Students with Care Experience and Higher Education

"Progression in life, despite my circumstances"

SUMMARY REPORT

INTRODUCTION

For the first time, experience of the care system was identified as a life situation that can lead to disadvantage within the overarching socioeconomically disadvantaged priority group of the National Access Plan: A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022-2028 (NAP). In response, a research study was conducted to explore the experience of higher education of students with care experience. The study aims to inform the enhancement of support services in higher education institutions for care-experienced students and to raise awareness around supports in order to increase the number of care-experienced students who access higher education. This summary report provides a brief overview of the study.

This research was carried out by the SOAR Project and Technological University Dublin in collaboration with community partners EPIC (Empowering People in Care), the Irish Aftercare Network and Care Leavers' Network Ireland. The SOAR Project is an inter-institutional collaboration on access bringing together Munster Technological University, South East Technological University, University College Cork and community partners to devise strategies to increase access to higher education for under-represented groups. The research was funded by the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) Strand 3.

ABOUT THE STUDY

The research enquiry was informed by three research questions:

- What challenges do care-experienced individuals encounter in accessing, participating and succeeding in higher education?

- What supports them in accessing, participating and completing/succeeding in higher education?

- What resources and supports are necessary to increase participation?

A mixed method approach was adopted in the study: a focus group with eight Access practitioners, online survey of students with care experience (48 responses) and semi-structured interviews with four students.

REPORT FINDINGS

Educational Attainment Prior to Higher Education

- 44% of respondents had completed the Leaving Certificate.

- 40% had completed a QQI course.

Motivation to Attend Third-level Education

- 57% of respondents were motivated to attend university in pursuit of a career.

- 29% reporting that they wish to follow the same path as others.

- 14% reported other reasons, which may be more aligned to their care experience.

… a chance to change your future and have a great life yourself.

May, Interview Participant

SUPPORTS IN ACCESSING AND NAVIGATING HIGHER EDUCATION

Financial Support

> *The Student Assistant Fund, without this, I might have been homeless and had to drop out of university.*
>
> Survey Respondent

Financial support was identified as being key to sustaining third-level study; survey respondents indicated they availed of support from multiple sources.

- 50% received significant financial support from TUSLA aftercare services.

- 41% received financial support from family.

- 25% received financial support through the HEAR scheme.

- 27% received the Student Assistant Fund.

- 9% were awarded the 1916 Bursary.

- 2% were awarded an Access scholarship.

Despite this, some respondents reported they also relied on charities such as the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

Access Service Supports

> *… the Access Officer has been the most necessary and supportive aspect of my college experience; without her, I definitely would not have been able to make it as far as I have in college – she has been a life raft in an ocean when I was drowning.*
>
> Survey Respondent

Half of survey respondents reported that they were aware of the Access service in their university and many found it very helpful. However, this indicates that 50% of respondents were not aware of this support.

CHALLENGES IN ACCESSING AND NAVIGATING HE

Accommodation

- Almost 30% of respondents had accommodation issues.

- 61.4% of respondents reported that they had no support with information on accommodation.

- 47.7% of students had never or rarely had a problem with accommodation.

Finances

- Finance was always a challenge for 25% of respondents.

- 20% of respondents reported they did not receive financial support.

The link between financial difficulties and mental health was articulated by survey respondents:

> *I struggle with my mental health because of the constant pressure to not fail and become homeless because of my grants being taken away and SUSI only paying for third-level once.*
>
> Survey Respondent

Access practitioners highlighted the financial stability afforded to students through the aftercare allowance can be jeopardised when/if a student's studies are disrupted by failing exams, allowing very little room for failure. However, it was also evident that flexibility in policy implementation can support students' retention in higher education.

Belonging & Academic Success

- 45.5% of respondents reported feeling fully engaged in university life.

- 45.4% felt like they belonged in university.

- Academic success was often a challenge for 21% students, 16% reported it to be always a challenge.

Stress and Mental Health

Survey respondents also spoke about mental health struggles:

> *I have struggled mentally to cope with my difficulties and to deal with extenuating circumstances that affected my ability to stay in college such as accommodation and financial restraints as well as personal issues.*
>
> Survey Respondent

The complexity and precarity of transitioning out of care, commencing higher education, sometimes moving to another location to study, results in multiple transitions simultaneously taking place for care-experienced students.

Planning and Organising Study

- Managing daily routine was a challenge for 84% of respondents.

- 82% indicated time management was occasionally, often or always a challenge.

Caring Responsibilities

- Almost 30% of survey respondents reported that caring responsibilities were always or often a challenge for them.

According to Access practitioners, historical issues, past traumas/unresolved issues often become a challenge for care-experienced students, some may have siblings at home (or in care) and the student continues to carry caring responsibilities.

Access Practitioners - Data Challenges

The absence of a clear mechanism for recording care experience at college registration results in a significant gap in coordinating and organising the nature and delivery of institutional supports to students with care experience. For care-experienced students who do not self-disclose, this can mean that their needs are not met by the support services.

DISCUSSION

In the research dataset, third-level education was felt to be transformative. The sense of achievement from accessing the higher education space was seen to support self-efficacy and a purpose in life, and a sense of 'normality' for students with care experience.

Important to students' higher education success appears to be the quality of the working relationship between the student and their aftercare worker in Tusla, and with Access services, if and when they engage with those support services. Coordination of care between these key supports is warranted to best ensure that the needs of students with care experience are met in higher education (Fig. 1).
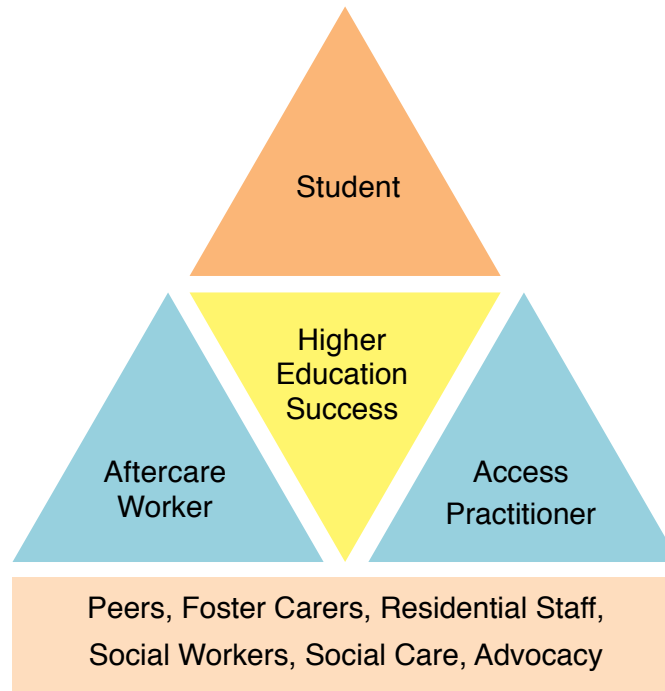

Figure 1. The Golden Triad of Higher-Education Success for Care-Experienced Students

Ideally, a network of support staff should be positioned as the foundation upon which the student builds their successes in higher education. Once the student enters higher education, the availability of 'care-aware' university-based supports, such as Access services, is essential in supporting academic success and retention. The availability of easily identifiable services to support care-experienced students was highlighted in the research. Along with Access practitioners, aftercare workers must work to support the student through their higher education journey.

To fully support students with care experience, it is important that we acknowledge and respond to their needs (Fig. 2), which are: accommodation and financial stability; accessible information; peer support; 'care aware' services; and flexibility from all stakeholders in relation to working with students from care-experienced backgrounds.
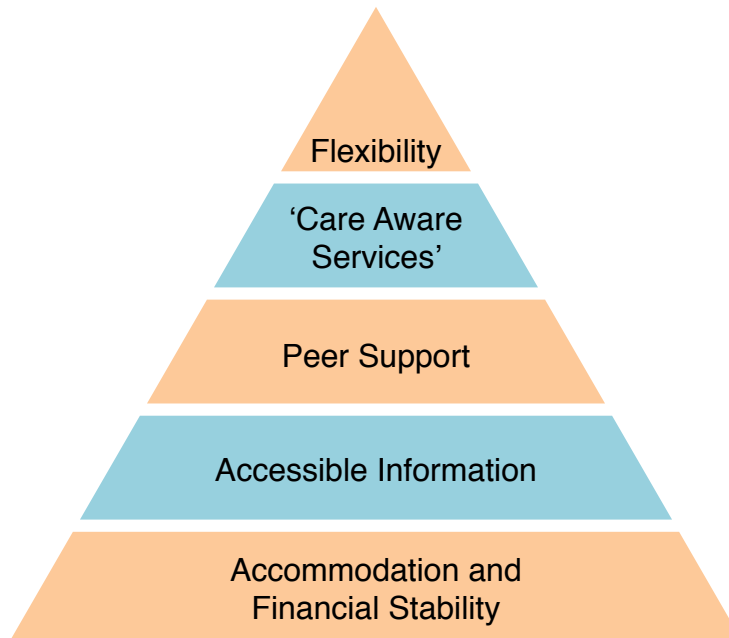

Figure 2. Hierarchy of Needs for Care-experienced Higher-Education Students

RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy

- There is a compelling need for consistent targeted financial aid and housing policies that address the unique needs of care-experienced students to ensure equitable access to higher education.

- Consideration of the limitations of the aftercare allowance is warranted in respect of repeating or changing course, in addition to instances where a student may take a year out. Care-experienced students should not be financially penalised in these circumstances.

- A system-wide mechanism for recording care-experience/care status history is needed to accurately identify access and retention rates for care-experienced students in higher education.

- The educational opportunities offered to care-experienced students in this report who were facilitated to transition from further education into higher education via FE to HE pathways demonstrates that tertiary routes facilitate and support educational trajectories for access groups. Further research is needed to explore how these routes can further enhance access policies.

Practice

- A university-wide Care Aware programme and training be delivered to raise awareness around embedding support for care-experienced students across campus.

- A network of relevant professionals be developed to create the Golden Triad of Support for care-experienced students, including aftercare workers, Access

practitioners, peers, foster carers, residential staff, social workers, social care and advocacy workers.

- An organised approach to information-sharing and open communication between Access services and Tusla would benefit care-experienced students' academic journeys and transition to higher education.

- That it is ensured that there is a dedicated person as a point of contact for care-experienced students in higher education institutions.

- That consideration be given to the development of a dedicated, curated and maintained centralised portal (website) with up-to-date information available for care-experienced people and professionals who work with /support them.

- That a peer mentoring network for care-experienced students be developed within all higher education institutions.

- That mental health supports and student counselling be resourced adequately to meet the needs of care-experienced students.

The full report Students with Care Experience and Higher Education 'Progression in life, despite my circumstances' is available at:

www.soarforaccess.ie
and
www.tudublin.ie/Access & Outreach