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Government of Ireland



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## **Minister O’Gorman announces the opening of applications for the Nurturing Skills Learner Fund**

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Roderic O’Gorman has today announced the opening of applications for the new *Nurturing Skills Learner Fund*, co-funded by the European Union through the EIST programme 2021 to 2027.

The new Nurturing Skills Learner Fund will support early years educators to undertake approved degree-level qualifications while continuing to work in the early learning and care (ELC) sector. It aims to help meet the Government objective of achieving a graduate-led workforce in ELC services by 2028.

The expansion of funding opportunities for early years educators to upskill was a key commitment in *Nurturing Skills, the Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare, 2022-2028*. Nurturing Skills aims to build on the significant progress already made in raising skill levels across the workforce. Current data indicates that the proportion of early years educators with a relevant degree qualification has risen from 12% in 2012 to 37% in 2022. Nurturing Skills aims to increase this proportion to at least 50% by 2028.

The Nurturing Skill Learner Fund, introduced on a pilot basis this year, will make a contribution of up to 90% of course fees for early years educators seeking to upskill by studying for a recognised ELC qualification at level 7 or 8 on the National Framework of Qualifications. It is designed to complement and add to other Government financial supports, such as the Free Fees Initiative and SUSI grants. Funding will be provided directly to approved higher education institutions to reduce the upfront costs of studying for early years educators.

The new Fund aims to enhance the quality of ELC services, while supporting the professional development of early years educators, developing career pathways, and supporting recruitment and retention of staff in the sector.

Announcing the opening of applications, Minister O’Gorman said:

*“The research evidence is clear that the quality of early learning and care and school age childcare services is key to ensuring good outcomes for children, and that educators and practitioners are the key to the quality of those services.*

*I am delighted to announce the opening of the Nurturing Skills Learner Fund for applications today. This new Fund aims to significantly reduce the cost barrier to support the further professional development of the early learning and care and school age childcare workforce which, is of course, essential for raising the profile of careers in the sector and key to improving outcomes for children and families.”*

Further information on the Nurturing Skills Learner fund can be found at [www.gov.ie/NurturingSkillsLearnerFund](http://www.gov.ie/NurturingSkillsLearnerFund)

**ENDS**

#### **Notes to the Editor**

- The reports mentioned are available at [www.gov.ie/nurturingskills](http://www.gov.ie/nurturingskills) and <https://www.first5.gov.ie/>
- Further information on the ESF+ programme in Ireland is available at <https://eufunds.ie/>
- To be eligible for financial support, courses must have been approved by the Qualifications Advisory Board for the ELC sector <https://www.gov.ie/en/organisation-information/c2e6b-qualifications-advisory-board-qab-for-the-early-learning-and-care-elc-sector/>