2025/2026

LEARNER SUPPORT FUND

Criteria & Guidance notes

(Terms and Conditions)

You should read the following document carefully before completing your Learner Support Fund application. By indication on the application that you have read the fund Terms and Conditions you are acknowledging that you have read this document in its entirety and have accepted the full terms and conditions relating to the fund.

Please see the evidence checklist at the end of this document for further detail on evidence needed. You must ensure that you attach, clear and appropriate evidence when prompted throughout the online application. If the evidence, you submit is insufficient or out of date your application will not be processed. You will be notified that your application is void and you will need to make a fresh application online.

Learner Support Fund Discretionary 2025/2026

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Introduction

Section 1

The Hardship Fund is a discretionary fund administered through the College (in Belfast Met it is known as the **Learner Support Fund)** to increase access, retention and achievement for those learners experiencing exceptional financial difficulty in meeting costs associated with learning.

This document is intended to inform you about the fund and guide you through the process of completing your application.

The **Learner Support Fund** (Hardship Fund) is administered by the College and governed by the Department for Economy. All applications are processed in line with the guidelines provided by the Department for Economy which can be viewed by going to the following webpage:
EC1 25 0160165 FE Hardship Fund - 2025-26 Circular(2).pdf

The College must comply with the Department for Economy Guidelines as failure to comply with these guidelines could result in funding being withheld from the College.

Please note: It is **your** responsibility to make sure that the Learner Support Fund administrator receives all the relevant documentation in support of your application. **Your application will not be assessed at time of submission but by a Learner Support Fund Panel at a separate time and date.**

You must submit your Learner Support Fund application online using the Learner Support Fund 25/26 Microsoft form. You must be logged into your student account when applying, therefore the application is only available on the Student Funding Canvas page or via your student email (Microsoft outlook) account.

You can request an application link to be sent to your student email account by emailing: studentfunding@belfastmet.ac.uk

Student Funding Office Provision

Contact with the Student Funding Office
studentfunding@belfastmet.ac.uk or by telephoning 028 9026 5183

If additional support is required, we will endeavour to provide this.

LEARNER SUPPORT FUND 2025/26 **Section 2**

Criteria

You can apply for assistance from the Learner Support Fund if you meet the following conditions:

a) **Age**

You are aged 18 or over on 1st July 2025 OR you attain the age of 18 during the current academic year and where there are sufficient weeks left to make an allowance

b) Course and Attendance

You must be enrolled and in attendance on a vocational course, which is externally accredited and is on the register of regulated qualifications. The following courses or attendance on the following courses are not eligible for the Learner Support Fund

1. Training for Success/Apprenticeships (with exception of Level 2 Training Programmes)
2. Kings Trust
3. Leisure courses

Above is not an exhausted list other programmes may not be eligible.

c) Residency

Students must meet the residency requirements set out in the "Schedule – Eligible Students" of The Further Education (Student Support) (Eligibility) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012, as amended by:

• The Further Education (Student Support) (Eligibility) (Amendment etc) (EU Exit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021;

• The Further Education (Student Support) (Eligibility) (Amendment etc.) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2022;

• The Further Education (Student Support) (Eligibility) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024;

and • The Further Education (Student Support) (Eligibility) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025.

d) Evidence of financial difficulties

You must be able to show that you need financial help and that you have explored other ways of supporting yourself by applying for other funding. If you are studying a Full Time Higher Education course you must have been financially assessed and must have taken all funding available to you including loans. You must present your final financial assessment letter as evidence in support of your application.

e) EU Students

You must have applied to the EU settlement scheme and be able to evidence your status that you have where living in the UK by 31st December 2020 and have continued to live in the UK since that date.

f) Income

The Learner Support Fund is means tested based on your income or that of your parents/guardian or spouse, therefore evidence of income from one or more of these sources must be provided to support your application i.e. both parents and where parents are divorced or separated evidence of this must be presented.

Support may be provided to you if your Household income is £33,950 or less and you meet all other criteria.

***Please see notes on income categories for students in the guidance notes*.**

Learner Support Fund Discretionary 2025/26 **Section 3**

What help is available?

Fees - You may be eligible for assistance with Fees including Tuition, Registration or Examination Fees, where help is not available from any other source. The amount is restricted and may not meet the full costs. Other criteria apply such as income levels, level of course and mode of attendance.

Books/equipment - To claim for these you must provide receipts. Funding is for **essential equipment only** and limited to £300 per Full Time student. Should you make a claim for assistance with expensive or large equipment above £300 you will not receive any financial assistance towards this item.

Travel – You can be assessed for Travel assistance if you live more than 3 miles away from your campus. You must provide evidence of the public transport costs to and from College or fuel receipts if travelling by car.

Please Note: If you are being funded from any other source for Fees, Books or travel from another source the Learner Support Fund cannot double fund under these categories.

Additional Living Costs - To be assessed for support within this category, you may be required to supply evidence of both your income (or lack of income) and outgoings so that a needs assessment can be carried out to assess your level of need.

Childcare - Childcare may be available to you if you have dependent children in registered or approved childcare. This includes lone parents, students with partners and students married to other students. Only the student who has primary care of the child/children can receive childcare support. If a student has children under 15 (or 17 if the child is registered as having special educational needs), the student may be eligible to receive up to 100% of actual childcare costs during term times and holidays** up to a maximum for full time students of £110 a week for one child and up to £188 a week for two or more children and for part time students up to a maximum of £56 a week for one child and up to £95 a week for 2 or more children.

Childcare is means tested and the amount you could receive depends on your household income

Please Note: Awards from Learner Support Fund cannot be backdated before the start of the term in which the application is made.

Learner Support Fund Discretionary 2025/26 **Section 4**

Guidance notes

When completing the Learner Support Fund application please answer all questions honestly and accurately. Please upload appropriate and clear evidence that supports the information you have entered into the form. Incomplete or applications submitted with incorrect information or insufficient evidence will not be processed. You will have notified that your application can not be progressed and you may be required to make a fresh application.

Please refer to the below guidance notes if you are unsure of what information is required or what evidence is required. Please note: it is impossible to cover every eventuality, please contact studentfunding@belfastmet.ac.uk if you need further guidance.

Proof of address
You must provide evidence of your address, **this will be the address you will live at during term time.** Acceptable evidence includes:
Tenancy agreement, Utility Bill, Mobile phone bill, Bank statement, Driving License, Document from any government department, documents from an Insurance provider, Document from an employer.
If you change your address you must notify the Student Funding Office and provide evidence of your new address.

Residence/Nationality
You must supply answer the questions within this section and supply the specific evidence you are prompted for. Due to the implications attached to this criterion the below list of evidence is specific and no alternative form of evidence can be used. If you answer

- UK National you must supply either a copy of your passport or a **long** birth Certificate
- EU National you must supply your UKIVISA share-code
- Refugee status you must supply your UKIVISA share-code
- Leave to Remain Status you must supply your UKIVISA share-code
- If you hold none of the above, you must enter your status and attach a copy of your passport and any relevant visas/permits you may be under.

Some status' require you to answer if you have lived outside the UK during the 3 years prior to the start of the course. If you answer:

- Yes, you must provide details (including precise dates) of where you lived
- No, you must provide evidence clearly showing that you have lived in the UK for the 3 years prior to the start of the course: For example, a letter from your previous school if applicable or a letter from your Doctor or a Letter from your employer or Benefits Office. Evidence must be clear and show 3 full years. The above is not an exhausted list please liaise with Student Funding to see what evidence is appropriate for your case.

Please note: If you are an Asylum Seeker or pay International fees you are not eligible to apply to the Learner Support Fund.

Bank account details
Learner Support Funds can only be paid into a bank account using the BACs system. The account **must** be in the applicant's name.

Evidence is required, it must show your Name, Bank Name, Sort Code and Account Number. Acceptable evidence includes: Bank statements, logbook, chequebook, online banking screenshot **(as long as it meets the above requirements). Please do not upload images of your Debit Card.**

If you change your bank details you must inform the Student Funding office immediately as well as provide evidence of the change.

Other sources of funding
All Students who are eligible to apply for funding from other sources **must do so** in the first instance. **Your Learner Support Fund application will not be processed until you have applied and have had a final decision made on your application from the external funding body.**

- All Higher Education students **must** apply to **Student Finance NI**
  Can apply up to 9 months from course start date.
- All Further Education Full Time students 19+ **must** apply for a **Further Education Grant**
  Closing date 31st October 2025 (Except A Level student's as they are not eligible)
- All Further Education Full Time students under 19 **must** apply to **EMA and Travel Pass**
  Closes end of academic year, back dated to date of application.
- Part Time Further Education students on a eligible course **must** apply for a **PT FE Grant**
  Closing date 31st October 2025

Every student must apply for all of the help that is available to them and agree to take all that is offered by these external funding bodies before applying to the Learner Support Fund.

If you apply for assistance from other sources, evidence must be provided were requested to clearly show the outcome of the application:

- Student Finance NI applicants must either show either their:
  - Student Finance NI entitlement letters/email (ALL of them) or their:
  - Student Finance NI refusal Letter/email
- Further Education Grant applicants must either show their:
  - FE Grant Award Notification Letter/email or their:
  - FE Grant refusal letter/email

If you indicate that you have not applied or received funding from any other sources, you must state why this is the case specifically the fund and what criteria you do not meet.

Support Category
You must indicate what category of assistance you wish to be assessed for. You may be required to upload evidence, depending on the category you pick. Student can be assessed for the following categories:

- Course Fees – Can include Tuition, Registration and examination fees
- Additional Living costs (Full time students only) – Costs associated with Learning

- Travel costs (must live 3 miles or more from campus) – Public transport costs or 25.7p per mile for private car ***evidence required***
- Book and equipment costs (refund of costs incurred) – Must be essential/required for the for example Uniform or Chef knives/Beauty Kit etc. ***evidence required***
- Help with Childcare Costs – Must be registered Childcare (you will be required to complete a Childcare sub form.

Travel Cost evidence:

- Public Transport – Evidence is required in order to calculate an accurate award. Evidence must be clear and show both travel route and cost of travel for example a Bus or Train Ticket (bank transactions cannot be accepted)
- Private Car – Evidence of fuel use will be required. The amount does not matter, as if successful you will receive 25.7p per mile from term time home to College campus for class for example a petrol or diesel receipt (Parking is not available through this fund, parking receipts will not be accepted a proof of Fuel costs)

Books and Equipment evidence

- Only receipts for essential/required items will be assessed under this category. Order forms will not be accepted must be proof of purchase, if online order must be in the applicant's name.

Previous study

Support is only available to Students whose course is part of their educational progression. You must include all qualifications you have studied regardless of grade or level of the course. If within the last ten years you have studied at the same level or higher than the course you are currently studying, you are advised to explain your circumstances and provide relevant evidence where appropriate.

Please note: "The Fund is not available to you if you are repeating courses/modules." Department for Economy Circular 2025/26

Financial details – Student Status

There are two categories of student for means testing either Independent student or Dependent student status. **Please Note: All Part-time students fall into the Independent category**

1. Independent

Where students claim to be independent they must meet **one** of the following conditions:-

Independence Condition	**Evidence Required**
Aged 25 or over before the start of the academic year	Long birth certificate, Passport or ID Card (previously submitted Residency section)
Have care of a child	Long birth certificate for a child you have care of
Studying a Part Time course	N/A
Married or entered into a civil partnership, evidence of which should be provided before the start of the academic year	Marriage certificate or Civil Partnership documentation

Have no living parents	Death certificates
Permanent estrangement from biological, adoptive or only living parent – no contact with parents (usually at least 12 months)	letter or statement of evidence from an Independent standing member of the community clearly showing your estrangement. If you This person should normally have known about your situation for a substantial amount of time, and can verify that you don't have any contact with your biological, adoptive or only living parent. This person must not be related to you or be a close friend of the family. (Examples of standing member of the community include: teachers, doctors, counsellors. nurses, lawyer/solicitors, police Officers, family mediation workers, social workers, notary public or minister of religion)
Supported themselves for a minimum of three years outside of full time education before the start of their course i.e. in full or part time employment and/or on benefits for the previous 3 years	We strongly advise obtaining an employment history from HMRC

Independent students are means tested using their own income and that of their spouse/partner if applicable.

2. Dependent

If you do not fall into any of the above, then you are classed as a dependent student and will be means tested on your Household Income

Household Income – generally means the income of the following people:

- Parent(s)
- Step-parent(s)
- Guardian(s)
- Mother's partner or fathers partner

Financial Details – Income Details

After defining which financial student status you fall under you will be required to provide details of Household Income:

- If you are independent, you will answer questions regarding your own and that of your partner/spouse income (if applicable)
- If you are dependent, you will answer questions regarding your parental/guardian income.

Please note: please check with your parents that the information you provide about them is accurate

Below is a table of what Income details we require and what evidence is acceptable. Failure to supply the correct evidence may result in a void application

Income Type	**Evidence required**
Employment	Last 3 payslips

Self-employment	Last available accounts as presented to HMRC
Universal Credit	Latest Universal Credit Full Statement (must show all entitlements and deductions)
Tax Credits	Latest TC602 or Annual review (Full Document) Must clearly show 25/26 payments
Jobseekers Allowance	letter from the DHSS dated within the last 3 months showing entitlement benefit or a bank statement dated within the last three months showing at least two payments for benefit received
Income Support	letter from the DHSS dated within the last 3 months showing entitlement benefit or a bank statement dated within the last three months showing at least two payments for benefit received
Employment Support Allowance	letter from the DHSS dated within the last 3 months showing entitlement benefit or a bank statement dated within the last three months showing at least two payments for benefit received
Carer Allowance	letter from the DHSS dated within the last 3 months showing entitlement benefit or a bank statement dated within the last three months showing at least two payments for benefit received
Housing Benefit	letter from the Housing Executive dated within the last 3 months showing entitlement benefit or a bank statement dated within the last three months showing at least two payments for benefit received
State Pension	letter from the DHSS dated within the last 3 months showing entitlement benefit or a bank statement dated within the last three months showing at least two payments for benefit received
Widows Pension	letter from the DHSS dated within the last 3 months showing entitlement benefit or a bank statement dated within the last three months showing at least two payments for benefit received
Private Pension	Last three Pension payslips or P60

Educational Grants	Award Notification from Awarding body
Any income not listed (PIPS or DLA not counted as Income)	Evidence must be direct from the Income source on official letter head.

Marital status
You must provide proof of separation or divorce in respect of your parents if you are a dependent student or proof of your own separation or divorce if you are an independent student.
Examples: Decree Absolute, Death Certificate, Letter from standing member in community etc.
Failure to supply the correct evidence may result in a void application

Student statement
This section should be used if you wish to provide any additional information relevant to your application or if you need to explain something within your application, for example progression issues.

You will be asked if you would like to submit evidence to support your statement. For example, medical evidence for non-progression etc.

Student declaration
You should read the terms and conditions set out in this document before completing your application as you will be required to sign a declaration. By submitting an application form you are confirming that have read and accepted the terms and conditions set out in this document.

Process and assessment of Application

Assessment of Learner Support Fund application forms

The Learner Support Fund Panel will assess your application form using the criteria and means test requirements set out by Department for Economy. The College also has the right to use discretion and where used, is applied equally to all students.

How you will be notified

You will be notified of the Panel's decision to your **College email account**. Your email will detail the outcome of your application; if successful it will state the amount of your award and the conditions you need to meet in order to ensure you receive continued support within your full entitlement. If unsuccessful your email will outline the reason for this decision and you will be informed of the Appeal process.

Appeal process

You will be informed in writing of the outcome of your application. You have the right to appeal within 14 days of the date of your notification email (this time frame may be reduced towards the end of the financial year) using the Learner Support Fund Appeal sub form that will be sent to you by email. If you fail to appeal within the time frame, your application is considered closed and you will need to make a fresh application before the final closing date. ***Please note: the decision of the Appeal Panel is final.***

Payment of Learner Support Awards

Payments will be made in instalments and the number of instalments will be determined both by the amount awarded, and the date by which you applied. The maximum number of instalments will be 3: i.e. one per term. Payments will be made as promptly as possible once the compulsory checks have been completed to ensure you have met the conditions of the Learner Support Fund.

Monitoring Attendance

To be eligible for the full financial assistance from the Learner Support Fund you must have achieved a minimum of **80%** attendance. If your attendance is less than 80% the level of financial assistance will be determined by the % of attendance. Where attendance is between 60-80%, the Student Funding Officers can apply discretion if there are extenuating circumstances with robust evidence in support of this. If your attendance falls below 60% the case will be referred to the Learner Support Fund panel for the consideration, and you may lose your financial assistance.
The Student Funding Officers will use e-registers through EBS to obtain your attendance percentage internally.

Please note: If your attendance percentage is affected by remote learning, approval must be given by your coordinator to overturn your attendance percentage recorded on your register. It is your responsibility to request this from your coordinator. Approval must be received direct from your coordinator to studentfunding@belfastmet.ac.uk

Monitoring of Progress

We may request internal progress reports through your school administration team and coordinators. Your Coordinators must be satisfied with your progress to date. If they are not your application will be put on hold and your payments stopped.

Payment for Childcare

If you have applied for Childcare assistance and are successful, the Learner Support Fund will pay your entitlement in arrears, on a monthly basis. For example, if your childcare provider submits an invoice for October it will be processed and paid mid-November to enable attendance and other essential administrative checks to be completed and so ensure that you are meeting attendance conditions.

The College will not enter into a contract with your Childcare provider and will take no responsibility for any outstanding childcare costs you may incur due to low attendance or additional charges for late fees.

Terms and conditions

Please note the following conditions:

1. If applying, you must submit your application with all the relevant documentation via the Learner Support Fund online application form. You can request a receipt of application on the last page of the application before hitting the submit button.

2. If you submit an application with insufficient documentation your form will not be accepted and you may need to resubmit an application with the relevant documentation. To avoid this you **must read the guidance notes** and ensure that all documentation is included with your application.

3. It is College policy to inform the Police in all cases where there is prima facie evidence of an attempt to defraud the College, or any other organization from whom funding is obtained. This applies both in cases where false information is provided and where the relevant information is not disclosed. It should be noted that information will be shared with other relevant bodies to establish whether a prima facie case exists.

4. You must notify the Student Funding Office **immediately** if you withdraw from your course. **Any support already received will have to be paid back and the College will take the necessary steps to recoup this.**

5. In the case of over payments, the College will inform you that an over payment has been made and ask for this to be paid back to the College as soon as possible. You are required to sign a declaration on your Learner Support fund application form to agree to this condition.

6. All payments are discretionary and dependent on the availability of funds.

7. Student Funding Staff are here to help and support you through the application process. They will explain and/or provide information about funding options in a clear and consistent manner in line with the Department for Economy requirements. Aggressive or threatening behaviour towards the Student Funding staff will not be tolerated and may result in College student disciplinary process being invoked and possible termination of your application for financial support.

Please Note: Awards from Learner Support Fund cannot be backdated before the start of the term in which the application is made.

Please note: The terms and conditions stated in this document are correct and up to date as of 01st September 2025 but may be subject to further changes at any point throughout the academic year. Please check with the Student Funding Office for the most up to date version.

General Data Protection Regulation

What data we need to collect and why?

Student Details:	**Reason for Collection**
Person Code	Needed to track student through internal systems
Name	Part of Identity Check
Address	Students informed of application outcome by Post
DOB	Part of Identity Check
Course Details	Application assessment dependent on which course studied
Residency details	Application assessment dependent on your residency status
Bank Details	Fund is paid straight to bank
Other Funding Received	Application Fund assessment dependent on other funding received
Income Details	Fund is means tested
Previous Educational History	Application dependent on students' academic progression

Sponsor (Parent/Guardian/Partner)	**Reason for Collection**
Income details	Fund is means tested

What documents we need and why?

Student Documentation Needed	**Reason for Collection**
Student ID	Needed proof of enrolment
Photographic ID	Needed to complete Identity check
Proof of Residency	Fund is dependent on Residency status
Proof of Address	Proof is required of postal address
Proof of Bank details	Fund is paid straight to bank
Proof of Other funding received	Award is dependent on what other funding is available
Proof of Travel costs	Needed to enable calculation of travel awards
Proof of Book and equipment costs	Needed to enable calculation of equipment awards
Proof of Gross Income (if independent)	Fund is means tested needed to calculate entitlement

Sponsor (Parent/Guardian/Partner)	**Reason for Collection**
Income Details	Fund is means tested needed to calculate entitlement

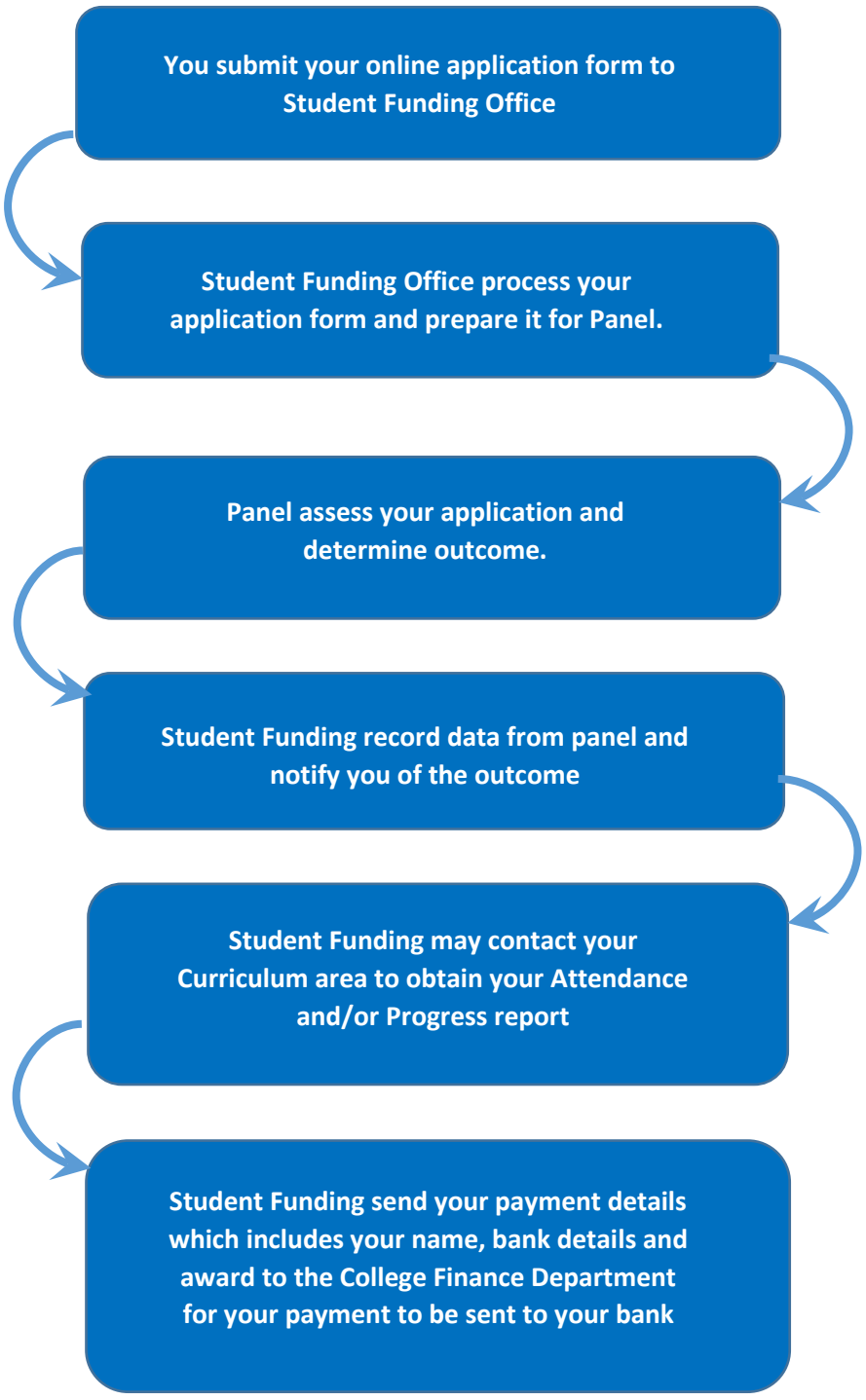
<u>Who will see the information provided?</u>

Data and documentation provided in a Learner Support Fund application form is handled by a limited group of people within the College.

Who will see your data	**What data will they see**	**Why they will see your data**
Student Funding (All Staff) (Panel Members)	All data provided in application	Submission and Assessment of application
Student Support Manager (Panel Member)	All data provided in application	Assessment of application
Curriculum Area	Name, course, Student ID, ATT%	To obtain your attendance and progress
Finance Department	Name, Bank details, Student ID,	To process the payment of your

	Award	Award

Data Flow Chart



Information Storage

All information submitted will remain on College servers for seven years as required by the Department for the Economy. After the seven year period passes your application and supporting evidence will be deleted.

Closing dates for application

The Learner Support Fund Panel will meet on a Fortnightly basis to assess applications. You will be informed of the outcome of your application in writing within 6 weeks (excluding term breaks) from your application submission date. The closing dates for each Term are as follows:

Learner Support Fund opens for submission of Applications on October 2025		
TERM	**CLOSING DATE**	** **PROVISIONAL STUDENT NOTIFICATION**
Term 1	**19/12/2025**	**6 weeks from your application submission date** (excluding term breaks)
Learner Support Fund Reopens for submission of new Applications on 05th January 2026		
Term 2	**27/03/2026**	**6 weeks from your application submission date** (excluding term breaks)
Learner Support Fund Reopens for submission of new Applications on 13th April 2026		
Term 3	**15/05/2026**	**6 weeks from your application submission date** (excluding term breaks)

***The Student Funding Office reserves the right to make changes to this schedule as determined by staff resource and Learner Support Fund budget, notification dates are merely provisional. If applications are processed sooner students will be notified of decision earlier than estimated, equally however, due to resource/staff commitments notification could take longer than estimated above.*

The final closing for applications will be 15/05/2026 unless the budget has been exhausted earlier in the year. Application forms, appeals, changes in circumstances, submission of late attendance

certificates or reassessments cannot be considered under any circumstance after the final closing date for Learner Support Fund Applications.

***If funds deplete due to demand prior to 15/05/2026 and no further funds are secured the Learner Support fund panel will be unable to assist those in financial difficulty.*