

Title: Further Education Learner Support and Hardship Funds Policy 2024/25

Type:	Policy
Purpose:	To inform staff and students of the financial support available to students, including those in exceptional circumstances and the application process.
Scope:	This policy applies to all further education students
Responsibility:	The Vice Principal HR & Student Services is responsible for this policy. The Director Student Services is responsible for the monitoring of the policy.
Legal Context:	Legal 16 to 19 Bursary Fund guide 2024 to 2025 academic year; Adult skills fund: funding rules 2024 to 2025; Equality Act 2010; Free meals in further education funded institutions guide: 2024 to 2025 academic year

Table of Contents

Title: Further Education Learner Support and Hardship Funds Policy 2024/25	1
1. General Policy Statement	3
2. 16 to 19 Bursaries	3
2.1. Eligibility criteria: 16 to 19 bursaries	3
2.2. Household Income	3
2.3. Age	3
2.4. Eligible education provision	4
2.5. Residency	4
2.6. Accompanied asylum seeking children (under 18 with an adult relative or partner)	4
2.7. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children	4
3. Bursaries for defined vulnerable groups (Enhanced / Vulnerable Bursary)	5
3.1. Defining in care and care leavers	6
3.2. Foster care, including privately arranged foster care	6
3.3. Universal Credit	6
3.4. Evidence of eligibility – Vulnerable Bursary	7
3.5. Pro-rata bursaries for vulnerable groups	7
3.6. Students eligible for a vulnerable bursary who don't require bursary funding	8
3.7. Recycling bursaries for vulnerable groups funding	8
4. 16-19 Discretionary Bursaries	8
4.1. Using household income and establishing individual student need	8
4.2. Evidence of eligibility	9
4.3. Awards	9
4.4. What the bursary fund cannot be used for	9

4.5. Rules on unspent bursary funds.....	10
5. Industry Placement Fund	10
6. Free Meals	10
6.1. Eligibility Criteria	11
6.1.1.Age	11
6.1.2.Eligible benefits.....	11
6.2. Verification of student eligibility	11
6.3. Awards.....	12
6.4. Raising awareness of free meals	12
6.5. Unspent free meals funds	12
7. 19+ Discretionary Learner Support.....	12
7.1. Eligibility Criteria	13
7.1.1.Using household income and establishing individual student need	13
7.1.2.Age	13
7.1.3.Eligible education provision.....	13
7.1.4.Residency	13
7.2. Awards.....	13
7.3. Hardship	13
7.4. 20+ childcare	14
7.5. ICT devices and connectivity	14
8. Advanced Learner Loans Bursary	14
8.1. Eligibility.....	15
8.1.1.Using household income and establishing individual student need	15
8.1.2.Age	15
8.1.3.Eligible education provision.....	15
8.2. Awards.....	15
8.3. Hardship	15
8.4. 20+ childcare	15
8.5. ICT devices and connectivity	16
9. Appeals Process – All Funding Streams.....	16
10. Payment Process for the Learner Support Fund	16
11. Monitoring Process for the Learner Support Funds.....	17
11.1. Rejections.....	17
11.2. Attendance checks - all funding streams.....	17
11.3. Withdrawals - all funding streams	17
12. College Hardship Fund.....	17
12.1. What the fund supports	17
12.2. Applications	17

1. General Policy Statement

The Learner Support Funds are designed to provide financial support to help students overcome specific barriers to participation so they can remain in education.

The College will operate four Learner Support funds during the 2024/25 academic year

- The 16 to 19 Bursary Fund
- Free Meals
- The 19+ Discretionary Learner Support Fund
- The Advanced Learner Loans Bursary

The College will also operate a Hardship fund to support students overcome specific barriers to participation that are not covered through the Learner Support Funds

2. 16 to 19 Bursaries

The 16 to 19 Bursary Fund provides financial support to help students overcome specific barriers to participation so they can remain in education.

There are 2 types of 16 to 19 bursaries:

- Bursaries for defined vulnerable groups referred to as the Enhanced / Vulnerable Bursary
- Discretionary bursaries.

2.1. Eligibility criteria: 16 to 19 bursaries

2.2. Household Income

For 2024/25, the College will operate a two-tier priority system for the discretionary element, based on household income as follows:

- Priority 1 - Household income of less than £35,000 per year
- Priority 2 - Household income between £35,000 and £40,000 per year

Those students falling into the Priority 2 category will be advised that they will be placed on a 'waiting list' and the position reviewed at October half term. Applicants in this group will be awarded financial help after the October half term, subject to sufficient funds remaining. An element of the funds will be top sliced for any new students (e.g. January starts)

Household income eligibility for the discretionary bursary will not take child benefit, child tax benefit, DLA/PIP or Carers Allowance into account, but will still be recorded on application.

2.3. Age

A student must be aged 16 or over but under 19 on 31 August 2024 to be eligible for help from either of the 16 to 19 bursary funds in the 2024 to 2025 academic year.

Students aged 19 or over are only eligible to receive a 16-19 discretionary bursary if they are continuing on the same study programme they began aged 16 to 18 (19+ continuers) or have an Education, Health and Care (EHC) Plan.

These 2 groups of aged 19+ students can receive a 16-19 discretionary bursary while they continue to attend education (in the case of a 19+ continuer, this must be the same programme they started before they turned 19), as long as their eligibility continues and are assessed as needing the support to continue their participation in education.

Students aged 19 or over are not eligible for bursaries for enhanced/vulnerable groups.

The 16 to 19 bursaries will generally only pay students aged 16 or over. However, in exceptional circumstances where under 16 students are on funded 16 to 19 study programmes at the college, discretion can be used to pay bursaries to younger students. For example, where a student is following an accelerated study programme.

Bursary funds will not be awarded to students enrolled at another institution, where that institution also receives public funding for the student, for example, students aged 14 to 16 who are attending college as part of their key stage 4 programme at a local school/academy.

Students aged under 19 enrolled on higher education qualifications are not eligible for support from the 16 to 19 Bursary Fund.

2.4. Eligible education provision

Students must be participating in provision that is subject to inspection by a public body that assures quality (for example Ofsted). The provision must also fall into one of these groups:

- funded directly by ESFA, or by EFSA via a local authority
- otherwise publicly funded and lead to a qualification (up to and including level 3) accredited by Ofqual or on the ESFA list of [qualifications approved for funding](#)

Students on apprenticeship programmes, or any waged training, are employed, rather than in education. They are not eligible for the 16 to 19 Bursary Fund.

Non-employed students aged 16 to 19 who are participating in a Prince's Trust Team Programme are eligible to receive the bursary in the same way as any other student participating in an eligible, publicly funded course.

We do not expect students on distance learning provision to need help from the bursary fund because they do not have the kinds of costs the bursary is intended to cover (travel, equipment, and uniforms, for example). In the rare instances where an such a student does require financial help, the college may be able to provide support in-kind. An example could be providing a temporary travel pass to attend exams if living 1.5+ miles from the campus where attending the exam.

2.5. Residency

Students must meet the residency criteria in [ESFA funding regulations](#) for post-16 provision. This document also specifies the evidence the college must see and retain for audit to confirm eligibility for post-16 funding (and therefore meet the residency criteria for bursary fund eligibility).

2.6. Accompanied asylum seeking children (under 18 with an adult relative or partner)

Generally, asylum seekers are not entitled to public funds. Accompanied asylum seeking children (those under 18 with an adult relative or partner) and those aged 18 and above are entitled to education, but not to public funds. If they are destitute, they can apply to the Home Office (HO) for suitable housing and cash for essentials, but they are not eligible for other income.

As long as an asylum seeker has not had their application for asylum refused, the college can provide in-kind student support such as books, equipment, or a travel pass. The college is not permitted to give cash to any asylum seeker unless they are an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child (UASC).

2.7. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children do not receive cash support from the HO and are the responsibility of the local authority. They are treated as looked after children and are eligible for a bursary for vulnerable groups ('in care' group), if there is a financial need.

When these young people reach legal adulthood at age 18, institutions must consider their immigration status. If the asylum claim is decided in their favour, the local authority must provide them with the same support and services as they do care leavers. As such, they continue to be eligible for a bursary as a student from a vulnerable group until they reach the [age](#) limit.

Where an asylum claim is not supported, the individual may not be able to stay legally in the UK. When asylum claims have been fully heard/the appeals process exhausted, an individual has no entitlement to public funds (with a few exceptions where the withdrawal of support would be seen as a breach of human rights).

3. Bursaries for defined vulnerable groups (Enhanced / Vulnerable Bursary)

Students who meet the eligibility criteria for 16-19 bursaries **and** are in one of the defined vulnerable groups listed below, can apply for a bursary for vulnerable groups. The defined groups reflect that these students are unlikely to be receiving financial assistance from parents or carers, so may need a greater level of support to enable them to continue to participate. Students will be awarded the amount of support they need to participate based on an assessment of the types of costs they have and **must not** be automatically awarded £1,200.

Bursary funding exists to help students with the cost of travel (for students who live 1.5+ miles from their campus of study), to buy essential books, equipment, or specialist clothing (such as protective overalls, for example) and any other assessed financial needs to participate in education. These are items the student would otherwise need to pay for to participate. The bursary fund is not intended to provide learning support – services that you give to students, for example, counselling or mentoring, or to support extra-curricular or non-compulsory activities that are not essential to the students' study programme or to provide living costs support.

The college must ensure students are eligible for the bursary for defined vulnerable groups in **each year** they require support.

The defined vulnerable groups are students who are:

- in care
- care leavers
- receiving Income Support (IS), or Universal Credit (UC) because they are financially supporting themselves or financially supporting themselves and someone who is dependent on them and living with them, such as a child or partner
- receiving Disability Living Allowance (DLA) or Personal Independence Payments (PIP) in their own right as well as Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) or UC in their own right

The managed move of legacy benefits claimants to UC means that new claims for the legacy benefits have not been possible since 2018. This means young people who are aged 16 to 18 now will not be in receipt of the legacy benefits listed above. However, students aged 19 to 25 and funded from the 16 to 19 budget (continuing students and those with an EHC plan) may still be in receipt of those other legacy benefits.

The bursary for vulnerable groups can pay up to £1,200 per year to a student participating on a study programme that lasts for 30 weeks or more if they need that amount of support. Students on study programmes of less than 30 weeks will be paid a pro-rata amount, as appropriate based on an assessment of their actual needs.

The college will also consider the number of hours involved in student's study programme when deciding if a pro-rata payment is more appropriate. A student studying for around 16 hours a week is likely to have greater costs than a student studying for 4 hours a week, for example.

Students will only receive the amount they actually need to participate, and the college will not automatically award students £1,200 if they do not need the full amount.

The college may decide that although a young person may be eligible for a bursary because they are in one or more of the defined vulnerable groups, they do not have any actual financial need. This might be

because their financial needs are already met and/or because they have no relevant costs. The college can refuse a student's application on this basis.

Equally, the college can pay a bursary to a vulnerable group student of more than £1,200 if there is an assessed need for extra help to remain in education. Any payments over £1,200 will be paid from the discretionary bursary allocation. If paid from discretionary bursary, all the eligibility criteria and usual assessment processes must be met and followed.

Free Meals has its own eligibility [criteria](#) and a student who meets the criteria for a defined vulnerable group bursary is not automatically eligible for a free meal.

3.1. Defining in care and care leavers

The 16 to 19 Bursary Fund defines 'in care' as children looked after by a local authority on a voluntary basis (section 20 of the Children Act 1989) or under a care order (section 31 of the Children Act 1989). Section 22 of the Children Act 1989 defines the term 'looked after child'.

A 'care leaver' is defined as:

1. a young person aged 16 and 17 who was previously looked after for a period of 13 weeks consecutively (or periods amounting to 13 weeks), which began after the age of 14 and ended after the age of 16; or
2. a young person aged 18 or above who was looked after prior to becoming 18 for a period of 13 weeks consecutively (or periods amounting to 13 weeks), which began after the age of 14 and ended after the age of 16

Only students who meet this definition are eligible if they have a financial need.

3.2. Foster care, including privately arranged foster care

A young person placed with a foster carer by the local authority, including where the foster carer is on the books of an independent fostering agency, is classed as looked after. They meet the criteria for the 'in care' vulnerable group where they need financial support to participate.

A child who is privately fostered (in other words, a private arrangement is made between the parent and the person who will care for the child) is not classed as a looked after child and is not eligible for the bursary for vulnerable groups.

In some instances, a young person may have been in the care of the local authority and the care transferred to another party via a permanent form of fostering such as a Special Guardianship Order. In these circumstances, the young person is defined as having left care so is now a care leaver. They must meet the definition of a 'care leaver' in full (so, the period of weeks and age range set out above). If they do, they are eligible for help from the bursary for vulnerable groups, where they need financial support to participate.

3.3. Universal Credit

UC has replaced IS and ESA as well as other benefits, for new claimants.

UC award notifications do not include any information on the benefits they replace. For this reason, the description of the bursaries for vulnerable group category that relates to receipt of UC or IS is that a student must be receiving UC in their own right because they are financially supporting themselves and anyone who is dependent on them and living with them, such as a child or partner.

DfE is keeping the situation surrounding the legacy benefits (above) under review, to ensure the descriptions of the defined vulnerable groups reflect the benefits situation.

Bursary funds awarded to a student should not form part of the UC assessment undertaken by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). How DWP treat any funding for education depends on whether the student is undertaking advanced full-time education.

It is unlikely that 16 to 18-year-olds will be in advanced full-time education as they are generally on study programmes at level 3 or below. Since full roll out of UC, any current and future 16 to 18 year old can only claim UC, they can no longer claim IS or income related ESA.

Under UC, any educational award which is paid under a scheme to enable persons under age 21 to complete a course of non-advanced education (which will include the 16 to 19 Bursary) does not fall to be treated as grant income for UC purposes – as provided under reg 68 (7) of the UC Regulations 2013.

3.4. Evidence of eligibility – Vulnerable Bursary

The college must obtain proof that students meet the criteria for the bursary for vulnerable groups in full. In other words, that they are in receipt of the specified benefits in their own name or that they fully meet the definitions for in care/care leavers. The college will ask for evidence from each student and retain copies for audit purposes.

For example:

- for students who are in care or a care leaver, written confirmation of their current or previous looked-after status from the relevant local authority – this is the local authority that looks after them or provides their leaving care services. The evidence could be a letter or an email but must be clearly from the local authority.
- for students in receipt of UC or IS, a copy of their UC or IS award notice. This must clearly state that the claim is in the student's name/confirm they are entitled to the benefits in their own right. The evidence must not state any conditions that prevent them from participating in further education or training. For students in receipt of UC, institutions must also see a document such as a tenancy agreement in the student's name, a child benefit receipt, children's birth certificates, utility bills and so on
- for students receiving UC/ESA and DLA and PIP, a copy of their UC claim from DWP. Evidence of receipt of DLA or PIP must also be provided

UC claimants should be able to print off details of their award from their online account or provide a screenshot to the institution.

Students can also contact their UC Work Coach (or relevant Benefit Office if they are receiving getting IS or ESA) and ask them for help in providing evidence of receiving benefits.

The college will only submit a funding claim to the Student Bursary Support Service (SBSS) when the appropriate evidence has been seen and verified to confirm that the student is eligible for the bursary for vulnerable groups, and an assessment of the actual amount of financial help the student needs to participate has been made.

3.5. Pro-rata bursaries for vulnerable groups

Students who have a financial need who meet the criteria for a bursary for vulnerable groups may be eligible for a bursary of up to £1,200 (with the actual amount dependant on the specific financial needs they have) if they are on a study programme which lasts for 30 weeks or more in the academic year. Students who meet the criteria and who are on study programmes lasting for less than 30 weeks will be given a bursary on a pro-rata basis, as appropriate, with the actual amount dependent on the assessment of their specific financial needs.

The college will also consider the number of hours involved in a student's study programme when deciding if a pro-rata payment is more appropriate. A student studying for around 16 hours a week is likely to have greater costs than a student studying for 4 hours a week, for example.

3.6. Students eligible for a vulnerable bursary who don't require bursary funding

In some cases, a young person might meet the eligibility criteria for a bursary for vulnerable groups, but their financial needs are already met, they have no relevant costs or they do not need the maximum award.

For example a student:

- attending specialist residential provision that covers their educational costs in full
- taking a distance learning programme who has no financial barriers to participation (for example, they don't have any travel costs or meal costs)
- in the care of the local authority whose educational costs are covered in full by the local authority
- who is financially supported by their partner

In these circumstances, the college can refuse the student's application. The college will explain to the student and/or the student's parents or support worker the aim of bursary funding and why they are not awarding any bursary.

The college will make it clear in our bursary fund application form that there is a possibility of no award or a limited award. This ensures all parties understand that meeting the criteria for a bursary for vulnerable groups does not automatically mean funding will be given.

The college will also ensure application forms avoid any terminology such as 'guaranteed bursary' or wording such as 'you will automatically get a bursary of £1,200 if you are in one of the defined groups'.

3.7. Recycling bursaries for vulnerable groups funding

The College may accrue some unused funding for bursaries for vulnerable groups during the academic year. For example, if a student leaves early after only receiving part of their bursary or the College does not pay the full amount to a student because they did not meet the agreed conditions. The College will recycle this funding and use it to offset funding claims for other eligible students until 30 April 2025.

The College can add any funding for bursaries for vulnerable groups they have claimed, but no longer need, for eligible students to their discretionary bursary allocation from 1 May 2025.

Should an incorrectly funding claimed for bursaries for vulnerable groups (for example, submitting a funding claim without verifying a student meets the criteria) be made, the College will try to recycle the funding on subsequent funding claims. However, if the College has no other students who are eligible for a bursary for vulnerable groups, the incorrectly claimed funds cannot be added to their discretionary bursary allocation because they were claimed in error. Instead, the College will contact SBSS to return the funds: 1619bursary@studentbursary.education.gov.uk.

4. 16-19 Discretionary Bursaries

The College will make discretionary bursary awards to students to help them overcome the individual barriers to participation they face, for example, help with the cost of transport, essential educational trips, books and equipment and free meals allowance.

The College will decide which students receive a discretionary bursary through published eligibility criteria set out below. The level of support each student receives will depend on the students individual circumstances and their actual financial need.

There is no set limit for the amount of discretionary bursary that can be awarded to students. The College can award discretionary bursaries equal to or higher than the bursary for vulnerable groups maximum as long as they have clearly identified an individual student requires this level of funding. The College must manage the number and size of discretionary bursary awards to keep with our budget.

4.1. Using household income and establishing individual student need

The College must ensure that the bursary policy is designed to ensure funding reaches those students who are most in need of financial support. The College will use household income to help establish the amount of support awarded to a student. This will be used in conjunction with other factors, such as distance to travel from the institution, the number of dependent children in the household or whether the young person

has additional responsibilities that may mean they need extra help, for example, they are a young carer or a parent.

For 2024/25, the College will operate a two-tier priority system for the discretionary element, based on household income as follows:

- Priority 1 - Household income of less than £35,000 per year
- Priority 2 - Household income between £35,000 and £40,000 per year

Those students falling into the Priority 2 category will be advised that they will be placed on a 'waiting list' and the position reviewed at October half term. Applicants in this group will be awarded financial help after the October half term, subject to sufficient funds remaining. An element of the funds will be top sliced for any new students (e.g. January starts)

Household income eligibility for the discretionary bursary will not take child benefit, child tax benefit, DLA/PIP or Carers Allowance into account, but will still be recorded on application.

In exceptional circumstances where students are unable to provide evidence of household income the college will discuss and document these circumstances. A decision will be made on whether to provide financial support through the discretionary bursary fund on the basis of the students' circumstances. Requests for exceptional circumstances will be made by the Caring Services Manager or Caring Services Coordinator for approval by the Frontline Services & Admission Manager or Student Services Director.

4.2. Evidence of eligibility

The College must obtain proof that students meet the household income eligibility criteria for the bursary. The College will ask for evidence from each student and retain copies for audit purposes.

For example:

- Last 3 months bank statements
- Last 3 months payslips
- Recent benefit awards notifications dated within 6 months of application

4.3. Awards

- Students will be issued with a termly payment equivalent to that of a termly bus pass or through the Travel West Midlands App should it be appropriate if they live 1.5+ miles from their campus of study. Provision of this fund is dependent on continued attendance on the students study programme at the college, reviewed monthly. Students will also be provided with support to purchase essential kit and equipment and financial support towards the cost of essential course related trips. The cost of any kit, equipment or trips will be established at the start of the academic year from each of the curriculum areas.

The College will retain a small emergency fund from the allocation to support students who face exceptional circumstances during the year that impact on their ability to participate.

Should funds permit, the 16-19 discretionary bursary will be used to purchase laptops for loan to students who meet the eligibility criteria for this fund, as detailed above.

4.4. What the bursary fund cannot be used for

Blanket or flat rate/fixed rate payments:

- to all students
- to students in particular income bands
- to students whose families are in receipt of particular benefits

All payments must be based on the actual financial needs of each student. The bursary fund is not intended to

- provide learning support – services that institutions give to students – for example, counselling, mentoring or extra tutoring
- support extra-curricular activities where these are not essential to the students' study programme
- The College cannot support the costs of foreign/overseas field trips where the content can be found within England at a much cheaper cost and/or to support the costs of fields trips that are not an essential part of a student's study programme goals.

The college is not permitted to use the bursary fund in any way that would give them a competitive advantage over other institutions. Examples include:

- fees for access to facilities in the institution
- block subsidy of the canteen
- block subsidy of transport, or support for travel for all students regardless of family incomes
- block provision of equipment, material or books
- making bonus payments to reward attendance or achievement
- payments to support students' general living costs

The college must not use the bursary as a way of incentivising attendance or as a marketing tool to encourage students to choose their institution over another.

4.5. Rules on unspent bursary funds

The ESFA permits institutions to carry unspent bursary funds over to the next academic year. Institutions must continue to use any funds carried forward to support students in line with the funding rules in this guide. Institutions cannot add the funds to general funds.

Where institutions are given a single overall allocation that includes funding for both free meals and the discretionary bursary, they can carry forward funds from both schemes. Institutions may use this funding for either free meals or discretionary bursary payments in the new academic year.

Institutions must fully use any unspent funds for either discretionary bursary or free meals before using their new academic year allocation.

Institutions cannot carry forward funding for discretionary bursary and/or free meals funding for more than one year and must return unspent funds prior to, and including, the 2022 to 2023 academic year or any funds that are over your current year allocation value.

Institutions must report the unspent funding via the ESFA [customer help centre](#). The ESFA encourage institutions to do this as soon as they are aware however they must report it no later than 31 March each year.

5. Industry Placement Fund

Some students may find themselves facing financial difficulties due to incurring extra participation costs, for example, because they need to pay for additional travel to their placement. These students may only need support for a brief period. Any additional costs will be assessed by the Frontline Services Team and awards made accordingly.

6. Free Meals

The 1996 Education Act requires maintained schools and academy sixth forms to provide free meals to disadvantaged students who are aged over 16. In the 2014 to 2015 academic year the requirement was extended to disadvantaged students following further education (FE) courses at the range of FE funded institutions. Funding agreements place a legal duty on institutions to comply with the requirement.

The college will make a free meal available for all eligible students for each day the student attends their study programme, where this is appropriate.

6.1. Eligibility Criteria

6.1.1. Age

A student must be aged 16 or over but under 19 on 31 August 2024 to be eligible to receive a free meal. Students aged 19 or over are only eligible to receive a free meal if they are continuing on a study programme they began aged 16 to 18 ('19+ continuers') or have an EHC plan.

These 2 groups of aged 19 plus students can receive a free meal while they continue to attend education (in the case of a 19+ continuer, this must be the same programme they started before they turned 19), as long as their eligibility continues.

The following groups of students are not eligible for free meals in further education:

- students aged between 14 and 16 (these students are already covered by FSM provision)
- students aged 19 or over at the start of their study programme, unless they have an EHC Plan or are a 19+ continuer
- apprentices, including those with an EHC Plan

6.1.2. Eligible benefits

Free meals are targeted at disadvantaged students. Free meals in further education defines disadvantage as students being in receipt of, or having parents who are in receipt of, one or more of the following benefits:

- Income Support
- income-based Jobseekers Allowance
- income-related Employment and Support Allowance (ESA)
- support under part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999
- the guarantee element of State Pension Credit
- Child Tax Credit (provided they are not entitled to Working Tax Credit and have an annual gross income of no more than £16,190, as assessed by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC))
- Working Tax Credit run-on – paid for 4 weeks after someone stops qualifying for Working Tax Credit
- UC with net earnings not exceeding the equivalent of £7,400 for each year (after tax and not including any benefits they get)

A student is only eligible to receive a free meal when they, or a responsible adult on their behalf, have made a successful application to the college.

Working Tax Credit is not a qualifying benefit for free meals, and a parent or student in receipt of Working Tax Credits is not entitled to a free meal (this is a common question sent to ESFA). Qualifying benefits do include the Working Tax Credit run-on which is paid for 4 weeks after you stop qualifying for Working Tax Credit.

From 1 April 2018, any student who is in receipt of, or has parents who are in receipt of, UC must have a net earned annual income of no more than £7,400 to be eligible for free meals.

Students must also satisfy the residency criteria set out in the ESFA [funding regulations guidance](#).

6.2. Verification of student eligibility

The college is responsible for assessing applications for free meals. All students applying for a free meal for the first time in the 2024 to 2025 academic year must submit an application to the college.

The Department for Education (DfE) provides an electronic Eligibility Checking System (ECS) that enables local authorities to check FSM eligibility on behalf of institutions.

It is important that institutions and local authorities understand that the legal gateway (section 110 of the Education Act 2005) that enables the department to obtain benefit information held by DWP and HMRC for checking eligibility is limited to FSM. Information from the ECS cannot currently be used to check entitlement for free meals for post-16 students.

As part of the application, the college will ask the student (or their parent/guardian) to provide evidence of the award of the qualifying benefits. This might be an award notice or letter from DWP or HMRC. The college will operate a combined application form and process for free meals and the 16 to 19 Bursary Fund.

6.3. Awards

Eligible students will receive a credit of £3.85 for each day they have timetabled lessons to purchase a meal in the college refectory, or, where this is not possible, in the form of vouchers/cash payment.

6.4. Raising awareness of free meals

The College will promote the availability of free meals to ensure students are aware of the eligibility criteria and encourage students who are eligible to apply.

6.5. Unspent free meals funds

The ESFA permit institutions to carry unspent free meals funds over to the next academic year. Any funds carried forward must continue to be used to support students. They cannot be added to general institution funds.

Where institutions are given a single overall allocation that includes funding for both free meals and the discretionary bursary, they can carry forward funds from both schemes. The funding may be used for either free meals or discretionary bursary payments in the new academic year.

Institutions must fully utilise any unspent funds for either free meals or discretionary bursary before using their new academic year allocation.

Institutions cannot carry forward funding for free meals and/or discretionary bursary meals funding for more than one year and must return unspent funds prior to, and including, the 2022 to 2023 academic year or any funds that are over your current year allocation value.

Institutions must report the unspent funding via the ESFA [customer help centre](#). The ESFA encourage institutions to do this as soon as they are aware however they must report it no later than 31 March each year.

7. 19+ Discretionary Learner Support

19+ Learner support is available to provide financial support for individuals with a specific financial hardship preventing them from taking part/continuing in learning. Awards are set out in the 'categories'.

- Hardship funding – financial support to enable financially disadvantaged learners to participate in learning
- 20+ childcare funding – for learners aged 20 or older on the first day of learning who are at risk of not starting or continuing learning because of childcare costs
- Care to Learn top up for 19-year-olds
- Residential Access funding – to support ESFA funded ASF learners (set out in the [who we fund](#) section) where they need to live away from home in order to access provision
- ICT devices and connectivity - to support disadvantaged learners who cannot undertake online delivery

The fund will be used for learners who are in clear need, to enhance their learning and ensure they are not disadvantaged with regard to engagement in their study programme and enrichment activities.

7.1. Eligibility Criteria

7.1.1. Using household income and establishing individual student need

The College must ensure that the bursary policy is designed to ensure funding reaches those students who are most in need of financial support. The College will use household income to help establish the amount of support awarded to a student. This will be used in conjunction with other factors, such as distance to travel from the institution, the number of dependent children in the household.

For 2024/25, the College will operate a two-tier priority system for the discretionary element, based on household income as follows:

- Priority 1 - Household income of less than £35,000 per year
- Priority 2 - Household income between £35,000 and £40,000 per year

Those students falling into the Priority 2 category will be advised that they will be placed on a 'waiting list' and the position reviewed at October half term. Applicants in this group will be awarded financial help after the October half term, subject to sufficient funds remaining. An element of the funds will be top sliced for any new students (e.g. January starts)

Household income eligibility for the discretionary bursary will not take child benefit, child tax benefit, DLA/PIP or Carers Allowance into account, but will still be recorded on application.

In exceptional circumstances where students are unable to provide evidence of household income the college will discuss and document these circumstances. A decision will be made on whether to provide financial support through the discretionary bursary fund on the basis of the students' circumstances.

7.1.2. Age

A student must be aged 19 years old or older on 31 August 2024 to be eligible for help from the 19+ discretionary learner support fund in the 2024 to 2025 academic year.

7.1.3. Eligible education provision

Students must be participating in provision that is subject to inspection by a public body that assures quality (for example Ofsted). The provision must also be funded directly by ESFA or by ESFA via a local authority.

7.1.4. Residency

Students must meet the residency criteria set out by the ESFA in the '[who we fund](#)' section. This document also specifies the evidence the College must see and retain for audit to confirm eligibility for post-16 funding (and therefore meet the residency criteria for fund eligibility).

7.2. Awards

The fund will be used to support the costs of travel (for students who live 1.5+ miles from their campus of study), essential trips, equipment, childcare and domestic emergencies.

The College will retain a small emergency fund from the allocation to support students who face exceptional circumstances during the year that impact on their ability to participate.

7.3. Hardship

Hardship funds can be used for the following:

- course-related costs, including course trips, books and equipment (where costs are not included in the funding rate)
- support with domestic emergencies and emergency accommodation provided by others, or by providing items or services or cash direct to the learner, this can be in the form of a grant or repayable loan provided by you
- transport costs (but not make a block contribution to post-16 transport partnerships or routinely fund transport costs covered in the local authority's legal duty for learners of sixth-form age)
- examination fees

- accreditation fees, professional membership fees and any fees or charges due to external bodies
- your registration fees
- to support learners on a traineeship including the work placement element

In exceptional circumstances, hardship funds can be used to assist with course fees for learners who need financial support to start or stay in learning.

If an asylum seeker is eligible for provision, learner support may be provided in the form of course-related books, equipment, cash payments or a travel pass.

7.4. 20+ childcare

Childcare funding can only be used to pay for childcare with a childminder, provider or childminder agency, registered with Ofsted.

Childcare funding must not be used to:

- fund informal childcare, such as that provided by a relative
- set up childcare places or to make a financial contribution to the costs of a crèche
- fund childcare for learners aged under 20 on the first day of learning; instead you must direct them to the [‘Care to Learn’ programme](#)

Childcare funding cannot be used for those aged 20 years or older to top up childcare payments for those receiving ‘Care to Learn’ payments.

7.5. ICT devices and connectivity

The funds can support disadvantaged learners who are undertaking classroom or blended learning to continue to participate via online learning where the learner does not have:

- internet access at home, and/or
- a suitable device, for example a laptop or tablet, to complete the necessary online course work

The college will seek to secure value for money when purchasing IT devices and/or internet access including:

- deploying any unused devices before you purchase new ones
- exploring options to access low cost second hand or recycled devices
- avoiding entering long term contract arrangements
- holding a record of actual costs for any IT devices and/or internet access bought for this purpose and make this available to the ESFA, if asked

IT devices must only be loaned out to learners and returned at the end of their learning aim to allow them to be re-used by other learners. Learners must sign a declaration, confirming:

- they will return the device when their online learning aim(s) is complete, or if they leave before completing their learning
- they will return the device in the same condition in which they received it

The college will record the following evidence in the learner’s evidence pack:

- the outcome of the assessment undertaken to identify the learner’s individual needs
- the learner declaration referred to above

8. Advanced Learner Loans Bursary

For the 2024/25 academic year Advanced learner loans are available for individuals aged 19 or above to undertake approved qualifications at Levels 3 to Level 6, at an approved provider in England. Advanced learner loans give individuals access to financial support for tuition costs similar to that available in higher education and are administered by Student Finance England.

The availability of loans at Level 3 for 19 to 23 year-olds does not replace an individual’s legal entitlement for full funding for a first full Level 3 qualification.

8.1. Eligibility

8.1.1. Using household income and establishing individual student need

The College must ensure that the bursary policy is designed to ensure funding reaches those students who are most in need of financial support. The College will use household income to help establish the amount of support awarded to a student. This will be used in conjunction with other factors, such as distance to travel from the institution, the number of dependent children in the household.

For 2024/25, the College will operate a two-tier priority system for the discretionary element, based on household income as follows:

- Priority 1 - Household income of less than £35,000 per year
- Priority 2 - Household income between £35,000 and £40,000 per year

Those students falling into the Priority 2 category will be advised that they will be placed on a 'waiting list' and the position reviewed at October half term. Applicants in this group will be awarded financial help after the October half term, subject to sufficient funds remaining. An element of the funds will be top sliced for any new students (e.g. January starts)

Household income eligibility for the discretionary bursary will not take child benefit, child tax benefit, DLA/PIP or Carers Allowance into account, but will still be recorded on application.

8.1.2. Age

A student must be aged 19 years old or older on 31 August 2024 and have a loan approved by the SLC to be eligible for help from the Advanced Learner Loan Bursary in the 2024 to 2025 academic year.

8.1.3. Eligible education provision

Students must be participating in provision that is funded through an Advanced Learner Loan.

8.2. Awards

The fund will be used to support the costs of travel (for students who live 1.5+ miles from their campus of study), essential trips, equipment, childcare and domestic emergencies.

8.3. Hardship

Hardship funds can be used for the following:

- course related costs, including course trips, books and equipment (where these costs are not required to be part of the fee)
- transport costs for getting to and from a course
- professional membership fees and any fees or charges due to external bodies related to the course
- exceptional support with domestic emergencies and emergency accommodation provided by others, or by providing items, services, or cash direct to the learner. This can be in the form of a grant or repayable loan provided by you for course related costs

8.4. 20+ childcare

Childcare funding can only be used to pay for childcare with a childminder, provider or childminder agency, registered with Ofsted.

Childcare funding must not be used to:

- fund informal childcare, such as that provided by a relative
- set up childcare places or to make a financial contribution to the costs of a crèche
- fund childcare for learners aged under 20 years of age on the first day of learning; instead you must direct them to the [Care to Learn guidance for institutions](#) or the [Care to Learn scheme](#) on GOV.UK
- top up childcare payments for learners aged under 20 years receiving funding from [Care to Learn](#)
- pay for childcare covered by other government childcare arrangements

Childcare funding cannot be used for those aged 20 years or older to top up childcare payments for those receiving 'Care to Learn' payments.

8.5. ICT devices and connectivity

The funds can support disadvantaged learners who are undertaking classroom or blended learning to continue to participate via online learning where the learner does not have:

- internet access at home, and/or
- a suitable device, for example a laptop or tablet, to complete the necessary online course work

The college will seek to secure value for money when purchasing IT devices and/or internet access including:

- deploying any unused devices before you purchase new ones
- exploring options to access low cost second hand or recycled devices
- avoiding entering long term contract arrangements
- holding a record of actual costs for any IT devices and/or internet access bought for this purpose and make this available to the ESFA, if asked

IT devices must only be loaned out to learners and returned at the end of their learning aim to allow them to be re-used by other learners. Learners must sign a declaration, confirming:

- they will return the device when their online learning aim(s) is complete, or if they leave before completing their learning
- they will return the device in the same condition in which they received it

The college will record the following evidence in the learner's evidence pack:

- the outcome of the assessment undertaken to identify the learner's individual needs
- the learner declaration referred to above

9. Appeals Process – All Funding Streams

1. Initial appeals in respect to attendance, levels of support or the eligibility of applicants will be sent in writing to the Front-line Services and Admissions Manager who will respond within 10 working days.
2. Appeals may then be progressed to the Director of Student Services if the student/prospective student wishes to challenge the decision of the Front-line Services and Admissions Manager
3. The decision of the Director of Student Services will mark the end of the appeals process. Further challenges to the decision will be supported by the College's Complaints Policy and Procedures.

10. Payment Process for the Learner Support Fund

The Learner Support funds are intended to remove specific barriers to participation. Institutions can insist that students awarded bursary funds spend them on travel costs, meals during the day, equipment, or any other support that has been identified as necessary to enable them to participate in education. The level of support provided will be detailed in an Award Notification.

The ESFA encourages institutions to pay bursaries in-kind rather than cash where possible. This helps ensure that the bursary is spent for the reasons it was awarded. In-kind payments can include travel passes, vouchers or credits for meals, required books and required equipment.

1. Currently the method of payment (BACs, Internal Transfer, Childcare Provider, Online Voucher Code) is chosen by the Frontline Services Team when entering the information onto the database.
2. The Frontline Services Team will allocate payments on a fixed processing date. These will be fixed on the system and disappear once the date has passed.
3. The Frontline Services Team will run a report of list of payments that fall within these fixed dates and pass to Finance. This report will be authorised by the Director of Student Services, or the Vice Principal HR & Student Services in their absence. This report will be cc'd to the relevant Finance team members responsible for processing payments.
4. Finance to make payment and advise the Frontline Services Team via a Payment Report together with any bounced payments.

5. Finance provides the remittance advice to the childcare provider.
6. In the event of a bounced payment the Frontline Services Team will reverse the allocation. Once correct BAC details have been confirmed they will tick the box to flag payment received and put in a new processing date.
7. Finance will advise the Frontline Services Team of further bounced payments from the bank.
8. The Frontline Services Team will update the payments to the systems using the Payments Report.

11. Monitoring Process for the Learner Support Funds

11.1. Rejections

- All students who apply for funding but do not match the published eligibility criteria will be sent a 'rejection' email.

11.2. Attendance checks - all funding streams

- Students who are eligible for funding must achieve 85% attendance apart from confirmed Young Adult Carers who need to achieve a minimum of 75% attendance. This is in recognition that due to their external caring responsibilities they face additional barriers to achieving the required attendance level.
- Authorised absences will not be counted as an absence mark for the purposes of these attendance checks.
- If the student fails to meet this benchmark then funding during the period of absence may be stopped
- If the student has been paid in advance (childcare) the next available month may be stopped
- If a student fails more than 2 months attendance in a row their support for the remainder of the year may be withdrawn

11.3. Withdrawals - all funding streams

- If a student withdraws from his/her course all further payments will be stopped
- Dependant on the circumstances of the student withdrawal the college reserves the right to request the repayment of support

12. College Hardship Fund

The College offers students in exceptional circumstances access to a hardship fund.

The fund will provide a safety net for students who are in danger of withdrawing from their course. The fund offers short-term financial support to meet travel and personal costs.

12.1. What the fund supports

The fund can be used to provide further education students financial support for food, clothing and toiletries costs and will be supported by the issuing of supermarket vouchers and reconciled with the return of receipts to ensure suitable items are purchased. The fund will also be used for the issuing of Lunch Vouchers to be cashed in at the refectories for a range of meal options. Only with the consent of the Frontline Services Manager, Caring Services Manager or Caring Services Coordinator and Director Student Services will cash awards be made from the fund.

This support is reviewed when the student claims state benefits, accesses hostel accommodation or is able to claim from a national scheme for financial support such as the Learner Support Funds.

12.2. Applications

All applications will be supported by a member of the Frontline Services Team or Student Support Officers who will meet with the student and make an initial assessment. Recommendations for financial support are completed using the Hardship application form. Completed hardship application forms are sent to the

Frontline Services Manager or the Caring Services Manager or Caring Services Co-ordinator and Director Student Services for approval.

Author	Date Created	Approved By	Last Reviewed	Next Review Date
Adam Thomas / Pete Haynes	2016	EMT	June 2024	June 2025