

“I CAN ACHIEVE ALMOST ANYTHING”: HIGHER EDUCATION EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG ADULTS WITH CARE EXPERIENCE IN IRELAND

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Abstract

International literature suggests that young people with care experience typically have lower educational attainment and reduced progression rates to higher education compared to their majority-population peers (McNamara et al., 2017; Sebbaet al., 2015; Stone, 2007; Trout et al., 2008; Brady et al., 2019). The experience of growing up in state care was only formally recognised in 2022 by the Irish Higher Education Authority (2022) as a life situation associated with social disadvantage, warranting strategic priority for providing increasing access opportunities to higher education. To date, there has been a reliance on anecdotal evidence to understand the higher education trajectories of care-experienced people in Ireland. This oral paper presents research from a funded report that addresses this paucity of primary research. It explores the enablers and challenges faced by care-experienced students in Irish higher education, highlighting the need for enhanced support services and data collection to improve their educational outcomes. A mixed method approach was adopted in this study with fieldwork taking place between November 2023 and February 2024 using three methods: a) A focus group with eight Access Practitioners with experience of working with care-experienced students in participating Irish universities; b) 48 responses to an online survey distributed to all students in participating HEIs and; c) Semi-structured individual interviews with four care-experienced university students using photo-voice. Our research suggested that while care-experienced students share similar aspirations with other students about attending higher education (such as pursuing a career), they are also influenced by their care experience. Some reported being guided by pragmatic reasons such as the eligibility requirement to be in full-time education to receive state financial allowances. Other key findings suggest that managing transitions – from care to independent living, and from school to higher education – is a significant challenge for care-experienced students. While they can feel belonging in university, participants sometimes prioritise external factors (e.g. caring responsibilities) over their academic achievement. Pivotal to their academic success appears to be the quality of the working relationship between the student, the child protection services and university access practitioners. The paper concludes with policy and practice recommendations, calling for sustained ‘care-aware’ university-based access and retention services.

Keywords: *Foster care, care-experience, access, educational attainment, peer support.*

1. Introduction

International literature suggests that young people with care experience typically have lower educational attainment and reduced progression rates to higher education compared to their majority-population peers (McNamara et al., 2017; Sebbaet al., 2015; Stone, 2007; Trout et al., 2008; Brady et al., 2019). The experience of growing up in state care was only formally recognised in 2022 by the Irish Higher Education Authority (2022) as a life situation associated with social disadvantage, warranting strategic priority for providing increasing access opportunities to higher education. To date, there has been a reliance on anecdotal evidence to understand the higher education trajectories of care-experienced people in Ireland. This paper, addressing this paucity of primary research, presents findings from a report funded by the Higher Education Authority [HEA], which aimed to inform the enhancement of support services in higher education institutions for care-experienced students.

2. Context

Jackson and Cameron (2011) in their YIPEE study (Young People in Public Care: Pathways to Education in Europe) found that “while remaining in formal education until, at the very least, age 18, has become the norm in those European countries studied, this is not the case for children in care” (cited in Brady et al, 2019: p. 55). Both practice experience and research studies tell us that placement stability has a direct link with educational attainment. A meta-analysis of seventeen studies (82% from the United States of America) by Cassarino-Perez et al. (2018) supports the view that the factor most closely associated with educational success is placement stability (Pinkney and Walker 2020:2). While research interest in the educational attainment of care-experienced children and youth, and adult care-leavers has increased in the last two decades in Ireland (see for example Brady and Gilligan 2020), there is a dependence on anecdotal evidence from care leaver students themselves and from access practitioners to understand about their higher education learning. There is no central database at institutional level to track the educational trajectories of care-experienced students in higher education in Ireland and there is a lack of systematically collected data on access, participation and engagement in education (Darmody et al., 2013; Daly and Gilligan, 2005).

While the educational attainment of children in care and care-leavers in Ireland has been highlighted by academic researchers (such as Prof. Robbie Gilligan and Dr. Eavan Brady, Trinity College Dublin), by the Children’s Ombudsman (2013) and advocacy organisations like Empowering People in Care (EPIC), there were no official statistics available for this cohort of students until the publication of *The Educational Attendance and Attainment of Children in Care, 2018 – 2023 Frontier Report* by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) in 2023. That report showed that while the proportion of young adults enrolled in further and higher education in 2021 was similar for children who left care (52%) compared with all children (47%) aged 18 to 22, a larger proportion of those with care experience attended further education courses (37%) compared with all children (11%).

3. Current study

Our study was enabled through the SOAR Project, an inter-institutional collaboration in the Southern region of Ireland to develop strategies to increase access to higher education for groups that are currently under-represented. The SOAR Project commenced in 2018 and is funded by the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) Strand 3. This current study formed one work stream of research exploring participants' experience of accessing and participating in university as a student with care-experience. The research enquiry was informed by three research questions:

1. What challenges do care-experienced individuals encounter in accessing, participating and succeeding in higher education?
2. What supports them in accessing, participating and completing/succeeding in higher education?
3. What resources and supports are necessary to increase this number?

4. Methods

A mixed method approach was adopted in this study with fieldwork taking place between November 2023 and February 2024 using three methods:

- a) A focus group with eight Access Practitioners with experience of working with care-experienced students from across four universities in Ireland;
- b) 48 responses to an online survey to all students in the same participating universities with questions relating to the experiences of care-experienced students accessing and participating in university and;
- c) Semi-structured individual interviews with four using photovoice with four care-experienced students.

We availed of support from community partners and advocacy groups - Empowering People in Care (EPIC), Care Leavers’ Network Ireland and the Irish Aftercare Network - who support children and young people in Ireland to act as an advisory board/steering group for the study and to assist with participant recruitment. Research ethical approval for this study was granted by our university (University College Cork) with other universities recognising this approval when agreeing to support the study. Participation in the research study was voluntary and informed consent was obtained from participants of all three methods of data collection.

5. Limitations

This study is small scale and exploratory in nature. Given that there is no central data set at institutional level, it was unclear from the outset how many students would be recruited for each element of the study and how to plan for generalisability, which is a noteworthy limitation. Our research funding was time-limited (eight months with research ethics reviews and approval taking three) and the uptake for interviews was challenging within the time-frame – eight interviews were organised but four withdrew from the study by cancelling or failing to present for interview. The lack of response for individual interviews limited the qualitative data from which we can draw findings and this study cannot be representative of all care-experienced individuals.

6. Findings and discussion

While this study was carried out within a tight time-frame and is small scale in nature, the findings from the survey, focus group and interviews provide insights into the lived realities for care-experienced students in higher education.

6.1. Motivations to access higher education

Our research demonstrates that care-experienced students share similar aspirations with other students about attending higher education – such as the pursuit of a career and to increase their life chances. However, their motivations seem to be also influenced by their care experience.

Some care-experienced students are motivated by a desire to change society by pursuing a career to help others who have experienced diversity. Others reported being guided by pragmatic and practical reasons such as their time in university assisting them in their transition from care to independent living, and that they are required to be in study/apprenticeship in order to be eligible to receive an aftercare allowance (financial support).

In the 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.

6.2. Peer support

Care-experienced students hear about university as an option from the adults one would expect them to hear about university life – career guidance teachers, foster carers, aftercare workers, social workers, advocates etc – but the role of peers and friends is as important, if not more important than some of these adults. This suggests that there are merits in harnessing peer mentorship and youth role-modelling as a means of disseminating information about access pathways to higher education.

6.3. Navigating transitions

Often in care-experienced student cohorts consideration of university coincides with turning eighteen years and “ageing out” of the care system. Our research coheres with other studies (Cassarino-Perez et al. 2018; Pinkney and Walker 2020) which indicate that placement stability in care supports academic success for care-experienced individuals. Care-experienced individuals who have frequent changes in placement and lack consistent support, can experience feelings of abandonment and neglect, further contributing to poor mental health outcomes (Luke et al., 2014).

There was notable evidence of mental health struggles in the data for this research. Our findings suggest that navigating third level, which includes managing transitions – from care to independent living, and from school to higher education – is a challenge for care-experienced students.

It was seen in this study that the cost of living, including housing, caused survey respondents a notable amount of stress and that academic achievement was being hindered by those stressors. These students are disproportionately affected as they often rely on part-time work and state support to cover living expenses, which are insufficient to meet escalating costs associated with the cost-of-living crisis currently experienced in Ireland (Murphy, 2021).

6.4. Relationship-based supports

Important to their academic success appears to be the quality of the working relationship between the student, their support worker in children and family services and with Access Services in universities if and when they engage with those support services. Coordination of care between these key supports is warranted to best ensure the needs of students with care experience are met in the higher education system.

7. Conclusion

Our research has illuminated the higher education journeys of care-experienced students. Our research demonstrates highlights that the availability of ‘care-aware’ university-based supports is essential in supporting academic success and retention of students with care experience. The availability of easily identifiable service to support care-experienced students was highlighted in our research. This does not necessarily mean the development of a distinct Access service separate from other ‘hard to reach’ student populations but rather having designated personnel (where resources are available) to respond to care-experienced students, and ensuring that supports and information is made easily available across campuses to raise awareness that universities are care-aware.

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