39% EMA

OUR SAY

A SCCYP project carried out and written by young people

Young people’s awareness and understanding of educational maintenance allowance in Scotland

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SCCYP!
Scotland’s Commission for Children and Young People
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From: Edinburgh (Originally Falkirk)  
About me: Connie here, from Edinburgh though im really from a wee place half an hour away called Falkirk. At the moment I'm studying History and Politics and have been getting involved in a number of different things outwith this, I actively work with different organisations to try and improve the lives of young people as I feel strongly about the issues we face.

**MORVEN**

Age: 19  
From: Glasgow (Originally from Kirniemuir)  
About me: Hey i'm Morven, I live in Glasgow just now and am at Uni studying medicine, I'm the kind of person who loves to doodle on anything! Love heading out to the cinema with friends too, got myself one of those monthly cards so can't stay away. I really enjoyed the research project- it was such an amazing opportunity and I'm so chuffed with the outcome.

**HALA**

Age: 20  
From: Glasgow  
About me: Hi I'm Hala, I'm at Uni now as well as the other two young researchers. The research project interested me because it was something I hadn't done before and it meant we could find out about an issue that we wanted to know more on and about how it affects other young people. One of the best things for me about the project was seeing the final report we've made!

**SADIQ**

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About me: Hi, I'm Sadiq. I've been a Participation Worker at SCCYP since 2007 and part of my work has been with the young researchers group. My role has been slightly different as I have been working as a staff member and as a young researcher. Doing the project has been great. I have loads of new skills but most of all, I have enjoyed working with the group members and making new friends.
“I think we picked a really good topic - it was interesting and relevant to us as we’d all not long left school, and it was something there hadn’t been much previous research on.”
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1 The findings presented in this report and the conclusions reached were made by the Young Researchers Group. They do not necessarily represent the views of Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People.
PART ONE

INTRODUCTION

We are a group of young people on the Reference Group for Scotland’s Commissioner for Children and Young People (SCCYP). SCCYP is a children’s rights organisation. This means that they want to make sure that children and young people in Scotland have their rights protected. It’s also important that children and young people know what their rights are. The group has 12 members and its role is to advise SCCYP on their work – from what their messages should be, to the best way of getting messages across.

Although young people already play an important role in setting out SCCYP’s work, the organisation wanted to see how they could become more actively involved in their research. There are real advantages of doing this: not only can young people offer insights into the issues that affect them, but young researchers may also be able to talk to their peers more openly than adult researchers. Being involved in research can give the opportunity to learn new skills and help with personal development.

The main aim of the project was to enable a group of young people to identify, undertake and report on a small research project with the support of SCCYP. This first-hand experience would then be used to guide the future involvement of young people as researchers.

Our report has four parts:

Part One discusses the process of doing research with young people. We have spent a lot of time thinking back to how things went and we have tried to be as honest as possible. The quotes in boxes are taken from a ‘reflections’ exercise we did at the end of the project and show our personal feelings about the project.

Part Two outlines our literature review and research findings on our research topic – the Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA). While this was a fairly small research project, we think it outlines some important findings. We have also used our own experiences and those of peers to help us think about the issues being reported.

Part Three gives our own conclusions and recommendations, both about the EMA and for doing research with young people.

Part Four gives our top tips for other young researchers.

ABOUT THE YOUNG RESEARCHERS

As this was a pilot project with limited time and support, the Young Researchers group was recruited from SCCYP’s Reference Group. This meant group members already knew each other and we did not need to spend time developing relationships.

“We had a really good group of people who got along and worked well together, which meant the project was fun as well as interesting.”

To start with, six members of the Reference Group showed an interest in the project. However, two dropped out at an early stage. We found that this left a good number as it was easier to manage things like meeting up and carrying out bits of work. With this small number, the group dynamics were good and it was easy to communicate information to the whole team quickly.
“We weren’t very good at planning our timescale well! We ran over time on pretty much every aspect of the project, which caused problems for us at times.”

One of the young researchers was also a member of staff in SCCYP. This has been beneficial in terms of overcoming issues of power and enabled the process to become more of a team effort as opposed to having a – sometimes natural and unavoidable – distinction between staff and young people.

“The group knew each other before coming into the research group and this helped the dynamic … we also ended up with a much smaller group than we anticipated although as this was our first peer research project this could be seen as a good point as it was manageable with the number we had.”

We found that the group was busy and it was often hard to fit the project around school, university, social lives and work. There were further difficulties meeting up as the members were from different parts of Scotland. This meant that we frequently found it difficult to meet the timescales we set for completing each part of the research.

“We weren’t very good at planning our timescale well! We ran over time on pretty much every aspect of the project, which caused problems for us at times.”

**TRAINING**

We have been given a lot of training over the course of the project. This started with an ‘introduction to research’ training day run by SCCYP’s Research Officer and an external trainer. More training was given informally as and when it was needed, including how to do a literature review, designing surveys, running focus groups and data analysis. We also had ongoing access and support from SCCYP members of staff.

“It’s important for young researchers … to notice where they have skills gaps – being youth led isn’t about young people doing everything or having all the power, it’s about young people taking the lead but accepting help, advice and knowledge from others where it’s needed. That’s what was good about this group because it was more of a partnership with the staff.”

We found that training was essential as it gave us the basic understanding we needed to be ‘real’ researchers and it encouraged us to take a lead role that otherwise would not have been possible. However, on reflection some training sessions were carried out too early, making it hard to remember the things we had learned. In our experience, the best training was held straight before a research activity. We did this for the data analysis part of the project and it meant that we were able to instantly put into practice what we had learned.
“I think we picked a really good topic - it was interesting and relevant to us as we’d all not long left school, and it was something there hadn’t been much previous research on.”

PLANNING THE RESEARCH

The most important part of this study was about involving young people in designing and delivering a research project from start to finish. It was therefore up to us to decide what topic we were going to choose.

“It was important for us to have ownership of the project and I felt that we did. SCCYP staff helped guide our ideas and worked with us to facilitate them, they never ruled out an idea or told us we couldn’t do something, but helped us think practically about what was achievable.”

We were encouraged to think about issues or problems that we were aware of, either from our own lives or through our work at SCCYP, and a long list of topics emerged. We wanted to do a project looking at children and young people’s education and we carried out an initial data search on this area. With the support of SCCYP’s Information Officer, we used the internet to look at the different types of research and policy documents in this area.

While the data searching was not much fun, it was core to the project. By looking at other projects and policy documents we quickly realised that our initial idea of exploring education and employment rights was far too wide a subject – we had to narrow down! On the basis of our data search, discussions with the rest of the Reference Group and SCCYP staff, we produced a list of five potential research topics.

The Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) was a topic being discussed a lot at the Reference Group meetings. SCCYP had recently received enquiries about the EMA from young people and from our own experience we knew that it was a topic being discussed by young people in schools. We looked at existing information on the EMA – this included statistical bulletins produced by the Scottish Government, policies and procedures for administering the EMA as well as existing research. While there was already quite a lot of information on the EMA, we felt that there was still room to investigate it further and especially focus on what young people currently think about the system.

Once we had decided on our topic we worked with SCCYP staff to think about what our research aims and objectives would be. We wanted the research to look quite broadly at young people’s views and experiences of the EMA. Together we agreed that our research aim would be exploratory rather than having a very narrow focus:

To produce research into the differing views and opinions on the EMA in Scotland among young people aged 15-20

We hoped to explore the following research questions:

- To identify the key issues around the EMA for young people.
- To gain views on how young people would improve the EMA.
- To provide recommendations on the future of the EMA.
- To reflect on the process of young people leading a research project.
Quantitative research is about numbers, counts and statistics. This kind of research involves structured questions and a large number of respondents. Qualitative research looks at what people do and say. It tends to involve a smaller number of respondents and uses focus groups or in-depth interviews.

HOW WE DID IT

Once we had decided on this research topic, we had to choose what methods we would use to answer our research questions. We agreed on a mixture of quantitative and qualitative approaches as we wanted to get an overview of the key themes and then follow this up with more in-depth views and experiences. Thus we decided to run a survey and conduct a small number of focus groups.

Stage 1 – Survey

Together we designed the survey from scratch; we brainstormed what we wanted to find out and used this to form the questions. The best thing about doing this was that it was really interactive and by the end of the process we had our completed survey. This gave us the sense that we had really achieved an outcome and had embarked on something exciting! Designing the survey taught us to think about ambiguous wording and how to avoid leading questions. This turned out to be quite hard but a good skill to have.

The survey was distributed in three ways – online, in paper format and by young people we met during a street work based session. A total number of 82 questionnaires were completed (18 online, 28 in paper and 36 during street work), just short of our target of 100. Given the small size of the project and the limited resources available, we did not seek to generate representative coverage of subgroups (for example, by age, gender or location). Instead, the survey generated a non-representative sample, designed to provide initial views and experiences of the EMA and a basis upon which to determine topics for exploration in the focus groups.

Our sampling method for distributing the paper surveys was ‘snowballing’, which meant that we and our friends completed the first batch of surveys. This initial group of friends then passed on further surveys to their friends and so on. However, since the profile of our original sample consisted mainly of young people not receiving the EMA, we found that the snowballed sample reflected this profile. As such, we found it hard to survey young people receiving the EMA and it was difficult to get opinions from all angles. To some extent we compensated for this during our street work session where we were able to talk to more young people receiving the EMA. However, again this cannot be considered representative since the young people encountered were all approached in one geographic location (Edinburgh City Centre).

To supplement the data collected by the surveys we attempted some media style interviews in Glasgow using a video camera (Vox Pops). However, as one of the group members told us, it didn’t exactly go to plan:

“Our spot on Buchanan Street was noisy … there were musicians and other people doing market research so people were suspicious when we approached them. We had been given a short training session on how to use the video camera but after five interviews we could not get it working again. I would use this method again, but next time I would take more time to plan the location and get better training on the technology.”

2 Quantitative research is about numbers, counts and statistics. This kind of research involves structured questions and a large number of respondents. Qualitative research looks at what people do and say. It tends to involve a smaller number of respondents and uses focus groups or in-depth interviews.
“I think some of us probably could have been more organised with things like the focus groups, but it was really hard to get everything sorted when we were all so busy with other things too!”

Stage 2 - Focus groups

The next stage was the focus groups. We conducted two sessions with young people. Both were organised and led by the young researchers. We held one focus group in a rural area and one in an urban area and in total involved 11 participants (five in one, six in the other). We had initially planned to do four groups but we found them difficult to set up and organise. Getting a group of our peers available at the same time was hard – as was getting access through ‘gatekeepers’ like teachers.

From the focus groups we hoped to explore in more detail the survey findings and talk to young people about their opinions and feelings on the EMA. The main topics covered in the focus groups were whether young people felt that the EMA affected students’ attendance at school, their views on means testing, its impact on working part-time and finally, their views on how the EMA could be improved.

“I think some of us probably could have been more organised with things like the focus groups, but it was really hard to get everything sorted when we were all so busy with other things too!”

The focus groups involved a lot of planning. We worked together to brainstorm different activities that would help the young people taking part to feel comfortable – we felt it was important to ensure that the sessions were participative and informal. We designed a topic guide which included interactive games to get participants moving around. This included ‘sliding scales’, where participants were given a statement and are asked to stand on a line numbered one to 10 depending on how much they agree or disagree with the statement. This method was used as a way of getting young people to discuss their views as a group.

We collected a lot of information so to ensure we had an accurate record of the sessions we used a digital recorder. We also took notes and recorded answers and comments on flip chart paper.

“...young people relate better to other young people. They are more likely to be open and honest when a young person is interviewing them or running a focus group than a researcher.”

The focus groups went really well. They were good experiences that gave us the opportunity to try out new ways of working. This helped to build our confidence and gave us the skills to run groups like these in the future.

“When we got the chance to actually go out and do the research rather than talking about the different areas, it was a lot more fun and engaging, would be good if a lot more of the project was doing the activities with other young people.”

A lot of what we learnt from these groups were things that you only learn by experience, for example, how to maintain the focus of a discussion. Importantly, we had a SCCYP staff member present, who we could turn to if we needed support.

Stage 3 – Data analysis and report writing

While this stage of the research process can be time consuming and less fun, we felt it was important to be involved in the analytical stages of the project. In this way we would understand more about the topic we were researching, learn new skills and importantly ‘own’ the final report.

For the survey, the data was first entered onto an excel spreadsheet. Together we produced tables using our organised data (these are called ‘pivot tables’ in excel). We also calculated percentages and created graphs and pie charts to illustrate our findings.
For the focus groups we started by transcribing our recordings from the groups. We then read through the notes, taking a memo of any interesting comments. Together we talked about the themes coming out and ‘coded’ the data – this basically means we organised the data according to the key topics being discussed. To do this we used highlighter pens and post-it notes. This process helped us to organise and make sense of all the data we had collected. It enabled us to see emerging themes and patterns across the two focus groups and the survey data.

The data analysis has taught us new skills, importantly some that we have since been able to use in our personal lives. While initially it was quite challenging to make sense of all the data, doing this work gave us a real sense of how time consuming data analysis can be, especially with bigger projects.

Following on from the data analysis we began to divide up sections of the report for each person to write. This was quite daunting as we did not realise how much work it would be. Being told you are going to write part of a report that will be distributed through a national organisation was nerve wracking, however, we did regularly work together – to write, look at the work we had done and make changes. This helped to make report writing less off-putting.

We worked together to look at conflicting arguments in the data and decide which themes we would explore further. It was a challenge narrowing down the large amount of information and deciding what was relevant. Despite this, one of the best parts of the report writing was being responsible for our own sections. But best of all was seeing our names on the cover of the report for the first time!

“...not everyone got the opportunity to be involved in every aspect of the project. But young people have their own commitments outside of a project, so you will always have this problem. We managed to work around it though by dividing up different sections of the project to different group members who would then report back their findings to the full group.”
PART TWO

ABOUT THE EDUCATIONAL MAINTENANCE ALLOWANCE

Having discussed our experiences of being young researchers, we will now move on to talk about our research findings on the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA). First, we will provide some background information about the EMA.

What is the EMA?

The EMA is a financial aid provided to students aged 16 and over who are from low income households and attend school or college full-time. The scheme was piloted in parts of Scotland between 1999 and 2004 and was then rolled out nationally in August 2005. In 2005-06, the EMA was extended to 17-year-olds and in 2006-07 eligibility was extended to 18-year-olds. Full roll out to 19-year-olds was completed in 2007-08.

The main purpose of the EMA is to address the link between low incomes and low levels of educational attainment. By providing a financial incentive direct to young people it is hoped that those from low income families would be encouraged to stay on and participate in full-time education beyond the statutory school leaving age.

Importantly, the EMA is designed to remove the financial barriers that can prevent young people from low income families from staying at school or going to college. It also aims to reduce the number of young people who are not in education, employment and training.

Finally, it is worth noting that the EMA requires a substantial budget. In terms of weekly payments, nearly £26 million of EMA support was paid to students during 2007-08. Of this, nearly £23 million (88%) went to students in the £30 group. A further £7 million was received in bonus payments.

How is the EMA paid?

Since the EMA is targeted at low income families, it is allocated according to a system of ‘means testing’. Young people receive £10, £20 or £30 per week, depending on the total income of their household before tax is deducted. As shown below, if a family income is more than £32,316 per year there is no entitlement to EMA. These bands apply regardless of family size and therefore do not take account of the additional financial costs associated with having more than one child.

Table 1: EMA means testing bands for the financial year 2007-08

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household Income</th>
<th>Students receive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Up to £21,835 per year</td>
<td>£30 per week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£21,836 - £26,769 per year</td>
<td>£20 a week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£26,770 - £32,316 per year</td>
<td>£10 a week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than £32,316</td>
<td>No entitlement to EMA per year</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: EMA Business Model Version 8 2008, page 10

To receive the weekly EMA payment, students must have 100% attendance in every week. Those receiving the EMA also get two bonuses a year of £150; one at Christmas and one at summer. These are given provided the terms of a ‘learning agreement’ are met, which are agreed between the young person and their educator. As well as attendance, these agreements are dependent on targets relating to behaviour and achievement.
During 2007-08, there were 37,815 students in receipt of the EMA in Scotland. Of these, the majority (64%) were in school. Overall, a large proportion of Scottish students benefit from the EMA, with 39% of all 16 to 18-year-old school pupils receiving it in 2007-08.

Government statistics can tell us about the profile of people receiving the EMA. As Chart 1 shows, the majority of those benefiting from the EMA receive the £30 weekly payment — this means that they live in households which earn less than £21,835 per year. School pupils are slightly less likely to be supported with the £30 per week payment.

It is also interesting to note that students from deprived areas are overrepresented on the EMA scheme. While 16% of 16 to 19-year-olds live in the most deprived areas of Scotland, almost a fifth (22%) of those receiving the EMA are from such areas. This suggests that it is achieving, at least in part, its aim of supporting those most in need.

### Table 2: Total Students - by place of study and level, 2007-08

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weekly payment</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>College</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>£10</td>
<td>3,430</td>
<td>2,335</td>
<td>1,095</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£20</td>
<td>3,965</td>
<td>1,170</td>
<td>1,170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£30</td>
<td>30,425</td>
<td>18,890</td>
<td>11,535</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>37,815</strong></td>
<td><strong>24,020</strong></td>
<td><strong>13,795</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Scottish Government (2009) ‘Education Maintenance Allowances 2007-08’
“Teachers have favourites that influence things, for example some people could come in just before the end of registration and be marked present, whereas others could come in two minutes after the start and be marked as late.” Focus group respondent

OUR RESEARCH FINDINGS

Having provided some background information about the EMA, this next section moves on to outline our own research findings from the survey responses and the focus groups.

Information and support

Based on the information from the focus groups, we found that there are a number of routes for young people to access information about the EMA. These included announcements in assemblies, the distribution of forms, letters through the post and word of mouth. While some participants commented that they “didn’t know they [EMA] existed” and others did not pay attention as they knew they would not be eligible, overall the information provided by schools and teachers seems to be fairly good. A website for information on the EMA is available and there are also new social networking sites providing information on the EMA. Although the young people we interviewed did not mention these, we believe any new information sources are a step in the right direction.

We also found evidence that more support to complete EMA forms is needed. Some focus group participants said that the forms are long and complicated. Others mentioned difficulties in getting all the information required to fill out the form and some did not know where to get help with their application. For example, because of their home circumstances, one young person responding to the survey was unable to get information on their parent’s income. In their own words, “this meant I struggled with money in my 6th year of school”.

In one focus group, it was stated that the forms were handed out and filled in during class and from our own experience this seems to be a fairly common practice. While this can be a way of offering support to young people completing the forms, it also means that students applying for the EMA may unwillingly be identified to the rest of the class. This could lead to students feeling uncomfortable or stigmatised.

Monitoring EMA payments

As stated above, the EMA is currently monitored according to attendance and this would normally be done by a teacher at registration. If attendance falls below 100% (excluding authorised absences), the EMA is not paid for that period. A number of issues relating to monitoring emerged during the focus groups.

Some participants argued that the system does not adequately allow for special circumstances. While the official EMA guidance states that a less rigid attendance agreement can be negotiated for young people with additional responsibilities or problems, it was felt that some young people entitled to the EMA (i.e. those having problems at home but who do not fit into the criteria for being a vulnerable student) may not be given such flexible arrangements.

Focus group participants were also concerned about the consistency of monitoring and in particular the influence and discretion of teachers. It was highlighted that young people are reliant on teachers to accurately record attendance; however, how this is done varies. As one focus group respondent said:

“Teachers have favourites that influence things, for example some people could come in just before the end of registration and be marked present, whereas others could come in two minutes after the start and be marked as late.” Focus group respondent

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There were concerns that this kind of ‘bias’ by teachers could impact on the payment of EMA. This is not helped by the fact that there are no specific guidelines to outline a process for recording attendance. Instead Learning Centres (i.e. schools and colleges) may use whichever method they deem appropriate to note attendance. Furthermore there are no consistent guidelines for teachers on what constitutes ‘good behaviour’, so again this can be discretionary.

While it was noted that teachers can monitor attendance inconsistently, one survey respondent said that there are young people who manage to get the EMA despite not attending classes. It was stated that there are students who “…don’t attend school then fill in notes lying about their absence.”

Respondents to the survey also voiced these concerns and one expressed frustration that this happens: “[I know] this girl who skipped school [but] still got it! Grrr”. Like the issues with teachers, this was thought to be unfair and something that teachers should monitor more closely.

Payment of EMA

Officially, Learning Centres (schools or colleges) are the designated first point of contact for students who have questions about EMA payments and “where a payment is not made, the student must be informed and given the reason why”\(^6\). However, from the experience of our focus group participants often this is not done and students are not given enough information on who to contact when a payment is withheld. In addition, issues of non-payment can take a long time to be resolved. As one participant said, “It’s really hard to get in contact with someone to find out why you didn’t get any money”. Another pointed out:

> “You basically go to your bank expecting it to be there, but it’s not there. Then you go to guidance staff for them to sort it out but it just takes ages. If I don’t get it, I don’t bother trying to sort it out, it takes too long. It’s too much hassle.”

Part of the issue seems to relate to the way EMA payments are administered. While Learning Centres are responsible for monitoring attendance, it is local authorities who allocate the payments to schools. Local authorities depend on accurate data being provided by schools and as we have highlighted there can be inconsistencies in the way attendance is recorded.

It is also worth noting that the payment of EMA is dependent on a young person having a bank account and for many this can be difficult. These barriers can be even greater where a young person is coping with issues such as homelessness, living in care or disabilities.

Views on means testing

The survey findings demonstrated a split in opinion on whether means testing was the most effective way of allocating the EMA. Thirty six felt that it was the best way to determine who received EMA, while 44 disagreed (the remainder did not know).

We asked those responding to the survey about other ways of testing eligibility for the EMA. Forty one respondents gave an answer to this question. While some felt that means testing was fair and should continue, a more popular response (n=13) was that the weekly EMA payment should be based on attainment or merit, rather than income. As one respondent wrote, “[it should be based on] achievements, too many stay for free money and achieve nothing!”. Another suggested looking at previous attendance records “…those who want to stay on for the right reasons will possibly show a higher level of attendance, i.e. more willing to learn”.

\(^1\) Scottish business model page 14 version 8: page 20.
\(^2\) Scottish business model page 14 version 8: page 21.
For many young people completing the survey, there was a sense that the EMA was allocated unfairly. A number (n=6) of people argued that everyone should get it, or get a baseline amount above which would be means tested. Others pointed out that parental income is not necessarily an accurate way to tell how much money young people receive from their parents. As one respondent stated, “I feel it is unfair to determine if someone should receive funds on what their parents earn as I know plenty of people who do not qualify and still get basic pocket money or no money from their parents”.

Similarly, one commented, “I may not qualify for EMA but my family is still skint” and another that, “everyone should get it or nobody should get it – just because people’s parents earn more doesn’t mean they see any of the money”.

Like the survey, the young people in the focus group could not agree on whether means testing was the most effective way to decide eligibility. Some believed that as well as means testing, the weekly EMA payment should be based on behaviour, achievements and performance. Others argued that means testing was discriminatory to young people living in higher earning households as they do not necessarily benefit financially from their parents income. However, it was also recognised that monitoring how much young people receive from their parents would be impossible.

In relation to parents, there was concern amongst focus group participants that some students’ parents were making fraudulent claims and were “tweaking” income figures to ensure that their child receive the EMA. Focus group members felt that this was an unfair use of the system. While this is a serious issue, we have no evidence of this being a widespread problem.

Alternative approaches to means testing suggested in the focus groups were that:

- Everyone should receive the EMA regardless of income, but all receive less. It was felt that this alternative would be affordable for the government.
- Instead of the EMA there should be benefits to all students regardless of family income – these could include free access to transport, school meals and other school supplies.
- Across both the survey and focus groups there was a strong feeling that the EMA system was unfair with many young people questioning why one group of young people should get paid to stay on at school. To some extent this may show a lack of awareness about the aims of the EMA system and its objective of targeting the lowest income households. Had our research involved more people who received the EMA, we believe that our findings may have provided a wider perspective.
**Bonus system**

Government statistics provide interesting information on bonuses. As shown in chart 2, 86% of students receiving the EMA in 2007-08 got one or more bonus payment. Only slightly less (83%) students living in the most deprived areas of Scotland received one or more bonus payments, while a fifth received none (see chart 3). This profile has changed significantly since last year. As shown in the chart, in 2006-07 less than half of students from of most deprived areas were receiving both bonuses and this has risen to 60% in 2007-08. This suggests that the proportion of students in the most deprived areas achieving the targets set out in their learning agreements has grown. While this is a positive trend, the reasons for it are unknown.

Issues relating to the bonus system were discussed in the focus groups. It was agreed that it is a good idea to give bonuses based on specific criteria (rather than just attendance) and for some students this will be an incentive for achievement. This however raised issues around inconsistency in the implementation of learning agreements. Young people from the focus groups as well as some survey respondents felt that the rules around monitoring and restricting the EMA are too flexible and can be dependent on the relationship between the teacher and the student.

While there was general agreement about the criteria used for allocating bonuses, there was still a feeling that overall the bonus system was unfair. In particular, it was noted that there are no incentives or rewards for those students who do not receive the EMA but have good attendance, behaviour and achievements.
One survey respondent reflected this point of view:

“...it could be argued that a pupil's schooling should be their own responsibility and pupils should want to be there to further their career potential any way. And where is the line drawn? Handing out up to £30 per month is one thing. Up to £300 bonuses for achieving something which should be good enough in itself is another.”

Young people in the focus groups suggested alternatives and improvements to the bonus system:

- The bonus should not be means tested; it should be an incentive for everyone. Young people recognised the cost that this might entail and suggested having a lower amount open to everyone.

- A limited number of bonuses should be given out in each school to the pupils who have ‘improved’ most over the period. However, there was debate as to how ‘improvement’ could be judged consistently.

- Some felt that bonuses were too high and should be scrapped or replaced with non-financial incentives such as gift vouchers, special events or prizes.

As highlighted at the one respondent stated,

“you should get bonuses from school that aren’t financial, to celebrate young people. Like dances and competitions and things like that.”

How young people spend the EMA

The members of the focus groups had mixed perspectives about how the EMA should be spent. Some felt the payments were important for their personal development as it enabled them to socialise and go out with friends. The cinema in particular was thought to be expensive and something they would be unable to do without this extra money.
However, others felt that many spend their EMA on alcohol, while it would be better spent on assisting with educational expenses. As one focus group participant stated, “It’s called the Educational Maintenance Allowance, not the Go Out and Get Pissed Allowance!”. Others felt that the EMA should not pay for socialising and that a part-time job should cover these kinds of costs. Nevertheless, it was acknowledged that not everyone would be eligible or able to work due to factors such as age or personal circumstances.

Findings from the focus groups highlighted the cost of items students need for school. Transport was a big issue as many young people did not live within the catchments area for their school and public transport was expensive. Purchase of past examination papers (which currently cost around £7.99) and school books were other costly necessities.

While there was great debate about how EMA should be spent or indeed, whether it should be provided in the first place, the focus group did agreed that if the EMA continues it should remain as a financial support which goes directly to young people. Although some use the EMA to contribute to the family household, the fact that it is given directly to the young person is empowering. As one survey respondent said, “receiving the EMA has really given me a confidence boost because I have learned financial independence and I don’t have to rely on my parents.”

Table 3: Do/did you have a part-time job whilst still at school

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Those not receiving EMA</th>
<th>Those receiving EMA</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No part-time job</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time job</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Number</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Young Researchers EMA Survey (2008)

In the survey we asked young people whether they had a part-time job whilst still at school. We found that those receiving the EMA are less likely to have a part-time job than those not receiving it. We feel this could be a combination of two factors. First, the EMA may be reducing the need for students to get part-time jobs. Secondly, those living in deprived areas may have fewer opportunities to gain work.

The young people in the focus groups discussed the influence that the EMA has on getting paid work and the following issues were raised:

- The weekly EMA payment is comparable to most part-time jobs and therefore may impact on a young person’s decision to work in their spare time.
- The EMA gives people who would otherwise have to get a part-time job more free-time for both socialising and studying. This means that they are also able to focus on achieving better grades.
“Receiving the EMA has really given me a confidence boost because I have learned financial independence and I don’t have to rely on my parents.” Survey respondent

- However, the importance of working was highlighted. Some felt that the EMA can discourage young people from getting a job and take away the experience paid work can offer.

- Some young people are unable to take on part-time work whilst at school for various reasons including being young carers or being disabled. It was perceived that these young people should be entitled to the EMA regardless of parental income because their particular circumstances could prevent them from getting paid employment.

The decision to stay on at school

Our research found that the EMA was not a significant factor in influencing young people’s decisions to stay on at school. Seventy-four percent of those responding to the survey stated that the EMA was ‘not important’ in influencing this decision and this view was reflected in the focus groups. Instead, reasons for staying at school included not feeling mature enough to leave school, the desire to obtain formal qualifications, admission to further/higher education and parental expectations.

This was explored more in the focus groups. Indeed, the family was identified as being one of the biggest influences on their decision to stay on at school, with many stating that their parents either assumed or insisted that their children stay on at school. Young people commented that it is often lower income families that would be pushed to go into employment to contribute to the household earnings. One young person said, “it sounds bad but it’s the way it is – that young people with higher income families tend to stay on at school more without the need for as much encouragement.”

This demonstrates how the EMA can benefit those from lower income families. It can take away the pressure to get paid employment and place less reliance on financial support from parents. However, the EMA may not be sufficient for overcoming stronger attitudinal barriers to staying on at school. For example, staying on or not may well be influenced by more general attitudes or expectations (by the young person, their parents and their teachers) rather than simply being a matter of the financial resources available.

Benefits of the EMA

All survey respondents – regardless of whether they received the EMA or not – were asked what they thought the benefits of the EMA are. As shown in chart 4, the most popular answer was ‘having money to pay for school things’ and the second most popular answer was ‘having money to do things outwith school’. A feeling of independence was the least commonly mentioned benefit (excluding the ‘other’ category).
Thirty nine per cent of the survey respondents felt that the EMA should motivate young people to stay on at school, however, according to the focus groups this does not necessarily mean young people are engaged in classes. A number of participants felt that the EMA encouraged young people to stay on at school who did not want to be there. As one person commented:

“Some people don’t even bother trying to work and only stayed on because of the EMA – this means that the rest of us have to put up with them disrupting us and making our own grades fall.”

This view was also reflected by a number of survey respondents, with one noting:

“I don’t think it is good if people stay in school only to earn EMA rather than work, though I guess it is good if they take useful subjects. Some may only stay on to get EMA and only mess around.”

We can see here that while the EMA may encourage young people to stay on at school this does not address the root causes of why some young people disengage from the school curriculum. It could be argued that for some young people school is not the best environment for them to learn and develop. Whilst the EMA may encourage them to stay on and attend school, it does not overcome the reasons behind this. Perhaps this reveals a lack of provision of alternative options such as apprenticeships and vocational courses for those not wishing to pursue higher grades.

Peers, stigma and the EMA

Young people in the focus groups were asked whether they felt there was any stigma associated with receiving the EMA. Responses to this were mixed. Most of those who did not receive the EMA did not think there was any stigma attached to receiving it. Instead, they were more concerned about the perceived unfairness that most students were not ‘being paid’ to be at school. Amongst those who did receive the EMA, there was a feeling that receiving it could cause embarrassment.
One issue was the public nature of how the EMA is monitored and administered. One pupil said, “if it wasn’t so public, it wouldn’t be such a hot topic of discussion.” For example it was mentioned that teachers would publicly ask for ‘EMA forms’ in registration class. This highlights a need for teachers to be more sensitive in the processes they use for administering the EMA and gathering monitoring information.

**PART THREE**

**OVERALL VIEWS ON THE EMA**

In our research we asked participants about their overall views on the EMA. Overall, the young people we surveyed and spoke to identified a number of benefits associated with the EMA:

- It is in fifth year that young people start to mature and develop less judgemental attitudes. If EMA can help young people stay on and gain these attributes then it is positive.

- Some young people need time to work out what they want to do with the rest of their lives. It is good that the EMA helps young people who otherwise would not have the finances to do this.

- The EMA can empower young people – it can give young people personal wealth which they otherwise would not have had.

- The fact that it is a benefit which goes directly to young people, without affecting household benefits, can teach young people about money and how to manage it.

However, while we recognise the purpose of the EMA and the kinds of benefits it offers, there are also a number of limitations:

- The weekly EMA payment in relative terms is substantial (£120 per month). There are concerns that young people are using these funds inappropriately (for example, on alcohol).

- While the EMA may encourage more young people to stay on at school, this does not necessarily mean that they will be more engaged in school work or leave school with any more qualifications.

- Government statistics suggest that 15% of young people receiving the EMA do not get any bonus – this means they are just attending class, but are not meeting the targets set in their learning agreements. It is yet to be demonstrated how the EMA is helping this group of young people to engage in education.

- The fact that some students are staying on at school just for the EMA can mean classes are disrupted by young people not interested in learning.

- Assessing purely on parental income is unfair and creates divisions between those receiving and not receiving it. The EMA can also contribute to stigma, especially where those receiving the EMA are identified by teachers in the classroom.

- It was noted that the EMA is also provided to people at college – this was thought to be good but it is a small amount if you are living away from home.

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If the EMA is failing in these areas, this would suggest that it is not achieving its aims. Overall the EMA is costing the government £32.4 million a year⁶ – this is a lot of money and we need to question whether it would be better spent in other ways. It is important to remember the purpose of the EMA – to support and encourage the most vulnerable young people to stay at school.

Overall, it was agreed that the ideals behind EMA were good – but coming up with alternatives was very difficult. We agree that the system should be reviewed and have suggested some recommendations. Some of these go beyond the remit of the EMA.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Application process and eligibility criteria

• There should be a review of the application process to ensure that the practice of parents supplying false details is not widespread.

• Our report has raised issues relating to the means testing system. Focus group participants discussed alternatives to this system but there was no clear consensus on which alternative should be used. We recommend that means testing is reviewed and alternatives are considered. Importantly, any review should take account the number of siblings within a household and therefore allow means testing levels to vary according to size of family.

• The bonus system should be reviewed. Suggested alternatives include opening up the bonus system to everyone (not just those entitled to the EMA) and/or introducing non-financial incentives like gift vouchers or trips

• To reduce the feeling of unfairness about the EMA system, all young people should be better informed about the aim of the EMA. While education is important, this should be balanced against the potential for it to further stigmatisate those receiving the EMA.

Monitoring

• Guidelines should be produced for schools and teachers on how the EMA should be monitored (specifically in relation to recording attendance and determining what kind of behaviour would result in withholding an EMA payment). This would minimise the potential for inconsistency in monitoring between different schools/teachers and reduce perceptions of ‘bias’ from individual teachers.

• Teachers need to be more discreet in gathering monitoring information and encouraging pupils to apply for the EMA to reduce perceived stigma of receiving the EMA.

Information and support

• All young people should be able to access confidential support with completing their EMA form.

• There should be more information available to young people in the instance of non-payment of their EMA. Issues of non-payment should be resolved quickly and through a more streamlined process.

Extending the remit

• We feel there is potential to examine whether the EMA could be extended to other young people who may not be eligible under the current systems, for example, young carers or young people with disabilities. The forms of social exclusion that young people from low income households face may be similar to young people from these types of groups and therefore it seems reasonable that the EMA could be extended in this way.

• The EMA should be extended to encompass a range of learning options to account for personal learning preferences.
We hope that our work encourages other organisations embarking on research to consider how young people may be involved as researchers.

Other recommendations

- Essential items should be free for all students, regardless of parental income (for example past papers). While there was debate about what constitutes an ‘essential item’ suggestions included transport costs, school meals and books.

- Better careers advice would allow young people to see all the learning choices open to them when they turn 16. Not all young people reach their full potential in the school environment and they should be supported and made aware of alternative vocational or informal learning options beyond school.

Further consultation

If the Scottish Government seeks to make changes to the EMA in the future, we would strongly advocate further consultation with young people in Scotland which provides a more representative response.

To conclude, the experience of working on and leading a research project was enjoyable for the Young Researchers Group and we hope that it will lead to the further involvement of young people as researchers in SCCYP’s future work. While it is small scale project, we hope that our project will raise awareness about young people’s opinions of the EMA. To help do this, we have submitted our report as part of SCCYP’s response to a Scottish Government consultation on ‘16+ Learning Choices: First Step Activity and Financial Support’. We hope that our work encourages other organisations embarking on research to consider how young people may be involved as researchers. To help, based on our own experiences, we have compiled some ‘top tips’ for doing this (see Part Four).
PART FOUR

TOP TIPS FOR INVOLVING YOUNG PEOPLE IN RESEARCH

Research training

For young people to be involved in every part of the research you need to be trained. It will also help to make you feel more comfortable with the different tasks you have to complete throughout your project as you will have a clear idea of what you need to do.

- Keep any research training simple and straightforward.
- Training takes time – plan for ongoing training and refresher courses within your timetable.
- Combine training sessions with ‘hands on’ research tasks – this means you can put your new skills into action while it is fresh in your mind.
- Consider building in formal qualifications or certificates into the process – this means young people can take away more than just the experience of being involved in the research.

Managing a research project

Having the right staff to support your project will help you to manage it effectively. With them, talk over how you will go about making sure you incorporate the following points so you can keep on top of what you decide to do and make it happen!

- Set out clear aims and objectives for your project.
- Be realistic about what you can achieve – being ambitious is good but not when it means you are constantly failing to meet your expectations.
- Have someone managing the process – create a timetable outlining your key tasks and deadlines. Don’t worry if your timetable slips but make sure you update it to reflect any changes.
- Ideally, you should be involved from the start to the finish.
- If not, you should be clear about the extent of your involvement
- Be prepared to lose some team members along the way – it may be that research is just not their thing.

Literature review

A literature review is where you look for any existing research on your topic. You need to do this to make sure you do not simply repeat other research but add to the discussion around the issue. Making sure your research is something that has not been already been done will help to ensure that people are interested in your work.

- Find ways of making a literature review more interesting.
- Before doing the literature review it is important to have your research aims and objectives – that way you can be focused on the questions you are seeking to answer.
Survey research

We found that surveys were one of the most useful tools for collecting information. If you decide to use a survey the below points could help you.

• Have a clear but flexible research design.

• Have incentives for young people completing your surveys – we found that even small things like badges and pens helped to encourage more responses.

• The easy routes are not always the best – surveying your own friends about a topic may be fine but remember their views may not be the same as other groups of young people.

Focus groups

A focus group is where you get a group of people together that have an interest in the topic you are researching. Together they discuss the points you want to find out about. We found that by including activities into these sessions, the group was able to explore their opinions and talk about them more openly. An example of this was where we had a line that ranged from one (disagree) to 10 (agree) and when we read out a statement the young people would have to stand on the number that relayed their opinion.

You might find it useful to practice with your friends before doing a real one as we found it quite nerve wracking! You should have a member of staff there to make sure everything goes well and they can help by taking notes.

• Give yourself enough time to set up your focus groups – this always takes longer than you think.

• Doing focus groups can be nerve racking so make sure you have enough support from an experienced member of staff.

• Support each other – have one person facilitating the focus group and one person taking notes.

• If you are recording the session, check (and recheck) your equipment before you start.

• If you are relying on handwritten notes, type them up as quickly as possible.

• Being nervous is normal. Try to enjoy running your session and remember completing your own focus group is very rewarding.

Analysing the data you collect

This is where you bring together all the information you have found out during your research. When you start doing this you will see common thoughts and feelings from a variety of people. You can also identify issues that people do not agree on and reasons for these differences. When you are analysing your data, keep an eye out for any good quotes and statements that illustrate the points you are trying to make.

• Make sure the whole team has adequate training before you begin your analysis.

• Get help to incorporate training and the data analysis into one session – that way you get to put what you have learned into practice straightaway.

• Split the things you need to do into easy manageable chunks which can be ticked off as you complete them.

• Data analysis can be boring so make sure sessions are as interesting as possible. Use flip charts, post it notes and interactive games to liven things up.
Most of all though – ENJOY!

Report writing

It’s great when you start seeing your research coming together, but remember it will be hard work! Meet up regularly to keep things moving. It is good to get advice from staff members here about the different ways you could do this - you could get them to write bits too.

- Make time for re-drafting (be prepared to have lots of revised versions before you are finished).
- Start writing and remember you can polish it later – the main thing is to get your ideas down on paper.
- Work as a team and brainstorm the issues together. Then split up the work between the group members.
- Make sure to meet and share what each person has done.
- Make time to think about how you will disseminate the report and how your work could make an impact.
- Leave time for design and layout – your report will have more impact if it is visually attractive. This does not mean you need a state of the art design, but even things like the font and good presentation will change how the report is viewed by others.