



**Minister Announces Significant Relaxing Of Qualifying Rules For Back To Education Support Scheme**

***Brennan Says New Arrangements Will Help Stem Flow Into Long-Term Unemployment***

The Minister for Social Affairs, Séamus Brennan, TD, today announced that from September there will be a significant relaxing of the qualifying rules for the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) support scheme.

The main changes involve reductions in the length of time persons must be in receipt of social welfare payments before qualifying for third level education under the scheme.

Minister Brennan said he has now reduced to 9 months - from the 15 months that previously applied - the qualifying period for those whose pursuit of third level education is assessed and approved by FÁS under the National Employment Action Plan.

For applicants who are not participating in the NEAP, the qualifying period has been reduced from 15 months to 12 months in recognition of the difficulties being experienced by some of the more marginalized students in accessing third level education.



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The new qualifying conditions will come into effect from September in advance of the start of the 2005/2006 academic year.

Also with effect from September, the allowance for the purchase of books and materials, the annual Cost of Education Allowance, for participants in the Back to Education Allowance scheme will increase from €254 per person to €400.

The BTEA scheme was first introduced in the 1989/1990 academic year and was designed to help people on the Live Register whose search for work may be hindered by a lack of education qualifications. It allows those who qualify to enrol in full time education and provides income support through a weekly payment equivalent to unemployment assistance or benefit.

Since the scheme was first introduced in 1990, it is estimated that more than 12,000 participants have gained third level qualifications with its support. In that period expenditure has more than doubled, from almost €20 million in 1999 to over €44 million in 2004. There are currently 7,308 participants in the Back to Education Allowance Scheme - 3,023 of these are pursuing second level qualifications and 4,285 are studying for third level qualifications.

Minister Brennan said: "The Back to Education scheme has been a career and employment lifeline for thousands of people who could otherwise have found themselves marginalised and struggling to escape from long-term unemployment. It is a valuable support scheme that must be structured in a way that offers genuine applicants early access to educational opportunities. I am confident that the relaxing of the qualifying rules will help stem the flow into long-term unemployment by assisting at an earlier stage those people who need a third level education to remain active in the workforce. It will also facilitate increased participation in higher education by people who up to now have been under-represented."

The Minister said the qualifying reduction would particularly benefit those who participate in the National Employment Action Plan and for whom third level education is the most



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appropriate way of progressing. He had been concerned that some may not qualify for the Back to Education scheme because they had been in receipt of a qualifying social welfare payment for less than 12 months.

He said that this further reduction in the qualifying period will facilitate such customers and enable the National Employment Action Plan process to conclude in a timely and appropriate manner in the individual cases concerned.

Minister Brennan added: "Reviews of Active Labour Market programmes clearly show that being long-term unemployed has a significantly negative impact on labour market outcomes and that, on the other hand, having a third level qualification has a significantly positive impact. All the evidence suggests that human potential is degraded over time where people remain unemployed and distant from the labour market. The new arrangements for the Back to Education support scheme will result in a more targeted approach because those benefiting will have engaged with FÁS and have had their employment potential and opportunities fully explored. It must also be realized that with the development of a more knowledge-based economy, more people who are unemployed, or will be in the future, will need to acquire third level qualifications to re-enter the labour market."

**ENDS**

**Please see attached Note for News Editors**



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### **Note for News Editors**

#### **Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) Scheme**

The Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) is an educational opportunities scheme for unemployed people, lone parents and people with disabilities who wish to pursue approved second or third level courses of education and, therefore, improve their employment prospects.

#### **Qualifying conditions**

To qualify for participation in the BTEA scheme, a person must be, amongst other things:

- attending an approved full-time day course of study at a recognised second or third level institute of education,
- getting a qualifying social welfare payment for the required period - currently 6 months for the second level option and, from this September, 12 months for the third level option, with 9 months for those people who are approved for third level education by FÁS under the NEAP.

Qualifying payments include Unemployment Assistance, Unemployment Benefit, Farm Assist, One-Parent Family Payment, Deserted Wife's Allowance/Benefit, Widow's /Widowers Contributory/Non Contributory Pension, Prisoners Wife's Allowance, Carer's Allowance, Blind Pension, Disability Allowance, Invalidity Pension or Unemployability Supplement.

#### **Payment**

Participants in the BTEA scheme are paid a weekly allowance equivalent to the maximum standard rate of the social welfare payment they were receiving prior to starting an approved course of study. The weekly allowance includes increases for a qualified adult and child(ren) where applicable. The allowance is not means-tested and, consequently, participants may avail of part-time employment without affecting their payment.

In addition to the weekly payment participants are entitled to an annual cost of education allowance - increased from €254 to €400 with effect from September 2005.

Participants are also entitled to retain those secondary benefits to which they had an entitlement prior to participation in the scheme e.g. Christmas Bonus & Fuel Allowance. They may also retain Rent or Mortgage Supplements under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance Scheme. However, any increase in income will affect entitlement to a Rent/Mortgage Supplement.