	72.5	68.4	71.4	61.1	55.0	59.5
56-60 points	81.7	73.4	79.7	71.5	62.8	69.3
61-65 points	86.3	78.7	84.7	78.2	69.2	76.2
66-70 points	89.0	85.6	88.3	82.3	77.5	81.3
71-75 points	92.3	88.7	91.7	86.1	82.0	85.3
76/max points	94.6	92.6	94.3	87.8	85.3	87.4
<b>All</b>	<b>81.7</b>	<b>71.4</b>	<b>79.3</b>	<b>72.1</b>	<b>60.4</b>	<b>69.3</b>

Source: Analysis of SLC EMA recipient database and Widening Access Database (2005, 2006 and 2007)

### Assessing the EMA effect

- 9.50 This chapter has provided a variety of information related to both the relative characteristics and educational outcomes of recipients and non-recipients of EMA. Whilst useful in terms of painting a rich picture of the circumstances of EMA recipients compared to other students, these comparisons do not provide any assessment of the effectiveness of EMA in incentivising and supporting students. The main difficulty faced in this respect is the inability to derive a control group that could accurately reflect the 'counterfactual' position of EMA recipients; i.e. what outcomes would we expect EMA recipients to have achieved in the absence of EMA.
- 9.51 In the absence of such control groups, it is only possible to compare the relative outcomes of recipients and non-recipients of EMA. Such analysis is limited in its usefulness as recipients of EMA differ significantly in their characteristics compared to non-recipients (see chapter 3), thereby confounding any such comparisons. Further problems also arise in terms of it not being possible to unequivocally determine whether or not a student was actually in receipt of EMA due to the issues surrounding the coverage of EMA data (i.e. not all EMA recipients provide consent for their data to be used for the purposes of research) and the inability to match all individuals recorded as being in receipt of EMA to the WA Database (see Technical Annex).
- 9.52 Table 9.6 presents summary statistics for some of the indicators discussed previously in the report for the four groups of students defined by the cross tabulation of FSM eligibility against receipt of EMA. Many of these results appear intuitive. Among the population of A-level students, those students who were in receipt of both EMA and FSM exhibit relatively high rates of non-progression from AS-level to A-level, the lowest levels of A-level attainment and the lowest rates of HE participation. In contrast, those who were neither in receipt of EMA nor eligible for FSM exhibit the lowest rates of non-progression from AS to A level; the highest levels of attainment at A-level and the highest rates of participation at HE. Those A-level students who have been in receipt of



either one or other of these benefits tend to occupy an intermediate position in terms of outcomes. Those in receipt of EMA but who were not eligible for FSM do better in terms of A-level progression and attainment than those eligible for FSM but not in receipt of EMA. The poorer outcomes of this latter group could be indicative of this group being defined inaccurately and actually containing many students who were in receipt of EMA but who were not identified as such in the WA Database.

9.52 The picture is however more complex for those outcomes associated with non-AS/A-level students in attendance at a FE college. Those in receipt of EMA and who were also eligible for FSM appear less likely to leave FE after a single year, exhibit comparable rates of attainment at Level 3+ and are most likely to attain awards at levels beyond their original entry aim. Such findings appear to resonate with the aims of EMA in supporting and incentivising students through post-compulsory education.

**Table 9.6: Combined FSM/EMA Status and Selected Outcomes**

Number and Percentages	Neither FSM nor EMA	FSM but not EMA	EMA but not FSM	FSM and EMA	All
<b><i>A Level Attainment</i></b>					
AS Level Non-Progression	15.7%	32.7%	22.9%	31.8%	18.3%
A-Level Attainment (Points)	607.7	514.5	542.3	470.5	588.2
<b><i>FE Attainment</i></b>					
Duration in FE (Years)	1.56	1.44	1.61	1.58	1.56
Leaving FE After 1 Year	18.1%	23.6%	13.0%	14.2%	17.4%
Achieving Level 3+ Award at FE	39.8%	19.6%	50.1%	35.3%	39.2%
Achieving Award Beyond FE Entry Aim	26.9%	26.2%	30.5%	31.4%	27.9%
<b><i>Entry to Higher Education</i></b>					
HE Participation	81.9%	74.1%	72.4%	64.3%	79.3%
HE Undergraduate	72.4%	61.4%	61.4%	53.5%	69.3%

Source: Analysis of SLC EMA recipient database and Widening Access Database (2005, 2006 and 2007)

9.53 The problem with the comparisons being made across the four groups of students in Table 9.6 is that they could be confounded by other

characteristics of students in these groups. For example, it is not clear whether the relative poorer outcomes of A-level students who were both eligible for FSM and who were identified as being in receipt of EMA can be attributed to the socio-economic circumstances of these students (as implied by the receipt of these benefits) or whether these students simply have poorer GCSE results and it is this lower level of educational attainment that underpins the poorer educational outcomes of this group. To examine these issues in further detail, multivariate statistical analyses were conducted on each of these outcome measures. The models simultaneously control for individual characteristics; school level characteristics measured among Year 11 pupils and local area characteristics. Full details of the modelling techniques used and analytical results are presented in the technical annex.

9.54 The analyses confirms that receipt of EMA is associated with a quicker entry into post-compulsory education, lower rates of progression from AS to A-Levels, lower levels of attainment at A-level, a longer duration spent in FE, an increased likelihood of achieving Level 3+ qualifications and an increased likelihood of achieving qualifications beyond the original entry aim after controlling for other characteristics. Receipt of EMA is associated with a reduced likelihood of participating in HE after controlling for other characteristics.

## **10 VALUE FOR MONEY**

### **Introduction**

10.1 In this section we discuss the views conveyed during our fieldwork as to whether the EMA offers value for money.

### **Views from fieldwork**

10.2 Stakeholders generally thought that the EMA Scheme offers reasonable value for money as it supports the right sort of students— indeed it was suggested by several stakeholders that the EMA has offered better value for money since the withdrawal of the lower cash allowances. At A handful of stakeholders took the view that the EMA could offer even greater value for money in the future if it could be targeted more effectively at those in greatest need thus reducing any inappropriate use or misuse of the funding amongst recipients. Some concern was also expressed about the high levels of ‘deadweight’ associated with the Scheme in that it was well known from other evaluations of the Scheme that a high proportion of EMA recipients would have enrolled on their courses anyway.

10.3 On the whole practitioners across schools and FEIs found it difficult to comment whether the EMA Scheme provided value for money, primarily because they were either unsure or unsighted about how recipients put the funds to use – of those that did, the majority thought it did offer good value for money. The feedback from EMA recipients interviewed during our fieldwork suggests that a fair amount of the allowance is put towards essential study costs thus offering reasonable value for money.

Practitioners in particular expressed several important considerations within the context of assessing value for money, including the net savings to the UK Treasury (given that some EMA recipients, in the absence of financial support would not have been able to afford to attend post-compulsory education, would be unable to find work and

thus forced to sign on to Jobseeker's Allowance) as well as the positive impact on attendance which in turn was thought to lead to better completion and attainment rates.

- 10.4 It was, however suggested by some interviewees that making transport universally available free of charge to further education students might offer better value for money than cash payments directly to students.
- 10.5 Practitioners at three schools suggested that there might be better ways of spending the EMA funds – either by supporting schools directly or by making the funds available on a discretionary basis. One such school suggested that there are 'more important areas to fund within education' and argued that the EMA 'isn't a better investment than employing teachers in the classroom.' Another school practitioner suggested that a discretionary fund, ring-fenced within the Welsh Government and which schools and students could apply for directly for specific activities could potentially offer better value for money.
- 10.6 Of those who were in a position to comment, schools and FEIs generally regarded the resources deployed by their institutions to oversee the EMA Scheme as reasonable, despite these costs not being reimbursed.
- 10.7 Several stakeholders and practitioners recognised that a 'statutory Scheme' offered a more cost efficient way of distributing financial support when compared to the costs involved in administering a 'discretionary Scheme'. One stakeholder went even further and suggested that the current EMA Scheme could be implemented in an even more cost-efficient manner if it were simplified e.g. automatic awarding of the EMA to those in geographically deprived wards, automatic payments to all recipients regardless of attendance etc. Whilst it was accepted that such changes would result in greater mis-use of the funds the reduction in Scheme administration costs was thought to probably off-set these. However several contributors suggested that a discretionary Scheme (although more resource intensive) would be

better targeted at those who require it the most i.e. 'needs-tested not means-tested'.

10.8 A mixed view was conveyed by stakeholders and practitioners in terms of whether the EMA offered any better (or worse) value for money compared to other financial education support Schemes for the further education sector. Some hinted in particular towards the increasing pressure on FCF and the possible scope to vire funds from EMA towards FCF. A small number also suggested that the EMA Scheme did not offer as good value for money as the ALG (FE) on the basis that the latter Scheme was thought to support more students who were in dire need of financial support.

## 11 FUTURE

### Introduction

11.1 In this section we present the views of stakeholders, practitioners and students on the future of financial support for students and the EMA in particular. It is worth noting that as a broader discussion about the general financial support landscape for FE students will be presented in our Strategic Report due for publication in 2015, we focus specifically on issues relating to EMA in this report.

### **Should the Welsh Government continue to financially support Welsh students aged 16 to 18 years old in the future?**

11.2 Students, practitioners and stakeholders alike presented an overwhelming view that the Welsh Government should continue to financially support Welsh students aged 16 to 18 in the future. Many were also keen to stress that the financial pressures facing students were significant and that finance was a real barrier to continuing in education for young people.

11.3 Both practitioners and stakeholders were highly aware of the current public sector financial constraints and the implications that this presented in terms of supporting the sector. Indeed it was widely accepted that any financial support should be prioritised to those who needed it and that it was unjustifiable to make available a universal offer. This was not the case amongst students however who tended to make a strong case for a universal EMA allowance for 16 to 18-year-old students. Many practitioners also stressed that they did not wish to see any reduction in the level of financial support made available via the Welsh Government in the future, although there was more openness to changing or adapting the current funding structures and funding streams.

11.4 It was suggested that the principle of financially supporting 16 to 18-year-olds in continuing education via the EMA Scheme might come into question however, if education becomes compulsory for this group in the future. In a similar manner local authority policy on transport cost issues was considered a vital factor – with the strong possibility that those local authorities who still subsidise the cost of transport for 16 to 18-year-olds may withdraw this in the coming years, which would possibly lead to increasing the need for the EMA and increasing demand upon other funding streams such as FCF in the future.

**Could the Welsh Government better target financial support for Welsh students aged 16 to 18 years old in the future?**

11.5 Our fieldwork revealed that there was no particular desire amongst practitioners or students to limit EMA eligibility to a narrower group than at present, for example to those from households on benefits, primarily as contributors did not necessarily think that this group always reflected those in most need and would certainly leave a large cohort of students from low-income households who would fall through the cracks.

11.6 Neither was there much desire amongst contributors (other than non-EMA recipients) to see more restrictions being applied on how the EMA should be spent, largely as it was thought such a change would be impractical to monitor and would not offer a particularly cost-effective solution.

11.7 There was a much stronger view however that the Welsh Government could adopt a more consistent approach to the household income thresholds set across its range of financial support packages for post-16 education, notably in respect of EMA and WGLG (FE) (and potentially also FCF). In an ideal world, contributors would prefer to see an increase to the WGLG (FE) household income threshold in line with that of the EMA. However whilst most disagreed with a decrease in the EMA threshold, some practitioners and stakeholders accepted that a 'levelling

down' to the current WGLG (FE) might be an acceptable way of achieving this consistency given the pressures on the public finances.

11.8 Mixed views were conveyed about the possibility of introducing a single pot of funding to replace the current three schemes although it is not our intention within this report to explore these in detail.

### **Should the EMA continue?**

11.9 The arguments for continuing the EMA as it stands far outnumbered the arguments for withdrawing the Scheme. A few contributors in particular noted that the Welsh Government and SFW have 'got it right' in that the Scheme is based on the right type of indicators namely household income and good attendance.

11.10 However, some interviewees would prefer to see a scheme where greater consideration was given to individual household circumstances, expenditure and other commitments such as siblings. Indeed some contributors also called for the Scheme to be based on the student's individual circumstances rather than their parents' or guardians'. However it was widely accepted that a discretionary scheme would be more costly to administer and that any scheme based on the student's as opposed to the household's income would be more expensive.

### **What impact would withdrawing the EMA Wales Scheme have?**

11.11 Practitioners and students alike discussed several impacts which they considered would happen if the EMA was withdrawn. These impacts included:

- fewer students enrolling at further education institutions (albeit that most accepted that the availability of EMA was a decisive factor for only a minority of students)
- a growth in the number of young people who are NEET



- an increase in the numbers of students working part-time to support their studies
- an increase in financial stress and concerns amongst students
- poorer attendance which would lead to lower achievement
- higher withdrawal rates.

**If the EMA is to continue, what changes ought to be made to the Scheme?**

11.12 Several suggestions were made by students, stakeholders and practitioners alike about improvements or changes they would like to see made to the EMA Scheme itself should it continue. As some of these have been discussed in detail elsewhere in the report a summary of the key common changes are presented in this section:

- More effective targeting of the funds to those students who most need it, either through a lowering of the eligible household income threshold or giving greater consideration to personal circumstances (particularly for students with a number of other siblings still in education; tightening up on those living in single parent households but who are supported by two parents, etc.);
- The introduction of money management skills training to EMA recipients as a prerequisite of payment;
- Allowing applicants to make applications on-line and possibly reducing the need to send original evidence by post to the SLC;
- The provision of application progress information to learning centres so that the learning centres could advise students on any application delays.
- Allowing the passporting of EMA application for other purposes such as FCF applications.

11.13 A more mixed view was conveyed as to whether performance related issues ought to be re-introduced within the context of awarding EMA.

Around half of those contributing to the fieldwork were supportive of this change whereas the remaining contributors did not support the use of subjective criteria as the basis of awarding funds.

11.14 Likewise no consistent view was expressed as to whether childcare and transport-related costs should become statutory considerations within the EMA Scheme.

11.15 Finally in terms of periodicity of payment, the majority of practitioners regarded the fortnightly system as suitable: these interviewees believed that the administrative costs of making weekly payments would not make it worthwhile. A large minority of students however were more inclined to argue the benefits of a weekly payment. The two main benefits identified related to improved cash-flow and the ability to resolve outstanding payment issues within a shorter timescale than at present.

## 12 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

12.1 In this section we present our conclusions and make a series of eight recommendations.

12.2 The evidence gathered in this evaluation demonstrates that EMA supports and contributes towards a range of Welsh Government policies particularly those geared towards widening access to education, reducing the rate of young people who are NEET and addressing the current link between poverty and educational attainment. The EMA Scheme also has a key role to play in helping learning centres achieve their funded targets in relation to improving student attendance, completion and attainment rates. The Scheme appears to be less well-aligned with the Welsh Government's objective of improving progression into higher education despite the fact that the single key indicator currently being used by the Welsh Government to monitor the impact of the Scheme relates to higher education progression.

12.3 A high proportion of full-time students are supported by the EMA Scheme. During the last academic year, around half of all full-time students who fell under the EMA age criteria were supported via the Scheme – with this proportion varying from a third of 16-18-year-olds at Welsh schools to 59 per cent of all 16-18-year-olds at Welsh FEIs. £25 million was spent on the EMA Scheme to directly support just over 30,000 recipients during 2012/13, equating to £826 per student supported. Our fieldwork revealed that students and practitioners alike argued strongly in support of the current Scheme albeit that the existence of the EMA for some 10 years has by now created a sense of entitlement for the support.

12.4 **Recommendation 1:** We recommend that the Welsh Government continues to maintain the EMA Scheme, but that financial funding support be better targeted at those students who are most in need. In

order for this to be achieved we recommend better targeting by lowering the household income threshold eligible for EMA support, and that the income threshold for both the EMA and the WGLG (FE) Schemes is set at the same level i.e. adopting the current household income threshold set for WGLG (FE) at £18,370 or less. We also recommend that the Scheme continues to adopt a different household income threshold for those students coming from households with other siblings still in education, but that this threshold is reduced in line with the overall lowering of the EMA threshold being proposed. We would recommend that the financial savings incurred by the Welsh Government in implementing these changes be retained within the student finance system and utilised and distributed via a more individualised assessment approach, thereby retaining expenditure at its current level, yet allowing the targeting of the allowance to be improved so as to achieve the maximum impact possible. The Welsh Government should conduct impact analysis to identify the number of recipients that would be affected by this change, and the sum of money that would be released;

**12.5 Recommendation 2:** We recommend that the EMA Scheme continues to be made available to students across both school and further education settings so as to maintain an equitable offer in both settings. We conclude that the provision of FCF (as opposed to the EMA Scheme) should continue to be used to off-set additional costs incurred by students on costly courses, particularly at FEIs, but would like to highlight the lack of access to a similar fund amongst school-based students incurring additional costs relating to their course.

12.6 In the main it appears that the right students (i.e. those at most need) are being supported by the EMA Scheme – albeit that there is evidence to suggest that there are small minorities of students who need support but do not qualify or who do not need support but do qualify. Indeed there is also some evidence stemming from this evaluation to suggest that the EMA may be acting as a perverse incentive for a very small number of students.

12.7 Our review has found that the EMA funds are used for a wide range of purposes, including direct educational related costs as well as day to day living costs. The EMA funding is also being used for non-essential purposes and indeed being set aside by students for savings. The evidence gathered suggest that there is a fair proportion of recipients who regard the financial support as a 'nice to have' rather than an essential contribution, and it is the view of the researchers that it would be justifiable to target EMA support to a smaller cohort of students who most genuinely require it. Identifying this cohort is virtually impossible however – and we recognise that household income alone is a somewhat blunt instrument to measure need. Other factors have a significant bearing upon student need – including economic factors (such as working on a part-time basis), contribution or support from separated parents, access to other subsidised or other funding such as FCF as well as course-related costs. In reality any Scheme based on a household income threshold will throw up anomalies, since income is not a perfect indicator of broader circumstances or indeed choices which determine the availability of resources within the family to support young people continuing in education.

12.8 The feedback collated suggests that in an ideal world it would be better to make available the financial support on a discretionary and needs-based basis. However we acknowledge that making funds available in this manner would incur significant costs for individual institutions (were they to take responsibility for a discretionary Scheme) and we are not convinced that the number of students who are currently missing out on funded support warrants making such a radical change. Rather we would recommend that greater flexibility be built into the existing discretionary FCF Scheme to enable individual institutions to support any student who require financial support and who are not able to access the EMA. In light of this argument it appears appropriate that an administrative Scheme distinguishes between those students who are the only young person in the household and those who come from

households with additional young people eligible for Child Benefit as this allows at least some degree of differentiation according to the need for financial support.

12.9 One critical consideration to emerge from our fieldwork related to the inconsistent transport funding policies across Welsh local authorities for post-16 students – which has significant bearing upon whether students have to pay or not for their transport. FEI and school practitioners highlighted the current discussions across several local authority areas about the possible withdrawal of such non-statutory funded transport which it was argued could place further financial pressure upon post-16 students, and consequently greater need for EMA (and/or FCF) funds. This in our view strengthens the argument for the EMA to be sustained in the short to medium term, although we would argue that it would be better in the future to fund transport provision directly, rather than via student finance Schemes.

**12.10 Recommendation 3:** We recommend that the EMA allowance level be maintained at its current level of £30 per week and that this single rate of allowance be based upon both satisfactory attendance levels as well as the achievement of agreed learning objectives as set out in learning agreements.

12.11 We are not convinced that increasing the EMA allowance above £30 per week would necessarily lead to a worthwhile economic return in terms of increasing enrolment, attendance or attainment within further education. Whilst there is some evidence to suggest that the allowance is on the generous side, in reality the value of the allowance has reduced with inflation over the last ten years, to the extent that the £30 per week is now closer to the original second tier allowance of £20 per week. Most of the feedback suggests that any cuts to the current allowance level would have a detrimental effect upon a proportion of EMA recipients who arguably are most at need and financially reliant upon the EMA funds and this is in line with earlier evaluation evidence

across the UK about the relative lack of effectiveness of EMA at lower levels.

12.12 The impact of the changes implemented to the EMA Scheme during 2011/12 appear to have been fairly limited and non-detrimental to the student population overall. Indeed in our view we would conclude that these changes were rational and led to a slightly more targeted Scheme. However the removal of the bonus payments seems a somewhat mixed blessing (as indeed the evidence from outside of Wales suggests) and in light of this it is difficult to make a strong case for its re-introduction in the future.

12.13 **Recommendation 4:** We recommend that the application process for a range of student finance funds available across further education, in particular the EMA and FCF, be streamlined. We suggest that the SLC and learning centres explore how the application processes for FE student support in general could be simplified so that an application as well as any supporting evidence submitted for any one scheme can be shared and automatically passported to others available across the FE sector. We further recommend that the Welsh Government and the SLC consider the possibility of adopting an on-line application process and removing the need to receive original documentation such as those relating to income by post (e.g. accessing information which is already being collected by learning centres for other purposes). We further recommend that the SLC considers how it can share information relating to applicant progress with each respective learning centre.

12.14 We conclude that overall there is good awareness of the EMA Scheme across schools and FEIs - perhaps this is not surprising given that it is a long-standing administrative Scheme with high student take-up. We do not therefore think there would be any significant benefits to moving away from the current branding of the Scheme (e.g. adopting a single brand covering all students' ages instead of the EMA and the WGLG). Unlike FSM, the EMA is a non-stigmatised fund and take-up is good.

The marketing of the Scheme appears to be fit for purpose with educational institutions undertaking an appropriate role in its promotion despite some evidence to suggest that a small cohort of students fail to pick up on its existence until later in the academic year. In our view the application process appears to be as straight-forward as is realistically possible for applicants (and their parents/carers) and has certainly improved in recent years. Several suggestions were however made around improvements to the application process in the future and specific recommendations are made in response to these.

12.15 The EMA Scheme appears to be appropriately administered in that applicants who had experienced delays were very much in the small minority.

12.16 **Recommendation 5:** We think that there would be merit in strengthening the purpose and value of the learning agreements which students are required to sign in order to receive funding, and recommend that the Welsh Government, in conjunction with the SLC reviews the use of learning agreements and explores ways of making the document more meaningful, including identifying what role each learning centre is required to commit as part of the agreement and how the learning agreements relate to institutional codes of conduct. Learning agreements could also be strengthened to reflect those changes we propose at Recommendation 6 below whereby the requirements for attendance are clearly outlined within the agreements.

12.17 **Recommendation 6:** We recommend that learning centres adopt more consistent policies in relation to EMA recipient attendance requirements as well as greater consistency in their practices to monitor attendance. This would result in a more equitable provision to EMA recipients, particularly around non-attendance resulting from illness. Furthermore we believe that there is further scope for learning centres to draw upon some of the good practices that currently exist within the sector in terms of attendance monitoring practices.



12.18 Our fieldwork revealed significant variation in the policies and practices adopted by learning centres in terms of the attendance and punctuality requirements imposed upon students in order to receive EMA payments. Furthermore learning centres set out different requirements for EMA recipients in terms of what proof of evidence was required of them to justify any period of absenteeism. They also adopted different procedures for monitoring lesson attendance and what (if any) attendance data was relayed to the student.

12.19 Our review has shown that there might be a case for considering the linking of EMA payments to daily attendance targets as opposed to weekly attendance targets given the feedback from some students that the incentive to attend would be greater i.e. that they would be paid £5 per day as opposed to £30 per week. We are not however convinced that introducing such a change would necessarily lead to any significant increases in attendance rates (largely as the feedback suggests the current processes work effectively in the main given the good attendance rates amongst EMA recipients) and that the costs incurred (mostly for SLC to administer the financial payment system) would not warrant its adoption. We do however think that it would be worthwhile calculating the costs involved in adopting such a change before this option be disregarded completely.

12.20 Turning to explore the impact of the EMA we conclude that our findings reflect much of the evaluation evidence available for the EMA outside of Wales – particularly in terms of the significant the number of students (particularly across schools) who would have participated in post-16 education anyway.

12.21 The availability of EMA allowance has not been fundamental to students' decisions to continue within education, with around four-fifths of EMA recipients stating that they would have continued with their education anyway in the absence of the EMA, with school students

much more likely to state this being the case. Our findings echo findings of other studies outside of Wales, and point to a significant amount of deadweight attached to the Scheme. Despite this, our analysis has shown that EMA recipients, particularly those from relatively disadvantaged groups, on average enter post-compulsory education more quickly than non-recipients. This suggests that the funding acts as an incentive in this respect.

12.22 In terms of widening participation our qualitative fieldwork revealed very little concrete evidence about whether or not the EMA had widened participation in post-16 education, although the view of students and practitioners were positive in this respect. It is noteworthy that the proportion of EMA recipients who were previously in receipt of FSM (and therefore from the lowest income households) is relatively low - which does raise some questions about the effectiveness of the EMA in widening participation (and also highlights the fact that EMA thresholds are more generous than those for FSM). More generally, the relatively limited evidence from our analysis of the WA Database highlights the fact that poor attainment at GCSE is an important determinant of progression and later attainment although the analysis also showed that among non-A-level students, levels of attainment and progression among recipients of EMA were comparable to those exhibited among non-recipients. Also, there is a well-known relationship between poverty and GCSE attainment, and earlier interventions are of critical importance in increasing the participation of those from poorer households in post-compulsory education and, to an even greater extent, progression to HE. Despite this, our analysis did show that EMA recipients who undertake qualifications other than AS or A Levels within further education continue with their FE studies for a longer period of time than other equivalent students, particularly when compared to those who were only eligible for FSM who spend the shortest time in further education. Furthermore, EMA recipients who undertake qualifications other than AS or A-Levels within further education are also more likely to achieve a Level 3+

award, particularly compared to those who were not previously eligible for FSM.

12.23 We conclude however that the availability of the EMA has had a very positive impact on recipient attendance and punctuality – not least because the funding has enabled students to get to their place of education in the first instance but also because the threat of missing out on the allowance is proving a major motivational incentive.

12.24 Our evaluation had provided some evidence to show that the EMA Scheme has had a positive impact on the attainment and achievement of EMA recipients - it was suggested that this is a result of higher attendance levels and a reduction in the need for EMA recipients to work part-time (or to work as many hours as they would otherwise have been required to). As would be expected, given the relative disadvantaged position of EMA recipients compared to their counterparts, our analysis has shown that levels of attainment at A-level amongst EMA recipients is lower than non-recipients – however when comparing A-level attainment for EMA recipients with non-EMA recipients who had similar GCSE attainment this difference reduces significantly.

12.25 We conclude that the provision of the EMA does not necessarily lead to higher rates of participation in higher education. Our analysis found that a lower proportion of EMA recipients compared with non EMA recipients who had undertaken A-levels progressed into higher education but that the key differential was attainment at GCSE – in that EMA recipients with lower levels of attainment are less likely to progress into higher education.

12.26 **Recommendation 7:** We recommend that the performance indicator(s) associated with the EMA Scheme be re-examined and that future indicators better reflect the outcomes intended to be achieved by the Scheme – primarily in terms of completion and attainment rates for recipients. In turn we would expect learning centres to be required to

monitor and collect these outputs in order to be able to report upon EMA recipient completion and achievements in post-compulsory education.

12.27 The only current outcome measure associated with the EMA Scheme relates to the proportion of recipients who progress on to Higher Education. Given the issues discussed above are concerned as to whether this measure alone is actually the most appropriate measure for assessing the success of the EMA – particularly given that the eligibility criteria for EMA do not refer to progression into higher education.

12.28 **Recommendation 8:** We recommend that issues surrounding making greater use of EMA data for the purpose of monitoring and research - including the possibility of requiring receipt of EMA to be flagged up directly in FE or school based administrative record - should be examined further. We further recommend that the Welsh Government and the SLC continue to monitor EMA student data sharing consent rates and take appropriate action should this rate not improve in the future.

12.29 Finally as a result of undertaking this evaluation it is worth highlighting some of the methodological issues experienced – particularly in matching EMA recipient data with those available via the WA Database. In particular it is concerning that the proportion of EMA recipients who consented to share their data for the purposes of research has been falling between 2005/6 to 2012/13. If this drop continues in future years the potential for undertaking any future matching and analysis will become increasingly limited. For the purposes of evaluation, it would have been more helpful if receipt of EMA was flagged up directly in FE or school based administrative records as a condition of receiving the benefit. This would allow more complete and detailed information on completion and attainment rates for recipients to be derived, such as more dynamic information on receipt of EMA and course attendance. This could potentially allow learning centres to be required to monitor and collect these outputs in order to be able to report upon

EMA recipient completion and achievements in post-compulsory education.

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