

Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Department

Young People's Awareness and Experience of Educational Maintenance Allowances (EMAs) and their Impact on Choices and Pathways

York Consulting LLP

This research, commissioned by the Scottish Executive's Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning Department, aimed to assess the impact of Educational Maintenance Allowances (EMAs) on young people's choices and pathways, in particular to assess if EMAs prevent young people from becoming NEET. The research combined qualitative and quantitative methods.

Main Findings

- EMA awareness-raising activities were undertaken in the summer term and these varied according to resources and local promotional opportunities. The timing of the promotion reflects that the EMA was not positioned as a NEET prevention tool at the local and area level
- EMA conditions were applied differently between Education Authorities (EAs), within schools in the same EA and between FE Colleges, due to a range of factors like different monitoring systems, the amount of control exhibited by the EA, the levels of discretion in schools and the interpretation of Scottish Executive Guidance
- EMA awareness and understanding was poor amongst 14/15 year olds. Awareness was normally as a result of being involved in the research or knowing EMA recipients
- The majority of EMA recipients had always planned to stay on at school and the EMA provided greater financial independence and was predominantly spent on personal items and social activities. Parental advice/expectation and career or HE aspirations were the key influencers in post-16 pathways. Other factors included educational ability and school experience
- Positive EMA effects identified included improvement in the attendance and punctuality of some young people, increased retention in colleges, increased personal responsibility of young people and important financial support for college students
- The EMA was not an influential factor in staying on at school, for the majority of young people in this study. However, the low number of pupils deemed to be at risk of becoming NEET involved meant that there was limited evidence to ascertain whether the EMA is having an impact on preventing young people in Scotland from becoming NEET

Background

The educational maintenance allowance (EMA), introduced in 2004, provides financial assistance to 16-19 year olds from low income families who attend school or college full time. Its original purpose was to increase participation and retention in post-16 education and more recently it has been viewed as a tool to prevent young people from falling into the 'not in education, employment and training' (NEET) group.

It is estimated that 35,000 young people between the ages of 16-19 fall into the NEET category and it has been found that financial incentives can be an important factor in encouraging those at risk of becoming NEET to consider their education, employment and training options.

The EMA is comprised of a means-tested weekly allowance payable fortnightly during term time with twice yearly bonuses. These are paid directly to the student on satisfactory adherence to a learning agreement made between the young person and the educational establishment. In 2005/6, £29.3 million was paid out in EMA to over 36,000 pupils across Scotland.

About the Research

This research was conducted to gather evidence of young people's awareness and experience of the EMA. It aimed to assess the EMA's impact on young people's choices and pathways, in particular to gauge if EMAs prevent young people becoming NEET.

The research combined qualitative and quantitative approaches to collect data and the views of stakeholders and young people in 23 schools and 6 colleges across Clackmannanshire, Dundee, Glasgow, Inverclyde and North Lanarkshire. The research involved:

- Face to face and telephone interviews with 37 stakeholders - EMA co-ordinators in schools, bursary officers in colleges, EMA lead contacts in Education Authorities and officers in the Scottish Funding Council – were conducted to gather their experiences of administering and processing the EMA and their views on the effect it had on young people

- Paired consultations or focus group interviews with 229 young people about their awareness and experience of the EMA. There were 3 different groups of young people interviewed - 14/15 year olds age ineligible for the EMA, 16+ year old EMA recipients and 16+ year olds not in receipt of the EMA

- A survey of the young people interviewed to collect personal background information and their perceptions of the EMA to support information gathering during the qualitative interviews

Schools and colleges selected young people for inclusion in the research and were asked to specifically involve those young people at risk of becoming NEET when selecting the 14/15 year olds. All participants received a £10 voucher and whilst this approach was successful, identifying and including those at risk of becoming NEET proved difficult. This was because many pupils at risk of becoming NEET had already become disengaged and 'lost' to the school. Some schools were concerned at labelling their pupils in such a way and others were concerned about how the 'at risk of NEET' pupils might behave during the interviews.

The information from the surveys and qualitative interviews was analysed to identify the key findings.

Research Findings

EMA Promotion

The methods employed to raise awareness of the EMA amongst school pupils varied. This was normally as a result of the available financial and human resources and the existence of local opportunities for promotion. The bulk of the promotion took place in the summer term, due to the practicalities of producing and processing applications in time for the new academic year. It also reflected the fact that the EMA was not positioned as a NEET prevention tool. Therefore the allowance was regarded as an element for consideration once the decision to stay on had been made rather than a factor in post-16 decision making.

In colleges, EMA information was incorporated into key documents, e.g. application packs, relating to accessing courses and advertised amongst the other forms of financial assistance available to

students. This placed the EMA at the centre of the college application process.

There were some examples of effective practice for promoting the EMA and disseminating information, e.g. pupils remembered the DVDs that played in their schools informing them of the EMA. Where local EMA working groups had been established, staff in schools and colleges had clarity about roles and responsibilities and greater ownership of the process.

EMA Awareness amongst Young People

EMA awareness and understanding was poor amongst S3/S4 pupils taking part in this research.

Where pupils were aware, this was normally as a result of being involved in the research or knowing friends or family members in receipt of the EMA. The lack of awareness was mainly due to the research taking place prior to the promotion of the EMA in the summer term. This meant that the financial assistance available for pursuing school or college education was not a factor when considering post-16 options. The young people interviewed showed interest in the EMA, and whilst they thought £30 a week was not a significant amount, for those who did not have clear plans, a financial incentive like the EMA was considered an influential factor.

The 16+ pupils recalled assemblies and guidance sessions as the main forms of EMA promotion. In some areas that used promotional DVDs the marketing of EMA on plasma screens within their schools was memorable. There was no stigma attached to receiving the EMA. The majority of pupils were unaware that the EMA was available at college, possibly because in some establishments, staying on at school is heavily promoted over college education and therefore the EMA option in college is also overlooked. If the EMA was a factor in decision making for any student, the absence of information relating to its availability at college could restrict the student learning choice to the school-based options.

EMA Management and Monitoring

Many establishments recognised the resource-intensive nature of processing and monitoring the EMA. This focus on administrative issues has meant that colleges and schools were not identifying the

impact the EMA had on attendance, punctuality, achievement and retention.

The Scottish Executive's guidance on EMAs has been diversely interpreted across EAs. Subsequently, those EAs that provided supplementary guidance have produced different translations for schools in their locality. While comprehensive direction from the EAs has led to greater certainty amongst establishments and more consistency across schools, there is less flexibility to recognise local school circumstances. Less instruction from the EA sometimes resulted in uncertainty and inconsistency but in these settings there was greater potential for the EMA procedure to complement existing school systems and ethos.

Monitoring systems and the management of the EMA also varied. It was often dictated by the IT systems in operation and in schools the software package was usually SEEMIS, while colleges normally used TeQuios. The methods and protocols for communicating between staff and reporting adherence to EMA 'conditions' linked into these operating systems. The established culture within the school or college was also an important factor in local level monitoring and practice.

Key influencers on the EMA operation (e.g. the monitoring systems, the amount of control exhibited by the EA, the levels of discretion in schools, the different application of guidelines and the subjectivity involved in reaching bonus payment decisions) meant that the EMA was applied differently between EAs, within schools in the same EA and between colleges. So for individual students, receiving a weekly or bonus payment could be 'easier' to achieve in one area compared to another.

The Experiences of EMA Recipients

Most EMA recipients talked positively about their experience of the EMA and the benefits of receiving a regular allowance and twice-yearly bonus payments. The EMA provided school pupils with greater financial independence, less need to secure part time work and, for some, motivated them to attend school more regularly. It did mean that the majority did not experience the benefits of part time work. The payments were predominantly spent on personal items and social activities.

The majority of EMA recipients were studying Highers and had planned to stay on at school, regardless of the EMA. Most recognised that the EMA would not have influenced their decision making.

College students tended to place greater importance on the influence of EMA on their decision to go to college, with a third stating that other EET routes would have been identified in the absence of the EMA. These students also used the EMA differently - to meet study and travel costs or contribute to general household income and expenditure. There is no clear explanation as to why this might be the case, possibly due to a more independent outlook and expectation placed on them by the college.

The Impact of the EMA

There were mixed views about the effect of the EMA. Some pupils felt that the weekly allowance helped them to attend more regularly and increased their punctuality – particularly when payments had been stopped. Likewise, some felt that working towards the bonus motivated them to study harder and attend more regularly. According to the qualitative and quantitative responses of young people in this sample, the EMA did not encourage them to stay on at school.

It was recognised that the EMA was having both positive and negative effects on young people and the educational establishments. On the negative side the EMA could:

- be an administrative burden
- lead to tensions/difficulties between staff and young people or staff and parents
- result in a sense of unfairness amongst non-recipients
- encourage young people to stay on at school when alternative EET routes might be more appropriate

All stakeholders and young people recognised the positive impact that the EMA appeared to have, in the main this was:

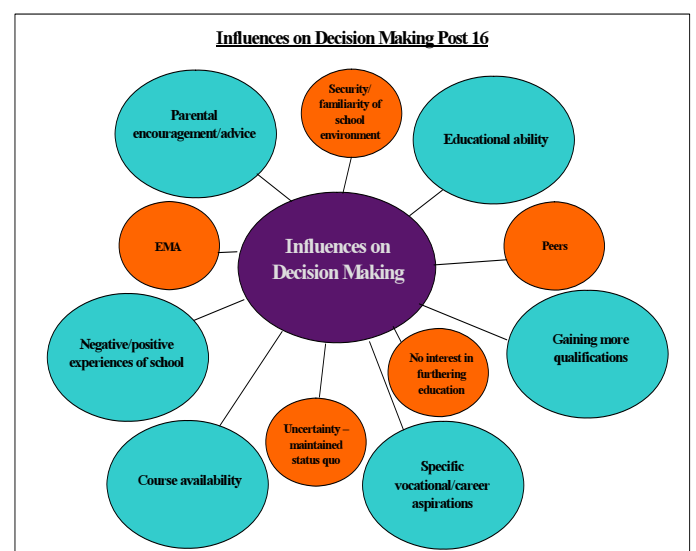
- improved attendance in schools and colleges

- improved retention in colleges
- increased interaction between staff and pupils
- greater financial independence amongst pupils
- the financial support the EMA offered college students

Young People's Decision Making

There was a level of consistency in the responses of young people across the pre and post 16 age bands with regard to the decision making influences. In general, parental advice/expectation along with career or HE aspirations were the key influencers. However these were always interconnected with other factors like educational ability, school experience and specific course requirements. Less influential, but still identifiable considerations were:

- uncertainty and indecision which led to maintaining the status quo
- readiness to move into a different learning or working environment
- availability of other options
- the EMA (but mainly confined to the 14/15 year old group)



In the above diagram the colour of the ovals depicts generally the different level of influence, with the influences in orange coloured ovals having the smallest impact. The number and relative importance of each

influence will vary for each young person, and for those who had not yet made a decision about their future, the EMA was a more significant factor in their decision making.

EMA and NEET

The EMA provides financial assistance to pupils from low income families. In the study, most EMA recipients did not need incentives to continue their education. Whilst there is a diverse group of young people who fall in the NEET category, two principle factors are young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and those who are educationally disaffected.

In this research, there was a minority of disengaged pupils included in the 14/15 year olds. Those young people most at risk of becoming NEET were not involved. This was because this target group were already absenting themselves from school or were disillusioned with education and had already left school.

Therefore the research found limited evidence to ascertain whether the EMA is having an impact on preventing young people in Scotland from becoming NEET.

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The report, "Young People's Awareness and Experience of EMAS and their Impact on Choices and Pathways," which is summarised in this research findings is a web only document and is available on the publications pages of the Scottish Executive website at <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/Recent>

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