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DAERA Further Education Support and Charging Stakeholder Consultation
Policy Development Branch
Policy, Economics and Statistics Division
Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
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Review of Further Education Support and Charging Policy at CAFRE Consultation

From the President

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to this very important stakeholder engagement document. The Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU) is the largest farming organisation in Northern Ireland representing approximately 11,500 farming families. The UFU represents farmers from all areas of Northern Ireland and across all sectors.

The UFU has a vision of a productive, profitable and progressive farming sector. To achieve this the industry requires people with the correct skills and training. The UFU want to support CAFRE in ensuring entrants to and already within NI agriculture, food, equine and horticulture industries are equipped with suitable knowledge and the capability to benefit the industry and wider economy.

Victor Chestnutt
UFU President

STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

Proposal A: DAERA proposes offering support to part-time FE students for books and equipment associated with their part time study 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?

Yes

No

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

Part-time students should have equal access to support that is currently available to full time students. Having access to equal support, will allow part time students to use the support at their digression depending on their work and home life situation.

As stated in the consultation paper, the current policy is not in line with further education support offered in NI at other colleges. This is likely to make CAFRE a less attractive option for students, who want to study part time, which may lead to people choosing courses at other colleges.

The UFU are supportive of part time students being eligible to access childcare allowance and hardship funds. As historically the number of full-time students seeking childcare allowances is low and with 14% of part time students having dependents, support may be better directed to part time students. The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (2013) found that childcare in rural areas was identified as severely lacking, made difficult by poor transport links and problems with sustaining providers, which should be taken into consideration.

The amount of financial support required for books and equipment is likely to differ depending on the course and should therefore be flexible depending on the course and individual student needs. As a result of COVID-19 additional funding for books and equipment may be required due to reduced sharing of resources.

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:

- The maximum 'At Home' grant rate should increase from £1,659 to £2,400 per annum.
- The maximum 'At Home' grant rate should remain unchanged
- I have an alternative proposal which I have detailed below**

Detail of Alternative Proposal for the 'At Home' grant:

The maximum 'At Home' grant rate should increase from £1,659 to £2,600 per annum. The suggested £2,400 'At Home' grant has a £200 shortfall between the actual cost of living at home and the proposed grant rates.

As the document highlights, students are not eligible for transport cost support and therefore often also apply for hardship funding. Covering transport cost is especially important for students who have to travel to campus daily from rural areas, who unlike students remaining in school, are not eligible for free transport through the education authority. In addition, rural areas often have poor public transport routes, making transport costs to CAFRE more expensive than other colleges (students are more likely to need access to a car).

Providing the full cost of living expenses whilst studying, including cost such as transport, should decrease the number of students having to seek additional financial help such as the hardship fund and reduce the stress associated with securing extra finance.

Cost of living and inflation should be applied/ reviewed more frequently than it has been (last reviewed in 2006) when calculating the amount of 'At Home' grant.

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

- The maximum 'Away from Home' grant rate should increase from £2,362 to £3,400
- The maximum 'Away from Home' grant rate should remain unchanged

I have an alternative proposal which I have detailed below

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

The maximum 'Away from Home' grant rate should increase from £2,362 to £3,800 per annum. The suggested £3,400 'Away from Home' grant has a £400 shortfall between the actual cost of living away from home and the suggested grant rate.

As the document highlights students are not eligible for transport cost support and therefore also often apply for hardship funding. This is likely to be less of a concern for students who live on campus and do not have to travel to campus daily. However, the cost of travelling to and from campus albeit less than 'At Home' students must still be considered and accounted for.

Providing the full cost of living expenses whilst studying, including cost such as transport, should decrease the number of students having to seek additional financial help such as the hardship fund and reduce the stress associated with securing extra finance.

Cost of living and inflation should be applied/ reviewed more frequently than it has been (last reviewed in 2006) when calculating the amount of 'Away from Home' grant.

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:

The total gross lower household income threshold should increase from £23,660 to £31,000

The total gross lower household income threshold should remain unchanged

I have an alternative proposal which I have detailed below

Detail of Alternative Proposal for the total gross lower household income threshold

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:

- The total gross upper household income threshold should decrease from £52,622 to £41,000
- The total gross upper household income threshold should remain unchanged**
- I have an alternative proposal which I have detailed below

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

ORDER OF PREFERENCE

Question 6: Future budgeting constraints could limit the FE support proposals that can be implemented going forward. Please place 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):

1 Proposal A: Extending support to part-time FE students

2/3 Proposal B: Increase the amount of 'At Home' and 'Away From Home' grant available

2 / 3 Proposal C: Raise the total gross lower household income threshold

4 Proposal D: Reduce the total gross upper household income threshold

Additional comments about your order of preference:

The UFU are completely opposed to proposal D. The proposal D should not even be considered although it aims to better target support at those with the greatest need it narrows the band of students that the grant is available to. If implemented, it would have to be in conjunction with proposal B to increase the amount of grant available to all eligible students.

DAERA FE CHARGING POLICY

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

Yes

No

Please give the reasons for your answer:

Those who chose further education courses should be able to attend their course at no cost, the same as those in school to complete A-Levels or attend other colleges at no cost. Charging for further education courses is likely to make CAFRE a less attractive option for students and leave them more inclined to complete further education elsewhere or not continue education at all.

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

ANYTHING ELSE WE SHOULD CONSIDER?

Question 8: 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? If so, please detail below:

CAFRE should consider providing 'earn while you learn apprenticeships' this may be an attractive option for students who are concerned by the cost of studying full time and not being able to work.

The UFU is concerned with the household income figure used to determine the level of grant awarded to students. Currently household income is calculated as total gross income before tax and national insurance, pension allowances or the cost of dependent children is deducted. The UFU strongly believe that the household income figure should be calculated once tax, pension, national insurance and the cost of dependent children has been deducted. In addition, the income of any working siblings living at home should not be taken into consideration when calculating total household income.

Poor rural public transport and the lack of financial support to cover the cost of travel to and from CAFRE, either daily or less frequently should be given greater consider. Other further education campuses located in towns benefit from local bus and rail stations to bring students to campus. However, for CAFRE campuses set in rural areas and with 69% of students coming from rural areas, extra consideration is required to ensure that transport to campus is not a barrier to education.

The NI agri-food and equine industry requires a constant supply of well-equipped entrants to the industry every year. CAFRE is best able to this through their practical teaching facilities and must remain competitive, other further education colleges could deliver similar or some of the same courses offered by CAFRE if there was an appetite amongst students.

IMPACT ASSESSMENTS

Question 9: Are there any further comments that you would like to add in regards to the published Rural Impact Assessment? If so, please detail below:

No further comments

Question 10: Are there any further comments that you would like to add in regards to the published Equality Impact Assessment Screening? If so, please detail b

The UFU believe that reducing the upper household income has the potential to have major impact rather than minor as stated on each Section 75 equality categories.

Childcare support for women who need it should be a priority as there is a lower employment rate amongst rural women due to restricted access to childcare compared to urban women. Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN) have found that women's caring responsibilities can exclude them from fully participating in social, economic and community based activities. Flexible, affordable, accessible quality childcare is very difficult to find in rural areas. The UFU ask that CAFRE acknowledge that childcare is both a social and economic issue; encouraging mothers to return to work or training needs to be supported by affordable childcare provision.

