

Improving for customers and enabling opportunity

[Michelle Donelan's, Minister of State for Higher and Further Education, speech to Times Higher Education Conference](#) this week, provides a timely reminder of the critical role higher and further education has to play in the post-Covid economic recovery.

This week we published the annual [Student Support for Higher Education 2021 Statistical Release for England, Wales and Northern Ireland](#). The publication sets out the amount of funding awarded and paid to students and higher education providers in the last academic year and shows the scale of SLC's role in enabling the opportunity that further and higher education can provide. In England, the total amount paid out in student support across full-time, part-time and postgraduate students reached £19.6 billion in academic year 2020/21. This is up 6.7% from 2019/20 which saw the amount paid at £18.4 billion. The number of students paid increased by 7.1% from 1.4 million students in academic year 2019/20 to 1.5 million in 2020/21 – a notably higher increase than in the previous academic year when levels increased by just 1.5%. And this academic year, we again have already processed and paid applications to an increased number of students.

However, delivering student support on this scale is not always plain sailing, especially when absorbing the impact of the pandemic. We haven't always got things right and unfortunately, at peak times, too many customers had to wait too long to speak to us. I am sorry that some of our customers were inconvenienced. To help customers during these busy periods we made significantly more student finance information available online and we expanded our support and service through social media channels.

But we are making more fundamental improvements to the customer experience.

We are currently trialling a new customer management system that for the first time gives us a 360 degree view of our customer. That in turn means that next year, all our customers who are studying for an undergraduate degree will receive automatic notifications about their application status, telling them whether they need to contact us to provide additional information to support their application and when we expect they will receive their funding. In addition to being able to self-serve in this way, they will be able to live chat and, if a query is more complex, send us a message or speak to an advisor. And that ability to see all customers' interactions with us will further allow us to provide better support to customers with more complex funding situations. Starting on this journey is our priority focus now.

I am delighted that our [Student Finance Customer Panel](#) and Disabled Students' Customer Panel, formed this year, have played a key role in some of the recent steps we have taken to improve the customer experience for some of our most vulnerable customers. We have started to make small, practical

improvements to our application process, for example, reducing the burden of evidence where the regulations let us and expanding our information and guidance for students who are estranged from their families, listening to our stakeholders, making it clearer how these students go about getting their funding.

Elsewhere we have listened to Martin Lewis, who asked that we made it clearer what students are entitled to in their maintenance loan. So through online and social media, we have made the difference between an individual's maintenance loan and the maximum possible award clearer, providing information on what this might mean for a student's finances.

Moving forward, we will deliver further improvements to the information we provide to all our customers. By doing so, we hope to make student loans easier to understand and simpler to manage.

We don't always get it right and we have much more to do, but I am confident that by continuing to listen and engage with customers, stakeholders, our shareholders in Government, and by maintaining our focus on delivering improvements, we will provide the intuitive, supportive and trusted service that we aspire to deliver to our customers.