Evaluation of the Adult Learner Account Trials:
Synthesis Report

December 2009

Of interest to everyone previously involved in Adult Learner Accounts or currently involved in Skills Accounts in England
The Institute for Employment Studies

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Acknowledgements

The authors at IES would like to thank Kate Murphy and Martin Donnelly at the LSC for their support and helpful comments on various internal reports during the course of this evaluation. We would also like to thank our partners at Ipsos MORI – Trinh Tu, Rebecca Guest, Adel Varnai, Hannah Jackson, and Matt Antill– who provided helpful comments on the survey questionnaires, and managed the learner surveys and data processing. At IES, we are grateful to Tom Usher and Rosie Page for their input into the Year 1 qualitative process evaluation, Jim Hillage for his input into the report conclusions, and Peter Bates for his advice on the ILR. Special thanks go to Gill Brown and Denise Hassany for their invaluable assistance in report formatting and proofing.

Finally, we would like to thank all of the Level 3 learners who kindly spared their time to participate in this research over the past 18 months, as well as all of the learning providers and other ALA stakeholders who participated in the qualitative process evaluation during 2007/08.
# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Executive Summary</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 What are Adult Learner Accounts?</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 How were the ALA trials evaluated?</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 What is in this report?</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 How Were the ALA Trials Set Up?</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Administrative and financial mechanisms</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Marketing and communications</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Partnership working and collaborative arrangements</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Expectations and perceived impact of ALAs</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 Summary of issues raised by the process evaluation</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Who Registered for an ALA?</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 ALA registrations by type and region</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Demographic profile of ALA learners</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Learners’ Experience of their Course: What Difference Did the ALA Make?</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1 Learners’ awareness and understanding of the ALA</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 How important was choice to ALA learners, and did they feel they had sufficient?</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 Learners’ use of and satisfaction with pre-entry IAG</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4 Were ALA learners satisfied with their course, overall?</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5 Course costs and financial support for learning</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6 Did ALA learners know more about the costs of their course?</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.7 The financial statement</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.8 Early leaving</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.9 Progression IAG and further learning</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5 **Learners’ Perceived Impacts of Completing their Level 3 Course**  55  
5.1 Impacts of doing a Level 3 course  55  
5.2 Progression to other courses and current status  56  
5.3 Likelihood of participating in further learning in the next three years  57  
5.4 Were ALA learners more likely to achieve a positive learning outcome?  58  

6 **Learners’ Perceived Impacts of the ALA**  59  

7 **Skills Accounts: What Do Learners Want?**  64  
7.1 Awareness of Skills Accounts  64  
7.2 Potential use of Skills Accounts  64  
7.3 Perceived usefulness of possible features of Skills Accounts  65  

8 **Conclusions and Implications**  68  
Appendices  73
Executive Summary

Introduction

The government White Paper ‘Further Education: Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances’ set out the trial of a new type of learner account from Autumn 2007. The Adult Learner Account (ALA) trials were launched in August 2007 in two Learning and Skills Council (LSC) regions: the South East and the East Midlands, targeting adult full Level 3 learners only.1 The aims of ALAs were as follows:

■ to offer a wider choice of providers offering full Level 3 learning, leading to an increased number of individuals being qualified to Level 3

■ to support learners in making the right learning choices by better access to information, advice and guidance (IAG) on learning, work and careers

■ to raise awareness of the support, costs and contribution that the state, employers and individuals are making through transparent financial statements.

Individuals who register to have an ALA were meant to receive:

■ access to high quality independent IAG on career choices, Level 3 courses and providers

■ receipt of an information pack setting out provider contact details and information on learning options

■ a wider range of providers to choose from than they would have had otherwise

■ regular statements showing details of their provider, course, total cost of tuition, contributions from the state and individuals/employers (if relevant), learner support provided, and sources of further information on learning and support for learning.

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1 Full Level 3 courses include courses such as NVQ Level 3, BTEC National Diploma, 2 or more A-levels, advanced vocational awards, or Access to Higher Education.
■ personalised support and IAG, during and on completion of the course, to help learners achieve their qualification aims and progress into work or further learning if they so wish.

The evaluation

The Institute for Employment Studies (IES) in partnership with Ipsos MORI have been commissioned to undertake the evaluation of the ALA trials. The evaluation took place between 2007 and 2009, and included qualitative and quantitative strands.

An early process evaluation strand exploring the initial design, management and delivery of the ALA trials was conducted during September 2007-January 2008. This involved interviews with key ALA stakeholders at national and regional levels, as well as interviews with 20 learning providers and five nextstep providers involved in delivering ALAs.

A longitudinal survey of ALA learners was then undertaken in two waves during May-June 2008 and December 2008, including a comparison survey of other Level 3 learners in the first wave. This was accompanied by analysis of Management Information (MI) including the Learner Account Management System (LAMS) database and the Individualised Learner Record (ILR).

Key findings

Learners’ awareness and understanding of ALAs was limited

■ Not all ALA learners knew they were registered for an ALA, although by the time of the Wave 2 survey, learners’ recognition of being registered had increased from 73 per cent to 84 per cent. A further 12 per cent could recall receiving information about the ALA. At Wave 2, just four per cent said they were not registered and could not recall receiving any information about it.

■ Although recognition of being registered for an ALA increased between the two surveys, the proportion of learners who reported they felt well-informed about it at Wave 2 remained stable, at around 50 per cent.

This meant that recognising the benefits of having an ALA was also limited

■ Learners continued to be unsure about the benefits of having an ALA, although much less so than in the Wave 1 survey. By the time of Wave 2, the proportion of learners who said they did not know any benefits from having an ALA had declined from 51 per cent to 28 per cent. However, one-third believed there were no benefits (33 per cent) compared with 12 per cent at Wave 1. The main reason why learners said they got no benefits was that they did not know enough about the ALA.
Two-thirds identified at least one benefit: the main one being better support and advice about progressing to a higher level course

- However, when prompted, two-thirds (64 per cent) of ALA learners who recognised they had one could identify at least one benefit. The main perceived benefit was better support and advice about progressing to a higher level course, mentioned by 32 per cent. This was followed by more regular access to information, advice and guidance about learning or training (19 per cent).

The most common suggestion for improving the ALA was giving learners more information about what it could provide

- When asked what could improve ALAs, most learners either did not know (30 per cent) or felt there was no need for improvement (20 per cent, rising to 31 per cent among those who were well-informed about the ALA). Among the rest, the most common suggestion for improvement was better communication about the ALA and what it was for, mentioned by 30 per cent. This is a reflection of the limited understanding that learners had about ALAs.

ALA learners expressed high satisfaction levels with their Level 3 course, comparable to the NLSS and other Level 3 learners

- Learners expressed very high satisfaction with their learning experience at both waves of the survey, at 88 per cent (comparable with the National Learner Satisfaction Survey 2007, at 90 per cent¹). Satisfaction ratings were also comparable with those of other Level 3 learners.

Just half of ALA learners said they received a financial statement

- The proportion of learners who could recall receiving a statement had increased between Wave 1 and Wave 2 (from 45 per cent to 51 per cent). However, if their recollection is accurate this means that around half of ALA learners had completed their course, or the first year of it, without receiving a financial statement. As in Wave 1, the vast majority of learners who received a statement found it easy to understand (90 per cent).

Those that did receive a statement felt more well-informed about the full cost of their course, and around half of them said they would not have appreciated this without getting a statement

- Learners who received a statement were significantly more likely than those who had not to say they felt well-informed about the cost of their course (88 per cent

¹ This figure is for Level 3 learners only; it should be noted that it includes learners aged 16 to 18 and is based on all Level 3 learners not just full Level 3 ones.
compared with 40 per cent), and 55 per cent of them said they did not appreciate the full cost of their course until they received their statement. This is important given that three-quarters of learners (73 per cent) agreed that knowing the full cost of the course would encourage them to complete it.

Three in five ALA learners had received progression IAG by the time of the Wave 2 survey: the most common source was from their learning provider

- In Wave 1, four learners in five (84 per cent) said they were likely to undertake further learning within the next three years, so access to progression IAG on future learning opportunities was critical. By the time of Wave 2, the proportion of learners who received progression IAG had increased slightly from 58 to 61 per cent (a similar level to the Wave 1 comparison sample of other Level 3 learners).

- Among those who had received progression IAG, the proportion of ALA learners accessing it from a teacher or tutor at their learning provider increased to 90 per cent, and the proportion who received it from a specialist adviser at their learning provider increased to 37 per cent. The main reason behind accessing IAG was to get advice about applying to university, mentioned by 40 per cent.

Learners’ views on access to and usefulness of progression IAG were very positive

- Four ALA learners in five (83 per cent) agreed that it was easy to get access to progression IAG during their course, if they needed it. Among those who had used it, almost nine in ten (88 per cent) said it had helped them decide what to do next in terms of learning or work.

Progression to other courses was high, although this partly reflects the high prevalence of ALAs among learners doing Access to HE courses

- Progression to other courses was high: 72 per cent of completers had subsequently started a new course. It should be remembered that ALAs were targeted at Level 3 courses, and some providers in particular had targeted learners doing Access to HE programmes which are designed as platforms for progression. Almost two-thirds (63 per cent) of learners who had started a new course were doing one at Level 4: this included 37 per cent who were now doing an undergraduate degree.

Reflecting high progression rates, almost half the learners surveyed at Wave 2 said they had opened or would consider opening a Skills Account in the next three years

- Almost one in five learners (17 per cent) had heard of Skills Accounts at the time of the survey, and seven per cent reported they had either opened one already or were planning to. Forty per cent of the remainder would consider opening a Skills Account in the next three years, in particular, learners aged 19 to 34, and those who
felt the ALA had a positive impact on their experience of the course, and those likely to participate in further learning.

- The most valuable feature of Skills Accounts was perceived to be access to a voucher showing the state funding that would be available towards a course of the learners’ choice (mentioned by 88 per cent), followed by a secure record of all learning or training completed (85 per cent).

Conclusions

The Wave 1 survey report raised the issue that ALAs were a ‘virtual’ service being trialled, about which few learners could articulate the benefits. In some ways this could be anticipated given that the process evaluation found that all of the learner-facing stakeholders (learning providers, ALA helpline, and nextstep) identified difficulties in ‘selling’ the benefits of having an Account. The Wave 2 confirmed that many learners were still unsure about the benefits of ALAs, or did not see any: even though many of the same learners benefited from progression IAG or appreciated knowing the full cost of their course through receipt of a financial statement. The main issue was that they did not associate these benefits with the ALA.

Better understanding among learners may have been achieved through better information – but also, having something more tangible associated with the Account, as concrete evidence to learners of its benefits. The only tangible thing associated with the Account as such was the financial statement and only half of ALA learners reported having received one of those, at the time of the Wave 2 survey – a similar proportion to Wave 1. However, the idea behind the statement appears to be on sound principles – as the majority of learners agreed that knowing the full cost of their course would encourage them to complete it, and learners who had received a statement were much more likely to feel well-informed about how much their course cost.

It could help learners to understand the benefits of having an ALA if some way of associating opportunities for progression IAG and additional support (such as information on financial support for learning, like the ALG) could be more explicitly linked to the ALA.

Learners themselves were very positive about the progression IAG they had received during their Level 3 course, and did appear more likely to have accessed this from specialist, independent sources. However, the way that ALAs were targeted by some providers, in particular at learners doing Access to HE courses, means that it is difficult to draw any conclusions about the impact of ALAs on progression to Level 4, given that they were already being aimed at learners most likely to make this transition.

Although awareness of Skills Accounts was limited at the time of the survey, two-fifths of learners said they would consider opening one in the next three years, and the vast majority said that they would find the various features of Skills Accounts useful. It is notable that learners who felt well-informed about the cost of their course,
had received a financial statement through their ALA, and had received progression IAG, were the most likely to find various prospective features of Skills Accounts useful. This suggests that experience of the ALA components (a financial statement showing the full cost of the course and how it had been paid for, and access to progression IAG) has had a positive effect in terms of enhancing the appeal of various features of Skills Accounts.

Lastly, the findings of the ALA evaluation hold some important transferable messages for Skills Accounts:

- The importance of clearly defining what the Account is for, how it can be of benefit, and communicating this to learners, learning, and IAG providers alike.

- The need to ensure that materials and systems are in place well before the main college enrolment windows, and any additional MI requirements fit into existing processes as far as possible, so that Accounts can be marketed in good time before the main enrolment, and to avoid learners being registered on Accounts retrospectively as was the case with some ALAs. Communications about Accounts to colleges in particular need to be made before the summer, when many staff is away on leave.

- Most importantly, the importance of offering something tangible attached to the Account. For example, learners were particularly positive about the usefulness of a voucher showing the amount of government funding they would be able to get towards a course of their choice, and about the secure online record of all learning or training they had completed.
1 Introduction

This report presents a synthesis of findings from the evaluation of the Adult Learner Account (ALA) trials. The evaluation was carried out by the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) (in partnership with Ipsos MORI) on behalf of the national Learning and Skills Council (LSC). The report draws on several strands of research undertaken over the past 18 months:

- a qualitative process study examining the design and early implementation of the ALAs. This involved interviews with key stakeholders at national and regional level, as well as interviews with learning and IAG providers. Interviews were undertaken between October 2007 and January 2008.

- telephone surveys of Level 3 learners registered for an ALA. The Wave 1 survey was undertaken during May-June 2008 and the Wave 2 follow-up survey six months later, in December 2008. The Wave 1 survey also included a comparison sample of other full Level 3 learners from outside of the ALA trial areas.

- profile analyses of learners who were registered for an ALA, in Year 1 using management information from the Learner Accounts Management System (LAMS) and in Year 2, using learner data from the Individualised Learner Records (ILR).

1.1 What are Adult Learner Accounts?

1.1.1 Policy background

The government White Paper ‘Further Education: Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances’ set out the trial of a new type of learner account from autumn 2007. The ALA trials were launched in August 2007 in two Learning and Skills Council (LSC) regions: the
South East and the East Midlands, targeting full Level 3 learners only. The aims of ALAs are as follows:

- to offer learners a wider choice of providers offering full Level 3 learning, leading to an increased number of individuals being qualified to Level 3
- to support learners in making the right learning choices by better access to information, advice and guidance (IAG) on learning, work and careers
- to raise awareness of the support, costs and contribution that the state, employers and individuals are making to the costs of learning, through transparent financial statements.

Individuals who register for an ALA are meant to receive the following:

- access to high quality independent IAG on career choices, Level 3 courses and providers
- receipt of an information pack setting out provider contact details and learning options
- a wider range of providers to choose from than they would have had otherwise
- regular statements showing details of their provider, course, total cost of tuition, contributions from the state and individuals/employers (if relevant), learner support provided, and sources of further information on learning and support for learning
- personalised support and IAG, during and on completion of the course, to help learners achieve their qualification aims and progress into work or further learning if they so wish.

ALAs are a virtual account: the learner does not receive any money directly. Learner funding is through standard FE funding arrangements using national fee remission categories and funding rates. Learners assessed to make a contribution to their course costs have the amount set to reflect the LSC’s national fee rate for that year (in 2007/08 this was 37.5 per cent fees and 62.5 per cent public funding).

### 1.1.2 The design of the ALA trials

In addition to the national policy aims, the two regions involved in implementing the trial also had supplementary objectives, reflected in the slightly different approaches to how and where the trial was set up in each region, although the ‘learner journey’

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1 Full Level 3 courses include courses such as NVQ Level 3, BTEC National Diploma, 2 or more A-levels, advanced vocational awards, or Access to Higher Education.
experienced by ALA learners remains the same, in principle, across both areas. Figure 1.1 summarises the approaches to the ALA trial in each LSC region.

Figure 1.1: Summary of ALA trials approach in each of the trial regions

**In the South East** the initial geographical focus was on development diamonds. Within these areas a *universal approach* was adopted to the scope of the trials, with all non employer-facing Level 3 learners eligible for an account if they are learning at one of the contracted learning providers. When measuring the number of ALA learners in the South East there is therefore a distinction between retained learners (who would have been learning anyway) and new (additional) learners - although on each course all ALA learners should get the same learning experience, access to IAG, and access to information on the costs of their learning via financial statements.

The South East region was expecting to enrol 7,000 to 8,000 ALA learners in total of which approximately 3,000 would be ‘additional’ learners.

Improving the relationships between learning and IAG providers was identified as a supplementary aim of the trial in the South East.

**In the East Midlands** the ALA trials are more *targeted*. They are focused on learners working or living in two geographical areas (Nottingham City and Lincolnshire and Rutland). Most of the target areas are socially and economically disadvantaged, for example with higher than average unemployment and traditionally a low take-up of Level 3 qualifications. Eligibility is determined by postcode either of the learner or their employer. Provision contracted through the trials has focused on the region’s priority sectors which are construction, engineering and health and social care. In addition, locally important sectors have also been prioritised - creative industries in Nottingham City and food and drink production in Lincolnshire and Rutland.

The East Midlands region was expecting to enrol 1,200 ‘additional’ ALA learners in total.

Generating demand for Level 3 learning from non-traditional groups was identified as a particular aim of the trial in the East Midlands.

### 1.2 How were the ALA trials evaluated?

The evaluation of the ALA trials ran between 2007 and 2009. The qualitative process evaluation strand involved depth interviews with national and regional stakeholders and local learning and IAG providers, and explored the design, management and early delivery of the ALA trials in the first 3-4 months after they were introduced. The quantitative evaluation strand comprises a two-wave longitudinal survey of ALA learners, a comparison sample of Level 3 learners outside the trial areas (at Wave 1 only), and analysis of Management Information (MI) from the LAMS database and the ILR.

The introduction of Skills Accounts in the same regions as the ALAs, from late 2008 onwards, had several implications for the ALA evaluation. In order to avoid over-burdening respondents managing and implementing the new Skills Accounts (which are being separately evaluated, concurrently with ALAs), it was decided that the
second part of the ALA qualitative process evaluation should be cancelled. In addition, Wave 2 of the learner survey was brought forward by three months, to December 2008, in order to undertake follow-up fieldwork with learners before Skills Account had been full launched, thereby avoiding confusion among learners, and contamination of views on ALAs with views on Skills Accounts. As well as this, the comparative element of the survey was scrapped.

1.2.1 Research objectives

Table 1.1 sets out an evaluation framework mapping the research objectives against the relevant strands of the study.

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<tr>
<th>Objective:</th>
<th>Covered in evaluation strand:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Assess the characteristics of learners accessing Accounts and how they</td>
<td>MI including analysis of LAMS database and ILR analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>compare to those who access Level 3 provision in FE</td>
<td>Learner surveys</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assess added value the Account offers the learner, over and above</td>
<td>Learner surveys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>accessing Level 3 provision in FE</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Explore operational delivery arrangements, including collaborative</td>
<td>Depth interviews with national/ regional and local</td>
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<tr>
<td>working to deliver accounts</td>
<td>LSCs and local providers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assess the additional administrative and programme costs of delivering</td>
<td>n/a</td>
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<tr>
<td>Level 3 learning via Accounts</td>
<td>This was planned to take place in Year 2 of the</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assess policy links between Accounts and other programmes, services and</td>
<td>MI including ILR analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>initiatives aiming to increase Level 3 participation and attainment (such</td>
<td>Learner surveys</td>
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<tr>
<td>as the Adult Learning Grant)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Measure the impact that Learner Accounts are having</td>
<td>Learner surveys</td>
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<tr>
<td>Explore the effectiveness of the Learner Account in supporting Level 3</td>
<td>MI including ILR analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>learning</td>
<td>(completion rates)</td>
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<td>Source: IES</td>
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1.2.2 Qualitative process evaluation

The process evaluation was originally designed in two phases. Phase 1 (September 2007 to January 2008) aimed to provide a baseline and focused on design and early implementation of the ALA trials. Phase 2 was planned to take place 12 months later, but it was decided to cancel this phase due to the implementation of Skills Accounts in the same ALA trial regions.

The qualitative research comprised:
■ face-to-face depth interviews with national-level stakeholders from within the Learning and Skills Council and Ufi/learndirect (September 2007)

■ face-to-face depth interviews with regional and local-level stakeholders including the South East and East Midlands regional managers delivering the ALA trials (conducted in September-October 07)

■ telephone interviews with 20 learning providers and five local nextstep providers participating in the ALA trials (conducted in December 07-January 08).

All the interviews were qualitative in approach, using a structured topic guide which covered:

■ the initial design of ALAs

■ contracting and operational arrangements

■ administrative and financial systems including MI

■ marketing and communications

■ partnership working and collaborative arrangements

■ expectations and perceived impact of ALAs.

It should be noted that the interviews with stakeholders and providers were conducted during the ALA’s set-up stage and the first four months of delivery. Their views on the impact of ALAs are therefore largely based on perception rather than actual impact.

**Defining ‘stakeholders’**

Adult Learner Account stakeholders (as defined by the LSC\(^1\)) are:

■ at national level, DIUS, the national LSC, and learndirect

■ at regional level, South East and East Midlands regional LSCs, the East Midlands Further Education Consortium (EMFEC), and SEEDA

■ at local level, partnership teams in the trial areas, nextstep providers, learning providers, and learners themselves.

In order to avoid identifying individual respondents, the following terms are used as descriptors and to attribute quotes: national stakeholder; regional stakeholder; partnership team; learning provider. Learning provider attributes have been distinguished according to provider and provision type (i.e. college versus private training provider; general versus specialised provision).

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1 Adult Learner Accounts Stakeholder Map (internal LSC document), April 2007.
1.2.3 Quantitative evaluation

The quantitative evaluation consisted of a two-wave learner survey alongside analysis of MI data to explore the profile of ALA-registered learners and look at their completion rates.

The learner sample

A census of all learner records as of the end of February 2008 was drawn from the Learner Account Management System (LAMS). At the time, there were 3,527 unique learners recorded on the system. However, the number of records containing a telephone number was lower, at 2,327 (increasing to 2,558 after telephone tracing). This sample formed the basis of the Wave 1 survey, conducted in May-June 2008, which achieved 886 interviews with ALA-registered learners. A comparison survey was also conducted covering 450 full Level 3 learners from outside of the ALA trial regions.

The Wave 2 survey was conducted in December 2008, approximately six months after the first survey, among those ALA learners who agreed to be re-contacted. Follow-up interviews were achieved with 450 ALA learners.

Questionnaire coverage

The questionnaires were designed by IES with input from Ipsos-MORI, in consultation with the LSC. Broadly, the questionnaires covered the following areas:

- awareness and understanding of ALA, and perceived benefits of having one
- experience of the course, including overall learner satisfaction
- access to a financial statement, knowledge of the full costs of the course, and views on paying for learning
- access to and views on pre-entry and progression IAG
- progression to further courses, and impact of completing the Level 3 course
- awareness of and views on various potential elements of Skills Accounts.

Further technical information on the learner surveys, including details of response rates and sample profiles, can be found in the Appendices.

MI analysis

The MI analysis included profile analysis of ALA-registered learners on the LAMS database (as of the end of February 2008) and analyses of learner profiles and completion rates using 2007/08 ILR data.
1.3 What is in this report?

This report draws on all aspects of the evaluation to pull together the main findings. The main sources for these findings are internal reports produced during the course of this study, comprising:

- a qualitative report on design and early implementation of the ALA trials
- a Wave 1 learner survey and MI report
- a Wave 2 follow-up survey report.

This report is structured thematically, as follows:

- Chapter 2 examines the set-up and early implementation of the ALA trials and draws mainly on evidence from the qualitative process evaluation.
- Chapter 3 looks at the number and profile of ALA-registered learners, using analyses from the LAMS database and the ILR for 2007/08.
- Chapter 4 explores ALA learners’ experience of their course and of having an ALA, drawing on data from the learner surveys.
- Chapter 5 focuses on perceived impacts of the ALA and on completion rates for ALA versus non-ALA learners, using evidence from the learner surveys and the MI analysis.
- Finally, Chapter 6 draws together conclusions from across all strands of the evaluation.

The Appendices contain more technical information on the survey methodology and sample profile as well as copies of the research materials used.
2 How Were the ALA Trials Set Up?

In this section we summarise some of the findings from the qualitative process evaluation, which focused on design and early implementation of the trials. Although based on research undertaken early in the implementation of ALAs, they still provide valuable context for the findings from the learner survey.

2.1 Administrative and financial mechanisms

This section examines administrative and financial mechanisms for delivering the Accounts, from contract management through to the generation of learners’ financial statements.

2.1.1 Procurement and contract management

The contracting of ALA provision was undertaken as part of a wider round of Open Competitive Tendering (OCT). Thirty-four learning providers were contracted to deliver ALAs in the South East region and 13 in the East Midlands. In both regions the contracted provision included a number of private training companies who had not previously been delivering full Level 3 learning to adults, aside from Apprenticeships. All providers bidding to deliver ALAs had to meet stringent quality standards.

National and regional stakeholders were pleased with the breadth of provision procured for ALAs and felt that the new provision mix would offer a wider choice to Level 3 learners.

Partnership managers in the local LSCs were responsible for managing individual providers in their area, under the umbrella of their regional LSC. There was scope for flexibility in the contracts across both regions, in terms of re-allocating funds based on provider performance against profile if demand was lacking in certain areas or for certain courses.
Regional-level stakeholders in particular commented that this would mean the need for more active contract management – and strong relationship management - from partnership team managers.

‘We will be trying to wire that money to where delivery is working well to ensure additionality … rather than have dead contracted volumes there at the end of the year we need to have meaningful discussion about how to improve things or shift it elsewhere where there is progress being made.’

Regional stakeholder

Some regional stakeholders raised concerns about whether MI performance data would be available in a timely enough manner to be able to inform this type of active contract management.¹

2.1.2 Checking learner eligibility

Live eligibility checks were made when the learner called the national advice line or approached an IAG provider for information on ALAs. There was a ‘no wrong door’ approach so if they were not eligible or did not want to do a Level 3; they were still referred for IAG on alternative programmes or options if they want it.

A postcode checker was incorporated within the Learner Account Management System database for verifying eligibility and this aspect was felt to have worked well.

‘That side of things has worked very well… in terms of developing the learner account management system, putting in the postcode and checking how it works with providers, the process has been super.’

Regional stakeholder

In the South East, eligibility was determined by provider – if the learner was in learning at an Account provider they were eligible for an Account no matter where they lived or worked.

2.1.3 Management Information (MI)

Additional codes were added to the Individualised Learner Record (ILR) in order to flag Account learners and provide specific Management Information (MI) on them. This MI was used alongside a template payment system and Learner Account Management System (LAMS) database for managing the ‘customer-facing’ elements of the Accounts on a day-to-day basis.

Adopting the existing FE MI system meant that the LSC had to train some private providers on it from scratch. Some received support from the LSC to buy in new

¹ It was not possible to follow up this issue due to the cancellation of the Year 2 process evaluation.
software, while some smaller providers collaborated with partners who entered the data on LAMS for them.

‘We have a training need internally on the system. The LSC supported us buying an upgrade to our current data system specifically for the ALA.’

Learning provider (private, specialised provision)

Alongside data collected for the ILR, a new Learner Accounts Management System (LAMS) was commissioned for the ALA trial. This was used to capture learner information, produce ‘live’ reports and financial statements, and send communications with learners. It was a stand-alone ‘front office’ system dealing with client-facing communications.

To open an Account, learners must be registered on LAMS. This was done either by Broadsystem (who operated the central ALA helpline), possibly via an IAG provider such as learndirect or nextstep, or directly by an ALA learning provider. At the point of registration, learners received a LAMS account number but this did not become active until they enrolled on a relevant course at one of the contracted providers.

Providers were responsible for populating the LAMS database with data such as course details, costs, fees, additional learner support funds, etc, which provided the basis for the learners’ financial statement. Some colleges expressed concern about what they perceived to be the added administrative burden of entering data on LAMS which they had already entered onto the ILR:

‘Administratively burdensome. We’re having to put all the student information on to LAMS and quite complex information in terms of their fees and funding. Quite a bit of it could have been available anyway, we’ve already done it.’

Learning provider (college, general provision)

There was also a separate piece of software called the Adult Learner Account Calculator (ALAC). This was devised in order to calculate specific financial contributions from the state, individual, employer, and other potential contributors, for each learner. The ALAC was ready for all providers by the end of October 2007, with instructions on how to use it. The ALAC relied upon providers running a report to extract relevant financial information which would then be available for providers to populate LAMS. This information was necessary in order for financial statements to be produced upon request from individual learners.

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1 National stakeholders felt that it was important to note that the current LAMS was specifically commissioned for use during the ALA trial and has a limited capacity of 20,000 learners. Therefore, any issues specifically related to LAMS are relevant to the evaluation of the trial but not necessarily relevant to any national roll-out.
At the time of fieldwork with providers (November 07-January 08), only one had issued any statements. Another reported having by-passed the ALAC, finding it easier to work out the various contributions without the calculator. In other cases, providers reported teething problems with the calculator’s forecast total course value when non-standard fees were being charged. There was also a concern, voiced by several providers, that the calculator only provided the LSC subsidy figure for the statement and that a lot of work was required across MI platforms to collate the other information on fees, financial support and employer contributions.

Learning point: Early evidence from providers indicated that using multiple platforms to collect MI on the Accounts and to administer the financial statement was administratively complex and time-consuming. With any future roll-out, it would be more efficient for providers to use existing systems as far as possible, or to use one new integrated system. The use of Unique Learner Numbers would help with collating information from different platforms as well as tracking progression.

2.1.4 The provider payment system

National-level stakeholders reported that consideration of financial control mechanisms was paramount in the design of the ALA trials, especially given the history of Individual Learning Accounts (ILAs). Payments were made through a newly designed system. The security checks were the same as the existing FE payment system, requiring validation against the ILR before payment was released.

Regional stakeholders viewed the change of payment system to a new template system as an improvement (as it is perceived to be more flexible, and allows easier re-profiling).

Payments were profiled monthly based on one-twelfth of the total cost of the course. A proxy amount of £2,500 per course was used but this may be more or less than the actual course cost. Providers drew down funding on a monthly basis and this was then periodically reconciled against the true cost of the course. Regional stakeholders felt this could potentially be problematic, but none of the providers voiced this as an issue during its early stages.

A small number of providers were unclear about how payments would work at the time they bid to deliver ALAs and felt this could have been communicated more clearly upfront. At the time of fieldwork, some providers had not yet been paid due to ongoing technical problems with the system. This had led to cash flow issues for some smaller providers.

‘At the moment that system has not worked. We’ve been running six weeks with no money.’

Learning provider (private, specialised provision)
Several private providers also had residual uncertainties about the amount of funding they would be in a position to claim or had learned that their funding per learner would be at a lower level than they initially expected. In certain cases, this related to the link between funding levels and guided learning hours. Providers responded to this situation either by putting on new courses to access the higher level funding or by increasing learner numbers.

**Learning point:** It appears that communication about learner funding through the ALA trials could have been clearer at the contracting stage, as several providers were still uncertain about how this would operate two or three months after the trials started.

### 2.1.5 The financial statement

The learner’s financial statement was initially expected to be available from October onwards but this was delayed. The aim was a 28-day turnaround between enrolling on an Account and receiving the first statement, with the point of enrolling on the Account being around the same time as the learner started their course. However, due to the time taken to enter learner details onto the LAMS database by some providers, there was sometimes a time-lag of up to several months between learners starting on their courses and being registered for an ALA.

At the time of the fieldwork only one provider had issued any statements. However, stakeholders felt that this was not an issue because of this time-lag.

‘The fact that people haven’t yet enrolled on the ALAs, when they do enrol they will still get their statement within a reasonable period of time. Had they enrolled in September, as was the intention, we are in October and they still haven’t got a means of getting their statement. But they will do eventually.’

Regional stakeholder

**Learning point:** Although learners may not have experienced a time-lag between being registered for an ALA and receiving a statement, the delays in getting learners registered on LAMS did mean that some of them had been doing their courses for several months before they could receive one. As one of the main ideas behind receiving a statement was that it would encourage learners to stay on their course if they knew the full value of it, and because early leaving is often more likely during the first few months of the course, this time-lag may have dissipated the influence of getting a financial statement on learner retention. If learners are to receive this form of financial information, either as a statement or as a voucher, they need to get it either before they start their course or as early as possible once the course has started.

The statement was designed by a Responsible Owners Group of experts within the LSC, which included regional stakeholders. Providers had mixed views regarding the use of the statements. There was widespread support for the idea of learners knowing the true cost of their course, but scepticism as to whether learners would be influenced in any
way by this knowledge. One provider had been publicising full course cost in its prospectus for several years.

The process for learners to enquire about information on the statement was to their learning provider in the first instance or to the national helpline if preferred. At the time of the qualitative research, some providers had already briefed staff on how to deal with this eventuality while others were in the process of doing so. Several providers had opted to pre-empt questions by informing learners that they would be receiving a statement, in advance.

*We’re not sure whether they’ve received [statements] yet. No one’s come to us and said ‘what’s this?’ but I think that’s because we’ve explained at the very beginning that this is liable to happen.*

Learning provider (specialised, private provision)

### 2.2 Marketing and communications

This section explores avenues into registering for an Account, and how Accounts have been promoted to learners.

#### 2.2.1 Three routes into opening an Account

From the learner’s perspective there were three main routes into opening an ALA. These were via an enquiry to the ALA helpline; through an IAG provider such as learndirect or nextstep; or directly through a learning provider.

Callers telephoning to enquire about ALAs went through to a dedicated information line where their eligibility was determined and their details recorded on LAMS, after which they are sent an information pack. If the caller wanted further advice on learning or careers they could be referred to an IAG provider, via direct transfer to the learndirect telephone advice line, or referral to a local nextstep office.

The national ALA helpline went live in June 2007 but the volume of enquiries was never as high as anticipated. Evidence from the stakeholder interviews suggested that the ALA helpline went live before all the necessary IT and administrative materials were in place, resulting in some delays in sending out information packs during the initial stages of the trial. From Spring 2008, callers went straight through to the learndirect telephone service instead.

**Learning point:** It is questionable whether there was a need for a dedicated ALA helpline, especially as its main function was administrative rather than to provide direct advice to callers, who would get referred to learndirect or nextstep if they wanted IAG on learning opportunities.
2.2.2 Marketing methods and sources

Marketing materials were designed nationally with regional input. The key messages were about value of doing Level 3 learning and how people could do this through an ALA. The availability of free independent IAG on learning options and other financial support available was also highlighted.

Marketing was via advertisements in local and regional press using different media including mailshots, flyers and postcards.

At regional level the aim was to work with contracted providers to market ALAs within their usual course marketing activities. For example the South East regional LSC allocated £1,000 extra per provider for marketing activity.

At the time of the qualitative fieldwork, there was mixed feedback from learning providers about how much of their own marketing they had done on ALAs. Some had been very proactive, for example through placing advertisements in local press and through liaison with local partners such as Nextstep and Jobcentre Plus. Several providers were also marketing the Accounts to employers via their business recruiters or through networking with their local Chamber of Commerce.

‘We were targeting learning champions in the community and we’ve spoken to some community organisations, done presentations. We’ve run several newspaper adverts, newsletters, put it on our website.’

Learning provider (private, specialised provision)

Generally, the private, specialised, providers had been most proactive in their marketing. The message targeted at learners was often more focused on the value of accessing Level 3 provision, rather than the specifics of the Accounts themselves. In relation to employers, private providers often scaled up their business recruitment activities proportionally to recruit for the extra places.

Conversely, many FE colleges felt that the ALAs had been rolled out too late to benefit from their main marketing stream (aimed at late August/ early September enrolments). Some reported that if they achieved their targets for ALA-registered learners, this was either because of the increased marketing ‘push’ on Level 3 provision as a whole or because they had identified a particular course where they felt learners might benefit, and enrolled all the students on ALAs retrospectively.

‘It was pretty much too late to be starting to market things and start to get new learners in. So we decided to centralise it on a couple of courses which we felt were most appropriate and for the courses students would have had the need for more initial assessment and guidance … We targeted those courses and decided we would convert those students into ALA students.’

Learning provider (college, general provision)
Several colleges had marketed the Accounts to their existing students through mailshots but all reported very low or non-existent levels of enquiries (for instance one out of 500). Eventually, some colleges registered existing full Level 3 students by running opt-outs rather than opt-ins, and ‘badging’ learners with Accounts retrospectively.

Learning point: Marketing and communications materials needed to be ready earlier for college providers to be able to use them effectively in their main enrolment window and to thoroughly brief all their staff before August, although those offering roll-on/roll-off provision were not as affected by this. The low volumes of enquiries to the ALA helpline suggest that few learners were encouraged to start a course because of the ALA, but were interested in doing Level 3 learning anyway, as they found out about the ALA mainly when they had already approached their learning provider.

2.3 Partnership working and collaborative arrangements

In this section we explore operational delivery arrangements focusing on partnership and collaborative arrangements. This section also includes links with nextstep providers and the Train to Gain programme.

2.3.1 National level

Ufi/learndirect is a national partner who has sub-contracted the ALA helpline to Broadsystem, who also deal with the fulfilment of welcome packs and financial statements. National-level stakeholders felt that having one main point of contact at the national LSC and Ufi/learndirect had helped to overcome early communication issues:

‘We’ve managed to get things sorted. It’s not that the relationship has been difficult; it’s more that there’s been so many different people involved… It has run a lot more smoothly since there has been one point of contact.’

National stakeholder

One issue which arose during procurement was that learndirect bid to provide ALA learning provision in one region. National-level stakeholders reported that this had caused delays during a key stage of development because it meant that day-to-day dialogue about the national helpline, fulfilment and National Learning Directory was then subject to non-disclosure agreements, given that commercially sensitive information was involved.

‘That caused us some problems because we couldn’t talk to them about the detail of some of the work because it was confidential… so we did have a bit of an issue there that took us a couple of months to work through.’

National stakeholder
2.3.2 Regional level

Both regions worked closely with the national LSC. Regional stakeholders commented that early staffing changes during the set-up period meant they occasionally received conflicting information, but this was addressed by more direct communication between the two regional LSCs, such as collating an issues log.

Regional stakeholders also spoke of the importance of a collaborative approach with learning providers, in particular when MI and finance systems were still being fine-tuned.

‘I think some of those systems even now [October 2007] are not worked out in the clarity we would like them to be. You are in a position of having to really work with your providers. Our providers have actually been ok about it, but you do need a provider network that will work with you.’

Regional stakeholder

Partnership managers dealt with the ALA providers in their area. In both regions, the focus was very much on local partnership managers to actively manage the contracts and regularly review providers’ progress against their learner profiles.

Both regions referred to a good relationship with nextstep:

‘Irrespective of the tight timescale they have been very supportive’.

Regional stakeholder

| Learning point: The South East region identified the possibility of a strengthened role for Jobcentre Plus in ALAs - via redundancy brokers - for individuals facing redundancy who needed new skills and IAG at Level 3. The East Midlands identified trade union learning representatives as a partnership link which could be further developed. |

2.3.3 Local level

Liaison between providers and partnership managers

During the ALA trials set-up phase, several providers mentioned they attended briefing sessions about the trials run by LSC partnership managers. Interviewees from large organisations often mentioned that it was difficult to know who should attend these meetings as several departments and individuals were involved in implementation of the ALAs within the provider.

| Learning point: After an initial burst of meetings and information sessions to explain the initiative, a small number of providers mentioned that they would have liked more regular ongoing meetings, in order to discuss progress and to learn from and support each other in the implementation of the trials. |
Collaboration between providers

At a local level, many providers worked fairly independently, and did not have any partnership or collaborative working arrangements. Outside of nextstep, partnership arrangements tended to be specific to individual providers and arranged on an ad hoc basis to meet particular circumstances or needs.

Examples of this included one provider entering learner information onto the LAMS database for a smaller provider in the same locality. Another provider was managing the ALA contract on behalf of three sub-contractors, and another was using a partner organisation to support their marketing of the ALAs and to generate potential employer and learner leads.

Working with nextstep

Interviewees from nextstep were generally supportive of the ALAs because of the scope for additional independent IAG that they offered to learners. However, they reported receiving very few referrals or enquiries about ALAs, and some commented that as a result, the ALAs had become a low business priority for them when compared with other initiatives. For example, two nextstep providers who had not yet received any referrals at the time of the qualitative research said:

‘My contract for nextstep is to see roughly 9,000-10,000 clients … and then the target for ALAs is 100 … my priorities are elsewhere.’

nextstep provider

‘I haven’t got time to waste on it in terms of spending hours sorting out systems, processes etc when nothing’s happening on it from our point of view.’

nextstep provider

One nextstep Operations Manager reported that the low volume of referrals may be explained by many of the providers already being Matrix-accredited and therefore being able to offer quality-approved IAG to learners themselves. Indeed, the vast majority of providers interviewed viewed the IAG offered as part of the ALA as a service provided by internal staff rather than by their external partners.

However, one college reported that they were working with nextstep advisers outside of their own organisation to develop a way to deliver IAG to the large volume of ALA learners they had badged on their system. Partnership working had therefore enhanced their delivery capacity. This provider was planning group sessions and a careers and learning fair to meet the additional demand.
Working with Train to Gain

Over half of the ALA providers interviewed for the qualitative research reported that they also had a Train to Gain contract. Several of these providers, particularly colleges, said that ALAs worked well alongside Train to Gain. This was largely due to the way in which the ALA had been targeted at a small number of courses, often excluding work-based learning qualifications.

For other providers, typically private, specialist providers, running Train to Gain and ALA contracts simultaneously meant that in some circumstances learners could be eligible for both. In some of these organisations, ALAs and Train to Gain were kept distinct and marketed at different people. Others had taken a less targeted approach and several of these raised questions about how to allocate learners between the two funding strands, especially as Train to Gain offered more funding per learner than the ALA:

‘Level 3 trials for Train to Gain offer financially more than an ALA does. Having communicated that to the managing director they said put the numbers through the Train to Gain trials. They are new as well but over the past month it’s become a bit ‘which one do you put them on?’

Learning provider (private, specialised provision)

‘If the situation does crop up where they could be eligible for both then in an IAG sense you choose which is best for the learner, but in a business sense, what is better financially.’

Learning provider (private, specialised provision)

Learning point: The confusion among some providers about whether to allocate learners through ALAs or through Train to Gain suggests they would have benefited from clearer guidelines on this early in contracting or delivery process.

2.4 Expectations and perceived impact of ALAs

This section identifies the perceived impacts of the ALAs among the range of stakeholders interviewed for this research. It should be noted that these were based on interviews undertaken in the first few months of the ALA trials and therefore based on perceptions. It was not possible to follow these up as the second tranche of the qualitative evaluation was cancelled due to the roll-out of Skills Accounts.

2.4.1 For the national and regional LSCs

ALAs were very much viewed as a vehicle for the LSC to strengthen support for learner choice by making a reality of demand-led funding. They were also seen as a way of targeting particular groups of learners, sectors or geographical areas to increase/widen participation in learning at Level 3.
2.4.2 For providers

Of the providers interviewed during the December-January 2008, the majority were either on target with learner numbers or optimistic that they would achieve these by mid-2008. However, as discussed previously, some colleges had met their targets by enrolling learners on ALAs retrospectively and/or targeting particular courses as block registrations. A small number of providers said that specific course cancellations meant that they would not be able to meet their sector-specific targets for some subjects.

Providers with rolling recruitment were more confident than those with fixed main start dates that they would meet their target for ALA registrations.

More companies moving into the adult learning market

One of the main benefits mentioned for providers was that more private companies could move into the adult market at Level 3, thereby increasing competition. As one private training provider said:

‘We want to be able to do direct funded Level 3 provision. If they are successful and it’s widened out we would want to move into the adult market more. It would be an expansion of our business.’

Learning provider (private, specialised provision)

Another provider who was a small charity was able to move into providing Level 3 training to adults via ALAs. They also felt that being in receipt of LSC mainstream funding increased their credibility and local standing as a provider. ALA funding had also enabled them to offer NVQs for the first time:

‘We’ve done qualifications before, but nothing in terms of the size of an NVQ programme, so when we got the contract the first step was to get NVQ assessors and get City and Guilds accredited and set up a whole programme from scratch … It’s giving us credibility, it’s the first time we’ve been able to do NVQs … at last it’s LSC mainstream.’

Learning provider (private, specialised provision)

The value of funding was lower than anticipated for some providers

A small number of private providers reported that the value of the funding they could claim for ALAs was lower than they had anticipated. Due to the mode of learning, typically via the work-place, they could not deliver the required number of guided learning hours to qualify for the highest level of ALA funding.
Being in it from the start was important to providers

Looking forward, providers often mentioned that they had taken part in ALA trials because they viewed Accounts as the direction in which learning and skills policy was moving, and wanted to be part of the policy from the start so as to be able to influence it. Providers also reported that they wanted to learn early lessons of working in this way and of operating with demand-led funding for their organisation so that they could build for the future.

‘It is better to be in it from the start than to come in part way through. To a degree then you can influence things, and it can also generate additional income. This is particularly because we fund our IAG adviser through additional contracts.’

Learning provider (college, general provision)

2.5 Summary of issues raised by the process evaluation

The process evaluation identified some early issues which had implications for learners’ subsequent experiences of the ALA. These were:

- Use of the ALA helpline was lower than anticipated, and some of the marketing materials and Account registration processes were not ready in time for learning providers to use them before or during their main enrolment period in August/September 2007. In practice, this meant that many learners enrolling on courses during the summer and early autumn of 2007 did not follow the planned ‘learner journey’ for opening an Account (i.e. register for an Account and then select a provider/course), but enrolled on the course first and were assigned an ALA at a later date. Some of these learners who were registered on an Account retrospectively may not have known much about it.

- Many college providers in particular did not register learners on an Account until 3-4 months after they had started their course. This was in part due to the absence of an automated/integrated MI system and the additional administrative burden of entering learners onto both the ILR and the LAMS database. As a result, many of the ALA learners registered in the first year of the trial would not have been offered access to independent, upfront IAG through the Account – although they may have had this anyway, or may not have needed it. Consequently, for many of these ALA learners, the emphasis would shift to access to ongoing IAG, in particular IAG on progression routes at the end of their course. While some providers reported they offered this to all learners anyway, others were gearing up for increased demand and for delivering a more systematic IAG offer.

- All of the main learner-facing gatekeepers to opening an ALA (the helpline, nextstep, and learning providers) reported difficulties ‘selling’ the benefits of having one, mainly due its ‘virtual’ nature. There was concern among providers
that the benefits of having an ALA were not particularly tangible to learners, other than seeing a financial statement.

These issues are all picked up in the later stages of this report, in terms of actual impacts on learners’ experiences of having an ALA.
3 Who Registered for an ALA?

In this section we use data from the 2007/08 Individualised Learner Record (ILR) full annual return to examine the profile of ALA-registered learners in terms of region, ALA type, and demographics. We also compare this with data for other adult Level 3 learners.

Further ILR analysis on fee payments and fee remission, and on retention, completion and withdrawal rates, can be found in Sections 4.5 and 4.8 respectively.

3.1 ALA registrations by type and region

Table 3.1 shows the number of ALA learners registered by region and ‘type’ for the 2007/08 academic year. It shows that during this timeframe there were 5,595 ALA learner starts, of which 860 were in the East Midlands (15 per cent) and 4,735 were in the South East/ Greater London (85 per cent). Region is based on region of the learning provider rather than home region of the learner.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of ALA learner flag</th>
<th>East Midlands</th>
<th>South East and Greater London</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>82 - additional</td>
<td>632</td>
<td>1,151</td>
<td>1,783</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>88 - badged</td>
<td>228</td>
<td>3,402</td>
<td>3,630</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n/a</td>
<td></td>
<td>182</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>860</td>
<td>4,735</td>
<td>5,595</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ILR Data 2007/08 FE F05

ALA learner starts are flagged under one of three different codes on the ILR, to designate which ‘type’ of learner they are. This allows identification of additional versus ‘badged’ ALA learners, as well as those which were RDA-funded (the latter group only applies to learners in the South East). The same table shows a clear

1 The data analysis was based on all learners with a course start date of 1st August 2007 or later.
distinction between the regions in terms of ALA learner type: seven in ten of those in the South East/ Greater London were ‘badged’ as ALA learner starts (72 per cent) compared with just three in ten (29 per cent) of those in the East Midlands.

In both regions the numbers of ALA learners (both overall and in terms of ‘additional’ learners) are below the targets mentioned earlier in this report (see Figure 1.1).

If we look at the breakdown of ALA learners within region, there are some interesting distinctions in terms of whether the learner was categorised as being ‘disadvantaged’ or not (using eligibility for the disadvantaged uplift flag on the ILR as proxy measure). This shows that a much higher proportion of ALA learners in the East Midlands came from a deprived ward, as we might expect given that the target areas in that region were more socially and economically disadvantaged than those in the South East. Notably, if starts are broken down further by ALA learner type, 44 per cent of additional learner starts in the East Midlands came from a deprived area, compared with 27 per cent of ‘badged’ learners there.

In addition, RDA-funded learners in the South East were more likely to come from a deprived area than other ALA learners in that region, at 19 per cent compared with 13 per cent of additional learners and eight per cent of ‘badged’ ones.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3.2: ALA learner eligibility for disadvantaged uplift, by region of ALA learning provider</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>From a deprived area (ward based uplift)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Studying basic skills programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other eligibility for disadvantaged uplift</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not eligible for disadvantaged uplift</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total N</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ILR Data 2007/08 FE F05

3.2 Demographic profile of ALA learners

Table 3.3 shows the profile of ALA-registered learners on the ILR compared with that of other adult Level 3 learners. There are many similarities in terms of ethnicity and whether or not the learner has a self-defined learning difficulty, disability or health problem. The key distinctions are by age and gender:

- By age, a much lower proportion of ALA learners were aged between 19 and 24 at the start of their course (38 per cent compared with 63 per cent). As a result there are proportionately more ALA learners in the 25 to 34, and 35 to 44 age groups. This difference may be linked to the types of courses that ALAs were targeted at, such as Access to HE, which attract older learners compared with A-levels.
By gender, two-thirds of ALA learners are female (66 per cent) compared with around three in five other Level 3 learners (59 per cent).

| Table 3.3: Profile of ALA-registered learners compared with other adult Level 3 learners |
|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Sex:                                            | ALA learners (%)| Other Level 3 learners (%) |
| Male                                            | 34              | 41              |
| Female                                          | 66              | 59              |
| Age band at start of course:                    |                 |                 |
| 19-24                                           | 38              | 63              |
| 25-34                                           | 30              | 17              |
| 35-44                                           | 21              | 13              |
| 45-54                                           | 9               | 6               |
| 55+                                             | 2               | 1               |
| Ethnicity:                                      |                 |                 |
| White British                                   | 70              | 71              |
| White other                                     | 8               | 4               |
| Asian/Asian British                             | 5               | 8               |
| Black/ Black British                            | 8               | 9               |
| Mixed                                           | 3               | 3               |
| Chinese/ other ethnic background                 | 3               | 3               |
| Not known                                       | 3               | 2               |
| Learner has a self-defined learning difficulty and/or disability and/or health problem |
| Yes                                             | 12              | 12              |
| No                                              | 83              | 83              |
| Unknown                                         | 5               | 5               |
| Prior Attainment Level (based on those for whom a prior qualification was recorded) |
| Level 1                                         | 20              | 18              |
| Full Level 2                                    | 49              | 56              |
| Full Level 3                                    | 15              | 13              |
| Level 4+                                        | 6               | 3               |
| Below Level 1/ entry level                      | 1               | 1               |
| Other qualifications (unknown level)            | 4               | 2               |
| No qualifications                               | 4               | 7               |
| Total N                                         | 5,595           | 336,674         |

Source: ILR Data 2007/08 FE F05
This section draws on evidence from Wave 1 and 2 of the learner surveys and MI analysis of the ILR to examine the following:

- learners’ awareness and understanding of ALAs, and where they got their information
- access to pre-entry IAG and views on choice of course and learning provider
- overall satisfaction with the course
- how much ALA learners paid towards their course costs, where additional financial support for paying course costs came from, and learners’ attitudes towards costs
- receipt of a financial statement and learners’ views on this
- access to progression IAG and likelihood of undertaking further study in the next three years
- reasons for early leaving, and completion rates.

4.1 Learners’ awareness and understanding of the ALA

This section explores learners’ awareness of the Adult Learner Account and how well-informed they felt about it. It shows that learner recognition of being registered for an ALA increased between the Wave 1 and Wave 2 surveys. However, the proportion feeling well-informed about the ALA remained stable. Feeling well-informed about the ALA is linked to holding more positive views about it, which underlines the importance of clear communication to learners about what the Account is and how it can help them. This is a message which is equally transferable to the new Skills Accounts.
4.1.1 Learners’ awareness of ALAs

Three-quarters of learners recognised they had an ALA at Wave 1

In the Wave 1 survey, ALA learners were given a short description of the ALA and asked if they had registered for one. In response, three-quarters said yes (73 per cent) – nine per cent reported they were not registered on an ALA and 18 per cent did not know whether they were registered or not.

Those who said they were not registered for an ALA, or did not know, were then asked whether they had received any information about an ALA since June 2007. They were prompted with examples such as a welcome pack or letter about the ALA, or a conversation about it with an adviser or someone at their learning provider. When prompted, half of those asked reported that they had received some form of information about the ALA (49 per cent).

Overall, this equated to a further 13 per cent of ALA learners with some knowledge of the ALA, bringing the total that were aware of the ALA to 86 per cent altogether.

Awareness of being registered for an ALA increased between Wave 1 and Wave 2, but was still not universal

In Wave 2, learners who were not previously aware of the ALA at Wave 1 were asked whether they were registered for one. At this point, 61 per cent of learners asked (n=34) confirmed they were registered. When combined with the findings from Wave 1 (see Figure 4.1), this shows that:

- 84 per cent of learners surveyed at both Wave 1 and Wave 2 recognised they were registered for an ALA (up from 73 per cent at Wave 1)
- a further 12 per cent of learners had received information about the ALA, but were unsure about whether they were registered for one, bringing the total ‘aware’ to 96 per cent altogether
- four per cent of learners reported they had not received any information on the ALA, and did not know whether they were registered for one or not.
Figure 4.1: Learners’ awareness of whether they were registered for an ALA

The less than universal awareness of being registered for an ALA is likely to be linked to the way that some learners were registered. We know from the qualitative process evaluation that some providers wrote to learners about the ALA and registered them retrospectively, without their active involvement. Several colleges had marketed the Accounts to their existing students through mail shots but reported very low or non-existent levels of enquiries (for instance one out of 500). Eventually, some colleges registered existing students by running opt-outs rather than opt-ins and ‘badging’ learners with Accounts retrospectively.

4.1.2 Learners’ understanding of ALAs

Half of learners said they felt well-informed about the ALA

In Wave 2, half the learners felt well-informed about the ALA (50 per cent), with slightly fewer saying they did not feel well-informed (46 per cent). Figure 4.2 indicates that ‘acknowledged’ ALA learners, that is, those who recognised they were registered for an Account, were more likely than others to report they felt well-informed (52 per cent compared with 39 per cent). There was no significant difference by course type or region.
Although the proportion of learners who acknowledged they were registered for an ALA had increased, the proportion who felt well-informed remained stable overall and it actually declined among those who reported being registered, from 60 per cent to 52 per cent. This may be linked to diminishing recall over time.

As in Wave 1, understanding of the ALA was higher among learners from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) backgrounds: they were almost twice as likely to say they felt well-informed about it (27 per cent compared with 15 per cent of white learners). The Wave 1 survey found that learners from BME backgrounds were more likely than white learners to have found out about the ALA from the adult careers advisory services such as nextstep or learndirect, or from their local LSC.

Feeling well-informed about the ALA was also associated with receiving financial support during the course; feeling informed about the cost of the course; receiving progression IAG; and reporting that the ALA had a positive impact on experience of the course. This underlines the importance of providing clear information to learners so they can understand more about what the ALA is for and what the links are between having an ALA and the additional services that go with it.

**Providers were the main source of information on ALAs**

Wave 1 learners who recognised they had an ALA or who reported receiving any information about it were asked how they first heard about it. By far the most common means was via their learning or training provider (42 per cent), followed by receiving information in the post or a leaflet through the door (20 per cent).
Figure 4.3 suggests that learners who first heard about the ALA via a letter or leaflet in the post may have needed more follow-up information in order to better understand it.

**Figure 4.3: How ALA learners first heard of the ALA, by how well-informed they felt about it**

![Diagram showing how ALA learners first heard of the ALA, by how well-informed they felt about it](image)

Base: All Wave 1 ALA learners who were aware of ALAs (764)

*Source: IES/ Ipsos MORI 2008*

As well as being the most common way that learners first heard about ALAs, learning or training providers were also the most common source of information about them, subsequently. Two-thirds of learners who had heard of ALAs had received information about them from their learning provider (67 per cent) – by far the most common source (Table 4.1). The next most common source was via a learndirect or nextstep careers adviser (at nine per cent).

**Table 4.1: Sources of information about ALAs, by ethnicity (all mentions over five per cent)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acknowledged ALA learners or who had received information on ALAs</th>
<th>Total (%)</th>
<th>White (%)</th>
<th>BME (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>From a learning/training provider</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>learnerdirect or nextstep careers adviser</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letter/leaflet</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local LSC</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work/colleagues/employer</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From the ALA helpline</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know/can’t remember</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Base (N)</td>
<td>764</td>
<td>565</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: IES/ Ipsos MORI 2008*

ALA learners from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups were significantly more likely than white learners to have received information about the ALA from a
learndirect or nextstep careers adviser (17 per cent compared with six per cent) or via their local LSC (11 per cent compared with four per cent). National figures\(^1\) show that the nextstep service sees a higher proportion of clients from BME groups than are represented in the general population. Figures for July 2008 found that 22 per cent of nextstep customers were from BME groups compared with eight per cent in England as a whole.

**Use of the ALA helpline was limited**

The relatively low volume of calls to the ALA helpline was reflected in the finding that just five per cent of ALA learners surveyed at Wave 1 (N=40) could recall using it.

When asked about their reasons for calling the helpline, the majority of callers said they had wanted to find out more about ALAs (58 per cent). Around one-quarter (23 per cent) had contacted the helpline to get information on a specific course they wanted to do and one-fifth (20 per cent) had called to find out about sources of funding for training and studying, more generally.

The vast majority of ALA learners who used the helpline were satisfied with the helpfulness of the Adviser (93 per cent in total) – including 50 per cent very satisfied and eight per cent who were extremely satisfied. Satisfaction ratings for the usefulness of the information provided were slightly lower, although still very high at 85 per cent satisfied overall.

**Most learners who received one found the ALA information pack useful**

All learners registered for an ALA were meant to receive information or ‘welcome’ pack containing a welcome letter and Account number, provider contact details, and information on learning options. Three-quarters of ALA learners interviewed at Wave 1 said they had received a pack (76 per cent). Almost one-fifth (18 per cent) said they had not, with a further seven per cent who could not remember.

Two-thirds reported they found the information pack either very or fairly useful (67 per cent) including 21 per cent who said it was very useful. Just one-fifth reported that the information pack was not useful (22 per cent).

Those who did not feel well-informed about the ALA were more likely than those who did to say the information pack was not useful (43 per cent compared with 12 per cent). This may have been related to when their Account was opened. The pack contained some information geared towards course choice, such as a list of providers offering the ALA, which may not have been particularly useful to learners who received it after they had already enrolled on their course. Analysis by where learners received information

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\(^1\) LSC IAG MI Performance Overview for nextstep (July 2008), downloaded from: www.nextstepstakeholder.co.uk
on the Account appears to support this: those who found the pack most useful were more likely to have received information from the ALA helpline or a specialist adviser (which are sources likely to have been used upfront, prior to enrolling on a course), than from their learning or training provider (Table 4.2).

Table 4.2: Usefulness of ALA information pack, by sources of information used

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very useful</th>
<th>ALA helpline</th>
<th>nextstep/ learndirect adviser</th>
<th>Learning or training provider</th>
<th>Local LSC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairly useful</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very useful</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not useful at all</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘NET’ useful</td>
<td>+45</td>
<td>+71</td>
<td>+62</td>
<td>+50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Base (N)</td>
<td>578</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>398</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: IES/Ipsos MORI 2008

4.2 How important was choice to ALA learners, and did they feel they had sufficient?

This section looks at whether ALA learners had a wider choice of learning than they would have otherwise had. From the provision perspective, this was the case as more private training providers reported that ALAs had allowed them to move into the adult Level 3 market. However, although choice of course and provider were important to ALA learners, they were no more or less likely to say they had a choice than those doing other Level 3 courses outside of the trial regions.

4.2.1 Stakeholders’ views

There were three examples where providers said that ALAs had enabled them to run additional/new Level 3 provision and hence offer learners a wider choice of providers and courses. These were all private training providers who mentioned that widening opportunities was a potential impact of the ALAs.

‘It opens up the possibilities of people doing an award that we wouldn’t be able to offer them.’

Learning provider (private, specialised provision)

Access to a wider range of courses and providers was not mentioned as a benefit by any college-based provider, as ALA learners in these providers tended to access existing provision.
4.2.2 ALA learners more likely than others to say that choice of course and provider was ‘very important’

One of the objectives of the ALA is that learners should feel they have a wider choice of course and provider than they would have had otherwise. All learners were asked how important it was for them to have a choice about which course they did and which college or training provider they used, then asked how much choice they felt they actually had about each.

An overwhelming majority regarded having a choice about which course they did as being very or fairly important (90 per cent of ALA learners and 89 per cent of other Level 3 learners). ALA learners were more likely than other Level 3 learners to think having a choice about their course was ‘very’ important (71 per cent compared with 63 per cent).

Choice of college or training provider was a slightly lower priority, but still deemed important by 80 per cent of ALA learners and 76 per cent of other Level 3 learners. Again, ALA learners were more likely than others to regard this as being ‘very’ important (53 per cent compared with 48 per cent).

4.2.3 But they were no more or less likely to say they had a choice

When asked how much choice they felt they had over which course they did, almost three-quarters of learners said a great deal or a fair amount (72 per cent). There were no significant differences between ALA (71 per cent) and other Level 3 learners (74 per cent).

Fewer learners said they had a great deal or a fair amount of choice about which provider they used (59 per cent) – as might be expected given the range of constraints such as location, timing, availability of transport etc., which could impact on this. There was no significant difference between ALA learners (58 per cent) and other Level 3 learners (62 per cent).

It is worth comparing importance of choice against how much choice learners felt they had. Table 4.3 shows that the gap between these was higher for ALA learners than for other Level 3 learners (particularly on choice of provider), mainly because ALA learners accorded choice a higher priority.

Among ALA learners, having choice over which course they did and/or which provider they used was consistently more important to BME learners and learners who had paid some of all of their course fees. Learners who were more likely to reporting having a good choice included these groups as well as those who felt well-informed about the ALA and who were satisfied with the pre-entry IAG they had received.
Table 4.3: Views on importance and extent of choice about course and provider (ALA learners and comparison sample)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Choice about course:</th>
<th>Choice very or fairly important (%)</th>
<th>Had great deal or fair amount of choice (%)</th>
<th>Difference (A-B)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ALA learner</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Level 3 learner</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice about provider:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALA learner</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Level 3 learner</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source: IES/ Ipsos MORI 2008</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.3 Learners’ use of and satisfaction with pre-entry IAG

Access to independent upfront IAG for those who wanted it was originally aimed as being a core aspect of the ALA. However, as discussed earlier in this report, the way that the ALAs were rolled out meant that many learners had already started their courses before they were registered for an ALA, and would not have received access to upfront IAG through the ALA itself (although they may have done so anyway, or may not have needed it). Many providers in particular questioned whether the ALA offered learners anything new in terms of access to upfront IAG, because they offered this anyway.

ALA learners were no more or less likely to have used pre-entry IAG than other Level 3 learners, although among those aged 19 to 25 it did appear that they made more use of formal sources such as an admissions adviser at their college or training provider. Satisfaction with pre-course IAG was high across both ALA and other Level 3 learners.

4.3.1 Stakeholders’ views on access to independent upfront IAG

The majority of national and regional stakeholders identified access to independent IAG as one of the main elements of ‘added value’. Many providers also emphasised the importance of independent IAG and that it could be a critical part of the learner experience. However, many providers also felt this was something which they were offering to learners anyway.

‘I don’t see what it’s doing for the learner that the learner doesn’t already have.’

Learning provider (college, general provision)

‘For the candidates the in-depth advice and guidance is there. That is of massive benefit to clients. That’s a good selling point in a way but across our other contracts we integrate advice and guidance anyway.’

Learning provider (private, specialised provision)
Some providers questioned whether upfront IAG was always necessary for learners - for example, if a learner had been working for a long time in a particular industry and was taking NVQ Level 3 specifically for their current job.

‘Because they’re employed it [IAG] is not as important for them, as it might be for someone who is not currently employed and who is trying to find the right direction… the learners who have been working for however many years … just want the Level 3 qualification.’

Learning provider (private, specialised provision)

4.3.2 Almost all learners had received some form of pre-course IAG

All Wave 1 learners were asked which, if any, sources of information, advice or guidance (IAG) about education, training or work they had used before starting their current Level 3 course. Almost all of them had used at least some form of formal or informal IAG (97 per cent of ALA learners and 96 per cent of other Level 3 learners). Overall, the most common route was via a teacher, tutor or admissions adviser at their learning or training provider, followed by more informal sources like friends or family, or their employer (Table 4.4).

The main reason learners said they had not accessed any pre-entry IAG was that they did not need any.

There were few significant differences between ALA and other Level 3 learners

Table 4.4 suggests there were few significant differences between ALA and other Level 3 learners, in terms of the sources of pre-entry IAG they had used. Most notably, other Level 3 learners were more likely to have used friends or family (44 per cent compared with 33 per cent), although this is related to the younger age profile among this group, overall. Comparing ALA and other Level 3 learners within age group finds that among the 19 to 25 year olds, ALA learners were more likely to have consulted an admissions adviser or tutor at their learning or training provider (67 per cent compared with 53 per cent of the comparison group); and less likely to have used friends and family (39 per cent compared with 51 per cent).

Table 4.4: Sources of pre-entry IAG used (mentions over five per cent only)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of IAG</th>
<th>ALA learners (%)</th>
<th>Comparison sample (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher/tutor or admissions adviser at learning provider</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends or family</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employer</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>learndirect telephone advice line or website</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nextstep centre</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other internet/websites</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Base (N)</td>
<td>886</td>
<td>448</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: IES/ Ipsos MORI 2008
The other key difference is that other Level 3 learners were more likely to have used the nextstep advice service than learners registered for an ALA (11 per cent compared with seven per cent). Findings from the qualitative process evaluation found that, although interviewees from nextstep were supportive of the ALA trials, generally they had received very few referrals or enquiries about ALAs. The low volume of referrals they experienced relative to their expectations may be explained by the fact that many of the learning providers were already Matrix-accredited\(^1\) and could therefore offer quality-approved IAG to learners directly.

The other explanation for this apparent lack of distinction between ALA and other Level 3 learners is that, in many cases, learners were not registered as having an ALA until after they had enrolled on their course, when the most opportune time for providing additional independent pre-entry IAG had already elapsed.

**Use of learndirect and nextstep among ALA learners**

In total, 16 per cent of Wave 1 ALA learners had accessed pre-entry IAG via learndirect and seven per cent via nextstep. The use of these two sources was much more common among BME learners compared with white learners (Table 4.5).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>White (%)</th>
<th>BME (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>learndirect (telephone or website)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nextstep</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Base (N)</td>
<td>667</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: IES/ Ipsos MORI 2008*

Use of learndirect and nextstep was also more common among ALA learners who felt well-informed about the ALA: 20 per cent of these had used learndirect and ten per cent nextstep, compared with 12 per cent and five per cent of those who did not feel well-informed.

Generally, learners who received information about the ALA from the helpline, a specialist adviser, or via their local LSC, were significantly more likely to have also received pre-course IAG from learndirect or nextstep compared with those who received information via their learning provider (Table 4.6).

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\(^1\) The Matrix standard is the national quality standard for any organisation that delivers information, advice and/or guidance on learning and work.
Table 4.6: Use of learndirect and nextstep among ALA learners, by sources of information about the ALA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Information</th>
<th>ALA helpline (%)</th>
<th>nextstep/learndirect adviser (%)</th>
<th>Learning or training provider (%)</th>
<th>Local LSC (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>learndirect (telephone or website)</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nextstep</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Base (N)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>510</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: IES/Ipsos MORI 2008

One-third of learners who had used either learndirect or nextstep for pre-course IAG and had used the ALA helpline (N=40) said they had been referred for the IAG after their initial telephone call. It is worth commenting on this because, in the original learner journey for ALA learners, one of the main conduits to independent and upfront IAG was planned to be referral to learndirect, via the ALA helpline. Lower than anticipated use of the helpline therefore meant that fewer ALA learners were referred to learndirect or nextstep via this route, for independent upfront IAG.

4.3.3 Overall, around nine learners in ten were satisfied with the pre-entry IAG they received

Satisfaction with pre-entry IAG among Wave 1 learners was high across the board. Figure 4.4 shows that ALA learners were slightly less likely to be satisfied with the pre-entry IAG they had received than other Level 3 learners (87 per cent compared with 90 per cent), although they were no more or less likely to be dissatisfied.

Figure 4.4: Satisfaction with pre-entry IAG

Base: All ALA learners (859) and comparison sample learners (431) who received pre-entry IAG

Source: IES/Ipsos MORI 2008
4.4 Were ALA learners satisfied with their course, overall?

ALA learners’ satisfaction with their Level 3 course was comparable with the National Learner Satisfaction Survey (NLSS) and showed no change since Wave 1. Learners awarded very high levels of satisfaction across the board, and particularly among learners doing Access to HE courses.

4.4.1 Among ALA learners, satisfaction with the learning experience was comparable with NLSS levels

Overall, 88 per cent of the Level 3 learners surveyed at Wave 2 were satisfied with their learning experience, including around one-quarter who said they were extremely satisfied (23 per cent). There was no significant change compared with Wave 1, where satisfaction levels were also very high. Although the survey populations are somewhat different¹, satisfaction ratings are comparable to those found in the National Learner Satisfaction Survey (NLSS) 2007, which found that 90 per cent of Level 3 learners were satisfied with their learning experience overall.

The highest satisfaction levels, at around 93 per cent overall, were found among learners who had received progression IAG; those who felt well-informed about the ALA; those who said the ALA had a positive impact on their experience of the course; and those who had subsequently started a new course.

Learners who were more likely than average to say they were ‘extremely satisfied’ were those who:

- Doing Access to HE courses (30 per cent, compared with 1 per cent of those doing NVQ Level 3s or BTECs)
- Had received some form of financial support for learning (27 per cent)
- Felt well-informed about the cost of their course (27 per cent)
- Had received progression IAG (27 per cent).

Figure 4.5 shows that there was a notable difference in satisfaction levels between learners who recognised they were registered for an ALA and those who did not. Around two-thirds of acknowledged ALA learners said they were extremely or very satisfied (68 per cent), compared with 55 per cent of those who did not realise they had an ALA.

¹ It should be noted that the NLSS 07 figure is based on all Level 3 learners (not just full Level 3 learners) and also includes Level 3 learners aged 16 to 18.
4.5 Course costs and financial support for learning

ALA learners were more likely to have contributed financially to their course costs than other Level 3 learners, although this is in part related to the different types of course they were doing. Among those who contributed part of the costs, the average was around one-third of the fee and the average amount was around £600. ALA learners were more likely than other Level 3 learners to have received financial support through the Adult Learning Grant: this may be related to joint marketing of the two initiatives by some providers.

4.5.1 ALA learners more likely to have paid towards the cost of their course

Wave 1 learners were asked whether they personally had made any financial contribution towards the cost of their course fees. One-quarter of ALA learners reported they had paid for the course in full (26 per cent) compared with one-fifth of other Level 3 learners (21 per cent). Overall, almost half (48 per cent) of ALA learners had made a financial contribution to the cost of their course fees, compared with around one-third of other Level 3 learners (37 per cent). Interestingly, comparison of the results within age group finds that younger ALA learners in the 19 to 25 and 25 to 34 age groups were more likely to have contributed towards their course costs than their counterparts in the comparison sample (around half had paid at least some of the course cost compared with one-third of the comparison sample, in the equivalent age group).
This is in part related to the course profile of ALA learners compared with other Level 3 learners (ALA learners were more likely to be doing Access to HE and other types of course which learners contribute towards). The recent evaluation of Level 3 (Wave 1 report) found that – among all Level 3 learners – making a contribution to the fees was particularly likely among those doing Access to HE (29 per cent of learners on Access courses had paid all and 19 per cent had paid some of their course fees).

Figure 4.6: Whether learners had made a financial contribution to the cost of their course fees, ALA learners and comparison sample

Base: All ALA (886) and comparison (448) learners

Source: IES/Ipsos MORI 2008

Among ALA learners, those who were dissatisfied were more likely to say they paid the full course costs (38 per cent, compared with 25 per cent of those who were satisfied). It is likely that those who pay have higher expectations about their course (because they have invested some of their own money in doing it) and are therefore more likely to report dissatisfaction if these are not met.

Table 4.7: Whether ALA learners made a financial contribution to the cost of their course fees, by satisfaction with learning experience overall

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satisfied (%)</th>
<th>Dissatisfied (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes- paid all of it</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes- paid some of it</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Base (N)</td>
<td>771</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: IES/Ipsos MORI 2008

1 Ipsos MORI and Experian (2008), Interim Evaluation of Level 3, Wave 1 Report, Learning and Skills Council, Coventry
ALA learners who reported they had received a financial statement at Wave 1 were more likely to say they had paid the full course costs than those who had not (34 per cent compared with 19 per cent) – although this could be influenced by learners being more likely to review the statement if they had paid towards the costs of the course.

Among ALA learners, the mean contribution made, among those who paid part of the course fees, was 32 per cent of the total cost.

Among ALA learners who reported they paid some or all of their course cost, the mean contribution paid was £591, slightly lower than the mean paid by learners in the comparison sample, at £649.

4.5.2 Reasons why learners did not pay all of their course costs

Learners who did not contribute towards their course costs, or who only paid for them partially, were asked why they did not pay the full amount. Around half the ALA and other Level 3 learners said that the main reason they did not pay the full amount was because the government/LSC was paying the difference (53 per cent and 51 per cent, respectively). Around one in three (27 per cent and 30 per cent, respectively) said their employer was paying for it. There were no significant differences between ALA and other Level 3 learners.

Among ALA learners, those aged 19 to 34 and 35 to 44 were more likely than those aged 45 to 54 to report that the government/LSC was paying for it. The younger age group (aged 19 to 34) were also more likely to say they were exempt from paying the fees, or that some of the course fees were waived. Older learners aged 35 to 44 and 45 to 54 (who were more likely to be in paid work) were significantly more likely than those aged 19 to 34 to report that their employer was paying some or all of their course costs (Table 4.8).

| Table 4.8: Reasons why ALA learners did not pay the full course costs, by age group |
|---------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Course paid for by govt/LSC     | 19-34 (%) | 35-44 (%) | 45-54 (%) | 55+ (%) |
| Course paid for by employer     | 18     | 34     | 50     | 39     |
| Course paid for by individual such as parent or partner | 5     | -     | -     | -     |
| Learner exempt from paying course fees | 15     | 8     | 10     | 11     |
| Some of the course fees were waived | 10     | 6     | 2     | -     |
| Other reason                    | 1      | 1      | 1      | -      |
| Don’t know                      | 2      | 3      | 6      | -      |
| Base (N)                        | 372    | 176    | 82     | 18**   |

** Very low base, ineligible for significance testing

Source: IES/ Ipsos MORI 2008

Among those who did not pay the full course costs, other learners more likely to report that the government/LSC was paying for some or all of their fees were those
not in paid work (69 per cent) and those in BME groups (60 per cent): there is some overlap between these two categories as BME learners were less likely than white learners to be employed.

Learners with a disability or health problem who did not pay the full course costs were more likely than others to say this was because the fees had been waived (21 per cent compared with seven per cent).

4.5.3 Access to financial support for learning

At Wave 1, all learners were asked whether they had received a number of different forms of financial support for learning. One-third of ALA and other Level 3 learners alike had received some form of additional financial support (33 per cent each).

The main distinction between them was that ALA learners were more likely to report receiving the Adult Learning Grant (ALG) (15 per cent, compared with 11 per cent). This was especially likely among younger learners aged 19 to 34, where a fifth reported they received ALG (20 per cent, versus 13 per cent of learners in the comparison sample, in the same age group).

Table 4.9 shows that, by the time of the Wave 2 survey, a much higher proportion of ALA learners reported having received financial support for learning, rising to over half (57 per cent). The proportion receiving ALG remained stable but there was a large increase in the proportion reporting that they had accessed Learner Support Funds from their college, likely to be related to their duration on the course.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wave 1 ALA learners (%)</th>
<th>Wave 2 ALA learners (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adult Learning Grant</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner Support Funds</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Development Loan</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employer</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any financial support</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of these</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total N</td>
<td>886</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: IES/ Ipsos MORI 2009

Learners who felt well-informed about the ALA were more likely than those who did not to report that they received the ALG (25 per cent compared with 10 per cent) – a similar finding to Wave 1 – which may be related to joint marketing of the ALA and the ALG by providers.
Generally, learners who reported that the ALA had a positive impact on their experience of the course were more likely than those who reported no impact, to say they received financial support, in particular the ALG (25 per cent compared with 12 per cent) and Learner Support Funds (24 per cent compared with 19 per cent).

4.6 Did ALA learners know more about the costs of their course?

ALA learners were more likely than other Level 3 learners to say they felt well-informed about the full costs of their course, and those who had received a financial statement as part of their ALA were twice as likely as others to say they felt well-informed. Almost three-quarters agreed that knowing the full cost of the course would encourage them to complete it, suggesting that one of the main ideas behind ALAs is on sound principles. Learners were generally positive about the value of investing in their own learning and felt that their Level 3 course was good value for money.

4.6.1 ALA learners were more likely than other Level 3 learners to say they felt well-informed about course costs

At Wave 1, three-quarters (73 per cent) of ALA learners felt well-informed about the full cost of their course, significantly higher than other Level 3 learners (64 per cent) – although this is associated with them being more likely to have paid towards the course. Other Level 3 learners were more likely to report that they felt ‘not well-informed at all’ (20 per cent compared with just 12 per cent of those with an ALA).

This is important given that better information about the monetary value of the course is key to one of the ideas underpinning the Adult Learner Account: that learners who know more about the full cost of their course and how it has been paid for, may be more likely to feel committed to completing it, potentially resulting in improved completion rates.

At Wave 2, two-thirds of learners (65 per cent) felt well-informed about the total cost of their course. This is lower than the Wave 1 figure but the decline could be explained by recall issues, in particular among those who have been finished the course for a few months. There was no difference between learners who recognised they had an ALA and those who did not.

Feeling well-informed about course costs was more common among:

- Younger learners aged 19 to 34 (71 per cent)
- Learners who had completed the course (71 per cent)
- Learners who felt well-informed about the ALA (70 per cent), compared with 61 per cent of those who did not; and
Learners who had received a financial statement as part of their ALA (88 per cent), compared with just 40 per cent of those who had not. Learners at Wave 2 were no more likely to report having received a financial statement showing the full cost of their course, than those in Wave 1: these figures suggest that if more of them had done so, a higher proportion of learners would feel well-informed about their course costs.

Figure 4.7: How well-informed learners felt about the full cost of their course, by whether they received a financial statement (at the Wave 2 survey)

Base: All Wave 2 ALA learners who had received a statement (229) and not received a statement (206)

Source: IES/ Ipsos MORI 2009

4.6.2 Attitudes towards course costs and impact of knowing the full cost of the course

It is important to look at awareness of course costs because better information about the monetary value of the course is key to one of the ideas underpinning the ALA, that learners, who know more about the full cost of their course and how it has been paid for, may be more likely to feel committed to completing it.

This idea, alongside learners’ views about the cost of their course generally, was tested in a series of attitudinal statements. The results are summarised in Figure 4.8.
Figure 4.8: ALA learners’ attitudes towards knowing the full costs of the course and paying towards learning

- **Knowing the full cost of the course encourages you to complete it**
- **I’m less likely to drop out if I have paid something towards the cost of the course**
- **Paying for learning is a worthwhile investment**
- **My course is/was good value for money**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Tend to agree</th>
<th>Neither</th>
<th>Tend to disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Don’t know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowing the full cost of the course encourages you to complete it</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m less likely to drop out if I have paid something towards the cost of the course</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paying for learning is a worthwhile investment</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My course is/was good value for money</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Base: All Wave 2 ALA learners who had received a statement (229) and not received a statement (206)

**Source:** IES/ Ipsos MORI 2009

‘Knowing the full cost of a course encourages you to complete it’

Almost three-quarters (73 per cent) of ALA learners agreed that knowing the full cost of a course encouraged them to complete it. Overall agreement was highest among those who felt well-informed about the ALA (77 per cent) and among those who said the ALA had a positive impact on their experience of the course (80 per cent). The types of learner most likely to agree strongly with this statement were:

- BME learners (62 per cent, compared with 52 per cent of white learners).
- Learners who had heard of Skills Accounts (64 per cent, compared with 50 per cent of those who had not).
- Learners who felt well-informed about the cost of their course (57 per cent, compared with 44 per cent of those who did not feel well-informed).
- Learners who felt that the ALA had a positive impact on their experience of the course (59 per cent compared with 47 per cent of those who felt it had no impact).

Those most likely to disagree were older learners aged 34 to 44 or 45 to 54 (at 22 per cent and 23 per cent respectively).

‘I am less likely to drop out of a course if I have paid something towards it’

Around two-thirds of learners agreed with this statement (64 per cent). There were few significant sub-group differences, the main one being that white learners were much more likely to agree than BME learners (69 per cent compared with 50 per cent).
‘Paying for learning is a worthwhile investment’

Almost nine in 10 learners (88 per cent) agreed with this statement. The highest levels of agreement were among:

- learners who said the ALA had a positive impact on their experience of the course (96 per cent)
- learners who felt well-informed about the course costs (91 per cent, compared with 82 per cent of those who did not)
- learners who had received progression IAG (91 per cent compared with 85 per cent)
- learners who reported they were likely to take part in further learning over the next three years (91 per cent compared with 78 per cent).

‘My course is/was good value for money’

Three-quarters of learners (74 per cent) agreed that their course represented good value for money, including around half (49 per cent) who agreed strongly. The highest levels of agreement were found among learners who:

- were doing Access to HE courses (84 per cent), compared with NVQs or BTECs (71 per cent and 69 per cent respectively)
- felt well-informed about the ALA (81 per cent compared with 68 per cent) and about their course costs (81 per cent compared with 60 per cent)
- said the ALA had a positive impact on their experience of the course (81 per cent compared with 69 per cent of those who said it had no impact)
- received progression IAG (79 per cent compared with 66 per cent of those who did not)
- were satisfied with their course (78 per cent, compared with just 40 per cent of those who were dissatisfied).

Learners least likely to consider their course good value for money were those who were dissatisfied (45 per cent disagreed).

4.7 The financial statement

Although getting a financial statement was strongly associated with feeling well-informed about the cost of the course, just over half the learners recalled they had ever received one. Taken together with the fact that most learners agreed knowing the cost of their course would encourage them to complete it, and over half said they did not appreciate the full course costs until they received a statement, this suggests that there was scope for the financial statement to have had more of an impact.
4.7.1 Stakeholders’ views on the impact of the statement

National and regional stakeholders emphasised the importance of the financial statement as a mechanism for showing learners the true cost of their learning, with a view to increasing commitment to completing the course and therefore improving retention and achievement rates.

However, some providers felt that, while it could be useful for learners to see the full cost of their course and how it had been paid for, this would have limited impact on retention as learners were more concerned with course quality.

“We’ve read what the LSC are thinking the value is, but when you put it into, sort of at ground level with the students, the only difference they’re getting is this statement, which is fairly meaningless to the student to be honest.’

Learning provider (college, general provision)

4.7.2 Almost half the ALA learners recalled receiving a statement

When asked whether they had received any financial statements showing the full cost of the course and how it had been paid for, around half the Wave 2 ALA learners said they had (51 per cent). This is a slight increase on the Wave 1 figure, although we might have expected this to have increased more, seeing as more of the Wave 2 learners had actually completed their course.

Learners in the East Midlands were more likely than those in the South East to report they had received a statement (60 per cent compared with 49 per cent). By course type, those doing NVQ Level 3 courses were least likely to say they had received a statement (40 per cent, compared with 69 per cent of learners on BTEC courses and 58 per cent of those doing Access to HE).

Given that most of the learners enrolled on their course between September and December 2007, and over half of them had completed their course by the time the Wave 2 fieldwork took place, this figure appears lower than we may have expected. It does not appear to be associated with limited awareness of being registered for an ALA as there is no significant difference according to whether learners recognised they had an ALA or felt well-informed about it.

Table 4.10 shows that learners who felt well-informed about the cost of their course were almost four times as likely as those who did not to have received a financial statement (69 per cent, compared with 18 per cent).

Almost all of those who received a statement found it easy to understand

Almost all the learners who reported that they had received a statement felt that it was very or fairly easy to understand (90 per cent, in line with the Wave 1 figure of 92 per cent). This included half who felt it was very easy to understand (49 per cent). The
relatively universal ease of understanding the statement (among those who recalled receiving one) suggests that providers’ initial concerns about the potential for misunderstanding among learners were somewhat founded.

Table 4.10: Receipt of a financial statement, by how well informed learners were about the cost of their course

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Well-informed (%)</th>
<th>Not well-informed (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Received statement</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not received statement</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Base (N)</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: IES/ Ipsos MORI 2009

Administration of the statement

Almost nine in 10 learners (87 per cent) who had received a statement through their ALA reported that the information on it was accurate.

Just four per cent of learners (N=10) said they had ever requested a statement; the rest said they received one automatically. The most common method of requesting a statement was in person or by phone, direct from the learning provider. Almost all of these said the process of requesting a statement was straightforward and they were satisfied with the amount of time it took for the statement to arrive.

Impact of the statement

As discussed earlier, one of the key ideas behind the ALA is that learners will know the full cost of their course through the financial statement, which may encourage higher retention and achievement. Some providers argued that, while this was useful, they made this information available to learners anyway.

Learners who had received a statement were asked how far they agreed or disagreed with the statement: ‘I never appreciated the full cost of courses until I got a financial statement as part of my ALA’.

Just over half the learners agreed with this statement (55 per cent) while over one-quarter (28 per cent) disagreed and 14 per cent were ambivalent. There were few significant subgroup differences: the key ones being that those who reported the ALA had a positive impact on their experience of the course (63 per cent), and those who had not paid anything towards their course costs (62 per cent) were most likely to agree. Learners doing NVQ and BTEC courses were also more likely to agree than those doing Access to HE (56 per cent compared with 49 per cent).

Taken altogether, the findings in this section appear to suggest that the financial statement has had a limited impact, mainly because only just over half the ALA
learners surveyed could recall receiving one. The fact that most learners agreed that knowing the full cost of the course would encourage them to complete it, and that over half said they did not appreciate the full cost of courses until they received a statement as part of the ALA, suggests that the ideas underlying it are fairly sound ones.

4.8 Early leaving

ILR analysis found that ALA learners were more likely to be continuing on their course and slightly more likely to have withdrawn, than other level 3 learners. Completion rates in the two ALA trial regions were very similar, once the type of ALA learner was taken into account.

The survey found that the main reasons for early leaving were choosing the wrong course, or finding it difficult to combine the course with family or other commitments. There were no significant differences between ALA and other Level 3 learners.

4.8.1 Completion status of ALA learners compared with other adult Level 3 learners

Table 4.11 shows the completion status for ALA-registered and other adult Level 3 learners, based on the full ILR record for 2007/08. Analysis is based on learners who started their course from 1st August 2007 onwards.

More ALA learners were still continuing or intending to continue their course, while fewer had completed. The withdrawal rate for ALA learners was 17 per cent, slightly higher than that of the other Level 3 learners, at 14 per cent. However, if transfer rates are taken into account as well, the rates are broadly similar at 18 and 17 per cent respectively.

Table 4.11: Completion status of all ALA and other Level 3 learners, based on ILR FE return for 2007/08

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Completion Status</th>
<th>ALA-registered (%)</th>
<th>Other Level 3 (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learner continuing or intending to continue their course</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner completed the activities leading to the learning aim</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner withdrawn from activities leading to the learning aim</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner transferred to a new learning aim</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (N)</td>
<td>5,575</td>
<td>336,674</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ILR Data 2007/08 FE F05

4.8.2 Completion status by ALA learner type within region

Table 4.12 shows completion status by ALA learner type within region. The key messages here are:
the proportion of learners continuing their course was highest among additional ALA learners in both regions. ALA-badged learners were more likely to have completed their course by the end of 2007/08.

completion rates were very similar across the two regions, by learner type.

Table 4.11: Completion status of ALA learners by region and ALA learner type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>East Midlands (%)</th>
<th>South East (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Additional (82)</td>
<td>Badged (88)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner continuing or</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>intending to continue their</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>course</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner completed the</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>activities leading to the</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>learning aim</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner withdrawn from</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>activities leading to the</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>learning aim</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner transferred to a new</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>learning aim</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (N)</td>
<td>632</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ILR Data 2007/08 FE F05

4.8.3 The survey results: extent of and reasons for early leaving

At the time the Wave 2 survey was conducted (December 2008), just over half the learners had completed their course (54 per cent). A further third (33 per cent) were still in learning on the same course, while four per cent had dropped out. The known proportion of early leavers across both waves of the survey was 10 per cent. However, in actuality this is likely to have been a minimum number, as early leavers may have been less likely to participate in the survey in the first place (for example, if they left the course because of moving area, their contact details would no longer be valid).

The most common reasons for early leaving (updated to reflect additional early leavers at Wave 2) revealed no statistically significant differences between ALA and other Level 3 learners (Figure 4.9). Choosing the wrong course was the most common reason among ALA learners overall, followed by difficulty combining the course with family or other commitments (which was the most common reason among the comparison group). Figures should be treated with caution due to the small base sizes involved.
4.9 Progression IAG and further learning

Three in five learners had received progression IAG during their Level 3 course, and most were extremely positive about the accessibility and value of this. Compared with the Wave 1 comparison sample, ALA learners continue to be more likely to get IAG from a specialist adviser at their college or through the adult Careers Advisory Services (learndirect and nextstep). In total almost three-quarters of completers said that they had started a new course: two-thirds of these had progressed to a Level 4 qualification.

4.9.1 Stakeholders’ views on progression IAG

A longer-term aim regarding learners is to improve retention rates and stimulate more progression from Level 3 to Level 4 (via more active modelling of access to and engagement with IAG towards the end of the Level 3 course). Several providers said that ALAs would result in a more systematic approach to delivering ongoing IAG to learners on particular courses such as Access to Higher Education (HE), which could eventually improve progression rates to Level 4.

It was felt to be important that IAG delivered as part of the ALA ‘learner journey’ was flexible and took into account individual circumstances and preferences. For example, a college provider reported that ALA learners on an Access to Higher Education course were better suited to IAG once they had had their results, whereas for learners...
on other courses, IAG may be more timely delivered immediately after they finished the qualification.

‘Because they’re on learner accounts they’re having more sessions of assessment and guidance throughout the year. They will have had that at the start anyway and because they’re on this learner account they are going to be getting more sessions of that.’

Learning provider (college, general provision)

4.9.2 Three in five ALA learners had received progression IAG

Around three in five learners (61 per cent) had received some form of IAG on further education, training or work opportunities they could do after their current course. This marks a slight increase on the Wave 1 figure (58 per cent) but is in line with the proportion cited among other Level 3 learners (63 per cent).

As in Wave 1, learners aged 19 to 34 were more likely than older learners to have received progression IAG (67 per cent).

Notably, learners who felt well-informed about the ALA were more likely than those who did not to have received progression IAG (Table 4.12). Also more likely to report receiving progression IAG were learners doing Access to HE (77 per cent) and BTECs (73 per cent), compared with those on NVQ Level 3 courses (50 per cent).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Well-informed (%)</th>
<th>Not well-informed (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Received progression IAG</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not received progression IAG</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Base (N)</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: IES/ Ipsos MORI 2009

ALA learners more likely to access progression IAG via a specialist adviser

Figure 4.10 reveals similar patterns of IAG access to those found in Wave 1, although the proportion of learners getting IAG from a teacher/tutor at their learning provider, and from their friends and family, has increased. Notably, ALA learners remain significantly more likely to have received IAG from a specialist adviser at their learning provider, at 37 per cent (in Wave 2) compared with just 23 per cent of learners in the Wave 1 comparison sample.
Main reason for accessing progression IAG was to get advice about university

Figure 4.11 shows that the most common reason for seeking IAG was to get advice about making applications for university, followed by progressing to further courses or training, or looking for a new job related to their Level 3 course.

Seeking advice about applying to university was more common among the 19 to 34 age group (45 per cent) although one-third of learners aged 35 to 44 and 45 to 54 also accessed progression IAG for this reason.
The majority of learners were positive about the accessibility and value of progression IAG

Learners were asked how far they agreed with a series of statements on access to information, advice and guidance during their Level 3 course: the results are summarised in Figure 4.12.

**Figure 4.12 Views on progression IAG**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Tend to agree</th>
<th>Neither</th>
<th>Tend to disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The IAG I received has helped me decide what to do next in terms of learning or work</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I do not/did not know where to go for further IAG</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is/was easy for me to get further IAG during my course, if I needed it</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Base: All ALA learners who received progression IAG (273); all ALA learners (450)

*Source: IES/Ipsos MORI 2009*

‘It was/is easy for me to get access to further information, advice or guidance during my course, if I need(ed) it’

Four in five learners (83 per cent) agreed that it was easy for them to get access to further IAG during their course, if they needed it, including 53 per cent who agreed strongly. Learners most likely to agree were:

- Those who felt well-informed about the ALA (88 per cent compared with 79 per cent of those who did not).
- Learners who were satisfied with their course, overall (87 per cent compared with 55 per cent of those who were dissatisfied).
- Learners who had actually received IAG during the course (94 per cent) and those who had already started a new course by the time of the Wave 2 survey (89 per cent).

Learners who most likely to disagree that it was easy to get access to IAG during their course were those who were dissatisfied with the course overall (40 per cent) and older learners aged 45 to 54 (21 per cent).
'I do/did not know where to go for further information, advice or guidance'

Just over one-fifth of learners agreed that they did not know where to go for further IAG during their course (22 per cent): the majority (72 per cent) disagreed. Those most likely to agree were learners who had not yet received any IAG (33 per cent) and those still in the middle of their course (28 per cent). Those most likely to disagree were learners who felt well-informed about the ALA (77 per cent) or who had already started a new course (78 per cent).

‘The information, advice or guidance I have received has helped me decide what to do next in terms of learning or work’

This statement was only asked of learners who had received any IAG. Almost nine in ten (88 per cent) agreed, including 53 per cent who agreed strongly. The highest levels of agreement were found among:

- Access to HE learners (67 per cent agreed strongly, compared with 49 per cent of those on NVQ programmes and 38 per cent of those doing BTECs)
- BME learners (66 per cent, compared with 49 per cent of white learners)
- Learners who had already completed their course (60 per cent) and started a new course (63 per cent)
- Learners who reported that the ALA had a positive impact on their experience of the course (61 per cent, compared with 48 per cent of those for whom it had no impact)
- Women (57 per cent, compared with 44 per cent of men).

Almost all ALA who had received progression IAG rated it as useful (95 per cent), including 56 per cent who regarded it as ‘very useful’. There were no significant subgroup differences.
5 Learners’ Perceived Impacts of Completing their Level 3 Course

In this section we look at learner perceptions about the benefits of completing their Level 3 course, and progression to further courses.

5.1 Impacts of doing a Level 3 course

The most common perceived impacts of completing their Level 3 course were improved skills and knowledge in the subject area and greater self-confidence, mentioned by around nine in ten learners who had completed (Figure 5.1). This was followed by the social benefit of making new friends on the course/expanding their social circle (78 per cent), which was in particular mentioned by learners from BME backgrounds (89 per cent).

Two-thirds of learners (66 per cent) reported that doing a Level 3 qualification had helped them to progress to a higher level course: this was particularly the case among learners who were now in full-time further or higher education (95 per cent) and who had received progression IAG (80 per cent).

Although mentioned less often, there were also some work-related benefits. Almost one-third of learners felt that completing the course had helped them to get a job or a new job (29 per cent); one-quarter felt it had helped them to get a pay rise (23 per cent); and 17 per cent said that it had helped them to gain a promotion. The latter was most commonly mentioned among older learners aged 45 to 54 (28 per cent).
5.2 Progression to other courses and current status

In total almost three-quarters of completers (72 per cent, equating to 44 per cent of Wave 2 learners overall) had started a new course since finishing their Level 3 qualification. Almost two-thirds (63 per cent) of these reported they had started a course at Level 4 (Figure 5.2), most of whom had started an undergraduate degree.

Learners aged 19 to 34 were the most likely to have started an undergraduate degree course (45 per cent) or a Higher National Diploma/Higher National Certificate (HND or HNC), at 16 per cent.
Almost a third of completers (31 per cent) reported that full-time education was their main activity, at the time of the Wave 2 survey. Sixty per cent of completers said their main activity was full or part-time employment, of whom two-thirds were still in part-time education or training.

5.3 Likelihood of participating in further learning in the next three years

All learners were asked how likely or unlikely they were to undertake further learning (in addition to their current course) within the next three years. Four learners in five said they were likely to do so (80 per cent).

Table 5.1 shows that among ALA learners, those aged under-35 were more likely to say they would undertake further learning in future, than older learners. Those most committed to further learning were from BME groups (among whom, 66 per cent said they were very likely to undertake further learning).

Table 5.1: Likelihood of further learning in next 3 years among ALA learners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Base N</th>
<th>Very likely (%)</th>
<th>Fairly likely (%)</th>
<th>Unlikely (%)</th>
<th>Don’t know (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19-34</td>
<td>254</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>341</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BME</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Well-informed about cost of their Level 3 course</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Received progression IAG during their Level 3 course</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Impact of ALA on experience of the Level 3 course</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive impact</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No impact</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: IES/ Ipsos MORI 2009*
5.4 Were ALA learners more likely to achieve a positive learning outcome?

Analysis of the ILR FE return for 2007/08 shows that, among completers, ALA learners were equally as likely as other Level 3 completers to have achieved their learning outcome (Table 5.2), at around 85 per cent.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ALA-registered (%)</th>
<th>Other Level 3 (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Achieved</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partial achievement</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No achievement</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exam taken/ assessment completed but result not yet known</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning completed but exam not yet taken</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (N)</td>
<td>3,084</td>
<td>221,016</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ILR Data 2007/08 FE F05

Looking at achievement of a first full Level 3 qualification (again focusing on completers only) finds that other Level 3 learners were more likely to be recorded as having achieved their first full Level 3 (51 per cent), than ALA-registered learners (43 per cent).
6 Learners’ Perceived Impacts of the ALA

This chapter looks at learner views on the benefits of having an ALA, and how this could be improved.

6.1.1 Stakeholders’ views on the benefits of having an ALA

Many stakeholders felt that the ‘virtual’ nature of the ALA made it difficult to ‘sell’ to learners. This was consistently raised by all of the three main gatekeepers into opening an account (the national helpline, IAG providers, and learning providers). Providers themselves commented that ALA learners would not necessarily be getting anything ‘additional’ from their learning experience, other than access to a financial statement on the full costs of the course and how these had been covered:

“If you had one person with an ALA sat next to another person without an ALA doing the same course, there would be no difference between them except that one person would know the full funding behind the course and the other wouldn’t. It’s hard to market to students when they’re not getting anything extra compared with the person sitting next to them.”

Learning provider (college, general provision)

6.1.2 Learners found it difficult to identify the benefits of having an ALA

Spontaneous views

In both survey waves, ALA learners were asked what benefits, if any; they felt they had gained from having an ALA. The question was initially asked unprompted, so that learners could give their top-of-mind response. Comparing the Wave 1 and wave 2 surveys, key points of note are:

- In terms of the benefits mentioned, there was very little change between Wave 1 and Wave 2, overall.
In Wave 2, fewer learners cited extra funding to pay for learning (which is not actually a benefit of having an ALA), suggesting that more learners know something about it.

The sharpest differences were in terms of the large decrease in the proportion of learners who said that they did not know what the benefits of having an ALA were. While this may seem a positive finding, there has been a sharp increase in the proportion who said there were no perceived benefits (albeit, this increase is smaller among learners who felt well-informed about the ALA).

Figure 6.1 shows the perceived benefits of the ALA by learners’ awareness of whether they had one, and whether they felt well-informed about it. As in Wave 1, those who felt well-informed were more likely to report benefits such as more regular access to IAG; better support about progressing to a higher level course; and better information on the full cost of the course. They were also much less likely to say there were no perceived benefits. This underlines the importance of good communication with learners about the Account.

Figure 6.1: Perceived benefits of having an ALA among ALA learners (spontaneous)

Base: All ALA learners (450); All acknowledged ALA learners (376); All who felt well informed about the ALA (226)

Source: IES/ Ipsos MORI 2009
Why did some learners say there were no perceived benefits?

Overall, around one-third of Wave 2 learners reported no perceived benefits of having an ALA. When prompted further on this, the main reasons why learners cited ‘no perceived benefits’ were:

- they did not know enough about it (35 per cent)
- they did not receive any benefits (20 per cent)
- they did not use the Account (19 per cent).

These all support the view that some stakeholders and providers had about the difficulty of ‘selling’ the ALA due to its lack of ‘tangible’ benefits for learners.

Prompted benefits

Acknowledged ALA learners (that is, those who recognised they had an Account) were also asked about a series of specific benefits they may or may not have obtained. Learners were only prompted on those benefits which they had not mentioned spontaneously. Results are shown in Figure 6.2 which shows combined spontaneous and prompted mentions.

![Figure 6.2: Perceived benefits of having an ALA (spontaneous + prompted)](image)

Base: All acknowledged ALA learners (376)

Source: IES/ Ipsos MORI 2009

Using this approach finds that around two-thirds (64 per cent) of ALA learners who recognised they had an ALA, could identify at least one benefit.
The main perceived benefit was better support and advice about progressing to a higher level course, mentioned by 32 per cent (combined spontaneous and prompted). This was followed by more regular access to information, advice and guidance about learning or training (19 per cent, combined). Fourteen per cent of learners felt they had a wider choice of courses than they would have had otherwise, through having an ALA, and 15 per cent felt that having an ALA had increased their commitment to completing the course.

6.1.3 Perceived impact of the ALA on experience of the course

Again focusing on acknowledged ALA learners, almost half (46 per cent) said that having an ALA had a positive impact on their experience of doing the Level 3 course, although more (50 per cent) said it had no impact.

Many of the main reasons for why the ALA had a positive impact were related more to wider benefits of doing the course than to the ALA itself, such as ‘learning more/becoming more knowledgeable’ (21 per cent) and ‘helping me in my job’ (12 per cent). Of those impacts directly related to the ALA, the most common mentions were:

- Help/encouragement to complete the course (14 per cent).
- More information and advice on next steps (12 per cent).
- Help to understand options for progression (10 per cent).
- Greater awareness of the costs of the course/better motivation to complete it (six per cent).

6.1.4 Learners’ views on how the ALA could be improved

When asked how the ALA could be improved, 30 per cent of Wave 2 learners who were aware of it said they did not know, and a further 20 per cent said they had no suggested improvements – the ALA was fine as it stood (this increased to 31 per cent among those who said they felt well-informed about it, Table 6.1).

Of the remainder, the most common suggestion was providing more information/better communication about the Account and how it works (mentioned by 30 per cent).

This was in particular mentioned by learners who said the ALA had no impact on their experience of the course (40 per cent) and by those who did not feel they knew much about it (44 per cent).
Table 6.1: Learners’ suggestions for improving the ALA, by how well-informed they felt about it

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Suggestion</th>
<th>All learners aware of the ALA (%)</th>
<th>Well-informed (%)</th>
<th>Not well-informed (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No improvements/fine as it is</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More information about how the Account works</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More regular access to IAG on learning, training and work</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offer extra funding to pay for learning</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clearer information on the cost/value of the course</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More regular access to advice on financial support for learning</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Base (N)</td>
<td>429</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: IES/ Ipsos MORI 2009
7 Skills Accounts: What Do Learners Want?

In this section, we test out learners’ awareness of Skills Accounts and their reactions to various potential components of them. The research was undertaken during December 2008, before the customer facing Skills Accounts portal was launched.

Almost one in five ALA learners said they were aware of Skills Accounts and seven per cent had already or were planning to open one. A further 40 per cent of the remainder said they consider doing so in the next three years, in particular younger learners aged 19 to 34, those who said they were likely to participate in further learning, and those who were positive about the impact of the ALA.

The most useful prospective features of Skills Accounts were deemed to be a voucher showing how much state funding would be available to wards a course of the learners’ choice (excluding HE), and secure record of all learning or training completed. In both cases more than four in five learners felt these would hold some appeal.

7.1 Awareness of Skills Accounts

All learners were read out a description of Skills Accounts and asked whether, before the interview, they had heard of them. Almost one in five said they had (17 per cent). Learners who were still in the middle of their course were the most likely to have heard of Skills Accounts at the point of the survey (22 per cent, compared with 14 per cent of those who had completed, and 15 per cent of early leavers). This is probably because their same learning provider will be offering Skills Accounts when they become available, instead of ALAs.

There were no significant differences by age, ethnicity or gender.

7.2 Potential use of Skills Accounts

At the point of the survey, just one per cent of learners claimed to have already opened a Skills Account, and a further six per cent were planning to open one.
Learners most likely to say they were planning to open a Skills Account were those from BME groups (13 per cent, compared with four per cent of white learners); men (10 per cent, compared with five per cent of women); and those who felt well-informed about the ALA (10 per cent versus just three per cent of those who did not) or felt the ALA had a positive impact on their experience of the course, rather than none (11 per cent compared with four per cent).

There were no significant differences by age nor by whether the learner had completed their original Level 3 course.

Learners with no immediate plans to open a Skills Account were then asked if they would consider opening one in the next three years or not. The results, depicted in Table 7.1, show that around two in five learners (40 per cent) said they would consider doing so. Those most likely to envisage opening a Skills Account in the next three years were:

- aged 19 to 34 (43 per cent)
- likely to participate in further learning in the next three years (47 per cent)
- positive about the impact of the ALA on their experience of the Level 3 course (47 per cent).

| Table 7.1: Consideration of opening a Skills Account in the next three years |
|-----------------|-------|-------|-------|
| Base N                  Yes (%) | No (%) | Don’t know (%) |
| Age                       |       |       |       |
| 19-34                     | 224   | 43    | 41    | 26    |
| 35-44                     | 104   | 49    | 46    | 54    |
| 45-54                     | 57    | 8     | 13    | 19    |
| Ethnicity                 |       |       |       |       |
| White                     | 309   | 38    | 53    | 8     |
| BME                       | 87    | 47    | 36    | 17    |
| Impact of ALA on experience of the Level 3 course |       |       |       |       |
| Positive impact           | 156   | 47    | 39    | 13    |
| No impact                 | 204   | 37    | 56    | 7     |

Source: IES/ Ipsos MORI 2009

7.3 Perceived usefulness of possible features of Skills Accounts

In order to assess which prospective elements of Skills Accounts are of most appeal to learners, a range of features were listed, and learners asked whether they would find each of them useful or not. Results are summarised in Figure 7.1.
The most useful component was a voucher showing how much state funding would be available towards a course of the learner’s choice (excluding higher education courses). Almost nine in ten learners (88 per cent) felt this would be useful. Learners who already felt well-informed about the cost of their Level 3 course were the most likely to think that such a voucher would be useful, at 93 per cent.

This was followed by a secure record of all learning or training completed, which could be accessed online or through the post, at 85 per cent. There were few significant subgroup differences, although learners who had already started a new course were the most likely to say that it would not be useful, at 17 per cent. This is linked to the high proportion of these learners who had started HE courses (which would be excluded from the online record).

Four in five learners (80 per cent) judged that they would find a secure financial record of what they, their employer, the government, or anyone else had paid towards the learning or training they had done. Notably, this had more appeal among learners who had received a financial statement as part of their ALA (84 per cent of whom said it would be useful). Older learners aged 45+ were much less likely to say this feature would be useful, than younger ones: just over two-thirds (69 per cent) compared with 81 per cent of those aged 19 to 34.

The feature that learners deemed least useful was an online CV builder (although, at 74 per cent, the majority still felt this would be useful). This may be linked to the fact that such tools are already available. Learners who had received progression IAG were more likely than those who had not to regard this as a potentially useful feature (78 per cent compared with 66 per cent), as were those who said they were likely to participate in further learning in the next three years (76 per cent, compared with 66 per cent).

---

**Figure 7.1: Perceived usefulness of various possible features of Skills Accounts**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Useful (%)</th>
<th>Don’t know (%)</th>
<th>Not useful (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voucher showing how much state funding the learner could get towards a course</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secure record of all learning/training completed, accessible online or by post</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secure financial record of any personal/employer/government payments towards your learning/training</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online CV builder</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Base: All learners (450)

*Source: IES/ Ipsos MORI 2009*
Taken together, these findings suggest that Skills Accounts still had very limited awareness among learners, at the time of the survey, although we would not necessarily have expected awareness to be particularly high at that point. Encouragingly, four in 10 learners said they would consider taking out a Skills Account in the next three years, rising to almost half of those who said they were likely to take part in further learning during that time. Learners who felt the ALA had a positive impact on their experience of doing their Level 3 course were also more likely to be positive about opening a Skills Account.

Finally, it is notable that learners who felt well-informed about the cost of their course, had received a financial statement through their ALA, and had received progression IAG, were the most likely to find various prospective features of Skills Accounts useful. This suggests that experience of the ALA components (a financial statement showing the full cost of the course and how it had been paid for, and greater access to progression IAG) has had a positive effect in terms of enhancing the appeal of various features of Skills Accounts.
8 Conclusions and Implications

In this section we summarise the key learning points from the ALA trials evaluation, implications for the ALA policy as a whole, and identify transferable messages for Skills Accounts.

8.1 Conclusions from the ALA trials evaluation

8.1.1 What are the ALA trials trying to test?

ALA trials are testing a set of hypotheses about the benefits of having an Adult Learner Account. The aims of the ALA trials are summarised in Chapter 1 of this report. These objectives mean that, in comparison to other Level 3 learners, we might expect ALA learners to be:

■ more likely to have independent, pre-learning IAG
■ more likely to have a choice of provision
■ more likely to know about the full cost of their course and how this has been paid
■ more likely to be offered progression IAG.

As a result, the hypothesis is that ALA learners will have a better learning experience (ie be more satisfied), have higher attainment/retention levels, and be more likely to progress to further learning.

8.1.2 Recap of key messages from the first year of the evaluation

Regarding the hypotheses listed above, findings from the Year 1 learner survey indicated that:

■ ALA learners were no more likely to have had pre-entry IAG or to feel that they had a choice about which course they did or which learning provider they used. There was a degree of mis-match between the ALA learner journey as originally
conceived and what happened in practice for those learners starting their courses in September 2007. This meant that access to upfront independent IAG before enrolment, through an ALA, was limited, as most learners identified a course, and enrolled on it, before they were identified or registered as having an Account.

- ALA learners were more likely to feel well-informed about the full cost of their course and how this had been paid for, and this was more likely among those who reported they had received a statement (even so, a majority of other Level 3 learners also felt well-informed about the cost of their course, as did a majority of ALA learners who reported they had not received a statement). The financial statement showing the full value of the course and how it has been paid for is key to one of the main ideas behind the policy – that learners who appreciate the full value of their course will feel more committed and be more likely to complete it. It is therefore important to ensure that all ALA learners get a regular statement. The time lag in sending out statements (which was caused by the time taken for providers to register learners on the LAMS system) may mean that the impact of getting a statement has been reduced because drop-out is more likely during the initial stages of a course and learners did not start getting statements until November onwards.

- There were no differences between ALA learners and other Level 3 learners on satisfaction with the learning experience overall, or the range of support learners had been given by their provider. (Satisfaction was high among both groups).

- There was no difference on use of progression IAG, although the nature of progression IAG provision did appear to be different for ALA learners, who were more likely to have received this from a specialist adviser at their learning provider.

8.1.3 Conclusions from the second year of the evaluation

Has learners’ awareness of having an Account increased?

Learners’ awareness of being registered for an Account has increased since the Wave 1 survey. However, the proportion who felt well-informed about the ALA remained static at around half, suggesting that awareness of being registered does not fully equate with having a good understanding about the ALA and what it is for. This points to a need for better communication on the ALA and how it works.

Can more learners identify the benefits of having an Account?

This finding is underlined by the fact that, although fewer learners in Wave 2 said they did not know what the benefits of the ALA were, more said that there were none. Learners’ most common suggested improvement to the ALA was better information about what it is and how it works. When acknowledged Account holders were
promoted for more specific benefits, better support and advice about progressing to a higher level course was the most common mention.

Have more learners had access to a financial statement?

Only slightly more learners could recall receiving a financial statement by Wave 2 compared with Wave 1, at around half. Given that most of the learners enrolled on their course between September and December 2007, and over half of them had completed their course by the time the Wave 2 fieldwork took place, this figure appears lower than we may have expected.

The financial statement had a limited impact, mainly because only half the ALA learners surveyed could recall receiving one. The fact that most learners agreed that knowing the full cost of the course would encourage them to complete it, and that over half said they did not appreciate the full cost of courses until they received a statement as part of the ALA, suggests that the ideas underlying it are fairly sound ones. Learners were keen to see their funding entitlement for various courses: evidenced by the fact that nine in ten said they would find it useful to have a voucher showing them what government funding would be available to them for a course of their choice (excluding HE).

Have more learners had access to progression IAG - and where from - and has it led to progression?

Although the proportion of learners reporting they had accessed progression IAG during their course had increased since Wave 1, it was not significantly higher. ALA learners continued to be more likely to get IAG from a specialist adviser at their learning provider, or from specialised independent advice services such as the CAS telephone helpline or website. The majority of learners were positive about their ease of access to, and the value of, progression IAG. Almost two-thirds of completers had since progressed to a course at Level 4 or equivalent.

Has learner satisfaction with their learning experience overall been maintained or increased?

Learner satisfaction with their Level 3 course has been maintained at the high level recorded in Wave 1, and remains comparable with national findings from the NLSS, at approaching nine in 10 learners.

8.1.4 Messages going forward

It was raised in Wave 1, that ALAs are a ‘virtual’ service being trialled, about which few learners could articulate the benefits. In some ways this could be anticipated given that the process evaluation found that all of the learner-facing stakeholders (providers, ALA helpline, nextstep) identified difficulties in ‘selling’ the benefits of
having an Account. Wave 2 has confirmed that many learners still feel unsure about the benefits of ALAs, or do not see any benefits at all: even though many of the same learners have benefited from progression IAG or now feel they appreciate the full cost of their course through receipt of a financial statement. The problem is that they do not associate these with the ALA itself.

Better understanding among learners could be achieved through better information – but also, having something more tangible associated with the Account, as concrete evidence to learners of what the benefits are. The only tangible thing associated with the ALA was the financial statement and only half of ALA learners reported having received one of those, at the time of the Wave 2 survey – a similar proportion to Wave 1. However, the idea behind the statement appears to be on sound principles – as the majority of learners agreed that knowing the full cost of their course would encourage them to complete it, and learners who had received a statement were much more likely to feel well-informed about how much their course did cost.

Learners themselves were very positive about the progression IAG they had received during their Level 3 course, and did appear more likely to have accessed this from specialist, independent sources. However, the way that ALAs were targeted by some providers, in particular at learners doing Access to HE courses, means that it is difficult to draw any conclusions about the impact of ALAs on progression to Level 4, given that they were already being aimed at learners most likely to make this transition. It could help learners to understand the benefits of having an ALA if some way of associating opportunities for progression IAG and additional support (such as information on financial support for learning, like the ALG) could be more explicitly linked to the ALA.

Although awareness of Skills Accounts was limited at the time of the Wave 2 survey, two-fifths of learners said they would consider opening one in the next three years, and the vast majority said that they would find the various features of Skills Accounts useful. It is notable that learners who felt well-informed about the cost of their course, had received a financial statement through their ALA, and had received progression IAG, were the most likely to find various prospective features of Skills Accounts useful. This suggests that experience of the ALA components has had a positive effect in terms of enhancing the appeal of various features of Skills Accounts.

The findings of the ALA learner survey hold some important transferable messages for Skills Accounts:

- The importance of clearly defining what the Account is for, how it can be of benefit, and communicating this to learners, learning, and IAG providers alike.

- The need to ensure that materials and systems are in place well before the main college enrolment windows, and any additional MI requirements fit into existing processes as far as possible, so that Accounts can be marketed in good time before the main enrolment, and to avoid learners being registered on Accounts.
retrospectively as was the case with some ALAs. Communications about Accounts to colleges in particular need to be made before the summer, when many staff are away on leave.

■ Most importantly, the importance of offering something tangible attached to the Account. For example, learners were particularly positive about the usefulness of a voucher showing the amount of government funding they would be able to get towards a course of their choice, and about the secure online record of all learning or training they had completed.
Appendices

Appendix 1

Technical notes for Wave 1 and 2 surveys Topic guide and survey questionnaires available on request