

Student Assistance Fund Guidelines for Higher Education Institutions

2023/24



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

HEA

HIGHER EDUCATION AUTHORITY
AN tÚDARÁS um ARD-OIDEACHAS

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1. Purpose of the Student Assistance Fund

The Student Assistance Fund (SAF) is managed by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) on behalf of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS). The SAF is allocated to higher education institutions (HEIs).

In general, the SAF has a dual focus and is designed to support students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds with ongoing needs for financial support **AND** provide emergency financial assistance for other students.

In all cases, HEIs are responsible for targeting the available resources at those students most in need. It is important that students are given timely access to information on the SAF and how to apply. HEIs are required to make decisions regarding the allocation of SAF students having regard to the guidelines and criteria set out in this document.

Since 2017, an additional €1 million per year has been allocated to the SAF with HEIs asked to prioritise and ring-fence this element of funding for the support of part-time students who are lone parents or members of the other access target groups identified in the *National Access Plan: A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022-2028*. **From 2022/23 onwards, HEIs are permitted to transfer unallocated funding from this ring-fenced element into the general allocation without making a formal request to the HEA once:**

- **A HEI is satisfied that there is no outstanding need for SAF from the part-time/lone parent cohort.**
- **A HEI reports on the amount transferred (if applicable) in the annual reporting template.**

2. Criteria for the Student Assistance Fund

2.1. Student eligibility

- Applications for the SAF can be made by students registered on higher education courses of not less than one year in duration.
- Students on courses that lead to a higher education award from level 6-10 of the [National Framework of Qualifications](#) are eligible to apply for the SAF. PhD students are eligible to apply for the SAF during the first four years of their studies. PhD students who have completed four years of their studies may also be considered eligible for support on a case-by-case basis.
- Students on courses that do not lead to a higher education award are not eligible to apply for the SAF.
- Students with a previous higher education qualification at the same NFQ level, or who, in the past, attended higher education without ultimately obtaining a qualification, may be considered for support on a case-by-case basis and subject to available funding.



- Students on [Springboard+/Human Capital Initiative](#) courses, or who are on blended/distance learning courses, are eligible to apply for support through the SAF subject to meeting the criteria outlined above.
- International/non-EU fee paying students are not eligible for funding.
- Students who are non-EU, including UK nationals, but who are eligible for free or reduced fees in line with the criteria for the [Free Fees Initiative](#), may be considered for the SAF subject to meeting other relevant criteria.
- Any student can receive funding from the SAF if their application is successful and they meet the relevant eligibility criteria i.e., a student does not have to be in receipt of a SUSI grant to be eligible to receive funding from SAF.
- A list of higher education institutions currently funded under the SAF is provided in Appendix 2.

2.2. Eligible costs

The SAF is available to assist students who are unable to meet costs associated with day-to-day participation in higher education **throughout the duration of the academic year:**

- books and other class material that are required to enable students to continue and participate in teaching and learning and/or complete examinations
- rent, heating and lighting bills and other utility bills e.g., mobile phone data plans, that are required to enable students to continue and participate in teaching and learning and/or complete examinations
- food
- essential travel
- childcare costs
- medical costs
- family difficulties e.g., bereavement

The above list is not exhaustive. However, it is important that the nature of the expenditure for which assistance is being provided is clearly identified.

HEIs should implement standard award amounts under each category of expenditure listed above to reflect the nature of the student's circumstances and thereby ensure equity in awards.

2.3. Ineligible costs

Funding is not available to assist students with the costs of tuition fees, registration fees, student loans or any costs that are borne by the HEI.

Payments under the SAF should be made directly to students. HEIs are not permitted to use SAF funding for bulk purchase of items or services for students e.g., books, data packages, etc.



3. Best practice guidelines

3.1. The SAF should be publicised widely

The HEA has developed student-friendly guidelines and an information poster, available at <https://hea.ie/funding-governance-performance/funding/student-finance/student-assistance-fund/> to support promotion of the SAF. These resources should be used by HEIs to communicate the SAF to full- and part-time students through all available opportunities, including the HEI's website and email networks, student handbooks, students' union and class representative networks, open days, career exhibitions, orientation, mentoring programmes and college newsletters.

The wider institutional community should also be aware of the SAF so that students in need can be directed to it from a range of sources including student services personnel, chaplaincy, the students' union, the access office, lifelong learning departments and Springboard+/HCI course co-ordinators.

3.2. Clear information and support should be provided for students

Clear information and support should be provided for students relating to the application and assessment process. If the application process is simple and clear, students will have fewer difficulties in applying. Having good information and support systems also helps, including clear guidelines for students explaining the application process and a designated member of staff to advise individual students on how to apply.

Students in need might be identified by information gathered at registration, however it is important that individual students initiate any contact with the SAF, rather than being contacted by staff of the HEI. The SAF should be administered on a strictly confidential basis and appropriate and current data protection procedures, including those in line with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act (2018), should be in place at all stages of the process.

3.3. The dual focus of the SAF should be maintained

In general, the dual focus of the SAF is to support students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds **AND** provide emergency financial assistance for other students.

For maximum flexibility and responsiveness to individual needs, it is recommended that HEIs adopt a combination of a targeted and an open access approach.

Students may also be referred to the [Money Advice and Budgeting Service](#) for advice on budgetary management.



3.4. The application process should be simple, consistent and transparent

(i) Application form

The purpose of the application form is to establish evidence of the student's need for financial assistance in line with the criteria for the SAF (i.e., that their income from other sources does not meet their costs under given headings).

The form should gather only essential information. Applicants should know in advance the kinds of documents that are required to support their application (e.g., bills, receipts, bank statements).

HEIs are no longer required to gather receipts as evidence of expenditure. Receipts are only required if they form part of a HEI's approach to assessing eligibility for support through the SAF.

There is no need for the application process to duplicate other means testing systems (e.g., medical card, SUSI grant, [Higher Education Access Route](#)).

Application forms should be designed to protect the student's identity by using only an identification number or code during the evaluation process. All information provided by applicants must be held in compliance with data protection legislation.

Students must be asked to sign a declaration on completion of a SAF application which includes the wording *"that all the information provided is true, complete and accurate and that assistance from other sources has not been received for the stated purpose/service which is the subject of this application"*.

Applicants should also be informed of the data protection implications of providing their personal data. They should be informed that:

- *personal data collected as part of the application process may be processed for the purposes of coordinating, monitoring and evaluating the operation of the SAF;*
- *this personal data may include special category data, including sensitive data such as socio-economic status, where they choose to share that data; and*
- *their data may be shared with third parties such as the HEA for the purposes of allocating funding and for monitoring.*

Where a HEI collects personal data from a student, the HEI should provide the student with all of the information as stipulated in article 13 of the GDPR. Please liaise with your institution's Data Protection Officer for further information and guidance.



(ii) Interviews

Students should be interviewed only where it is necessary to obtain additional information. Interviews should be one-to-one, with trained interviewers, and held in a dignified and private setting.

The same interview format and similar questions, where relevant, should be used for all applicants so that it is possible to make objective comparisons.

Interviewers should avoid making assumptions about applicants and use the application form and interview as the basis of a fair and independent decision.

Interviewers should make a recommendation to the advisory group (see section 3.6), with a system of appeal and review by another member of the group if required.

3.5. Training and development for staff

Training and development should be provided by HEIs for staff who are involved in administering the SAF and in assessing applications. This should include training in current data protection requirements.

Those who are involved in interviewing students should receive specific training for this role. A procedures manual should be developed, and this should be reviewed each year. The criteria for awarding funding should be reviewed regularly to ensure that the SAF continues to meet its objectives.

3.6. An institutional advisory group should be established

Final decisions on the award of funding should not be taken by one individual. A small group should be appointed by the HEI's management, the membership of which may include the registrar, access officer, student welfare officer, student union representative, head of student services, head of lifelong/flexible learning or finance officer.

For reasons of confidentiality and consistency, it is best to keep the group small. This group will play an important role in ensuring that the system of assessing applications and making payments is fair and consistent.

The criteria that are used to assess applications for assistance through the SAF should be explicit to applicants and assessors and be applied fairly and flexibly.

3.7. An appeals process should be available to students

An appeals procedure should be available so that students can have their application re-considered if they are not satisfied with the outcome.



Applicants should be notified in advance that there is an appeals procedure and be given details of how it operates. As part of this process a student can revise an application or submit new information.

The appeal should be examined by different persons from the first application, to ensure independence and objectivity. An appellant may be interviewed to verify details of the appeal.

3.8. Awarding funding

SAF administrators should satisfy themselves that a student in receipt of assistance from the SAF is attending their course on a regular basis. SAF administrators should also satisfy themselves that students are not receiving financial or other supports from other sources to cover the costs for which they are applying for SAF.

When receiving awards, students must sign a form of undertaking that “(a) they have received the amount stated and (b) that it will be used for the purpose intended”. If receipt of award is via electronic transfer, the declaration under (b) should be addressed in the application form.

Students who abuse the SAF by giving false information or omitting to advise of changes in circumstances should be disqualified from receiving further support from the SAF. The HEI should try to recoup the payment made in such cases.

4. Financial and data requirements

4.1. Financial period for the Student Assistance Fund

The financial year for the 2023/24 SAF is 1 October 2023 – 30 September 2024. Payment of the 2023/24 allocation will take place during this period with the first payment expected to be made in September.

The HEA is required to take account of any portion of unallocated SAF funding in a HEI on 30 September each year in the transfer of funding to that HEI for the following year.

4.2. Supplementary institutional funding

Each HEI is requested to supplement their SAF allocation from their own resources (e.g., non-EU fee income) or from private sources. Student welfare initiatives are appropriate areas for support by the corporate sector and alumni.



4.3. Emergency funding

The dual focus of the SAF is to support students from under-represented groups **AND** provide emergency financial assistance for other students. Where possible, it is recommended that a small percentage of the SAF and/or other funds be made available to support financial emergencies that may arise for students at any stage in the academic year. For example, HEIs are advised to ring-fence a small fund from non-EU fee income to provide for any emergency financial requirements for students in need.

4.4. Administration and payment of the Student Assistance Fund

A separate bank account should be maintained to administer monies received from the HEA for the SAF. Payment of SAF awards to students should be made by electronic transfer where possible and cash should only be used as a last resort. Payment can also include transfer of funds to applicants' approved campus smart cards, where such a card scheme exists.

4.5. Financial reporting requirements

Record-keeping and financial reporting are necessary to establish the ongoing position of HEIs regarding allocation of the SAF locally, and to advise national policy.

Data is also required on the types of cost items (e.g., rent, childcare) for which funding is allocated to students. To support these objectives, HEIs are required to submit an end of year activity report, a sample of which is provided in Appendix 1. This template may be subject to amendments throughout the year by the HEA. The finalised end of year activity reporting template will be issued to HEIs at the end of the academic year.

As recommended by the [Review of the Student Assistance Fund](#), the end of year activity report will also gather data on unsuccessful applicants for funding to assess the level of demand for the SAF.

HEIs will be asked to report on the number of students supported and the amount of SAF that is provided under each of the relevant categories (general SAF allocation and part-time allocation for students who are lone parents or members of other target groups), on an annual basis.



4.6. Document retention

Source documentation from must be retained in line with standard record retention requirements in the event of an inspection or audit by the following:

- Higher Education Authority or its nominated agents;
- Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science;
- Comptroller and Auditor General.

The HEA will provide ongoing advice and support to HEIs on the SAF. Queries can be directed to saf@hea.ie or access@hea.ie.



Appendix 1

Sample End of Year Activity Report: Part A 1 October 2023 – 30 September 2024

A1: SUMMARY OF BENEFICIARIES

HEI name	General SAF allocation									Part-time allocation for students who are lone parents or members of other target groups				SAF overall (General SAF + Part-time lone parents and other target groups)														
	Full Time				Part Time				Total	Part Time				Total	Full Time				Part Time				Total					
	Female	Male	Gender non-binary	Prefer not to say	Female	Male	Gender non-binary	Prefer not to say		Female	Male	Gender non-binary	Prefer not to say		Female	Male	Gender non-binary	Prefer not to say	Female	Male	Gender non-binary	Prefer not to say						
Number of applicants									0					0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Number of eligible applicants									0					0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Number of recipients <i>(please ensure that students are only counted once)</i>									0					0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Out of the recipients listed in the row above (row 6), how many were lone parents?	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A						0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A



A2: EXAMPLE OF SUMMARY OF EXPENDITURE

	HEI name	General allocation	Part-time students who are lone parents or members of the other access target groups	Total (General SAF + Part-time lone parents and other target groups)
A	2022/23 SAF Allocations (as per HEA's allocation letter)			
B	2021/22 SAF carryover balance as at 1 October 2021			
C	SAF Payments provided by the HEA towards 2022/23 SAF allocation (B-A)			
D	Total SAF expenditure for 2022/23 (funded from the allocation as communicated in your SAF allocation letter)			
E	Unspent balance from 2022/23 to carry forward as at 30 September 2022 (B-D)*			
If a carryover balance is reported, please outline the reasons why the funds were not fully spent:				



A3: EXPENDITURE RETURN

HEI name	General allocation		Part-time students who are lone parents or members of the other access target groups	
	Expenditure	Number of recipients*	Expenditure	Number of recipients*
Books and class materials				
Transport				
Rent				
Childcare costs				
Heating / lighting / food and other utility bills				
Medical				
Supporting student participation in online learning (e.g. accessing broadband etc.)				
Supporting students to meet other costs associated with the impact of COVID-19				
Other (specify details below)				
Total	10.00	0	10.00	0
* If the total number of recipients listed here does not equal the total number of recipients listed in part one of this activity form, please outline the reason(s) why (e.g. did a number of students receive funding under two different expenditure headings?):				



Sample End of Year Activity Report: Part B
1 October 2023 – 30 September 2024

Higher education institution	
Address	
Name	
Position	
Phone	
Email	

The undersigned, being the operational agency official responsible for the preparation of this return, hereby certifies:

- a) that the figures contained in this return are accurate and complete;
- b) that the costs covered by this claim have already been incurred and amounts given in this return have been expended; and
- c) that in respect of an underspend, the HEI is satisfied that everything reasonable was done to advertise and promote the SAF (as outlined in section 3.1).

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Institutional stamp:

Appendix 2

List of institutions covered by the Student Assistance Fund (SAF)

Universities

Atlantic Technological University
 Dublin City University
 Maynooth University
 Munster Technological University
 Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, University of Medicine and Health Sciences
 Technological University Dublin
 Technological University of the Shannon
 Trinity College Dublin
 University College Cork
 University College Dublin
 University of Galway
 University of Limerick
 South East Technological University

Institutes of Technology

Dundalk Institute of Technology
 Institute of Art, Design and Technology Dún Laoghaire

Other Colleges

Marino Institute of Education
 National College of Art & Design
 National College of Ireland
 Mary Immaculate College
 St Angela's College
 St. Patrick's College Pontifical University of Maynooth

