



Free College Meals: Student Eligibility

Age

A student must be aged 16 or over but under 19 on 31 August 2025 to be eligible to receive a free meal. Students aged 19 or over are only eligible to receive a free meal if they are continuing a study programme, they began aged 16 to 18 ('19+ continuers') or have an Education Health Care Plan (EHCP).

These 2 groups of aged 19 plus students can receive a free meal while they continue to attend education (in the case of a 19+ continuer, this must be the same programme they started before they turned 19), if their eligibility continues.

The following groups of students are not eligible for free meals in further education:

- students aged between 14 and 16
- students aged 19 or over at the start of their study programme, unless they have an EHCP or are a 19+ continuer
- apprentices, including those with an EHCP

Students must also satisfy the residency criteria set out below:

Students Eligible for Funding

The following persons will be eligible for funding (these groups correspond to some of the groups in Schedule 1 to the Education (Fees and Awards) (England) Regulations 2007 (as amended):

- a person on the 'relevant date' who is 'settled' in the UK, and who has been ordinarily resident in the UK and Islands (that is including the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man) for the 3 years preceding the 'relevant date'. 'Settled' means having either indefinite leave to enter or remain (ILE/ILR), being an Irish citizen or having the right of abode in the UK. Students who are eligible for funding include:
 - British citizens who hold a United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland passport
 - Irish citizens
 - European Union citizens or family members of EEA and Swiss workers (resident in the UK before 1 January 2021) with settled status
 - students who are children of Turkish workers where the Turkish worker has been lawfully employed and resident in the UK before 1 January 2021
 - British Dependent Territory Citizens (now known as British Overseas Territory Citizens)
 - those whose passports have been endorsed to show they have right of abode in the UK
 - those who have a certificate of naturalisation or registration as a British Citizen

- those with Hong Kong British National (Overseas) (BN(O)) visa who have been given Home Office permission to reside in the UK

In addition to the groups outlined above, ESFA will also consider the following groups of students (including those who may not have lived in the UK for the last 3 years) to be eligible for funding:

- people with refugee status (RS) or humanitarian protection (HP) or discretionary leave (DL) or exceptional leave to enter or remain (ELE/ELR), their spouses, civil partners and children
- people with recently settled status (this means those having been granted indefinite leave to enter or remain, right of abode or British citizenship within the 3 years immediately preceding the start of the course) -people granted pre-settled status following our exit from EU

In addition to the groups above, ESFA will also consider the following groups of students (including those who may not have lived in the UK for the last 3 years), aged up to and including the age of 18, as eligible for funding as follows:

- those who are accompanying or joining parents or spouses or civil partners who have the right of abode or leave to enter or remain in the UK (or accompanying or joining relevant family members, usually parents, who are UK or Irish citizens), or those who are children of diplomats
- those who are dependants of teachers coming to the UK on a teacher exchange scheme
- those who are residing legally in the UK (including those entering the UK in the last 3 years who are or were not accompanied by their parents) who are British (or Irish) citizens or those whose passports have been endorsed (or as part of move to digital immigration systems, either a biometric residency permit (BRP), or an equivalent digital status and/or an endorsement letter) to either show they have the right of abode in this country or to show that they have no restrictions on working in the UK
- those who are dependants of adults residing legally in the UK who have been given immigration rights as workers to reside in the UK
- those who are dependants of foreign students where the accompanying parent or legal guardian has a student visa (the accompanying parent or legal guardian is excluded from our funding as set out in paragraph 71)
- asylum seekers
- those having been granted leave under section 67 of the [Immigration Act 2016](#) (the 'Dubs' amendment)
- those having been granted Calais leave to remain.
- those who are (including unaccompanied asylum seekers) placed in the care of social services or those in receipt of Section 4 support.

Eligible Benefits

Free meals are targeted at disadvantaged students. Free meals in further education defines disadvantage as students being in receipt of, or having parents who are in receipt of, one or more of the following benefits:

- Income Support
- Income-based Jobseekers Allowance
- Income-related Employment and Support Allowance (ESA)
- support under part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999
- the 'guarantee' element of State Pension Credit
- Child Tax Credit (provided they are not entitled to Working Tax Credit and have an annual gross income of no more than £16,190, as assessed by HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC))
- Working Tax Credit run-on – paid for 4 weeks after someone stops qualifying for Working Tax Credit
- UC with net earnings not exceeding the equivalent of £7,400 for each year (after tax and not including any benefits they get)

It is important that institutions ensure they understand that a parent or student must be in receipt of one of the qualifying benefits set out above to be eligible.

Working Tax Credit is not a qualifying benefit for free meals, and a parent or student in receipt of Working Tax Credits is not entitled to a free meal (this is a common question sent to ESFA). Qualifying benefits do include the Working Tax Credit run-on which is paid for 4 weeks after you stop qualifying for Working Tax Credit.

Still need help?

For further information please visit www.copc.ac.uk/financial-support or contact our friendly and knowledgeable finance support team.

Telephone: **023 9421 1980**

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