

**Strategic Planning and Corporate
Services Group**
Strategic Support Directorate



Department of
**Agriculture, Environment
and Rural Affairs**

An Roinn

**Talmhaíochta, Comhshaoil
agus Gnóthaí Tuaithe**

Department of

**Fairmin, Environment
an' Kintra Matthers**

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**FROM: PAUL MCGRANAGHAN
DAERA DALO**

DATE: 12 MAY 2026

**TO: DR. JANICE THOMPSON
AERA COMMITTEE CLERK**

Agriculture (Student Fees) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

Summary: These Regulations amend The Agriculture (Student Fees) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023 by applying an inflationary increase to the current Higher Education (HE) student fees at CAFRE, sets the 2026/27 academic year as the final year that the 2022 legacy fee framework will operate, and better defines international students for student fee purposes with new wording.

Business Area: Education Policy Branch (EPB), Policy, Economics and Statistics Division (PESD), Food, Farming and Rural Affairs Group (FFRAG).

Issue: The laying of the Agriculture (Student Fees) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026.

Restrictions: None

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Action Required: To bring to the attention of the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee.

Officials Attending: Mark McLean, Acting Chief Agricultural Economist; and Sharon Muldoon, Head of Education Policy Branch.

Background

The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs proposes to make the above named Statutory Rule under powers conferred on it by section 5A(1) and (2) of the Agriculture Act 1949, as amended.

The Statutory Rule is subject to negative resolution procedure.

Purpose of Legislation/Policy Background

The proposed Statutory Rule (“DAERA 2026 Regulations”) will amend the Agriculture (Student Fees) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023 (“DAERA 2023 Regulations”), which sets the level of fees payable for undergraduate and postgraduate HE courses delivered by DAERA, at its College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE).

Home students

DAERA introduced a new HE student fee policy in 2022 that maintains parity with the maximum fee-level set by the Department for the Economy (DfE) for other HE courses in Northern Ireland for home students (students normally domiciled in Northern Ireland). This resulted in DAERA operating two fee frameworks from 1 September 2022, referred to as the “current fee framework” and the “2022 legacy fee framework”.

All students who commenced the first academic year of a HE course at CAFRE on or after the 1 September 2022 will follow the current fee framework. Those students at CAFRE who commenced their first academic year of a HE course prior to 1 September 2022 will follow the 2022 legacy fee framework, with the 2026/27 academic year being the final year in which to do so. The DAERA 2023 Regulations provide for the operation of these two frameworks.

DfE set the basic and higher amounts for HE student fees charged at all other HE Institutions in Northern Ireland for home students using the forecasted All Items Retail Prices Index Excluding Mortgage Interest Payments (RPI-X).

In line with The Student Fees (Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025 made by DfE, the DAERA 2026 Regulations intend to apply a 2.7% inflationary increase to the 2025/26 academic year student fee amounts at CAFRE to commence from the beginning of the 2026/27 academic year.

For home students under the current fee framework, the student fee amount for a HE undergraduate degree course at CAFRE will move from £4,855 to £4,985 and the fee amount for students undertaking a foundation degree course at CAFRE will move from £2,680 to £2,745. Under the 2022 legacy fee framework, the student fee amount for a HE undergraduate degree course and a foundation degree course at CAFRE will move from £1,910 to £1,960.

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EU students with protected rights

EU national students (including students from Switzerland, Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein) who are within the personal scope of the citizens' rights provisions or a person with protected rights under the EU-UK Withdrawal Agreements, including the EU Settlement Scheme contained in Appendix EU of the immigration rules, will be treated the same as students ordinarily domiciled in Northern Ireland or Great Britain as the case may be.

Gibraltar students

Students from Gibraltar who have commenced the first academic year of their CAFRE course before the 1 January 2021 will pay the same student fee amount as a student ordinarily domiciled in Northern Ireland. Gibraltar students who commence their course on or after 1 January 2021 will be treated similar to students from Great Britain.

ROI students

Students ordinarily domiciled in the Republic of Ireland who hold ROI citizenship will continue to be treated the same as a student ordinarily domiciled in Northern Ireland under the terms of the Common Travel Area agreement.

GB students

Since the 2018/2019 academic year GB students have been charged £9,250 per year in line with the approach taken by Ulster University and Queen's University of Belfast for GB students. The UK Government applied a 3.1% increase to this student fee amount for English students on full-time undergraduate, full-time accelerated undergraduate and part-time undergraduate courses to £9,535 for the 2025/26 academic year. The UK Government has applied a further 2.7% increase to this student fee amount to £9,790 for the 2026/27 academic year.

The student fee amount charged to students from Great Britain enrolled on a HE course at CAFRE for academic year 2026/27 will increase from £9,535 to £9,790 to reflect the level set by the Department of Education for England. This maintains parity with the charge set by all other HE institutions in Northern Ireland.

HE Student Fee 2025/26 Academic Year Errata

During the drafting of The Agriculture (Student Fees) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026, two errors were discovered in The Agriculture (Student Fees) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025. The student fee amounts set for home students enrolled in Year 1 of an Extended Foundation Degree and students from GB enrolled on a postgraduate course in the 2025/26 academic year were incorrect.

The student fee amount assigned to student fee code FC3 (Extended Foundation Degree Year 1) in regulation is £1,340 but should have been set to £2,680 for the 2025/26 academic year.

The student fee amounts assigned to student fee codes FC15 (Postgraduate Certificate), FC16 (Postgraduate Diploma) and FC17 (Master's Degree) in regulation are £3,085, £6,165 and £9,250 respectively. These amounts should have been set to £3,180, £6,360 and £9,535 respectively.

The student fee amounts assigned to student fee codes FC25 (Postgraduate Certificate), FC26 (Postgraduate Diploma) and FC27 (Master's Degree) in regulation are £3,085, £6,165 and £9,250 respectively. These amounts should have been set to £3,180, £6,360 and £9,535 respectively.

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The error relating to students from GB enrolled on a postgraduate course has no impact. There are no GB students enrolled on a postgraduate course at CAFRE in the 2025/26 academic year. The Department is currently assessing potential implications of the error in relation to the student fee code FC3 (Extended Foundation Degree Year 1) for the 2025/2026 cohort.

The Agriculture (Student Fees) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 will set the student fee amounts to the correct amount for the 2026/27 academic year which will be an inflationary increase of 2.7% on the correct amount in 2025/26.

Previous Engagement with the Committee

This amending legislation applies an annual inflationary increase to student fees. As such this is brought to the attention of the Committee each year. There is no difference in the policy position or approach from previous engagement.

The 2025 Regulations were considered by Committee on 27 May 2025 and an Oral Briefing was provided on 5 June 2025.

Financial Implications

The Regulations set the HE student fees for full-time home students at CAFRE as follows:

Higher Education Course	Legacy Fee Framework	Current Fee Framework
Foundation Degree	£1,960	£2,745
Bachelor's Degree	£1,960	£4,985
Postgraduate Certificate	N/A	£985
Postgraduate Diploma	N/A	£1,970
Master's Degree	N/A	£2,955
Reduced Fee	£955	£955

Home students to whom the legacy free framework applies were not charged a student fee amount for part-time HE courses while home students to whom the current fee framework applies were charged a pro rata student fee amount based on course intensity.

The student fee amount charged to students from England, Scotland, Wales, the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands at CAFRE will increase from £9,535 to £9,970 to reflect the level set by the Department of Education for England. This maintains parity with the charge set by all other HE institutions in Northern Ireland.

Students from the EU, Switzerland, Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein and have obtained, or are eligible for, 'pre-settled' or 'settled' status through the EU Settlement Scheme would pay a tuition fee similar to a student ordinarily domiciled in Northern Ireland.

Students who require a Student Visa to study in the UK would be classed as international students and will pay a student fee amount of £10,190 per annum. Students from the EU, Switzerland, Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein who have not obtained, or are not eligible for, 'pre-settled' or 'settled' status through the EU Settlement Scheme would require a Student Visa and would therefore be categorised as international students.

Students from ROI who hold Irish citizenship, under the terms of the Common Travel Area agreement, pay the same student fee amount as a student ordinarily domiciled in Northern Ireland.

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Consultation

No consultation was carried out as this Statutory Rule applies an annual inflationary uplift in line with Department for the Economy (DfE) changes. Since 2022, DAERA's policy position on student fees for home students enrolled on HE courses at CAFRE is to maintain parity with the HE student fee framework set by DfE for HE courses provided by other HE institutions in Northern Ireland. DfE set the annual increase using the forecasted All Items Retail Prices Index Excluding Mortgage Interest Payments (RPI-X), as published by the Office for Budget Responsibility. The DfE laid The Student Fees (Inflation Index) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023 to prescribe the RPI-X rate used for these inflationary increases, providing clarity going forward.

Compliance with Section 24 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998

This Statutory Rule applies an inflationary increase to the student fees charged by CAFRE to students enrolled on one of its HE courses equally. This Statutory Rule is not incompatible with the European Convention on Human Rights or Article 2(1) of the Protocol of Ireland/Northern Ireland in the EU withdrawal agreement (rights of individuals). Further, this Statutory Rule does not discriminate against a person or class of person on the ground of religious belief or political opinion nor does it aid or incite any person to do so.

Equality Impact

In accordance with DAERA's obligations under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the equality implications of these Regulations have been assessed. No differential impact on any of the Section 75 categories were identified. Therefore, these Regulations have been screened out of a full equality impact assessment. The student fee amounts charged to students enrolled on HE courses at CAFRE are the same student fee amounts charged to students enrolled on a course at all other HE institutions in Northern Ireland equally. A copy of the screening document is attached at **Annex C**.

Regulatory Impact / Better Regulation

A Regulatory Impact Assessment is unnecessary as this Statutory Rule has no impact in terms of cost on businesses, charities, social economy enterprises or voluntary bodies. The CAFRE student fees are increased by the predetermined RPI-X rate, in line with DfE.

Rural Needs Impact

In accordance with DAERA's obligations under the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016, the Regulations have been considered with regard to rural needs. The impact assessment concluded that there is no differential impact on rural areas compared to urban areas **Annex D**.

Data Protection Impact

A Data Protection Impact Assessment is not required as there is no involvement of the processing of personal or sensitive personal data.

Child Rights Impact

In line with the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) guidance, a Child Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA) is not required for this amending legislation as it does not relate to the development of new policy or legislation or to the review of existing policy or legislation. The proposed amendment applies a small inflationary increase to the existing legislation which governs the existing student fee policy at the College for higher education students only. NICCY guidance states that CRIAs are not required on measures already in place.

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It is also important to note that the potential impact on children and young people of the proposed amending legislation is considered within the broader statutory Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) completed under the NI Act 1998 as age is one of the Section 75 grounds considered in the EQIA. The EQIA did not identify any age-related equality impacts.

Position in Great Britain (if appropriate).

N/A.

Proposed timing of consideration of the SL1

This SL1 has been submitted to the Committee in accordance with the minimum four-week timeframe. The date on which the Department proposes that the Committee note receipt of the SL1 is 14 May 2026. The Oral Briefing is scheduled for 11 June 2026.

Proposed Operational Date

It is proposed that the rule will come into operation on 1 September 2026.

The draft of the proposed Statutory Rule and Explanatory Memorandum are attached at **Annex A and Annex B** respectively. You will wish to bring this matter to the attention of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

This SL1 is being copied to the Human Rights Commission, Equality Commission and Assembly & Legislation Section of The Executive Office.

Yours sincerely,



Paul McGranaghan
Departmental Assembly Liaison Officer

Enc.

- Annex A: The Agriculture (Student Fees) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026**
- Annex B: Explanatory Memorandum for The Agriculture (Student Fees) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026**
- Annex C: Equality Screening Document - The Agriculture (Student Fees) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026**
- Annex D: Rural Needs Impact Assessment - The Agriculture (Student Fees) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026**

Cc: Human Rights Commission
Equality Commission
Legislative Programme Secretariat

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