

General Block Exemption Regulation (“the Regulation”) Skills to Advance Scheme - SA59380

1. Objective of Scheme

The objective of this scheme is to enable targeted support for vulnerable groups in the Irish workforce, those who have lower skills levels and who need more opportunities to advance in their working lives and careers, to sustain their employment and to avoid displacement or to avail of emerging job opportunities. The policy also supports small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) who need some assistance to invest in and develop their workforce to adapt to changes in work practices, technology and markets.

The scheme is implemented through Skills to Advance programmes delivered by the 16 Education and Training Boards based throughout Ireland.

2. Legal Basis and Rules

The national legal basis is the National Training Fund Act 2000 and the enabling legislation of SOLAS and the Education and Training Boards (“the training and development agencies”)
SOLAS: Further Education and Training Act, 2014
ETBs: Education and Training Boards Act, 2013

Skills to Advance is funded from the National Training Fund of Vote 26 Department of Education and Skills.

State Aid basis:

The operation of this scheme is subject to Article 31 of the General Block Exemption Regulation for 2014–2020, published in Official Journal No 57, 26th June 2014, Commission Regulation (EU) No 651/2014. This was prolonged until 31st December 2023 under the Commission Regulation (EU) 2020/972 of 2 July 2020.

3. Funding

Funding for the Skills to Advance scheme is provided by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science from the National Training Fund. Funding is determined through the annual estimates process and the final amounts made available to Skills to Advance as noted in the Estimates for Public Services as approved by Dáil Éireann.

Skills to Advance is funded under Employee and Continuing Professional Development line of the National Training Fund Estimates under Vote 26 - Department of Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation and Science.

4. Who can apply?

Applicants will be eligible to apply for Training Aid where the project concerned addresses the target groups as follows:

Small and medium sized enterprises and other organisations with limited capacity to identify and meet skills development needs of their employees in lower skilled work.

Companies in industry sectors which are experiencing particular changes in work practices, technology and markets and require support to upskill and reskill employees in lower skilled work.

The right to apply does not impose any obligation on the State to provide funding to an applicant.

5. Incentive Effect

5.1 This scheme shall apply only to aid which has an incentive effect.

5.2 Aid shall be considered to have an incentive effect if the beneficiary has submitted a written application to the relevant Education and Training Board before support in relation to training needs identification or training activity starts. The application for the aid shall contain at least the following information:

- (a) undertaking's name, size, sector and number of employees;
- (b) description of the aid i.e. training support needed if known;
- (c) suitability for Skills to Advance training support.

6. Scope of Scheme

6.1 This Scheme shall not apply to the following;

- (a) Aid exceeding €2 million per training project,
- (b) Aid shall not be granted for training which undertakings carry out to comply with national mandatory standards on training.

6.2 The following beneficiaries are ineligible for aid under the scheme:

- (a) A beneficiary who is subject to an outstanding recovery order following a previous Commission decision declaring the aid illegal and incompatible with the internal market.
- (b) A firm in difficulty as defined by Article 2(18) of the Regulation.

7. Eligible Projects

Training supports in relation to training needs identification or training activity, that address a company's upskilling and reskilling needs of their employees, will be eligible for support under Skills to Advance.

8. Eligible Costs and Aid Intensity

The Education and Training Boards will comply with the requirements relating to aid intensity and eligible costs as defined by Article 7 of Commission Regulation (EC) No 651/2014. For the purpose of calculating the aid intensity and eligible costs, all figures used shall be taken before any deduction of tax or other charge. Aid payable in several instalments shall be discounted to its value at the moment it is granted. The eligible costs shall be discounted to their value at the moment the aid is granted.

The eligible costs of a training project relating to identification of training needs, training development, design, delivery and learning support services shall include:

- (a) trainers' personnel costs, for the hours during which the trainers participate in the training;
- (b) trainers' and trainees' operating costs directly relating to the training project such as travel expenses, materials and supplies directly related to the project, depreciation of tools and equipment, to the extent that they are used exclusively for the training project.
- (c) costs of advisory services linked to the training project;
- (d) Trainees' personnel costs and general indirect costs (administrative costs, rent, overheads) for the hours during which the trainees participate in the training.

Accommodation costs are excluded except for the minimum necessary accommodation costs for trainees' who are workers with disabilities.

9. Support Intensity

The aid intensity will not exceed 50% of the eligible costs outlined in Section 8. It may be increased, up to a maximum of 70% of eligible costs as follows:-

- (a) by 10% if the aid is granted to medium-sized enterprises and
- (b) by 20% if the aid is granted to small enterprises;

	Large	Medium	Small
Max Aid Intensity	50%	60%	70%

Small enterprises are defined as having 49 employees or less and an annual turnover not in excess of €10m;

Medium sized enterprises as having between 50 and 249 employees and an annual turnover not in excess of €43m;

Large enterprises are defined as having in excess of 250 employees and an annual turnover in excess of €43m.

As per Article 4.1(n) of the Regulation, the maximum amount of aid that will be provided will be less than €2m per training project, or the maximum limit permitted under Irish legislation, whichever the lesser. Where a project relates to the same company, the same workforce and the same timing, then it can be considered as the same training project.

10. Form of Aid

Only transparent forms of aid may be paid by the Education and Training Boards i.e. in which it is possible to calculate precisely the gross grant equivalent as a percentage of eligible expenditure ex ante without need to undertake a risk assessment.

11. Definitions

For the purposes of this scheme the definitions set out in Article 2 in the Regulation shall apply.

12. Cumulation

The Education and Training Boards will comply with the regulations relating to cumulation as defined by Article 8 of Commission Regulation (EC) No 651/2014. Aid under this Scheme shall not be cumulated with any de minimis aid in respect of the same eligible costs if such cumulation would result in an aid intensity exceeding those laid down in the Regulation.

13. Period of Validity

This scheme shall operate from 6th April 2019 until 31st March 2034.

14. Publication and Information

The full text of the scheme will be published on the webpage of the Skills to Advance page on the SOLAS website.

The link to the scheme is as follows:

https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/13e729103d/skillstoadvance_scheme_sa-59380.pdf