Higher Education Authority

Student Assistance Fund: Guidelines for 2016-17

1 Introduction

The Student Assistance Fund (SAF) is managed by the Higher Education Authority on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills. The Fund is allocated annually to the universities, the institutes of technology, the colleges of education and a number of other higher education institutions.

Along with the Fund for Students with Disabilities, the Student Assistance Fund is an objective of the Third Level Access measure which is co-funded by the ESF Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning (PEIL) 2014-2020.

2 Objective and scope of the Fund

The objective of the Fund is to provide financial assistance to full-time undergraduate or postgraduate students in need of such support. The Fund is intended to support students whose participation in higher education would otherwise be at risk as a direct result of financial difficulties.

The Fund is designed to support students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds with ongoing needs for financial support and students with other circumstances giving rise to short or longer-term financial difficulties, including family responsibilities, bereavement, family difficulties, accidents or health problems. In all cases, institutions are responsible for targeting the available resources at those students most in need.

Unemployment has created difficulties for families to contribute financially to the day-to-day costs of attending college, and opportunities for part-time work have diminished as a result of the recession. In addition, some significant changes to the student grant eligibility criteria have taken effect since 2011-12, resulting in a number of grant-holders receiving lower rates of grant than would have been the case in previous years. Given that there will be cases where particular additional needs arise as a result of these changes, it is important that students are given timely access to information on the fund and how to apply.

3 Who is eligible to apply to the Fund

Application to the fund is open to full-time registered students on courses of not less than one year’s duration leading to an undergraduate or postgraduate qualification.
The Fund is not open to students on part-time courses. Students on full-time courses that do not lead to an undergraduate qualification, such as foundation or access courses, are also not eligible to apply.

4 Costs for which assistance is available
The SAF is available to assist students who are unable to meet costs associated with day-to-day participation in higher education, including

- Books
- Class materials
- Rent
- Heating and lighting bills
- Food
- Essential travel
- In the case of parent students, childcare costs
- Medical costs

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

It is recommended that each participating institution implement standard awards for the various categories of expenditure for which assistance is sought to ensure equity in awards.

5 Costs for which assistance is not available
Funding is not available to students to assist with meeting the following types of costs:

- Tuition fees
- Registration fees
- Servicing student loans.

The Fund is not available to meet any costs borne by the institution.

6 Financial period for Fund
The financial year for the 2016-17 Fund is 1 October 2016 - 30 September 2017. Disbursement of the 2016-17 allocation can take place during this period. Any portion of the fund unallocated as at 30 September 2017 will be used to part-fund the gross allocation due to the institution for the following financial year.
7 Supplementary institutional funding
Each institution is requested to supplement their SAF allocation from their own resources (e.g. Non-EU fee income) or from private sources. In particular, the HEA requests that institutions with significant numbers of international students ring-fence a small fund from Non-EU fee income to provide for any emergency financial requirements arising for international students. More broadly, student welfare initiatives are very appropriate areas for funding contributions from the corporate sector and alumni.

8 Local administration of the Fund
Institutions should ensure that the following requirements are met in administering the Fund:

(i) Confidentiality
The SAF should at all times be administered on a strictly confidential basis.

(ii) Group decisions on awards
Final decisions on assistance awards under this Fund should be taken by a small group appointed by the institution’s management. Final decisions should not be made by one individual only. It is suggested that the Access Officer (or the equivalent member of staff) should be a member of the committee. It is also suggested that a representative from the Student’s Union be a member.

(iii) Verification of normal attendance
Fund administrators should satisfy themselves that a student in receipt of assistance from the Fund is attending their course on a regular basis.

(iv) Disqualification where Fund has been abused
Students who are found to abuse the scheme by giving false information or omitting to advise of changes of circumstances should be disqualified from all further support from the Fund. The institution should endeavour to recoup the payment made in such cases.

(v) Application declaration
Students should be asked to sign a declaration on completion of the 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.”

(vi) Declaration when receiving award(s)
When receiving awards, students should 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 on (b) should be addressed in the application form.

**Process Review and Improvement**
Institutions are encouraged to review the administration of the fund at local level on an annual basis and engage in a process of continual quality improvement. Areas for review could include:

- promotion of the fund
- targeting of high-priority groups
- the application form and applicant guidelines
- the application and decision process
- appeals process (if any)
- collection of data
- verification of expenditure (receipts)
- record-keeping and financial reporting

**Good Practice Guidelines**
To assist institutions in managing the fund, the HEA provides a set of good practice guidelines with this document. The good practice guidelines were prepared following a review of practice in participating institutions which included a survey capturing details of existing approaches and inviting input on how the Fund could be improved. The good practice guidelines are contained in Appendix 1 below.

**9 Payment of SAF awards**
Payment of SAF awards can include transfer of funds to approved applicants’ campus smart cards, where such a card scheme exists in the college.

**10 Financial reporting and control requirements**
Record-keeping and financial reporting for the SAF serve a number of distinct requirements. They are:

a) To establish the ongoing position of institutions regarding the allocation of the fund locally (i.e. cheques issued to approved students) at a relevant point in time but in particular at the end of the financial period. The HEA is required to take account of any portion of the SAF tranche which is unallocated in an institution as at the 30 September each year in the transfer of funding to that institution for the following year.
b) To gather data on the types of cost items (e.g. rent, childcare) for which funding is allocated to students in need.

Institutions are required to complete and submit:

- Quarterly Returns
- End-of-Year Form A

The Quarterly Returns and end-of-year Form A issued by the HEA are designed to address a) and b) above.

2. A separate bank account should be maintained/set up for the purpose of administering monies received from the HEA for the Fund.

11 ESF co-financing: what this means for participating institutions

11.1 ESF Third Level Access claims process

The Student Assistance Fund is part of the Third Level Access measure, funded by the Irish Government and part-funded by the ESF Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning (PEIL) 2014-2020. Following each calendar year, a process takes place by which a claim is made to the European Social Fund for the European funding contribution.

Separate guidelines for the completion of ESF returns for 2016 will be issued as soon as these are available from the Irish ESF authorities.

11.2 ESF publicity requirements

The Department of Education and Skills, and bodies who implement programmes, are obliged to ensure that recognition of assistance from the ESF is provided.

Non-compliance with these requirements can lead to the imposition by the European Commission of a fine on the Department.


11.3 ESF Data Reporting requirements

As part of the conditions of co-financing under the ESF PEIL programme, institutions are obliged to report data on all participants. Please note that data will be reported by the HEA to the Department of Education & Skills at aggregate level (Regional NUTS...
II or III and National). Please see Appendix II for more information on the data required.

12 Contact details for queries and assistance

The HEA is available to provide advice and support to institutions on the operation of the Student Assistance Fund. Queries can be directed to the following members of staff:

Ms Sheena Duffy
Assistant Principal Officer
Tel: 01 2317114
Email: sheena@hea.ie

Modesta Mawarire
Executive Officer
Tel: 01-231732
Email: mmawarire@hea.ie
Appendix 1

Good Practice Administrative Guidelines

1. Guidelines on PUBLICITY and TARGETING

a) Publicise the Student Assistance Fund widely among students in your college, using all available media and communication channels.
Examples of practice: communicate information about the fund through
- College prospectus
- College website
- Student handbook or other published material
- Student welfare services
- Access office
- Students’ union
- Email/text message notification to all students
- Notice boards and posters in highly visible locations
- Class representatives
- Personal tutors
- Mentors (academic and peer)
- Induction programme and materials
- Orientation day
- Student services newsletter
- College radio/podcasts
- Admissions office
- Advertising in crèche
- Email to heads of departments

b) Publicise the Student Assistance Fund among prospective students at the pre-entry stage, using all available media and communication channels.
Examples of practice: communicate information about the fund through
- Open days/information evenings
- School visits
- Career exhibitions
- Access programme activities
- Community-based partnerships
- Prospectus and web site: link to DES/HEA guidelines for the fund
- Information for second level guidance counsellors
- Information for parents of prospective students

c) Maintain the dual focus of the Student Assistance Fund: to support students from under-represented groups AND to provide emergency financial assistance for other students.
For maximum flexibility and responsiveness to individual needs, it is recommended that institutions adopt a combination of a targeted and an open access approach.

Students in need might be identified by information gathered at registration, but it is important that students initiate any contact with the fund, rather than being contacted by staff. Not all students in need wish to avail of it.

Make the entire institutional community aware of the fund, so that students can be directed to it from a variety of sources.

Promote close liaison between student services personnel, Chaplain, students’ union and access officer and make sure that relevant personnel are alerted to the signs of need in students.

2. Guidelines on the APPLICATION PROCESS

a) Try to keep the application process as simple as possible, while aiming for maximum consistency and transparency.

The application form

- The purpose of the form is to establish evidence of the student’s need for financial assistance according to the criteria for the fund (i.e. that their income from other sources does not meet their costs under given headings).
- Tell applicants in advance the kinds of documentation that are required to support their application: e.g. bills, receipts, bank statements.
- Design the form to gather only essential information: 1-2 pages recommended.
- Data collected for analysis purposes should not identify individuals.
- Forms can be designed to protect the students’ identity by using only a number or code during the process of evaluating applications.

Meeting/Interview

- Interview students only where it is necessary to obtain additional information.
- Arrange one-to-one interviews, with trained interviewers nominated by an advisory group. This person makes a recommendation to the advisory group, with a system of appeal and review by another member of the group if required.
- Provide adequate space and resources in the institution to ensure that one-to-one meetings can be held in a dignified and private setting.
- Use the same interview format and questions for all applicants, so that it is possible to make objective comparisons.
- Avoid making assumptions about applicants and use the application form and interview as the basis of a fair and independent decision.

Evidence of means

- There is no need to duplicate other means testing systems e.g. medical card, local authority grant.
Apply financial criteria fairly, and ensure supporting documentation is provided.

*Proof of income:* own or parents' as appropriate; P60, P21, social welfare records

*Proof of expenditure:* statements, bills/receipts e.g. rent, living expenses, childcare, emergency expenses

b) Provide readily accessible information and support for students on the application and assessment process.

If the application process and forms are simple and clear, students will have fewer difficulties in completing their applications. Having good information and support systems will also help.

Examples of practice: provide assistance to students through
- Information sheets and handouts explaining the process and the application form
- Having information available on the college intranet
- Establishing and publishing clear guidelines with the support of an advisory group in the institution
- Having a liaison person available to advise individual students, for example access officer, welfare officer, student support officer
- Referring students to Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS), who can advise students on budgeting management.

c) Provide a formal appeals process so that students can have their application re-considered if they are not satisfied with the outcome.

Examples of practice
- Notify students in advance that there is an appeals procedure, and give details of how it operates.
- Student can revise application or submit new information.
- The appeal is examined by a different person or group from the first application, to ensure independence and objectivity.
- Student is interviewed if necessary to verify details of the appeal.
3. Guidelines on ASSESSING APPLICATIONS

a) Make explicit the criteria that are used to assess applications for assistance under the fund, and apply these fairly but flexibly.
Aim to achieve balance between
- Setting clear criteria for the award of grants under the fund; make them known to all students; review the criteria regularly, to ensure that the fund meets its objectives
- Remaining flexible in responding to the needs of individual applicants

b) Set up an advisory group including people with relevant expertise and experience to assist in assessing applications.
The advisory group in each college will play an important role in ensuring that the system of assessing applications and making payments under the fund is fair and consistent. Typically, the advisory group will include the following members:
- Access officer
- Student welfare officer
- Student union representative

It might also include some of the following, as appropriate to the institution –
- Head of student affairs/ student services
- Equality officer
- Registrar/assistant registrar
- Secretary / Bursar
- Finance officer/ Financial controller
- Fees and grants officer
- Student services officer
- Student counsellor
- Nurse
- Chaplain
- Disability officer
- Mature student officer
- International student officer
- Senior tutor
- Postgraduate student officer
- Student assistance officer/ fund administrator

However, for reasons of confidentiality and consistency it is best to keep the group small; it is also important to ensure that the involvement of staff and students in the process does not compromise the confidentiality of applicants.

c) Provide appropriate training and development for people who are involved in administering the fund and assessing applications.
- It is important that all members of the advisory group or committee have an understanding of social diversity and the difficulties and challenges that many students face.
• They should also be familiar with the application processes and procedures for awarding grants under the fund.
• Any changes to the guidelines or criteria need to be discussed and agreed by the advisory group.
• People who are involved in interviewing students should receive specific training for this role.
• Have a procedures manual that is reviewed annually.
• Update training each year with all team members involved in the fund.
Appendix 2

SAF RECIPIENT DATA Requirements

As part of the conditions of ESF co-funding, institutions in receipt of TLA funds (both the Fund for Students with Disabilities and the Student Assistance Fund) are required to report data on all funding beneficiaries. To aid in the data collection, a data collection spreadsheet has been provided. The format is similar to that used for the purposes of submitting applications for funding under the Fund for Students with disabilities. It is preferable that the data is provided in this format or a format as close as possible to it. The questions are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Question</strong></th>
<th><strong>Answer</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Academic year</td>
<td>2016/2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Higher Education Institution</td>
<td>Please select your HEI from the dropdown menu (You only need to do this for the first entry).</td>
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<tr>
<td>(3) Student ID</td>
<td>Please type the students ID – this must be done accurately.</td>
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<td>(4) First Name</td>
<td>Please type students first name</td>
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<tr>
<td>(5) Second Name</td>
<td>Please type students second name</td>
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<tr>
<td>(6) Gender</td>
<td>Please select students gender from the drop-down menu</td>
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<tr>
<td>(7) Date of Birth</td>
<td>Please enter the student’s date of birth in the format dd/mm/yyyy. Do not use any other format.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(8) Labour Market Status (leave blank)</td>
<td>The default answer is &quot;Student&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>(9) Educational Attainment</td>
<td>Please select the highest level of educational attainment of the student prior to commencement in their present course of study. The options are: Primary or Lower secondary education only, Upper secondary education (leaving certificate or equivalent), Post-secondary (Further Education Qualification), Third level Education Qualification (level 5 - 8), Postgraduate Qualification</td>
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<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<td>(10) Other minority backgrounds (leave blank if inapplicable)</td>
<td>If the student is a non-national but permanently resident in the state (see residency requirements) or from the travelling community or Roma community, then please tick yes. Tick no or leave blank if not applicable or not disclosed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(11) Household status (leave blank if inapplicable)</td>
<td>The options here are (a) Jobless Household, (b) Jobless household with dependent children, (c) Single adult household with dependent children, (d) Homeless/Affected by housing exclusion. Leave blank if not applicable. Note that this applies to the student's normal residence, not term-time accommodation.</td>
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<td>(12) Rural area</td>
<td>If the student is from a rural area, please answer Yes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(13) Does the student have a disability?</td>
<td>Yes/No</td>
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<tr>
<td>(14) If yes, is the student supported by the FSD in the current academic year</td>
<td>Please tick yes if the student is also a beneficiary of the FSD. Please note that this does not affect the student's eligibility for support under the SAF.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(15) Other EU Funding</td>
<td>Please check if the student is or has been a beneficiary of another EU measure (i.e. not TLA) in the 2016-17 year, etc, tick yes. Leave blank if not. (Please note: this does not affect eligibility under the Fund).</td>
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<tr>
<td>(16) Students area of origin</td>
<td>The options are: EU Member State, Other EEA Country or Swiss Confederation, NonEU/EEA countries</td>
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<tr>
<td>(17) Has the Student been supported under the SAF in the previous academic year</td>
<td>Please answer Yes or No</td>
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1. Appendix 3

European Economic Area (EEA) Countries

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<th>EU Member States</th>
<th>Non-EU Member States</th>
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