

Education and Training

Individual Learning Accounts Scotland (ILA Scotland) – Learners Study

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The results reported here are key findings from a survey that evaluates Individual Learning Accounts Scotland (ILA Scotland) commissioned by the then Scottish Executive's Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning Department (ETLLD), and carried out by BMRB Social Research Ltd. between January 2006 and September 2007. The aim of the survey was to gauge the impact of the ILA Scotland scheme in relation to the following aims, which were set out prior to its launch: widening participation in adult learning by increasing interest and uptake; introducing new learners to adult learning and to provide an opportunity for those who have not recently participated in learning to do so; encouraging more learning progression; encouraging individuals to invest in their own learning (and take ownership); prioritising the learning needs of certain groups of learners (i.e. people on low incomes); supporting the development of a quality learning provider base in Scotland.

Main Findings

- Information and communication technologies (ICT) was the most common subject of ILA funded courses on both offers, and around half of courses took place at a college.
- Most respondents said that their ILA funded course had led or would lead to a qualification (82% for ILA200 and 75% for ILA100), and this qualification was generally seen as important to the learner (88% on ILA200 and 89% on ILA100).
- In both offers, the outcomes that respondents felt they had achieved from ILA funded courses generally matched their priorities for doing the course, so that gaining new skills or knowledge was likely to be seen as both an important reason for doing a course and something that learners had successfully achieved.
- By the time of the wave 2 interview, around three in five successful applicants had actually undertaken an ILA funded course (62% for ILA200, 59% for ILA100). Those who had not undertaken any ILA funded courses by the time of the wave 1 interview were most likely to say this was because ILA funding was not accepted on their chosen course, or because they could not find an appropriate course.
- The majority of learners that had been on an ILA funded course said that it had met or exceeded their expectations (89% on ILA200, 87% on ILA100). At wave 2, 96% of learners on ILA200 and 93% of those on ILA100 said that they were satisfied with the offer overall. Those who had been on a course were also very positive towards individual aspects of the course (quality of teaching and course materials, the learning provider and ILA staff).
- Successful applicants on ILA100 had higher qualifications and were in higher social grades than the Scottish population, while those on ILA200 were similar to the Scottish population as a whole; this suggests that *within the eligible population* those with low skills are under-represented on ILA200.

- One in six (16%) successful applicants on ILA200 were “new” learners (who had not done any learning since leaving school); the equivalent figure for ILA100 was 14%. In addition, 21% of ILA200 and 16% of ILA100 respondents were “returners” (had done no learning in the last three years).
- Most respondents were satisfied with the ILA helpline (90% for ILA200 and 87% for ILA100) and had not used any other source of information during the ILA application process. Nearly all successful applicants found the application process straightforward (96% for ILA200, 93% for ILA100), and this was also true of unconverted enquirers - those who had requested an application form but who had not returned it (most of whom found the application form easy to understand).
- There was some criticism of the range of courses available amongst those who had not undertaken any ILA funded courses, as well as amongst the unconverted enquirers (between 23% and 32% agreed that course locations or times were inconvenient or that they couldn't find a course subject that they wanted to do).
- Most respondents (85% on ILA200 and 82% on ILA100) felt that the personal contribution they were required to pay was about the right amount, and were satisfied with the overall level of funding provided by the ILA each year (88% on ILA200 and 84% on ILA100).
- Respondents who had been on an ILA funded course were asked whether they would have taken the course if ILA funding had not been available. The proportion who said they would still have done the course without ILA funding was higher for those on ILA100 than ILA200 (27% and 16% respectively said it was very likely that they would still have done the course).

Background

The importance of measures designed to increase and widen participation in lifelong learning, improve skills and enhance the employability of the Scottish workforce have been recognised as important priorities in the policy agenda in Scotland in recent years (*Life Through Learning Through Life: The Lifelong Learning Strategy for Scotland*, Scottish Executive, 2003; *Skills for Scotland: A Lifelong Skills Strategy*, Scottish Government, 2007). The ILA Scotland scheme is viewed as central to these strategies as a means of encouraging non-traditional learners to access learning opportunities. The first phase, ILA200 (previously named targeted offer), was launched in December 2004 and was aimed at those on low incomes (at the time of the launch, those learners with an income of £15,000 or less and those on benefits were eligible). It provides eligible learners with funding of £200 which can be put towards a wide range of learning opportunities. In June 2007 the income threshold to qualify for ILA200 was raised to £18,000. The second phase, the ILA100 offer (previously named universal offer), was launched in August 2005. This offer is not income restricted. Initially ILA100 eligible learners could access £100 funding towards basic ICT learning leading to a formal qualification/certification up to SCQF Level 5 or equivalent. ILA100 was extended in summer 2006 to include a much wider range of courses, not just limited to courses in ICT, and leading to a formal qualification/certification up to SCQF Level 6.

About the Study

The survey was designed to assess the extent to which learners felt the ILA scheme had met its objectives, specifically: what were the characteristics of people on the two schemes, and when had they last undertaken learning; had people on the schemes actually been on ILA funded courses; to what extent had participation in the schemes encouraged learning progression; were learners satisfied with the courses they had been on; did they meet their needs; what benefits did they feel they received from the courses they had been on; and was the funding critical to their participation in learning, or would they have done so anyway.

Methodology

BMRB carried out a longitudinal survey of successful applicants of the two ILA offers, between January 2006 and September 2007. “Successful applicants” are people who have had an application for ILA100 or ILA200 successfully upheld by ILA Scotland and therefore hold an ILA account; they may or may not have actually undertaken any learning on ILA-funded courses. All interviews were conducted by telephone.

At wave 1 of the survey, 1,000 ILA200 applicants and 1,000 ILA100 applicants were interviewed. At wave 2, BMRB attempted to re-contact all those who had agreed to take part in a second interview nine months later, in order to track respondents and explore learner outcomes; interviews were conducted with 628 ILA200 respondents and 596 ILA100 respondents.

In addition, a separate survey was conducted among 996 “unconverted enquirers”, people who had requested an ILA Scotland application form but who had not returned the form.

Key Findings of the Research

Characteristics of applicants

In comparison with the adult population of Scotland, the profile of successful ILA200 applicants was younger, with more women than men. Those on ILA100 were closer to the profile of the Scottish population but with a greater concentration between the ages of 31 and 60. Those on both offers were more likely than the Scottish population as a whole to be in work, and the number in work was particularly high among those on ILA100 (and most were working full-time). ILA100 contained a relatively high proportion of people in social grades A and B (professional and managerial occupations), while the proportion for ILA200 was slightly lower than the population as a whole.

Around one in six successful applicants were “new” learners (who had not done any learning since leaving school): 16% for ILA200 and 14% for ILA100. In addition, 21% of ILA200 and 16% of ILA100 respondents were “returners” (had done no learning in the last three years). Those on ILA100 were more likely than those on ILA200 to be qualified to degree level or above (32% compared with 18%).

Unconverted enquirers tended to be younger than successful applicants, and were less likely to have studied recently. However, they were similar to successful applicants in terms of the highest qualification they had attained.

The application process

TV and radio were commonly used sources of information for both offers, and were also seen as effective. The ILA website, the learning provider and word of mouth were also seen as effective sources of information.

Most respondents were satisfied with the ILA helpline (90% for ILA200 and 87% for ILA100) and had not used any other source of information during the ILA application process.

Nearly all successful applicants found the application process straightforward (96% for ILA200, 93% for ILA100), and this was also true of unconverted enquirers (most of whom found the application form easy to understand). The unconverted enquirers also thought the income assessment section was easy to complete, although 18% felt that they

would have had difficulties providing the supporting documents. The main reasons why the unconverted enquirers did not return the form were a change of mind, being too busy and not being eligible for funding.

Participation in ILA funded learning

By the time of the wave 2 interview, around three in five successful applicants had actually undertaken an ILA funded course (62% for ILA200, 59% for ILA100). This comprised those who had completed a course (27% for ILA200, 32% for ILA100), those who had dropped out of a course before it finished (14% and 13% respectively) and the remainder who were still on their first course (21% and 14% respectively).

Around half of all respondents said that they were planning to do a new course in the next 12 months when interviewed at wave 2, and this was higher amongst those who had already been on a course. However, only one in five of those planning to do a course at wave 1 had actually done so by the time of the wave 2 interview nine months later.

Types of course and qualifications

Information and communication technologies (ICT) was the most common subject of ILA funded courses on both offers, and around half of courses took place at a college.

Most respondents said that their course had led or would lead to a qualification (82% for ILA200 and 75% for ILA100), and this qualification was generally seen as important to the learner (88% on ILA200 and 89% on ILA100).

Where learners were planning to do a course in the future, the subjects closely reflected those of courses already undertaken through ILA.

Motivations and barriers

Many people took ILA funded courses to help to find work or a change of job, and this was higher among those on ILA200 than those on ILA100. Gaining skills or qualifications were the other main reasons for undertaking a course, although courses under the ILA200 offer do not need to lead to qualifications.

Those who had not undertaken any ILA funded courses by the time of the wave 1 interview were most likely to say this was because ILA funding was not accepted on their chosen course, or because they could not find an appropriate course. Other reasons related to personal circumstances, including work and family commitments, and these were also the most common reasons for dropping out of a course.

Outcomes from ILA courses

In both offers, the outcomes that respondents felt they had achieved from ILA funded courses generally matched their priorities for doing the course, so that gaining new skills or knowledge was likely to be seen as both an important reason for doing a course and something that learners had successfully achieved.

Respondents were more likely to say they had achieved “softer” outcomes (e.g. gaining new skills and increasing self-confidence) than harder employment related outcomes (such as getting a job, changing jobs or getting a promotion), although a proportion of learners said that their course had helped them in relation to work; this was more pronounced for ILA200 than ILA100 learners (26% of ILA200 learners said that the course had helped them to get work and 23% to find a job with a different employer).

Satisfaction

There were high levels of satisfaction with ILA funded learning amongst those that had been on a course: at the first wave of the survey, 21% of those on ILA200 and 13% on ILA100 said that the course had exceeded their expectations, while most of the remainder said that it had met their expectations. At wave 2, 96% of learners on ILA200 and 93% of those on ILA100 said that they were satisfied with the offer overall. Those who had been on a course were also very positive towards individual aspects of the course (quality of teaching and course materials, the learning provider and ILA staff).

While the majority of respondents were satisfied with the range of courses available, the availability of courses in their area, and the availability of suitable dates and times for courses, those who had not undertaken any ILA funded courses were more negative (between 25% and 30% were dissatisfied with these aspects), as were the unconverted enquirers (between 23% and 32% agreed that course locations or times were inconvenient or that they couldn't find a course subject that they wanted to do).

Funding

Most respondents (85% on ILA200 and 82% on ILA100) felt that the personal contribution they were required to pay was about the right amount, and were satisfied with the overall level of funding provided by the ILA each year (88% on ILA200 and 84% on ILA100). However, around two in five respondents (40% on ILA200 and 41% on ILA100) indicated that the personal contribution they had to pay might discourage them, by agreeing with the statement that paying the personal contribution made you think twice about applying for a course.

Respondents who had been on an ILA funded course were asked whether they would have taken the course if ILA funding had not been available. The proportion who said they would have done the course without ILA funding was higher for those on ILA100 than ILA200 (27% and 16% respectively said it was very likely that they would still have done the course).

Conclusions

When the ILA Scotland scheme was launched in 2004, targets were set for the numbers of “active learners” (people who have actually undertaken ILA funded learning). The target for ILA200 has now been achieved, but take-up of ILA100 has been lower than expected.

By wave 2 of the survey, around three in five “successful applicants” (people who already held an ILA100 or ILA200 account) had started an ILA-funded course. Where people had not started a course, it was most commonly because ILA funding did not cover the type of course they wanted. When asked directly, these respondents were often critical of the range of courses available to them. The “unconverted enquirers” covered by the survey expressed similar views, suggesting that the limited range of courses may also be an issue for those who do not open an account. In considering the range of courses covered by ILA funding, it is important to bear in mind the timing of the survey: most of the courses in question were those offered in 2005 and 2006, and the range of courses has been expanding since that time. Nevertheless, the survey confirms that the ability to offer a wide range of relevant courses is important in increasing the numbers of active learners. It is also worth noting in this context that non-ILA funded courses taken by learners covered a wider range in terms of subjects and types of providers than ILA funded courses.

In assessing the role of the ILA scheme in encouraging participation, it is also important to examine whether the funding was responsible for people taking up courses or whether they would have done so anyway even if the ILA funding was not available. A proportion (16% on ILA200 and 27% on ILA100) said they would have been “very likely” to have done the course anyway, but the majority felt that the funding did make a difference to their participation.

One of the aims of the ILA scheme was to prioritise the needs of low-skilled people and those on lower incomes. ILA200 has, by definition, prioritised those on lower incomes, but it may not have attracted as many low-skilled people as anticipated – analysis of the profile of successful applicants shows that those on ILA200 were similar to the Scottish population as a whole in terms of their qualifications

and social grade. Given that ILA200 was restricted to those on low incomes, it is therefore likely that *within the eligible population* those with low skills are under-represented on ILA200.

Successful applicants on ILA100 had higher qualifications and were in higher social grades than the Scottish population. Those with higher qualifications were also most likely to say that they could not get the course they wanted through ILA. This suggests that the people who are attracted to ILA100 are not necessarily those at whom the funded courses are aimed at. Therefore, as well as trying to attract more people with low skills, it is also important to clarify the types of course on offer to potential applicants.

Analysis of ILA200 showed that women were more likely than men both to hold an account and to become an “active” learner. In this context, it is important to bear in mind that in the Scottish population as a whole, as of 2006 overall employment rates were more than five percentage points lower for women than for men. In addition, the employment rate for men in full-time employment remains markedly higher than for women, and the employment rate of men is higher than women at every qualification level except for graduates.

As noted above, the majority of learners on both offers said that they would not have started their course without the ILA funding. In addition, the majority agreed that the amount they contributed personally was “about right”. This suggests that the levels of funding offered by the scheme are sufficient to help people to undertake courses. However, the overall take-up of ILA100 has been low and people on both offers indicated that the personal contribution may be an obstacle to starting a course (two in five agreed that having to pay a personal contribution makes you think twice about applying for a course). However, the survey cannot predict whether a higher rate of funding would boost the numbers of active learners.

Although the survey does not indicate the extent to which ILA-funded learning helps to increase learners’ qualification levels, it confirmed that most courses do lead to a qualification (including 82% on ILA200 where courses do not need to lead to a qualification). Gaining a recognised qualification was also one of the outcomes most valued by learners.

In addition, it is clear that many learners used their initial learning to move onto further courses: three in ten learners on ILA200 said that the course had helped them “to a great extent” to move onto another course.

One of the scheme’s targets when it was launched was for 90% of learners to be satisfied with the quality of their learning. The survey findings showed that ILA-funded courses have met this target: more than 90% of learners on each offer said they were satisfied overall, and the vast majority said that the course had met or exceeded their expectations.

Positive views were also expressed towards the application process and ILA helpline. Even the unconverted enquirers were generally positive towards the application form and guidance they received; the one area of difficulty was the income assessment section of the form, for which 18% of unconverted enquirers said they thought they would have had problems providing supporting documentation. Overall, however, these findings indicate that the application process works well.

Overall, the survey findings indicate that the ILA scheme has helped people to take up courses, and is giving access to good quality learning. The challenge the scheme faces is to increase the numbers of people participating in the scheme, particularly those with low skills.

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ISBN 978-0-7559-7041-4

