

Funding adult learning

So you want some help with your course fees or funding for your professional development? Liz Carboni, AdviceUK's National Training Team Manager, explains some of the options

The funding of training and development in the advice sector has always been a thorny issue. Many centres are facing funding issues and the first budget cut seems to be on staff development. Many are asking what can be accessed for free. Another issue is the amount of time out staff will have to take to attend a course and whether it is worth it. Even when training is free staff can be called back into work at short notice due to one 'crisis' or another, which can be very frustrating for the individual involved.

Many individuals or organisations manage to find some funding to help them with their development – perhaps through a local bursary scheme, or a grant giving trust for young learners of single parents, or just by careful budget planning.

A simple way to fund the learning needs for your advice organisation for a year – or a group of organisations can buddy up to do this – is to apply to Awards for All. Awards for All can grant between £300 - £10,000 for training & development – the bid can cover funding for training courses, qualifications such as NVQs, and volunteers' expenses. Go to www.awardsforall.org.uk for more information. Some of our members apply on an annual basis to cover staff development costs.

If you have a member of staff aged 16 -26 Lawrence Atwell's Charity may be able to help fund their training and qualification in their chosen career. Go to www.skinnerhall.co.uk/lawrence_atwell.htm for more information. In addition the Abbey Charitable Trust may fund projects that include education and training – phone 0870 608 0104 for more information.

If you know you want to do a qualification that is offered by City & Guilds and AdviceUK is your provider of choice, you can contact City & Guilds as they offer a small number of educational grants every year that cover course fees, childcare or travel expenses –go to www.cityandguilds.com and search for details.

Money advice training has been accessible through MAT's Wiser Adviser for eight years – but where has that left other training? AdviceUK members have to wait for free training – a project may come up, often limited to a particular location, that offers training, or Train to Gain may be available to fund an NVQ (so long as the learner isn't already qualified above level 2).

But things may be changing. In the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (DBIS) paper, Skills for Growth, published in November 2009, Peter Mandelson outlined his plans for introducing Skills Accounts in order "to empower individuals as active, well informed consumers whose choice drives improvements in the learning & skills system". That all sounds well and good, but what if Skills Accounts can only be used with further education colleges and not the advice sector networks?

In 2010/11 academic year (that's August to July), Skills Accounts will be offered to all adults who access publicly funded training, including Train to Gain and apprenticeships. Learners or

their employers will most likely have to contribute a percentage of the cost of the learning – maybe up to 50 per cent in some cases. For learning providers, such as AdviceUK, this means that they will have to register with the Skills Funding Agency (this is replacing the Learning and Skills Council) and jump through bureaucratic hoops in order to make qualifications available to learners. This leaves other types of learning subject to the same old cost recovery issues – not free for the end user.

OK, so you still want to do that course that may get you up to the next stage in your career. What about a Professional or Careers development loan? These are usually provided by the high street banks and are usually for recognised qualifications. If you don't ask your bank manager, you won't know if they're available.

Some providers, such as further education colleges, offer childcare funding while you are learning but this is subject to various eligibility criteria or means testing. If your local authority offers this, it's probably only for you to undertake a recognised qualification.

Scotland and Wales have a much more straightforward approach to funding learning. The Scottish Government provides funding to help learners improve their skills and qualifications. Learndirect Scotland is the national 'broker' for learning in Scotland. It provides information and guidance via its network of over 500 branded learning centres across Scotland together with its National Learning Opportunities Database, helpline and web services. You can find out more by visiting the www.learndirectscotland.com .

Similarly in Wales, there is a guide to funding for adult learners www.wales.gov.uk/topics/educationandskills/publications/guidance/learnerfundingguide/?lang=en

Even some local authorities have local help – such as Hampshire. Open4Learning Hampshire is a website that helps learners to access financial support for all types of learning. It covers course fees, exam costs, childcare and living expenses.

So if you still want to do that course, you need to get researching your funding options.

Have you heard of Student cash? They publish a book, usually available to student or careers advisers in colleges, universities or other public bodies, called Financial Support for Adult Learners. This book is aimed specifically at adults who need to find cash for their studies. It covers issues such as student loans, adult education bursaries, funding from employment and other sources of student financial aid. It's £20 - £30 but can be bought through www.studentcash.org.uk/guide_adults.

Heard enough to put you off going on that training course or going for a qualification? Looks like you need a diploma in researching your options before you even start – happy learning!