

Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Research Programme

Education Maintenance Allowances (EMAs) Attainment of National Qualifications in the Scottish Pilots

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The EMA provides financial support for 16-19 year olds from low-income households undertaking appropriate full-time courses at school or college. Young people from low income families are less likely to stay in formal education after compulsory schooling has ended, may leave school without qualifications, and are thus at risk of unemployment or insecure employment and of social exclusion. The EMA aims to reduce financial barriers to staying on, and thus improve post-16 participation, retention and achievement rates in education among young people from low-income families. In Scotland, EMAs were piloted in East Ayrshire from 1999-2000 (Phase 1), and in Glasgow, Dundee and West Dunbartonshire from 2001-2 (Phase 2).

This evaluation of the EMA pilots is based exclusively on Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) records of national units and courses over the two years after the S4 Standard Grade examinations. However the picture is complicated by the introduction in 1999-2000 of the new national qualifications framework (Higher Still) and the associated increase in participation and attainment levels. Higher Still and the EMA have complementary objectives. Higher Still seeks to improve participation and attainment through a flexible system of units and courses appropriate to all levels of ability, while the EMA pursues the same ends through reduction of financial barriers to staying on.

Main Findings

- The EMA has a positive, independent effect on participation and attainment in national qualifications. Increases in participation and attainment are significantly greater in the EMA pilot areas than in the control areas.
- EMA has led to a significant rise in average attainment among the EMA target group, that is young people with low Standard Grade attainment.
- Throughout Scotland, levels of participation in national qualifications have risen substantially since 2000, as Higher Still has offered more appropriate provision, and this rise in participation has contributed to the increase in levels of attainment. It appears that the two policies (Higher Still, and EMA) have combined to encourage disadvantaged students to stay on in full-time education after S4, with subsequent improvements in attainment.

Data and methods

This evaluation of the Phase 1 (East Ayrshire) and Phase 2 (Glasgow, Dundee and West Dunbartonshire) EMA pilots is based exclusively on SQA records of national units and courses over the two years after the S4 Standard Grade examinations. Post-code based measures of socio-economic status (SES) have been linked to the SQA data. Before the introduction of the EMA, all four pilot areas had higher proportions of young people living in areas of low SES, and lower average attainment, than the rest of Scotland. The evaluation compared the EMA pilots with “control groups” based on schools with similar intake characteristics, but where the EMA scheme was not in operation. Comparing trends in the pilot areas with “control” areas enables us to distinguish the impact of the EMA from the effects of other initiatives and trends – especially the effects of the Higher Still reforms. Statistical modelling was used to estimate the effects of EMA on participation and attainment after taking account of prior attainment and socio-economic status.

The Phase 1 EMA Pilot (East Ayrshire) over three years

In the first post-compulsory year, there is evidence of a positive EMA effect on attainment both overall and especially among low-attainers:

- In the East Ayrshire pilot the increase in full-time participation in the first post-compulsory year was over and above the general increase in participation that resulted from Higher Still.
- In 2001 and 2002, overall attainment in the first year after S4 increased to a greater extent in the East Ayrshire pilot than the control area.
- Average attainment by young people with low prior attainment increased to a greater extent by 2002 in the East Ayrshire pilot than in the control area.

EMA had a cumulative effect over two post-compulsory years leading to a significant rise in attainment, both overall and also among low attainers:

- There is no evidence that the EMA has had either a positive or a negative effect on participation in the second post-compulsory year.
- If attainment over two post-compulsory years is combined, it is evident that by 2002 and 2003, average attainment in the East Ayrshire pilot had risen to a significantly higher level than that in the control area, and

young people with low standard grade attainment shared this EMA advantage.

The Phase 2 EMA pilots (Glasgow, Dundee and West Dunbartonshire) in their first year

The Phase 2 EMA pilots had a positive effect on participation and attainment in the first year of operation, both overall and among low attainers.

- Full-time study of national qualifications in the first year after S4 (S5 or its college equivalent) rose substantially between 2000 and 2002, and the increase was greater in the Phase 2 pilot areas than the control areas. Rising participation was evident in the Phase 2 pilot areas before the introduction of the EMA, and increased thereafter. Upward trends in participation among young people with low Standard Grade attainment were greater on average in the EMA pilots.
- Participation in the second year after S4 increased between 2001 and 2003 in both pilot and control areas, but there is no evidence that the increase was different in the EMA pilots than in the control areas.
- Attainment of national qualifications in the first year after S4 rose substantially between 2000 and 2002. Average attainment rose to a greater extent in the Phase 2 pilot areas than the control areas. Rising attainment was evident in the Phase 2 pilot areas before the start of the EMA, and increased further in 2002 after the start of the EMA.
- Average attainment increased among young people with low Standard Grade attainment, and the increase was greater on average in the EMA pilots.

The EMA pilots had a positive effect on attainment that was cumulative in the two post-compulsory years.

- Between 2001 and 2003 cumulative attainment over two post-compulsory years rose substantially. In 2001, before the start of the EMA, there was no difference in attainment between Phase 2 pilot and control areas, while the increase in attainment in 2002 and 2003 was significantly greater on average in the Phase 2 pilots than in the control areas. The beneficial effect was evident for the whole sample and among low attainers.

There were differences between the Phase 2 pilots

- Participation and attainment rose more steeply in West Dunbartonshire than elsewhere.

Issues arising from the evaluation

As indicated above, the start of the first EMA pilot, in session 1999-2000, coincided with the introduction of a new system of national qualifications as a result of the Higher Still reforms. These policies had complementary objectives which seem to be being achieved: however their co-existence creates some complexity for the evaluation of the EMA pilots.

Throughout Scotland, levels of participation in national qualifications have risen substantially since 2000, and the steepest increase has been among young people with low Standard Grade attainment, for whom previously there had been few appropriate courses. Levels of attainment have also risen since 2000, partly as a result of increased participation. There has been a significant rise in average attainment among young people with low Standard Grade attainment, although the increase has not been as great as that for young people with higher Standard Grade attainment.

Amongst young people in the EMA pilot and control areas, participation and attainment in national qualifications have increased since the Higher Still reform. However, these increases are significantly greater in the pilot areas than in the control areas, suggesting that Higher Still and EMA policies have been mutually reinforcing. It could be argued that both the provision of appropriate courses and the reduction of financial barriers have played a part in encouraging disadvantaged students to stay on in full-time education after S4 with subsequent improvements in attainment.

These findings refute the predictions of some critics that the EMA would depress overall attainment because disruptive and disaffected students might be encouraged to stay-on at school just for the money. Far from depressing attainment, the EMA pilots have increased overall attainment to a significantly greater extent than the control areas.

It is not possible to say very much about the impact of EMA on young people at college as the analysis of national qualifications at college has been relatively limited in this evaluation because of limitations in the college data. The impact of the EMA on college provision is an area that needs more research, because colleges often provide a second chance to young people who have not done well at school.

Overall, this study confirms that young people from low-income households tend to have low attainment at school, and are less likely to participate in post-compulsory education. Policies such as EMA address this deep rooted structural disadvantage, and by encouraging young people to continue their education offer longer-term benefits to the wider society and to the individual by improving young people's educational and labour market opportunities.

About the Evaluation of EMA Pilots in Scotland

The evaluation was undertaken by the Centre for Educational Sociology (CES), University of Edinburgh, for the Scottish Executive, Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning Department. The first part of the evaluation, focusing on the initial effects of the EMA pilot in East Ayrshire, included a survey of young people and case studies of EMA recipients. It has been reported in Research Findings No. 6/2002.

By contrast, this second stage of the evaluation is entirely quantitative, and is based exclusively on qualifications records provided by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA). The SQA data consisted of administrative records of entries and awards in national units and courses. Measures derived from SQA data are necessarily very complex because the qualifications themselves comprise a complex system of national units and courses, and the complexity was increased for this evaluation by the overlap of Higher Still with previous units and courses.

The SQA data used for the evaluation relate to sequential cohorts of young people, defined in terms of the year in which they sat their Standard Grade examinations and completed the S4 year stage. The analysis focuses on subsequent participation and attainment by each cohort in the first year after S4 (S5 or its college equivalent) and the second year after S4 (S6 or its college equivalent).

The key aim of this second stage of the research is to analyse the impact of EMA pilots on young people's participation and attainment in national qualifications. It considers the following questions:

- What are the trends in participation and attainment in national qualifications in Scotland as a whole?
- To what extent has overall post-compulsory attainment in national qualifications improved in the East Ayrshire pilot area since the introduction of EMA in autumn 1999?
- Have there been different patterns of attainment in the East Ayrshire pilot area in comparison to the control area?

- What levels of improvement in attainment can be identified in the East Ayrshire pilot area among young people with low standard grade attainment?
- To what extent has overall post-compulsory attainment in national qualifications changed in the Glasgow, Dundee and West Dunbartonshire pilot areas since the introduction of EMA in autumn 2001?
- Has the level of attainment in the Glasgow, Dundee and West Dunbartonshire pilot areas been different to comparable areas with no EMA?
- Is there evidence of above-average improvement in attainment in the Glasgow, Dundee and West Dunbartonshire pilot areas among young people with low standard grade attainment?

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