

Summary of Responses to the Consultation on Further Education Support and Charging Policy at the College of Food, Agriculture and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE)

The consultation on Further Education (FE) Support and Charging Policy at the College of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) opened on 1 June 2020 and closed on 18 September 2020. This was longer than the normal consultation period recognising the challenges that stakeholders may have faced in preparing a consultation response during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Respondents

1. In total, 22 responses were received – 19 from organisations and 3 from individuals¹:
 - Ulster University (3 separate but similar responses were received from Ulster University (UUx3);
 - South West College (SWC);
 - Northern Ireland Food and Drink Association (NIFDA);
 - Education Training Inspectorate (ETI);
 - National Union of Students – Union of Students in Ireland (NUS-USI);
 - Newry, Mourne and Down District Council (NMDC);
 - Ulster Arable Society (UAS);
 - Rural Community Network (RCN);
 - Equine Council for Northern Ireland (ECNI);
 - Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU);
 - Mid Ulster District Council (MUJDC);
 - Education Authority (EA) Omagh – FE Grants Section;
 - Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers Association (NIAPA);
 - Farmers for Action (FFA);
 - Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster (YFCU);
 - Sinn Féin (SF);
 - DfE;
 - Individual 1 (i1);
 - Individual 2 (i2); and
 - Individual 3 (i3).
2. Results have been calculated based on the number of responses to each question. 21 respondents answered the six main consultation questions in relation to the future FE support proposals and the current FE charging policy.
3. One respondent (DfE) did not answer the consultation questions but made a single comment raising concern in relation to the impact increased support at CAFRE will have on FE Colleges offering similar courses.
4. The Departments response to the consultation is included on page 11 of this document.

¹ Individuals have been anonymised and allocated a number.

PROPOSAL A: DAERA PROPOSES OFFERING SUPPORT TO PART-TIME FE STUDENTS AND AS A CONSEQUENCE, ELIGIBILITY TO THE OTHER STUDENT SUPPORT MECHANISMS AVAILABLE SUCH AS CHILDCARE SUPPORT AND THE CAFRE HARDSHIP FUND.

Question 1: Do you agree with offering support to part-time FE students?

5. 21 respondents answered this question and **100%** agreed with offering support to part-time FE students. Respondents include all those listed in Para. 1 except DfE.

Please give reasons for your choice and if you consider providing support for books and equipment alone (maximum £400) is sufficient?

6. The majority of reasons given for their choice included:
- offering support to part-time students would address the current inequality between part-time and full-students at CAFRE, and between part-time FE students at CAFRE and those in the wider FE sector in NI;
 - extending support to part-time students would widen access and encourage participation in lifelong learning within the Agri-food sector; and
 - opening up access to additional support for part-time students such as childcare support.
7. NUS-USI noted that while they very much welcome the proposal to offer support to part-time students, they do not believe that the proposed maximum grant of £400 per eligible student would sufficiently support *all* of those eligible part-time students, particularly in the era of Covid-19.
8. Similarly, UFU also note that the amount of support required may differ amongst students and should therefore be flexible. They consider that an additional amount of support may also be required for the purchase of course resources in light of the COVID-19 pandemic as this will result in reduced sharing of equipment and books etc. among students.
9. The Equine Council for Northern Ireland and the UAS noted that support for the cost of technology such as laptops, iPads / tablets should be considered particularly as many books / resources are now downloaded by students.

PROPOSAL B: DAERA PROPOSES APPLYING AN INFLATIONARY INCREASE TO BOTH THE ‘AT HOME’ AND ‘AWAY FROM HOME’ GRANT RATES.

Question 2: Please indicate which statement you agree with in relation to the ‘At Home’ grant.

10. 21 respondents answered this question.

Proposal	Number (%) who agreed with this statement	Respondent
The maximum ‘At Home’ grant rate should increase from £1,659 to £2,400 per annum	15 (71%)	UUx3, SWC, NMDC, UAS, RCN, ECNI, MUDC, EA, NIAPA, SF, NIFDA, FFA, YFCU
The maximum ‘At Home’ grant rate should remain unchanged	2 (10%)	i2, i3
I have an alternative proposal which I have detailed below	4 (19%)	NUS, UFU, ETI, i1

11. 3 of the 4 alternative proposals (NUS, UFU & ETI) would result in an increase to the grant rate equal to or above £2,400 therefore overall the total number of respondents in support of increasing the At Home grant rate is 18 (**86%**).

12. A number of respondents, in support of the proposed increase, went on to explain their choice by noting that the increased At Home grant rate would widen access and participation, while also increasing student pathways and improving student retention. The proposal to increase the rate was welcomed as it has not been reviewed or increased for 14 years. RCN expanded upon this by suggesting that this is the *minimum* increase which should be considered given the period of time since the last review / increase.

13. 2 respondents did not support increasing the At Home grant rate. One of them, Individual 3, explained that a slight increase designated as emergency hardship funding could be granted for those most in need or those who are required to undertake additional travel in excess of their regular attendance travel distance.

Detail of Alternative Proposal for the ‘At Home’ grant:

14. NUS-USI and UFU suggest that the At Home grant rate should be increased further from £1,659 to £2,600, as the Review identified this as the approximate cost per annum of studying at CAFRE while living at home. UFU highlighted increased travel costs incurred by students as a result of the distances involved and the reduced public transport links in and around CAFRE campuses.

15. ETI agreed that the rate should be increased in line with the proposed amount and consideration of the amount received by the students should also depend on the distance they are required to travel to attend college.

16. Individual 1 agreed with an increase to the At Home grant rate in principle however they propose that this increase should only cover the mileage expenses incurred by a student travelling to and from their college campus and should be capped at an agreed rate. Individual 1 has also noted that, in their opinion, a student living close to campus yet receiving the same grant rate as a student living a good distance away from campus, would be an inequality.

Additional Comments

17. Farmers for Action, the UAS and the ETI suggest that the grant rate should be subject to more regular review or linked to inflation.

Question 3: Please indicate which statement you agree with in relation to the 'Away from Home' grant:

18. 21 respondents answered this question.

Proposal	Number (%) who agreed with this statement	Respondent
The maximum 'Away from Home' grant rate should increase from £2,362 to £3,400	16 (76%)	UUx3, SWC, NMDC, UAS, RCN, ECNI, MUDC, EA, NIAPA, SF, i1, NIFDA, FFA, YFCU
The maximum 'Away from Home' grant rate should remain unchanged	1 (5%)	i2
I have an alternative proposal which I have detailed below	4 (19%)	NUS, UFU, ETI, i3

19. 3 of the 4 alternative proposals (NUS, UFU & ETI) would result in an increase to the grant rate equal to or above £3,400 therefore overall the total number of respondents in support of increasing the Away from Home grant rate is 19 (90%).

20. A number of respondents, in support of the proposed increase, went on to explain their choice by noting that the proposed grant rate would better meet the costs associated with studying at CAFRE while living away from home.

Detail of Alternative Proposal for the 'Away from Home' grant:

21. NUS and UFU suggest that the 'Away from Home' grant rate should be increased further to £3,800 per annum as identified by the Review as the cost per annum of studying at CAFRE while living on campus or in lodgings. UFU also notes that travel costs incurred by 'Away from Home' students, albeit less than those who travel daily, should still be considered.

22. Under an Alternative Proposals the ETI agreed that the 'Away from Home' grant rate should be increased in line with the proposed amount however they went on to suggest alternative methods of administering the grant (Paragraph 25 below).

23. Individual 3 noted that a slight increase designated as emergency hardship funding could be granted for those most in need or those who are required to undertake additional travel in excess of their regular attendance travel distance.

Additional Comments

24. Farmers for Action, the UAS and the ETI suggest consideration should be given to making the amount of grant paid index linked or subject to more regular reviews.
25. ETI also suggested moving to the fortnightly payment of the grant similar to the Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) as a single payment at the start of each term is a risk for those students who have poor budgeting skills and could potentially be a factor in students having to access the hardship fund earlier in the term. They also recommend the cost of accommodation should also be paid directly to the provider.

PROPOSAL C: DAERA PROPOSES RAISING THE LOWER HOUSEHOLD INCOME THRESHOLD (CURRENTLY £23,660) TO £31,000.

Question 4: Please indicate which statement you agree with in relation to the total gross lower household income threshold:

26. 21 respondents answered this question.

Proposal	Number (%) who agreed with this statement	Respondent
The total gross lower household income threshold should increase from £23,660 to £31,000	18 (86%)	UUx3, SWC, ETI, NUS, NMDC, UAS, RCN, ECNI, UFU, MUDC, EA, NIAPA, SF, i1, i2, i3
The total gross lower household income threshold should remain unchanged	2 (9%)	NIFDA, FFA
I have an alternative proposal which I have detailed below	1 (5%)	YFCU

27. Overall the total number of respondents in support of increasing the total gross lower household income threshold is 18 (**86%**).
28. Respondents who supported increasing the lower household income threshold welcomed the proposal as the current threshold has been frozen for 12 years and the move would target those most in need, allowing them to access the maximum level of support, while potentially reducing reliance on Hardship Funding.

29. NIFDA and Farmers for Action (9%) stated that the gross lower household income threshold should remain unchanged. No further explanation or comments were made about their preference.

Detail of the Alternative Proposal for the lower household income threshold:

30. 1 respondent (5%), YFCU, proposed lowering the threshold as an alternative for the gross lower household income threshold. No further detail is provided.

Additional Comments

31. NUS suggested that while they welcome the proposed increase to the gross lower threshold, an inflationary increase should be taken into account on an annual basis. They also cautioned against placing excess reliance on parental income as the basis of the assessment for grant as a student may be estranged from their family, however it is difficult for them to prove this due to the prohibitive level of paperwork required to do so.

PROPOSAL D: DAERA PROPOSES REDUCING THE TOTAL GROSS UPPER HOUSEHOLD INCOME THRESHOLD (CURRENTLY £52,622) TO £41,000.

Question 5: Please indicate which statement you agree with in relation to the upper household income threshold.

32. 21 respondents answered this question.

Proposal	Number (%) who agreed with this statement	Respondent
The total gross upper household income threshold should decrease from £52,622 to £41,000	11 (52%)	UUx3, SWC, NMDC, UAS, RCN, ECNI, i2, YFCU, NIFDA
The total gross upper household income threshold should remain unchanged	9 (43%)	ETI, NUS, UFU, i3 MUDC, EA, NIAPA, SF, i1
I have an alternative proposal which I have detailed below	1 (5%)	FFA

33. Overall the total number of respondents in support of decreasing the upper household income threshold is 11 (52%).

34. Comments by respondents who supported decreasing the upper threshold included that this proposal would allow support to be targeted towards those most in need and it is a logical step to take to bring the DAERA Award in line with other funders.

35. 9 respondents (43%) state that the upper household income threshold should remain unchanged. ETI noted that the proposal to reduce the upper income threshold would have the unintended outcome of reducing the amount of grant payable to those with a household income of between £37,000 and £41,000. Sinn Féin stated that the comparisons which have been made with DfE are not reflective of the circumstances faced by CAFRE students, e.g. the specialist courses provided by CAFRE are not available elsewhere in NI meaning that students may have to travel significant distances to CAFRE campuses to complete their chosen course of study. Sinn Féin also note that there appears to be no significant saving associated with reducing the upper household income threshold.

Detail of Alternative Proposal for the total gross upper household income threshold:

36. 1 respondent, Farmers for Action, made an alternative proposal for the upper household income threshold stating that it should be linked to annual farm income statistics. No further detail is provided.

FE SUPPORT PROPOSALS IN ORDER OF PREFERENCE FOR IMPLEMENTATION

37. Respondents were also asked to rank each of the FE support proposals in order of preference for implementation should it be necessary for the Department to prioritise them (1 = most preferred option through to 4 – least preferred option)

38. 19 respondents answered this section of the consultation and the proposals were ranked as follows:

- **Priority 1:** Proposal A Extending support to part-time FE students - 10 respondents put this as their first priority (53%) and overall Proposal A ranked first.
- **Priority 2:** Proposal B Increase the amount of 'At Home' and 'Away from Home' Grant available - 6 respondents put this as their first priority (32%) and overall Proposal B ranked second.
- **Priority 3:** Proposal C Raise the total gross lower household income threshold - 1 respondent put this as their first priority (5%) but overall Proposal C ranked third.
- **Priority 4:** Proposal D Reduce the total gross upper household income threshold - 2 respondents put this as their first priority (10%) but overall Proposal D ranked fourth.

39. A breakdown of how each respondent ranked the proposals is attached at **Annex A**

DAERA FE CHARGING POLICY

Question 7: Should the Department consider introducing charges for Further Education courses?

40. 21 respondents answered this question.

The Introduction of Fees	Number (%) who agreed with this statement	Respondent
YES	3 (14%)	NIFDA, ECNI, i1
NO	18 (86%)	UUx3, SWC, NMDC, UAS, RCN, MUDC, EA, NIAPA, SF, FFA, YFCU, NUS, UFU, ETI, i3, i2

41. The majority (86%) of respondents did not support the introduction of charges for FE courses. Comments included: that students should have access to FE courses at CAFRE without having to pay a fee as this is in keeping with the DAERA Knowledge Framework; that keeping these FE courses free of charge would prevent a barrier to education, which could be detrimental and discriminatory against those from lower income households; and the introduction of fees may discourage students from choosing to study at CAFRE, which could impact on the future workforce of the Agri-food sector.

42. Individual 2 does not support the introduction of charges at CAFRE, however does suggest that a charge could be considered for a student who continues to repeat the same level of course, without showing any academic progression.

If you answered YES to Question 7 above please also detail on what basis these charges should be applied e.g. by age group, type of course, household income, part time/full time etc.

43. 3 respondents (NIFDA, ECNI & i1) think that DAERA should consider the introduction of charges for FE courses at CAFRE. The Equine Council for NI suggested that charges be introduced as those outside of the agriculture sector are required to pay for their education. NIFDA suggest that the introduction of charges should be considered for non-core, part-time courses only. Individual 1 suggests that introducing a fee may improve the calibre of students attending CAFRE and also highlighted that by charging a fee, students would expect a higher level of service and quality of teaching at CAFRE.

ARE THERE ANY OTHER OPTIONS FOR FURTHER EDUCATION SUPPORT WHICH YOU BELIEVE THE DEPARTMENT SHOULD CONSIDER OR ANY OTHER INFORMATION YOU WOULD LIKE TO ADD TO YOUR RESPONSE?

44. A number of respondents made additional comments. Key comments and other options identified for FE support are detailed below.

- Individual 1 suggested that consideration should be given to a Looked after Young Persons Bursary and that academic progression rules should also be considered.
- UAS suggested that provision should be made to facilitate the engagement of CAFRE students with other courses, either remotely or through attendance at other educational institutions in GB / ROI, to encourage additional learning in specialist enterprises and emerging technologies. While recognising the benefits of practical, hands-on training, UAS also note that the remote learning brought about by the Covid 19 emergency should continue to be embraced as this method of learning is ideally suited to the dispersed community of CAFRE students.
- UFU believe that a household income figure, which is used to determine the level of support a student is eligible for, should be calculated once tax, pension, national insurance and the cost of dependent children has been deducted. They also believe that the income of any working siblings living at home should not be taken into consideration when calculating total household income. UFU stated extra consideration is required to ensure that poor rural public transport is not a barrier to education.
- NIAPA agree that education has an important role in the progress and evolution of agricultural practice and suggest that farmers today, and in the future, may require education to keep up with technological advances and to improve the long term efficiency of the farming industry. NIAPA also highlighted the benefits of having young, educated farmers and suggested potential incentives such as top up payments, better rates of grants etc. as a means of nurturing and supporting young farmers into education.
- Farmers for Action state that Government should support education in full and should fully advertise what support is available to those who are eligible.
- Sinn Féin notes that the Covid-19 pandemic is ongoing and will further impact on household incomes. Farm income has already dropped by over 25% since last year and as this has been exacerbated by the current crisis, the number of students seeking support may increase. Sinn Féin suggests that the Department fully consider the impact of the Covid-19 crisis before making a final decision on future FE support at CAFRE. Sinn Féin also believe that FE support policy should be reviewed more regularly to take account of the

increasing cost of living and also suggest the Department should fully considers a funding stream to alleviate transport costs incurred by CAFRE students.

ARE THERE ANY FURTHER COMMENTS THAT YOU WOULD LIKE TO ADD IN REGARDS TO THE PUBLISHED IMPACT ASSESSMENTS

Rural Needs Impact Assessment Comments

45. Seven respondents provided comments on the RNIA completed on the proposed changes to FE Support and Charging Policy at CAFRE. Key points included:

- EA noted the poor public transport links in rural communities and the distance and costs associated with travelling to and from CAFRE campuses, and suggest that consideration be given to a non means tested standard amount/flat rate grant towards travel costs.
- Sinn Féin acknowledge that the skills challenge in rural areas is significant and recognise that the financial support provided by CAFRE widens participation to education and is pivotal to the sustainability and growth of the rural economy and rural communities.

Equality Impact Assessment Screening Comments

46. Seven respondents provided comments on the Equality screening completed on the proposed changes to FE Support and Charging Policy at CAFRE. Key points included:

- ETI consider that the rationale for charging for a number of part-time courses is unclear and further note that these courses, where fees are charged, would tend to attract more female students e.g. animal care and veterinary nursing.
- UFU believe that reducing the upper household income has the potential to have major impact rather than minor impact as stated within the EQIA. UFU also believe that childcare support should be a priority for rural women who already have restricted access to flexible, affordable, accessible quality childcare compared to urban women. UFU ask that the Department acknowledge that childcare is both a social and economic issue and encouraging mothers to return to work or training should be supported by affordable childcare provision.
- EA have stated that if these proposals are implemented, consideration must be given on how to deal with funding for students who are mid-way through a course. If they will have commenced their course, having been assessed against the 'old rules', will they continue to be assessed against the 'old rules' or will they be assessed against the new scheme for their remaining year(s).

- Sinn Féin note that the current grant available to CAFRE students falls well below the estimated cost of attendance and strongly recommend that DAERA address this deficit.

Departmental Response

Taking into account the outcomes of the consultation the following proposals for future FE support at CAFRE have been approved for implementation from September 2021:

Extend means-tested FE support to part-time students for books and equipment associated with their study (up to £400 maximum/year)

The 2018/19 Review of Support and Charging at CAFRE found disparity between full-time and part-time students in respect of eligibility for FE awards and hardship support at CAFRE. This recommendation will widen FE support to part-time students and, as a consequence, eligibility for other support mechanisms. It will also end the disparity in the treatment of full and part-time students.

A change in part-time support policy would also mean support will be available to participants of new part-time courses which are currently being developed by CAFRE such as the OCN NI Level 3 Extended Diploma in Agricultural Business and may encourage a commitment to lifelong learning.

Increase the maximum amount of grant available for students residing at home and travelling to the College each day from £1,659 to £2,400 annually and increase the maximum amount of grant available for students residing on campus or in lodgings nearby from £2,362 to £3,400 annually

The Review found the FE grant is not sufficiently well targeted towards those students with the greatest need; may be focused on too wide a range of students and does not address the varying travel costs of students attending CAFRE. This recommendation aims to target support at those students most in need and address the varying travel costs students attending CAFRE may incur.

Historically, the majority of students applying for additional hardship funding fall within the lowest household income band (less than £23,660) demonstrating the current maximum grant is insufficient to cover the costs associated with undertaking a course of study at CAFRE. The increased maximum grant amounts should go some way to addressing this issue, therefore reducing the need for students to rely on hardship funds.

The proposed figures (£2,400 & £3,400) were calculated by applying inflationary increases to the original rates - they take account of the steady increase in the cost of living since the grant rates were last reviewed in 2006 and are more reflective of the actual costs incurred by CAFRE students as evidenced by the Review.

Raise the lower household income threshold below which students are eligible for maximum grant from £23,660 (set in 2008) to £27,330 (to be reviewed 2024). Maintain the upper household income threshold at its current level of £52,622.

The current lower household income threshold (£23,660) was set in 2008 and has been frozen for the last 12 years. As stated above the Review found the FE grant is not sufficiently well targeted towards those students with the greatest need and the majority of students applying for hardship funds fall within the lowest household income band (less than £23,660).

By raising the lower household income threshold, this recommendation, in conjunction with Recommendation 2 aims to target support at those students most in need and to reduce reliance on hardship funding.

A new total gross lower household income figure of £31,000 was proposed in the consultation. This figure is in line with the 2008 figure once inflation has been applied, and maintaining the purchasing power of the original amount. However, on the advice of DAERA economists, it is too early at this stage to predict the impact of the current COVID-19 pandemic on household incomes in the future. There is also uncertainty regarding the potential impact of the UK exit from the EU on household incomes, therefore DAERA economists have advised any changes to the household income thresholds of the FE support scheme introduced in September 2021 be reviewed after two years (2024) to ensure they are still appropriate in a post COVID/post Brexit NI economy.

Taking on board the economist's advice we consider it more prudent to introduce a two-step change to the lower income threshold. This involves increasing the threshold to £27,330 (the midpoint between the current and proposed figures) from 2021 followed by a review in 2024 to determine whether it is appropriate to fully implement the increase of the lower income threshold to £31,000.

The consultation also included a proposal which would have seen the upper household income threshold reduced from £52,622 to £41,000. However this would have the knock on effect of decreasing the amount of grant paid to students with household incomes between the lower threshold and the new upper threshold (£41,000). This is an unintended consequence of this proposal, and as such it was decided to maintain the upper household income threshold at its current level of £52,622.

Maintain the current policy of not charging for FE courses at CAFRE.

The cost of full-time and the vast majority of part-time FE courses at CAFRE are largely met in full by DAERA. The 2018/19 Review did not find any evidence to support the introduction of fees for FE courses at CAFRE, either for full-time or part-time courses, however the Review did recommend "obtaining views on DAERA's current charging policy and potential alternative options".

In keeping with the majority (86%) of respondents who did not support the introduction of charges for FE courses, the Department is not minded to change current FE charging policy at this time.

ANNEX A - Priority Rankings for Implementation of Proposals A – D (broken down by Respondent)

Respondent	Proposal A: Extending support to part-time FE students	Proposal B: Increase the amount of 'At Home' and 'Away From Home' grant available	Proposal C: Raise the total gross lower household income threshold	Proposal D: Reduce the total gross upper household income threshold
Individual 1	2	1	3	4
UU 1	2	1	4	3
South West College	1	2	3	4
NIFDA	4	2	3	1
ETI	1	3	2	4
NUS-USI	Did not respond to this Question.			
UU 2	1	2	3	4
Newry, Mourne & Down District Council	1	2	4	3
UAS	2	1	3	4
RCN	2	3	1	4
Equine Council for NI	1	2	3	4

ANNEX A - Priority Rankings for Implementation of Proposals A – D (broken down by Respondent)

Individual 2	1	4	2	3
UU 3	1	2	4	3
Individual 3	1	2	3	4
UFU	1	2	3	4
Mid Ulster District Council	3	1	2	4
EA Omagh - FE Grants Section	3	1	2	4
NIAPA	1	2	3	4
Farmers for Action	Did not respond to this Question.			
YFCU	2	3	4	1
Sinn Féin	3	1	2	4