



Student Loans Company

Vulnerable Students Stakeholder Group 19.02.2020

OfS & SLC Offices, 2nd Floor, Finlaison House, 15-17 Furnival Street, London, EC4A 1AB

Note to Cascade

SFW update

Application volumes for returning students had dropped but were on schedule. Self-supporting student applications had risen slightly. The SFW team had expanded, with further additional headcount planned. Incoming call volumes had dropped.

Figures for returning Independent students in Wales were lower than expected, following the usual trend. Data was provided by the Information Office. Retention would have some impact here, and some investigation was needed. Current figures suggested an improvement. Students often moved between categories, or reached the age of twenty-five and therefore became Independent through age.

All current ADG/PLA claims had been paid, with c. 500 CCG claims awaiting further information. CCG messaging had vastly improved but childcare information could still be made plainer. Claims were removed where students did not return their CCG2.

The new Assessment Services incorporated several SFW teams, meaning colleagues were now multi-skilled. By the end of the current recruitment drive, seventeen new assessors would join the department, training for GfD and core workflow from day one. Six of them would be returners to work, through collaboration with DWP and the local council.

Collaboration with SFE colleagues had made guidance on Estrangement for students in Wales clearer and more current. The new standardised Estrangement form should reduce confusion, and all criteria should now be fulfilled first time. The benefit of the new form should be visible from 2021 onwards. Students should receive the new form automatically when they ticked the Estrangement box on the SFW application form. The dedicated email address for Welsh Estrangement queries was not yet live, and any queries should continue to be sent to Rachel Steele in the meantime.

Following one particular query, it was confirmed that overpayments should normally be recovered during the course of study, with debt collection agencies only being engaged post-study where necessary.

SFE Operational Update

The 2020 cycle opened on 17th February 2020, with approximately 390 cases to date where CCG2 forms had not been returned. These claims would be removed in the week commencing 24th February 2020. Automated approvals were currently within two days.

Work was underway to improve the customer journey, turnaround times, and staff experience. Six new assessors were due to join the department on 2nd March 2020. 20/21 applications were in hand, and the GfD team was in a healthy position, given the time of year. Experience showed that GfD students were well-organised at the start of the process but the manual nature of CCG2 tended to slow the process down. The transition to Wider Plan should help to manage this.



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Application numbers were still twice those of approvals, but were expected to be lower under Wider Plan. Practitioners still needed oversight on this so they could ensure that students received their money on time. It also let them understand when students became aware of childcare funding and their eligibility to apply.

Data on trans students in receipt of GfD would be shared in future meetings.

CCG and Wider Plan Update

Uptake of Wider Plan among students and childcare providers was high and continued to rise, suggesting historical barriers were being overcome. The number of payments was increasing monthly, but as this was the first year of the new scheme, the true baseline would not be quantifiable for another twelve months. Feedback from all parties was positive and no problems had been reported.

Payments were made twice weekly. There had been no instances so far of students having exhausted their entitlement. Data on this had already been shared, and would be included in VSSG presentations going forward. Ongoing monitoring of this spend was worthwhile, as Wider Plan was in its first year at SFE, and childcare costs were being paid over 52 weeks now instead of 12 months.

CCGPS calls were maintaining a service level of 97%. The transition to the new system had been smooth, making life easier for everyone involved. For it to be adopted in Wales, the Welsh government would have to commission it. This had not been considered to date.

Independent Team Update

Independent processing figures followed the expected trends.

The definition of students whose Parents were Outside UK was clarified. This category included students whose parents lived, for example, in areas where internet contact was not possible due to war or poverty, students for whom contact with their parents was not practical for other reasons, or where contact would jeopardise their parents. Students had to meet UK residency criteria, and in many cases were refugees, some of whom may have arrived as unaccompanied minors. If they were also care experienced, they would be assessed under Care Leaver in the first instance, before being classed under Parents Outside UK.

Where students were applying as Estranged but being assessed as not, some relationship or contact was found to have continued. Care leavers may automatically move from one category to another depending on their age. Alternatives to the Estranged category were actively sought out, and change in circumstance did not affect a student's status until the following annual year, when they may be assessed as Independent.

The most current Estrangement data at HEP level was requested as the most recent figures were for AY 17/18.

Practitioners needed clarification on how to know if a student needed to re-evidence their status after the first year. The letter issued to the student stated whether their status had been granted for the current year of study or for the duration of study. Assessors made that decision when a claim came under review, and where further evidence was required, this was requested of the student directly.

Figures for returning care leavers applying for student finance were falling consistently year on year, and this was a sector-wide issue. Local council funding cuts impacted on care leaver retention rates. Most applications which were submitted incorrectly fell under the Care Leaver heading. HESA data to the year 17/18 did not indicate any fall in numbers, which may be partly explained by the fact that the definition of care leaver had not been revisited in some twenty years. The wording surrounding care leavers was not clear, despite efforts to



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update it which had been ongoing for some time. Most HEPs included children in care in their access and participation activities, and therefore it was difficult to identify where the drop in figures occurred.

Changes to the Estrangement process had come into effect on 13th January 2020, meaning advisors from HEPs could now complete the declaration without a prior relationship with the student. This should make evidence gathering easier. Since 13th January 2020, there had been 121 such cases, of which approximately 7% had already been approved without a prior student-advisor relationship. Fewer students were having to undergo telephone interviews with case workers, and Estranged status could be awarded at an earlier point in the application process. Previous methods remained in the background as a backup where needed. Independent application volumes were currently low.

A new support helpline had been rolled out in Glasgow and then in Darlington for senior managers in SLC whose teams needed support on specialised Estrangement queries. It had seen relatively low usage to date. If the helpline was found to detract from the Independent team's SLAs, an alternative solution would be sought out.

DfE Update

The post-Brexit cabinet reshuffle had seen considerable churn at ministerial level but Gavin Williamson remained Secretary of State for Education. Michelle Donelan was now the Universities Minister without the science portfolio. Among other duties, Michelle Donelan had oversight of the government response to the Augur report. Widening participation and social mobility were both key concerns for her. Likely priorities could not be confirmed at this stage.

NUS had been notified of concerns around freedom of speech surrounding the Conservative manifesto.

AOB

- Vulnerable Student Policy

Sign-off on this was almost complete, and should be confirmed at the next meeting of the VSSG.

- Repayments website

There had been a demo at the recent Ops meeting which covered new online statements. An equality impact assessment in terms of autism was suggested.

Meeting close



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Next meeting date: Tuesday 19 May 2020 11:30 - 15:00, venue and format to be confirmed