



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

## Research and Information Service Briefing Note

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Paper 84/14

02 September 2014

NIAR 524-2014

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# Student Hardship Fund

## 1 Introduction

The following paper provides a brief discussion of the Student Hardship Fund available to students studying in Northern Ireland's Regional Colleges.

## 2 Student Hardship Fund

As stated by the Department for Employment and Learning, the Student Hardship Fund (SHF) is:<sup>1</sup>

*...intended to provide support to learners who are experiencing exceptional financial difficulty with meeting costs associated with learning. Priority should be given to learners, for whatever reason, who are economically or socially disadvantaged.*

The SHF is administered by an applicant's college but funded by the Department for Employment and Learning.

To be eligible for access to the SHF, students must meet a number of criteria, including:<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Department for Employment and Learning, Section 75 Equality of opportunity screening analysis Form 2011 – Student Hardship Fund, [http://www.delni.gov.uk/es/screening\\_analysis\\_form\\_-\\_hardship\\_fund.pdf](http://www.delni.gov.uk/es/screening_analysis_form_-_hardship_fund.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Belfast Metropolitan College, Student Support Handbook 2013-2014,

- Students should be enrolled in a full-time or part-time nationally accredited professional or technical course;
- Students must be at least 18 or attain the age of 18 during the academic year;
- Students must have exhausted all other avenues of assistance before applying for of the SHF;
- Students on Higher Education courses must have agreed to take the full amount offered to them by the Student Loan Company; and
- Support is only available to students whose course is part of their educational progression.

The Fund provides a maximum payment of £3,500 (for tuition fees and cost assistance). Colleges will decide whether payments would best be made as grants, lump sum payments or regular instalments; conditions determined by the College must be attached to the payments.<sup>3</sup>

SHF can cover a range of costs, including:

- **Fees:** These include tuition, registration and examination fees. The amounts disbursed in respect of fees must not be more than the fees normally charged in respect of the courses being followed and should take account of any reduction for concessionary fees. The amount provided will depend on household income levels;
- **Additional Living/Costs associated with Learning:** Funding is available to Full-time students aged 18 and over. Amount received based on household income and whether or not the student is Dependent (up to £30 per week of each term/attendance) or Independent (up to £45 per week of each term/attendance);
- **Books, Equipment, etc:** Funding should be based on actual costs up to a maximum of £300. Colleges must obtain receipts of expenditure which should be retained for audit purposes;
- **Transport:** Funding should be based on actual public transport costs (ticket price). Verification of these costs must be obtained by the college which should be retained for audit purposes;
- **Part-time Students:** Fees should only be given to part-time students: who have lost their jobs during their course of study; or who are in receipt of Income Support, Income Related Job Seeker's Allowance, Housing Benefit, Employment Support Allowance or Working Family Tax Credit or where income is below the lower income threshold; or HE Students who are not in receipt of tuition fee support under the Education [Student Support] (Eligibility) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012; and
- **Childcare Allowance:** Available to full and part time students on a low household income with dependent children in registered or approved childcare. The student may be eligible to receive up to 100% of actual childcare costs during term times and holidays up to a maximum for full time students of £110 a week for one child

<sup>3</sup> Department for Employment and Learning, 30 May 2013, Hardship Fund (Discretionary) 2014/15, <http://www.delni.gov.uk/hardship-fund-discretionary-2014-15.pdf>

and up to £188 a week for two or more children and for part time students up to a maximum of £56 a week for one child and up to £95 a week for 2 or more children.

It should be noted that a student's attendance is taken into account when applying for the Hardship Fund. As stated by DEL:<sup>4</sup>

*To receive full financial assistance from the Hardship Fund eligible Students must as a minimum have achieved 80% attendance. Electronic registers should be used where possible to verify a student's attendance when receiving the Hardship Fund... If an eligible student's attendance is less than 80% the level of financial assistance will be determined by the % of attendance.*

Further information on the Hardship Fund can be found [here](#).

## 2.1 DEL Funding Allocation

In May 2014 the Department for Employment and Learning published a circular for FE Colleges on the SHF. It states that:<sup>5</sup>

*The allocation of the Hardship fund will be based on the number of relevant Targeting Social Need (TSN) students in each college in the academic year 2012/13 and historical data based on previous expenditure.*

The allocations may be adjusted as a result of any unspent funds from the 2013/14 allocations. These funds are not returned to the college as they will be used by DEL to adjust in-year allocations.

For the 2013/14 and 2014/15 academic years these allocations are:<sup>6</sup>

**Table 1:** DEL Hardship Fund Allocations

Regional College	2013/14 Hardship Fund Allocation	2014/15 Hardship Fund Allocation
Belfast Metropolitan College	£494,500	£626,711
North West Regional College	£322,500	£397,421
Northern Regional College	£215,000	£158,384
South Eastern Regional College	£215,000	£175,860
South West College	£193,500	£213,199
Southern Regional College	£709,500	£528,424
<b>Total</b>	<b>£2,150,000</b>	<b>£2,100,000</b>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Department for Employment and Learning, 30 May 2013, Hardship Fund (Discretionary) 2013/14 and 2014/15, <http://www.delni.gov.uk/es/hardship-fund-circular-2013-14-final.pdf> and <http://www.delni.gov.uk/hardship-fund-discretionary-2014-15.pdf>

As can be seen above, the allocation has fallen by £50,000 between 2013/14 and 2014/15 - a reduction of 2.3%. Based on available information this may be a result of a drop in the number of students in TSN areas or the use of historical data to calculate the figure.

The table below details the Hardship Funds available and disbursed by Regional Colleges for the financial year 2011/2012 and 2012/2013. Please note, the data presented was sourced via the Regional Colleges Annual Reports and Financial Statements for Year ended 31 July 2013 and as such may be non-comparable with the data provided in Table 1 above.

In addition, the Northern Regional College and the South Eastern Regional College Total SHF figure includes carried over balances.

**Table 2:** Hardship Funds Available and Disbursed during Financial Year 2012/2013 and 2011/2012<sup>7</sup>

Regional College	Financial Year 2012/2013			Financial Year 2011/2012		
	Total SHF Available (£)	Amount Disbursed (£)	Balance unspent at 31 July (£)	Total SHF Available (£)	Amount Disbursed (£)	Balance unspent at 31 July (£)
Belfast Metropolitan College (BMC)	-	-	-	-	-	-
North West Regional College (NWRC)	418,000	416,000	1,000	360,000	316,000	43,000
Northern Regional College (NRC)	152,000	133,000	19,000	169,000	126,000	43,000
South Eastern Regional College (SERC)	294,000	143,000	151,000	331,000	123,000	208,000
South West College (SWC)	-	-	-	-	-	-
Southern Regional College (SRC)	386,000	358,000	28,000	525,000	427,000	98,000

Please note, there are no figures for Belfast Metropolitan College and South West College as the data provided in their Financial Statements refers to Support Funds rather than Hardship Funds. As such it is not possible to disaggregate the SHF figures.

As can be seen, of the colleges for which data was available the NWRC had the highest level of SHF available in financial year 2012/2013 and disbursed almost the

<sup>7</sup> Please note, figures may not add up due to the rounding of original source material.

total amount. The NRC had the lowest level available (at £152,000) but the second lowest unspent balance.

SERC had the highest unspent Balance as of 31 July 2013.

## 2.2 Reduction in Funding

A BBC News report on the 2 September 2014 found that the amount being made available to the Hardship Fund had been reduced by £1.3 million over the last five years.<sup>8</sup>

It stated that:

*In the 2009/10 academic year £3.46m had been allocated to the overall fund but that figure has gradually decreased and the amount allocated for 2014/2015 year is £2.1m.*

The Department for Employment and Learning responded that:

*While hardship funds have been reducing over time, there has also been an increase in the take-up in FE awards and the two are inter-linked. As such this is not a case of the department cutting funding.*

Further Education Awards (FEA) are available for students who are required to pay fees and need assistance.

Review of the financial support guidance for FE students in 2014/15 found that students applying for FEA must meet a number of criteria, including:<sup>9</sup>

- Courses must be at least one academic year in duration;
- Students must be 19 years of age or over on 1 July 2014. Those aged under 19 will only be considered if they have to live away from home in order to undertake the course; and
- Applicants must be progressing to a more advanced level of study.

The award received will be based upon whether or not a student is Dependent (if they answer no to a series of questions such as: are you not married or in a civil partnership?; Are you aged under 25?; Are you estranged from your parents? etc.) or Independent (If the student answers yes to any of the questions listed above). Support under the FEA includes:<sup>10</sup>

- **Tuition Fees:** If the student is studying outside NI and a course charges fees, a grant of up to £930 may be available;

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<sup>8</sup> BBC News, 2 September 2014, Student hardship fund: Stephen Farry criticised for £1.3m cut, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-29026281>

<sup>9</sup> WELB, A guide to financial support for further education students in 2014/15, [http://www.welbni.org/uploads/File/FE\\_Booklet\\_2014\\_2015.pdf](http://www.welbni.org/uploads/File/FE_Booklet_2014_2015.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

- **Maintenance Grant:** Maintenance Grants are available for students living in Northern Ireland. These grants provide financial support towards living costs. They are assessed on household income with between £1,122 to £2,092 available (per year with instalments paid at the start of each term), dependent on circumstances;
- **Childcare Grant:** This can be claimed if a student is using registered or approved childcare. The amount available will vary depending on whether they are a full or part-time student and on household income.

It should be noted that the guidance goes on to state that:<sup>11</sup>

*For students who are experiencing financial difficulty attending their course there may be some additional help from the Hardship Fund.*

The Departmental guidance on the Hardship Fund states that:<sup>12</sup>

*Students already in receipt of an FE Award can in exceptional circumstances apply to the Hardship Fund depending upon their financial needs. In this case the total support should never exceed £3,500; this should include their FE Award allocation. The only exception to this is when financial assistance for childcare is being provided.*

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Department for Employment and Learning, 30 May 2013, Hardship Fund (Discretionary) 2014/15, <http://www.delni.gov.uk/hardship-fund-discretionary-2014-15.pdf>