Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

Rules for Nurturing Skills Learner Fund
(2024/2025)

A. Background to the Nurturing Skills Learner Fund ("NSLF")

The Nurturing Skills Learner Fund is co-financed by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth ("DCEDIY") and the European Commission.

Through the Nurturing Skills Learner Fund ("NSLF"), the DCEDIY seeks to increase significantly the level of funding for approved early years educators and School-Age Childcare (SAC) practitioners who undertake flexible education programmes in ELC or SAC at Levels 7 and 8 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) while continuing to work in the sector.

From 2024, the NSLF will pay a contribution each year to approved early years educators' and school age childcare practitioners' costs of studying, with funding going directly to the Higher Education Institutions (HEI), in order to minimise the up-front cost barrier facing early years educators and SAC practitioners who wish to upskill.

It is a requirement of funding under the NSLF that the student will remain in employment in the Early Learning and Care (ELC) or SAC sector throughout the period of study. The proposed fund is designed to complement (and avoid double-funding with) other financial supports available to educators/practioners, including through the Free Fees Initiative.

A Glossary of Terms is included at the end of this rules document in order to help you understand some of the terms used in this rules document.

B. Rules Applicable to the Provision of Funding under the NSLF

This document sets out the rules applicable to the provision of funding under the NSLF in respect of applicants seeking to commence an Approved Course during the academic year commencing in 2024/2025.

The rules and conditions in relation to funding under the NSLF are created by the DCEDIY.

Pobal will conduct the application process and operate and manage the provision of funding provided under the NSLF to applicants on behalf of the DCEDIY. Pobal will provide the funding for a student directly to the student's applicable higher education institution.

The DCEDIY reserves the right to amend the rules applicable to the provision of funding under the NSLF. The rules document is published on the DCEDIY website in addition to be being on the Portal.

The onus is on the applicant to familiarise themselves with the rules applicable to the provision of funding in respect of the intended period of study.

The rules document also explains how funding will be allocated to applicants.

While the DCEDIY does not envisage changing the rules during the 2024/2025 academic year in circumstances where it is necessary the DCEDIY will inform all applicants of the changes to the rules document and any impact they may have through the NSLF Student Portal.

This rules document should be read in conjunction with the Conditions for receipt of the NSLF (2024/2025) which are available on the DCEDIY website

The Portal will automatically close for receipt of applications on the closing date. The closing date will be publicised through the NSLF Student Portal and the DCEDIY website.

Calculation of Funding

A. The total amount paid to the relevant HEI for an eligible student is calculated on the basis that all other forms of Government funding that the Eligible Student is in receipt of is deducted from the Eligible Student's Course Fees prior to the NSLF funding calculations being made.

B. Please note that the actual amount of funding to be provided to the HEI on behalf of the student is dependent on;

    a. the Eligible Student being in possession of a NSLF funding letter from the DCEDIY
    b. All forms of Government funding that the Eligible Student is in receipt of being deducted from the Eligible Student's Course Fees prior to the NSLF funding calculations being made.

c. Calculation of funding claim being 80% of the remaining Course Fees to a maximum of €3,200 per academic year.

d. NSLF funding will not exceed a maximum of €3,200 per Eligible Student per academic year irrespective of the total Course Fee.

e. The maximum amount of funding the HEI can receive from Pobal for a student is 80% of the total cost of their course fees/registration (after discounting other governmental assistance such as Free Fees, SUSI etc..) to a maximum cap of €3,200. A maximum 80% will be paid direct to the HEI by Pobal for the student.

f. The remaining 20% (of which 10% will be refunded to the student after completion of the course contingent on working in the sector and completing the relevant exit survey) plus any outstanding fees above €3,200 will be paid by the student directly to the HEI.

g. The student is required to pay the remainder of their course fees plus student levies when requested by the course provider direct to HEI.

h. As part of the DCEDIY and ESF+ Funding there is a requirement that an exit survey be carried out by students who have been in receipt of NSLF funding. Students will be entitled to receive a rebate of 10% of course fees to a max of €400 per year if they can provide proof of employment in the sector 6 months after their graduation and completing the relevant exit survey This rebate will be paid directly to the student.

C. Before Submitting an Application for Funding

Before submitting an application for funding, you must be satisfied that that you:

1. meet the below eligibility criteria; and

2. are in a position to comply with the rules contained in this document and the conditions for funding contained in the Conditions for receipt of the NSLF (2024/2025).

D. Eligibility Criteria

The following eligibility criteria determines whether you are eligible for funding under the NSLF in respect of a period of study on an Approved Course commencing in the academic year 2024/2025.

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In order to be deemed eligible for funding under the NSLF, you must:

- be working with children or be working as an out of ratio manager in a Tusla-registered Early Learning and Care (ELC) or School-Age Childcare (SAC) service, and the service you work in must have a **current** signed Core Funding contract with the DCEDIY by the above closing date for the receipt of completed applications for funding under the NSLF;

- have worked within an ELC or SAC service for the six months prior to receipt of application;

- provide your Core Funding Staff ID as proof of working in that service. Your service manager/Core Funding administrator will be able to provide you with this information;

- have submitted a completed application for funding by no later than the above closing date for the receipt of funding;

- provide additional supporting documentation if required to confirm that you have worked in a Tusla registered ELC or SAC service six months prior to receipt of application.

- ensure all relevant documentation required in order to complete your application is uploaded to the NSLF Student Portal within the required timeframe;

- have applied for an Approved Course before the closing date for the receipt of completed applications;

- communicate with the institution directly to determine if the HEI has signed up to and is participating in the NSLF;

- ensure that your course registration status with the relevant HEI is and remains up to date with the HEI where you are registered;

- submit a completed application together with all of the required supporting documentation through the process outlined on the NSLF Student Portal;

- inform the Administrator (Pobal) if any information you have provided in your application is no longer correct and if you no longer comply with the criteria for eligibility;

- be a **new entrant** to an Approved Course for the academic year commencing 2024/2025;

- not be an ELC educator or SAC practitioner currently undertaking the completion of an Approved Course or an equivalent degree; and

- not be an ELC educator or SAC practitioner who has already completed an Approved Course or equivalent degree.

Where changes are made to your application process after the closing date a student must inform Pobal of such a necessary change by email to NSLF@pobal.ie e.g a change to the matters contained in a completed application for funding, including where you are no longer in employment in the setting that formed part of your application. Where necessary, Pobal will bring this information to the attention of the DCEDIY and the DCEDIY reserves the right to determine whether any such change impacts your eligibility for funding under the NSLF.

Eligibility for NSLF will be determined having regard to the information provided in the required application form. Accordingly, the onus is on you to ensure that you have provided all relevant information and supporting documentation in your completed application for funding.

The DCEDIY, in its absolute discretion, shall determine whether an applicant for funding under the NSLF meets the above eligibility criteria. In relation to the above, the DCEDIY shall determine whether you are currently undertaking, or have undertaken an equivalent degree, having regard to the list of approved courses contained at Appendix 1 and on the DCEDIY website.

Applicants who do not meet the above eligibility criteria will not proceed any further in the assessment process. The DCEDIY will inform applicants whose applications do not meet the above eligibility criteria, through the NSLF Student Portal or by email together with the reasons why, in the view of the DCEDIY, the applicant does not meet the required eligibility criteria.

All information submitted by you as part of the application process must be accurate and complete. Failure to submit all of the required information together with the required supporting documentation may result in the exclusion of your application from the application process. The submission of incorrect or misleading information will result in the exclusion of your application from the application process.

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E. Selection Process in respect of Eligible Applicants

Pobal will review all applications received through the NSLF Student Portal on behalf of the DCEDIY based on the selection criteria set out below

Applicants for funding under the NSLF which meet the above criteria shall be considered an "Eligible Applicant".

The NSLF will be introduced in pilot phase for 2024 and is budget limited. As the level of uptake remains uncertain, it is important to ensure the NSLF operates within the budget available.

Therefore, the number of successful NSLF applicants will be limited by the available funding. The proposed approach to selection of applicants reflects the following objectives:

- Commitments in First 5 and Nurturing Skills to support a graduate-led workforce, given evidence on the impact of graduate leadership on the quality of provision.

- The targeting of the Equal Participation Model (EPM) on supports for services catering for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, given evidence on the greater impact of quality provision on children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Having regard to the above DCEDIY policy objectives, if demand for NSLF funding exceed the available budget then the selection of Applicants will be based on the following criteria in the following prioritisation order (with 1 being the highest level of priority and 4 being the lowest level of priority):

1. the number of graduates in the applicant's service, with priority for applicants from services with no graduates.

2. EPM Index, with priority for applicants from services supporting the most disadvantaged children (i.e. index 1 = first 9% of most disadvantaged services, 2 = second 9% of most disadvantages service and 3 = remaining services),

3. the role of the applicant in a service, with priority for those in lead educator or manager roles.

4. if, after the above prioritisation has been applied and has not been decisive, random selection will be applied.

In practice what this means is all applications received if the Fund is oversubscribed will be assessed against scenario 1. The DCEDIY will try to allocate as many places as possible to applicants using this scenario. However, where there are more applicants than funding available, the DCEDIY will allocate funding to the applicants who fit into scenario 1 only and there will be no need to move to scenario 2 or 3 or 4.

However, where there is still funding remaining after the application of scenario one, then those remaining applications will be assessed against scenario 2 and the EPM identification model. As above, the DCEDIY will try to allocate as many places as possible to applicants using this scenario 2. However, where there are more applicants than funding still remaining the DCEDIY will allocate funding to the remaining applicants who fit into scenario 2 and there will be no need to move to scenario 3 or 4.

Where there is still funding remaining after the application of scenario one and two then those remaining applications will be assessed against scenario 3 and the role of the applicant in the ELC or SAC service. As above, the DCEDIY will try to allocate as many places as possible to applicants using this scenario 3. However, where there are more applicants than funding still remaining the DCEDIY will allocate funding to the remaining applicants who fit into scenario 3 by way of random selection using an objective random selection process or application.

The above prioritisation order means that:
- An educator/practitioner who is from a service with no graduates will be prioritised over a lead educator / manager from a service that already has another graduate
- An educator/practitioner from a disadvantaged service with no graduates will be prioritised over a Lead educator/Manager from a less disadvantaged service with no graduates
- A Lead educator/Manager in a service with no graduates will be prioritised over an Educator from a service with no graduates where both are in services with the same level of disadvantage.

The scenarios below illustrate how the criteria will be applied based on an example of 10 NSLF funded places available for 15 Applications.

Table (a) shows the number of applicants (and their selection criteria data) who submitted an NSLF application. Table (b) shows the list of 10 applications that were successful in receiving NSLF funding

Table (a) Applications received

App no.	EPM index	Grads in Service	Highest Role
Applicant 1	1	0	Educator
Applicant 3	1	0	Manager
Applicant 6	2	0	Educator
Applicant 4	3	1	Manager
Applicant 5	3	1	Educator
Applicant 7	2	0	Lead Ed
Applicant 2	3	0	Lead Ed
Applicant 8	2	1	Manager
Applicant 9	2	1	Manager
Applicant 10	3	1	Manager
Applicant 11	1	0	Manager
Applicant 12	3	1	Educator
Applicant 13	2	0	Educator
Applicant 14	3	1	Manager
Applicant 15	2	0	Manager

Table (b) NSLF successful applicants

App no.	EPM index	Grads in Service	Highest Role
Applicant 3	1	0	Manager
Applicant 11	1	0	Manager
Applicant 1	1	0	Educator
Applicant 15	2	0	Manager
Applicant 7	2	0	Lead Ed
Applicant 6	2	0	Educator
Applicant 13	2	0	Educator
Applicant 2	3	0	Lead Ed
Applicant 8	2	1	Manager
Applicant 9	2	1	Manager

How the selection process works

Firstly, applications from services without a graduate are selected. In this criteria sub group, if the number of applications are less than or equal to 10 all applications are offered funding. However, if only 6 places were available to be offered for this sub group, the next level of priority would be the EPM Index, then the staff role and finally random selection. In this case (as illustrated in table (c) below), all applications from individuals working in services without graduates will be offered places as there are only 8 applicants.

Table (c) Applications from services without no graduates

App no.	EPM index	Grads in Service	Highest Role	
Applicant 1	1	0	Educator	Offer
Applicant 3	1	0	Manager	Offer
Applicant 11	1	0	Manager	Offer
Applicant 6	2	0	Educator	Offer
Applicant 7	2	0	Lead Ed	Offer
Applicant 13	2	0	Educator	Offer
Applicant 15	2	0	Manager	Offer
Applicant 2	3	0	Lead Ed	Offer

Next, as all applicants from services with no graduates have been successful and more places are available to offer, applications from services with graduates are next assessed. Here the applications are prioritised by EPM index first. In Table (d) below, there are 2 applications in this sub set. Therefore in this case applicants 8 and 9 will receive the offers based on EPM index prioritisation.

Table (d) Applications from Managers/ Lead educators

App no.	EPM index	Grads in Service	Highest Role	
Applicant 8	2	1	Manager	Offer
Applicant 9	2	1	Manager	Offer
Applicant 4	3	1	Manager	
Applicant 10	3	1	Manager	
Applicant 14	3	1	Manager	

Table (b) then shows the full list on 10 successful applicants based on the selection criteria used.

F. Successful Applicants

Where an Applicant is deemed successful for funding under the NSLF (a "Successful Applicant"), they will receive a Letter of Conditional Funding through the NSLF Student Portal or by email from Pobal.

Successful applicants must provide their Letter of Conditional Funding to the relevant Institution as part of their registration details in order to receive NSLF funding.

Where a Successful Applicant is no longer registered on an Approved Course (for reasons such as but not limited to; withdrawal, deferral or repeating a semester then the Successful Applicant must inform Pobal by email to NSLF@pobal.ie setting out the reasons as to why they are no longer registered on an Approved Course. Where necessary Pobal will bring this information to the attention of the DCEDIY and the DCEDIY may, and subject to the reasons provided, withhold the period of funding for a period specified in writing by the DCEDIY. The decision to withhold the provision of funding is strictly at the discretion of funding and any such funding must be availed of by the Successful Applicant within the period specified by the DCEDIY.

Successful Applicants who complete an Approved Course will be requested through the NSFL Student Funding to and must complete an exit survey within six months following the completion of the Approved Course.

Appendix 1:

Approved Courses

Link to NSLF eligible courses for the academic year 2024/2025 QAB approved can be found on the Nurturing Skills Learner Fund page- link- www.gov.ie/NurturingSkillsLearnerFund

Or at the link here.

Appendix 2:

Glossary of Terms

In this document each capitalised term will have the meaning set out as follows:

"Approved course" means ELC degrees (level 7 and 8) that have been approved by the QAB by 1 November 2023 and that are thereby approved for recognition by the DCEDIY. A full list of NSLF approved courses for academic year 2024/2025 is available at Appendix 1

"Course Fees" means Course Tuition fee and Student Contribution fee only. It does not include institutional levies or student support costs.

"Data" means all Confidential Information, whether in oral or written (including electronic) form, created by or in any way originating with the DCEDIY (including but not limited to its employees, agents, independent contractors and/or Sub-contractors) and all information that is the output of any computer processing, or other electronic manipulation of any information that was created by or in any way originating with the DCEDIY provided under this Agreement and includes any Personal Data.

"Data Controller" has the meaning given under the Data Protection Laws.

"Data Processor" has the meaning given under the Data Protection Laws.

"Data Protection Laws" means all applicable national and EU data protection laws, regulations and guidelines, including but not limited to Regulation (EU) 2016/679 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data, and repealing Directive 95/46/EC

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(the "General Data Protection Regulation"), and any guidelines and codes of practice issued by the Office of the Data Protection Commission or other supervisory authority for data protection in Ireland.

"Data Subject" has the meaning given under the Data Protection Laws.

"Data Subject Access Request" means a request made by a Data Subject in accordance with rights granted under the Data Protection Laws to access his or her Personal Data.

"DCEDIY" means the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

"Early Learning and Care" or "ELC" means any regulated arrangement that provides learning and care for children from birth to compulsory primary school age.

"Eligible Applicant" means a staff member in a Tusla-registered ELC or SAC service where the service they work in has a signed and active Core Funding Agreement with DCEDIY and as set out in these rules. This aligns with Partnership for Public Good objectives to see Core Funding unlocking supports for the sector.

"Eligible Student" means an applicant registered by the Institution(s) on an approved course, whose eligibility for the NSLF has been verified by DCEDIY

"Funding" means the support provided to Eligible Students from the NSLF (paid directly to the Institution) to attend an Approved Course as detailed in Appendix A for the initial academic year 2024/2025 and for subsequent years, subject to sufficient budget allocation.

"Government Supports" means financial assistance provided by any Government Department or Agency towards the full or partial cost of undertaking a higher education award. A list is available at https://hea.ie/funding-governance-performance/funding/student-finance/ and includes the Free Fees Scheme, SUSI grants and a range of other financial supports.

"Institution" means the provider of an Approved Course as listed in Appendix 1.

"Nurturing Skills" means the Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age Childcare (SAC), 2022-2028" (www.gov.ie/nurturingskills).

"Nurturing Skills Learner Fund"" means an initiative, administered by Pobal on behalf of DCEDIY, through which those working in ELC and SAC settings undertaking level 7-8 qualifications that are in line with the new standards may qualify for financial supports to reduce the cost of participating in those courses.

"NSLF Student Portal" is an online platform that serves as a hub to enable staff working in Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School Age Childcare (SAC) to apply for NSLF Funding and access information regarding the NSLF"

"Personal Data" has the meaning given under Data Protection Laws.

"Processing" has the meaning given under the Data Protection .Laws.

"Professional Award Criteria Guidelines" or "PACG" means the Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines (PACG) for Initial Professional Education (Level 7 and Level 8) Degree Programmes for the Early Learning and Care (ELC) Sector in Ireland as agreed by the Minister of Education and the Minister of Children, published at-https://www.gov.ie/en/organisation-information/c2e6b-qualifications-advisory-board-qab-for-the-early-learning-and-care-elc-sector/#list-of-approved-programmes-with-adherence-to-the-professional-award-criteria-and-guidelines.

"Qualifications Advisory Board" or "QAB" means the body which was jointly instituted by the Minister for Education and the then Minister for Children and Youth Affairs on a non-statutory basis to review Initial Professional Education (Level 7 and Level 8) Degree Programmes for the Early Learning and Care (ELC) Sector. The QAB reviews Initial Professional Education (Level 7 and Level 8) Degree Programmes for the Early Learning and Care (ELC) Sector and advises both Departments whether a programme, once validated as a professional award, can be considered for inclusion on a list of professional qualifications for the Early Learning and Care sector. Further information in relation to the QAB is available here-:https://www.gov.ie/en/organisation-information/c2e6b-qualifications-advisory-board-qab-for-the-early-learning-and-care-elc-sector/

"Quality and Qualifications Ireland" or "QQI" means the State agency responsible for promoting the quality, integrity and reputation of Ireland's further and higher education system (https://www.qqi.ie/).

"School Age Childcare" or "SAC" means any school age service that is regulated under the Child Care Act 1991.

"The Minister" means the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

"Institution" means Educations providers of QAB approved programme registered on the Pobal Early Years Portal eligible for NSLF Funding

"DCEDIY website for Nurturing Skills Learner Fund can be found at the following link Nurturing Skills Learner Fund page- link- www.gov.ie/NurturingSkillsLearnerFund