

Social Justice Research Programme

Impact Of Childcare Support For Lone Parent Students

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Defeating child poverty is one of the Scottish Executive's social justice milestones. Supporting lone parents into education, to expand their knowledge and skills for work, is an important way to begin to address child poverty. The aims of the research reported here were to monitor the first year of 2 elements of the 3-year £24m child poverty package and to draw out lessons to inform future years of operation of the initiative.

Main Findings

- A survey of lone parent students showed that 96% of recipients of the new Lone Parent Childcare Grant (LPCG) described the grant as either 'very helpful' or 'helpful'.
- The key incentive to studying was identified as supporting their children, either by improving their prospects in the employment market, getting a better job, or a job with a better income. This motivation was particularly strong amongst those previously in part-time education and/or on Income Support.
- Prior to studying, a third of lone parent students and 2 in 5 LPCG claimants were outside the education system and employment market.
- Those who were previously in employment tended to have been in administrative or service industries, usually in a support position. Plans for future employment tended to focus around teaching, business and the caring professions.
- In focus groups, lone parents raised concerns about high stress levels, financial worries, access to childcare and support and guidance.
- Exploratory research with further education (FE) colleges found that some were keen to maximise their student numbers and were effectively utilising the new monies to attract lone parents. One rural college had refrained from expanding childcare capacity.

Background

The 2 elements of the child poverty package which are the concern of this research are: (1) a £1,000 grant per annum towards the cost of registered childcare for lone parents in full-time higher education; and (2) £7.5m made available initially over three years for further education (FE) colleges to widen childcare provision to meet locally identified needs for lone parents.

Reactions to the new Grant

A survey of lone parents in higher education (HE) was conducted as part of the monitoring data collected for the operation of the new Lone Parent Childcare Grant (LPCG). The survey found that almost half the lone parent students in the sample claimed the LPCG in 2001-2002. The main reason given for not claiming the grant was that the respondent was not using a formal childcare arrangement (registered childminders, after school clubs and providers of day care and education). Ninety-six percent of LPCG claimants described the grant as either 'very helpful' or 'helpful'. Comments included: "It would be very difficult to manage financially without it." "Now it means I have just enough money to live on." "Because without the additional childcare cost, I would not have anyone to look after my child, therefore would not be able to attend college."

Motivations for Studying and Future Plans

The key incentive to studying identified by the respondents was to support their children, either by improving their prospects in the employment market, getting a better job, or a job with a better income. This motivation was particularly strong amongst those previously in part-time education and/or on Income Support.

Prior to commencing this course, over a third of all respondents and 2 in 5 of LPCG claimants were outside the education system and employment market. If previously in employment, respondents tended to have been in administrative or service industries, and usually in a support position. Plans for future employment tend to focus around teaching, business and the caring professions.

Awareness of the Grant

A fifth of non-claimants, particularly the younger ones, said

they had not applied for the LPCG because they did not know about it. This is likely to have been affected by the timing of the announcement. The researchers also emphasise the need for good financial advice and support networks for lone parents.

Concerns raised by Lone Parent Students

The focus groups and discussions with lone parent students raised some concerns. For example, all participants reported high stress levels arising from combining being a student and a lone parent and, in some cases, also a part-time employee. It is worth noting that from the research of this study it is not possible to say how prevalent the views expressed below are among the total lone parent student population.

Assistance with Childcare

Having a fixed amount for the LPCG makes it difficult for lone parents with very young children in particular. The researchers therefore recommend that consideration should be given to making additional support available which relates to the number and age of children requiring childcare.

Furthermore, issues of differentials between provision for FE and HE students that can affect progression from FE to HE, even within the same institution, were raised. FE students may stay on social security benefits, and have access to free nursery places in the college. Most HE students lose their benefits once in receipt of the student loan although students with children can retain Housing Benefit entitlement in some cases, and lone parent students receive the Lone Parents' Grant (£1,100) and the LPCG towards childcare. Like other students, they also have access to the Mature Students' Bursary Fund (or Young Students' Bursary), the Dependants' Grant, School Meals Grant and Travelling Expenses, where eligible. Despite this, some lone parents in HE felt that the loss of benefits, access to free nursery places, and the fact that the LPCG is a fixed amount, meant they could be worse off compared to FE students. The researchers therefore recommend that consideration be given to providing additional assistance to lone parents in HE.

Timing of Assistance

The timing of the grant payment system in general was also mentioned. The fact that payment is geared to institutional

term dates was also raised as problematic. The researchers fed this back to the appropriate body and the Guide to Student Support 2002-2003 now states that, if making the first payment at the start of the course would cause hardship, advance payment of Dependents' Grant, Lone Parent Grant, LPCG and School Meals Grant can be requested to cover the period from the beginning of August to the start of the course.

Childcare Access

Lone parents noted that there is little provision for After School Care beyond primary school. Lone parent students with children at secondary school are dependent on informal childcare arrangements, which do not qualify for the LPCG. The researchers therefore recommend that the provision of wrap-around pre and after school childcare for children aged 11 – 13 should be increased.

Rural Childcare Provision

In rural areas, some students reported there is insufficient 'formal' childcare. Even where such provision is available, it can be inaccessible. Childcare in rural areas needs to be particularly flexible to allow for the early drop-off and late collection of children, as parents have additional travel time to and from college. The researchers therefore recommend that more could be done to address the needs of lone parent students in rural areas in respect of childcare.

Support and Guidance

Some students found that the availability of support and guidance for students in HE institutions (HEIs) compared unfavourably to that available in FE colleges. The researchers also found evidence of lack of awareness and understanding of what support is available, among lone parent students generally. The researchers therefore suggest that Student Services departments in FE colleges and HEIs should be encouraged to establish lone parent support networks with support from lone parent organisations. This could be linked to the provision of information, advice and support for lone parent students on campus to ensure that information on the support available reaches students and potential students. Information could also be made available through Family Support Centres and community groups working with lone parents.

Reactions from FE Colleges

As part of the monitoring and evaluation of the fund for FE colleges to widen childcare provision for lone parents, the

research included exploratory interviews with a handful of selected FE colleges. These found that some FE colleges were keen to maximise their student numbers and were effectively utilising the new monies to attract lone parents. They were also forming links with community groups to address childcare problems, e.g. Lauder College.

At one rural college, the research team was informed that senior management had refrained from expanding capacity in the college nursery in the face of additional demand because of the time limited nature of the FE Childcare Fund (initially announced for 3 years).

In order to encourage action in those colleges that have yet to prioritise the lone parent market, the researchers recommend that a case study based around the experience of a college that has had success in this market should be produced and circulated to other colleges.

Future Monitoring and Evaluation

For the LPCG, the researchers recommend that the collection of available data should be continued, with additional data becoming available after 2001-2. This data is collected by the Student Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS) and comprises of: the number of lone parent students entering HE and progressing each year, sex, proportions studying in FE colleges and HEI, the type of course, age groups, marital status, and weekly childcare costs. In addition, the researchers recommend that the survey of lone parent students should be repeated after the grant has been available for a longer period of years, e.g. in academic year 2003-04 or 2004-05.

There was insufficient evidence to assess the overall impact of the new resources for FE colleges at the time the research was undertaken. This was because management reporting systems in colleges were unable to produce the required level of monitoring information for 2001-02. However, since the research took place, the majority of colleges have implemented system changes to enable the information requested by the Scottish Further Education Funding Council (SFEFC) to be reported. This will include information on: the amount of Childcare Fund carried forward, the amount allocated, distributed and underspent, the number of FE students applying for assistance and assisted, totals and broken down by part-time and full-time study and lone parent status, and the amount disbursed for each of these.

About this Study

In June 2001 the Government launched a new 3-year £24m package of initiatives aimed at encouraging lone parents into Scotland's universities and colleges. The package consists of 3 elements: (1) A £1,000 grant per annum towards the cost of registered childcare for lone parents in full-time higher education; (2) £7.5m made available over the three years for FE colleges to widen childcare provision to meet locally identified needs for lone parents; (3) £8m to enable local authorities to support further out of school childcare provision in disadvantaged areas. The research study was concerned with the first 2 elements of the package. Nearly 1,600 lone parents claimed this grant in 2001/02. As at January 2003, over 1,500 lone parents have already claimed for 2002/03.

Research Methods

The research involved a quantitative study of 4,000 lone parent students studying on HE programmes at institutions throughout Scotland. The survey was conducted in May 2002. 1,120 questionnaires were completed and returned, giving an overall response rate of 28%. To supplement the survey 5 focus groups with lone parent students were held in Dundee, Glasgow and Edinburgh. More informal discussion groups with FE and HE lone parent students took place in Dumfries & Galloway College, Langside College, Lauder College and Motherwell College. In addition, the researchers met with the Student Awards Agency for Scotland and the Scottish Further Education Funding Council, and held discussions with 5 FE colleges.

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