

LEARNER SUPPORT COMMUNICATIONS WORK PLAN

2008 – 2012

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LIFELONG LEARNING DIRECTORATE

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INTRODUCTION

The Scottish Government's **Vision for Learner Support** over the next four years is that we will deliver a fair and responsive learner support system that:

- supports individual aspirations at all ages
- provides incentives for employers to contribute
- responds to the needs of employers and the economy
- uses both entitlement and discretionary support mechanisms
- widens access to learning, based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay
- offers value for money
- provides not just financial support
- has an outward, international focus.

However, the Government's funding support for learners can be fully effective – and its vision realised – only if learners and prospective learners for whom financial concerns might limit their choices are aware of what funding they could get.

Therefore, to maximise the impact of our funding for learners, we need to raise public awareness of the support available through improved provision of Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) to current and prospective learners and their advisers, on the full range of funding support available for learning.

A number of measures have been introduced in recent years to improve the IAG on funding for learners available to people across Scotland. These include:

- a national service, via *learndirect scotland*, to provide IAG on funding;
- a Students and Benefits advice service for front-line advisers on how funding for learners interacts with the benefits system; and
- an annual series of guidance leaflets on learner funding.

However, we know that there are still issues around the accessibility, accuracy and consistency of IAG on learner funding. Therefore, we need to do still more to raise public awareness of what the current and future funding system will offer prospective and existing learners in Scotland.

In addition, the Government's skills strategy – *Skills for Scotland: A Lifelong Skills Strategy* – is clear that we must promote equal access to skills and learning opportunities for everyone. The skills strategy calls for IAG which is high quality, comprehensive, accessible and effectively targeted; a service which will be focused on the learner, all-age in its approach, simple to use and understand, offer value for money and be accessible to all.

This Learner Support Communications Work Plan will seek to provide a blueprint for clear, well coordinated and accessible IAG provision, to raise public awareness of what the funding system will offer for learners in 2008/09 and beyond.

Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) on learner support in Scotland

Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) on funding for learners in Scotland is provided by a range of advisers and intermediaries:

learn direct scotland - the national 'broker' for learning in Scotland through its National Learning Opportunities Database, helpline and web services, a network of over 500 branded learning centres across Scotland and as a delivery partner for ILA Scotland. Since February 2007, *learn direct scotland* has also operated the National Service for IAG on funding;

Student Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS) - provides IAG for Higher Education students, through a variety of information leaflets, posters, fliers, etc. (but moving towards greater use of CD-ROMs and a web based IAG system). SAAS also attends open days at educational institutions to offer IAG on learner support issues, gives talks to key advisory and representative bodies and visits other EU countries, in partnership with the British Council and some universities, to present information about support for EU students;

Scottish Funding Council (SFC) - provides resources to Scotland's colleges to support learners in Further Education programmes, in accordance with policies determined by the Scottish Government, through FE bursaries, Childcare and Hardship Funds, all FE and part-time HE fee waivers. SFC's principal involvement in IAG is in advising college bursary officers, on request, on specific learner support issues;

National Union of Students (NUS) Scotland - offers IAG to member students' associations, to individual students and the general public on a range of issues affecting students, including funding support;

Scotland's colleges and universities - provide IAG on funding support to students and prospective students at their respective institutions, through designated staff in their respective Bursary or Registry Offices;

Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) Scotland - provides IAG on funding issues, mainly to intermediaries and advisers rather than individual learners, and operates the Benefits for Students Training, Advice and Information Service for front-line advisers on how funding for learners interacts with the benefits system;

Scottish Government's Lifelong Learning Directorate (LLD) - produces a range of information leaflets and factsheets in the *Helping you meet the costs of learning* series, for a variety of specific learner groups, e.g. postgraduate students, part-time learners, students with dependent children (including lone parents). LLD also deals with individual queries from learners and their advisers by telephone, email and letter;

Skills Development Scotland (SDS) – is the new body, operational since 1 April 2008, which brings together *learn direct scotland*, Careers Scotland and the skills and training functions of Highlands and Islands and Scottish Enterprise;

Others – the above is not an exhaustive list of the intermediaries actively involved in offering IAG on funding for learners. Others, including Careers Scotland, Jobcentre Plus offices, Skill Scotland, community learning providers and voluntary organisations, make important contributions to IAG provision which we are happy to acknowledge here.

The scope and content of the Learner Support Communications Work Plan is intended to include all of these partners.

Why we need a Learner Support Communications Work Plan

The various bodies involved in providing IAG on funding for learners, outlined above, give learners and prospective learners access to a wide range of IAG sources and channels. However, an evaluation of perceptions of learners, potential learners and intermediary groups¹ indicated that there may nonetheless be issues around the accessibility, accuracy and consistency of IAG on funding. Similar concerns have emerged from a series of discussions with many of the organisations involved in IAG provision.

The concerns identified centre on:

- those prospective learners who are not being reached by current IAG provision;
- the clarity and consistency of the messages we are communicating; and
- the effectiveness of the media through which we communicate IAG.

These issues are discussed in more detail in the *Who?*, *What?* and *How?* sections below.

¹ *Evaluation of advice and guidance: Perceptions of learners, potential learners and intermediary groups*; Sue Granville and Diarmid Campbell-Jack, George Street Research; Scottish Executive Social Research; December 2006: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2007/03/21153903/0>.

LEARNER SUPPORT COMMUNICATIONS WORK PLAN: PRINCIPLES AND OBJECTIVES

The overall goal of this Learner Support Communications Work Plan is the comprehensive and accessible provision of good quality IAG in Scotland, so that all learners, prospective learners and their advisers can easily get the information, advice and guidance they need.

Principles for provision of Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG)

The objective will be to raise public awareness of what the funding system will offer to prospective and existing learners in Scotland, based on the following guiding principles for IAG provision in Scotland:

- *Clarity* (IAG which is clear, precise and understandable)
- *Consistency* (IAG which gives learners and their advisers consistent and compatible messages)
- *Coordination* (IAG which is offered by providers working together to deliver a comprehensive, accessible and efficient service)
- *Cohesion* (IAG which provides cohesion between the various changes to learner support for 2008/09 and subsequent years)
- *Quality* – (IAG which is high quality, cost-effective and uses best practice in communication).

These principles were widely circulated to our main partners in IAG provision² for comment. Responses indicated broad agreement with the government's Vision for learner support and the above Principles for IAG provision, acknowledged that lack of public awareness of the funding support available for learners is a shared problem and expressed support for development of a communications plan.

Objectives

The Learner Support Communications Work Plan seeks to:

- *Identify the key audiences for IAG;*
- *Identify a common set of core messages, so that our audiences will all receive the same clear, consistent and coherent information from all sources;*
- *Identify best ways to communicate those messages; and*
- *Build a coalition of partners in IAG provision, to include all the main providers of IAG for learners and prospective learners.*

These objectives are discussed further in the following pages.

² including the Student Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS), the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), learndirect Scotland, Careers Scotland, all of Scotland's colleges and universities, NUS Scotland, Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) Scotland, Skill Scotland and representative organisations of practitioners involved in IAG provision in Scotland.

Who? (*To identify the key audiences for IAG*)

We will aim to improve IAG provision for *everyone* for whom financial concerns might limit their choices in relation to learning. All such people should have access to clear IAG about the funding support for which they could be eligible.

However, this audience for IAG can be broadly segmented into a number of distinct groups.

Existing students (in school, college or university)

Existing students are generally well served for IAG, being relatively easy to reach by their current education institution. Most, moreover, are likely to be receiving all of the funding support for which they are eligible. However, there are various types of student within this group who may not be aware of the full range of funding for which they could be eligible.

For instance, some students may not understand the further support they could get to progress to the next level of education. Students in Further Education (FE) may not be fully aware of the different funding support available to Higher Education (HE) students. However, as well as making clear the differences in student support from one level of education to the next, our IAG must emphasise the continuity of funding support in order to encourage progression in learning.

Students with a disability are another group who may not be accessing the full support for which they are eligible, perhaps through lack of awareness that the additional support for which disabled students are eligible might extend to their particular impairment. Therefore, IAG may need to highlight more effectively the full range of circumstances for which additional funding support may be available.

Current IAG may be less accessible for part-time students, distance learners and learners in a community setting, who may not be attending classes at a college or university campus. We need to ensure that we can communicate our IAG effectively to these students.

Parents (and, to a lesser extent perhaps, teachers) often have a significant influence on their school children's decisions about progression to Further or Higher Education. We should not expect that all school students will be able to pass on effectively to their parents the IAG they themselves have had about learner support. Therefore, we will seek to identify effective ways of communicating information about funding options to parents.

Individuals not in learning but who make the decision to enquire about learning opportunities

There is a clear opening to offer advice to these individuals about the funding support for which they could be eligible at the point when they make their first enquiry about learning opportunities. It is at this stage that IAG on funding support will be most useful to this group. Therefore, we must ensure that we use this opportunity to the full, to raise awareness of possible funding support whether or not the prospective learner first raises the question.

Individuals not in employment or learning and who make no enquiry about learning

This group is the hardest to reach with IAG and includes many of those for whom clear advice about funding support may be most needed. Many in this group may have no current intention to engage in learning largely because they assume that it will be too costly for them, either directly or through loss of benefits. Many in this group may be among the most vulnerable in society. We must find the most effective ways of communicating to this hardest to reach group the financial support that is available for learning and how that support interacts with the benefits system.

The Learner Support Communications Work Plan intends that these groups – and, indeed, all learners and potential learners – should have access to the IAG they need to be able to make fully informed choices about participating in learning.

What? (*To identify a common set of core messages*)

Given the range of individual circumstances, levels of learning and modes of study to which it applies, the Scottish Government's learner support system is necessarily a varied, intricate package. Perhaps inevitably, then, the messages about what funding is available can be correspondingly diverse and complex. Communicating detailed IAG as clearly as possible is, therefore, a challenge.

We must also recognise that each individual learner or prospective learner will most likely be interested in detailed information only about the funding support for which they could be eligible, not about the entire funding system.

However, the first step in promoting that interest is to raise awareness of the bigger messages that:

- *Funding for learning IS available: to help with tuition fees, living costs, additional needs and expenses such as childcare and travel costs; and that*
- *Funding may not affect benefits or other sources of financial support.*

These, then, are the core messages we will aim to communicate as widely as possible.

Evaluation of learners' and potential learners' perceptions of IAG shows that, when individuals seek information about the specific support for which they themselves might be eligible, their preference is to get this advice on a one-to-one basis, either in person or by telephone.

As described at page 3 above, there is a range of advisers and intermediaries capable of providing such personalised advice. However, the available evidence suggests that many learners and potential learners either are unaware of these sources or are unsure of how to contact them. This indicates that there is a need for more active promotion of IAG sources to raise awareness and usage of them.

Therefore, in addition to the high level messages outlined above, another of the core message we should aim to communicate is:

- *Expert, personal advice about financial support is available and easy to get [and where to get it]*

This message will aim to raise the profile of the National Service for IAG and publicise the role of the other intermediaries in IAG provision.

We need also to raise awareness of this latter message among front-line advisers across the spectrum of IAG providers. These intermediaries themselves may not always be equipped with the detailed knowledge to be able to advise fully and accurately about the funding options applicable in particular circumstances. In order to provide the desired level of service, these advisers must also be aware of where to get detailed information and guidance.

In focussing on these core messages, we will not lose sight of the need also to communicate more detailed messages of particular relevance and importance to specific groups. For example, there is a need (see above) to raise awareness among students with a disability of the additional support available for them and the types of impairment to which it can apply. We will aim to identify how to communicate such messages more effectively to those who need to be aware of them.

We recognise, too, that there remains an important role for IAG in print form as a source which users – learners, potential learners, advisers and intermediaries - can peruse as and when they wish and retain for reference. The existing range of IAG literature, then, will contribute significantly to achieving the objectives of this work plan.

However, there is a need for this literature to communicate information in the clearest, simplest terms possible if it is to be useful to all of its readers. Therefore, we will aim to keep under review the language used in our IAG literature to ensure that it is as user-friendly as possible in vocabulary and tone, without any loss of accuracy. Additionally, future editions of existing IAG literature will be amended, where appropriate, to feature prominently some or all of the core messages outlined above.

Generally, intermediaries who have used the current range of IAG literature are positive about it. The literature most useful to intermediaries, unsurprisingly, is that which covers the widest range of possibilities. However, some whose client groups may be drawn from a narrower set of circumstances – for example, advisers in Jobcentre Plus offices - might find it more useful to have concise briefing about the particular support for which their clients are more likely to be eligible. Therefore, we will consider how best to give such intermediaries access to the tailored information they need.

How? (*To identify best ways to communicate those messages*)

A mix of communications methods and media will be needed to get the core messages identified above to as wide an audience as possible.

Existing IAG communication processes will have an important role in achieving our objectives, but we must recognise that they are not all currently as effective as we need them to be.

We have noted, for instance, that those intermediaries who have used our current literature have found it helpful. However, its use by advisers is not as widespread as we might wish, with perhaps the majority of intermediaries being unaware of it. It will be important, then, to identify the most effective way of raising awareness of the existing literature amongst advisers. We will review the routes by which this information is distributed and circulated and will amend or add to them, as necessary, to ensure that it promptly reaches the personnel who need and can make the most use of it.

We have also recognised that, for learners and prospective learners, the language in our IAG literature must be user friendly to communicate effectively with all of its potential audiences. Future editions of our literature, then, as well as being updated factually, will be redrafted as necessary to make their messages as clear and simple as possible. (Publications by some of our IAG partners, such as learndirect scotland and SAAS, already conform to Plain English standards.)

We will also consider how to make the information in our literature as meaningful and relevant as possible to its audiences; e.g. through more detailed case studies to illustrate the impact of our funding support in terms of an individual's or household's overall budget.

As well as raising the profile and usage of existing sources of IAG on funding support, we intend to look for new routes for communicating the important messages. As we have already recognised, a mix of media and methods will be needed.

Posters and postcard 'fliers' may be a simple, cost-effective method of communicating our core messages via a wide range of education, employment and community settings. We will also aim to make wider use of appropriate websites for this purpose.

We have seen that learners and potential learners strongly prefer personalised, one-to-one advice about the funding for which they could be eligible. Some intermediaries, too, need to be better aware of where they can access further guidance on particular learner support issues. We recognise that we need to raise awareness of existing sources of such advice. In particular, we need to heighten the profile of the National Service for IAG.

The National Service, which is operated by learndirect scotland (see page 3), was launched in February 2007 to provide advice on funding support for learners via the learndirect helpline and website – in effect, to be the 'one-stop shop' for IAG on funding that learners and prospective learners have said they would prefer. However, usage – and, therefore, we may infer, awareness - of the service in its first year of operation has been low. Nonetheless, the National Service should have a key role in achieving the aims of the Learner Support Communications Work Plan. Therefore, we need to do more to alert potential users to the availability of this service.

However, learndirect scotland is one of the organisations recently subsumed into Scotland's new national skills body, Skills Development Scotland (SDS) (see page 3). The remit of the latter encompasses wider IAG about lifelong learning opportunities and careers guidance, as well as funding support and it will be important to consider how IAG on funding can best be positioned in that broader IAG context. The creation of SDS, then, may offer opportunities to ensure that information about learner support is optimally placed in relation to wider IAG about lifelong learning; and any initiatives under the Learner Support Communications Work Plan to raise the profile or develop the role of the National Service will be designed to fit well with the wider activities of SDS.

As already noted above, we will aim to use relevant websites to communicate our core messages. We will also plan to make better use of the internet as a medium for communicating more detailed IAG on funding. Definitive information about the learner funding package is currently available on several websites, including that of SAAS, for Higher Education student support, and in the funding pages on the learndirect scotland website. Our intention will be to build up the latter as an authoritative source of comprehensive information about the full learner support system and the eligibility conditions applicable to it.

Indeed, we will aim to develop this website further so that any learner, prospective learner or their advisers can not only access funding information but can interact with the site to input details of their personal circumstances and the course they might do or progress to and get an *indication* of the funding support for which they could be eligible, i.e. a 'ready reckoner' of the support applicable in specific circumstances.

This website might be further developed as a medium for communicating the *value* of learning to the individual - i.e. what learning can be *worth* to the individual, rather than what it could *cost*. Thus, the 'ready reckoner' might be enhanced to give the user an indication of progression options, in terms of further learning or career opportunities, arising from their chosen course. It might be further augmented to indicate the full extent of the funding

(including tuition costs, etc.) attached to a place on the individual's chosen course, to illustrate the value of learning through the Government investment committed to it.

Again, any such growth will be planned to complement other developments in relation to the learndirect scotland and SDS websites.

However, we recognise the continuing value of having funding information also on other websites, such as SAAS's as referred to above. Therefore, maintenance and, where useful, expansion of this IAG will also be integral to our plans.

While we will seek to develop existing IAG media and methods in the ways discussed above, we must acknowledge that these enhancements may not be enough to enable us to communicate effectively with those hardest to reach groups with which current IAG provision does not connect. Consequently, we will try to identify and initiate new ways of reaching these groups with the messages we want them to hear.

Different routes and messages will work better in connecting with the various audiences we have identified. We do not prescribe here what these routes and messages should be. We propose that they should be identified and developed in consultation with our existing partners in IAG provision and marketing and communications experts in the Scottish Government and SDS, to take full advantage of their complementary expertise and experience and to ensure that any new initiatives fit as well as possible with existing IAG provision and related developments. We will also work closely with Skills Development Scotland to identify how the new organisation's service delivery can contribute most effectively to meeting the objectives of this plan.

A coalition of partners in IAG provision

Indeed, we will aim to involve our various IAG partners at all key stages in the implementation of this Learner Support Communications Work Plan, in order to develop the coalition approach to IAG provision which will be essential to its success.

We mean to reinforce and build on the partner relationships between key bodies – including the Scottish Government - delivering IAG on financial support for learners, so that there is integrated, cohesive management and provision of IAG across all learning levels, for the benefit of learners.

IMPLEMENTATION

All of our current partners in IAG provision will have a part to play in achieving our objectives of good quality, well coordinated information, advice and guidance, provided in ways that best suit those who need access to it.

Each of these bodies may currently have a particular role in communicating with specific audiences - e.g. SAAS with HE students and prospective students – and our plans will not aim to undermine or supplant the good work already being done by these organisations. On the contrary, our proposals should help these organisations to find even better ways to meet the needs of the audiences they seek to serve.

The new national skills body, Skills Development Scotland, will occupy a central position in the implementation of this work plan. The vision and goals of the new organisation harmonise closely with the Scottish Government's vision for learner support and our IAG objectives.

As part of SDS's overall business transformation process, a current programme of joint project activity between the Scottish Government's Lifelong Learning Directorate and SDS to develop options and proposals for new ways of working and further build SDS capability includes a review of SDS's current IAG activities and services.

SDS will aim to build on the work that both learndirect scotland and Careers Scotland have been doing on IAG provision, developing and where necessary, redesigning service delivery to meet customer expectations fully. SDS will be seeking new solutions and developing partnership working, to find better ways to raise awareness of the funding support available for learning.

Key steps in achieving the objectives set out in this document, then, such as raising awareness of the National Service for IAG and development of the current funding IAG on the learndirect scotland website, will be implemented as integral parts of SDS's business transformation process, where such developments would not cut across longer term change in SDS's business processes.

CONCLUSION

This Learner Support Communications Work Plan seeks to provide a blueprint for clear, well coordinated and accessible Information, Advice and Guidance to raise public awareness of what the Scottish Government's funding support for learners will offer in 2008/09 and beyond.

It will play a key role in realising the Scottish Government's vision of a fair and responsive learner support system and, thus, will contribute to achieving the government's strategic objectives of a **Smarter** and **Wealthier and Fairer** Scotland.

It will promote IAG provision of consistently high quality by a coalition of all of the main providers of IAG for learners and prospective learners.

As well as further developing existing IAG media and methods, the plan aims to find new ways of reaching key audiences.

The effectiveness of the Learner Support Communications Work Plan in meeting its objectives will be evaluated in late 2008 and reported to Ministers with any recommendations for its further improvement.

TIMELINE

What	By whom	When
CPAG <i>Benefits for Students in Scotland Handbook</i> for 2008/09 published	CPAG	April 2008
SAAS website and IAG publications updated for 2008/09	SAAS	April 2008
<i>Your guide to funding</i> booklet for 2008/09 published	SDS (learndirect scotland)	June 2008
Range of <i>Helping you meet the costs of learning</i> leaflets for 2008/09 published	SG: LLD	July/August 2008
2008/09 funding information published on SDS (learndirect scotland) website	SDS (learndirect scotland)	June 2008
Establish network of Student Services key contacts in colleges and universities	SG: LLD	June 2008
'Contact the experts' postcards distributed	SDS (learndirect scotland)/ SAAS	July/August 2008
Raise awareness of National Service for IAG	SDS (learndirect scotland)/ SG: LLD	Ongoing
Development of funding pages on SDS (learndirect Scotland) website	SDS (learndirect Scotland)	Ongoing
Develop and initiate new ways of communicating IAG to hard-to-reach audiences	SG: LLD/ SDS (learndirect scotland)/All IAG partners	Ongoing

Scottish Government
 Lifelong Learning Directorate: Higher Education and Learner Support
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