

TUITION WAIVERS AND EDUCATIONAL EQUITY: SUPPORTING FORMER YOUTH IN CARE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Dale Kirby

Faculty of Education, Memorial University of Newfoundland (Canada)

Abstract

Youth with lived experience in the child welfare system face significant barriers to accessing and succeeding in higher education, resulting in socioeconomic and health disparities as compared to their peers. Tuition waiver programs are designed to reduce these barriers by mitigating financial obstacles to accessing post-secondary education. This study explored the effectiveness of such programs through interviews with 31 stakeholders, including former youth in care, institutional staff, and community professionals. Using an emergent theme content analysis framework, ten key themes were identified, highlighting critical challenges such as financial limitations beyond tuition, lack of program awareness, and the need for holistic wraparound supports. These findings emphasize the importance of integrating dedicated mentorship, culturally responsive support systems, and flexible success metrics into tuition waiver programs. This research provides practical insights that may be drawn on to improve the effectiveness of tuition waiver programs in promoting educational access for former youth in care.

Keywords: *Tuition waivers, tuition fees, former youth in care, higher education.*

1. Introduction

Youth with lived experience in the child welfare system encounter numerous obstacles to achieving educational milestones, such as completing secondary school or pursuing higher education. Attending college or university can offer former youth in care (FYIC) enduring advantages, such as establishing structure and routine, fostering broader social networks and community ties, improving the likelihood of meaningful employment, cultivating a sense of belonging, and acquiring critical life skills necessary for adulthood (e.g., independence, time management, communication, organization) (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2018).

Although education is universally acknowledged as a fundamental human right, FYIC frequently face overlapping forms of disadvantage. In Canada, this population tends to have lower educational achievement, higher unemployment rates, and poorer health and social outcomes than their peers in the general population (Nichols et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2015; Strand, 2014). Moreover, Black, Indigenous, and LGBTQ+ youth are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system, and their lack of access to higher education has far-reaching implications for individuals and society (Gahagan et al., 2024a, 2024b).

The Government of Canada (2018) has emphasized that “all young people deserve access to affordable quality education, no matter their circumstances” (p. 13). Completing secondary school and higher education significantly influences employment opportunities, income, social mobility, health outcomes, and overall quality of life (Francis & Wong, 2013; Lehmann, 2021). Tuition waiver programs for FYIC, designed to eliminate financial obstacles by covering part of the cost of higher education, aim to address these disparities both directly (e.g., reducing economic barriers) and indirectly (e.g., promoting social mobility and employability). These programs can play a key role in enhancing access to higher education for this historically marginalized group, potentially fostering greater diversity and inclusion within Canadian post-secondary institutions, not only among students but also in the pool of future educators (Harder et al., 2020; Payne, 2016; Unrau et al., 2012; Wimpenny & Savin-Baden, 2013).

The limited existing data indicate that former youth in care are less likely to have completed secondary school and thus face significant barriers to accessing higher education (Kirby, 2023; Kovarikova, 2018). Because former youth in care are one of the most underrepresented groups attending Canada’s colleges and universities, some institutions have created tuition fee waiver programs as an intervention to help reduce the financial barriers faced by care-experienced youth. Although tuition waiver programs have been established in Canada since the 1990s, no comprehensive evaluations of how they impact youth in care have been conducted.

2. Research questions

Since the establishment of the Atlantic Canada Tuition Waiver Working Group in 2021, our interdisciplinary research team has been working in partnership on a multi-year research project to examine how tuition waiver programs facilitate access to higher education for youth with experience in the child welfare system. Building on our recently published international scoping review of peer-reviewed research on tuition waiver programs (Gahagan et al., 2023), the most recently completed phase of our research, covered here, was guided by the following research questions: 1) what are some of the key components of tuition waivers programs for FYIC?; 2) how are tuition waiver programs, interventions, policies, or related programs addressing barriers to post-secondary education for FYIC?; 3) what are key measures of success for these programs and how should these be measured?; and 4) how can existing tuition waiver programs be improved to better facilitate access to post-secondary education for FYIC?

3. Theoretical framework

The foundational framework for this study is the ecology of inclusive education model devised by Anderson, Boyle, and Depler (2014). This model is rooted in Bronfenbrenner's (1976) ecological systems theory and Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) bioecological model of human development. The ecology of inclusive education provides a structured lens for examining environmental influences on learners, including those in higher education, by situating the learner at the core of the framework. Through these inter-related models, we can organize and comprehensively interpret of how various elements within an educational ecosystem interact and impact student experiences. Bronfenbrenner's earlier work described the learner's environment as a "nested arrangement of structures" (p. 5), conceptualizing it through five interconnected systems that can be seen as shaping inclusive education practices. These systems, micro-system, meso-system, exo-system, macro-system, and chrono-system, provide a valuable framework for analyzing and advancing inclusivity within educational setting

At the core, the micro-system encompasses direct interactions involving the learner, including their relationships with family, peers, and educators. These interactions are integral to the learner's developmental processes. Expanding outward, the meso-system highlights the interconnectedness between the components of the micro-system, such as the collaboration between schools and local communities. The exo-system refers to external structures, both formal and informal, that indirectly influence the learner's immediate environment, such as policies or organizational decisions impacting educational settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1976). The macro-system represents the overarching cultural, societal, and ideological contexts that frame the functioning of the other systems. Finally, the chrono-system adds a temporal dimension, acknowledging how time and life transitions affect the learner and their interactions with the other systems.

In the context of higher education, this ecological approach underscores the need to consider the intersectionality of these systems when fostering an inclusive environment. For instance, financial challenges faced by students often reflect decisions and resources at multiple systemic levels. Within the micro-system, these challenges are evident in the form of restricted access to personal or family financial resources. The exo-system plays a role through institutional policies and support programs shaped by leadership priorities, while the macro-system reflects the broader political, cultural, and economic contexts influencing higher education. The chrono-system highlights the dynamic nature of these factors as they evolve over time, continuously influencing students' educational experiences and opportunities for inclusion.

4. Methods

This research involved interviews with thirty-one individuals including former youth in care, institutional staff working with tuition waiver programs, and community-based professionals who support care-experienced youth. The interviews were conducted and recorded using Microsoft Teams and lasted an average of 30 min per interview. The transcribed interview data were open coded with data analysis conducted using MAXQDA software.

The interview data underwent a comprehensive and systematic analysis to identify, critically examine, and synthesize texts that were directly relevant to the study's research questions (Carter et al., 2015; Davies, 2000). This process utilized an emergent theme content analysis framework, which is recognized for its structured and analytical nature, allowing for a detailed exploration of the data (Bengtsson, 2016; Krippendorff, 2013). The collected texts were initially coded in an open-ended manner to ensure that no potential themes were overlooked. This open coding approach served as the foundation for an extended analytical process aimed at uncovering meaningful patterns and insights within the data.

Key themes and categories were iteratively constructed, tested, and validated to maintain the integrity and reliability of the analysis. Following Bengtsson's (2016) well-established four-stage framework for textual analysis, the methodology incorporated: a) decontextualisation, where meaning units or potential themes were identified and openly coded to capture their essence; b) recontextualisation, which involved a meticulous comparison of these themes against the original data to ensure consistency and relevance; c) categorisation, where identified themes and meaning units were condensed into coherent and distinct categories that could be further analyzed; and d) compilation, the final stage where the analyzed data were synthesized into a cohesive summary, allowing for validation and a deeper understanding of the findings. This robust and multi-layered process provided a comprehensive approach to understanding the complexities of the data and effectively addressing the research questions.

5. Results

Our analysis of interview data revealed ten interrelated themes highlighting the challenges and opportunities for former youth in care pursuing higher education. 1. Financial barriers extend beyond tuition waivers, as students struggle to cover essential costs like housing, transportation, and textbooks, which often deter them from fully participating in their studies. 2. Awareness and promotion of tuition waiver programs remain inadequate, with many eligible students unaware of the resources available, often discovering them too late to benefit fully. 3. Holistic wraparound supports are critical, encompassing mentorship, mental health resources, tutoring, and accommodations for individual needs to help students navigate academic and personal challenges. 4. Impostor syndrome and mental health issues are pervasive among students, stemming from feelings of inadequacy and lack of belonging, often amplified by their unique backgrounds. 5. High turnover in support staff disrupts the consistency of guidance and mentorship, leaving students without stable relationships to rely on during their academic journey. 6. Lack of long-term planning means many students enter post-secondary education without adequate preparation, as systemic issues fail to encourage early academic goal-setting and course selection. 7. Cultural and peer connections are vital to fostering a sense of belonging, yet many students feel isolated, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds. 8. Data collection and evaluation of tuition waiver programs are insufficient, hindering the ability to measure success and refine supports effectively. 9. Flexible measures of success are needed, recognizing achievements beyond academic performance, such as personal growth, life skills development, and community involvement. 10. Dedicated navigators and mentors are essential to provide personalized, consistent guidance, ensuring students can navigate institutional systems, access resources, and address their unique challenges effectively. These themes collectively underscore the multifaceted barriers faced by former youth in care and the importance of holistic, proactive solutions to support their success.

6. Implications of findings

The findings of this study significantly contribute to established knowledge on educational equity by shedding light on the unique challenges faced by former youth in care and the potential of targeted interventions, such as tuition waiver programs, to address systemic inequities. While existing literature highlights the underrepresentation of care-experienced youth in higher education, this study provides insight into the supports and obstacles that shape their academic journeys. By identifying critical themes such as the need for wraparound support, enhanced program awareness, and flexible success measures, our research bridges gaps in understanding and offers a foundation for actionable policy reforms. These findings not only validate the importance of financial and institutional support mechanisms but also underscore the value of holistic, equity-driven strategies in fostering educational access and success. As a result, this study provides an evidence-based framework for expanding and refining tuition waiver programs, ensuring that they effectively address the needs of one of society's most vulnerable populations, thereby advancing the broader goals of social and educational justice. This will be of interest to all those concerned with widening access to higher education to excluded populations.

Acknowledgments

This work was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Partnership Development Grant (SSHRC Grant 890–2021–0105).

References

- Anderson, J., Boyle, C., & Deppeler, J. (2014). The ecology of inclusive education: Reconceptualising Bronfenbrenner. In H. Zhang, P. W. Keung Chan, & C. Boyle (Eds.), *Equality in education: Fairness and inclusion* (pp. 23-34). SensePublishers.
- Bengtsson, M. (2016). How to plan and perform a qualitative study using content analysis. *Nursing Plus Open*, 2, 8-14. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.npls.2016.01.001>
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1976). The experimental ecology of education. *Educational Researcher*, 5(5), 5-15. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1174755>
- Bronfenbrenner, U., & Morris, P. (2006). The bioecological model of human development. In R. M. Lerner & W. Damon (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology: Theoretical models of human development* (6th ed., pp. 793-828). John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Carter, D. P., Weible, C. M., Siddiki, S. N., & Basurto, X. (2015). Integrating core concepts from the institutional analysis and development framework for the systematic analysis of policy designs: An illustration from the US National Organic Program regulation. *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, 28(1), 159-185. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0951629815603494>
- Davies, P. (2000). The relevance of systematic reviews to educational policy and practice. *Oxford Review of Education*, 26(3/4), 365-378. <https://doi.org/10.1080/713688543>
- Francis, B., & Wong, B. (2013). *What is preventing social mobility? A review of the evidence*. Leicester: ASCL.
- Gahagan, J., Slipp, N., Chowdhury, R., Kirby, D., Smith, S., McWilliam, S., Carter, N., Anderson, K., Chughtai, S., Robinson, M., & Mueller, R. E. (2023). Reducing barriers to post-secondary education among former youth in care: A scoping review. *International Journal of Educational Research Open*, 5(2023), Article 100303.
- Gahagan, J., Kirby, D., Anderson, K., & Smith, S. (2024a, March 10). Canada is falling behind other countries in meeting the needs of former youth in care. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/canada-is-falling-behind-other-countries-in-meeting-the-needs-of-former-youth-in-care-224238>
- Gahagan, J., Kirby, D., Robinson, M., & Chowdhury, R. (2024b, November 19). How a failure to support youth who were once in care may be fueling unemployment. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/how-a-failure-to-support-youth-who-were-once-in-care-may-be-fuelling-unemployment-240956>
- Government of Canada, (2018). *Key health inequalities in Canada: A national portrait – Executive summary*. <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/phacaspc/documents/services/publications/science-research/key-health-inequalities-canada-national-portrait-executive-summary/hir-executive-summary-eng.pdf>
- Harder, A. T., Mann-Feder, V., Oterholm, I., & Rafaeli, T. (2020). Supporting transitions to adulthood for youth leaving care: Consensus based principles. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 116. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105260>
- Kirby, D. (2023, May). *First voices of former youth in care: Perspectives on tuition waivers for post-secondary education*. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education, Toronto, Ontario.
- Kovarikova, J. (2018). *Review and practice for youth leaving care - White paper*. Child Welfare PAC. https://42bf8e9c-2414-4457-bac7-f47eccf53bff.filesusr.com/ugd/6548f4_7ba391d9a4b54e7a972c1314de2cefca.pdf
- Krippendorff, K. (2013). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lehmann, W. (2021). Conflict and contentment: Case study of the social mobility of working-class students in Canada. *European Journal of Education*, 56(1), 41-52. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12431>
- Nichols, N., Schwan, K., Gaetz, S., Redman, M., French, D., Kidd, S., & O'Grady, B. (2017). *Child welfare and youth homelessness in Canada: A proposal for action*. Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press. <http://rightsofchildren.ca/wpcontent/uploads/2019/07/Child-Welfare-and-Youth-Homelessness-in-Canada.pdf>

- Payne, L. (2016). Student engagement: Three models for its investigation. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 43(5), 641-657. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2017.1391186>
- Rutman, D., & Hubberstey, C. (2018). Fostering educational success of children and youth in care: Perspectives of youth with experience living in care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 94, 257-264. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2018.10.022>
- Smith, A., Peled, M., Poon, C., Stewart, D., & Saewyc, E. (2015). *We all have a role: Building social capital among youth in care*. Vancouver, BC: McCreary Centre Society. <https://www.saravyc.ubc.ca/2015/04/30/we-all-have-a-role-buildingsocial-capital-among-youth-in-care>
- Strand, S. (2014). Ethnicity, gender, social class and achievement gaps at age 16: Intersectionality and “getting it” for the white working class. *Research Papers in Education*, 29(2), 131-171. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2013.767370>
- Unrau, Y. A., Font, S. A., Rawls, G. (2012). Readiness for college engagement among students who have aged out of foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 34(1), 76-83. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2011.09.002>
- Wimpenny, K., & Savin-Baden, M. (2013). Alienation agency and authenticity: a synthesis of the literature on student engagement. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 18(3), 311-326. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2012.725223>