



5 May 2023

Tēnā koe

On 10 March 2023, you emailed the Ministry of Social Development (the Ministry) requesting information under the Official Information Act 1982 (the Act) as follows:

- *The number of StudyLink employees which act as phone operators that answer enquiries.*
- *The number of calls in which are received by StudyLink, however go unanswered by an operator.*
- *What percentage per day, for the past 28 days, have StudyLinks automatic answer machine that disconnects the call due to "high volume of calls" been active?*

On 21 March 2023, you refined your 4th request: "What the standard response time for applications for Student Allowance, Student Loans, and Jobseeker Support - Student Hardship has been for the past 4 months (November to February" to:

- *How long does it take for StudyLink to finalise an application for Student Allowance, Student Loan and Jobseeker Support Student Hardship (JSSH) for the months of November 2022 to February 2023.*

You further asked:

- *How long does it take for StudyLink to acknowledge receipt of a person's application for Student Allowance, Student Loan, JSSH, by hard copy application and by online application.*

I will answer your questions in turn.

- *The number of StudyLink employees which act as phone operators that answer enquiries.*

The Ministry employs 109 full-time Customer Service Representatives (CSRs) who are trained to answer StudyLink-related telephone enquiries.

- *The number of calls which are received by StudyLink, however go unanswered by an operator.*

When a caller telephones, they may receive automated messages including advice about making enquiries through other means, for example using MyStudyLink. They also receive an automated message advising estimated wait times. This helps callers decide whether to wait or call back later.

We acknowledge how long it can sometimes take for callers to be connected with a CSR and we also appreciate how frustrating it can be to experience such delays. It may be helpful for you to know that each year, from October to March, are the Ministry's busiest time for StudyLink-related enquiries.

As part of our ongoing service improvements, we introduced CallMe for callers who have provided their client number and had their identity verified. This means that rather than waiting until a CSR answers their call, they can leave a message to be called back, without losing their place in the queue.

You may also be interested to know that during these times, the Ministry recruits additional staff and may deploy staff from other areas to assist. During these times, staff work extra hours, outside normal operating hours, to help meet demand.

Unfortunately, there are times when callers, for whatever reason, are not connected with CSRs. The Ministry terms these "Abandoned Calls". For the month ended 10 March 2023, the date your request was received by the Ministry, the number of abandoned calls totalled 8,482.

- *What percentage per day, for the past 28 days, have StudyLink's automatic answer machine that disconnects the call due to "high volume of calls" been active?*

The Ministry's systems do not capture data of the number of calls that are played a disconnection message. The Ministry is continually reviewing its service standards and looking at how improvements can be made while still maintaining fiscal responsibility.

Your request for this information is refused under section 18(g) of the Act as the information you have requested is not held by the Ministry and I have no grounds to believe that the information is either held by or closely connected to the functions of another department, Minister of the Crown or organisation.

- *How long does it take for StudyLink to finalise an application for Student Allowance, Student Loan and Jobseeker Support Student Hardship (JSSH) for the months of November 2022 to February 2023.*

It may be helpful for you to know that Student Allowances (SA) and Student Loans (SL) are processed through the Ministry's Student Allowances and Loans system (SAL) while JSSH applications are processed through the Ministry's SWIFTT system. I have set out information relating to each process separately, following.

Student Allowances and Student Loans

For SA and SL, the timeliness standard is that at least 95% of SA and SL applications will be assessed for entitlement within five working days of receipt. From July 2022 to 31 March 2023, 99.8% of SA and SL applications were assessed within five working days. Assessment of entitlement is different to approving or declining of payment or, specifically, finalising applications as you have asked.

There are several factors that affect how SA and SL applications progress and which can impact reaching a final outcome. These factors include:

- how far before study start date the application is received,
- when a student's enrolment is finalised with the education provider,
- when study details are verified with the education provider,
- when information or evidence to support an application is received. For SA, this could include information from parents or partner

Because of these variable factors, the Ministry does not formally report on SA and SL applications finalised. It is important to note that policy allows until the last day of a student's course of study to provide required information and this can affect the length of time it takes to finalise an application. Furthermore, an applicant has until the course end date to provide information relating to the processing of an application.

To provide the timeframes to finalise applications would require the Ministry to review information held in individual case files. This would mean that Ministry staff would have to manually review a substantial number of files. As such, I refuse your request under section 18(f) of the Act. The greater public interest is in the effective and efficient administration of the public service.

I have considered whether the Ministry would be able to respond to your request given extra time, or the ability to charge for the information requested. I have concluded that, in either case, the Ministry's ability to undertake its work would still be prejudiced.

However, I can provide you with additional information which I hope will be helpful to you.

The Ministry receives more than 70% of SA and SL applications during their busiest time, from October to March. One of the initiatives to reduce delays in applications being finalised is a country-wide "Call to Action" campaign encouraging students to apply online by 16 December. This campaign has been in place since 2013 and assists students getting finalised before their study starts.

Throughout the summer season, the percentage of applications finalised by the main study start date each year is monitored. As at 25 February 2023, 86% of applications for 2023 study received by 16 December 2022 had been finalised by the main study start date, compared with a lower 60% received and finalised for those who applied after 16 December. Of the total applications not finalised, there is a number of reasons this may have happened, including the application no longer being required or the Ministry working through the required information held, or seeking further information.

Jobseeker Support Student Hardship

With regard to JSSH, the Ministry's standard is that all actions must be completed within five working days from receipt of the last piece of information required to complete the action. This applies whether the application was received online or through other channels including by paper or telephone. Over 90% were received online and the average time taken to process these applications ranged from 3 to 5 days.

Of the less than 10% of JSSH applications received through other channels, information regarding processing times is held in individual case files. In order to provide you with this information, Ministry staff would have to manually review a substantial number of files. As such, I refuse your request under section 18(f) of the Act. The greater public interest is in the effective and efficient administration of the public service.

I have considered whether the Ministry would be able to respond to your request given extra time, or the ability to charge for the information requested. I have concluded that, in either case, the Ministry's ability to undertake its work would still be prejudiced.

- *How long does it take for StudyLink to acknowledge receipt of a person's application for Student Allowance, Student Loan, JSSH, by hard copy application and by online application.*

All SA and SL application received online are automatically issued an email acknowledging receipt of the application. To March 2023, 99% of total SA and SL applications were received online. For the 1% received through other channels, these applications must be registered within 24 hours of receipt and the applicant advised at the same time.

As noted above, to February 2023, over 90% of applications were received online and a confirmation email acknowledging receipt was automatically issued. For the remaining applications, received through other channels, acknowledgment was issued once the application was finalised. As noted earlier in this letter, these applications took between 3 and 5 days, on average, to finalise.

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 and any attached documents available to the wider public. The Ministry will do this by publishing this letter on the Ministry'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 about timeliness standards for SA, SL and JSSH, 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



Geoff Cook
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Contact Centre and Digital Services