

Transforming SLC to support the post-Covid economy

The recently published Skills for Jobs white paper sets out an extensive suite of reforms for post-16 education.

In doing so it envisages a fundamental shift in the way further and higher education is accessed, and how student finance will need to be delivered by the UK Government. It will not be lost on many readers that the implications for the Student Loans Company and our administration of student finance in the coming years are potentially mammoth.

Loans for lifelong learning

Right now, there is an urgent need to rebuild the pandemic-impacted economy and skills must be at the centre of that. Effectively and efficiently financing those skills is imperative and SLC exists to enable people to invest in their futures through further and higher education. But delivering the ambitions set out in the white paper will require extensive change for SLC. Building on the Prime Minister's "Lifetime Skills Guarantee" speech in September 2020, the white paper commits to implement a flexible Lifelong Loan Entitlement (LLE) to the equivalent of four years of post-18 education from 2025, to use over a lifetime.

The government's intention is that the LLE will support modular provision, so that learners can build up credits flexibly over a period of time through online and blended learning. This is a fundamental shift away from the qualification-based loan products currently offered to students. It will be a shift for SLC's various systems, IT, operational structures and processes, which are currently predominately geared towards an academic year delivery cycle. It will be a major shift too in the way SLC currently conceives of and services its customers which is first as applicants, then students and then repayers; under the new model envisaged by the white paper, they could conceivably be all three at once.

Simplifying the system

Notwithstanding the change and challenge it will bring, SLC sees that the introduction of LLE presents an opportunity to tackle existing complexity within the student finance system and simplify SLC's administration of funding. [SLC intends to support government from the earliest stage to ensure these proposals become user-centred-designed, efficient, and effective student finance products.](#)

SLC is perhaps now better positioned than it has been in a long time to deliver such significant reforms. [In 2020, despite the multitude of challenges brought by the pandemic, we performed strongly and the organisation showed itself to be thoughtful, adaptable and confident.](#) We

processed more applications and paid more students than ever before. We also took significant and long-awaited steps to improve our customer experience – introducing a new online repayment service giving customers up-to-date balance information for the first time; and introducing a digital evidence upload function, removing some of the need for students to post hardcopy evidence, which we know is a significant pain point in the application journey.

But there are more improvements to be made – and I am determined that before we can deliver a new student finance model, we must finish the job of transforming how we currently deliver our services and simplify and stabilise our technology, because this will lay the groundwork for a better customer experience from the outset. In the coming months, we will take a significant step towards improving the student finance application service as we roll out a new customer engagement management system.

This is the first fundamental change to how our teams interact with customers, initially to enable more customer queries to be resolved via self-service or at first point of contact. Later in the year, we will start to proactively provide customers with real time status updates on their applications. We are also currently reforming the provision of Disabled Students Allowances to enhance the customer experience and improve value for money for the taxpayer.

Crucially, the changes we are making this year will enable us to upskill colleagues to focus, via a case-management approach, on the more complex customer cases – those who most need our support on their student finance application journey.

To ensure the voice of our customer is at the forefront of these changes, [we have recently launched a Student Finance Customer Panel](#). The Panel will enhance SLC's understanding of the customer journey – it will inform, shape and challenge us as we strive to deliver an outstanding customer experience.

We have made recent strides towards our ambition to be a modern, responsive and sustainable organisation for our customers, colleagues and shareholder governments – but there is more to do. 2021 will be a year in which SLC focuses on significantly improving our customer experience; but we are also already looking ahead to the changes, challenges and opportunities the white paper brings for us. If 2020 has taught me anything it is that SLC can be the agile organisation needed to deliver these changes, and we are up for the challenge.

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