



Department for the  
**Economy**  
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HIGHER EDUCATION SUPPORT FUNDS 2023/24

# **Conditions of funding for Higher Education Institutions in Northern Ireland**

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# Conditions of funding for Higher Education Institutions in Northern Ireland

## PURPOSE OF THE SUPPORT FUNDS

1. The Support Funds are to be used to provide financial help to students whose access to higher education might be inhibited by financial considerations, or who, for whatever reason, including physical or other disabilities, face financial difficulties in meeting their living costs. Support Funds cannot be used for tuition fees. Fee support is already available through Tuition Fee Loans. Support Funds shall not be used to assist students who are eligible for a student loan in the relevant academic year but who have decided not to take one out.
2. Support Funds may however also be used for emergency payments in the case of students who have not received their loan instalment at the beginning of term.

## ELIGIBLE STUDENTS

3. Any student with Northern Ireland home fee status or who qualifies for the higher Great Britain fee rate and who is eligible for student support in their jurisdiction may apply for Support Funds.
4. Students on part-time undergraduate courses must study that academic year at an intensity of at least 25% of a full-time equivalent to be eligible to apply.
5. In each case “home students” means persons who satisfy certain conditions of eligibility for a student loan.

## CONDITIONS OF PAYMENT

6. Support Funds are provided by the Department for the Economy to the institutions in two instalments (normally in September and January of each academic year) on condition that:
  - i. they are used only for the purpose mentioned in paragraphs 1 and 2 above;
  - ii. they are made available only to eligible students, as defined in paragraphs 3 and 4 above;
  - iii. the institutions follow the guidance as set out within this document;
  - iv. institutions maintain their Support Funds in an interest bearing account (see paragraph 7).

# Conditions of funding for Higher Education Institutions in Northern Ireland cont.

## **ACCOUNTING FOR EXPENDITURE**

7. As soon as possible after the end of the academic year, and not later than 31 December, institutions shall provide the Department with a receipts and payments account for the Support Funds covering the year ending the previous academic year, audited and certified by an auditor belonging to a recognised accounting body. Auditors shall be required to certify whether the Support Funds and any interest earned on them have been applied in accordance with the terms and conditions contained in this document.

## **UNSPENT BALANCES**

8. With the Department's approval a proportion of any unspent balances may be carried forward to the following financial year and may be deducted from the institutions' next year's allocation.

In certain circumstances the Department may request unspent balances to be returned to them no later than four months after the end of the academic year.

## **REVISION**

9. The Department may at any time revise, revoke or add to any of the terms and conditions in this document. The institution itself may make representations to the Department for revision, revocation or addition to the terms and conditions of payment.

# Support Funds 2023/24

## Guidance for Institutions

### PAYMENTS

10. Support Funds should be targeted at students in particular need. Very small payments are inconsistent with this. The minimum payment should be £100, other than in exceptional circumstances. Normally, individuals should not receive payments totalling more than £3,500 from the Support Funds towards living costs in any one academic year. However, it is recognised that certain students may require assistance beyond this level.
11. It is for each institution to decide individual applications for payments from its Support Funds within the criteria laid down by the Department. Institutions are asked to ensure that the need for a payment is in each case properly supported by evidence of a gap between income and expenditure.
12. To widen access to further and higher education, institutions must use the funds to provide support to contribute towards the **living costs** but not the tuition fees, of students who would otherwise be deterred from entering or continuing higher education because of their financial circumstances.

### HELP FOR STUDENTS WHO HAVE YET TO RECEIVE LOAN INSTALMENTS

13. Students who have difficulty in meeting their living costs include those who have not received the Government financial support by the beginning of term.

14. The student support arrangements for 2023/24 are designed to ensure that all eligible students receive some support at the beginning of term. For late applicants, this would be a payment for the non means-tested element of the student loan as an interim payment while any application for means-tested support was being processed. But there will be a small number of students for whom there has not been enough time to process any part of their application, perhaps because they took a very late decision to enter higher education or did not have confirmation of their course or institution until late. The Department would like institutions to use their Support Funds in a flexible and sympathetic way to help any student in these circumstances who is in need of support. This should normally be in the form of a short-term loan, to be repaid to the institution when the student loan is received.
15. Institutions will only need to pay for students' immediate needs over a few weeks, and only if the student has no other means of support. Some institutions already have schemes in place, either through Support Funds, or through alternative funds, which will achieve this aim and there is no need to change their arrangements if that is the case. Institutions may want to check the following before giving help in these cases:
  - proof of identity;
  - the student is registered at the institution for a course designated for loans;

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## Guidance for Institutions cont.

- the student has applied for a loan, or has at the very least, contacted their Student Finance NI office to begin the application process;
- basic eligibility check (e.g. three years' residency and settled status); and
- student's financial resources and needs.

16. Institutions are recommended to ask the student to sign a declaration that they will repay the loan once the loan instalment has been received.

### **DECIDING WHETHER A PART-TIME COURSE QUALIFIES**

17. When deciding whether a student is studying at an intensity of at least 25% in that academic year, institutions should consider how long it would take to achieve the relevant qualification if the course were taken full-time (or consider the number of learning credits the student is studying that year compared to the full-time equivalent course). Where no full-time equivalent course exists, institutions may find it useful to compare the length of study to a more measurable course, perhaps in another institution if appropriate.

### **ASSESSING STUDENTS**

18. Institutions should look at both the student's and their partner's income when assessing applications - institutions may wish to refer to Schedule 5 of The Education (Student Support) (No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009, as amended.

### **EVIDENCE FROM STUDENTS**

19. Students should be asked to provide supporting evidence of income including their assessment notice for any means-tested benefits or tax credits.

### **DISBURSING SUPPORT FUNDS**

20. Assistance from the Support Funds may be given in the form of a cash payment to the student or to a third party, or through the provision of items or services for the student on an individual basis or in the form of a short term repayable loan. Large items of equipment bought for the use of individual students should remain the property of the institution.

# Support Funds 2023/24

## Guidance for Institutions cont.

### **Institutions should take account of the following factors when considering applications:**

- whether the claimed shortfall between income and expenditure constitutes real need and cannot reasonably be reduced to a manageable level through action by the student;
- the availability of support from other sources; and
- whether in some cases the payment should be in instalments subject to further review, or in the form of a short-term repayable loan, rather than a one-off grant.

### **The Support Funds should not be used for any of the following:**

- i. to provide group or communal facilities;
  - ii. adaptations to buildings; or
  - iii. to meet staff salaries or any costs of administering or publicising the Funds.
21. Support Funds should not be used to meet tuition fees and, as a general rule, should not be used to make good failure to receive the parental contribution towards student maintenance.

22. Institutions should seek to ensure that applications are processed within a reasonable time. Students might reasonably expect to receive a decision within four weeks of applying. Where decisions are due to be taken at particular times during the year, the dates should be publicised.

### **GOOD PRACTICE**

23. The following are some examples of good practice in the ways that the Funds can be targeted to students in genuine need:

### **PROACTIVE PREVENTION OF HARDSHIP**

- The Department expects institutions to use Support Funds more proactively to prevent students from falling into hardship, rather than waiting for students to run into real difficulties before applying for help. Institutions could, for example, trawl vulnerable groups particularly mature students with dependants, at the start of the academic year, to see whether they have any foreseeable financial needs for which Support Funds could appropriately provide assistance. Payment could be made in instalments throughout the academic year. Payment can also be made in kind, such as paying directly for childcare.

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## Guidance for Institutions cont.

- When advertising Support Funds, care should be taken not to give the impression that all applicants will necessarily be successful, and institutions must check of course that the need is genuine in each case. It is for institutions to manage their support funds allocation throughout the year through the monthly monitoring process. Institutions should give official notice to the Department if they are experiencing genuine higher demand for funds.
- Institutions are encouraged to discuss with individual students who have particular needs how Support Funds might be used to provide additional financial help.
- Publicity should as far as possible be directed towards students who may need assistance most, and not presented so as to suggest that all eligible students will receive payments. It may be helpful to consult counselling staff, personal tutors or student representatives on ways of achieving well-directed publicity.
- Counselling on money management may help ensure that assistance provided from the Support Funds is not wasted. Some institutions find group workshops effective.
- Institutions need to consider what evidence they require of a student's financial position. For example, a single bank balance does not indicate the long-term position, but monthly bank/building society statements are more likely to do so. Where students are eligible for student loans (from SFNI, SFE, SFW, SAAS, SUSI), institutions should check that the student has applied for the full loan entitlement (except in the case of emergency payments at the very beginning of term).

### **INTERCALATING STUDENTS (THOSE WHO ARE SICK OR UNABLE TO ATTEND THEIR COURSE FOR HEALTH OR CARING REASONS OR OTHER UNAVOIDABLE CIRCUMSTANCE)**

24. Applications for help from the Support Funds should be considered from students who are intercalating as set out above.

Payments from the Fund can be made to students who are not attending their course through illness, caring responsibilities, pregnancy or other unavoidable circumstances, provided the institution is satisfied that the student intends to return.



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## Guidance for Institutions cont.

25. If the institution has decided that the student has withdrawn or abandoned or been expelled from the course and the Student Finance NI office has been notified, payments from the Fund should not be made.

The Departmental return will be made on the template provided by the Department and must include spend made from the Departmental funding allocation only, and not the institution's own support or hardship funds.

### **PROVISION FOR SUMMER TERM AND THE LONG VACATION**

26. Some students find that they need financial assistance late in the academic year, perhaps because they have not been able to find temporary employment for the long vacation. Through the monthly monitoring process institutions are asked to manage their allocation to provide support for students throughout the full academic year.

### **IN YEAR MONITORING**

28. In year monitoring will be by monthly returns as detailed in the previous section. Institutions should manage their allocation throughout the year and should give official notice to the Department, at the earliest opportunity, if they are experiencing very high demand for support funds. This must be backed up with information from the monthly returns.

### **MONITORING**

27. Institutions must provide the Department with updates for the current academic year on a monthly basis by the end of the 3rd week following the end of the previous period, to include:

- i.** number of applicants, both successful and unsuccessful;
- ii.** amount of money awarded;
- iii.** amount of money loaned; and
- iv.** how this compared to the same period for the previous academic year.

### **APPEALS**

29. It is for individual institutions to consider and resolve appeals by students in respect of applications for a Support Funds payment and to establish a procedure for this purpose if they consider that appropriate. Appeals should not be referred to the Department.

### **ADVICE TO STUDENTS**

30. Successful applicants should be advised that payments from the Support Funds may have implications for their entitlement to social security benefits (particularly income support, housing benefit), tax credits and certain payments from the Social Fund.



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