

Student Support Fund Policy (2018)

Policy Name : Student Support Fund Policy	
Policy Owner and Department:	Student Support
Policy Author and Department:	Student Money Advice Student Support
Approving body:	Student Support Funding Sub Committee
Date of approval:	
Review date:	
Queries:	University Secretary Tel: 028 7012 4533

The document is available, on request, in alternative formats including:

- Braille
- Computer Disc
- Audio cassette
- Minority languages to meet the needs of those who are not fluent in English.

Introduction & Background

Ulster University has developed a Student Support Fund Policy to ensure fairness and transparency for all students applying to the Student Support Fund. The policy complies with the Department for the Economy (NI) Conditions of Funding for Higher Education Institutions in Northern Ireland.

Relevant Legislation

Education (Student Support) (No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) (2009)

Immigration Act 1971

Income Tax Acts (Northern Ireland) Order 1995

Income and Corporation Taxes Act 1988

Finance Act 2004

General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2018

Aims, Purpose and Scope of the Policy

Aim: To provide clarity and transparency regarding the administration of the Student Support Fund at Ulster University.

Purpose: To administer the Student Support Fund, which is funded by the Department for the Economy (DfE), to provide financial help to Ulster students whose access to Higher Education might be inhibited by financial considerations, or those who face financial difficulties in meeting their living costs.

Scope: Any registered Ulster University student who meets the defined eligibility criteria and provides the requested documentary evidence may be considered for an award from the fund. Students must take their full entitlement of statutory funding (Student Tuition Fee and Maintenance loans) and be able to demonstrate they have made adequate provision to fund their daily living costs at University.

The fund is offered between October and the end of July each academic year, however, this is dependent on Ulster University receiving funds from the Department for the Economy (NI) and monies being available in the fund when an application is made.

The Student Support Fund can also be used in the following ways:

- To provide emergency funds for students who do not receive their government funded financial support by the beginning of Semester 1.
- To meet the cost of Diagnostic Assessments for registered students.
- To cover the cost of medical evidence, which has been authorised by an AccessAbility Adviser as being required for Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) funded support.

Roles and Responsibilities

The Student Support Administrative Manager oversees the operation of the Student Support Fund & University Hardship Funds. Student Finance Coordinators process all applications, reviews, spot checks and payments. The Student Support Funding Sub Committee (SSFSC) oversees policy implementation and governance of the fund, including appeals.

Eligibility guidelines for students

Ulster University must comply with the Department for the Economy (NI) Support Funds Guidance. The guidance states that the fund is only available to home students i.e. the student must fall within a category mentioned in Part 2, Schedule 2, to the Education (Student Support) (No2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009 as amended, in order to be eligible to apply under the fund. GB students are deemed eligible as they are classified as Home students for the purposes of the Student Support Fund. These can be either:

- Undergraduate – all home students following full-time (including sandwich courses but excluding a year out) or part-time courses of higher education (50% of a full-time equivalent).
- Postgraduate – all home students following full-time or part-time courses of higher education studying at levels above first degree.

Priority Groups

Although applications will be considered from all students experiencing financial difficulty, priority will be given to the following groups of students:

- Mature students (25 & over)
- Students with dependents including those not in receipt of a Childcare Grant
- Disabled students not in receipt of Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA)
- Students from Care, from Foyers or who are registered as Homeless
- Final year students

Gambling and Erratic Spending

Students will not be eligible to receive an award if their bank statements show evidence of gambling/betting activities or erratic spending. When the student can provide evidence that their gambling/betting accounts have been closed down and provide three months of bank statements confirming all gambling activities or erratic spending have ceased, their application can then be considered, providing the fund is still open and monies are available.

Applying for the Student Support Fund

Emergency Payments

Emergency payments are available within the first four weeks of Semester 1 to registered undergraduate first year students and students with dependents who have not received their first student loan instalment (perhaps due to a late application). Students must have applied for full core funding and should contact Student Support to arrange an interview with a Student Finance Coordinator to apply. The value of the emergency payment will be deducted from any subsequent Student Support Fund award.

Student Support Fund

Any eligible students must apply for the Student Support Fund via the online application form. This link is available on the Student Support website <https://www.ulster.ac.uk/studentsupport/services/student-money-advice/student-support-fund> where there is also detailed information on eligibility criteria and evidence required to apply.

All applicants must complete all parts of the online form and upload all relevant documentary evidence before submitting the form. If sufficient documentary evidence is not provided, Student Support staff will notify the student and ask that it be provided. However, it is the responsibility of the student to provide the requested information and their application will not move to be assessed until this is provided.

Processing the Student Support Fund

Standard Award

Standard awards will be made to help students who have fallen into financial difficulty due to unanticipated expenditure. Awards are payable based on a shortfall between assessed income and outgoings and the maximum amount any one student can receive per academic year is £2000.

Non-standard Award

It is anticipated that the majority of applications will fall within the Standard award remit; however, students who face exceptional circumstances may have their application treated as non-standard. Non-standard awards will be considered on a case-by-case basis and the student must provide an explanation and evidence of the exceptional costs incurred.

Review

Students who have already received a payment from the Student Support Fund during the academic year, but whose financial situation has changed significantly since then, can request a review to be completed. Running out of money does not meet this criterion.

Payment

Award amounts are fixed and agreed by the Student Support Fund Sub Committee each academic year. Any award greater than £1000 will be made in two separate payments. The first payment of £1000 will be made at the time of processing; the second payment will be made in May of Semester 2 in the current academic year, subject to funding available. Applications ready for payment after April will be made in full, subject to funding available. As per DfE guidance, the maximum any one student can receive (standard & non-standard award) can be no more than £3,500. Awards will normally be paid by BACS directly into the student's bank account but can be paid directly to a third party (i.e. Residential Services) with written permission from the student.

This payment process is measured through a KPI that aims to ensure each student is notified with the result of their application within 4 weeks (20 working days) of receiving their completed form. This 4-week period begins when all necessary documentation has been received in full and ends when the payment details have been passed to Finance for processing. Successful applicants will receive a remittance slip from Finance to their University email address and unsuccessful applicants will be notified by email by a Student Finance Coordinator.

Appealing a Student Support Fund Decision

Appeals Stage 1: Reassessment

If a student is not satisfied with the decision of their Student Support Fund application they can request a reassessment for the following reasons:

- Application was unsuccessful and student feels this was the wrong decision.
- Student omitted to include pertinent information in the application.
- The amount awarded was less than the student thought it should be.

Students can request a reassessment of their application by emailing studentsupport@ulster.ac.uk within two working weeks of receiving a decision and a member of staff who was not involved in the original decision will carry out the reassessment. Students must include a personal statement detailing the reason why they wish to have their application reassessed along with any supporting evidence.

Following reassessment, a decision will be made to uphold the original decision, or revise the decision (subject to monies being available in the fund). The outcome of

the reassessment will be emailed to the student's University email address within two working weeks.

Appeals Stage 2: Formal Appeal

If a student is not satisfied with the outcome of their reassessment, they can submit a formal appeal in writing, using the appeals form, within 5 working days, outlining any information they feel is relevant to their application. The appeal should be sent to the Chair of the Student Support Funding Sub Committee.

The appeal can only be made on the grounds of an administrative error, whereby the administration of the Support Fund has not been carried out according to the Student Support Fund Policy & DfE guidelines. The formal appeal will be submitted to the Student Support Fund Appeals Panel and the panel may wish to speak to the Student Finance Coordinator involved in the original decision and/or the student.

The Appeals Panel will consider the appeal and make a decision either to uphold the original decision and dismiss the appeal, or authorise, increase or revise an award (subject to monies being available in the fund).

Conflict of Interest

All staff, regardless of position or seniority, are under a duty to disclose conflicts of interest, actual or possible, to ensure the University acts in a manner that is honest, ethical and transparent. If a staff member believes there is a conflict of interest, they must complete the 'Conflict of Interest' section within the application, and notify another team member to assess. If all members of the Student Money Advice team feel that there is a conflict of interest, the application will be referred to the Student Support Funding Sub Committee.

Reporting

The Student Money Advice team will collate Student Support Fund application information annually, which they will use to populate the DfE Annual Monitoring Return. The University Accountant and Administrative Manager will verify this and the Monitoring Return will be presented to the Student Support Funding Sub Committee for final approval before submission to DfE.

General Data Protection Regulation

All personal details will be kept in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulations 2018 and the Ulster University GDPR Policy. The Student Support Fund is independently audited each year and student bank details and all documentary evidence will be deleted after audit completion each year. Applications cannot be discussed with a third party unless the student has given us written permission.