**Introduction of a new pilot Nurturing Skills Learner Fund**

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The Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Roderic O’Gorman, T.D., has today announced the introduction of a new *Nurturing Skills Learner Fund* on a pilot basis. The new Fund, which will run alongside the existing Learner Fund, aims to assist early years educators to pursue early learning and care qualifications that have been approved by the Qualifications Advisory Board (QAB) while continuing to work in the sector in line with commitments in *Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare, 2022-2028.*

The research evidence is clear that the quality of early learning and care services is key to ensuring good outcomes for children, and that the professionals who work with children are the key to the quality of those services. Recognising their central importance for the quality of early learning and care, Nurturing Skills aims to support the professional development of the workforce and raise the profile of careers in the sector.

The Nurturing Skills Learner Fund pilot will make a contribution of up to 90% of course fees that early years educators face while pursuing QAB approved early learning and care qualifications at levels 7 and 8 on the National Framework of Qualifications. The funding will be paid directly to the higher education institution on behalf of the early years educator in order to minimise the financial and administrative barrier the educator faces when seeking to undertake further studies.

The new Fund will run as a pilot in 2024. It is co-funded by the European Union through the ESF+ Employment, Inclusion, Skills and Training programme (EIST) 2021-27. It is included under the Skills and Lifelong Learning strand with the aim of promoting lifelong learning, in particular flexible upskilling and reskilling opportunities for all.

Unlike the current Learner Fund, the new Learner Fund will be operated through Pobal making payments directly to Higher Education Institutions, who will then reduce the course fees they charge to students. The CCCs will therefore not be directly involved in implementation, though your support will be important in explaining the Fund to early years educators, in particular to explain its interaction with the existing Learner Fund.

This new scheme will run in conjunction with the current Learner Fund scheme, which will continue to be administered by the County/City Childcare Committees. The current Learner Fund will continue to be available, with a higher level of post-award bursary contribution from 2024 (rising from €750 to €1,000), to assist those who are undertaking degrees but are not part of the pilot Nurturing Skills Learner Fund.

Applications for the Pilot Nurturing Skills Learner Fund will open in May 2024, via Pobal, to early years educators who have applied to approved higher education institutions, with a view to educators who are selected for the pilot receiving financial support for studies commencing in September 2024.

Information on the Pilot NSLF can be found on www.gov.ie/NurturingSkillsLearnerFund