



**MINISTRY OF SOCIAL
DEVELOPMENT**

TE MANATŪ WHAKAHIATO ORA

26 MAR 2021

On 24 February 2021, you emailed the Ministry of Social Development (the Ministry) requesting, under the Official Information Act 1982, the following information:

- 1. The percentage of applications for Student Loan and Student Allowances that are approved after study has started for students, where study was confirmed prior to the start date of the course,*
- 2. The average length of time that applications for student allowances and student loans spend on the "Study Confirmed - Awaiting Final Processing" before being approved,*
- 3. Whether processes are continually reviewed for improvement and activities that Studylink is undertaking to actively improve processing timeframes, and*
- 4. Whether staff are asked to volunteer to work overtime during high volume application processing times or whether Studylink simply operates under their normal staffing timeframes.*

On 26 February 2021, the Ministry contacted you in order to clarify the timeframe you were interested in, in regard to your request. You responded on the same day that you were looking for data for the last three years – 2018, 2019 and 2020. You added that if there is provisional data surrounding expectations for 2021 (or forecast figures), that you would like this information included. You also added the following:

- Whether Studylink also temporarily increases staffing levels throughout high volume periods, either through labour hire, temporary workers, or through internal recruitment of fixed term contracted staff.*

The peak student application season runs from September to March each year, as students apply for financial assistance over their summer study break, and for the coming academic year.

This is StudyLink's busiest time of year, and in order to effectively manage the large volume of applications received, the annual 'call to action' campaign encourages students to apply online and provide their supporting documents by the target date of 16 December. The Ministry can finalise the majority of applications received by 16 December, complete with all the information needed, prior to main study start dates.

From 13 September to 27 February this year, 150,162 students submitted 229,030 applications for student support (student allowance and/or student loan). These applications represent 69.4% of the total number of student support applications forecasted for 2020/21.

As at 20 February 2021, 82.8% of applications received by 16 December 2020 had been finalised, compared to 55.56% of applications received after 16 December. By 27 February this had increased to 86.1% and 59.5% respectively. Many of those applications which have not been finalised are waiting for information required to confirm entitlement, for example, more than 27,000 of the student allowance applications received since 13 September are incomplete.

Students who miss the 16 December application date are advised that they might not have everything sorted in time for the start of their course. You can read more about this at the following link:

www.studylink.govt.nz/about-studylink/news/2020/you-cant-miss-it.html.

The target application date of 16 December was introduced from the 2013/14 peak application season, following consultation with students and student representatives, who advised that they wanted a specific deadline to reinforce the 'call to action'. This was necessary, as the majority of applications were traditionally received during January and February, making it impossible to effectively manage the volume of work over the short time period available prior to the start of study.

For the sake of clarity, your request will be addressed in turn below.

1. *The percentage of applications for Student Loan and Student Allowances that are approved after study has started for students, where study was confirmed prior to the start date of the course.*

The following two tables show the number and percentages of Student Allowance and Student Loan applications that are approved after study start date:

- **Table One:** The number and percentages of Student Allowance applications that are approved after study start date.
- **Table Two:** The number and percentages of Student Loan applications that are approved after study start date.

Table One: The number and percentages of Student Allowance applications that are approved after study start date compared to those approved prior to study start date.

	2018		2019		2020	
Approved prior to start date	34,101	79.5%	32,190	79.5%	29,754	75.8%
Approved after start date	8,775	20.5%	8,295	20.5%	9,522	24.2%
Total	42,876	100.0%	40,485	100.0%	39,276	100.0%

Table Two: The number and percentages of Student Loan applications that are approved after study start date compared to those approved prior to study start date.

	2018		2019		2020	
Approved prior to start date	115,938	97.90%	109,854	97.60%	106,425	94.30%
Approved after start date	2,505	2.10%	2,754	2.40%	6,411	5.70%
Total	118,443	100.00%	112,605	100.00%	112,836	100.00%

Notes for **Table One** and **Table Two:**

- To protect confidentiality, the Ministry uses processes to make it difficult to identify an individual person or entity from published data. These data tables have had random rounding (to a multiple of three) applied to all cell counts in the table. For example, a value of one or two maybe be rounded to zero or three. The impact of applying random rounding is that columns and rows may not add exactly to the given column or row totals. The published counts will never differ by more than two counts.
2. *The average length of time that applications for student allowances and student loans spend on the "Study Confirmed - Awaiting Final Processing" before being approved.*

The following two tables show the mean and median days it takes for Student Allowance and Student Loan applications at the 'Study Confirmed – Awaiting Final Processing' state to clear:

- Table Three:** Mean and median days it takes for Student Allowance applications at the 'Study Confirmed – Awaiting Final Processing' state to clear.
- Table Four:** Mean and median days it takes for Student Loan applications at the 'Study Confirmed – Awaiting Final Processing' state to clear.

Table Three: Mean and median days it takes for Student Allowance applications at the 'Study Confirmed – Awaiting Final Processing' state to clear.

Study start year	Mean days	Median days
2018	4.3	3.0
2019	6.0	4.0
2020	11.0	8.0

Table Four: Mean and median days it takes for Student Loan applications at the 'Study Confirmed – Awaiting Final Processing' state to clear.

Study start year	Mean days	Median days
2018	4.6	3.0
2019	6.5	5.0
2020	12.3	9.0

Notes for **Table Three** and **Table Four**:

- The 'Study Confirmed – Awaiting Final Processing' state is a MyStudyLink state, and does not officially exist in the Allowance and Loan system.
- This state includes applications where a verification of study has been received, however, requires further action.

3. *Whether processes are continually reviewed for improvement and activities that Studylink is undertaking to actively improve processing timeframes.*

Planning for StudyLink's peak season utilises regular application and workload forecasting to determine staffing and training requirements each year. There is a strong emphasis on business improvement, and an annual review is undertaken after the end of peak season to identify opportunities to improve the service for the following year. Studylink also has an internal channel for staff to raise initiatives and changes for improvements in systems and processing.

Significant investment in technology means the majority of applications and supporting documents are submitted online, enabling faster processing and more self-service.

4. *Whether staff are asked to volunteer to work overtime during high volume application processing times or whether Studylink simply operates under their normal staffing timeframes.*

Overtime is completed regularly throughout the peak student application season, as determined by workloads. Staff have the option to work overtime on three nights each week and every Saturday.

Overtime is on a volunteer basis therefore staff are given the option to work overtime but the decision to take up this extra work, and how much overtime they choose to take is ultimately sits with them. Ensuring staff health and well-being remains a priority.

5. *Whether Studylink also temporarily increase staffing levels throughout high volume periods, either through labour hire temporary workers, or through internal recruitment of fixed term contracted staff.*

StudyLink has historically taken on high numbers of temporary staff from September to March. In recent years, it has maintained higher numbers of permanent staff, who

are utilised across other areas of the Ministry outside StudyLink's peak application season. This year, 32 additional fixed term staff were recruited to support peak season processing. Further, the Contact Centre recruited 26 fixed term staff and upskilled 12 existing staff to answer student phone calls.

The principles and purposes of the Official Information Act 1982 under which you made your request are:

- to create greater openness and transparency about the plans, work and activities of the Government,
- to increase the ability of the public to participate in the making and administration of our laws and policies and
- to lead to greater accountability in the conduct of public affairs.

This Ministry fully supports those principles and purposes. The Ministry therefore intends to make the information contained in this letter available to the wider public. The Ministry will do this by publishing this letter and attachments on the Ministry of Social Development's website. Your personal details will be deleted, and the Ministry will not publish any information that would identify you as the person who requested the information.

If you wish to discuss this response with us, please feel free to contact OIA_Requests@msd.govt.nz.

If you are not satisfied with this response regarding Studylink, you have the right to seek an investigation and review by the Ombudsman. Information about how to make a complaint is available at www.ombudsman.parliament.nz or 0800 802 602.

Ngā mihi nui



Jason Dwen
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Centralised Services