



# Bursaries and free meals

## Lessons learnt 2023/24 funding year

### Introduction

It has always been important to have up to date information on the Bursary and free school meals payments being awarded to learners enrolled onto a 16 to 19 study programme to ensure that Providers are allocating the funding available to those learners with an assessed need, and in line with the guidance set out by the ESFA. The funding guidance does allow providers to carry forward bursary funding for one academic year, and funds going unspent after this time must be reported to the ESFA (soon to be DfE) no later than 31 March each year.

For the 2023/24 academic year RSM was contracted to undertake Bursary and free school meals audits on behalf of the ESFA. In this briefing we explore the key themes which have been identified as part of these reviews, including areas of best practice and also where funds could potentially be at risk for areas of non-compliance with the guidance.

### Bursaries

#### Discretionary Bursary Policy

Providers do overall have a Discretionary Bursary Policy in place; however, the types of awards and the eligibility requirements of the awards are not always sufficiently detailed for audit to be able to identify how the learner would be eligible for the award. For example, whilst travel would be an eligible cost there is a lack of detail in terms of how far from the provider the learner needs to reside in order to be considered for the award, and how this meets the local authority's travel requirements.

#### Financial assessments

We are seeing learners who are enrolled on two-year study programmes who have been awarded a discretionary or vulnerable bursary for their first academic year based on a financial assessment which is then being 'rolled forwards' for the second academic year without the provider reconfirming that the learner would be eligible for the Bursary in a second academic year. Whilst the guidance states that providers can exercise discretion as to whether an annual financial assessment is undertaken, if no financial assessment is undertaken for the second year of study, providers must obtain a signed and dated self-declaration from the student to confirm that their household circumstances have not changed. If no self-declaration is obtained, there is risk that the learner would be deemed ineligible for the bursary.



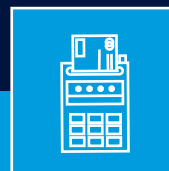
### Bursary funds conditions

We identified a number of providers who for the 2023/24 academic year, whilst awarding bursaries to learners, did not have any clearly defined terms and conditions linked to attendance or behaviours with which the learners must comply and agree to, in order to continue to be in receipt of Bursary payments. This is a controls point rather than effecting funding.



### Lack of supporting evidence

We have encountered instances where, whilst the providers have documented the type of evidence they have reviewed to deem the learner as being eligible for the bursary (i.e. universal credit statements), they have not retained evidence on file, or the evidence on file does not meet the three-month requirement as set out in the Bursary funding guidance. If this cannot be provided during audit, there is a risk that this may result in the Bursary payments being ineligible for funding.



### Bulk payments – Discretionary Bursary

A number of providers have been awarding learners set monthly bulk payments, such as £50 a month to spend on eligible items such as books and equipment, however, the payments are made in advance with no receipts being provided to justify the spend. These payments have been seen being paid either directly into the learner's bank accounts or onto individual learner 'ID cards' which are also usable within the provider's refectories (which is not always an eligible spend). This has resulted in these payments being considered ineligible.

## Free meals in Further Education

### Attendance

Providers in some cases have been providing free meals payments to the learner's canteen cards on days where the learners may not be entitled to a free meal. This includes days where the learner is not in attendance (and it is not clear how the monies were recovered), is on study leave at home and also periods where the learner is only in attendance for an hour's lesson in the morning/afternoon where there is no requirement to be onsite for the full duration of the day.

### Provision of meals whilst on work experience

We have identified instances where the learners are being provided with set monthly supermarket vouchers when work experience is being undertaken off site. In the majority of these instances the vouchers are being provided in advance of the work experience taking place and is not being mapped to the learner's actual activity. In addition to this, no receipts are being sought to ensure that the vouchers are covering the learner's meals only on the days they have attended the work experience.



Lisa Smith  
Risk Assurance Director  
lisa.smith@rsmuk.com



Emma Gipson  
Managing Consultant  
emma.gipson@rsmuk.com



Kimberley Hancock  
Principal Consultant  
kimberley.hancock@rsmuk.com

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