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Review of the Welsh Government Learning Grant (Further Education)

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Review of the Welsh Government Learning Grant (Further Education)

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researcher and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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Glossary

Additional Learning Needs (ALN)

Support provided to learners who require extra help due to learning difficulties, disabilities, or other educational needs.

Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP)

A UK Government policy providing support and resettlement for Afghan nationals relocating to the UK.

Assembly Learning Grant FE (ALG FE)

A financial support scheme for learners in further education which was the predecessor to the WGLG (FE), aimed at helping eligible students meet the costs of study.

Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC)

Vocational qualifications offered at various levels, recognised in further and higher education.

Citizen Resettlement Scheme (CRS)

A scheme that provides relocation and resettlement support for certain groups of refugees or displaced individuals.

City and Guilds

A vocational education organisation offering qualifications and certifications across a wide range of industries.

Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA)

Financial support for 16 to 19-year-olds in further education from lower-income households, designed to encourage continued participation in learning.

English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)

Courses designed to help learners improve their English language skills, particularly for those whose first language is not English.

EUSS Settled Status

The status granted under the EU Settlement Scheme, allowing EU citizens and their families to live and work in the UK after Brexit.

Financial Contingency Fund (FCF)

A fund provided via further education institutions to support learners with urgent or unexpected financial needs, such as childcare or travel costs.

Further Education Institution (FEI)

An education provider offering courses for learners typically aged 16 and above, including vocational qualifications, A-levels, and adult learning.

Global Majority

A term used to describe Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups, which recognises that collectively, they make up the majority of the world's population.

His Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC)

The UK government department responsible for tax collection, national insurance, and managing benefits relevant to student financial support.

Independent Living Skills (ILS)

Courses aimed at developing practical skills for independent living, often targeted at those with additional learning needs.

Learning Agreement

A formal agreement outlining a learner's course of study and responsibilities, often used for grant or financial support eligibility.

Learning Centres

Colleges, schools and training providers recognised by Student Loans Company as an education institution which can administer the WGLG (FE) scheme.

Management Information (MI)

Data collected by institutions to monitor learner numbers, funding, progress, and outcomes.

Medr

Medr is Wales's Commission for Tertiary Education, a Welsh Government's arms-length body responsible for funding and regulating the tertiary education and research sector in Wales.

National Vocational Qualification (NVQ)

Work-based qualifications that assess learners' competence in a specific role or sector.

Personal Learning Accounts (PLA)

A Welsh Government scheme offering financial support to adult learners for training and upskilling opportunities.

[Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales \(CQFW\)](#)

This is a learning framework which sets out all learning levels from very initial stages (Entry 1, 2 and 3) to the most advanced (Level 8).

ReAct+

A Welsh Government employability programme providing financial support for adult learners trying to re-enter the labour market to undertake short courses aimed at retraining or upskilling.

Student Loans Company (SLC)

An executive non-departmental public body that provides student loans and manages related financial support for higher and further education learners in the UK.

Student Finance Wales (SFW)

The funding service delivered by the Student Loans Company to funding to eligible Welsh students studying at universities and colleges in Wales, England, Scotland, and Northern Ireland.

Vocationally Related Qualification (VRQ)

Qualifications designed to develop practical skills in specific occupational areas, often offered alongside NVQs or BTECs.

Welsh Government Learning Grant FE (WGLG FE)

A grant providing financial support to eligible learners aged 19 and over in further education, particularly those from lower-income households, based on household income and attendance.

1. Introduction and background

1.1. Background

OB3 Research was appointed by the Welsh Government to undertake a review of the Welsh Government Learning Grant (WGLG) (Further Education) (FE). The aim of the review was to explore the implementation and impact of the grant scheme and provide recommendations for the future.

It was expected that the review would:

- consider the eligibility criteria and value of support of the WGLG (FE)
- provide an understanding of the profile of WGLG (FE) recipients including their reasons to continue with further study
- assess the impact of the WGLG (FE) on learners' decisions to participate in further study
- assess the impact of the WGLG (FE) on learners' engagement with their studies once they have enrolled
- assess the impact of the WGLG (FE) on learners' ability to cope with financial pressures more generally, specifically in light of the cost-of-living crisis
- assess how the criteria and value of support should be kept under review in future years
- assess whether the WGLG (FE) model is the most effective and efficient model to support learners or whether alternative models should be considered.

2. Methodology

2.1. Approach

The review was conducted in five stages. Further detail about the approach taken is set out at Annex B.

Stage one involved an inception meeting to agree the work programme and access documentation, followed by an inception report and 7 scoping interviews with contributors from the Welsh Government and Student Loans Company (SLC).

The second stage involved a review of policy and programme documentation as well as published WGLG (FE) data.

Stage 3 involved developing bilingual research tools, including a survey for WGLG (FE) applicants, a survey for Learning Centre staff involved in administering the scheme and a discussion guide for focus groups and interviews with Learning Centre staff.

Stage 4 involved the fieldwork elements. Using a WGLG (FE) applicant database (n=8,858) the applicant survey was distributed in September 2025. In total, 578 responses were received, representing a 7.2% response rate of those delivered.

The Learning Centre staff survey was also distributed in September 2025 using a database of Learning Centre staff email addresses (n=328). A total of 32 responses were received (10% response rate).

At the close of the staff survey, respondents were invited to contribute further to focus group sessions. In total 12 people from 7 institutions contributed to the qualitative fieldwork.

Interviews were also held with three stakeholder organisations. These stakeholders were partner organisations and included those who represented the interests of students and referred people to further education opportunities.

The final stage of the work programme involved analysing fieldwork data and preparing this report.

2.2. Methodological considerations

2.2.1. Analysis of the WGLG (FE) applicant MI data

It was intended that this review considered WGLG (FE) applicant MI data provided by the SLC. Although the evaluation team received the data, quality concerns meant that any analysis would not meet the required statistical publication standards. As a result, MI-derived analyses will be taken forward outside this published report and may be presented in a technical annex at a later date.

The initial analysis conducted by the evaluation team suggested that there were notable demographic gaps in the SLC data largely due to the voluntary nature of many data fields in the application form. For example, the proportions of learners recorded as care-experienced

or with dependent children were much lower than expected and compared with survey findings. Another limitation concerned information on applicants' intended courses of study. The data was captured in open-text format which led to considerable variation in responses: some applicants provided the subject of their intended course, others the qualification level, and some both.

2.2.2. Survey of WGLG (FE) applicants

In terms of the survey of WGLG (FE) applicants, the high number of undeliverable email addresses is likely explained by the high occurrence of applicants using their academic email address when applying for the grant. Given that the database supplied covered a three-year period, it would be expected that some of these learners were no longer studying at their respective institutions at the time of the survey.

The survey data has been analysed using the following terms:

- nearly all = with very few exceptions
- most = 90% or more
- many = 70% or more
- a majority = over 60%
- half = 50%
- around half = close to 50%
- a minority = below 40%
- few = below 20%
- very few = less than 10%.

Many of the WGLG (FE) applicant survey responses (71%, n=463) came from successful applicants. As such some caution is required when analysing feedback from a relatively small cohort of unsuccessful applicants. Despite this, the cohort of unsuccessful applicants (n=44) still provides interesting insights into their experiences of the application process and their subsequent activities.

A fifth (20%, n=109) of WGLG (FE) applicant survey respondents identified as refugees or asylum seekers. The feedback from this cohort has provided valuable insight into their experience of applying. Both terms are used in this report when referencing the survey data, although, as asylum seekers are not eligible for support, it has been assumed that survey grant recipients are all refugees.

Some of the data on qualification levels from the applicant survey should be interpreted with caution. Although a link to further information on qualification levels was provided in the survey, the inconsistencies provided across their responses suggests that many respondents appeared to find it difficult to answer questions about their previous qualifications, the level of their intended course, and any subsequent courses progressed to.

It is also likely that some survey respondents had received WGLG (FE) support multiple times for different courses. This appears likely because some of these learners reported that they had moved on to study qualifications at Level 3 or below, which would have been

eligible for continued WGLG (FE) support. This means that whilst we can provide an insight into the overall education progression made by grant recipients over time we cannot isolate the progression made by learners after their involvement with the WGLG (FE) comes to an end in its entirety.

2.2.3.Engaging Learning Centres

Engaging with Learning Centre staff presented some challenges. In many cases, the database contained contact details for multiple individuals for the same Learning Centre, sometimes up to 20 members of staff. Analysis of the profile of responses, suggests that typically only one member of staff per individual institution contributed to the review. In total, 111 different institutions were included in the dataset which partly explains the low response rate. It is also likely that many Learning Centres, particularly schools, listed on the SLC's database had few, if any, recent WGLG (FE) recipients as they do not usually deliver provision to adult learners. This is consistent with the overall reduction in the number of awards made over time. As such, many of these centres would not have considered the review to be relevant to them.

3. Context

This section presents an overview of the WGLG (FE), as well as the overall policy environment within which it operates.

3.1. About the WGLG (FE)

3.1.1. Objectives

The WGLG (FE) is a long-established scheme, that has been operational for over twenty years, having been first introduced in 2002/03 as the Assembly Learning Grant (ALG) FE. It provides means-tested financial support to learners aged 19 or over studying further education courses up to and including Level 3 qualifications as set out in the [Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales \(CQFW\)](#) ^[footnote 1] at approved institutions across Wales and elsewhere in the UK.

The grant is designed to reduce the financial barriers that can prevent learners from entering or continuing education. By contributing towards everyday learning costs such as travel, study materials, and childcare, the scheme enables individuals from low-income households to pursue qualifications that enhance their employment prospects, build their confidence, and support lifelong learning.

3.1.2. Funding available

Grant value under the WGLG (FE) scheme varies according to household income and intensity of study. Following a Ministerial announcement [in June 2025](#) the grant level was increased and as set out in [Welsh Government's WGLG \(FE\) explanatory note](#), from September 2025 full-time learners with a household income of:

- £6,120 or less are eligible for a £1,919 grant (an inflationary increase from the previous £1,500 grant)
- more than £6,120 but less than £12,235 are eligible for a £959 grant
- more than £12,235 but less than £18,370 are eligible for a £576 grant.

Part-time learners are entitled to a proportionate amount, with those with a household income of:

- £6,120 or less are eligible for a £959 grant (an inflationary increase from the previous £750 grant)
- more than £6,120 but less than £12,235 are eligible for a £576 grant
- more than £12,235 but less than £18,370 are eligible for a £384 grant.

¹ These include qualifications such as BTECs, GSCE, A Levels and Diplomas

Whilst modest increases were made to household income thresholds over the scheme's initial period of delivery, they have remained static since 2011 to 2012 when the threshold increased from £17,700 to £18,370.

Payments are made in three instalments throughout the year and are conditional on satisfactory attendance and academic progress by the learner as determined by the provider.

WGLG (FE) is intended to support the cost of attending college. As such, the Department for Work and Pensions has confirmed to Welsh Government that WGLG (FE) payments will not affect any [benefits paid to the student or their household](#).

The [SLC's eligibility guidance](#) clarifies that students must not be receiving funding for the course from other sources, such as a [Training Allowance via Jobs Growth Wales+](#) or work based learning funding. Where students from Wales are studying in England, they may be eligible to access both the WGLG (FE) from Student Finance Wales and an [Advanced Learner Loan](#), which is also administered by the SLC.

3.1.3. Student eligibility

Eligibility is based on household income of up to £18,370 as set out at section 3.1.2. The scheme requires applicants to have been resident in the UK for at least three years and be living in Wales prior to commencing their course. They must be studying a designated full- or part-time further education course at a recognised institution. They must also have applied for the grant within 9 months of starting their course to receive the grant for that academic year. Care leavers aged under 25 at the start of their course are exempt from the means testing and automatically qualify for the maximum full- or part-time grant subject to meeting all other criteria for age, residency and course.

A key principle of the WGLG (FE) is progression from a previous year of study, meaning that students (in usual circumstances) can continue to receive the grant if they are enrolled on the second year of their course, enrolled on a higher-level course than when they were last eligible for the WGLG (FE), or studying in a related area of study which complements their original course and demonstrates progression as a whole. The [SLC's guidance on progression](#) explains that 'students will not be eligible for WGLG FE if they've previously received WGLG FE support for attendance on a course at the same or higher level. They must normally show advancement to a higher level of learning to remain eligible.'

3.1.4. Eligible courses

[SLC's guidance on eligible courses](#) explains that an eligible course must be publicly funded and require regular attendance at a recognised education provider, as well as show some measure of progression from the student. All students must follow or intend to follow a course that has 500 or more contact hours if they are full-time and 275 to 499 contact hours if they are part-time. The scheme leaves some room for interpretation of those contact hours but should generally include any time when a member of the Learning Centre staff is present to give specific guidance.

Table 3.1 provides an overview of eligible courses as set out in the [SLC's guidance on eligible courses](#).

Table 3.1: Course types eligible for the WGLG (FE) scheme

Level	Course type
Entry level	Preparation for level 1 qualifications Traineeship Engagement
Level 1	BTEC level 1 NVQ level 1 Traineeship level 1 City & Guilds level 1 VRQ level 1
Level 2	BTEC level 2 NVQ level 2 GCSEs City & Guilds level 2 VRQ level 2
Level 3	A levels Access to Higher Education BTEC level 3 NVQ level 3 VRQ level 2

Source: Student Loans Company

In addition, from 2019 to 2020, students with learning difficulties commencing a personalised learning programme funded by the Welsh Government under the Preparation for Life and Work programme area are eligible for support through the WGLG (FE) scheme.

Students who study a course as part of an apprenticeship or work-related study are not eligible for a grant for that course. Neither does the WGLG (FE) fund distance learning provision, though the SLC may award discretionary payments to students unable to attend a course in person due to a disability.

3.1.5. Application process

The SLC administers the scheme through Student Finance Wales. Applicants can apply for the grant via a paper or online process.

As set out in the [SLC's guidance notes on the application process](#), new applicants are required to complete the full application and must include evidence of income and course details.^[footnote 2]

Once a student has completed the application form, SLC assesses their application and contacts the student if any information or evidence is missing. There are two stages to

² From 2019 to 2020, all independent students have their income taken into account. From 2020 to 2021 all dependent students provide details of any taxable income.

determining eligibility. The first is personal eligibility, based on the personal and financial information in the form. If the student is eligible, SLC will issue a provisional award letter to the learner to confirm that their application has been successful. The second is course eligibility, which the Learning Centres are required to confirm to SLC once a learner signs a WGLG (FE) Learning Agreement (see Section 3.1.6).

For returning students, the WGLG (FE) Learning Agreement acts as a formal application to reapply for the grant for a further academic year of study. The SLC performs a sample check of auto-renewals in November each academic year, asking students to provide financial details or income evidence.

The [SLC's guidance note on promoting the scheme](#) states that Learning Centres have an important role to play in promoting the WGLG (FE) scheme and during the initial application stages. The SLC request that Learning Centres offer encouragement and advice about completing and returning the relevant form.

3.1.6. Learning Agreements and monitoring

WGLG (FE) payments are conditional on regular attendance and satisfactory academic progress by the learner.

WGLG (FE) Learning Agreements are a requirement of receiving funding for both new and returning students. They aim to set out clearly what the student needs to do to receive their termly payments. Learning Centres must use a mandatory Learning Agreement template issued by Student Finance Wales and set out their own attendance requirements. Some absences may be treated as an authorised absence, such as a visit to a university open day or a family emergency, and the student can self-certify illness for up to five days. Students have the opportunity to note any extenuating circumstances in their WGLG (FE) Learning Agreement and Learning Centres should take these circumstances into account should it impact on students meeting their attendance criteria.

Learning Centres keep records of attendance in order for the regular payments to be released to students. If the student has not fulfilled the centre's attendance criteria, the centre will not confirm the student's attendance to Student Finance Wales to release that terms payment.

3.2. Previous evaluation

The [previous evaluation of the then Assembly Learning Grant \(FE\)](#), published in 2015, concluded that there was a definite need for the scheme, not least because adult learners in FE were able to access very little other financial support. It found that administering means testing was an appropriate criteria and that the maximum funding allowance of £1,500 was appropriate at the time for students living at home without dependents but inadequate for those living independently or with other dependents. The evaluation also queried the suitability of the process for determining whether or not a student lived independently, based on the cut off age of 25 years which was in place at the time.

Despite a wide range of promotional and information dissemination methods being adopted to market the ALG (FE) Scheme, the evaluation reported that there was generally low awareness of its existence across the FE sector.

The study raised issues relating to the administration of the scheme, including some confusion amongst the student population caused by two separate administrative schemes for older and young learners. Other main difficulties expressed by applicants related to terminology and the sourcing and submitting of original documentation. The fieldwork also identified mixed views on the value of using Learning Agreements.

In terms of impact, the evaluation found that the scheme had little impact upon decisions to enrol in further study but did make a modest difference to attendance levels and an important contribution to retention levels. Indeed, 'the research found that the Scheme was critical to a large number of students in enabling them to stay in further education and in many cases meet unanticipated costs associated with further education.' The study did not find any evidence either way that the grant was impacting student attainment, achievement or progression into higher education.

The evaluation made nine recommendations which included:

- maintaining the means-tested thresholds and re-examining and costing the funding allowances
- raising awareness of the existence of financial support for adult learners
- taking practical steps to improve the application process (such as the introduction of an online process)
- enhancing the value of the Learning Agreements adopted
- making improvements to the payment and monitoring process.

3.3. Policy and funding context

The WGLG (FE) operates within the broader policy framework set out by the Welsh Government's [Programme for Government](#) to address educational inequalities by expanding community-based and accessible learning opportunities for adults, especially in disadvantaged communities. In particular, the grant contributes to the Welsh Government's commitment to tackle poverty and increase opportunities for all by removing financial barriers to participate in education and training. [Welsh Government's Annual Report for 2024-25](#) highlighted the recent grant increase as part of Welsh Government's commitment to supporting adult learners and ensuring that educational inequalities narrow and standards rise.

The grant also aligns with the goals of the [Well-being of future generations \(Wales\) Act 2015](#) by contributing to a more prosperous and more equal Wales as it enables people to fulfil their potential regardless of their socio-economic background and circumstances. In the [2025 Future Generations annual report](#), the Commissioner explained that 'the national indicator milestone aims for 75% of working-age adults to achieve Level 3 or higher in the

National Qualifications Framework by 2050. Progress is on track, reaching 67% in 2023, with budget allocations reflecting investment in skills, training, education, and job opportunities.' The WGLG (FE) is part of the policy and funding package supporting achievement of this national indicator.

It also supports the goals outlined in the [Welsh Government's employability and skills plan](#) including the priorities of nurturing a learning for life culture, to widen participation, tackle low qualifications and increase the mobility of workers. The skills plan places a particular emphasis on supporting disabled people and ethnic minority groups to participate in the skills system. The plan also sets out a milestone of ensuring that 75% of working age adults in Wales will be qualified to Level 3 or higher and that 5% or fewer working age adults in each local authority area across Wales have no qualifications by 2050.

In addition, the grant plays a role within the [Welsh Government's Young Person's Guarantee](#) (also referenced in the employability and skills plan) which provides support to young people aged 16 to 24 to gain a place in education or training, or help to get into work or self-employment. Indeed, the recent [Ministerial announcement on the WGLG \(FE\) grant increase](#) highlighted the contribution of both the WGLG (FE) and the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) to the 'Welsh Government's National Milestone of at least 90% of 16- to 24-year-olds being in education, employment, or training by 2050.' [Working Wales](#) plays a central role the Young Person's Guarantee, including ensuring potential students have knowledge of and access to the WGLG (FE).

The WGLG (FE) has an important role to help achieve the ambitions of [Cymraeg 2050](#) as supported learners can choose to study at further education through the medium of Welsh, albeit that this is not monitored at scheme level in any way.

Furthermore, the WGLG (FE) is expected to contribute to the objectives of the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act 2022 and the work of Medr (the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research) by supporting equitable access to post-16 education and aligning with the integrated oversight of the tertiary sector.

The WGLG (FE), and this review, align with wider developments and reviews of the post-16 tertiary education funding package more generally around interventions which aim to raise participation in tertiary education in Wales, including the recent [Review of the EMA](#) and the [evaluation of the Diamond reforms to higher education funding in Wales](#) (due to be published in Spring 2026). There is also sustained policy attention on ensuring that FE (and post-16 learning more generally) is accessible and responsive to a more diverse range of learners. For example, in 2025, the Cabinet Secretary for Education set out [Welsh Government's Commitment to Adult Education and Lifelong Learning](#), noting that over the forthcoming academic year, Medr, will be investing more than £80m in part-time and adult learning opportunities. The Welsh Government has also recently committed to further consideration of vocational qualifications in the [Welsh Government response to the 2024 Vocational Qualifications review](#). In addition, the [strategic framework for post-16 digital learning](#), highlights the Welsh Government's ambition to harness digital technology to strengthen post-16 provision in Wales. This is an important consideration for this WGLG (FE) review, which currently only supports in-person learning.

Since the previous review, the COVID-19 pandemic and the rising cost of living are likely to have influenced decisions around continued learning and the affordability of study for learners aged 19 and over. Given that the grant's value increased from September 2025 onwards, it is essential that this review assesses whether the current financial offer is sufficient to address the barriers it set out to overcome.

The WGLG (FE) forms part of a wider package of financial support available to eligible adult learners potentially wishing to study at further education-level in Wales. This includes a range of Welsh Government funds as well as support offered through wider non-Welsh Government funding programmes. Examples of Welsh Government funding routes include:

- the Financial Contingency Fund, available to support certain costs associated with FE study such as travel, equipment, lunch and childcare
- Personal Learning Accounts (PLAs), available to eligible individuals to gain higher level skills to access a wider range of job opportunities and/or gain higher level employment within priority sectors. PLAs are available to learners aged 19 and over, who earn up to £34,303 per year (on an individual, not household income basis). Applicants can be employed, self-employed or not currently working. Most of the PLA-funded provision are short courses with a focus on work progression
- Jobs Growth Wales+, a training and development programme for 16 to 19 year olds which includes the option of a weekly training allowances whilst learning
- Education Maintenance Allowance, which provides payment for 16 to 18 year olds living in Wales, who want to continue their education after school leaving age
- Communities for Work+, which provides funding for essential costs related to training and can cover short accredited courses
- ReAct+, which offers a skills-development grant of up to £1,500 for individuals aged over 20 years old who are facing redundancy or are ex-offenders.

4. WGLG (FE) applications and awards

This chapter considers the published data available for the WGLG (FE) in terms of application numbers, successful awards and profile of grant recipients.

The data in this chapter are mostly drawn from StatsWales. As StatsWales data are rounded to the closest multiple of 5, some rows and columns presented in this chapter do not add to the total figure given.

4.1. Overview

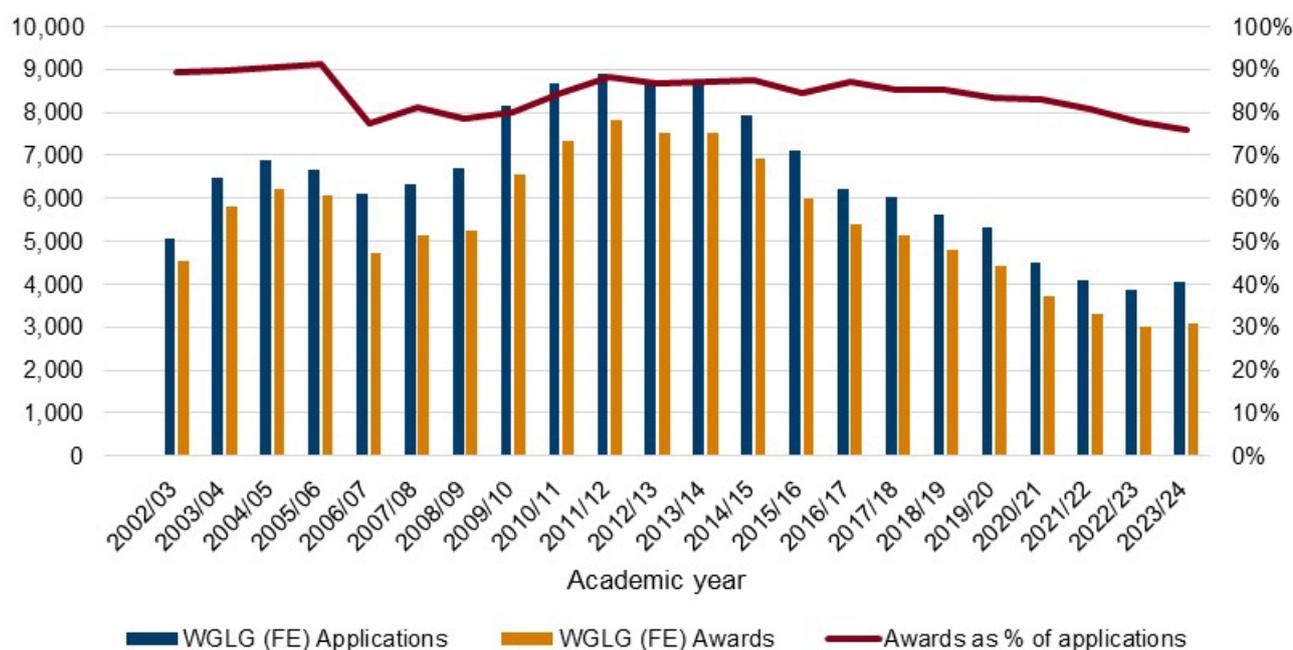
Since its introduction in 2002 to 2003, the number of applications for the WGLG (FE) has fluctuated but generally increased, reaching a peak of 8,885 in 2011 to 2012. It has seen a consistent decline for 10 years from 2012 to 2013 until 2022 to 2023. In 2023 to 2024 there was a slight increase with 4,040 applications received ^[footnote 3], but this was still less than half the peak of 8,885 in 2011 to 2012 as shown at Figure 4.1. The number of successful awards followed a similar pattern, fluctuating but generally increasing to a peak of 7,825 in 2011 to 2012 before falling year on year until 2022 to 2023, with a slight increase observed between 2022 to 2023 and 2023 to 2024 to 3,070 awards. ^[footnote 4]

The awards made as a proportion of all applications has broadly dropped over time. During the first few years following its introduction, around 90% of all applications were successful. A sharp drop to 77% was experienced during 2006 to 2007 followed by a slight recovery. Since 2016 to 2017 the application-to-reward proportion has dropped on an annual basis and by 2023 to 2024, 76% of all applications were successful, as shown at Figure 4.1.

³ [Applications for Further Education Welsh Government Learning Grants by LEA, academic year, mode of study and outcome of application](#)

⁴ [Successful applications for Further Education Welsh Government Learning Grants by institution type, academic year and mode of study](#)

Figure 4.1: Number of WGLG (FE) applications and awards per academic year, 2002/03 to 2023/24



Description of figure: A chart showing an initial increase in WGLG (FE) applications and awards up until 2011 to 2012 followed by a drop in both applications and awards.

Source: [StatsWales](https://stats.wales.gov.uk/)

Some of the decline in applications and awards may be attributed to changing cohort sizes during this period. While the overall number of further education learners aged 19 and over has dropped during the same period, the proportion of learners receiving the grant within the cohort has also decreased: from 5% in 2015 to 2016 to 2.5% in 2023 to 2024. ^[footnote 5] This may be due to fewer learners meeting the eligibility criteria due to unchanging household income thresholds. However, it could also reflect broader challenges such as reduced awareness of the fund or barriers within the application process.

4.2. Profile of applications and awards made

4.2.1. Mode of study

Since 2019/20, applicant and award data have been published by mode of study. The data over this five-year period shows that the vast majority of WGLG (FE) awards have been made to full-time learners. During 2023 to 2024, 92% (2,810 of 3,070) of recipients were studying on a full-time basis. ^[footnote 6] Part-time learners account for a very small proportion of WGLG (FE) recipients. This is in contrast to the proportion of adults studying at further education institutions by mode of study. During 2023 to 2024, excluding those studying

⁵ [Welsh Government Learning Grants \(further education\): September 2023 to August 2024 | GOV.WALES](https://gov.wales/welsh-government-learning-grants-further-education)

⁶ [Successful applications for Further Education Welsh Government Learning Grants by mode of study, residual income, academic year and measure](#)

work-based courses, 87% of adult learners aged 19 and over were studying on a part-time basis and 13% on a full-time basis. ^[footnote 7]

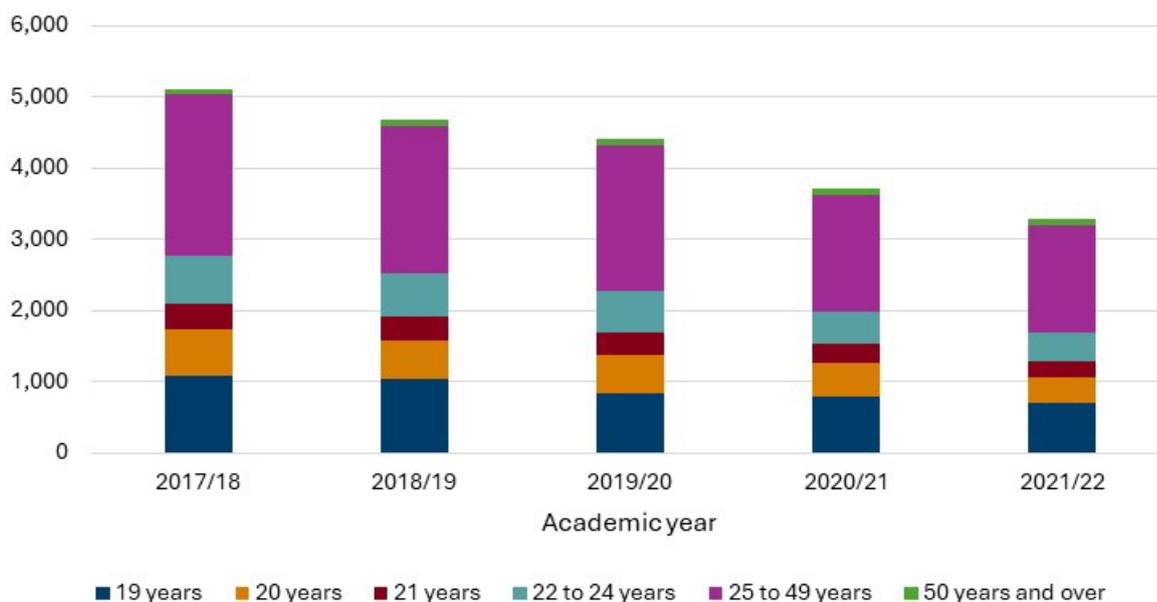
4.2.2. Gender

The majority of WGLG (FE) awards have been made to female students. For instance, in the latest reporting period 2023 to 2024, 63% (1,930) of successful applications were from female students. This is in the context of the majority of post-18 FE learners being female, at 58% during 2023 to 2024. ^[footnote 8]

4.2.3. Age

Data on the age profile of WGLG (FE) recipients is available for a 5-year period between 2017 to 2018 and 2021 to 2022. As shown at Figure 4.2, the majority of recipients were from younger age groups, with 51% of successful applications during 2021 to 2022 made by learners aged 19 to 24 year old. However, this represents a slight decline over the 5-year period, from 54% in 2017 to 2018. Learners aged 25 to 49 accounted for 46% of successful applicants during 2021 to 2022 whilst 3% of successful applicants were aged 50 years and over.

Figure 4.2: Age profile of successful WGLG (FE) applicants



Description of figure: A chart showing that while the majority of grant recipients are aged 24 and under, their share of the total has gradually declined over time

Source: [Welsh Government](#)

⁷ [Unique learners enrolled at further education institutions by age group, mode of learning and gender](#). 59,370 adults aged 19 and over were studying on a part-time and 8,605 on a full-time basis.

⁸ [Unique learner numbers by age and gender](#)

4.2.4. Type of institution

Almost all WGLG (FE) recipients study at Welsh Further Education Institutions (FEIs) (99% in 2023 to 2024), with the remaining few learners either attending other Welsh Learning Centres such as schools or English institutions. ^[footnote 9]

4.2.5. Local authority

Local authority level data for WGLG (FE) applicants, based on their home address shows that the highest number of applicants come from Cardiff, followed by Swansea and Newport. These 3 authority areas accounted for over a third of all applicants during 2023/24 (36%, or 1,460 of 4,040 applicants). There has been a notable drop in the number of applications from Rhondda Cynon Taf over time (from a high of 920 applications during 2011 to 2012 to a low of 245 during 2023 to 2024) and the number of applications from this county has not recovered recently unlike the broader recent increase in other areas.

Local authority level data for successful WGLG (FE) applicants, based on their home address, shows that Cardiff, Swansea and Newport again account for a high proportion of all successful applicants, at 40% (1,235 of 3,070). Applicants from these counties were more likely than average to secure a successful outcome. These 3 local authority areas, as well as Wrexham, are recognised by the Home Office as dispersal areas in Wales for receiving asylum seekers.

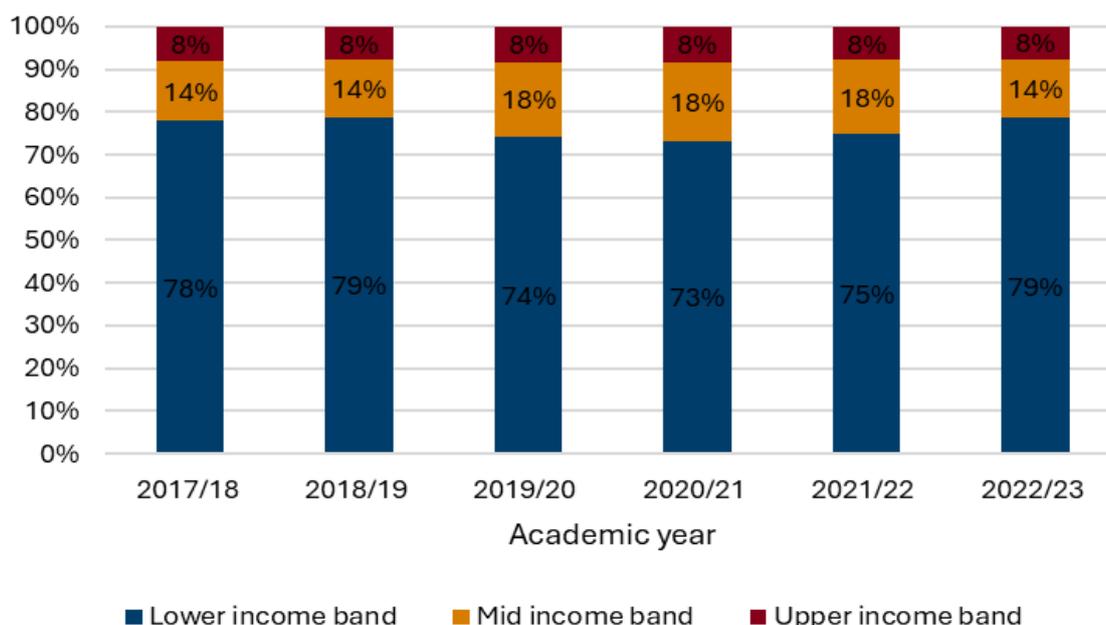
4.2.6. Household income

The vast majority of WGLG (FE) recipients come from the lowest income band, although the proportions doing so has fluctuated slightly over time, as shown at Figure 4.3. During the latest reporting period, 79% of 2022 to 2023 recipients came from households earning £6,120 or less. ^[footnote 10] The proportion of WGLG (FE) recipients coming from eligible upper income households (between £12,236 and £18,370) has remained static, at 8% over the reporting period.

⁹ [Successful applications for Further Education Welsh Government Learning Grants by institution type, academic year and mode of study](#)

¹⁰ [Successful applications for Further Education Welsh Government Learning Grants by mode of study, residual income, academic year and measure](#) Data for 2023 to 2024 is not yet available.

Figure 4.3: Household income bands of WGLG (FE) recipients



Description of figure: The chart shows that most of the grant uptake is by recipients from the lowest income households and that the proportion of recipients from lower income bands has fluctuated over time.

Source: [StatsWales](#)

4.2.7. Disability and ethnicity

The SLC asks applicants to complete an equal opportunities form providing information about whether they identify as having a disability, and their ethnicity. As this is a voluntary requirement, it has typically been completed by around half of all applicants in recent years. The information is disassociated from the application process so it is not possible to analyse the data by the outcome of the application.

The [Welsh Government's Annual Bulletin for 2023 to 24](#) reports that 1,875 equal opportunities monitoring forms were completed for that year – equating to 47% of all applications received. Of these:

- 25% identified as disabled
- 79% identified their ethnicity as White and 21% as Global Majority.^[footnote 11]

There has been an upward trend over time in the proportion of applicants who identify as disabled e.g. from 15% during 2016 to 2017. Similarly, there have been an increase in those reporting their ethnicity as Global Majority e.g. from 12% during 2016 to 2017.

¹¹ Black or British Black, Mixed ethnicity, Asian or Asian British and Chinese or other ethnic group.

4.3. Funding awarded

The total funding awarded through the WGLG (FE) scheme has decreased over time: falling from £5.6 million in 2017 to 2018 to £3.3 million in 2022 to 2023 ^[footnote 12] with a slight increase to £3.4 million in 2023/24. ^[footnote 13] During 2022 to 2023, 90% of the funding (£3.0 of £3.3 million) was awarded to recipients from within the lower income household threshold, 8% was awarded to those from the middle income household threshold, and 3% to the those within the upper income household threshold. ^[footnote 14] ^[footnote 15] ^[footnote 16]

¹² [Successful applications for Further Education Welsh Government Learning Grants by mode of study, residual income, academic year and measure](#)

¹³ [Welsh Government Learning Grants \(further education\): September 2023 to August 2024 | GOV.WALES](#)

¹⁴ Due to rounding, these proportions do not tally to 100%

¹⁵ The award amount made to learners depends on their household income thresholds.

¹⁶ [Successful applications for Further Education Welsh Government Learning Grants by mode of study, residual income, academic year and measure](#)

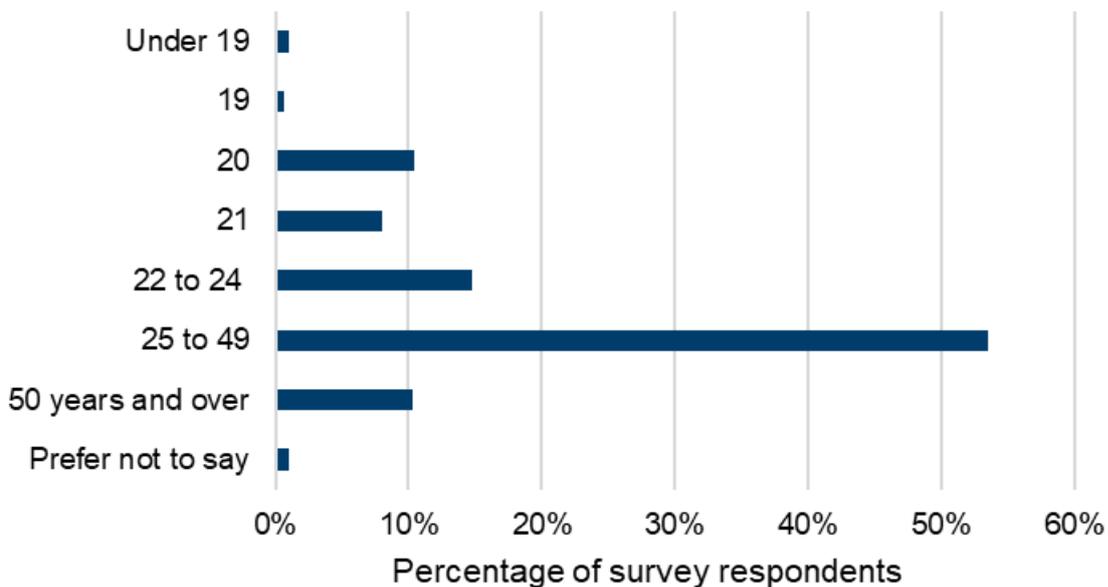
5. Profile of survey respondents

This section sets out the profile of WGLG (FE) applicant survey respondents (573) and Learning Centre staff survey respondents (32).

5.1. Profile of WGLG (FE) applicant survey respondents

As shown in Figure 5.1, 64% who responded to the survey were aged 25 and over. A smaller proportion (15%) were aged 22 to 24 whilst a fifth (20%) were aged 21 and under. Very few were 19 or under 19. This is broadly in line with published data, albeit that the published data by age is only available for successful applicants not all applicants, and suggests that older respondents were more likely to participate in the survey.

Figure 5.1: Age of applicant survey respondents



Description of figure: This chart shows that respondents represented a broad range of ages, with 54% falling between 25 and 49 years old.

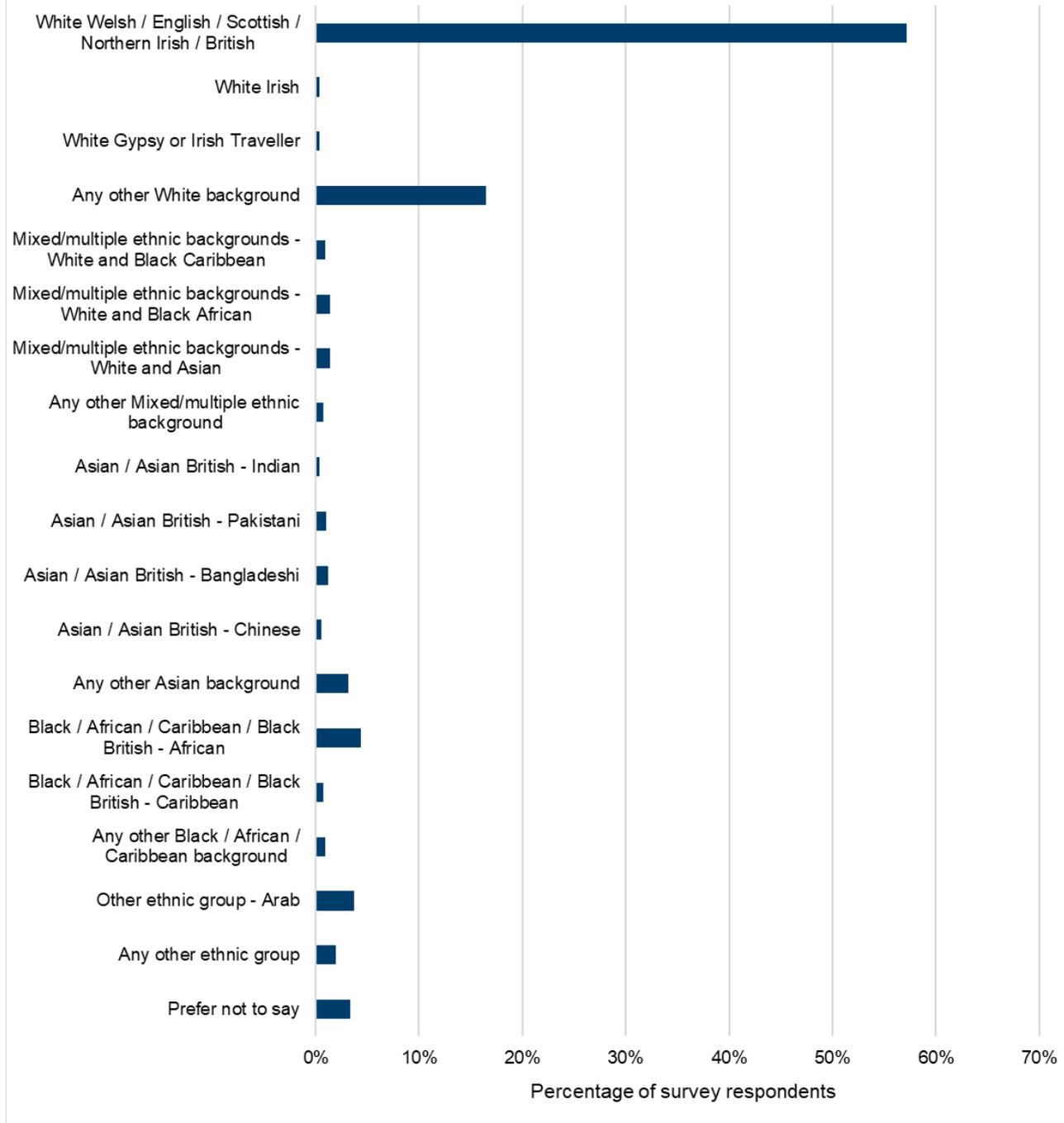
Source: OB3 Research applicant survey, n=573.

The majority of respondents were female (69%) and the minority were male (28%). Most (96%) noted that the gender they identify with is the same as their sex registered at birth.

In terms of ethnic group or nationality, 74% identified themselves as White ^[footnote 17] whilst 22% identified their ethnicity as Global Majority. Figure 5.2 provides a detailed breakdown showing the ethnic groups and nationalities identified by respondents. Of those who identified as 'another White' background, 27% noted that they are Ukrainian.

¹⁷ Be that White Welsh, English, Scottish, Northern Irish, British, Irish, Gypsy or Irish Traveller or any other White background.

Figure 5.2: Ethnic group or nationality of applicant survey respondents



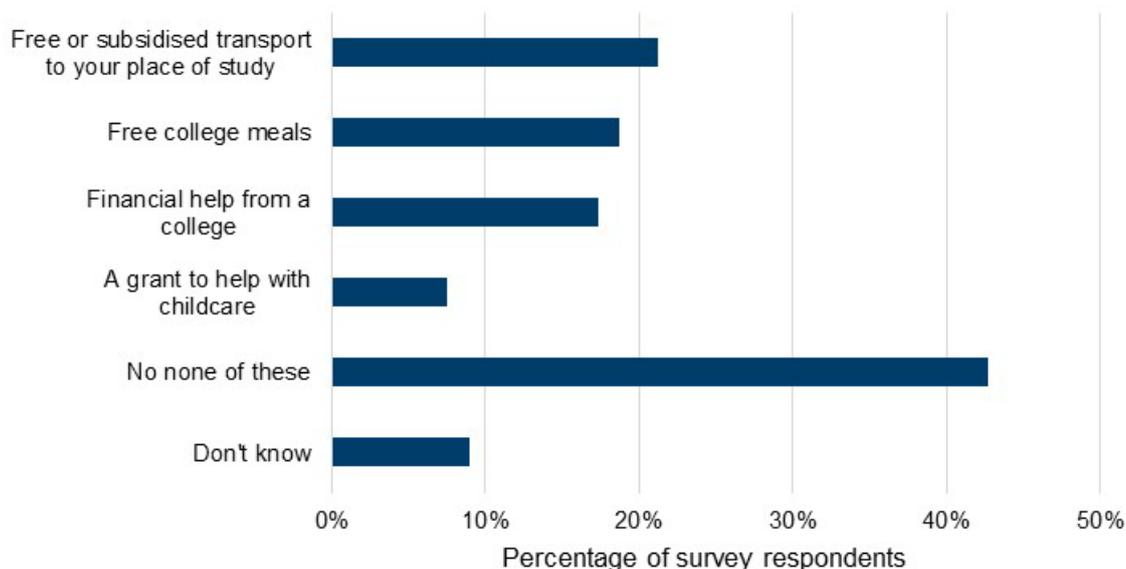
Description of figure: This chart shows that 73% of survey respondents were White and most of the remaining respondents were of a Global Majority background.

Source: OB3 Research applicant survey, n=570.

Around half of respondents had received some additional financial help or support while studying their course, while around half had not. This included free or subsidised transport to their place of study (21%), free college meals (19%), financial help from a college (17%) and/or a grant to help with childcare (8%). Learners aged 21 and under were more likely to have received free or subsidised transport, learners aged 22 to 24 were more likely to have

received free college meals and learners aged 25 and over were more likely to have received a grant to help with childcare.

Figure 5.3: Additional financial help received by applicant survey respondents

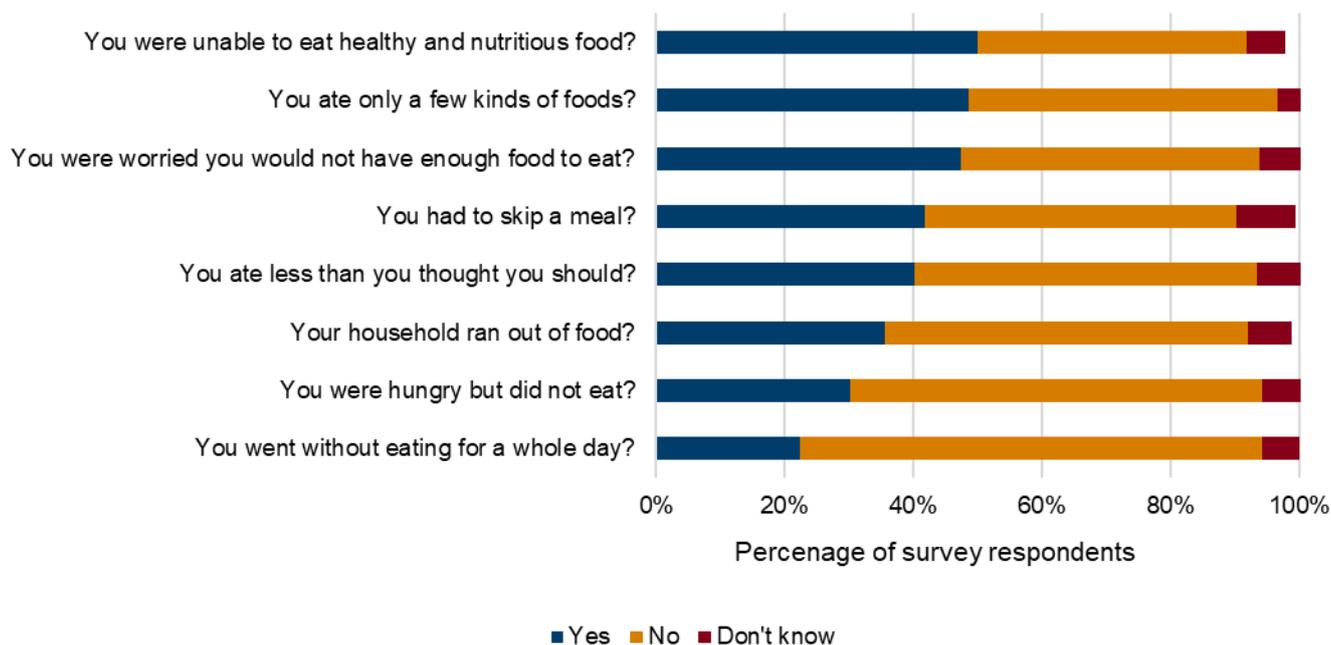


Description of figure: This chart shows that under half of respondents had not received any additional financial help.

Source: OB3 Research applicant survey, n=480.

Survey respondents were also asked about the impact of any financial concerns on their ability to eat regularly within the last 12 months. Around half reported there was a time when they were worried they would not have enough food to eat (48%), were unable to eat healthy and nutritious food (47%) or ate only a few kinds of foods (51%). Under half said there was a time they had to skip a meal (40%) or ate less than they thought they should (42%). A minority noted that their household had run out of food (30%), they were hungry but did not eat (36%) or they went without eating for a whole day (22%). Learners aged 25 and over were somewhat more likely to face some of these challenges, in particular worrying that they would not have enough food to eat, being unable to eat healthy and nutritious food and/or that their household ran out of food. However, those aged 22 to 24 were more likely to have skipped a meal and to have gone without eating for a whole day.

Figure 5.4: Applicant survey respondents' experiences of food poverty within the last 12 months



Description of figure: This chart shows that financial concerns had a moderate impact on the eating habits of around half of respondents and a more severe impact on around a third of respondents.

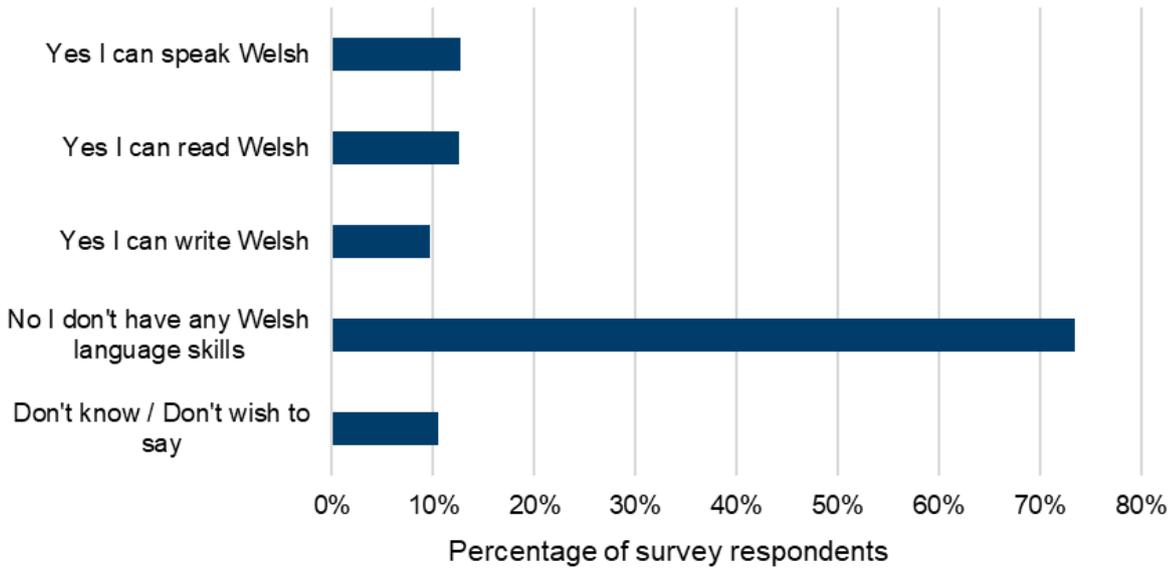
Source: OB3 Research applicant survey, n= 491, n= 492, n= 482, n= 476, n= 474, n= 476, n= 471, n= 470 for each question respectively

Few (11%) had experience of being in care, though those aged 22 to 24 were more likely to have experience of being in care. Around half (44%) had at least one child aged under 18, with the majority of these respondents being aged 25 and over. Around a fifth (19%) cared for another family member, with those aged 25 and over more likely to state that they cared for another family member

A third (33%) reported that they have additional learning needs, such as a learning difficulty or disability, which makes it harder for them to learn. Those aged 22 to 24 were most likely to report that they have additional learning needs and those aged 25 and over were least likely.

As shown at Figure 5.5, many (73%) noted that they do not have any Welsh language skills, while a smaller proportion could speak Welsh (13%), read Welsh (13%) and/or write Welsh (10%). Those aged 25 and over were more likely to note that they do not have any Welsh language skills.

Figure 5.5: Applicant survey respondents' Welsh language skills

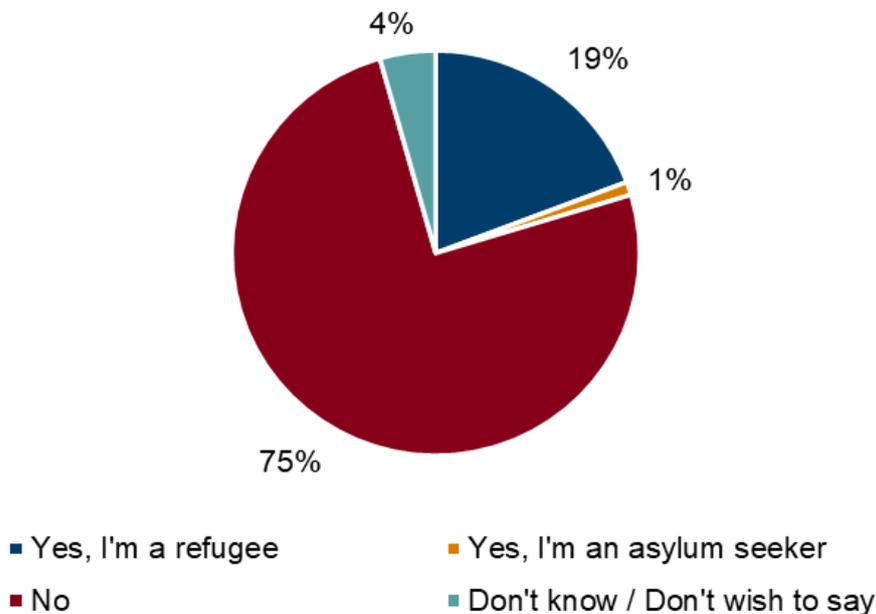


Description of figure: This chart shows that most respondents did not have any Welsh language skills.

Source: OB3 Research applicant survey, n=565. Respondents could select more than one option.

Around a fifth of respondents noted that they are refugees (19%) or asylum seekers (1%), as shown in Figure 5.6. Those aged 25 and over were more likely than younger age groups to note that they were refugees.

Figure 5.6: Whether applicant survey respondents are refugees or asylum seekers



Description of figure: This chart shows that 20% of survey respondents were refugees or asylum seekers.

Source: OB3 Research applicant survey, n= 565.

Very few respondents (2%) had spent time in prison, youth detention or another secure facility.

5.2. Profile of Learning Centre staff survey respondents

The Learning Centre staff survey was completed by 32 people. Most (78% or 25) worked at a Further Education Institution (FEI), 6% (2) worked at an Adult Learning Provider and 16% (5) worked in another type of setting such as a school.

The majority of respondents were student support or student welfare staff (38% or 12) or administrative staff (38% or 12). The remaining few held senior manager (13% or 4) or business manager (13% or 4) roles.

There were stark differences in the number of WGLG (FE) recipients studying at respondents' institutions during 2024 to 2025. In 13 cases the institution had up to 50 recipients (and based on the qualitative responses received some of these had very few or none at all) whilst in 8 cases the institution had over 200 recipients. Most of the remaining cases (8) had between 50 and 200 recipients, whilst 4 either did not know or preferred not to answer this question.

6. WGLG (FE) promotion and application process

This chapter considers the effectiveness of how the WGLG (FE) scheme is promoted and applicants' experiences of applying to the fund. It first sets out applicants' circumstances when they first applied for the grant, the qualification they intended to study and any concerns they had about continuing or returning to education.

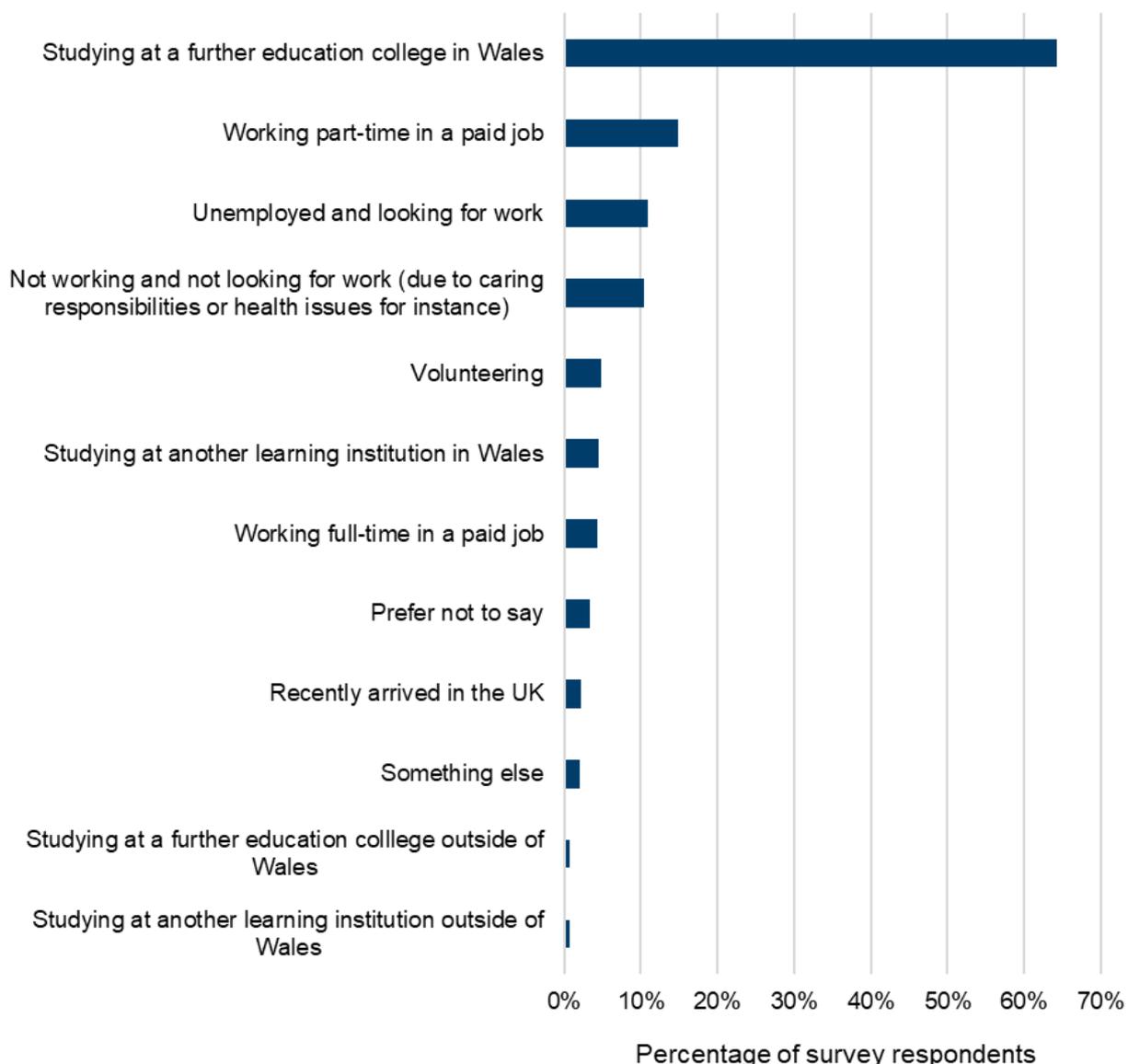
It draws upon the findings of the applicant survey, the Learning Centre staff survey and focus groups, and interviews with stakeholders.

6.1. Applicant circumstances when applying for the grant

In their survey responses, applicants provided information about what they were doing when they applied for the WGLG (FE). As shown in Figure 6.1, the majority of applicants (64%) were studying at a further education college in Wales. A smaller proportion were either working part-time in a paid job (15%), unemployed and looking for work (11%) or not working and not looking for work (11%). Very few were doing something else when they applied.

Those aged 25 and over and those planning on studying a part-time course were slightly less likely state they were already studying at a further education college in Wales and more likely to state they were doing other things, such as they were unemployed. Similarly, those identifying as refugees and asylum seekers were more likely to state they were unemployed and looking for work as well as studying at a further education college.

Figure 6.1: What applicants were doing when they applied for the grant



Description of figure: This chart shows that the most common thing which survey respondents were doing when they applied for the grant was studying at a further education college in Wales.

Source: OB3 Research applicant survey, n=573

When asked about their highest qualification when they applied for the grant, applicants most commonly reported Level 2 (22% of applicants) or Level 3 qualifications (26% of applicants). A minority had either no formal qualifications (10%), entry level qualifications (12%) or Level 1 qualifications (10%). Very few had qualifications at Level 4 or above.

Those identifying as refugees and asylum seekers were slightly more likely to report having lower-level qualifications (such as no formal qualifications, Level 1 or Entry) and less likely to report Level 3 qualifications than applicants on average. Those aged over 25 were less

likely than younger respondents to report Level 2 or Level 3 qualifications, but more likely to report Entry Level and Level 4 or above.

Figure 6.2: Applicants' highest qualification when they applied for the grant



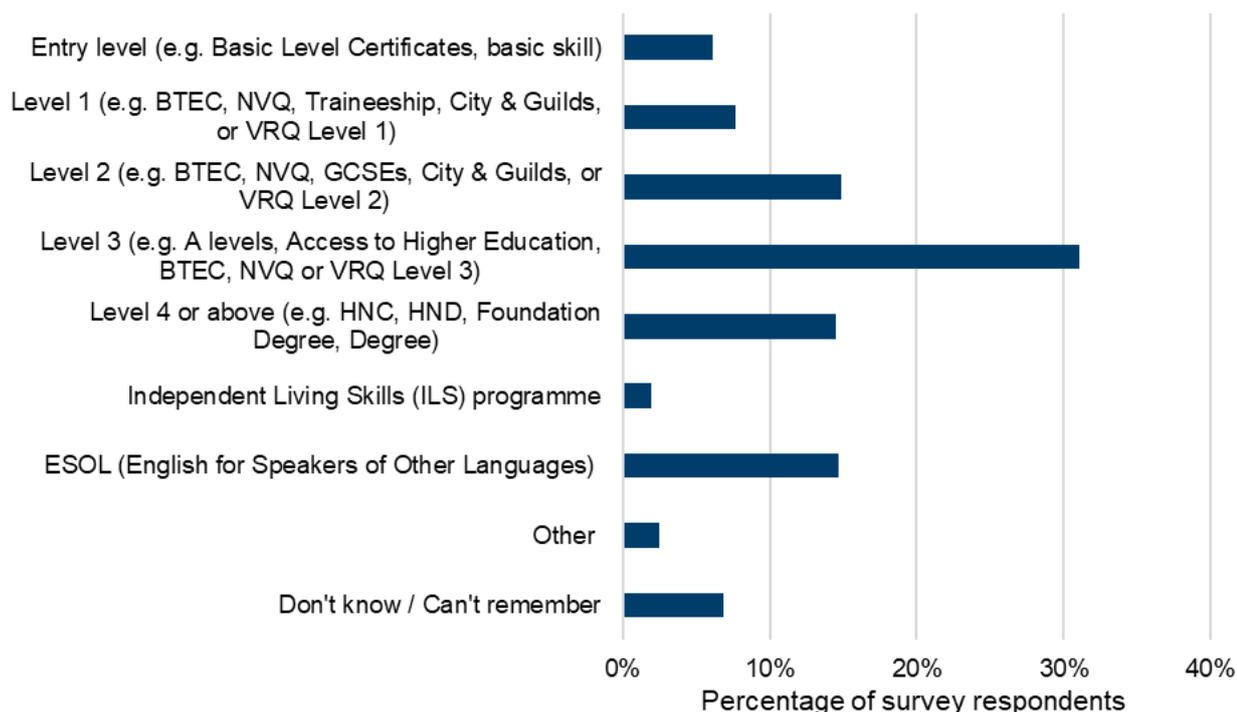
Description of figure: This chart shows that many applicants had qualifications at Level 3 or below.

Source: OB3 Research applicant survey, n=572.

Applicants were most commonly (31%) hoping to study a Level 3 course when they applied for the grant, as shown in Figure 6.3. Few were planning to study other courses such as ESOL (15%) or Level 2 (14%), while very few were planning to study lower-level courses or Independent Living Skills. In their responses, 14% of applicants noted that they were intending to follow courses at Level 4 or above, and three-quarters of these went on to note that their applications had been successful. As the WGLG (FE) only supports learners studying qualifications below Level 4, this suggests that some respondents may have misunderstood the qualification levels. A few applicants named their course title (e.g. Bakery) without specifying the Level.

Particular groups of applicants were less likely to plan to study Level 3 qualifications in favour of lower-level qualifications, particularly Level 2: males, those with experience of being in care, those caring for a family member, those with additional learning needs, and refugees and asylum seekers. Refugees and asylum seekers, as well as those aged 25 and over, were more likely to intend to study ESOL qualifications than average while those aged over 25 were also more likely to plan to study Level 4 or above. Level 3 qualifications were also more likely to be studied on a full-time rather than part-time basis and by those aged 21 and under, or 22 to 24.

Figure 6.3: Type of course applicants were planning to study when they applied for the grant



Description of figure: This chart shows that applicants most commonly intended to study Level 3 qualifications.

Source: OB3 Research applicant survey, n=573.

Many survey applicants (83%) were planning to study on a full-time basis rather than part-time (14%), particularly those aged 21 and under. This pattern is broadly consistent with the published data, albeit that a slightly higher proportion of grant recipients (e.g. at 92% during 2023 to 2024) were studying on a full-time basis.

Few were planning to study through the medium of Welsh; 3% were planning to study all or most of their course through the medium of Welsh and 13% were planning to study some or a little of it through the medium of Welsh.

Applicants in older age groups (particularly those aged over 50) were less likely than those in younger age groups to study full-time, as were those with children.

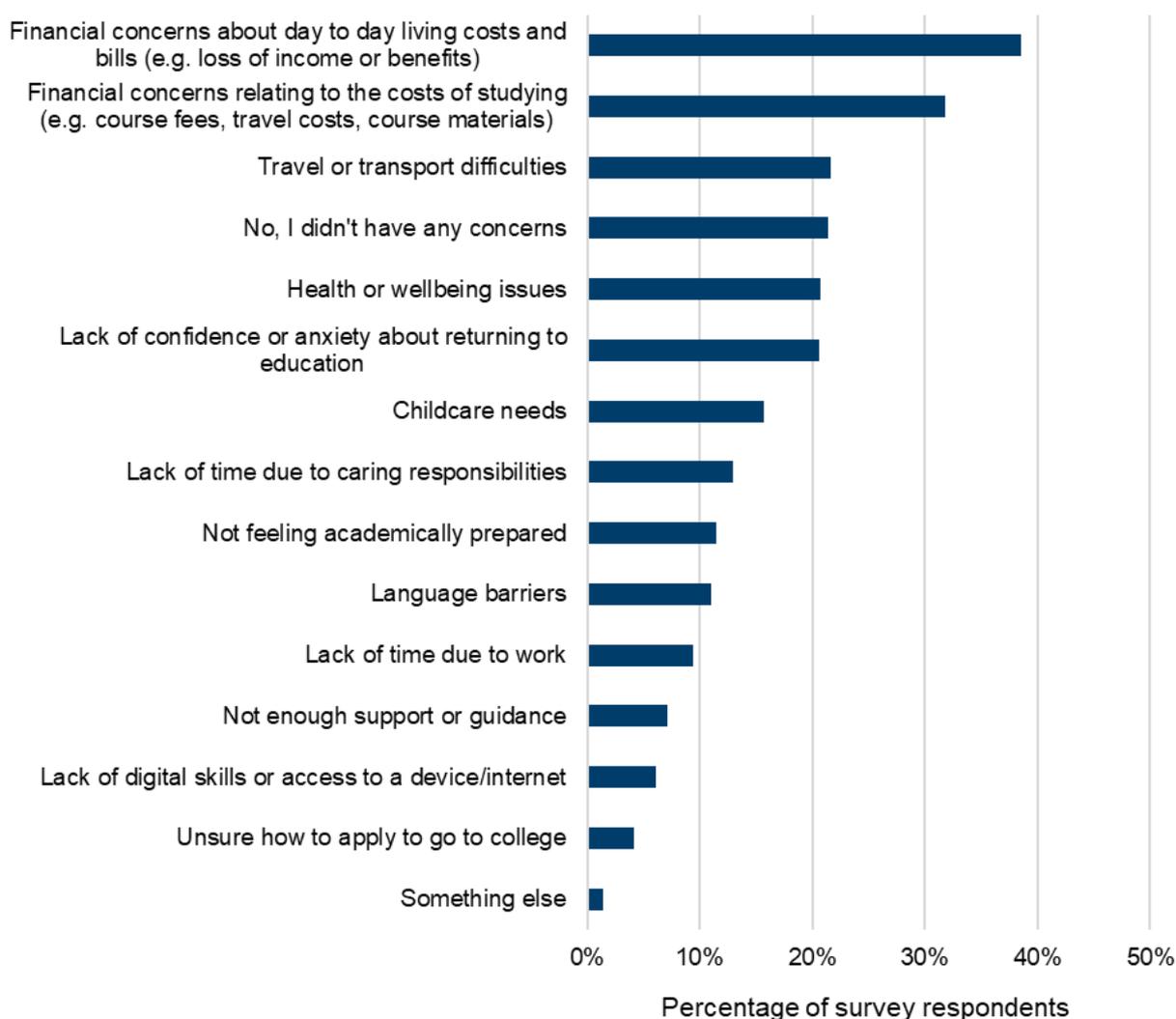
6.2. Concerns about starting or continuing in further study

As shown at Figure 6.4, applicants noted some concerns about starting or continuing in further study. Although each concern was raised by a minority of applicants, only around a fifth of applicants (21%) reported having no concerns at all. The most common concerns were financial concerns about day to day living costs and bills (39%) and relating to the costs of studying (32%). Other common concerns included travel or transport difficulties (22%), health or wellbeing issues (21%) and lack of confidence or anxiety about returning to education (21%).

Applicants in younger age groups (aged 21 and under or 22 to 24) were more likely than those aged 25 or over to express financial concerns and/or travel or transport difficulties. Those aged 22 to 24 were also more likely to express a lack of confidence or anxiety about further study or not feeling academically prepared. Those in younger age groups (aged 21 and under or 22 to 24) were also more likely to report that they had no particular concerns. Older applicants, aged 25 or over, were more likely to express concerns about childcare needs or a lack of time due to work or caring responsibilities.

Health or wellbeing was a particular concern amongst those with ALN and language barriers a concern for refugees and asylum seekers. Those with experience of being in care were less likely to express financial concerns about day-to-day living or a lack of confidence or anxiety about returning to education, while those with children were more likely to express financial concerns about day-to-day living. Those caring for a family member were less likely to express financial concerns relating to their course.

Figure 6.4: Applicant concerns about starting or continuing in further study



Description of figure: This chart shows that applicants were mostly concerned about financial concerns relating to starting or continuing in study.

Source: OB3 Research applicant survey, n=573.

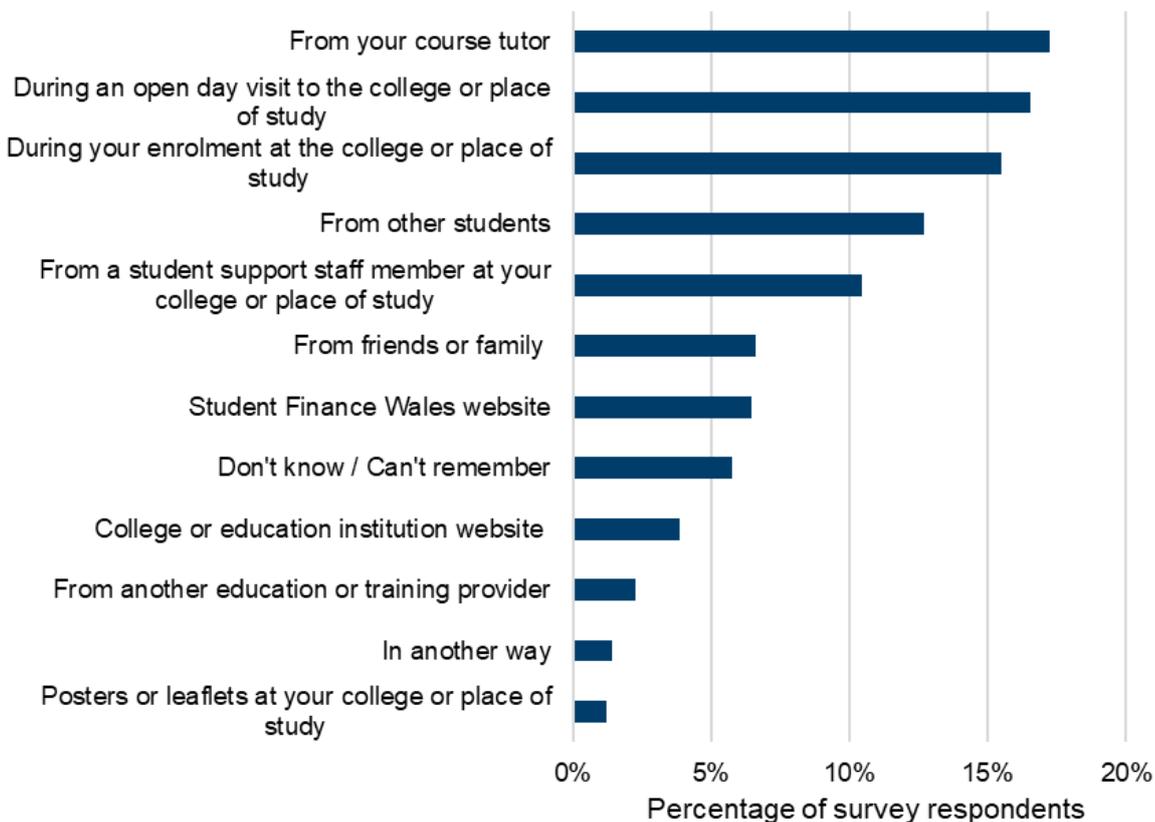
6.3. Hearing about the WGLG (FE)

A little under half of applicants (46%) had first heard about the grant before they started their course, with a further minority (36%) first hearing about it during the first term of their course. Very few had first heard about the grant later in their studies. The fact that 64% of those surveyed applied for the grant while already enrolled in further education suggests that although many may have been aware of it earlier, for example during an open day, they were not in a position to apply before starting their course. This may be because they were unsure how to access the grant or could not access any support to help with the application. It may also be the case that some were unsure whether they would qualify for support.

Younger applicants (those aged 21 and under and 22 to 24) were more likely to have heard about the grant before they started their course, while older applicants (aged 25 and over) were more likely to have heard about it during the first term. Refugees and asylum seekers were more likely to have heard about the grant before they started.

As shown in Figure 6.5, applicants typically heard about the grant through their course provider in some way. This included hearing from their course tutor (17%), during an open day visit (17%), during their enrolment (16%), from other students (13%) or from student support staff (10%). Few applicants had heard about the grant from other sources. Those aged 25 and over were more likely than younger applicants to have heard about the grant from other students.

Figure 6.5: How applicants first heard about the grant



Description of figure: This chart shows that course tutors and open day visits are important sources of first hearing about the WGLG (FE).

Source: OB3 Research applicant survey, n=574.

Learning Centre staff who completed the survey were asked about the methods which they considered to be most effective to promote the grant to potential applicants. Respondents were able to select up to four options. Of those surveyed (32), the most commonly cited options were:

- posters or leaflets at their institution (69% or 22 responses)
- directly from student support officers at their institution (59% or 19 responses)
- student Finance Wales website (50% or 16 responses)
- information during open day visits to their institution (47% or 15 responses).

In contrast to applicants, Learning Centre staff placed less emphasis on course tutors and lecturers as a method of promoting the grant, with this option only having been selected by 31% (10 respondents), as well as hearing through other students, identified by only 19% (6 respondents).

Overall, Learning Centres who contributed to the focus groups thought that they were able to promote the grant effectively to prospective learners who made contact with their institutions.

“We give advice and guidance at all our open events and welcome talks. We’ve got posters everywhere, PowerPoint presentations go to all staff. I think we promote it pretty well.”

Feedback from stakeholders suggests that promoting the grant is largely left to Learning Centres. Although information about the grant is available through services such as Working Wales, external organisations do not record how many people they refer or signpost to the scheme.

An unprompted issue raised by Learning Centre focus group participants related to perceptions among Job Centre staff regarding the impact of the grant on learners’ benefits. This misunderstanding, which was recognised as a concern several years ago and possibly linked to the fact that maintenance support for Higher Education study does affect recipients’ income, was considered difficult to correct. In the past, staff reported instances of Job Centres warning learners that receiving the grant could result in the loss of their benefits. Colleges indicated that they continue to encounter learners who are anxious about applying for the WGLG (FE) due to fears of losing financial support. Although some progress has been made through local awareness-raising and advocacy by staff, participants agreed that the effects of earlier “scaremongering” persist, particularly among vulnerable learners who are dependent on benefits.

“We’ve had to submit details from Welsh Government showing that it can’t be taken into account when assessing benefit entitlement, but some students still refuse to apply because they don’t want to take the risk.”

“I think it should be made clear if applying for WGLG affects learners benefits i.e. Universal Credit payment as there is currently conflicting information about receiving WGLG and benefit payments. Especially for those who have dependents. This puts off people applying for WGLG or even returning to studies.”

Focus group participants suggested two main ways by which the WGLG (FE) could be better promoted.

First, there was a call for more digital and easier to read promotional resources such as digital flyers and “engaging digital resources” that could be shared with potential applicants, including on digital screens at colleges. Staff suggested that infographics or short videos explaining “what it is, how to apply, and what it can be used for” would support both learners and, where relevant, their caseworkers in understanding the process. A further suggestion was to produce a resource similar to the existing “little book of EMA,” providing concise and easy-to-read information about the grant, as current materials were considered too lengthy and discouraging to engage with.

Second, participants noted that public awareness of the grant remains low, particularly outside college environments. They felt there was a need to promote the grant more widely across Wales, including in public spaces such as bars, restaurants, and supermarkets to better target the more diverse nature of adult learners. Learning Centres also acknowledged that they often struggle to reach potential learners early enough, before they have made a decision about enrolment.

“There’s still a gap ... people don’t know what’s available until they come to us.”

“We only have sight of these students when they come and enrol, but they need to make these decisions prior to starting the course.”

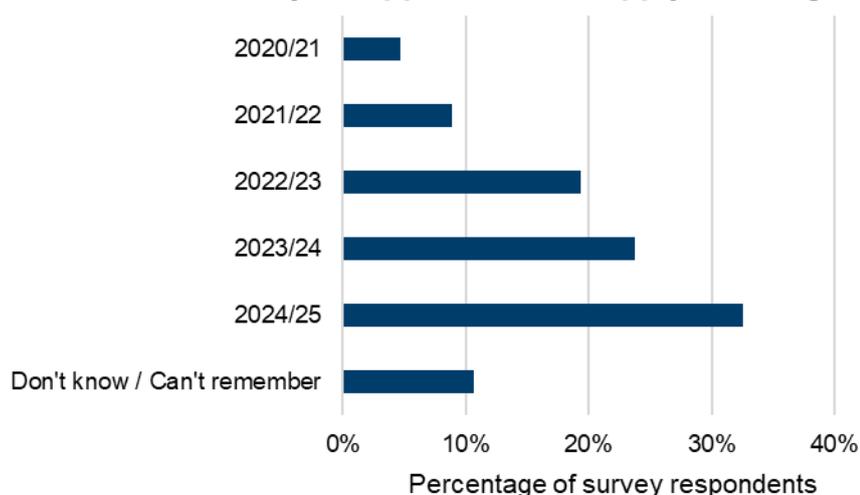
By comparison, focus group contributors thought that awareness of the WGLG (FE) remained secondary to the better known EMA and that it was very difficult to identify and reach potential learners early enough:

“There’s so much information sharing and marketing around students moving from school to FE... but I feel like almost the WGLG is a second thought.”

6.4. Applying for the WGLG (FE)

Over half of survey responses came from applicants who had applied during the last 2 financial years (33% in 2024 to 2025 and 24% in 2023 to 2024), with a further fifth from those who had applied in 2022 to 2023. Very few survey respondents had applied during 2021 to 2022 or 2020 to 2021, as shown at Figure 6.6. In contrast to the overall SLC database, which shows broadly equal numbers of applicants across the three-year period, the survey achieved a higher response rate from the 2024 to 2025 cohort and a lower response rate from the 2022 to 2023 cohort. While it is positive that respondents from the most recent cohort will have a fresher recollection of the application process, it also means that fewer respondents will have had time to progress on to further study.

Figure 6.6: In which academic year applicants first apply for the grant



Description of figure: This chart shows that more survey responses were secured from applicants who applied for the grant during the last academic year.

Source: OB3 Research applicant survey, n=572.

Over half of applicants had applied on paper (56%) while a third (34%) had applied online and the remainder did not know. Those aged 22 to 24 were somewhat more likely than those in other age groups to have completed the form online. Applicants were broadly positive about the application process. Over half had found the form very easy (22%) or fairly easy (35%) to complete, while roughly a quarter found it neither easy nor difficult (26%)

Those who had completed the form online were more positive about the process than those who had completed the form on paper:

- just over half of applicants who had completed the form on paper found the process either very easy (19%) or fairly easy (34%)
- the majority of those who completed it online found it either very easy (29%) or fairly easy (40%).

People aged over 50, those with ALN and refugees and asylum seekers were slightly less likely to report that the form was very easy to complete.

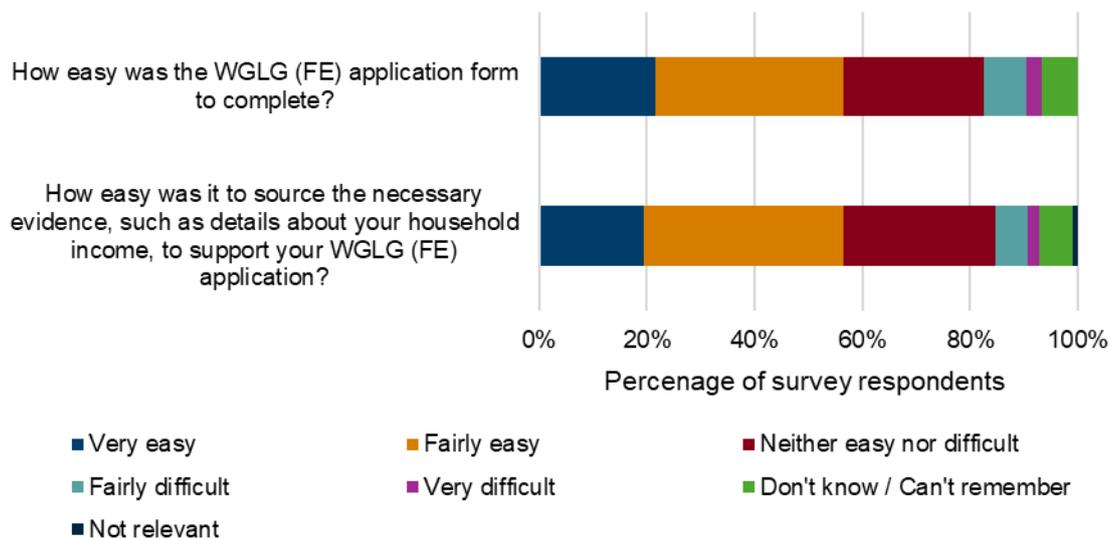
Most staff survey respondents from Learning Centres reported that applicants found the current online application process either very easy (9% or 3) or fairly easy (50% or 16). A few (17% or 5) considered the online application difficult, while the remaining staff were unsure. Focus group participants noted that the online application system had improved accessibility for applicants, reduced errors on forms, and accelerated application timelines - partly because the system now uses HMRC ^[footnote 18] data to assess household income rather than relying on applicants to provide this information.

¹⁸ His Majesty's Revenue and Customs

“The online application has been an absolute godsend... they can be approved within several days.”

Over half of survey applicants had also found sourcing the necessary evidence either very easy (19%) or fairly easy (37%), while roughly a quarter had found this neither easy nor difficult (28%). Those aged 21 and under and 22 to 24 were less likely to report that sourcing evidence had been very easy for them, whereas those with experience of care and those with children were more likely to find the process very easy.

Figure 6.7: Applicant views on ease of application process



Description of figure: This chart shows that over half of applicants found the application process easy and a quarter found it difficult.

Source: OB3 Research applicant survey, n=575 for first question, n=573 for second question.

6.5. Application barriers

In all, 8% (49) of those surveyed specified the main difficulties they had experienced with the application form. These issues were primarily raised by those who had completed the paper version of the form (33 out of the 49) but not exclusively, as those who had completed the form online also expressed similar issues:

- language and accessibility barriers. Some applicants were non-native English speakers or had ALN, including autism and dyslexia. They found the language overly complex, the layout inaccessible, and the lack of ESOL support particularly difficult

“The language used in the application was too complex for me as a non-native English speaker.”

- form complexity and length. The application was described as long, confusing, and overly detailed. Questions were hard to interpret, and some sections lacked clarity about who should provide the information

“There was a lot to fill in and I found the questions/application hard to understand.”

- financial information requirements. Gathering financial data, especially from previous years, was an obstacle on occasion. Applicants struggled to access parental income records, tax documents, and benefit details, with some citing family complexity or lack of documentation

“The amount of financial information needed and the inability to access information from previous years.”

- technical issues. Online submission errors (e.g. server failures), poor website navigation, and inconsistent advice from helpline staff were reported. Several applicants received incorrect forms or experienced delays
- reliance on support and guidance from others. Some relied on college staff or others to support them with the application form.

Similarly, few survey applicants had found sourcing the necessary evidence difficult. The main barriers reported by 31 applicants were:

- ambiguity and administrative burden. Evidence requirements were unclear, with applicants unsure what documents were needed or best suited. Many described the volume of paperwork as excessive or unnecessary

“Finding it all and getting exactly what was needed. Due to having children and being divorced there was a vast amount of evidence needed.”

- availability of documents. Applicants struggled to obtain historical records such as P60s, benefit letters, and tax statements, especially when documents were outdated, lost, or never issued. Some lacked access to family income details due to estrangement, bereavement, ALN-related barriers or partner retirement

“Unable to retrieve my partners evidence of previous employment as she is retired and the paperwork no longer exists. But after numerous correspondence explaining the reasons, I constantly had letters asking for her details that I’d explained no longer existed. I then surrendered to the fact that no matter how many times I explained, the message was not getting through to whoever was dealing with my application. The result was that I gave up applying through utter frustration.”

- proof of address and identity challenges. Several applicants lacked bills or official documents in their name
- technical and administrative problems for those completing the form online. Issues included lost documents and technical problems
- time pressure. The process was described as time-consuming and emotionally taxing, especially when evidence was not readily available or when deadlines conflicted with enrolment timelines.

Learning Centre staff participating in focus groups observed that providing proof of identity remains one of the greatest barriers for refugees. They reported that Student Finance Wales currently requires either an original birth certificate or a valid passport, which is often impossible for individuals who have fled their home countries without documentation. Staff suggested that many refugees can provide a Home Office “share code” to verify their immigration status and residency in the UK; however, whilst this form of evidence is not routinely accepted by Student Finance Wales for identity it is accepted for verifying the person’s immigration status. As a result, learners are frequently rejected initially, even when they have been resident in the UK for more than three years and living in Wales, the minimum requirement for eligibility.

Staff also highlighted that household circumstances for refugees can change rapidly, for example, due to changes in legal status, family reunification, or employment which make a grant system based on the previous tax year’s income often unsuitable. They called for a more responsive system that could account for extenuating circumstances and sudden changes to better reflect the realities of these learners’ lives. Furthermore, staff noted that young refugees are classed as unaccompanied minors or estranged young adults, yet the current requirement for proof of three years’ financial independence makes it almost impossible for them to be recognised as independent learners.

A minority of applicants (38%) reported receiving support from their college or course provider to complete their application, while around half (52%) did not. Those who did receive support generally felt the support was very good (71%) or fairly good (25%), particularly those aged 25 and over. Certain groups of applicants were more likely to have received support, including those aged 25 and over, those with experience of being in care, those who care for family members and refugees. Men were less likely to have received support than women.

Around two-thirds of surveyed Learning Centre staff thought that their institution provided support to applicants with their application either on a regular (34% or 11 respondents) or occasional basis (34% or 11 respondents). Those whose institution very rarely or never provided such support had very few, if any, recent applicants.

Focus group Learning Centre staff noted that most of their support is focused on helping ESOL and refugee learners complete the application forms, primarily due to language barriers. Their limited English proficiency meant that supporting these learners was “time-consuming”:

“Most days we’ll have at least two who need help... it’s time-consuming, but necessary because of the language barrier.”

“We have a large cohort of ESOL students... it takes a lot of input just guiding them through.”

One stakeholder interviewed also reported that they support refugees and migrants in completing the WGLG (FE) application, often providing assistance in the applicant’s first language. As a result, they believed this support was well received, as it allowed them to explain the requirements in a way that applicants could fully understand.

6.6. Improvements to the application process

When asked whether the application form could be changed or improved, roughly half of the applicant respondents who answered this question either felt the application form was fine as it is or were not sure about any potential improvements. The remainder of respondents, however, suggested some improvements. These included:

- simplifying of the form. Respondents who completed the paper version of the form felt it was too long, complicated, or overwhelming. They suggested using simpler wording, reducing paperwork, and making questions clearer. Several highlighted that it should be easier for people with learning difficulties, disabilities, or limited literacy

“Simplified so it doesn't feel so overwhelming. Especially for people who aren't strong academically.”

- online access and digital processes. Respondents preferred an online application option, with the ability to upload evidence digitally. They suggested options for saving previous details for renewals and having a personal login/account system
- guidance and support. There were calls for clearer instructions, examples, or even video guides amongst those who had completed the form either online or on paper. Some wanted real-time support, such as online chat or in-person help at college. There were also requests for tutor assistance or staff trained to guide applicants

“Could provide a video on how to explain how to fill in sections on the paper version of the application.”

- accessibility. Suggestions included offering multiple formats (paper, online, translated versions, audio support). Some recommended colour changes to paper forms for people with visual stress/dyslexia
- administrative improvements. There was some frustration with using financial information from 2 years prior, as it was not seen to reflect current needs. There were also calls for faster processing, clearer payment schedules, and fewer repetitive evidence requests
- improving promotion and communication. A few respondents said they only found out about the grant late during their studies and suggested better promotion. Others asked for improved communication on application status and payment timings.

Survey and focus group Learning Centre staff offered a few suggestions for improving the application process. Many of these suggestions echoed the points raised by applicants – such as making the application form more streamlined, providing an easy read option and offering more diagrammatic explanations or video clips where possible to support the applicant's comprehension.

Learning Centre staff also called for the applicant to be taken 'immediately to the application form' after registering for an account online, in order to eliminate any confusion about where to go next. From their experience, they had several learners who misunderstood that the

registration process equated to the full application process and had not proceeded with their application as a result.

“Some make an account and think that’s it done. We’ve had to help them realise there’s another step.”

A few Learning Centre staff offered specific suggestions which would make the application process easier for those whose first language is not English. These included being able to complete the application form in multiple languages, gaining access to a digital platform that can read text in different languages and having access to a dedicated contact number for support when completing their application:

“It would help them [ESOL learners] if the online platform offered accessibility software, such as Recite Me, to translate the page content in to their first language.”

“The language barrier continues to be the main issue with many of our adult learners. Students have the option of selecting their choice of language on their mobile phone. Could this be an option when completing the online form.”

“One of our managers ran the WGLG form through an easy-reader programme, and it came out at a really high literacy level. There’s no easy-read option out there, which really does need to be addressed.”

However, one stakeholder cautioned against making the application form or any supporting documents available in other minority languages. They argued that doing so could discourage applicants with limited English from recognising the value of learning the language and, ultimately, integrating into wider society. In their view, this approach would be inappropriate in principle and would not empower non-English-speaking applicants.

One Learning Centre staff also called for a dedicated application section for Learning Centres in order to ease the process when learners are being supported by staff:

“Maybe allowing service providers a dedicated online application section... so it’s flagged as a supported application rather than just a learner doing it alone.”

Other staff suggested that the application process should accept uploaded or digital copies of birth certificates, as providing original documents proved challenging for some applicants. It was also recommended that SFW accept alternative forms of ID for those who struggle to evidence the three-year residency requirement, particularly refugees.

6.7. Grant application outcome

Overall, amongst survey applicants, 80% were successful in achieving a grant and 8% were unsuccessful, while a few could not remember (12%). Amongst those who were unsuccessful, a majority (63%) knew why and a minority did not (37%). Around 35 unsuccessful applicants shared their views about the outcome of their application. Key themes in their responses included:

- frustration with the eligibility criteria. Several explained that their applications were declined because their course hours fell short due to the way modules were structured or split. Others noted attendance-related disqualifications that did not take into account valid reasons such as childcare responsibilities or transportation difficulties. Inconsistencies between institutions and between full-time versus part-time learners were also mentioned as causes for frustration

“We have studied for the whole academic year as a part-time ESOL-Level 2 students (4 days a week) which exceeds the minimum hours required to be eligible for the WGLG, however, my application was rejected from the college due to organising issue as they split the ESOL course into 2 courses (Listening and Speaking, Writing and Reading), consequently, each course individually was below the hours of eligibility. This has not applied to full-time students and wasn't applied to similar part-time ESOL courses in other colleges.”

- lack of clear communication and guidance. Some raised concerns about poor or unclear communication from grant administrators or educational institutions. This included unclear instructions on necessary documentation, such as proof of legal residence, and misleading information prior to course enrolment regarding grant availability. Confusion over deadlines and procedural requirements further complicated the process for many applicants

“Not enough help in completing it and when asked on campus, passed from pillar to post, gave up and struggled without funds.”

- perceptions of unfairness and inconsistency. Several respondents perceived the outcome as unjust. They cited examples of peers with similar circumstances who successfully received funding. Some expressed that long-term eligibility factors, like previous receipt of EMA, were overlooked. There was also a sense among some applicants that external factors beyond their control negatively impacted their chances

“Unfair as I was entitled to EMA for a few years and no circumstances had changed.”

- an emotional response. Applicants sometimes reported disappointment and discouragement. Some applicants described feeling unsupported or let down, particularly those facing additional challenges responsibilities
- practical barriers to application. Challenges with the application process itself were noted. Some respondents struggled with understanding or completing certain sections, often due to lack of assistance or support
- acceptance of the outcome. A smaller portion of respondents accepted the decision as fair, acknowledging their own shortcomings in providing required information or meeting criteria.

6.8. Changes observed in the profile of WGLG (FE) recipients

Surveyed Learning Centre staff were asked about the way the profile of WGLG (FE) recipients at their institution had changed over time. The main message was that the number of students applying and receiving the grant had declined over time, and this was attributed to the static household income thresholds. One such surveyed staff observed that:

“many learners who would previously have qualified for WGLG support are now unable to access it. We have observed that these learners often still experience financial hardship despite being above the threshold.”

A few surveyed staff had not observed any noticeable change, adding that it tended to be those who had missed out on their education first time round who were applying for it.

A small number of surveyed Learning Centre staff reported that they had seen an increase in applications from refugees and those supported via the Ukraine scheme over time. A similar number also noted that increasing proportions of recipients were studying ESOL and lower level courses such as the Independent Living Skills programmes: “We see a trend in that lower level course applicants tend to be from the lower income demographic.”

Learning Centre staff were supportive of ESOL learners being supported by the scheme, adding that it was often the case that they were “highly qualified back home .. and just need the English” to progress. One stakeholder disagreed with the principle of financially supporting refugees and migrants to learn English. In this case, it was argued that learners were already accessing free ESOL provision and that they did not need to be encouraged financially to engage: “They are getting ESOL classes ... why do you pay them on top of that?”

7. Administration, Learning Agreements and payments

This section considers the administration of the WGLG (FE) scheme, grant attendance and progression requirements, the use and value of Learning Agreements as well as grant payment practices.

7.1. Administration of the WGLG (FE) scheme

A small number of Learning Centre staff survey respondents (16% or 5 respondents) reported that their institutions faced challenges in meeting their expected responsibilities in administering the WGLG (FE) scheme. In 9% of cases (3), respondents cited issues relating to staffing resources, and in one setting, increased demand for WGLG (FE), as well as EMA and FCF, meant that the workload had become “unsustainable and unmanageable.” Other respondents highlighted more specific issues, often related to communication challenges:

“We don't have a campus and our learners are spread out across multiple learning venues across Wales. We are not informed when they submit an application and so we only know an application has been made by regularly checking the portal.”

“If learners do not meet the attendance criteria they contact SFW who often tell them they are eligible. This confuses the learner as yes they are eligible for funding subject to meeting the attendance criteria.”

Overall, Learning Centre staff thought that the WGLG (FE) guidance prepared by the SLC provided their institution with enough clarity about the administration of the scheme, although there appears to be scope to improve the guidance around two main aspects - the academic progression criteria for eligible students and the attendance requirements for learners.

Regarding guidance on progression, it was felt that this should be given greater prominence rather than being “just one line in the guidance.” Staff called for clearer academic progression criteria to provide more clarity in cases such as applicants starting the same level course in a different subject area. It was also suggested that SFW advisors should adhere more closely to the guidance on progression when responding to applicant queries, as some applicants had received conflicting advice:

“I will explain they are not eligible as they have received same/higher level funding previously and are now not eligible, student then phones SFW who allegedly tells the student they can have WGLG and to speak to us again! I always check for extenuating circumstances etc before a final "no", so for the student to come back with that message from SFW makes me feel like an idiot and the student is given the impression that I have done my job wrong! The info given should be consistent and supporting the school and colleges.”

Focus group staff also called for more frequent training around the administration of the grant scheme, due to staff turnover and high demand for support from ESOL and refugee students, with one observing that:

“It’s a bit of a minefield – you’re too scared to step left or right. Updated training or guidance, offered in different formats, would help.”

7.2. Grant attendance and progression requirements

Survey Learning Centre staff were asked to specify the attendance requirements which WGLG (FE) recipients must follow at their institution in order to receive payments. It is possible to make the following observations about their responses, which all point to a variation in policies and practice:

- where a respondent provided a proportional attendance requirement (50% or 16 responses), the attendance rate varied from a low of 80% (16% or 5 responses) to a high of 90% over the term (22% or 7 responses). Another 2 Learning Centres (6%) stipulated that they expected learners to attend “every lesson”
- in addition to their termly attendance requirements, 9% (3) Learning Centres stipulated that, in accordance with the guidance, learners must achieve 100% attendance during the first 2 weeks of the first term (and in some cases at the start of subsequent terms as well)
- several Learning Centres added that they would take extenuating circumstances into consideration. This was particularly highlighted by institutions which catered for learners with ALN
- Learning Centre staff also emphasised the importance of adopting greater flexibility to accommodate the needs of disabled learners, particularly in relation to setting out lower attendance requirements and accommodating health needs
- a few Learning Centres added that they would also take the progress being made by learners into consideration
- one Learning Centre noted that they did not allow more than two consecutive weeks of absence, although it is possible that those with extenuating circumstances might be treated differently.

Of the 32 respondents, 53% (17) thought that their institution adhered very strictly to these requirements whilst most of the remaining respondents (41% or 13) noted that they were fairly strictly adhered to. The remaining 6% (2) did not know or did not respond.

In a similar manner, surveyed Learning Centre staff specified the academic progression requirements set by their institution in order for learners to keep receiving WGLG (FE) payments. Respondents highlighted 2 main requirements which related to:

- progression to the next level of study, which was thought to be in line with the SFW guidance which stipulates that learners are not eligible for the grant if they are planning to study a course which was at the same or lower level than a course for which they had previously received the grant. A few respondents noted that they applied some discretion e.g. “Where a course or level change is shown to support

genuine progression, particularly improving employment prospects, we allow funding to continue”

- an expectation that learners keep up with course requirements, such as ‘actively completing work’, ‘achieving their units’ and ‘handing in work by deadlines’.

Again, half of survey respondents (50% or 16) thought that their institution adhered very strictly to these requirements whilst most of the remaining respondents (34% or 11) thought that they were being adhered to in a fairly strict way.

Overall most surveyed Learning Centre staff (91% or 29) considered the current criteria of attendance and progression for awarding the grant to be appropriate. Focus group participants and some stakeholders suggested that this cohort is more motivated than their EMA counterpart, and as such there are less issues around attendance.

Focus group Learning Centre staff commonly reported that their institutions had made major strides in recent years to improve their own internal systems for recording the attendance of learners which in turn allowed them to easily check which students were eligible for WGLG (FE) payments and share this data with the SLC. One observed:

“Now I can just click a button... it tells me who’s eligible for payments.”

Many applicants (82%) felt that awarding the grant on the basis of attendance was appropriate, while very few did not (7%). Just over 6% (37 respondents) decided to explain why they thought awarding the grant on the basis of attendance was inappropriate and/or suggest alternative criteria.

- Financial need and personal circumstances should be top priorities. This includes people on low incomes, those receiving benefits, single parents, carers, and those facing housing difficulties. The common view was that these challenges often affect attendance, so considering financial hardship directly would be fairer and more helpful.

“Take into account other household responsibilities such as someone’s main carer.”

- Another important theme was recognising learners’ commitment and progress, since attendance alone does not capture the full story. People suggested that showing effort, completing assignments, and improving over time should count as much as simply being present. Many noted genuine barriers such as health problems, mental health challenges, childcare duties, or transport issues that can prevent regular attendance.

“I don’t think it’s appropriate for the WGLG (FE) allowance to be awarded solely on the basis of attendance. While attendance is important, many students face barriers such as illness, disability, caring responsibilities, or transport issues which can affect their ability to be present every day. The allowance should instead be based on commitment to learning and engagement with the course

(e.g. submitting work, progress made, or effort shown), with flexibility for genuine circumstances. This would make the support fairer and more inclusive.”

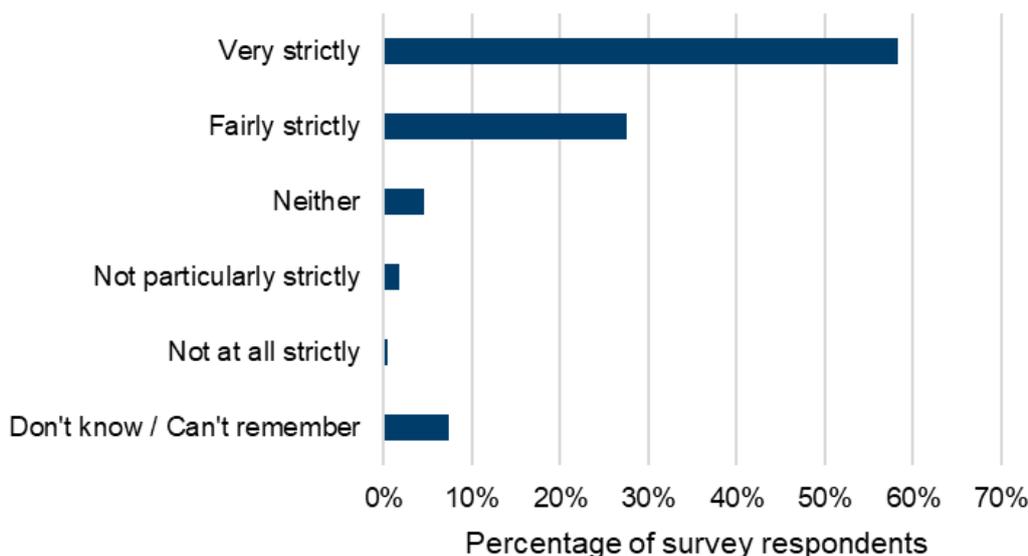
- Some comments pointed out that different types of courses, especially ESOL and part-time programmes, have unique patterns of attendance that do not fit the usual rules. Flexibility in how attendance is assessed across these course types was seen as important.
- A few respondents suggested involving tutors or support staff in the decision-making process. Since staff often understand learners’ situations better, their recommendations could add fairness and context, helping to identify those who deserve support even if their attendance is low.
- Lastly, a smaller number mentioned academic performance as a possible factor, suggesting that grades or test results could reflect commitment and effort.

7.3. Learning Agreements

Many surveyed Learning Centre staff (75% or 24 respondents) considered the WGLG (FE) Learning Agreements signed between their institution and grant recipients to be either very valuable (50% or 15 respondents) or fairly valuable (30% or 9 respondents). Only 6% (2) did not consider them valuable and the remaining respondents either thought they were neither valuable or invaluable or did not know. Focus group Learning Centre staff broadly believed that Learning Agreements worked well and reiterated their value. They were often described as digital agreements, which was thought to have helped streamline their completion by learners.

Most survey grant recipients (90%) remembered signing a Learning Agreement. Many of these recipients reported that the college or course provider followed the attendance requirements set out in the Learning Agreement either very strictly (58%) or fairly strictly (28%), as shown at Figure 7.1. Those aged 25 and over were more likely to report that their college or course provider followed the attendance requirements very strictly.

Figure 7.1: How strictly colleges or course providers followed the attendance requirements within Learning Agreements



Description of figure: This chart shows 58% of grant recipients thought that the attendance requirements set by their learning institution was very strict.

Source: OB3 Research applicant survey, n=458.

When asked about suggested changes or improvements to the Learning Agreements, around half of recipients who answered the question made specific suggestions for improvements while the others felt no change was needed. Themes for improvement related to:

- attendance rules and flexibility. The most frequent theme was concern about the strict high attendance requirement. Respondents suggested more leniency for students with health issues, disabilities, caring responsibilities, or other unavoidable absences. Some wanted attendance policies to reflect genuine engagement rather than rigid percentages

“Give some leeway to the attendance guidelines due to unexpected health or home circumstances.”

- simplification and clarity. Several respondents asked for clearer explanations of requirements and consequences (e.g., what happens if attendance or progress targets are not met). Others suggested simpler language, and clearer guidance at the point of signing

“I think the WGLG (FE) Learning Agreement could be clearer and easier to understand. It would be good if it was more flexible for individual needs and included regular check-ins to see how things are going.”

- communication and support. Respondents highlighted the need for clearer communication about signing the agreement and about payment timelines. Suggestions included reminders, progress check-ins, or request-tracking systems. Some wanted more support for students struggling with mental health, anxiety, or other barriers
- administrative improvements. Suggestions included faster issuing of agreements, allowing students to manage the process through online accounts, avoiding errors in issuing the wrong agreement and more transparency in how decisions are made.

7.4. Grant payments

Many recipients (84%) reported receiving their termly grant payments on time, while a small proportion (13%) received them on time in most cases. Only a very small number reported not receiving payments on time. Those aged 21 and under were less likely to report receiving their grant payments on time in all cases.

A minority of grant recipients reported problems with the grant payment system and/or made suggested improvements. These suggestions included:

- changes to payment frequency and timing. Grant recipients expressed a desire for more frequent payments (e.g., monthly, fortnightly, or weekly instead of termly).

Some recipients preferred payments to be split into smaller amounts to help with budgeting and prevent overspending. There were also calls for earlier payments at the start of term to cover essential costs such as travel, equipment, and uniforms. On occasion, recipients reported their payments had been late or missing. Other recipients had found it difficult to source the required evidence and had their initial payments delayed as a result

“Payments could be made more frequently, such as monthly instead of termly, to help with regular living costs.”

“Because I went the first term without payment due to spending so much time trying to prove my eligibility.”

- the introduction of partial payments (rather than losing the entire payment) when attendance falls slightly short. Some recommended flexibility in assessing entitlement, noting that household income does not always reflect a student's personal access to funds. They also emphasised the need to ensure that any administrative errors in recording attendance does not affect payments
- improving administration and communication. Delays in receiving payments were sometimes attributed to poor coordination between colleges, students, and the grant administrators. There were requests for clearer information about payment dates and amounts, ideally provided at the start of the year

“A prior break down of payment amounts and dates would be highly beneficial for the individual in managing money throughout the year.”

“Initial payment on first application payment was delayed as college/[grant team]/student weren't in complete communication.”

- increasing the grant amount. Some suggested that grant amounts should be increased, citing rising living costs, fuel, housing, and food prices. Some felt that part-time students should receive more support and that payments should be scaled more fairly with household circumstances

“I don't feel the funding matches the cost of living and needs to be higher to support this.”

- ensuring that delayed payments do not result in financial hardship. A small number of recipients described financial hardship caused by delayed payments, including borrowing money, struggling to afford childcare, and nearly dropping out of their course
- ensuring that external factors such as bank holidays, high demand and differing term start dates between institutions do not result in delayed payments.

8. The importance of the WGLG (FE)

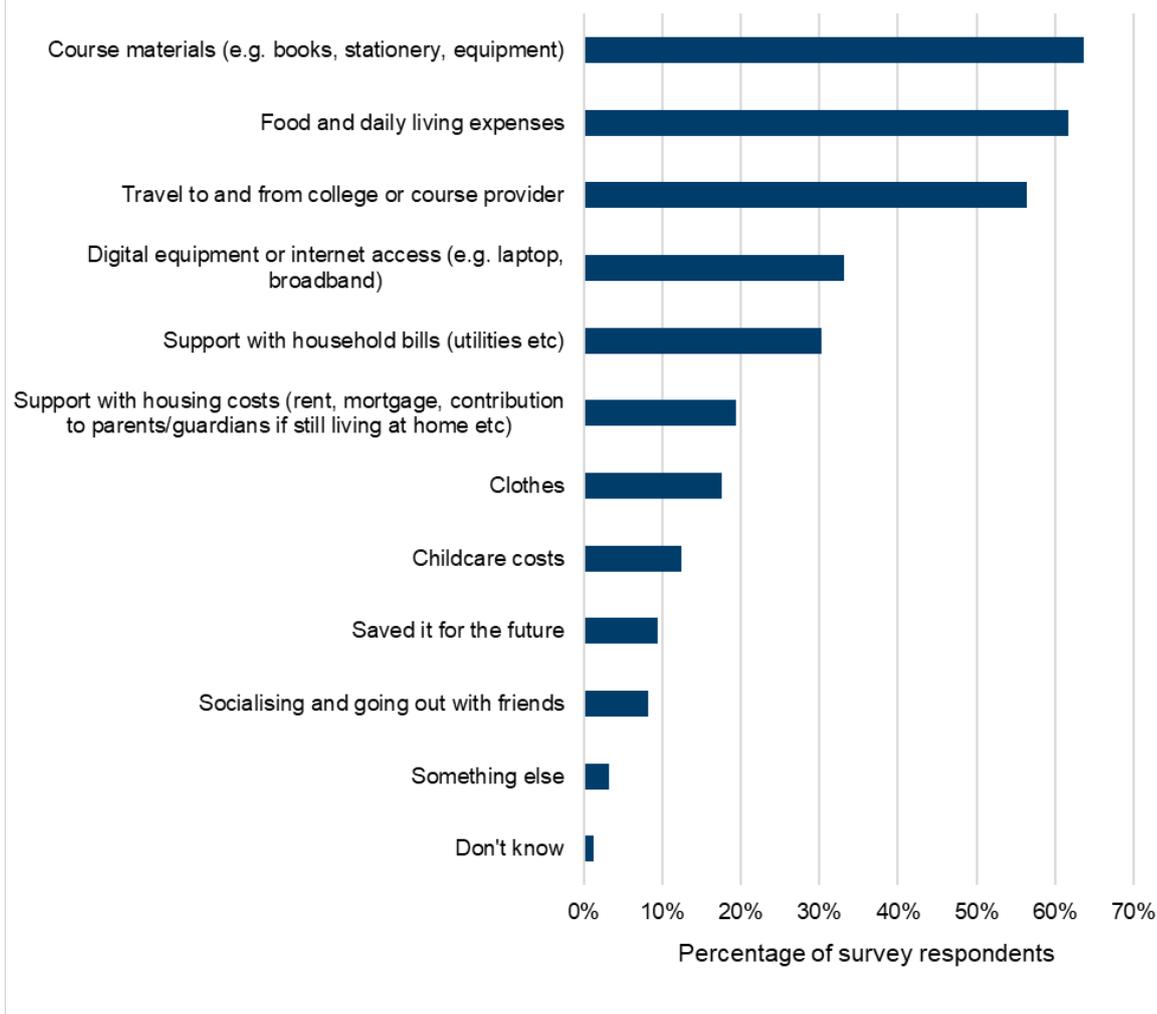
This section considers the use and importance of the WGLG (FE), and draws upon the views of successful recipients, unsuccessful applicants and feedback gathered from Learning Centre staff who completed the survey and participated in qualitative discussions.

8.1. Use of the WGLG (FE)

Grant recipients primarily reported spending the grant on course materials (64%), food and daily living expenses (62%) and travel to and from their college or course provider (56%). A minority also reported spending the grant on digital equipment or internet access (33%) or support with household bills (30%). Fewer reported spending the grant on other costs such as housing costs (19%), clothes (18%) and childcare costs (12%). Figure 8.1 presents an overview of this spending. Other broader examples provided by a few applicants included driving lessons, supporting their family and course fees.

Those aged 25 and over were more likely to spend their grant on household bills, digital equipment or internet access, housing costs and childcare costs. Those caring for family members and those with children were also more likely to spend the grant on household bills. Carers and those with children were also more likely to spend the grant on digital equipment and internet access.

Figure 8.1: On what recipients usually spend their grant

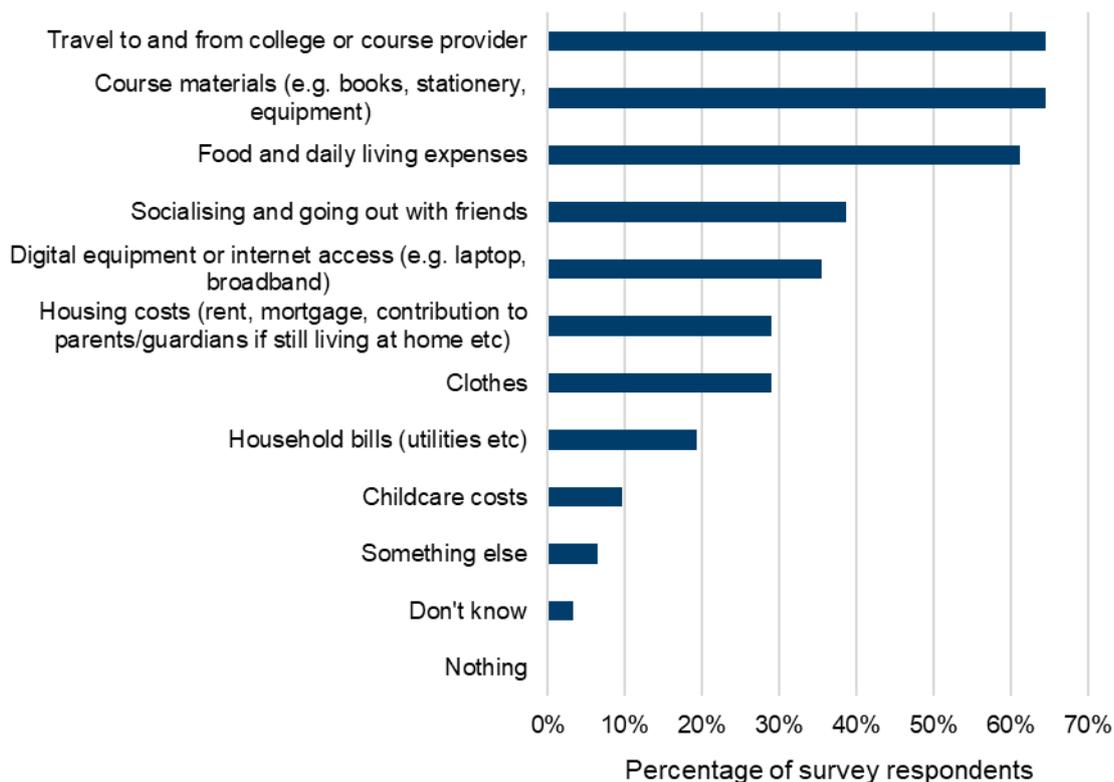


Description of figure: This chart shows that recipients mainly used the grant to cover course materials, food and daily living expenses, as well as travel.

Source: OB3 Research applicant survey, n=459.

The 31 unsuccessful grant applicants who took up their course expressed similar views, noting that because they did not receive the grant they found it difficult to pay for travel to and from college (65%), course materials (65%) and food and daily living expenses (61%). As shown in Figure 8.2, they also found it difficult to pay for socialising and going out with friends (39%), digital equipment or internet access (35%), housing costs (29%) and clothes (29%). These views were echoed by the 9 unsuccessful applicants who did not take up their course; 8 noted they had concerns about how they would pay for travel, 4 expressed concerns about paying for course materials, 4 about paying for food and daily living and 4 about paying for digital equipment or internet access.

Figure 8.2: Things which unsuccessful applicants found difficult to pay for without the grant



Description of figure: This chart shows that unsuccessful applicants found it difficult to pay for travel, course materials and food and daily living expenses.

Source: OB3 Research applicant survey, n=31.

Focus group staff often observed that learners relied on the grant to help cover the costs associated with their course such as travel, equipment and clothing. It was also frequently mentioned that learners used the grant to cover the costs of essential items:

“We often get students coming in desperate to know when the next payment is due.”

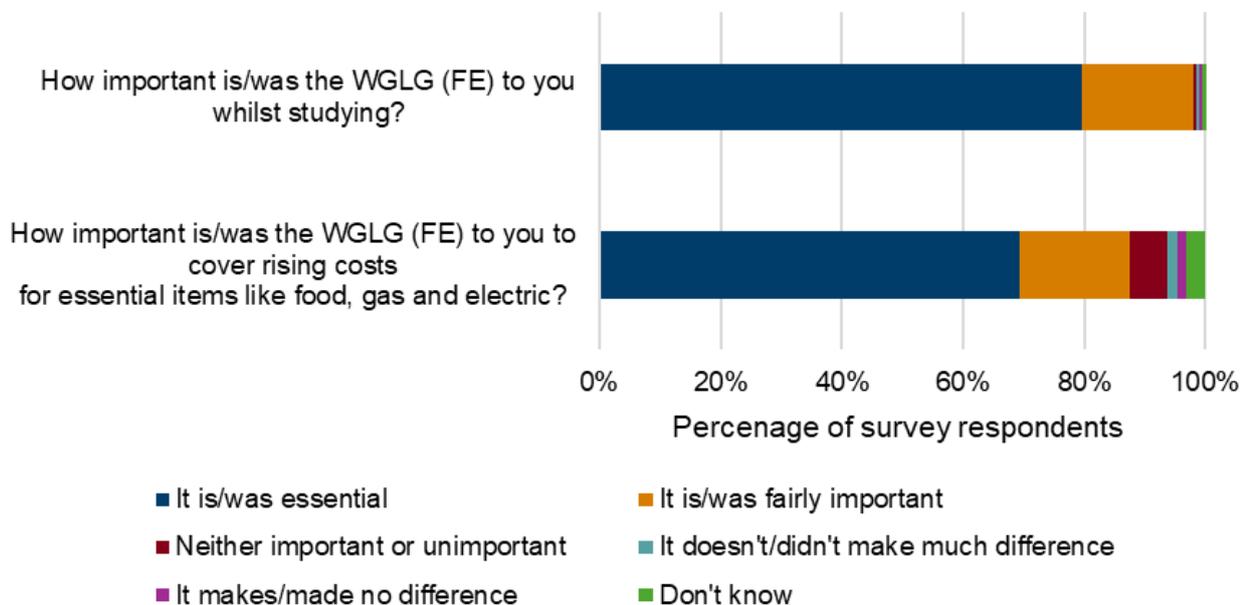
Learning Centre focus group staff did not suggest that the WGLG (FE) was being used to pay course fees, as these are typically waived for grant recipients from low-income households. However, it was noted that learners must pay a small administrative charge associated with course enrolment, which some find difficult to cover, as they were not yet in receipt of the WGLG (FE).

8.2. Importance of the WGLG (FE)

Grant recipients typically indicated that the grant was very important to them during their studies. As shown in Figure 8.3, many (80%) felt that the grant was essential while they were studying, with a further minority (18%) saying it was fairly important. Women were more likely than men to report that the grant was essential to them, as were those aged 21 and under, while those who had experience of care reported it as less essential.

A majority (69%) also felt it was essential to help them cover rising costs of essential items, with a further minority (18%) saying it was fairly important. Certain groups of applicants were more likely than average to state the grant was essential in terms of rising costs, including learners aged 25 and over, those with children, those with ALN and refugees. Part-time learners were less likely to report that the grant was essential to cover rising costs.

Figure 8.3: Importance of the grant to recipients



Description of figure: This chart shows that many recipients considered the grant an essential income source for them whilst studying and important in covering rising living costs.

Source: OB3 Research applicant survey, n=457 for first question, n=460 for second question.

Feedback from Learning Centre staff reinforced these findings, with many survey respondents (88% or 28 of 32) of the view that the grant was either very or fairly important to learner’s ability to cope with the financial pressures that they may experience because of their studies. Focus group participants added that the grant makes a substantial difference to learners, adding that it can be a helpful contribution to those learners who return to education to retrain or change careers:

“We have people giving up work to do a course and go into a different trade – they’re really relying on this.”

Unsuccessful grant applicants (who took up their course) also reported that receiving a grant would have made a big difference to them in the majority of cases (61%), or some difference in a minority of cases (39%). Many also felt the grant would have made a big difference (58%) or some difference (26%) to their ability to cover rising costs.

As a result, many recipients felt that without the grant, it would have been either very difficult (43%) or fairly difficult (27%) to pay for study related costs. Few felt it would have been very

easy (10%) or easy (6%). Those aged 25 or over were more likely to report that it would have been very difficult, whereas men and those with experience of care were less likely to do so. Many (90%) unsuccessful applicants (who took up their course) agreed that having the grant would have made it much easier to pay for study related costs.

9. Impact of the WGLG (FE)

This section considers the views of surveyed applicants as well as surveyed and interviewed Learning Centre staff about the impact of the grant scheme upon decisions to enrol on courses, attendance levels, engagement with courses, and course completion rates.

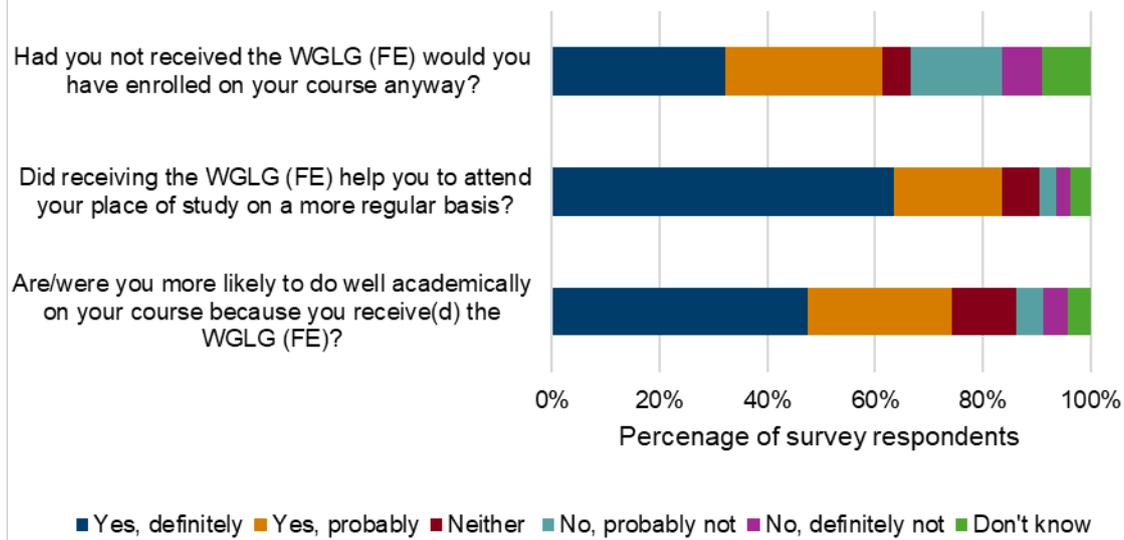
9.1. Impact upon decisions to enrol on course, attendance and engagement

Many grant recipients felt that the prospect of receiving the grant played either a very important (46%) or fairly important (27%) part in their decision to enrol on their course in the first place. Few (10%) felt it was not important. Those aged 25 and over, as well as refugees, were more likely to report that it was very important to their decision. However, as seen in Figure 9.1, a majority of recipients reported that they would definitely (32%) or probably (29%) have enrolled onto their courses anyway if they had not received the grant, suggesting that other factors also influenced their decisions. Those aged 25 and over, those with experience of care and refugees were more likely to report that they definitely would have enrolled anyway.

The survey data shows that 70% of unsuccessful applicants took up and continued their course despite not receiving the grant. A small number of unsuccessful applicants (9) did not take up or continue with their course and provided a range of reasons for why. These included not being able to afford the course, challenges with the course (such as loss of interest or enjoyment), difficulty in attending regularly, time spent on other commitments and having started a job. All but 1 of the 9 also stated they had been concerned (either a lot or a little) about how they would manage financially had they continued studying. Of the small minority who were unsuccessful and didn't continue (2 of 9) felt they would probably or definitely have continued with their course had they received the grant.

Receiving the grant did, on the other hand, often make recipients more likely to attend their place of study on a more regular basis (63% definitely and 20% probably) and somewhat more likely to do well academically (48% definitely and 27% probably). Learners aged 25 and over were more likely to report that the grant definitely helped them attend on a more regular basis. Learners aged 25 and over, refugees and those caring for family members were also more likely to report that the grant would definitely support them to do well academically.

Figure 9.1: Impact of the grant on recipient enrolment decisions, attendance and academic achievement

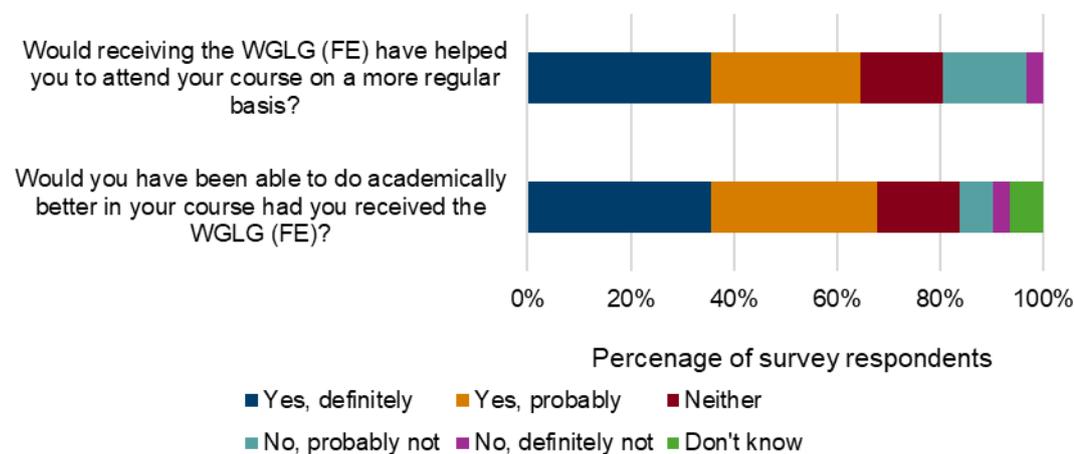


Description of figure: This chart shows that recipients thought the grant had a very positive impact upon their attendance and a fairly positive impact on their academic success. The majority of recipients would have enrolled anyway in the absence of the grant.

Source: OB3 Research applicant survey, n=458, n=457, n=456 for each question respectively.

As shown in Figure 9.2, unsuccessful applicants (who took up their course) expressed somewhat more reserved positive opinions about the potential impact of the grant on their attendance and academic achievement. A minority (35%) felt that the grant would definitely have helped them attend their place of study more regularly, while a minority (29%) felt it probably would have. Similarly, a minority (35%) felt the grant would definitely have had a positive impact on their academic achievement, while a minority (32%) thought it probably would have.

Figure 9.2: Unsuccessful applicants' views on the potential impact of the grant on attendance and academic achievement



Description of figure: This chart shows that a minority of unsuccessful applicants thought the grant would have had a positive impact on their attendance and academic achievement.

Source: OB3 Research applicant survey, n=31.

These findings were reinforced by Learning Centre staff survey data, with many staff reporting that the grant made either a large (50% or 16 of 32 respondents) or some (31% or 10 respondents) difference to recipients' attendance levels. Focus group staff reiterated the view that the grant was having a positive impact upon recipients' attendance, given the conditional link between attendance and payment which reinforced positive habits:

“We've seen attendance go up once they realise the implications of their money not coming through.”

However, one staff member raised concerns about cases where learners attended only for the first two weeks of the academic year before disengaging after receiving the initial payment, suggesting that the timing of the grant payment might unintentionally encourage early withdrawal rather than sustain engagement.

Staff were also positive about the grant's impact on recipients' engagement levels, though to a lesser extent: 25% (8 of 32) of staff felt it made a large difference, while 44% (14) reported it made some difference. Staff highlighted the importance of the grant in helping learners to pay for transport and as a contribution towards course costs such as books, equipment and clothing. Some examples were provided by focus group contributors, where the grant was making a difference for learners to focus on their education without the immediate financial pressures that might otherwise force them to seek full-time work.

“We see first-hand the difference it makes... one student, a dad with three children, wouldn't be doing the course without having the grant.”

While other stakeholders could not comment on how the grant affects attendance or engagement, they were more cautious about its influence on learners' decisions to enrol in the first place. They noted that, because the grant is relatively small (especially compared with higher education support), it is likely to have only a limited effect on such decisions.

9.2. Impact upon course completion rates

Nearly all survey grant recipients had either completed their course (78%) or their course was still ongoing (16%). Very few (3%) had left their course early. Similarly, nearly all unsuccessful applicants had either completed their course (74%) or their course was still ongoing (19%). Many surveyed Learning Centre staff thought that the grant made either a large (41% or 13) or some (41% or 13) difference to recipient's ability to stay on, and complete, their course. One such respondent highlighted that:

“WGLG learners are on low incomes and in the current financial climate the grant does go a little way to help them stay at college, whether helping with transport costs to the campuses or for course costs, books, clothing etc”

Amongst the small number of survey grant recipients who had left their course early, reasons why included physical or mental health concerns, perceived college or course inadequacy, childcare costs and responsibilities, personal difficulties at home. Unsuccessful applicants who initially started their course but left also cited a lack of interest in the course.

10. Progression

This section considers the progression made by grant recipients, and what surveyed applicants have done since in terms of any further or higher education.

10.1. What applicants did after completing or leaving their course

Grant recipients who had completed their course or left the course early (a total of 373 respondents) were asked whether they had progressed to another training course or qualification after they completed or left the course for which they received the WGLG (FE), and at what level this course or qualification was. Key findings were as follows:

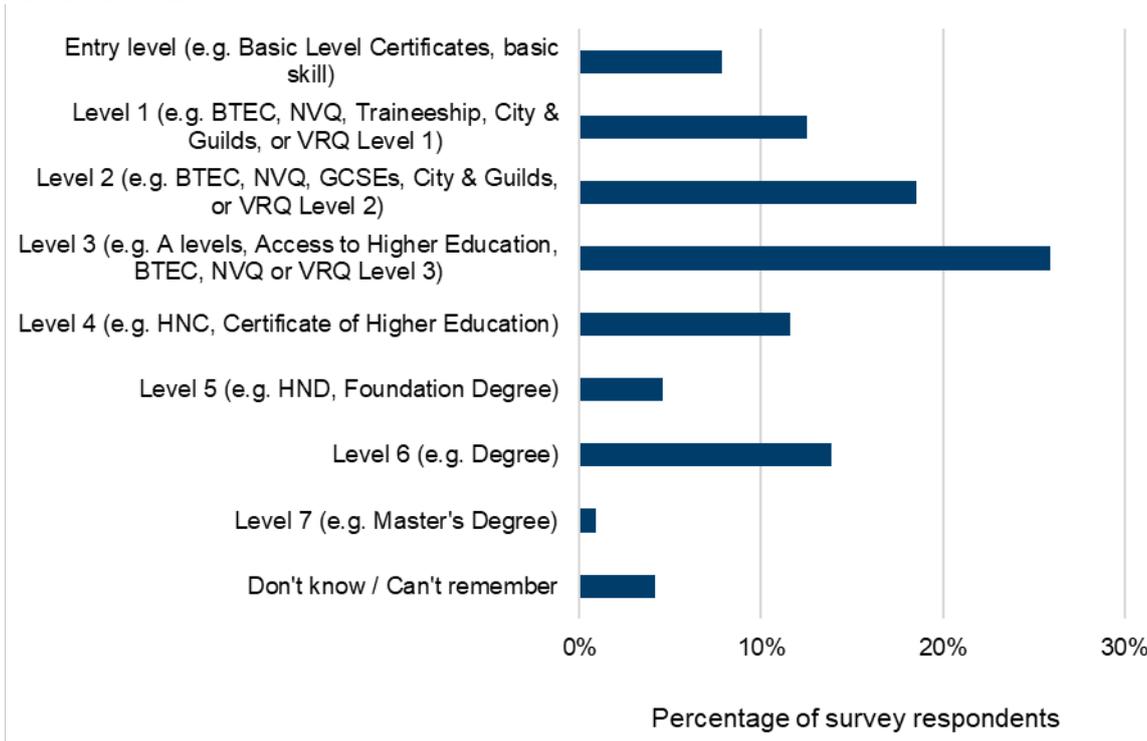
- 58% of these grant recipients who had completed or left their course reported that they had since moved on to another training course or qualification
- excluding those who were planning to study an ESOL qualification when they applied for the grant ^[footnote 19], a slightly higher proportion, at 60%, of the remaining grant recipients who had completed or left their course went on to study another training course or qualification. Of these, two-fifths noted that they progressed to a higher-level course (which equates to a quarter of all grant recipients excluding those who studied ESOL)
- in terms of those who studied ESOL, 47% of those who had completed or left their course went on to study another training course or qualification.

As seen in Figure 10.1, the majority of grant recipients who stated that they had moved on to another course since completing or leaving their WGLG (FE) course were now studying qualifications at Level 3 or below. Grant recipients had most commonly moved on to study a Level 3 qualification (24%), while others had moved on to a Level 2 qualification (19%), Level 1 (13%) or Entry level (8%). Given that courses up to Level 3 are eligible for WGLG (FE) funding, it is likely that some respondents included progression-related courses that were also funded through the WGLG (FE) when responding to this question.

A minority had moved on to study qualifications at Level 4 or above, in particular Level 4 qualifications (12%) and Level 6 (14%). Women were more likely than men to have progressed to higher-level qualifications (Level 6 or 7).

¹⁹ Data was not available on the levels of ESOL courses and so progression to higher level courses cannot be calculated for recipients studying ESOL courses.

Figure 10.1: Further qualifications undertaken by grant recipients who had progressed on to a further qualification since completing or leaving their WGLG (FE) funded course



Description of figure: This chart shows that the majority of grant recipients who had progressed on to a further qualification after completing or leaving their WGLG (FE) funded course had studied a Level 3 or lower course.

Source: OB3 Research applicant survey, n=216 who had progressed on to a further qualification after completing their course.

The majority of surveyed Learning Centre staff thought that the grant made either a large (41% or 13) or some (22% or 7) difference to recipients' progression into further education study. Around half also thought that the grant made either a large (41% or 13) or some (16% or 5) difference to recipients' progression into higher education study. Some survey respondents highlighted that progressing into further education would not be an option for recipients at their institution, such as in the case of a residential college for adults with ALN.

This issue was interpreted in several ways by Learning Centre staff who attended focus group discussions. First, it was thought that WGLG (FE) played an important role in "keeping learners on the educational ladder", particularly younger learners who were progressing from the EMA to the WGLG (FE). Second, it was considered appropriate that the WGLG (FE) was only awarded to learners over consecutive academic years if they demonstrated that they were progressing with their further education learning, either progressing from a lower to a higher level course, or broadening their knowledge and skills, such as studying a Level 2 beauty course after having completed a Level 3 hairdressing course. Third, staff thought that the grant also supported the progression of recipients into higher education and employment, and that the route taken was often determined by the course which learners had studied. For instance, recipients studying life skills courses were

often thought to be focused on getting ready for employment whilst those studying access courses were often moving on to higher education, particularly in vocational areas such as nursing.

Some staff also observed that increasing numbers of learners at their institution were having to repeat the same level of course over two consecutive years and were therefore not eligible for the grant. For instance one reported that they had:

“more returners who have previously studied at the same level so [are] not eligible for the grant.”

Focus group participants discussed the different progression routes taken by ESOL students. They noted that some learners, including many refugees, were already highly qualified in their home countries but needed to improve their English to secure work in their field. Others were seen to use WGLG (FE)-funded courses as a stepping stone into a new area of study:

“Once they’ve done the ESOL, they are trying to go into an actual area where they can get a good course behind them and get a job.”

It was also the case that ESOL learners were seen to progress meaningfully through education and society, and staff highlighted that refugees sometimes progress faster than expected:

“There is real progression – in language, confidence, and integration. It allows them to become active members of society and access employment.”

One stakeholder was less convinced that grant-recipient ESOL students were progressing into further or higher education after completing their course, suggesting that the WGLG (FE) was not achieving its objectives in this respect.

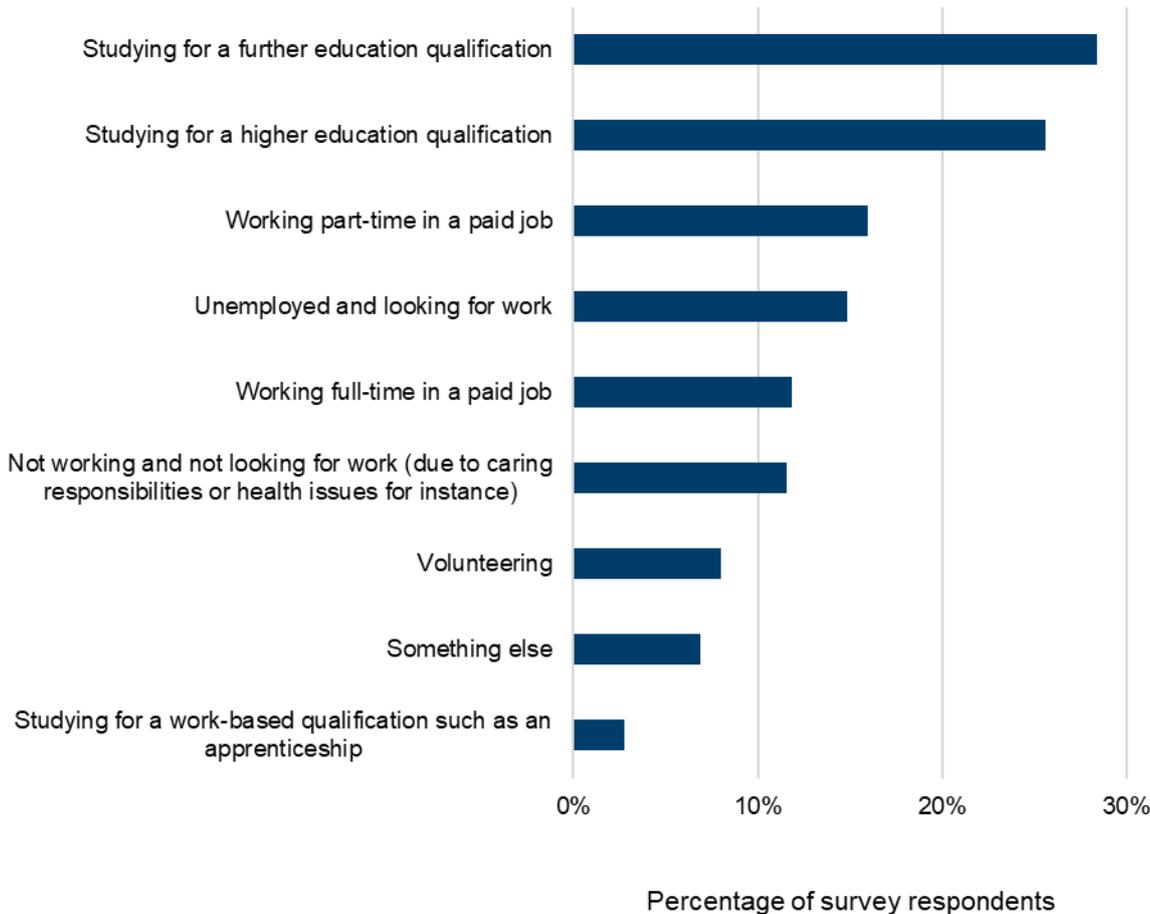
Unsuccessful applicants who had taken up their course were asked whether they had subsequently progressed to another training course or qualification, and at what level. Of the small number of unsuccessful applicants who took up their courses and have since completed it or left early (25), about two-fifths (10) specified that they had moved on to another training course or qualification since completing or leaving the course. Five of these courses or qualifications were at a higher level than the course for which they had applied for WGLG (FE) funding. Although these proportions are lower than for grant recipients, the difference in overall numbers of grant recipients and unsuccessful applicants makes direct comparison difficult. Where unsuccessful applicants went on to study, 4 studied at Level 3 or below, and 6 progressed to Level 4 or above.

10.2. What recipients were doing at the time of survey

Grant recipients who had either completed their course or left early provided information about what they were doing at the time of the survey. Over half of respondents (54%) were still studying. As shown in Figure 10.2, these learners were fairly evenly split between those undertaking further education and those undertaking higher education qualifications. However, some caution is needed when interpreting the data by qualification type, as it is

likely that a number of respondents may have misunderstood or misreported the level of qualification they were studying. Less frequently, recipients who had completed their course or left early also reported working part-time (16%) or full-time in a paid job (12%), being unemployed and looking for work (15%) or not working and not looking for work (12%) for example due to caring responsibilities. Those aged 22 to 24 were less likely to be studying for a further education qualification and more likely to be studying for a higher education qualification. Those with experience of being in care were also more likely to report they were studying towards either a further or higher education qualification. Those caring for a family member were also more likely to report studying for a further education qualification, as were refugees.

Figure 10.2: What grant recipients who had completed their course or left early were doing at the time of survey



Description of figure: This chart shows that grant recipients who had completed their course or left early were most likely to be studying for a further or higher education qualification at the time of the survey.

Source: OB3 Research applicant survey, n=363.

11. WGLG (FE) eligibility and value of support

This section considers the views of applicants and Learning Centre staff about the eligibility for receiving the grant, the value of the grant and frequency of payment.

11.1. Grant eligibility criteria

11.1.1. Household income threshold

At present full-time learners:

- with a household income of £6,120 or less are eligible for the maximum grant of £1,919
- with an income of up to £12,235 are eligible for £959
- with an income of up to £18,370 are eligible for a £576 grant.

Part-time learners are entitled to a proportionate amount.

Learning Centre staff thought that these household income thresholds were too low and this was the main issue raised by survey respondents and focus group participants alike. Of those surveyed, the majority (66%, or 21 of 32) thought that the thresholds were too low. Few (19% or 6) thought that they were about right and one thought that there should not be any threshold in place. Focus group participants believed that the frozen thresholds were the main reason for the decline in grant recipients over time. They noted that even many of the lowest-income families now exceed the £18,370 limit. As a result, a growing group of learners are seen as “just missing out” on support despite being in genuine financial hardship.

“The threshold is set at such a low level that it excludes a significant number of potential learners from accessing college ... the threshold becomes a barrier to many looking to return to education.”

“The current limit has remained static despite rising living costs and education-related expenses, meaning many learners in genuine hardship are excluded from support. Updating the threshold would make WGLG (FE) more equitable and reflective of today’s economic realities.”

When asked what the thresholds should be, 13% (4) survey respondents mentioned that they should be aligned with those set in place for the EMA (at £23,400). Of the 14 who provided a specific figure, thresholds ranged from a low of £20,000 to a high of £26,000, averaging at £22,430.

Focus group participants argued that EMA and WGLG (FE) income thresholds should be aligned, describing the current arrangement as “illogical” and “heart-breaking”. They felt alignment would give learners greater continuity and support their progression to higher-level study. Participants were particularly concerned that the sharp drop in income thresholds between EMA and WGLG (FE) disrupts progression for learners moving from age 18 to 19.

“For one child they can get up to £23,401 income on EMA, but for WGLG it drops to £18,370... it’s ridiculous. We’re supporting them one year, then they move on and we’re saying, sorry, you’re not eligible anymore.”

“They get £40 a week on EMA, then they move on and get nothing because the income threshold suddenly drops. It’s ridiculous.”

Focus group participants stressed the point that adult learners often have financial commitments to cover, often due to having dependents, and were therefore unduly disadvantaged now compared to their EMA counterparts:

“These are adults with houses and children – to expect them to live on such low incomes is unrealistic. It’s a barrier to accessing education.”

Some focus group participants and stakeholders also questioned whether all applicants aged between 19 and 25 should be assessed for WGLG (FE) based on their own income rather than parental income ^[footnote 20], since they are effectively adults. Adopting this approach would create a scheme more similar to Personal Learning Accounts and ReAct.

Focus group participants also suggested that care leavers should be able to access the ‘guaranteed maximum support’ available within the scheme as this would help them become more financially independent.

Furthermore, Learning Centre staff also said they would welcome an annual review of the thresholds, rather than ad hoc changes to the criteria.

11.1.2. Level of qualification

The majority of surveyed Learning Centre staff (67%, 21 of 32) thought it appropriate that the grant be restricted to learners studying up to Level 3 qualifications. A few (9% or 3) disagreed and argued that they had learners who were studying Level 4 qualifications, such as hair and beauty courses, who did not qualify for any financial support:

“We run several level 4 courses and they are not eligible nor are they eligible for HE funding, so there is a gap.”

Focus group participants were particularly vocal about this issue, giving several examples of learners who were slipping through the gaps while studying FE Level 4 courses. Courses cited included Level 4 Construction, Engineering, Association of Accounting Technicians, and Acting. Given the relatively small number of learners affected, participants suggested that extending eligibility to this group should not present major cost issues.

“They’ve gone from Level 3 to Level 4 and there’s nothing to support them – they’re in no man’s land.”

²⁰ Those aged between 19 and 25 are normally considered a dependent student unless they satisfy other criteria such as having supported themselves financially for at least here years, are married or responsible for a child. The guidance considers those 25 and over as an independent student.

“We’ve got one learner who’s done three years of EMA and is in dire financial situation, but she can’t get WGLG because she’s now on a Level 4 acting course.”

11.1.3. Distance learning

Over half of surveyed Learning Centre staff (59% or 19 of 32) thought it appropriate that the grant was not available to learners studying on a distance learning basis. 19% (6) disagreed and argued that this cohort of learners should be entitled to support, not least because they were incurring similar course costs to those studying in-person and because there had been a growth in virtual learning of late:

“They are still learning and taking time to complete a course and having to purchase books and resources.”

“The world has changed and asynchronised learning is becoming more appealing.”

Focus group participants were also divided over whether WGLG (FE) should be extended to distance learning students. Some argued that the grant should reflect the increasing use of hybrid learning in further education. Others were more cautious, mainly because they felt it would be difficult to monitor attendance, as the grant is attendance-based. Several participants also noted that the issue was not relevant to their setting, as they did not offer any distance-learning provision.

Other stakeholders were more supportive of including distance learning students in the scheme, noting that most adult learning and training now involves some form of distance learning. They also highlighted that this group would need financial support to cover course resources, such as books, equipment, and broadband.

11.1.4. Part-time learners

Focus group Learning Centre staff were divided over the criteria for awarding the grant to part-time learners. Some felt the criteria were “probably fair,” while others argued that the minimum study hours required were too high. In their institutions, many part-time courses had far fewer contact hours, meaning learners would never qualify for support. It was also noted that part-time learners are often mature students with financial commitments and childcare responsibilities and therefore could benefit most from financial assistance.

“Our part-time courses never reach the 275-hour minimum - those learners can’t access it at all. Our part-time courses are around six hours per week, which doesn’t even equate to 200 hours over the academic year. So it is only full-time learners that can access the support.”

“The part-time hours need to be reviewed. That would make it more accessible to mature learners and give them the tools to progress in what they want to do.”

One stakeholder which refers clients to further education study suggested that the minimum part-time hours requirement was too high. In this case, many of their adult clients would find

studying 275 hours a year too demanding, and they were often seeking shorter courses focused on upskilling and retraining.

11.2. Fit with other financial support

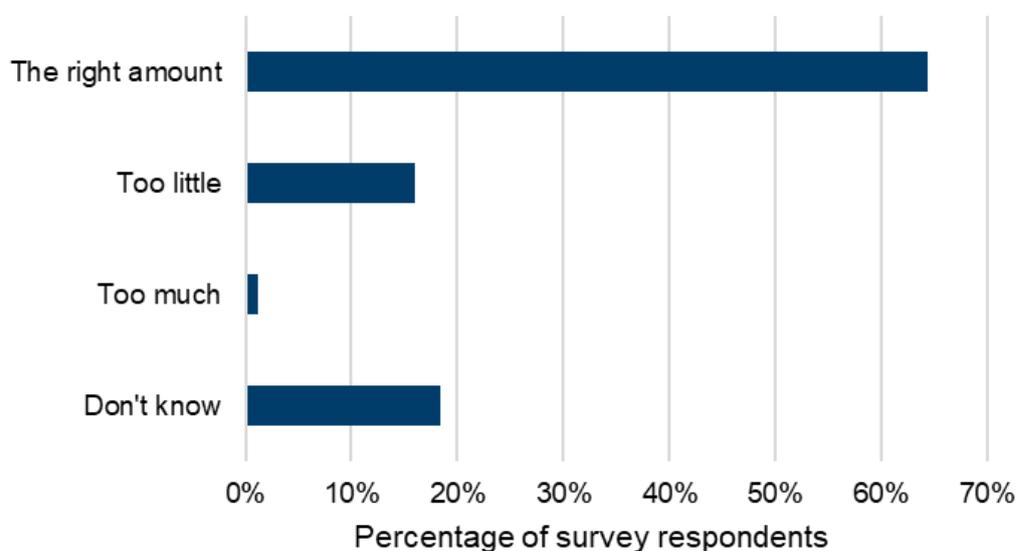
Focus group Learning Centre participants noted that WGLG (FE) criteria are often used to determine eligibility for other financial support, such as the FCF, although this varies between settings:

- in one setting, any learner with a household income of up to £30,000 qualifies for the FCF, so both WGLG (FE) recipients and non-recipients with household incomes below this value can access support
- in another setting, WGLG (FE) recipients automatically qualify for the FCF, as the college applies the higher-rate EMA household income threshold of £23,401. Non-recipients whose household income falls below this threshold also qualify
- in a third setting, learners aged 19 and over are generally ineligible for the FCF, though some individual exceptions are made
- in a fourth setting, the FCF is primarily used to cover costs such as providing bus passes to 16 to 19 year old learners, so adult learners do not qualify for it.

11.3. Value of grant

Applicants and Learning Centre staff were asked whether the maximum allowance from September 2025 for a full-time course (£1,919) and part-time course (£959) was the right amount. The majority of applicants (64%) felt it was the right amount while few (16%) thought it was too little. Very few (1%) felt it was too much, as shown at Figure 11.1. Those with experience of care were more likely to report that this was the right amount, as were refugees and asylum seekers. A similar proportion of surveyed Learning Centre staff (66% or 21 of 32) thought that the value of the allowance was about right whilst a higher proportion, at 22% (7 of 32), believed it to be too low.

Figure 11.1: Applicant views on the grant amount



Description of figure: The majority of grant applicants believed that the grant amount was about right.

Source: OB3 Research applicant survey, n=565.

A total of 69 applicants suggested alternative maximum grant allowances for those studying full-time and coming from a low-income household. The majority of these (67%) suggested a grant amount of between £2,000 and £3,499. Table 11.1 presents a more detailed breakdown of the suggested grant amounts. Only 12 applicants provided views on a suitable alternative allowance for those studying part-time. These suggestions ranged steadily from £1,200 to £3,300.

Table 11.1: Number of applicants who suggested each alternative maximum grant allowance for full-time learners

Grant amount	Number of applicants
£1,000 to £1,499	3
£1,500 to £1,999	3
£2,000 to £2,499	14
£2,500 to £2,999	18
£3,000 to £3,499	14
£3,500 to £3,999	4
£4,000 to £4,499	5
£4,500 to £4,999	0
£5,000 to £5,499	1
£5,500 to £5,999	0
£6,000 to £6,499	3
Over £10,000	4

Source: OB3 Research applicant survey, n=69.

By comparison, surveyed Learning Centre staff who thought that the grant value was too low suggested that the payment to full-time learners ought to be in the region of between £2,000 and £5,000 per year, with an average figure of circa £3,500. Focus group staff welcomed the recent temporary increase in the WGLG (FE) grant, noting that it had been long overdue given rising living costs and a comparable increase to the EMA award. They suggested that the WGLG (FE) grant should be aligned with the EMA and reviewed regularly to account for inflation and the rising cost of living.

“Pay gets reviewed every year – why can’t these grants?”

“Link the grant to an annual uplift to adjust for inflation.”

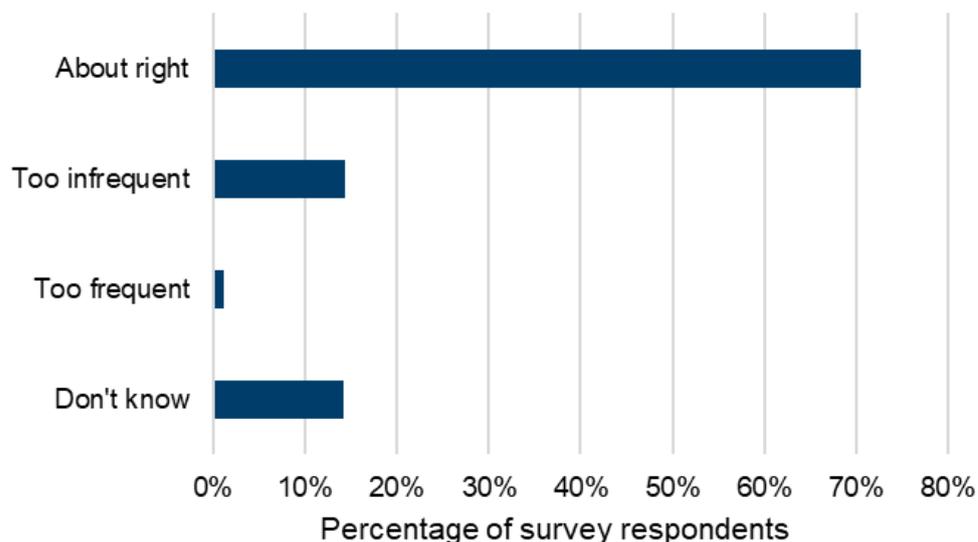
One stakeholder also welcomed the increase, noting that it could encourage more learners to apply. Their experience supporting learners, including those with neurodivergent conditions and disabilities, suggested that the previous grant value was often seen as not worth the effort of applying.

Focus group staff suggested that the value of the grant should more accurately reflect the additional costs faced by some learners. In particular, disabled learners often incur higher transport and course-related equipment expenses. Staff also noted that the current grant scheme does not take account of the number of dependants a learner has, or the additional expenditure associated with caring responsibilities, such as childcare costs.

11.4. Frequency of payment

The WGLG (FE) is currently paid to learners on a termly basis. Grant applicants and Learning Centre staff were asked to share their views on the grant payment schedule. Many applicants (70%) felt this frequency was about right, whereas few thought it was too infrequent (14%). Very few felt it was too frequent (1%) as shown at Figure 11.2. Those aged 21 and under were more likely to report that payments were too infrequent.

Figure 11.2: Applicant views on the frequency of grant payments



Description of figure: This chart shows that many grant applicants thought that the grant payment frequency was about right.

Source: OB3 Research applicant survey, n=566.

Of those applicants who felt that payments were too infrequent, 72 suggested alternative payment schedules. Many (71%) suggested monthly payments, noting that this would align with regular outgoings. Very few suggested other schedules such as every 6 or 8 weeks (8%), fortnightly (8%) or weekly (7%).

Whilst the majority of surveyed Learning Centre staff (66%, 21 of 32) thought that the payment frequency was about right, a higher proportion than applicants at a fifth (22%, 7 of 32) thought it was too infrequent. A few focus group participants noted that the termly payment schedule can make budgeting difficult, and they, along with some stakeholders, supported moving to monthly payments. One participant reported frequently receiving enquiries from students “desperately needing to know when the next payment is due.” For some learners, the long gap between payments, particularly from September to January, meant that money was quickly spent on immediate needs, leaving little to cover the rest of the term.

“They get one in September and then nothing till January... that’s a long stretch.”

11.5. Broader changes to the grant

Broadly, applicants were also asked what, if anything, they would like to see changed or improved about the grant. Roughly 300 applicants responded to this question, though around half of these either stated that they could not think of any necessary improvements or made general brief positive comments acknowledging that the grant had been helpful to them. The other half made some suggestions for improvements, some of which echoed points made earlier on in the survey. Suggestions for improvement related to the themes of:

- application process and communication. Many respondents described the application process as overly complex and difficult to navigate. Forms were seen as repetitive and unclear, particularly around evidence requirements and deadlines. Several learners said this created barriers for those with disabilities, ALN, or limited English. Suggestions included simplifying the forms, introducing digital submissions (such as mobile apps and online portals), and providing clear, accessible guidance throughout. A stronger emphasis on communication and support was also requested, with calls for quicker responses to queries, more helpful staff, and more transparent updates on application progress

“I think the WGLG is an amazing system that got me through further education, I’d only suggest making it more easily accessible and making the process more accessible for people with learning disabilities such as my sister who has autism and ADHD, as she required my aid in completing the process due to her difficulties in understanding the process and how to manage the application.”

- payment structure and frequency. The timing of payments was a consistent concern. A majority preferred monthly or more frequent instalments instead of termly payments, arguing that this would help with budgeting and reduce financial stress. Learners also wanted payments to be more reliable and clearly scheduled, with some recommending that money be released at the start of each term to cover upfront costs such as travel, books, and equipment

“Payments to be more frequent, when I was receiving WGLG I felt as though I was waiting for my next payment as my money would run out near the end of term for my travel cost.”

- grant amounts and cost-of-living pressures. Respondents frequently said the amount no longer reflects the reality of rising living costs, particularly in relation to food, transport, and course-related expenses. Some highlighted the particular difficulties faced by adult learners, parents, and carers
- attendance requirements and flexibility. Many students felt that strict attendance rules were unfair, particularly for those with disabilities, health conditions, caring responsibilities, or unavoidable absences. Respondents suggested that attendance should not be the sole measure of commitment, and that alternative indicators, such as coursework completion, online participation, or progress achieved should be recognised. While some respondents supported the principle of attendance-based conditions, even they suggested the system could be applied more fairly and with greater understanding of individual circumstances.

“Allowances shouldn’t be cut if absences are due to illness, disability, caring duties, or transport problems. Colleges could have a system where students can provide evidence or explain their situation instead of being penalised automatically. Recognise effort through submitted coursework, participation in online learning, or progress made.”

- additional support. Some respondents proposed expanding the scheme to include other forms of support beyond financial payments. These included subsidised or free bus passes, provision of laptops or course equipment, free meals, and better promotion of the grant to ensure eligible learners become aware of it.

12. Conclusions

This chapter sets out the conclusions of our review.

12.1. Scheme design and policy objectives

The WGLG (FE) continues to address a clear and ongoing gap in financial support for adult learners seeking to return to, or progress within, further education. This is particularly important given the absence of a comparable support mechanism and the ineligibility of many adult learners for the FCF administered by further education colleges in Wales. As such, the scheme makes a valuable contribution to supporting the Welsh Government's objective of enabling more working-age adults in Wales to achieve a Level 3 qualification.

The substantial decline in WGLG (FE) awards over the last decade is concerning. The number of supported learners has halved during this period, and while this reduction occurred alongside a fall in the overall number of adult learners in further education, WGLG (FE) recipients now account for only 2.5% of all adult learners, down from 5% in 2015 to 2-16. Expenditure on the scheme has also decreased by half since 2017 to 2018.

The feedback from Learning Centres suggests that, in recent years, the grant has increasingly supported a narrower cohort of learners, most notably those studying ESOL qualifications and those enrolled on independent living and life skills programmes. The evidence indicates that this shift has occurred because the scheme's household income thresholds levels have remained unchanged. As a result, the grant no longer effectively contributes to addressing educational inequalities for all by removing financial barriers to participation; indeed, there is evidence that some learners who are experiencing significant poverty no longer meet the eligibility criteria. Learners who participated in the evaluation reported high levels of financial hardship, which in some cases led to serious instances of food poverty.

12.2. The impact of the WGLG (FE) on learners

As with the previous evaluation, the fieldwork for this evaluation found that the WGLG (FE) had limited influence on learners' decisions to enrol in further study. Most survey respondents reported that they would have enrolled on their course regardless of receiving the grant. This finding is reinforced by the fact that 70% of unsuccessful applicants still started and continued their studies despite not securing funding. This suggests that, given the grant's relatively modest value, it only has limited influence over decisions to continue or return to education.

Older learners and refugees were more likely to state that the grant played an important role in their decision to study. However, refugees were also more likely than other groups to report that they would definitely have enrolled regardless, presenting a somewhat nuanced or potentially contradictory set of responses from this cohort.

The grant continued to make a modest but positive difference to recipients' attendance, and an important contribution to retention levels. Very few recipients who took part in the

evaluation reported leaving their course early. The grant was often described as an essential source of financial support, frequently used to cover course-related expenses as well as wider living costs, thus helping learners to remain focused on their studies.

The scheme's eligibility requirement for learners to demonstrate progression across qualification levels whilst continuing to receive grant support for consecutive years was being monitored effectively by Learning Centres. There were some exceptions, for instance whereby learners accessed the grant to broaden their skills by studying a different course at the same or lower level as one previously completed.

In terms of onward progression, over half of recipients who completed or left their WGLG (FE)-funded course moved on to another training course or qualification at the time of fieldwork. This suggests that the scheme makes a meaningful contribution to learners' progression routes. However, progression rates differed across cohorts: a lower proportion of ESOL learners moved on to further study compared with other learners. The findings also indicate that most progression is on to courses at Level 3 or below, with few learners advancing to Level 4 or above.

Feedback from Learning Centres also indicates that those studying independent living and life skills programmes are the least likely to progress into further or higher education. Consequently, the scheme's impact on onward educational progression for this group is more limited. However, employment and personal development outcomes are important considerations of the broader benefits of participation for these learners in the context of achieving the Welsh Government's National Milestone of at least 90% of 16- to 24-year-olds being in education, employment, or training by 2050.

12.3. Scheme administration

Awareness of the WGLG (FE) amongst prospective applicants was found to be low prior to enrolment. Applicants most commonly became aware of the grant through course tutors, open days, and enrolment activities. Learning Centres considered promotion largely effective within the college environment but acknowledged that broader public awareness remained limited.

The introduction of the on-line application has been welcomed and has led to a marked improvement in applicants' experience of applying for support. Overall, applicants found the application process manageable, particularly online, though some groups, particularly older learners, refugees and those with ALN, experience greater difficulties when applying for support.

Some applicants can mistake the registration stage with the full application process while others struggle to source the necessary documentation to prove their eligibility. Some applicants would also benefit from having a more accessible or easy-read version of the application form.

Overall, Learning Centre staff found WGLG (FE) administration manageable, but some reported difficulties in resourcing the level of support required by certain applicants, particularly those with limited English language skills, to complete the application form.

Guidance from SFW was generally considered clear but staff highlighted a need for more frequent training or briefings to ensure consistent administration, particularly given high staff turnover and the increasing numbers of ESOL and refugee students.

The shift by Learning Centres towards adopting digital Learning Agreements seems to have eased some of the issues identified in the previous evaluation about their use. Learning Agreements were valued by both staff and applicants as a useful framework for monitoring attendance and engagement. Most recipients recalled signing an agreement, and compliance with attendance requirements was reported to be high.

Improvements put in place across Learning Centres to automate the collection of attendance data seem to have improved payment and monitoring processes associated with the WGLG (FE). Most recipients reported receiving payments on time. However, some experienced delays, due to administrative errors or difficulties providing evidence and suggested more frequent payments or earlier disbursements to support living costs. Recipients also called for flexibility in relation to attendance requirements, partial payments for minor absences, and adjustments to reflect financial need or changing household circumstances.

Although Learning Centres have processes in place to check whether successful applicants progress to higher-level courses while receiving the grant, the WGLG (FE) guidance does not explicitly state that learners are ineligible if they have previously studied at the same or a higher level without WGLG (FE) support. While such cases may be infrequent, there would be value in clarifying this within the guidance.

12.4. Scheme eligibility and value of support

The evidence shows that the WGLG (FE) is still valued by many learners, but its eligibility rules are no longer aligned with the financial pressures learners face today. Household income thresholds are widely regarded as too low and outdated, excluding many learners experiencing genuine hardship. Misalignment between EMA and WGLG (FE) income thresholds creates a sharp drop-off in support for learners progressing from age-based to adult provision, which staff viewed as a barrier to continued participation in education.

Some further education learners are not eligible from the scheme because of the scheme's criteria, and it would be worth addressing these issues. The exclusion of learners undertaking Level 4 courses which are not eligible for higher education student support in particular leave some learners without access to appropriate support, despite comparable financial pressures. Similarly, some part-time learners cannot access support because they do not meet the minimum requirement of 275 contact hours a year to be eligible. At present, part-time learners represent a very small proportion of WGLG (FE) recipients, at around 8%, and feedback from Learning Centres suggests that this low level of uptake is largely because part-time course structures often do not meet the minimum requirement of 275 contact hours to be eligible for support, and many are delivered within 200 contact hours per academic year. Some applicants also reported having their applications declined because their course hours fell short of the required threshold.

Although distance learners are currently not eligible for the WGLG (FE), there was no clear agreement among Learning Centre staff about whether they should be included in the future. Concerns about how to accurately monitor their attendance and engagement also make it difficult to recommend extending eligibility to this group. However, as digital learning continues to grow, it may be worth keeping this issue under review.

The recent increase in the value of the WGLG (FE) is widely welcomed and there is a widely held view that it should be retained and increased in future years in line with inflation.

The current termly payment schedule works well for many, but a few reported difficulties managing their finances over long intervals between instalments, particularly at the start of the academic year.

13. Recommendations

This chapter offers a series of recommendations for the Welsh Government to consider.

Recommendation 1:

There is scope to raise awareness and promote the WGLG (FE) beyond colleges and other educational settings. Expanding outreach through public spaces such as community venues, GP surgeries and libraries and digital platforms could help reach potential applicants earlier in their decision-making process.

Recommendation 2:

There is a need to develop more accessible promotional materials, including digital and easy-read resources, to help Learning Centres clearly explain the schemes' eligibility, application process and benefits

Recommendation 3:

There is a need for a more streamlined application process, including directing learners to the WGLG (FE) application page once they have registered online for a Student Finance Wales account.

Recommendation 4:

It would be beneficial if applicants could submit digital evidence as part of their application and for Student Finance Wales to accept alternative forms of documentation, such as the Home Office 'share code' for refugees.

Recommendation 5:

It would be worth considering how Learning Centres with high numbers of applications from non-English speaking learners could be better resourced to provide the necessary tailored support for this cohort.

Recommendation 6:

The Student Loans Company should provide more frequent training and/or briefings for Learning Centre staff to ensure consistency in how the guidance is applied in terms of attendance, progression and eligibility criteria.

Recommendation 7:

There is a need to provide greater clarification on what academic progression should entail as part of the guidance and whether learners who have previously studied at the same or a higher level are eligible for WGLG (FE) support or not.

Recommendation 8:

Some aspects of the online application form should be made mandatory, particularly the questions about care-experience and dependent children; in order to capture better

monitoring data about the successful outcome rate for vulnerable learners. These data can be used in turn to inform the development of the scheme.

Recommendation 9:

The application form should ask applicants to indicate both the level and subject of their course. These would be better captured via closed options rather than open text boxes in order to improve the monitoring data available for subjects and level of study being pursued by WGLG (FE) recipients.

Recommendation 10:

The current value of the WGLG (FE) should be retained and processes put in place to increase the value of the grant in line with inflationary increases and increased costs of living on an annual basis, should financial resources allow for it.

Recommendation 11:

Subject to the availability of financial resources, the household income thresholds for WGLG (FE) eligibility should be increased. The upper household income threshold for full-time learners should be aligned with that of the EMA, taking on board the EMA's approach to set different income thresholds for learners coming from households with additional dependent children. Furthermore, the household income thresholds set for lower WGLG (FE) grant amounts and for part-time learners should be uplifted on a proportionate basis. Household income thresholds should be reviewed annually to reflect inflationary increases.

Recommendation 12:

Subject to the availability of financial resources, the WGLG (FE) should be extended to include further education learners who undertake non higher education supported Level 4 qualifications.

Recommendation 13:

The Welsh Government should consider reducing the qualifying number of hours for eligible part-time learners.

Recommendation 14:

The Welsh Government should keep under review the case for including distance learners in the WGLG (FE) scheme.

Recommendation 15:

The Welsh Government may wish to explore whether administering a more timely payment model, such as monthly returns, would be a cost-effective option.

Annex A References

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Annex B Evaluation method

The evaluation was conducted in five stages.

The first stage comprised an inception meeting with the client to agree the work programme and secure access to relevant documentation. The work programme was confirmed in an inception report. During this stage, an aide-memoire was developed, and a series of scoping interviews were undertaken with 7 contributors from the Welsh Government and the Student Loans Company (SLC). The purpose of these interviews was to build a robust understanding of the grant scheme, identify any additional research or data to inform the review, and agree the themes and questions to be addressed during fieldwork with applicants and Learning Centre providers.

The second stage focused on reviewing policy and programme documentation, including published data on WGLG (FE) take-up. A Data Access Agreement was established to enable access to anonymised management information (MI) held by the SLC. Data covering WGLG (FE) applicants over an 11-year period (academic years 2014 to 2015 to 2024 to 2025) was provided to the evaluation team. However, data quality concerns meant that the analysis would not meet the required statistical publication standards. Consequently, MI-derived analyses will be progressed outside this published report and may be presented in a technical annex at a later date.

Stage 3 involved developing bilingual research tools, including:

- a survey for WGLG (FE) applicants (covering applications made across a three academic year period between 2022 to 2023 and 2024 to 2025)
- a survey for Learning Centre staff involved in administering the scheme
- a discussion guide for focus groups and interviews with Learning Centre staff.

Draft tools and bilingual privacy notices were submitted to the client for review and approval before fieldwork commenced. Privacy notices were hosted online, and hyperlinks were included in all participation invitations.

Two databases were provided for survey distribution: one containing 8,858 unique WGLG (FE) applicant email addresses, and the other 328 unique Learning Centre staff email addresses.

Stage four involved the fieldwork elements. The applicant survey, hosted in SNAP, was launched on 5 September 2025. Two reminder messages were issued, and the survey closed on 22 September 2025. Of the 8,858 email addresses, 864 were undeliverable and 165 individuals opted out. In total, 578 responses were received, representing a 7.2% response rate of those delivered. All but one survey responses were completed in English. On completion of the survey, 504 respondents entered a prize draw and a winner was drawn at random and received a £50 shopping voucher.

The Learning Centre staff survey, also hosted in SNAP, was distributed on 9 September 2025. Two reminders were sent, and additional follow-up emails were issued directly to

Further Education Institutions (FEIs). The survey closed on 24 October. Of the 328 email addresses supplied, 22 were undeliverable and 32 individuals opted out. A total of 32 responses were received (10% response rate). Of these, 29 were completed in English and 3 in Welsh.

At the close of the staff survey, respondents were invited to register separately for follow-up discussion groups. Ten individuals expressed interest. Two later declined (due to limited or no experience with WGLG (FE) recipients at their institution) and one did not respond. Seven confirmed their participation. Two group sessions were held in mid-October, attended by 9 staff from 6 institutions. Additionally, a separate discussion was arranged with one FEI identified during desk research as enrolling a high number of refugee and migrant learners in receipt of WGLG (FE). This session was attended by 3 staff members from the institution. In total therefore, 12 people from 7 institutions contributed to the qualitative fieldwork.

Interviews were also conducted with three stakeholder organisations. These stakeholders were partner organisations and included those who represented the interests of students and referred people to further education opportunities.

The final stage of the work programme involved analysing survey and discussion data. Applicant survey responses were coded and thematically analysed. Closed questions were examined by key demographics, including age, sex, additional learning needs, care experience, caring responsibilities, refugee/asylum seeker status, and study mode (full- or part-time). Learning Centre survey responses were analysed by institution type and the number of WGLG (FE) recipients supported at their institution during the previous academic year.

Findings from the scoping interviews and Learning Centre staff discussions were also analysed using the themes set out in the discussion guides.

The report has been subject to an internal peer review prior to submitting it to the client and redrafted following receipt of comments.

Annex C Research instruments

Questions for focus groups with Learning Centre staff

Introduction

1. Tell me about your role and involvement with the WGLG (FE).

Promotion, application and take up of the WGLG (FE) (10 minutes)

2. Has the take up and profile of WGLG (FE) applicants and recipients at your institution changed in recent years? If so, how?
 - Ask about changes in demographic profile, subject and qualifications, and what students were doing previously?
 - What accounts for these changes?
 - What impact, if any, did the Covid pandemic have upon these changes?
3. How do you promote WGLG (FE) and what works well in terms of you promoting the grant?
4. How could the WGLG (FE) be better promoted, particularly to vulnerable groups? [By vulnerable groups we mean care leavers, young adult carers aged 18-25, disabled students, refugees and migrants and prison leavers and young offenders]
5. What are your views on the WGLG (FE) application process?
 - What insight do you have about applicant's application experiences?
 - What works well?
 - What could be improved?

Administration

6. What are your views about the way the WGLG (FE) is administered?
 - Ask about expectations placed upon LCs by SLC/WG
 - Ask about processes for recording attendance and academic progress
 - Ask about processes for paying students
 - Ask if they access SFW website and SLC's Learning Centre website ^[footnote 21] and do they provide enough guidance and support
7. What are your views about the use of the WGLG (FE) Learning Grant Agreement (i.e. WGLG (FE) Agreement)?
 - What difference do they make?
 - What could be changed or improved?

²¹ [Home | Learning Centre Services](#)

8. What evidence do you have about the value of the WGLG (FE) to learners?
 - What difference does it make to their ability to cope with financial pressures whilst studying?

9. What evidence do you have about the difference which the WGLG (FE) is having upon learners?
 - In terms of decisions to study and enrol on courses
 - In terms of improving attendance levels
 - In terms of engaging with their course
 - In terms of continuing to completion / reducing dropout rate
 - In terms of improving attainment levels
 - In terms of progressing into further education study
 - In terms of progressing into higher education study

Strategic fit, eligibility and value of support (10-15 minutes)

10. How well does WGLG (FE) compare, and fit with other support available to adult learners in further education?
 - How does it fit with other financial support made available by your institution?
 - Are there any areas of duplication or gaps?

11. What contribution does the WGLG (FE) make to Welsh Government's objectives of:
 - Widening participation in further education in Wales?
 - Increasing post 19 participation rates in further education in Wales?
 - Promoting and facilitating the use of the Welsh language under Cymraeg 2050?
 - Ensuring that 75% of working age adults in Wales will be qualified to Level 3 or higher by 2050 [a national milestone for the Well-being of Future Generations for Waels]

12. What are your views about the eligibility of the WGLG (FE)? Ask about appropriateness of:
 - Household income thresholds and appropriateness of tiered structure
 - Not available to distance learning students
 - Being limited to learners studying up to Level 3 FE qualifications
 - Qualifying number of contact hours (i.e. teaching/supervision) ^[footnote22] for part time (275 to 499 hours) and full time (500+ hours) study. Is this appropriate?
 - Using attendance and academic progression as the basis for awarding payment

²² the period of time expressed in hours in respect of which an eligible student receives teaching or supervision during periods of study or practice

13. What are your views about the value of the grant?
- Should the increases adopted for 2025 to 2026 be retained?
 - Is the grant adequate?
 - How often should the grant be reviewed and what criteria should be used to review it?

Refugee and migrant students

14. We are interested in the experiences of refugees and migrant students who might be eligible, apply and/or receive the WGLG (FE).
- What can you tell us about the specific needs of this cohort within the further education setting?
 - What additional issues do refugees and migrant students face when enrolling at further education?
 - What courses do they enrol on?
 - What (additional) support does your institution provide to this cohort?
 - Do refugees enrolled on resettlement programmes access any free of charge FE courses?
 - What evidence do you have that they progress into further or higher education study after completing their WGLG (FE) funded course?
15. How well does WGLG (FE) meet the needs of refugees and migrant students?
- How many refugees and migrants are studying at your institution? Of these approximately what proportion receive the WGLG (FE)?
 - What changes or improvements, if anything, could be made to the WGLG (FE) to better accommodate the needs of refugees and migrant students?

Closing remarks

16. Thank you for your contribution. Do you wish to make any other comments about the WGLG (FE) scheme?

WGLG (FE) applicant survey

A copy of the WGLG (FE) applicant survey is available on request.

Learning Centre staff survey

A copy of the Learning Centre staff survey is available on request.