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Education first?

Lone parents' lived experience of the challenges and benefits of participating in higher education

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List of abbreviations

BTEA – Back to Education Allowance

DSP – Department of Social Protection

HE – Higher Education

HEA – Higher Education Authority

HEI – Higher Education Institution

JST – Jobseeker's Transitional Payment

JA – Jobseeker's Allowance

JB – Jobseeker's Benefit

NCS – National Childcare Scheme

OFP – One Parent Family Payment

SAF – Student Assistance Fund

SUSI - Student Universal Support Ireland

TAP – Trinity Access Programme

TCD – Trinity College Dublin.

UCC – University College Cork

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Executive Summary & Recommendations

There is a concerning educational attainment gap between lone parents and the general population, particularly at third-level. Given the economic and other benefits of higher education (HE), and the fact that lone parents have a very high risk of poverty, this is a significant policy problem.

Despite the government's commitment to increase access to HE for lone parents, as set out in the *National Access Plan 2022-2028*, there is a dearth of targeted policy interventions and of research on how to boost access and retention for this cohort. In addition, for lone parents who claim social welfare, they have increasingly become the subject of social welfare policy interventions that prioritise work over education, or 'work first'.

Against this background, this project conducted mixed-methods research to document the experience of lone parents in HE, exploring their pathways into HE, potential challenges and rewards, and factors that support retention. Through a survey of 105 lone parent students, interviews with twelve lone parent students and five audio diaries documenting typical days in college, the research generated a detailed set of findings with the aim of advancing an 'education first' approach to supporting lone parents. Education first refers to a policy approach that supports and enables lone parents to pursue education if it is their preference to do so.

Key Findings

Lone parents are not a homogenous group and this follows through in the lone parent student population. Across the range of participants in the research, some were participating in HE for the first time as mature students; others returned to do a second degree or pursue a postgraduate course; some became lone parents while in college. The findings also suggest that they are a more diverse cohort than the general third level student body. When compared with Higher Education Authority (HEA) student statistics, for example, the survey findings reveal a lower proportion of lone parent students pursuing post-graduate qualifications and greater proportions from minority backgrounds.

Key challenges faced are finance, childcare, the timing of study, and time poverty. Participation in HE comes at a significant financial cost with 83% of those surveyed citing finance as a major or significant challenge. The majority of students participating in the survey (63%) also reported being less well-off while in college. Lack of childcare was another significant barrier with the majority (70%) relying on informal care (family, friends or neighbours) in addition to, or in place of, formal childcare and only 3% of those surveyed reported using college childcare facilities. 70% of those surveyed cited access to affordable childcare as a major or significant challenge. The greatest challenge, however, is juggling the multiple demands of being a lone parent and being a student and the time poverty this generates. 97% of survey participants reported family responsibilities and commitments as a major or significant challenge. This can be exacerbated by a lack of flexibility in how courses are organised and delivered with 70% of those surveyed citing the timing of study as a major or significant challenge.

From a lone parent perspective, HE is designed around a 'carefree' student model. While lone parent students are not the only cohort with caring responsibilities, the findings reveal a lack of lone parent visibility and recognition in HE; there are no specific supports targeted at them and wider supports do not necessarily cater for their specific needs.

Many participants also expressed a sense of being 'out of place' and lack of a sense of integration into college life. Lack of childcare on campus is a significant issue and this is compounded by lack of age-appropriate childcare, especially for older children. In addition, student accommodation does not cater for lone parent families. A lack of flexibility regarding lecture timetables and online delivery, assessment deadlines, and placement timetables were also significant concerns.



A particularly concerning finding is that 65% of the students who completed the survey considered leaving their course at some point. The interview findings and the diaries illuminated the experience of being a student with the stresses of balancing competing demands and the realities of caring as a lone parent. Participants mentioned, for example, the challenges of *'trying to have time for everything and everyone'* and '*constantly stressing about being everywhere at once'*, which are not compatible with the 'carefree' structures of HE. Particularly stressful times occur when children are ill, when school holidays or days off are not compatible with the academic calendar, and the timing of assessments and examinations. Such experiences are even more acute in the case of some lone parents. This includes those with children with additional needs and migrant students who do not have wider family supports to draw on in Ireland.

Despite the challenges, the resilience of lone parent students and the strength of their motivation are also very important findings emerging from the research. Participants spoke of parenting and their children as being an important motivator: *'those little ones are dependent on me so at times when I forget why am I doing this, I look at them and go "ok, ok"'*, and of having a *'just do it mentality'*. Their experiences are testimony to the importance of HE across several dimensions. While career and financial benefits are important motivations, they are not the only ones expressed by the research participants. The importance of education for lone parents' own wellbeing now and in the future, and for their children's wellbeing are particularly significant findings. Doing something for themselves, and for some, doing something for their community were also strong themes.

For participants who have experience of claiming social welfare whilst being a student, comprising 87% of the survey participants and all of the interviewees, several significant findings arise. These relate to the inadequacy of financial supports and the lack of support in general in the social protection system for lone parents who transition to HE.

Due to a lack of information and appropriate advice, some lone parents were not initially in receipt of the most appropriate payment, e.g. One Parent Family Payment (OFP) or Jobseeker's Transitional Payment (JST), that would allow them to apply for a Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) grant. Household means testing is also a major problem for lone parents who live with their parents and are classed as dependents, rendering them ineligible for a SUSI grant if the intergenerational household does not meet the means test requirements.

In the context of the housing crisis and lack of affordable housing this is a double injustice, which becomes a triple injustice due to the financial and time costs of commuting to college. For lone parents claiming

Back to Education Allowance (BTEA), having to switch to claiming Jobseeker's Allowance (JA) over the summer months is also a problem, as is the general financial inadequacy of the system where the full cost of living and cost of participating in education as a lone parent is not covered. 68% of participants relied on additional financial supports. It is concerning that the only participants who felt in any way financially secure were those with multiple sources of financial support, including bursaries and the Student Assistance Fund (SAF). Moreover, the availability of these supports are often not well timed and so do not prevent significant financial distress occurring during the academic year.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

The *Access Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education* (2022-2028) (HEA, 2022) includes lone parents as a subgroup of those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged and require additional support to access HE. Acknowledgement of lone parents in this plan is important. This research suggests, however, that more needs to be done to not only support their access to HE but to support their participation and retention. The following recommendations emerge from the research:

Data and Targets

More data is needed on lone parent participation in HE. This should be collected and tracked by both the HEA and the Department of Social Protection (DSP). Currently, there is a dearth of data and the full extent of lone parent participation in HE is unknown, with HEA information being linked to recipients of OFP only. This lack of data extends to data on lone parent students who are also in receipt of a welfare payment. The DSP lacks reliable and consistent data on how many lone parents in receipt of payments are in HE.

In addition, a specific commitment should be made to increase lone parent participation in HE over time. Targets should be set both for lone parents in general and for lone parents in receipt of a welfare payment.

Financial Supports

The cost of participating in HE for lone parents needs to be fully recognised in the financial supports available. SUSI and social welfare payments for lone parents in HE should be adequate in their own right without lone parent students having to apply for multiple sources of funding, including charitable sources. Adequacy should take into account the costs of participation including the costs of resources necessary to complete a course, costs associated with placements, commuting costs, extra childcare costs and general increases in the cost of living.

Specifically in relation to SUSI, several changes could be made to improve the financial situation of lone parents in HE. Means testing for lone parents should not include the full household where lone parents live with their own parents, nor should child maintenance be assessable as means. All lone parents who qualify for SUSI should be allowed to automatically access special rate, non-adjacent SUSI grants. Given lone parent preferences and their experiences of time poverty, SUSI grants should be rolled out for all part-time HE courses and courses that are delivered online.

Specifically in relation to DSP services and payments, the adequacy of payments needs to be addressed to reflect the disproportionately high risk of poverty faced by lone parent families in addition to the costs of participating in HE.

Scholarship awards for PhD students should not be treated as assessable income for OFP and JST payments, following the model of 'Catherine's Law' that has amended means testing for those in receipt of Disability Allowance payments. Any expenses lone parent students receive while on placement for their course should not result in a review of their payment. In addition, DSP staff should be trained to understand the specific challenges and responsibilities of lone parents and how to respond with empathy and respect.

A greater awareness is needed of lone parents who attend or who wish to attend HE. Adequate information needs to be made available on all entitlements and potential supports so that lone parent students benefit fully from what they are entitled to. Adequate information is also needed on any implications of attending



HE for lone parents' payment to avoid stress around payment compliance. It is also vital that lone parent students are fully informed about the most beneficial payment to them. Lone parents in receipt of BTEA should not be required to switch to Jobseeker's Allowance (JA) during the summer months.

Childcare and Housing

Lone parent students need greater access to affordable and age-appropriate childcare. The dearth of childcare facilities in HEIs needs to be addressed and late evening facilities need to be made available, mirroring lecture timetables where classes may not finish until 6 or 7pm. While the National Childcare Scheme (NCS) has improved affordability in general, several changes could be made which would improve affordability and access for lone parents. These include excluding OFP, JST and child maintenance as means for the NCS. In addition, an NCS subsidy specifically for one-parent families could be established that would provide care at affordable rates or free of charge as per the European Child Guarantee.

HE provision of student accommodation should include units that are suitable and affordable for lone parent families. Beyond student accommodation, the wider lack of affordable housing for lone parents and their housing insecurity needs to be addressed. The number of social housing units made available to one-parent families needs to be scaled up, particularly for those already living in emergency accommodation.

Higher Education Supports

Lone parent students need greater recognition and visibility in how academic programmes and wider supports and services are delivered in HE. In addition to housing and childcare services provided by higher education institutes (HEIs) as outlined above, existing pastoral and academic supports need to more specifically target and reach out to lone parent students. The provision of particular supports, including student counselling, need greater availability and the importance of one-to-one supports, whether academic, mentoring, budgeting, skills-based or pastoral, need to be recognised and strengthened with adequate resources.

Lone parent students are typically highly motivated but time poor. They are also likely to encounter episodic disruptions to their study given the demands of parenting alone. Greater flexibility needs to be built into how courses are organised to support lone parent access, participation and retention.

This includes affording lone parents access to online recorded lectures and hybrid learning options where appropriate. Lecture timetables should also take account of the care responsibilities of lone parents which are not compatible with classes that start at 9am and end at 6 or 7pm. Similarly, the timing of placements, particularly placements run during summer months, should consider the care responsibilities of lone parents. Greater flexibility also needs to be built into assessment deadlines with HE extension policies recognising lone parent care responsibilities as a standard accommodation. Treating lone parent students with dignity and respect is a principle that should underpin the practice of all HE staff and services.

Introduction

The under-representation of lone parents in HE continues to be a significant problem despite an agenda of widening participation in education policy over several decades. The current National Access Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education (2022-2028) (HEA, 2022) sets out a vision to ensure that the student body entering and completing HE reflects the diversity of Ireland's population.

Among the main target groups in the Plan, lone parents are identified as a subgroup of those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged and require additional support to access HE. Lone parents are not a homogenous group and there are several in-group differences between lone parent trajectories and experiences (Struffolino et al., 2020). Amongst other things, their socio-economic and education status can vary. However, existing data indicates that many lone parents have lower levels of educational attainment. Data from the 2016 Census for example indicated that 18% of lone parents had a third level qualification, compared to 40% of the general population (Indecon, 2021). A similarly significant gap was found by Russell and Maître (2024) using Growing Up in Ireland data: 19.7% of lone mothers had a third level qualification compared to 33.1% of partnered mothers.

Moreover, the Survey of Income and Living Conditions routinely finds that lone parent families experience disproportionate levels of poverty and deprivation (CSO, various years) and they are one of the groups most likely not to have a minimum income which meets their essential expenditure needs (Maître and Alamir, 2024). They are also at disproportionate risk of in-work poverty (Roantree et al, 2022). Education – particularly HE – is seen as a means to secure well-paid employment (Millar and Crosse 2016; Byrne and Murray 2017; Russell and Maître, 2024).

Social policies, including social protection that provides income support, and labour market activation that 'activates' individuals to engage in paid labour through services such as job preparation programmes and training and up-skilling, can broadly be depicted as having a work first or education first orientation in respect of lone parents and their high risk of poverty. Typically, these social policies have in Ireland and elsewhere become increasingly focused on a work first approach. This approach focuses on paid employment as the preferred solution to lone parent family poverty.

Income supports for lone parents have become more conditional and tied more closely to engagement with labour market activation services that focus on rapid entry into the workforce such as short-term training programmes for relatively low-skilled work and job-seeking activities such as regular job applications.

Education first, by contrast, is an approach that focuses on building the education attainment of lone parents and on activation services that support and enable lone parents to pursue educational qualifications to secure better employment and wellbeing outcomes for them and their families in the long run. The importance of education and a policy of education first over work first is emphasised by Russell and Maître (2024) whose research draws on Growing Up in Ireland data from the 2008 cohort across four waves from 2008 to 2017. Tracking lone mother transitions over this period they found that 'education emerges as an important safeguard against poverty as it is an important pathway to better employment opportunities and higher wages as well as financial independence' (Russell and Maître, 2024: 55). HE in particular is 'associated with a greater likelihood of escaping economic vulnerability' (Russell and Maître, 2024: 55).

Other factors matter in conjunction with education including childcare, financial and social supports and labour market participation. The importance of education as a safeguard has significant policy implications for how lone parents are supported in educational advancement including how they are supported by activation. As Russell and Maître (2024: 56) note, 'activating lone mothers into in-work poverty is not a good outcome for parents or their children. Educational qualifications and skills are a key lever for accessing decent work reiterating the importance of access to education and training opportunities across the life-course'.

To date, little research has been carried out on access to HE for lone parents relative to other non-traditional students, in Ireland and internationally, or on the intersection of access policies with social

protection and activation systems. While Byrne and Murray (2017) identified the financial barriers to HE in Ireland, there is a pressing need for greater understanding of motivations and pathways into HE, the lived experience of students who are lone parents, and the factors that support persistence and progression.

According to Tinto (1993) academic and social involvement and a sense of belonging are important factors in student retention, pointing to the need for a better understanding of the student experience. This is particularly important in the case of lone parents, already a relatively socially marginalised group, who have reported feelings of isolation in college (Longhurst et al., 2012) and who are at a higher risk of non-completion (NUS, 2009). In addition, data on participation rates in HE is limited.

Research aims

Given the increased emphasis on access to HE for lone parents in educational policy discourses, and the dearth of research in Ireland and internationally, this project aims to document lone parents' pathways into HE, the potential challenges they face, their experiences of HE, and the supports that help them progress through college. These themes are explored for lone parent students as a whole and for the substantial sub-set of lone parent students who simultaneously are recipients of income support from the DSP.

Methodology

This is a small-scale exploratory study. It begins with a review of the national and international literature on lone parent experiences of HE and related policy and practice issues spanning education and income support. The primary research employed a mixed-method, creative design incorporating participatory techniques designed in conjunction with our research partner, One Family, with additional input from the Project Advisory Group. Conducted over three phases, the initial phase involved an online survey to capture the range of experiences of student lone parents currently in HE (N=105). The survey was circulated by the two main participating universities' access offices (University College Cork (UCC) and Trinity College Dublin (TCD)) and more widely through Mature Students Ireland, a network of Mature Student Officers and others with responsibility for mature students from all state funded HEIs in Ireland.

One Family circulated the survey through their social media and newsletter and promoted it amongst related organisations working with lone parents. The survey collected a mix of quantitative and qualitative data covering areas such as motivations to pursue HE, difficulties encountered, and benefits experienced. The survey was administered online using Qualtrics software.

Building on the baseline knowledge of participation trends, experiences and issues revealed by the survey, in-depth interviews were conducted with student lone parents, recruited through an invitation for further participation via the survey. 62 survey participants expressed an interest in completing a follow-up interview however, due to the small-scale nature of the study and its limited capacity, twelve interviews were conducted in total. Interviews were conducted either online or face-to-face and lasted between 40–60 minutes. In addition, five interviewees agreed to keep audio-diaries, using recording devices provided by the research team. The diaries captured participant experiences of at least two days of life in college and the juggle of caring, studying and other commitments, and reflections on these experiences in the context of their overall experience of attending college. Complementing the interviews, the diary method generated in-depth insight into the temporal, spatial and emotional everyday reality of participating in HE as a lone parent student.

Limitations

The main limitation of this study concerns the extent to which we were able to reach lone parent students across all HEIs in the Republic of Ireland. The level of responses across HEIs was uneven. Proportionately most of the responses were from the two lead universities involved in the research, namely UCC and TCD.



Both are long-established universities and the study is less representative of newer universities. The involvement of the Access Offices in both UCC and TCD greatly facilitated recruitment in these universities and the study lacked the resources to carry out more comprehensive research. In addition, because data on the full number of lone parent students in HE does not exist we do not know how representative our survey is. Nonetheless the number of responses appears sizeable, especially when compared to the data available from the HEA, as outlined in Section 1.

Research ethics

Ethical approval for the research was obtained from UCC's Social Research Ethics Committee and followed standard ethical procedures for the social sciences, as set out in the UCC Code of Research Conduct (UCC, 2021). The introduction to the online survey provided information on what the research was about, participant privacy and data protection. Mandatory questions at the start of the survey asked participants to confirm that they were over eighteen and that they agreed to participate in the research. Interview participants were supplied with a detailed information sheet and asked to sign a consent form, including consent to have the interview recorded.

All participants were also advised of their right to withdraw from the study up to two weeks after their participation however, none did so. Interview data was transcribed and any details that would identify a participant were removed and each participant was given a pseudonym, as used in this report. The same ethical procedures and steps applied to participants of the audio diaries with the addition of the provision of a set of guidelines about how to complete the diaries and what information to include. Subsequent to their participation, those who completed the audio diary were offered a €50 gift voucher in recognition of the time commitment involved in this component of the research. Mindful of ethical considerations and in compliance with UCC's Social Research Ethics Committee policy we took care not to use the vouchers to incentivise participation. However, the research team felt it was important to offer some token of our appreciation for the time people took to participate in this phase of the study, given the time constraints of lone-parenthood.

Report structure

The remainder of the report consists of three sections. Section one provides a policy overview and a review of national and international literature on the experience of lone parents in HE. The review draws on research that looks at lone parents specifically and from wider sets of literature on parents, carers and mature students in HE as areas of research which intersect with the lone parent experience. Section two presents the findings from the first phase of the research which surveyed 105 lone parents in HE. The section presents data on the profile of lone parents in HE; the benefits, motivations, supports and challenges; and the financial aspects of being a lone parent student and experiences of financial supports. Section three presents a more in-depth exploration of these themes drawing on the data from twelve interviews with lone parent students and the five audio diaries. The report ends with a concluding discussion and the policy implications of the research findings.

Section 1:
Policy & Literature Review

Policy context

Widening access to higher education

In line with international trends, participation in HE in Ireland has expanded significantly over the last 50 years, increasing from circa 20% in 1980, to 44% in 1998 and 52% in 2011 (HEA 2015). As well as increasing overall participation rates, a key policy focus for successive governments has been the widening of participation in HE for under-represented groups.

A number of policies have been introduced to promote equitable access to HE, including the provision of student grants from the early 1970s and, more recently, the setting up of targeted access programmes (Byrne et al. 2014, 32–33). Current student grants and other forms of funding of relevance to lone parents, amongst other targeted groups, include:

- The SUSI grant. This is the main financial support scheme for third-level students in Ireland. SUSI offers funding to eligible students in approved courses at Post Leaving Certificate, undergraduate and postgraduate levels. It is a means tested payment - applications are assessed with regard to gross household income from the previous year. Student grants are divided into maintenance grants and fee grants (SUSI, 2025).

- The Student Assistance Fund (SAF). This is designed to support students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds with ongoing needs for financial support and provide emergency financial assistance for other students. The fund is managed by the HEA on behalf of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. The SAF is allocated to HEIs, who are responsible for targeting the available resources at those students most in need (HEA, 2024a).

- Scholarships and bursaries. Mature students may, for example, apply to Uversity (a registered charity) for HE scholarships. There are two levels of financial support available depending on whether or not the successful candidate has dependent children. The 1916 Bursary Fund was introduced to support students from the most under-represented groups to participate in HE. Lone parents must account for 20% of awardees (Cummins et al., 2024). The Fund is managed by the HEA on behalf of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

- In addition to these payments focused on financially supporting students who would otherwise be unable to attend HE for financial reasons the DSP also provides a targeted payment, which is the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA). The BTEA provides income support for jobseekers and others in receipt of qualifying payments who take full-time courses of education at further or higher level. Qualifying payments include JA or Jobseeker's Benefit (JB), JST, and OFP (DSP, 2025).

Across these payments it should be noted that there are issues with adequacy, eligibility, limited funds and the complexity of means testing rules. Some of these points are explored further in the literature review and form a substantial element of findings in this report which are unpacked in sections two and three.

In addition to financial supports, policy makers and HEIs have turned their attention to students' transition to HE and experience of university life, in order to boost rates of retention. A range of supports and services have been developed within HEIs, some of which are available to all students (e.g. counselling, peer-support) while others are targeted at 'non-traditional' entrants, including mature students, people with disabilities and those from lower socio-economic groups.

The Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) and the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) initiative were developed to support lower socio-economic groups and people with disabilities to access and progress through HE (Byrne et al. 2014). Students entering HE through these routes typically receive a

variety of academic, personal and social supports over the course of their studies. Some HEIs run access or foundational courses that are a route to HE for adults who have been away from formal education for a number of years.

The Trinity Access Programme (TAP), for example, offers a number of pre-entry outreach initiatives that aim to 'promote positive attitudes to education' and to increase the number of students who progress to third level education, including mature students.

Lone Parents, higher education and welfare reform

The two main payments available to lone parents in Ireland are:

- One Parent Family Payment (OFP) A means-tested payment for people who are bringing children up without the support of a partner. To qualify for the OFP, parents must have at least one child under seven years of age.

- Jobseeker's Transitional Payment (JST) A means-tested payment which is made to individuals who are caring for a child or children without the support of a partner. It is available to lone parents who have a youngest child aged seven to thirteen years (inclusive). According to the terms of the scheme, JST recipients are not required 'to be available for full-time work and genuinely seeking work' (DSP, 2025). However, recipients must engage with their local Intreo office when required to do so (see Dukelow et al. 2023). Once their youngest child reaches fourteen, lone parents in receipt of JST may be eligible to apply for JA, a payment to people who are unemployed. Recipients of this payment are expected to 'be available for full-time work and genuinely seeking work'.

The current *National Access Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education* (2022-2028) (HEA, 2022) sets out a vision to ensure that the student body entering and completing HE reflects the diversity of Ireland's population. Among the main target groups in the Plan, lone parents are identified as a subgroup of those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged and require additional support to access HE.

However, recent reforms to the welfare system – on which many lone-parents rely – may be at odds with the widening participation agenda by prioritising work over education, that is, a 'work first' approach (Hinton-Smith, 2016; Millar and Crosse, 2018; Dukelow, 2018; Dukelow et al., 2023; Gjersøe and Nicolaisen, 2024). Although policies vary considerably between countries, work activation measures typically involve tighter eligibility criteria for benefits, greater surveillance, and sanctions for noncompliance with work-related requirements (McGann et al., 2020).

It has been argued that the increased conditionality applied to supports for lone parents in the Irish system means that there is greater emphasis on employment, and employment of any kind, over education or training (Sinnott, 2017; Dukelow et al., 2023). This is reflected in the shift towards activating lone parents earlier in their children's lives with the introduction of JST in 2015 which means that lone parents are required to engage with activation services once their youngest child reaches seven years of age.

Dukelow et al.'s (2023) study of JST found that recipients were typically not informed of education options or they were encouraged towards forms of training which were inappropriate for their particular circumstances and interests. Once a lone parent's youngest child reaches fourteen years of age the social protection system treats lone parents as job seekers. Prior to these reforms lone parents were entitled to OFP until their youngest child reached eighteen or 22 if still in full-time education. The work first approach is also reflected in cutbacks to BTEA, which is the main social welfare payment lone parents in HE now rely on if they are no longer eligible for OFP or JST. A key issue with this payment is that since 2010 it is not possible to apply for a SUSI grant whilst claiming BTEA. Since 2014 prior approval for the course of study must be attained from the DSP (Dukelow, 2018). Since these reforms the numbers in receipt of BTEA have declined significantly.

The contrast between work first and education first approaches has been noted by the Joint Committee on Social Protection (2017) in its report on the position of lone parents. It recommended a number of ways income and activation supports could improve access and participation in education. It also recommended that the DSP set targets to monitor 'educational and poverty levels' and 'the number of lone parents that are completing second and third level education' (Joint Committee on Social Protection, 2017: 41).

Data on lone parents in higher education

Comprehensive access data on lone parents is not collected by the HEA via its main collection instrument which is the annual Equal Access Survey of new entrants to HE. This survey does include a question on whether the new entrant is a parent and on whether the respondent is in receipt of OFP. Data from the academic years 2019/2020 to 2022/2023 shows a relatively small proportion of students who are parents. Parents comprised 3% (756) of all students in 2019/2020 and 1.9% (568) of all students in 2022/2023 (HEA, 2024b). Of the total parent group, those who reported being in receipt of OFP amounted to 193 students (26% of all parents / 0.7% of all students) in 2019/2020 and 133 students (24% of all parents / 0.4% of all students in 2022/2023).

However, this only gives us a partial picture of lone parent participation in HE. It does not account for lone parents who may be in receipt of the other main lone parent payment, namely JST, nor those who are participating in HE and who are not entitled to income support from the DSP. The non-response rate to the Equal Access Survey as a whole and to individual survey questions also needs to be taken into account.

Table 1 (below) summarises these findings from the HEA Equal Access Survey. Data on SUSI grant status is also included. A far higher proportion of students who report claiming OFP are SUSI awardees compared to the SUSI awardee rate for the total number of new entrants. In 2019/2020, for example, 82% of students who claimed OFP were SUSI awardees compared to 41.7% of the total number of new entrants. In 2022/2023 the proportions were 73% and 34% respectively.

Table 1: HEA data on parental status, OFP and SUSI payments

Academic year	Parent – Yes	OFP – Yes	OFP – Yes & SUSI awardee	OFP – Yes & non-SUSI awardee
2019/2020	756	193	159	34
2020/2021	862	201	166	35
2021/2022	737	158	124	34
2022/2023	568	133	98	35

Data source: HEA 2024b

Previous research on lone parents in higher education

Four bodies of research are relevant when looking at the experience of lone parents in HE. The first is research which is directly about lone parents in HE (Horne and Hardie, 2002; Yakaboski, 2010; Hinton-Smith, 2012, 2016; Byrne and Murray 2017; Lindsay and LeBlanc Gillum, 2018; Trotter, 2023). Research on community education is also relevant because it is an important route into HE for lone parents (Centre for Effective Services, 2023; Eustace et al. 2023). The three other areas span research with parents generally, including lone parents, in HE (NUS, 2009; Moreau and Kerner, 2012; 2015); research with mature students (Indecon, 2021) and research with non-traditional students more generally. The latter group includes student carers. This body of research varies in terms of whether it includes lone parents as carers, some studies do include lone parents (Rawlinson, 2024) whilst others do not (Taylor et al., 2023; Runacres et al., 2024; Pierce, 2024).

The studies in these three areas are useful for comparisons, indicating the additional challenges lone parents may face compared to partnered parents, as well as showing common ground, which is especially the case in research involving carers. Studies which focus solely on lone parents tend to be small-scale and qualitative. Drawing on these four bodies of research, four key themes relating to lone parents' experience of HE are explored: the barriers to access and challenges faced by lone parent students; motivations and perceived benefits of HE; the supports that facilitate access and retention; and the key policy messages and recommendations emerging from the research.

Barriers to access and challenges while in college

Previous research suggests several interlinked challenges, including:

- Financial hardships and difficulties in negotiating different payments.
- Limited access to childcare.
- Challenges of juggling student and parent roles, leading to time poverty.
- Problems integrating into university life, both academically and socially.
- Lack of access to housing and lack of geographical mobility which may limit choice or add to time poverty.

The financial barriers to HE have been documented in studies carried out in Ireland (Byrne and Murray, 2017), the UK (Horne and Hardie, 2002; NUS 2009; Moreau and Kerner, 2015; Hinton-Smith 2016), and the US (Yakaboski, 2010; Lindsay and LeBlanc Gillum, 2018). For lone parents in Byrne and Murray's (2017: 77) research, financial problems emerged as a central concern, 'dominating the day-to-day routine and proving to be a source of stress'. Lone parents faced considerable challenges in meeting the costs of attending college, paying rent, raising a family, and paying childcare, even in light of the supports offered by the state through bundles of social welfare payments, housing payments and the student grant scheme. Accessing hardship funds was common among the lone parents in their study. Similarly, an NUS (2009) survey in the UK found that while many students with children are likely to experience financial pressures, lone parents are the 'poorest' group. They are more likely to be in debt (61% compared with 53%), less likely to be able to supplement their income through paid work, more likely to apply for hardship funding (42% compared with 30%), more likely to have sought money advice and more likely to run out of money at certain times of the year (32% compared with 19%).

Research with lone parents and stakeholder groups has also identified the complexity of navigating the welfare support system and the state student grant system as a barrier in accessing Further Education (FE)/HE (Byrne and Murray, 2017). In Ireland, changing eligibility criteria for BTEA and other supports over time, coupled with the limits around rent allowance, fed into the complexity of the range of supports that lone-parents faced when navigating the system. As a result, accessing HE was regarded as increasingly risky for lone parents. Similar issues were raised in research by Horne and Hardie (2002) which highlighted the complexities of the state benefits system and the difficulties lone parent students experienced in obtaining advice to enable forward planning. Moreover, lone parents are not always aware of the supports for which they are eligible, such as the SAF. Particular issues arise for lone parents studying part-time or who are undertaking postgraduate courses (Byrne and Murray, 2017).

While access has improved with the extension of the fee income component of the SUSI grant to part-time students studying at undergraduate level from September 2024, eligibility barriers remain that can impact particularly on lone parents. These include ineligibility for postgraduate students studying part time; for students taking courses in private HEIs; for students taking courses fully online; and for single parent students living in intergenerational households who may not be eligible because of household means testing. The provision of extra funding, such as the SAF and scholarships such as the 1916 bursary, is very important. However, research in Ireland and elsewhere notes the lack of visibility and awareness around such targeted supports and the administrative burden involved in applying for such support with no guarantee of success (Runacres et al., 2024). Cummins et al.'s (2024) study of student experiences of applying for the 1916 bursary found, for example, that the number of applicants far exceeds the number of bursaries available. In the South Cluster of universities only 12% of eligible applicants received a bursary.

As noted earlier, the degree to which welfare support systems embody a work first approach can also hinder access. Writing in the US, Yakaboski (2010) argues that welfare reforms embodying a work-first ideology have impeded access to and continuation in HE for lone parents. Under this system, single parent students are expected to simultaneously be in education and employment while parenting for eligibility to receive federal assistance.

Lack of access to adequate and affordable child-care and after-school care can be a significant barrier to access and course completion (NUS, 2009; Byrne and Murray, 2017; Lindsay and LeBlanc Gillum, 2018; Johnson, 2022). In Byrne and Murray's (2017) study, a key concern raised by lone-parents and advocacy groups was that many universities and HEIs have private crèches on campus, with little access to community crèches and/or subsidised childcare in or around HEIs.

As a result of difficulties in securing suitable, affordable childcare, some lone parents had to rely on informal childcare (family, friends, neighbours) at low or no cost. Finding childcare that coincides with college schedules adds to the complexity and the reliance on informal childcare.

Research suggests that the scheduling of teaching may be out of step with the caring needs of single parent students, for example lectures occurring at school pick-up times, reading week coinciding with half term or the scheduling of evening and weekend classes (NUS, 2009; Lindsay and LeBlanc Gillum, 2018; Johnson, 2022; Trotter, 2023). In a study with lone parent students at a midwestern US university, Yakaboski (2010) found that a lack of coordination between university and school or daycare schedules impeded class attendance by lone parent students. In this instance, the start of the academic year schedules for the university and the school district varied by 3 weeks with the result that lone parent students had to secure temporary daycare or miss the first 3 weeks of semester. The difficulty was compounded by a campus daycare policy that did not allow short-term enrolment. Similarly, a number of parents in Byrne and Murray's (2017) research were unable to attend some lectures (particularly those from 5pm onwards) or even missed a complete module at college because it was outside the travel time required to meet the formal childcare hours.

Moreover, certain college courses require students to undertake work placements which may create further childcare challenges for single parent students. This is especially the case when there is no flexibility over the timings of work placements (Sinnott, 2017). Furthermore, without adequate and flexible childcare, single parents may not be able to utilize available campus services or campus activities including instructor office hours, tutoring and student organisation meetings (Lindsay and LeBlanc Gillum, 2018, see also Hinton-Smith, 2016).

The challenge of juggling studying, childcare and (in many cases) part-time work is a recurring theme in the literature on lone-parent students in HE (Hinton-Smith, 2012; Lindsay and LeBlanc Gillum, 2018; Trotter, 2023). Time-scarcity means that lone parents rarely have time to themselves (Trotter, 2023), while the need to juggle multiple roles can lead to feelings of guilt that they are failing in one or more of these roles.

Hinton-Smith's (2012) research identified particular 'crisis times' for managing the tightrope between the demands of home and university, including, for instance school holidays and times of children's illnesses. Impacts of such a time deficit include exhaustion and adverse health effects. Moreover, the ongoing challenge of balancing different roles can impact on class attendance, assignment submission and, ultimately, retention rates:

> The stress of managing studentship with family life can, unsurprisingly impact detrimentally on retention, and some lone mothers in this research reported leaving courses prematurely due to the constraints of juggling study with parenting alone. Students' lives outside university are evidenced to be a key reason for students leaving HE courses prematurely... Relevant factors include problems coordinating childcare arrangements, lengthy travelling times to tutorials, and lack of institutional flexibility over attendance, resulting in damage to relationships with family and partner (Hinton-Smith, 2012: 153).

Similar issues relating to student retention are raised in other studies. Due to the huge personal demands placed on them during the Covid 19 pandemic, many single-parent students disengaged, contemplated leaving, or paused their studies (Trotter, 2023). Earlier research from NUS (2009) found that 65% of lone parents had contemplated leaving their course at some point. An analysis carried out by the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) of educational statistics gathered by the U.S. Department of Education found that from 2003 to 2009, single mothers in the US were 'more than six times less likely to graduate with a degree than women in college without children' (Cruse et al., 2019: 8). Hinton-Smith (2012) also reported that the strain of juggling multiple roles may lead some students to withdraw.

Ability to access university and peer supports may be hindered for lone parent students who are more likely to experience time poverty (Trotter, 2023). The impact of time poverty can extend to lone parent students not feeling part of the education system (Trotter, 2023) and to the experience of feelings of isolation (Yakaboski, 2010). Time poverty and childcare needs means that they have less time to spend in college, for instance leaving after lectures to collect children from childcare, and may not feel integrated into university life, specifically the social aspects of university life.

It may be difficult for single-parent students to feel part of the university system for a number of reasons, as Trotter (2023: 1050) explains:

> In the context of Higher Education in the UK, many of the single-parent students who took part in the research indicated that they felt left out of the system, seeing it as a context

> in which the subjectivities of students were constituted by performative discourses which generate an image of 'the student' as 'young and care/commitment free', as one of the participants put it. This research has demonstrated that beyond the language used generating a particular image of the student, the physical space of campus (for example, a lack of – or inaccessible – childcare, and no baby-changing facilities) and the way in which time is organised (for example, lectures occurring at school pick-up times, or reading week coinciding with half term) were also performative acts which created or reaffirmed this image.

Identity conflicts also serve as a barrier to single parent's college access and success. Yakaboski (2010: 474) describes how single mothers must deal with 'complex identity roles' that hold competing demands, such as studenthood and motherhood. Juggling complex roles and identities combined with time poverty that inhibits inclusion in traditional student activities can lead to feelings of isolation and serve as a barrier to college supports and success (Yakaboski, 2010; Trotter, 2023; Austin and McDermott 2003). Sinnott (2017) details how single mothers in HE can experience isolation from not only college peers but also their wider community due to factors such as time poverty and financial limitations. A participant in this study described the constant feeling of guilt associated with the demands of being a single parent and student and how that acts as a barrier to education, particularly for single parents who have previous experience in HE and wish to return. The struggle for single parent students to juggle multiple roles, identities, and responsibilities can be an emotional challenge which can be 'stressful, frustrating, overwhelming, mentally exhausting, emotionally exhausting, guilt-ridden, challenging, and confusing' (Johnson, 2022: 66).

In addition to the barriers mentioned thus far, challenges exist in relation to housing availability and its subsequent impact on university choice (Yakaboski, 2010). Financial challenges combined with a lack of affordable and suitable housing can result in single parent students needing to live with family members which, although it can be a source of support, can also be a source of stress (Hinton-Smith, 2012). Moreover, it may cause barriers when attempting to avail of college grants, such as the SUSI grant, as the income of all those living in the household are accounted for when determining grant eligibility. An interview participant in Sinnott's (2017: 69) study, for example, described being 'denied access to a SUSI grant because she couldn't afford to live independently with her son, so she moved home and then was classed as a dependant on her parents'.

Motivations and perceived benefits of higher education

For single parents the financial benefits of HE are significant and have several dimensions. Another significant benefit is related to the idea of being a role model for one's children which is intertwined with being able to financially provide for their children and giving them a better future. The employment opportunities opened up by HE also feature and are linked to broader economic and social benefits. However, some research also points to lone parents' awareness of limited opportunities for well-paid and secure employment, especially in more feminised areas of work.

Participants in Bryne and Murray's (2017) research viewed upgrading their education as an essential route out of poverty. The NUS report (2009) states that for 58% of parent students, creating financial security for their children in the future motivated them to keep studying and this figure increases to 67% for lone parents. Similar findings are presented by Horne and Hardie (2002), claiming improved job prospects and increased earning potential were key motivating factors for lone parent students in their study.

Becoming financially independent in the sense of no longer having to claim income supports also features in the research. Some parents in the NUS study (2009), particularly lone parents, suggested their motivation to study was to become independent of state benefits and that participation in education would help them to combat the negative stereotypes they felt they were subjected to:

> Some single mothers that we spoke to in focus groups felt particularly affected by negative discourses around lone parenthood and benefits. They were keen to demonstrate that they were working hard to 'better themselves', and to emphasise that the reason they were studying was so that they wouldn't have to depend on benefits in the future (NUS, 2009: 22)

The opportunity of educational progression to provide a financially stable future for their family is a common motivating factor expressed by single parent students, presenting a future orientated outlook and approach to education (NUS, 2009; Lindsay and LeBlanc Gillum, 2018; Cruse et al., 2019; Johnson, 2022).

The idea of being a role model for children and countering stereotypes is also raised by Moreau and Kerner (2015) and by Trotter (2023). For the mothers in Lindsay and LeBlanc Gillum's (2018: 192) study, earning a degree provided the possibility of financially providing for their children in the future and the basis for the belief that 'higher levels of education were a pathway to their future success'. Trotter (2023) notes that not only were concerns about their children's future a reason for single parents to enter college but motivated them to continue:

> Many of the participants in this study began studying precisely with the aim of 'giving [their] children a better life', and others described how their children gave them the strength and motivation to continue through the difficulties of balancing distinct roles. When participants were asked about what the most rewarding element of being a single-parent student was, participants referred to the way in which their studies made their children proud, to the importance of being good role models, and to the reasoning behind their studies – to give their children a better life. They highlighted the ways in which studying alongside parenthood was a key factor in building strength and resilience (Trotter, 2023: 1049).

A recurrent theme in the interviews conducted by Byrne and Murray (2017) with HE students pertained to the long-term benefits of acquiring HE qualifications for themselves and their children. The intergenerational effects were seen to include a greater likelihood that their children would themselves go on to HE. The interviews highlighted 'the positive effects of increasing parent levels of education on the aspirations, expectations and cultural capital acquisition of children' (Byrne and Murray, 2017: 56). Similarly, Hinton-Smith (2012) states that lone parent students are not exclusively the beneficiaries of HE, as the benefits are potentially intergenerational, extending to long term positive impacts for the children of lone parents.

At a larger scale, societal benefits may emerge through the fostering of 'social inclusion and attacking the symptoms of exclusion' (Hinton-Smith, 2012: 246). The economic and societal benefits of single mothers' pursuit and attainment of HE is described in a briefing paper by the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) (2019) in the US, finding that both single mother students and wider society are recipients of economic gain.

At an individual level, single mother's attainment of HE can result in an economic return through increased opportunities for well-paid employment and at the state level, gains are made through an increase in tax contributions from single mothers in employment and subsequently a reduction of their reliance on public assistance.

Although HE attainment can result in individual, intergenerational, and societal benefits (Hinton-Smith, 2012; Byrne and Murray, 2017; Cruse et al., 2019), it is important to note that such benefits are not guaranteed, due to factors such as chosen degree types and barriers to well-paid and available work in specific employment sectors, amongst others (Hinton-Smith, 2012; Sinnott, 2017). Some participants in Sinnott's (2017) research were strongly aware of these issues. When asked if education was the only way out of poverty, opinions differed between participants who believed that education is the primary way out of poverty compared to participants who disagreed, having attained college degrees but were still in low paid employment.

Achieving financial stability through employment can be in many cases dependant on the type of educational area one choses to study, with traditionally feminised fields of employment characterised by low-pay and low-status positions. Hinton-Smith (2012) state that although access routes to further and HE in the UK can be an important enabler for mature students and single parents to avail of educational opportunities, they can be concentrated in areas of study that are traditionally feminised, such as social care, teaching and nursing courses, and:

> While training for these professions may buy learners the relative security of regular work and income, it also leads individuals into careers frequently characterised by the same low pay, low-status, and high-stress caring work that also dominates their lives at home bringing up children (Hinton-Smith, 2012: 229).

Bryne and Murray's (2017) research found that few in-house studies exist of the post-university careers of lone parents, as data on outcomes for this cohort of students is rarely gathered. As a result, there is little evidence of the nature of pathways that lone parents pursue upon completion of HE. However, interviews with HEI representatives in their study indicated that there is considerable anecdotal information indicating positive outcomes.

What helped with access and participation?

As well as identifying the barriers, the research reports on what helped lone parents persist with their studies. Many of the single-parent students who participated in Trotter's (2023) study emphasised how invaluable their personal tutors had been to them during the Covid pandemic. In addition to personal support and academic support from the university, peer support was seen as invaluable in terms of supporting students' wellbeing and studies. Similarly, participants in Johnson's (2022) study emphasised the role supportive 'advisors, teachers, and mentors' played in creating a positive experience of community college.

A participant 'described a supportive teacher as a teacher who listens to your concerns, helps you develop solutions, and provides extra resources when needed' (Johnson, 2022: 90). Because single parent students often have multiple responsibilities that can limit their time availability to, for instance, attend class and meet assignment deadlines, having supportive college staff that 'are eager to help them succeed' (Johnson, 2022: 72) can help parents persist in their studies and positively influence their overall experience of HE.

The establishment of study groups with peers were also perceived as helpful for single parent students in HE. Participants in Lindsay and LeBlanc Gillum's (2018) study emphasised the diverse range of support they availed of through a range of college campus services such as disability services, tutoring and college counselling. A participant mentioned the help they received with scholarship applications and housing from their college's nontraditional student office. Notably, the reverse can be true, meaning that if HE staff and educators are not supportive, this can be a further challenge and stressor for single parent students (Johnson, 2022). Hinton-Smith (2012) similarly notes the pivotal role of staff and institutions in exacerbating or mediating the stresses of time poverty for lone parents.

In terms of access, research suggests that participation in community education programmes can be a stepping stone to further and HE for lone parents (Eustace et al., 2023). The incremental nature of community education allows participants to progress from non-accredited courses through accredited programmes and on to degree and postgraduate qualifications. Moreover, community education has been found to build confidence and overlay previous poor experiences of school with more positive and supportive ones. This can have a particular resonance for lone parents (Centre for Effective Services, 2023).

Recommendations made by previous research

Previous research provides recommendations on how to support lone parent student access to and retention in HE. Some of these relate to changes in universities, whilst others have wider policy implications. Recommendations include the creation of parent/family-friendly events, activities and supports on campus (Yakaboski, 2010; Johnson, 2022; Trotter, 2023), affordable and flexible childcare on campus (Byrne and Murray, 2017; Lindsay and LeBlanc Gillum, 2018; Johnson, 2022; Trotter, 2023).

Additional recommendations include on-campus family housing (Yakaboski, 2010; Lindsay and LeBlanc Gillum, 2018) and for financial supports that comprehensively cover the needs of lone parents attending HE, including support for tuition and learning materials, transport, childcare and broader clubs and activities involving their children (Yakaboski, 2010; Byrne and Murray, 2017; Johnson, 2022).

Recommendations relating specifically to learning and teaching are made by Byrne and Murray (2017: 113) 'ensuring equality proofing teaching and learning practices that are sensitive to the needs of lone parents regarding timetabling, curriculum design and HE assessment schedules and the availability of flexible modes of participation.'

In particular, flexibility around attendance requirements and accommodations regarding assessment deadlines are key to ensuring that lone parents can succeed given factors such as time poverty and the unpredictability of caring responsibilities around times when their children are unwell or off school. As Rawlinson (2024: 4) notes 'an undercurrent of many suggestions is the necessity of institutional flexibility and allowances for students particularly around episodic disruptions to their studies'. In this regard, Rawlinson's research (2024) recommends the idea of a 'Carer's Passport' for carers, including single parents, in HE that would include, amongst other things, automatic extensions for assignments. This is a practice in place in some Australian universities. In addition, Trotter (2023), Byrne and Murray (2017) and Lindsay

and LeBlanc Gillum (2018), suggest universities should collect data on single parent students to better support them.

Several reports in Ireland and elsewhere have commented on the lack of research and official data on students who are parents or carers (Moreau and Kerner, 2012; Taylor et al., 2023; Pierce, 2024; Runacres et al., 2024) and lone parents (Byrne and Murray, 2017). Cruse et al. (2019) advise the collection of data should also include educational outcomes of lone parent students. While collecting data on student lone parents is important in terms of raising their institutional visibility and offering support, the mechanisms by which it is collected is also an important consideration with research finding that not all lone parents will self-identify for fear of stigma or discrimination (Rawlinson, 2024). The Joint Committee on Social Protection (2017: 41) made similar recommendations relating to the DSP around monitoring the number of lone parents in receipt of income support who complete second and third level education.

Conclusion

The section began with a brief policy overview and then reviewed existing national and international research that provides a primarily qualitative picture of the experiences of lone parents in HE either as a group in their own right or as part of a wider study of 'non-traditional' student groups including parents and mature students.

The review has shown that there is a substantial body of research which indicates the financial hardships these student groups encounter and the corresponding complex financial support systems that must be navigated.

In addition, frequently occurring issues with limited access to childcare, lack of access to housing, lack of geographical mobility and issues with integrating into university life are intensified for lone parent students who have the added challenge of juggling student and parent roles and for whom time poverty is especially acute and a major source of stress. These findings are counter-balanced by the benefits of HE lone parent students experience.

Existing research cites the personal growth HE offers, the model effect it has on the children of lone parents, as well as the path HE qualifications offer as a route out of poverty and toward financial stability, and for opportunities for career advancement and for combatting the stereotyping of lone parents.

Such benefits are however tempered by the fact many courses and career opportunities that lone parents pursue are feminised and not particularly well paid including social care, early years education and nursing. As will be documented in the following sections many of these findings strongly resonate with the findings emerging from this particular research project.

Section 2:
Survey Findings

Introduction

This section presents the key findings from the survey of lone parents who were studying at third level during the academic year 2023/24. It begins by outlining some of the personal and student profile details of the survey respondents, followed by an overview of their childcare arrangements. It goes on to present findings related to respondents' motivations for entering HE, the challenges they encountered, the perceived benefits of HE, and their experience of supports. The section ends with a cluster of findings related to the financial situation of survey respondents, including details of financial supports from a variety of sources including the DSP.

The data presented in this section is primarily quantitative. Some open-ended questions were included in the survey and participants were also invited to expand on their answer in some cases. We include some of this data in this section where it is indicative of overall trends or where it highlights a particular issue.

However, we focus most of our qualitative analysis in the subsequent section, section three, which presents findings from the interviews and diaries with lone parent students and more in-depth insights into the lived experience behind the statistical picture developed in this section.

Survey respondents' personal profile, student profile and childcare arrangements

Table 2 summarises the demographic profile of the survey respondents. The gender breakdown broadly reflects the make-up of lone parents in Ireland, the majority of whom are women. The findings on ethnicity or cultural background suggest that lone parents in are a more diverse cohort than third level students in general. For example, 12% of students in our survey were Black or Black Irish-African, compared with 4.3% of students in the HEA Equal Access Survey. 66% of respondents in our survey were White-Irish compared with 74% of students in the HEA Equal Access Survey 2023/24.[1]

Table 2: Demographic Profile

Gender	99% of respondents were female and 1% were male.
Age	2% were aged 18-22, 98% were aged 23 and over.
Ethnicity or cultural background	Based on categories used in the 2022 Census of Population, 66% of respondents were White-Irish; 2% were White-Traveller and 13% were White-any other background. 12% were Black or Black Irish- African; 2% were Black or Black Irish-any other background. 5% chose the 'Other' category- including mixed background.
Number of children	54% of respondents had one child; 34% had two children, 5% had three children; 4% had four children and 3% had five children.
Ages of children	53% had children aged 7 years and under; 53% had children aged between 8 and 14; 24% had children 15-18; 15% also had children aged over 18[2].

Data source: HEA 2024b

1 Data from HEA Equal Access Survey 2023/24 available at: *hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/key-facts-figures/*

2 Our survey targeted lone parents who had children aged 18 and under. However, the survey did collect details on all children in each respondent's family including those aged over 18.

Tables 3-7 present information on aspects of the survey participants' participation in HE, including whether they are studying full or part-time; at undergraduate or postgraduate level; the HEI attended; and field of study. Participants were also asked to specify whether they would prefer to study full- or part-time.

Table 3: Current Mode of Study

	Percentage	N
Full-time	85%	89
Part-time	15%	16
Total	100%	105

Table 4: Preferred Mode of Study

	Percentage	N
Full-time	61%	64
Part-time	39%	41
Total	100%	105

The majority of respondents were full-time students however, it is notable that over twice the number of lone parents studying part-time would prefer to study part-time (15% versus 39%).

Table 5: Programme Type

	Percentage	N
Undergraduate	89%	93
Postgraduate	11%	12
Total	100%	105

The majority of respondents were undergraduate students. Only 11% were post-graduate students which is substantially lower than the proportion of post-graduate students in general which was 30% for the year 2023/2024[3].

3 Authors' calculation based on HEA 2023/24 data. https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/key-facts-figures/ (HEA stats for 23/24 61,830 at postgrad and 204,070 at undergrad)

Table 6: Higher Education Institution Attended

	Percentage	N
Trinity College Dublin	23%	24
University College Cork	20%	21
Dundalk Institute of Technology	15%	16
University of Galway	11%	12
Technological University Shannon: Midlands Midwest	10%	10
Mary Immaculate College	7%	7
University of Limerick	2%	2
South East Technological University	2%	2
Technological University Dublin	2%	2
Maynooth University	1%	1
Munster Technological University	1%	1
RCSI University of Medicine and Health Sciences	1%	1
HEI not named*	6%	6
Total	100%*	105

*Percentages have been rounded and may not total to 100%.

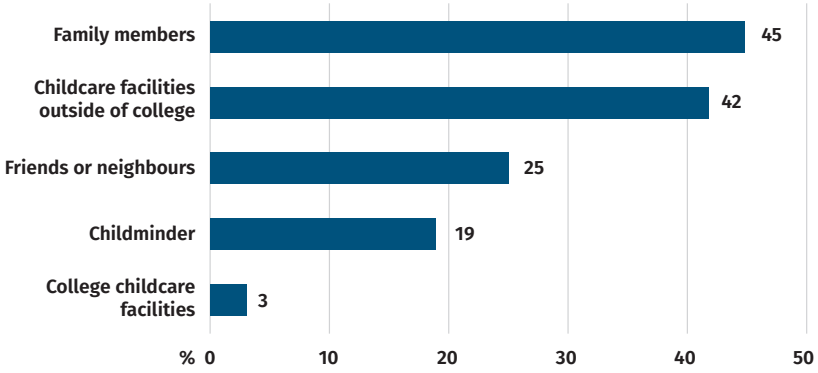
Table 7: Field of Study

	Percentage	N
Social Sciences	35%	37
Nursing and health related courses	29%	30
Arts and humanities	12%	13
Teaching	6%	6
Law	5%	5
Science	4%	4
Business	2%	2
Engineering and architecture	2%	2
Computer science	1%	1
Other	5%	5
Total	100%*	105

*Percentages have been rounded and may not total to 100%.

While the range of programmes studied by participants is quite diverse, the findings point to the dominance of social and health related/nursing courses, which reflects the wider research on the gendered nature of both lone parenthood and these courses. It is also notable that medicine, dentistry and pharmacy were options in this question but were not selected by any of the survey respondents.

Figure 1: Childcare Arrangements



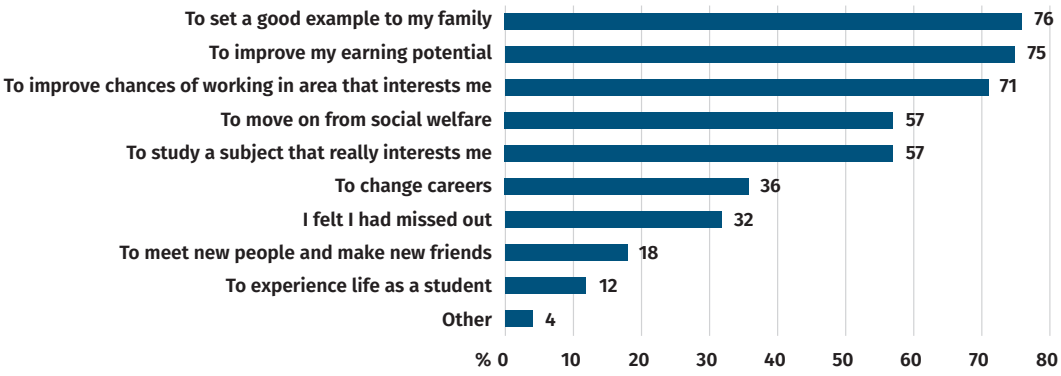
N=88

Figure 1 presents details of childcare arrangements. Survey participants were asked to select all options that applied. It is notable that there is a heavy reliance on informal care, either provided by family members or by friends or neighbours. In some cases, help provided by older children in the family was mentioned. A particularly striking finding is the very small number who use college childcare facilities which appears to reflect a lack of affordable, on-campus provision.

Motivations, challenges, benefits and supports

This section explores the reasons for entering HE, the challenges encountered, the benefits of participating in HE and the respondents' experiences of educational supports.

Figure 2: Reasons for Entering Higher Education

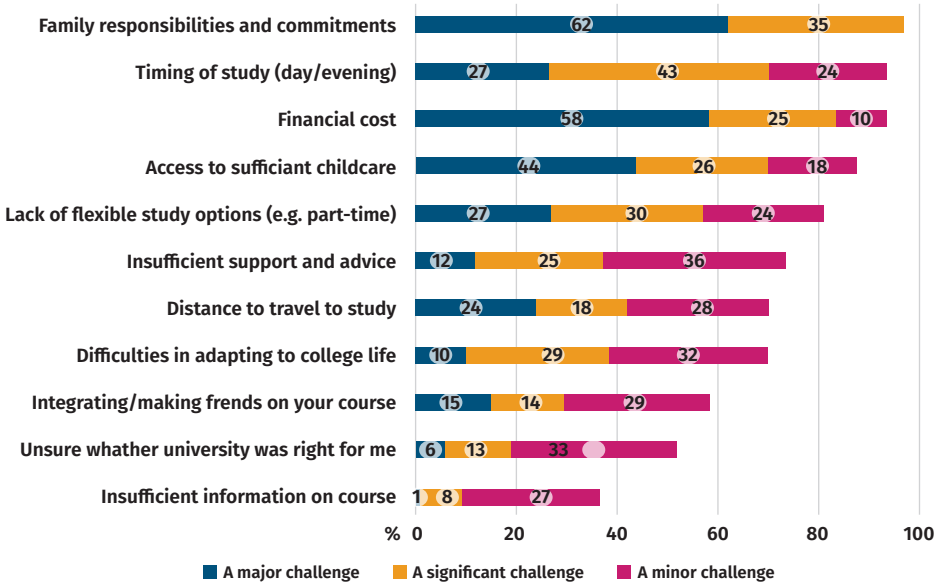


N=105

The three main reasons for entering HE identified by respondents were: to set an example to their family (76%); to improve their earning potential (75%); and to improve their chances of working in an area of interest (71%) (Figure 2). The aspiration to study a subject of interest also featured frequently, as did the objective of moving on from social welfare. As the findings presented in Figure 2 indicate, a much wider set of rationalities motivated the respondents to participate in HE, compared to the dominant policy rationale of education for employment and poverty prevention.

In the 'other' category, where respondents were invited to add other reasons, one participant mentioned overcoming barriers to employment linked to their disability: 'to get into a career I can do despite my disability'. Typically, respondents used the 'other' option to replicate or expand on the reasons they had already chosen.

Figure 3: Challenges Faced by Students



The average number of responses to each of these statements was 100.

If family featured as one of the main reasons for entering HE, family commitments also present as a 'major' or 'significant' challenge selected by the vast majority (97%) of survey respondents (see Figure 3). Respondents described having to juggle various demands and commitments and being frequently pressed for time, which one participant summed up as 'trying to have time for everything and everyone'. Another participant commented that lone parents are 'constantly stressing about being everywhere at once'. The challenges involved in combining the roles of student and parent are also clearly conveyed by this comment:

> My daughter turned 1 the week I started my course so trying to be an only present parent while studying a substantial subject and working has been the ultimate test of my juggling skills. I should be in a circus as I do it so well but also feeling like I'm missing her growing up some times. That's been brutally hard for me as mother who wanted her child for so long and taking the time away from her was extremely difficult for me but I also needed to do it for her.

Financial issues were identified as a major challenge by 58% of respondents while a further 44% reported that access to sufficient childcare was a major challenge. Issues around insufficient childcare and the implications these have were revealed by a range of comments survey participants made.

Timetables which do not align with childcare opening times presented a particular difficulty. These included college timetables which run until 6pm or later, or which do not align with school mid-term breaks. Some respondents also mentioned having to miss classes for this reason:

> It's tricky to find childcare that runs past 6pm or that covers school holidays, even worse for illness.

> The commute to childcare from college for 6pm has been stressful for the childcare facility to find suitable childcare workers as not many parents need childcare until 6pm.

> If I had lectures until six I wouldn't be home until half seven. Friends and family not always available to help and childminders are expensive.

Occasions when respondents' children were sick were also difficult to balance with college commitments:

> Sometimes my childcare doesn't line up with certain deadlines and you can't account for when she's sick and all she wants is her mammy and I have an assignment due.

> When my daughter has been unwell I have found it difficult to find someone to care for her. Recently she had chickenpox and was off school for two weeks. I could not find

> anyone to mind her and that was really difficult as it caused me to fall behind. School holidays are also tricky she does not get midterm breaks when I do so it is very difficult to secure a child minder.

While many mentioned the invaluable help of their families, the limits to family and friends being able to help was also a feature of the comments.

> My mum is amazing but it can be challenging at times because there may be times she has her own appointments to tend to but she is amazing so it's more positive than negative.
>
> The only person I have to help is my mam. When she's not around I miss out on college days.

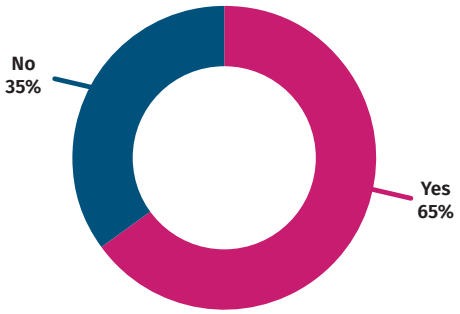
The degree to which family help is crucial is also indicated by efforts to involve family members who live abroad, as the following example illustrates:

> I had to beg my dad to fly over from Poland to stay with my children during the exams, even though I knew he had other important things going on for him during that time, but I had absolutely no other option left.

Other difficulties mentioned included the amount of time it takes to secure a place in childcare and the expense involved which some respondents could no longer afford and took their child(ren) out of formal childcare. Securing childcare for children with additional needs was also an issue for some respondents.

The college-related challenges that featured most prominently relate to the timing of study (day/evening) and lack of flexible study options, which reflect the time demands on lone parents. These challenges clearly intersect with the childcare challenges outlined. Other college-related challenges tend to be considered as more minor, including those relating to support and advice, and adapting to college life.

Figure 4: Considered Leaving College

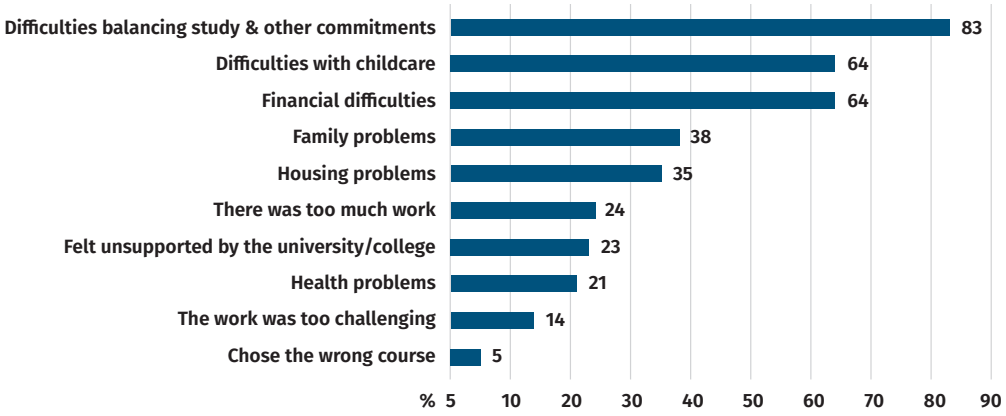


N=105

A highly significant finding is that almost two thirds (65%) of the survey respondents have considered leaving college (Figure 4). The reasons for this are set out in Figure 5 and include the challenges of balancing college with family commitments (83%), financial issues and childcare issues (both chosen by 64% of respondents) family problems (38%) and problems with housing (35%).

On the other hand, a relatively small proportion of respondents had considered leaving college because they felt they had chosen the wrong course (5%) or because college work was too challenging (14%).

Figure 5: Reasons for Considering Leaving College

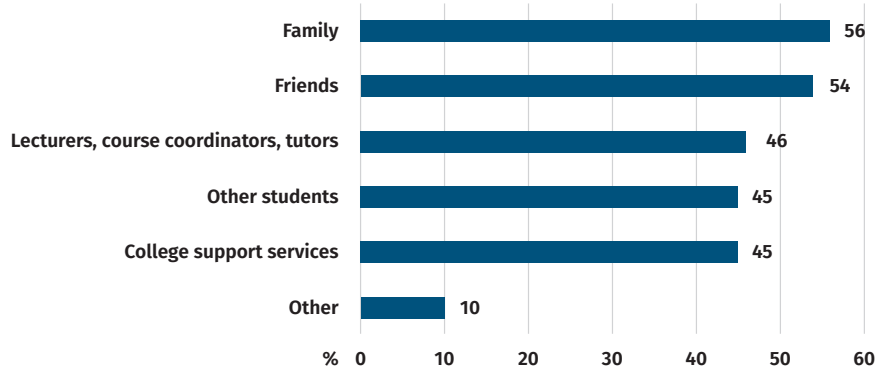


N=66

In addition to the issues listed in Figure 5, in an 'other' category, where respondents were invited to add other reasons, two respondents noted the difficulties of settling into university, while another reported being made to feel unwelcome in her first year: 'l was told by one of the lecturers that l was not supposed to be in University if l was having kids'. Having to undertake an unpaid placement was also raised by another student who had considered leaving university: 'The work placement, the amount of unpaid work experience I have to do in social care even though my job is in social care'. Some respondents elaborated on the reasons listed in Figure 5. The comments below illuminate the impact of financial difficulties, family problems and balancing study and other commitments.

> Mostly it's financial, and although my mum helps with the childcare it can be challenging at times especially when the children have appointments that I need to attend to, but mostly 100% it's financial and I can see why so many lone parents [are] leaving because of the financial barriers, like I've to pay for my kids school buses too but none of this is calculated when applying for support which is a bit ridiculous.
>
> My lone parent allowance was cut off in my final year as my youngest turned 15 and, I was refused back to education [allowance] and had zero income in my final semester. thankfully the university ambassador program gave me hours and financial aid was approved for me.
>
> Stress levels have been extremely high between meeting deadlines, parenting and managing a tumultuous relationship with the father of my child while attending mediation. On top of trying to have some semblance of a social life.

Figure 6: Supports that Helped with College

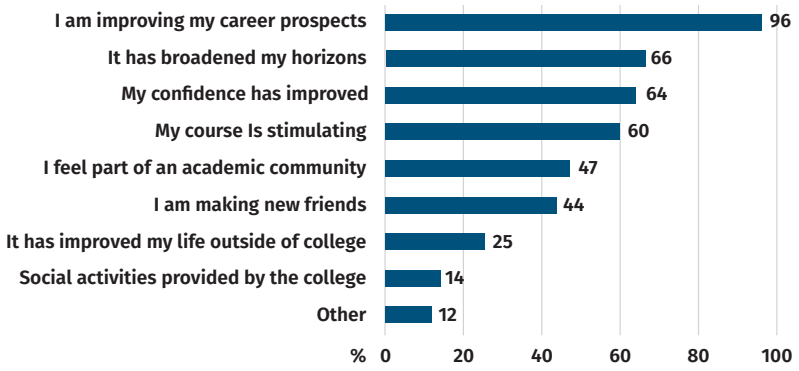


N=101

Family and friends were the most frequently mentioned supports to lone parents in HE (Figure 6). The nature of their contribution will be explored in detail in Section 3, using interview and diary data. Other significant supports included course staff (lecturers, co-ordinators and tutors); fellow students; and wider college

supports. Those who chose the college support services option were asked to identify which services they had used. Student counselling services featured prominently in the answers; however, it is notable that one participant commented that 'I have attended counselling but it doesn't fix a lack of support'. Financial supports were also frequently mentioned - either specific types of financial aid or HE personnel who advised or administered financial supports such as budget advisors and 1916 bursary officers. Other supports mentioned included private counselling and support from employers.

Figure 7: Main Benefits of Attending Higher Education



N=102

Career prospects featured prominently in the perceived benefits of attending HE, followed by a sense of fulfilment personally, socially and academically (Figure 7). The comments provided by some participants illustrate the wellbeing and outlook benefits of participating in HE:

> I am more empathetic.
>
> It makes me feel like I have a purpose in life.
>
> It has improved my mental health.
>
> Another focus instead of abusive ex.
>
> Feeling great and proud of what I have achieved so far.
>
> I love being me, a student, an individual before being a mother - it's about me and my choices and my options.

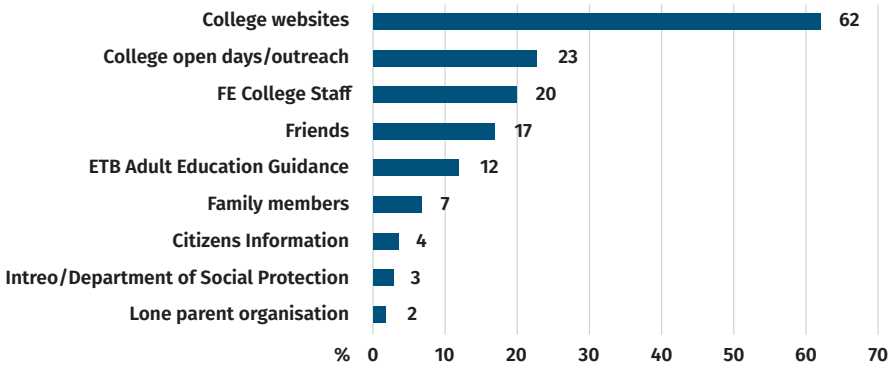
Another respondent pointed to the skills she had gained as a student:

> My writing skills, communication skills, reflective skills, and much more have improved. Keen to share with others and help others do the same.

Some comments reiterated career focused motivations that would benefit both parents and children:

> To get into a profession that I am passionate about to get a career that will help me financially pay for my kids college, yes I know I could be a waitress and pay for their college but unfortunately they are not a secure job and your hours are not always guaranteed and the money is crap for the work you put in.

Figure 8: Sources of Information about College or Course



N=102

As Figure 8 illustrates, college websites were the most important source of information about colleges and/or courses. Nearly a quarter identified college open days/outreach, followed by FE college staff (20%). It was notable that only 7% of respondents said that family members provided information. A small number of respondents identified other sources, including Springboard, the CAO and a school counsellor. The following comments from one survey respondent, illustrate how impactful information services can be:

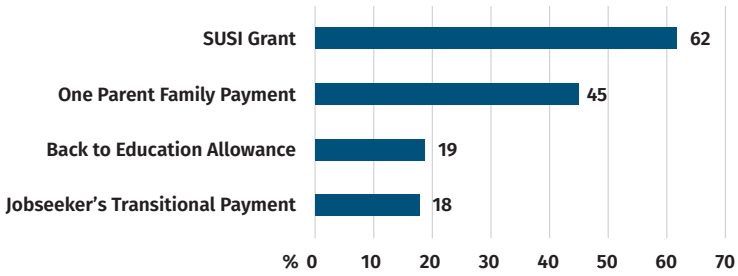
> I got my information from LYCS[4], my old FAS I hadn't attended it in years but I went in and told them I wanted to go back to college and they welcomed me with open arms, they helped me research courses and find ones that were best for me. Still to this day I reach out when I am struggling or need advice or guidance. Truthfully if not for them it's likely that I would not be in the position I am today.

Those who selected 'lone parent organisation' as a source of information specified that this was One Family.

Financial supports and financial situation

The vast majority of respondents received some form of financial support. 62% were in receipt of a SUSI grant. 87% received a weekly payment from the DSP. Figure 9 details the main payments. In addition to these payments, a small number of respondents indicated that they received other weekly welfare payments, including Jobseeker's Benefit (one respondent), Carer's Allowance (one respondent), Disability Allowance (one respondent), Supplementary Welfare Allowance (one respondent). A further three mentioned receiving the Domiciliary Care Allowance.

Figure 9: Payments to Students/Parents



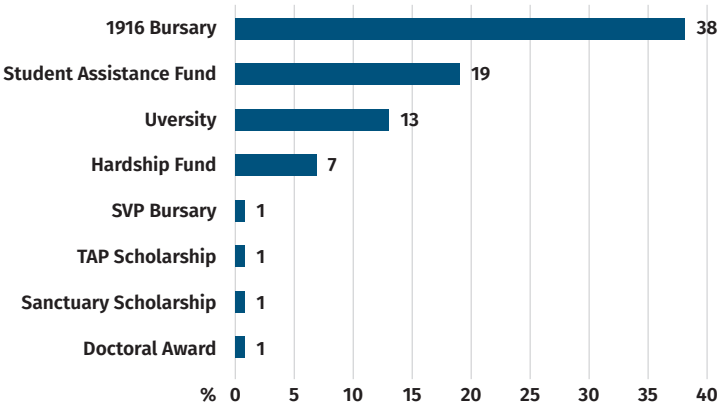
N=93

4 Lourdes Youth and Community Services which is a community development project in Dublin's North East inner city.

Scholarships, bursaries or other financial help

Survey participants were asked if they had received a scholarship, bursary or financial help from particular funds or organisations. The majority (69% n=68) said that they had, and the types of financial support received is detailed in Figure 10. The potential impact of such supports is conveyed by this comment: 'I have just received the 1916 bursary, which is a game changer'.

Figure 10: Additional Financial Supports



N=68

Respondents who were receiving a social welfare payment prior to coming to college were asked if they were able to access information and advice on how becoming a student would affect the payment (Table 8). Only 8% felt they had sufficient information, with 42% indicating that there was not enough information available while another substantial proportion (23%) found it almost impossible to access relevant information.

Table 8: Access to Information and Advice on Social Welfare Payments

	Percentage	N
Yes, there was ample information	8%	6
Yes, there was some information	28%	22
There wasn't enough information available	42%	33
It was almost impossible to get information	23%	18
Total	**100%***	**79**

*Percentages have been rounded and may not total to 100%.

In an open-ended question, participants in receipt of a social welfare payment were asked whether they had experienced any difficulties with this payment since becoming a student. While some participants had no issues with how their social welfare payment aligned with their participation in HE, others reported a number of difficulties related to their payments.

Some participants mentioned a fear of having their payment cut off and not being compliant with the payment conditions.

> They keep sending out reminders to see if I am still attending [college] this can be unsettling because there is always the fear that they will make you withdraw from the course.

Reliance on HE administration was also a source of stress in this regard:

> The threat of getting your payment stopped if your college does not confirm you are a student early enough.

The administrative burden and intrusion involved was also mentioned by some respondents:

> I feel I have been reviewed more often and the amount of paperwork has increased due to needing letters from my university, SUSI, etc.
>
> A lot of bureaucracy and enquiries about the course and my life circumstances.

Specific difficulties included changes to payments and conditions over the summer period:

> Changing my status every summer to maintain payment, while being strongly encouraged to take up employment for the 3 months when my kids were out of school and risk losing any payment for the next year of college.
>
> During summer months the BTE [Back to Education] Allowance stops and you need to switch to Jobseeker's, it's a degrading experience.

For respondents who had placements, another difficulty concerned payment for placement expenses and how that is treated as income by social welfare services:

> When I started my placement, my welfare payment came up for review (triggered by revenue due to receiving mileage for going on visitations). Despite going to my local branch, multiple phone calls and sending emails with documentation about my placement being unpaid - my claim is still under review. So I am still at this time worried that my welfare will be cut off.
>
> I had my payment stopped when I was added to a system to receive mileage while on student placement.

Several respondents mentioned the general lack of information and support specific to their circumstances, which is encapsulated in this comment:

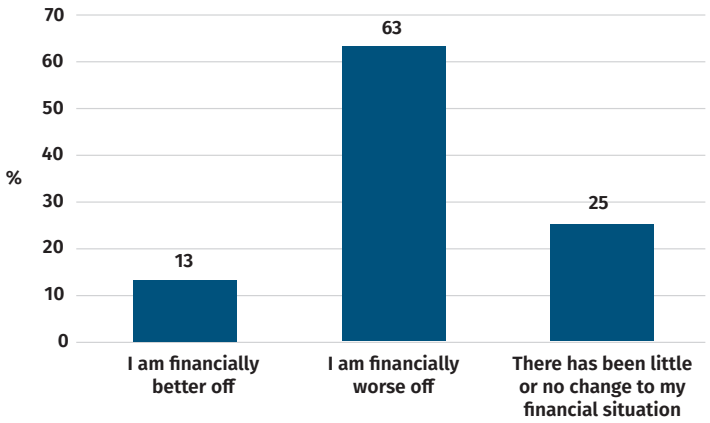
> The social welfare department has contributed to me feeling like I should just leave college. In my opinion there is no consideration given to lone parents who are attending college. I have found many (not all) officials rude when trying to explain my circumstances. It's only after I mention I am in [name of university] studying law that I am shown respect. .... Lone parents in college need to be better supported and understood by the social welfare department.

Finally, participants were asked about their overall financial status since becoming a student – whether it had improved, worsened or stayed the same. As Figure 11 illustrates, nearly two thirds said that they were financially worse off, a quarter said there was little or no change, while only 13% indicated that they were better off. In an open-ended question on why their financial circumstances had changed, those who were worse off mentioned having to leave work or reduce their working hours to pursue their education.

Many also mentioned the expenses involved. Extra childcare and transport costs (to attend college and for their children attending school) featured frequently amongst the responses. Other costs included those

associated with their courses such as specific equipment and the costs incurred on unpaid placements. For the minority who were financially better off, this was typically because they were able to combine different sources of income, such as scholarships or financial assistance that are not means tested.

Figure 11: Financial Situation Since Becoming a Student



*Percentages have been rounded and may not total to 100%.

N=96

Conclusion

This section presented the findings of the first phase of the research. Through a survey of 105 lone parent students a picture emerges of the diverse profile of this student cohort and the range of motivations, challenges and benefits as they navigate their way into and through the HE system.

Major challenges to do with juggling the commitments of being a parent and a student, financial hardships, lack of childcare and inflexible structures in how courses are organised and delivered are central to the stressful experience of being a lone parent student.

Another layer of stress is presented by the social welfare system which is not experienced as an enabling system by the majority of lone parent students who also rely on it whilst studying. The survey also reveals the major benefits of HE experienced by the participants and the crucial importance of a range of supports at individual HE level and beyond that are needed to support lone parent participation in HE.

The next section explores these findings in greater depth via the interview and audio diary data gathered in the subsequent phases of the research.

Section 3:
Interview Findings & Diary Experiences

Introduction

This section presents the key findings from the second and third phases of the research. This comprised interviews with twelve lone parents who were studying at third level during the 2023/24 academic year and audio diaries documenting typical days in college with a subset of five of these lone parents. The section begins with an overview of the participants, followed by an examination of their motivations for entering HE; their concerns and the challenges encountered; and the perceived benefits of HE.

Attention is then turned to interviewees' experiences of university structures, course delivery and assessment, and general supports. A more detailed look at experiences of financial supports, including specific educational supports and DSP payments (upon which all interviewees depended), is presented.

The section concludes with participants' views on what changes would improve their experience of participating in HE. Detailed extracts from the diaries are interspersed throughout rather than being analysed separately, allowing diary entries to 'speak for themselves'.

An overview of the interview and diary participants

Table 9 provides a profile of the twelve interviewees. The five participants who also recorded diaries have an asterisk beside their name. All names are pseudonyms and in order to further protect participants' anonymity the HE attended is not included. Three participants attended UCC, two attended Dundalk Institute of Technology and one each attended Institute of Integrative Counselling & Psychotherapy Dublin, University of Limerick, Griffith College Dublin, Maynooth University, Technological University Dublin, TCD and the Technological University Shannon.

Nearly all participants had some experience of further education (FE) or HE prior to their current participation. Five interviewees had previously completed a Bachelor's degree and a further six participants had engaged in FE or access courses. Only one participant, Emma, who is studying law, had no prior experience of FE or HE. Ten of the participants did not work, one worked part-time and one worked occasionally. Lack of time prevented most participants from working with the added complexities of a health condition in the case of one interviewee, and a child with additional needs in the case of another interviewee.

Table 9: An Overview of the Interview and Audio Diary Participants

Name	Gender	Age	No. of children and ages	Area of study	Year	Financial Support
Niamh	F	30's	1 child: 8 months	Masters in Social Work (Full-time)	Year 2 (of 2)	OFP SUSI grant
Catherine	F	30's	2 children: 6 and 9	Counselling and Psychotherapy (Part-time)	Year 3 (of 4)	OFP
Lisa	F	40's	2 children: 4 and 7	Engineering and Architecture (Part-time)	Year 2 (of 2)	OFP
Lucy	F	40's	1 child: 13	Law- Certificate in Mediation (Part-time)	Year 1 (of 1)	JST Financial assistance from Focus Ireland

Name	Gender	Age	No. of children and ages	Area of study	Year	Financial Support
Lauren*	F	30's	2 children: 9 and 15	Bachelor of Social Work (Full-time)	Year 2 (of 4)	JST SUSI grant
Jennifer	F	40's	2 children: 7 and 11	Masters in Social Policy and Rights (Full-time)	Year 1 (of 1)	JST SUSI grant Uversity Scholarship
Aoife	F	40's	5 children: 2, 11, 15, 16 and 21	Social Care (Full-time)	Year 3 (of 3)	OFP SUSI grant Uversity Scholarship 1916 Bursary
Mary*	F	30's	1 child: 9	Occupational Therapy (Full-time)	Year 3 (of 4)	JST St Vincent de Paul Bursary
Olivia	F	40's	5 children: 29, 22, 13, 9, and 8	Social Care (Full-time)	Year 3 (of 3)	JST SUSI grant
Kelly*	F	30's	1 child: 10	Psychology (Full-time)	Year 3 (of 4)	JST SUSI grant TAP scholarship Uversity Scholarship
Eileen*	F	30's	2 children: 6 and 14	Data Analytics (Part-time)	Year 1 (of 2)	JB
Emma*	F	40's	1 child: 3	Law (Part-time)	Year 3 (of 4)	OFP

*Participated in both the interview and the audio diary.

Motivations to pursue higher education

Motivations to enter HE for the lone parents in this study centred on the themes of financial stability/ security, becoming a role model for their children, and giving back to the community.

Financial stability

For most interview participants, entering HE was a necessary pathway to achieving financial stability. When asked what made her decide to come to college, Aoife described the moment she realised she 'needed something to change':

> I think to be honest I was sitting here one night and the ice cream van came around and I actually didn't even have a euro to get the kids an ice cream. I just sat there and I said to myself I just can't do this anymore. I need to change, I need money, I need a job – I need all this kind of stuff – so that was the first point that made me change.

Financial stability was expressed by interview participants as both a short- and long-term motivator to enter HE. Lisa explained that her entry into education was 'just to get better job opportunities'. For Lauren, the decision to go to college was influenced by concerns about future financial security for both herself and her family:

> The fact that, between being a lone parent and being a carer, at some point I was going to reach my late 40's with no pension, no job history – nothing – and that was going to be it. I would never have been able to provide for them and I would have nothing for my future.

Participants were driven to achieve future financial security for both themselves and their children. Catherine spoke of how entering HE was 'investing in the future' so that she can become financially independent:

> The fact that at some point I won't have to rely on social welfare or friends or this or that – I will be able to stand on my own two feet financially which will be a great example for the children as well. Not only am I going to provide, but I am going to do something that I love.

A role model for their children

Some interview participants were motivated to enter HE to be a role model for their children. Olivia detailed the generational impact she hopes her educational achievements will have for her family:

> Above all, I wanted to set an example for my children – for my family. I wanted a situation when I am no more here – you know leave the earth – my grandchildren will look at that picture there on the wall and they will take example from there and say 'look at grandma' – that is just my dream.

Similarly, Lucy believes that 'it is good for a child to see their mum going to school too'. For Lucy, she wants to set an example for her child to understand that 'you are never too old' to learn. Lucy was inspired by her own mother:

> So she is my inspiration to go to college and stuff like that. If my mum can do it, I can do it – anyone can do it, you know, that kind of way. Age shouldn't be a barrier.

Kelly thinks that attending HE gives her 'daughter something to aspire towards'. She stated:

> She already knows she wants to go to college and she says 'my mother is in college'. I mean having a child motivates me and it gives me life experience. I feel like it helps me in my studies.

For Jennifer, her children were not only a motivation to enter HE, but a motivator to stay in college when faced with the challenges of being a lone parent and student:

> It is challenging. There is a lot of juggling, a lot of time management- organising- yes but at the same time being a parent is a motivation because those little ones are dependent on me so at times when I forget why am I doing this, I look at them and go 'ok, ok'.

Additional motivations mentioned included interest in the field of study and a desire to change careers.

Giving back to the community

In deciding to go to college and train for a particular career, Aoife, Olivia and Lucy were motivated, in part, by a desire to 'give back to the community'. Aoife explained how she 'always kind of wanted' to study social care and 'give back to people'. Olivia, also studying social care, stated she was motivated to enter HE:

> To be a role model for my children and also I give back to the community because I have got a lot of love and support from the community; so I just feel the experience I had wasn't enough, you know, I need to gain more experience and more skills to be able to give back to the community.

Aoife and Olivia's motivation to give back correlates with the field of study they have chosen being social care. Another interview participant, Lucy, explained that because she lives in a disadvantaged area, she received financial and study support from her local community. Although not a main motivation to enter HE, using the skills she acquires through her college degree Lucy, who is studying mediation, plans to give back to her community:

> Actually, do you know what, I think I am going to go down the mediation line and I think I am going to give a pay back to my community or something like that.

Concerns and challenges

The core concerns/challenges expressed by participants were related to finance, childcare, balancing multiple roles and responsibilities, and social integration. Additional challenges mentioned included transport and accommodation. Notably, financial challenges cut across most, if not all, of the areas of concern and difficulty mentioned by interview participants.

Financial concerns

Financial concerns and challenges related to single parenting and attending HE were mentioned by most interview participants. When asked about the key challenges of being a student, Catherine's immediate response was, 'the financial aspect- definitely'. Catherine was completing her degree at a private college because of the flexibility it could provide, e.g. online and weekend classes. However, this meant she was not eligible for the SUSI grant and consequently had to pay full college fees. Jennifer also mentioned the financial challenges and barriers to SUSI grant eligibility, leading her to enrol full-time in college rather than on a part-time basis. Jennifer stated:

> When I started the only option was full-time to get the SUSI; so I had no choice really. I had to do the full time. If I would have a choice I would do it part-time. There is no time to work really so it is a big decision.

Lauren, Emma and Olivia detailed the financial strain they experience while in HE. Lauren explained her financial struggle in relation to being 'time poor'. Financial strain according to interview participants, is attributed to the inability to work while in college and having to solely rely on social welfare support and available college grants. Emma stated:

> I went to college thinking I was going to put myself in a better financial position for my child going forward and I ended up making my financial position the worst it has ever been in my entire life but I have gone too far, you know, that kind of way.

Olivia felt she was financially stable and able to save money while she was working, however, since entering HE full-time, she no longer has the time to work and therefore relies on social welfare payments, causing her to struggle to pay bills:

> It is like I can receive my payment this day – like today – and then the next day nothing is there anymore. It is more difficult to... and then I am owing. I have been in Ireland for about 20 years and I have never owed – I don't – I try my best not to but this is the first year that I am not able to pay my electricity, I am not able to pay so many things and I am like 'where am I going wrong?'

Financial challenges cut across additional concerns and challenges experienced by participants, specifically in relation to childcare, travel, and accommodation.

Childcare provision

Childcare challenges mentioned by interview participants centred on the cost of childcare, how childcare arrangements correspond with college hours, and the waiting lists for childcare facilities. Several participants did not have any paid childcare and relied on their parents and sometimes ex-partners which was problematic.

Diary extract

So today was a little bit chaotic and a little bit hard to, to manage, but we got through it. Um, my parents are away for a couple of days. So, I had to kind of, because I'm gone so early in the morning, I can't drop [name of child] to school. So, I had to organize for a neighbour to do it so getting out the door this morning and getting to Waterford on time was challenging. So, both of us had to be up quite early. And I had to drop him to a neighbour's before I went so it just takes a lot of preparation the night before and stuff like that. Um, so dropped him to the neighbours about 10 past 7 and then I hit the road. So I had like his breakfast and everything ready like for him to have down there and his school bag, everything. So, everything was prepared. So, I was actually up at 6:00 this morning just to kind of get organized before I got him up. So yeah, so headed to work and yeah, it was quite a busy day.

Mary

Niamh became pregnant while in the first year of her master's degree and since returning to college post maternity, has struggled to arrange childcare:

> I can't get her into a crèche anyway because it is all waiting lists and everything. That really made life very difficult so I had to go out and find a private child minder which, unfortunately, is more expensive too when you are not working but you still need it. It is kind of an unfortunate necessity.

The expense of childcare, particularly private childcare, was an issue for many of the interview participants. Lauren, for example, spoke of the challenge to pay for private childcare fees on a student's budget. Lauren had applied for a place at the daycare centre provided by the HEI she attends, however due to the centre's long waiting list, she must rely on alternative private childcare arrangements. She described the barriers of arranging childcare in traditional childcare settings because of her daughter's additional needs. After childcare arrangements fell through, Lauren had to ask herself:

> Where am I going to put her? Am I going to be able to attend college? Then there was another place but I couldn't afford it.

She went on to comment that:

> At the moment, it [childcare] is kind of cobbled together... at the Primary School kind of age everybody expects that you can just put them in clubs, after schools – everything – and if you have a kid that falls outside of that and you don't make a large salary, there is nowhere for you to put your child... So it is a huge, huge stressor.

Diary extract

I try and just focus on college when I'm in college, but it can be hard, especially if I'm in a lecture at 3:00. I will like constantly be looking at my phone. I know I shouldn't be, but I'm always like worried that, you know, my daughter's after school carer, like will forget to pick her up or something. And so I have to make sure to keep an eye on my phone at 3:00 and it makes me really, really anxious. I'm just wondering like was she picked up? Is everything OK? Is she OK? Um. Yeah, So I would say I'm like constantly in a state of anxiety.

Kelly

Another challenge mentioned by interview participants is the scheduling of class hours and childcare arrangements. Kelly, for example, who commutes two hours to college, stated that: 'if there are lectures that are past like 5 pm, I just can't attend them because the childcare closes at 7 pm so there is nothing I can do about it'.

Balancing multiple roles and responsibilities

Interview participants detailed the challenge they faced to balance being both a lone parent and a student, and in some cases, working. Their multiple roles placed increased demands on their time availability, leaving some participants time poor. As well as juggling caring and student roles, some participants also described the stresses of going through court proceedings.

Diary extract

This morning, we had a bit of a rough start. I had a lot of college work to do last night, and I fell asleep without setting an alarm. So, my youngest kid, who's 9, woke me up and then we had slept in, so we had to rush. And we had to get a taxi so that we could make it to the school, and I could make it to my lecture on time. My youngest child is also autistic, so that was not easy because when I was rushing her then she had a meltdown, and I had to spend a bit of time calming her down before we could go... ...Um, we were late again today. I think we were just exhausted to be honest. I had to work last night, and my youngest child is just not settling in school at the moment. And so yeah, we were, we had to get another taxi again. Um, that didn't, that at least kind of saved us from being too late. My daughter got to school at 9:15 and she's supposed to start at 8:50.

Lauren

When asked what the challenges are in relation to being a student, Emma, for example, claims that 'a lot of it is time'. She continues by stating that 'the challenges would be more kind of trying to balance being a parent and giving the time to her [her child].' Emma described herself as 'very good at juggling' yet struggled with time management once she entered HE.

She underestimated the time she would need to dedicate to her studies as a part-time student. She equated part-time study to part-time work but in her first year of study she realised 'the actual volume of stuff that you have to do yourself', outside of lecture hours. Difficulties in maintaining a balance between parenting and study was expressed by other interview participants, such as Kelly, who said:

> Trying to balance my time and energy between things is probably the biggest one. I always feel like I am never giving enough to either. Like if I give just enough to my child, I am really neglecting my studies. If I give enough to my studies, I am neglecting my child; so it is a very, very hard balance to get right. I feel like you can't ever get it right – you just have to make do. Like I said I have to sacrifice a lot.

Participants felt under pressure balancing being a lone parent and student, particularly at busier times in the academic year, such as exam time. Lauren stated:

> I feel I am under pressure and I kind of feel like you want to ask for help but people don't know how to help you. It is not very straight forward – like nobody else can do roles that I am doing, you know, to alleviate the pressure.

Other parents described the fragility of balancing caring and student roles, particularly in the face of additional or unexpected demands on their time (e.g. children's illnesses, childcare arrangements falling through, children's appointments). According to Lauren:

> It is just a very delicate balance because there was only so far ahead you could have started [the assignments] and, if anything goes wrong, again if a kid gets sick... One of my kids had to go through an autism assessment in the middle of this and there was no way to go 'sorry I know we have been waiting forever but now is not a good time'. So if you have anything that is taking from your energy from all of that, you are running very close to deadlines to the point where I actually have submitted two [assignments] late.

Diary extract

Here's an example of how your day of studying goes wrong. My mom just rang me and she's like, 'hey, come up'. ... So, I have to abandon my assignment and my study to go and save my mom so yeah, the day never runs the way you think it's going to go. That's one thing that I've learned in my four years of college. Well, 3 years of college. You think you've got, like I'm on a roll now, it's going to be great. No, something silly comes along and that has to take priority.

Emma

The multiple roles and responsibilities of being a lone parent student meant participants felt they are unable to give enough time to each role. Olivia stated:

> It was a very hard decision for me and it is very, very difficult because sometimes you look at your children and I am like 'oh God, am I really giving them all they need? Am I neglecting them?'

Similarly, Catherine sometimes feared she wasn't 'doing anything right' in either role, leading to feelings of guilt:

> It has been a very hard year because I am also going through the divorce and that has had a really, really big impact with court and everything. I think this year, in particular, I was kind of behind with the assignments. I got extensions over extensions over other extensions and it did feel at times that I wasn't doing anything right really. I wasn't doing the assignments on time, I wasn't enjoying the time with the children because I had the pressure of the assignments and the guilt that I should be doing this and the other for school and I haven't. So yes it can be very challenging at times.

When referring to the challenge of parenting while in full-time education, Mary also expressed feelings of guilt:

> So I definitely feel like you'd feel a lot of guilt sometimes that you're not giving them as much time as they need.

Diary extract

Today I suppose, it wasn't the greatest day, you know. Um, just lots of emotions and if I'm honest, the feeling of the constant-ness of college and the go go go and the demands and trying to regulate the kids and some of the tough course material is just making me feel very anxious. And it probably hasn't helped that I'm trying to overcompensate with coffee as well. But I think I would feel anxious anyway. Um, so tomorrow I don't have lectures, but that's, that's my reading day. So, I've got to squeeze in like a hospital appointment and, and then I'm, I'm actually going to try and catch up on some time with the kids because I feel like I haven't seen probably enough of them this week.

Lauren

Lucy claimed that to juggle her multiple roles, she needs to be organised and good with time management, as well having a 'just do it mentality'. This approach to balance being both a student and lone parent was mirrored by other participants, such as Mary, who when asked 'how do you balance being both a parent and a student?' replied 'I think you just have to do it'. Olivia stated that:

> the balance is not easy to maintain – especially when you have to satisfy the lecturers, the college and the children – but I try to do it with time management. Time management is the secret.

Diary extract

Yesterday was fine, but I, I just was so tired and had headaches all day and I had to clean the whole house and stuff. So it was, I didn't really get much college work done and I'm feeling really guilty about that. I kind of feel like no matter what I do, there's always an aspect of guilt, like if I'm getting like college work done and I'm feeling ahead in college or you know, where I should be, I shouldn't stay ahead because I've never really been ahead. But if I am feeling like I'm where I should be in my college work then, um, I'm kind of behind on my other commitments. Like the house is always a bit messy or I've realized my daughter's had chicken nuggets and chips for two days in a row. I have to make something substantial for dinner. Or, you know, the laundry's piling up. And then if I feel like I'm getting on top of the housework, then the college work is neglected. And then you know, I'm not spending time with my daughter. There's always like, it's very hard to balance it, especially with the traveling. It's just. It really is like a tight rope act and it's very hard to balance.

Kelly

Social integration

Some interview participants described the struggle they encountered when socialising with college peers. The main challenge they identified was 'fitting in', particularly for lone parent students at undergraduate level in courses that predominantly consist of younger students.

For example, Mary struggled during the first two years of her degree due to social challenges of fitting in with and relating to students in her programme:

> And then the social can be quite difficult. Um, definitely in our course, it's very clicky and I just find that younger people's attitudes towards mature students can be quite I think it's umm it is funny. It's like 'Uh, the mature students', you know, kind of thing so. That can be a bit challenging, especially especially when you have a child, because I'm the only one in my course with a child. So I just found that yeah, I just found that there's no one, you know, that you can relate to.

Mary attempted to attend social events outside of lecture hours, however, childcare and travel acted as a barrier to social engagement and integration.

A challenge for Kelly as a lone mother was feeling 'like you are out of place wherever you go'. Kelly detailed the stigma and judgement towards lone parents, particularly mothers, still present in Irish society:

> I think when you are a mother, people always kind of judge what you do. If you stay at home, you are lazy. If you go to college, you don't care enough about your child. You are just going to always be judged and I think that is a big challenge to kind of feel like you are out of place wherever you go.

Diary extract

But I do feel jealous, like when I see other students and they're kind of going to the, they're doing society things or they're going out and like, it's not like they don't invite me. Like they will say, 'ohh, like do you want to come out for a drink?' But they, they know I can't. So it's just kind of like, 'no, I have to go home, I have to get my daughter to bed and I have to make dinner and I have to do laundry, I have to clean the house and I have to walk the dog'. And, you know, just those things that I have to do. And, but like, I don't really complain about it because like I chose to do this. I chose to go to college knowing I had a daughter. Um, did I know it was going to be this hard mentally? No, but I still feel like I don't have the right to complain because I chose to do it.

Kelly

Transport and accommodation

Travel times and transport to and from college posed a challenge for some interview participants. For Niamh, the biggest challenge she faced was the five hours round commute to college from her parents' home, where she currently lives. The following account gives a sense of her day:

> When I was in classes I used to get up at 6 am...It would be about a two and a half hour drive because you would hit traffic at the wrong times. I would do my classes, I would leave generally depending on what time they finished. My latest one used to be 4 pm and I used to get home then about half six. My mother – I moved back home to my parents – used to drop my daughter to the childcare and pick her up from the childcare because she lived closer. I would come home. Then it was feeding dinners - getting everything ready for tomorrow – trying to have some quality time in the evenings with her – pretty much put her to bed – try and get some readings done then for college the next day and try and get some sleep on top of it.

Moving closer to college was not seen as an option due to childcare needs and the lack of affordable accommodation:

> I would have no support system in Cork anyway but... housing is so hard to get and then it is really expensive. You can't go into student housing because you have got a child. That was really a big issue and what made me decide to commute in the end because there was really no way I would be able to actually do that and make it all work if I moved down. (Niamh)

Similarly for Mary, who also lives with her parents, the greatest challenge of being a student was travel:

> Being a student umm, so definitely, I suppose, like the travel, umm for me is a huge thing. I find that exhausting. Um, and I suppose then financially can be a, quite a big challenge because I suppose I wasn't getting to my lectures on time getting the bus. So then I had to drive. Umm. And then, like parking is an issue. So then if I have to pay for that as well, that's like another expense. Um, so it's kind of, it's nonstop with the financial I think as well.

Kelly explained that it is a two-hour commute to her college from where she lives, meaning that on days she attends college, she must travel for a total of four hours. This contributed to her overall sense of college as a space that is not inclusive:

> I wish that education was more accessible for parents and carers because I feel like it is not. I feel like it is very much geared towards the young students. I feel like in Trinity specifically it is geared towards, you know, students who live in Dublin.

Another participant, Catherine, relied on staying with friends, when she attended week-end classes in Dublin – paying for accommodation was not an option.

Diary extract

I picked up my daughter and we were waiting for the bus. And I think like there were so many cancelled buses and things that by the time we got home it was like half seven. So, we just got a quick and easy oven dinner and then I had to do laundry, I had to clean the breakfast stuff away. The table was filthy. Um, I've just put stuff in the drier and it's like midnight just so that we can have clean pants in the morning. Um, yeah, so that's that's just another tired day. I think this is, yeah, pretty typical. Like this was a good enough day. Um, there wasn't too much stresses in it. Yeah. But I'm tired.

Lauren

The constraints and challenges encountered with travel and accommodation had implications for the choices made around what courses to pursue. Several interview participants mentioned choosing their course because of where it was based, given their caring responsibilities and lack of mobility. For Jennifer very close proximity to college was important:

> The location was very important first of all because for me, as a mum, I need to consider my kids' school, where they are going to go for after-school. If I am going to be able to come back quickly to pick them up, the location was number one.

Co-parenting arrangements were also a factor in choosing a course based on its location:

> There really isn't much of a choice I suppose for lone parents depending... At the time, their father was involved so you couldn't really move out of Cork, you know what I mean? There is no other choice in that but I did like the courses that were on offer – I did – in UCC you know. (Lauren)

Similarly, Mary, who with her son lived with her parents, although happy with the college she attended, noted that there was no option of moving elsewhere:

> UCC was within an ok distance for me, so because obviously I'd have to stay at home because I have my son. So UCC was my only option really. Yeah, practically. Yeah, but also it's good college.

A related point raised in the interviews was the flexibility afforded by online courses. These were the only practical option for one participant who lived at a distance from all HEIs.

The benefits of higher education

The benefits of attending HE, as described by interview participants centred on financial security/job opportunities, self-actualisation, acquisition of knowledge and new skills, and meeting new people and making friends.

Financial security/job opportunities

When asked about the benefits of being a student, interview participants highlighted the prospect of attaining well-paid employment once they receive their degree. Niamh spoke of the long-term employment benefits of entering HE:

> For the long term, it is a good paying job that I would be going into and it just gives me a better future for myself and my child.

According to Aoife, her main motivation for entering HE was to 'to get employment, do something I like doing and be paid something decent - so I achieved it'. Similarly, when asked the benefits of attending college, Eileen stated:

> I think the main benefit is that I will get the degree or the HDip – that is the main benefit – that I will have it on my CV and that this will be a pass to a better paid job.

Self-actualisation

Interview participants detailed how their entry into HE contributed to feelings of confidence and pride, as well as fostering an identity outside of being a parent.

When asked the benefits of being a student, Jennifer replied:

> There are loads of benefits. I definitely feel I have grown more confident as a woman and as a person just looking back on how I was when I started college and how I am now.

Lucy and Lauren described the increase in confidence they experienced since entering HE. For Lauren, a positive aspect of attending HE was that she gained 'self-confidence', 'self-empowerment' and pride through her studies: 'I feel really proud of myself. I also feel like it has made a positive impact on my kids.'

Moreover, interview participants explained that attending HE enabled them to foster an identity outside of parenthood. When asked the benefits of being a student, Lisa replied, 'just doing something outside of being in the role of mum'. Similarly, Kelly noted, 'it gives me my own identity back – it gets me to be my own person'. Catherine claimed that being a student enabled her to have:

> a sense of being a whole person other than a mother and having something else that is just for me that I like and can, hopefully, do in the future as well...having that one thing for me and being something else other than a mother and feeling like I can be and I have a lot more to offer than just – I know 'just' being a mother is a huge thing – but outside of that.

In addition, Catherine noted that undertaking a course in Counselling and Psychotherapy had helped her become more self-aware:

> Doing this course has been an eye-opener on so many levels. The nature of the course as well. It is a lot of digging, it is a lot of getting to know yourself and becoming aware of a lot of things. I feel like it has changed me as a whole different person and even if I didn't end up working in this area or being a therapist – which I know I will – I absolutely would have done this course only for me, you know, just for everything that I have got so far.

Olivia explained that her entry into HE was delayed due to family circumstances, so when she finally had the opportunity eight years later to go to college she felt 'this is my time to shine!'.

Acquiring knowledge and new skills

Some interview participants described the acquisition of knowledge and new skills as a benefit of attending HE. When asked about the benefits of being a student, Emma explained that it was the opportunity to learn, 'I like learning. I have always liked learning'. For Jennifer, the knowledge she obtained through her studies allowed her to engage in and contribute to conversations about different topics. Jennifer stated:

> It gives you more confidence, it gives you the knowledge of the language. I am able now to discuss things with people that I wasn't able to discuss before, I am able to engage on different topics because we are learning so much about homelessness, about politics, about what is going on – the current events – so I am feeling more aware and more knowledgeable about Irish society. I am able to contribute to the conversations and to show – not show but present - information to others.

Access to resources provided by HEIs aided participants in their learning journey. For instance, Mary stated that having access 'to a lot of academic literature' provided her with the opportunity for academic development.

Interview participants also mentioned the benefit of acquiring new skills through their education. For Lisa, entering HE was an opportunity to upskill which she described as 'investing in myself'. Jennifer, who is now completing her master's degree, stated:

> Yeah, I definitely feel I have gained a lot since I started four years ago even just academic writing – the skills that you learn – it is huge.

Olivia felt that 'there are loads of benefits' to being a student, proceeding to describe the skills she has developed during her time as a student thus far. They included academic writing, communication, and public speaking skills. Moreover, she discovered her ability to be resilient when faced with the challenges of being a lone parent student:

> And then resilience – I have learned resilience because if it wasn't for resilience I wouldn't be in college to be honest. No matter the difficulties, no matter the situation, I am still resilient.

Meeting new people and making friends

Interview participants detailed the social benefit of attending university which provided the opportunity to meet people from a diversity of backgrounds. Jennifer, a master's student, suggested there was 'such diversity in the course' meaning she could socialise and learn with 'people from all kinds of walks of life'. For Jennifer, a benefit of HE was:

> Meeting new friends, connecting with different kinds of people from different backgrounds.

Similarly, Lucy described the benefits of studying with 'so many different types of people on the course and it is great that we are all able to mix together'.

Some participants highlighted the positive impact of spending time with college peers, such as Niamh, who detailed the social benefit of returning to college post maternity:

> Because I have just had a child and you spend so much time on your own when you are on maternity it was nice to actually be around adults for the day and actually find that bit of a social scene really... I think that was one of the better parts of it.

Kelly made a similar point. She became a parent at a young age and subsequently did not attend college when she had hoped to. Now that she has entered HE, she particularly enjoys the companionship of her peers and the social aspect of college:

> Like when I am in college – especially around young people – I think it brings out a silly side of me that I don't get to often... I have silly moments with my daughter but I do have to be always in charge. It is kind of nice to be me again and almost relive my youth because I didn't get to have my early 20's, you know. I had a baby so it was like, yeah...

University structure, course delivery and assessment

Experiences of how courses are structured, delivered and assessed varied across participants and the HEI they attend. Some interview participants expressed negative experiences and some positive. A theme that emerged across interviews with participants was the importance of flexibility and accommodations that cater to lone parents.

Scheduling of classes

Interview participants noted that the scheduling of certain lecture hours does not consider the caring responsibilities of lone parents. Interviewees explained that formal childcare hours limit their time availability to attend lectures that take place in the early morning and/or late evening. Lauren stated:

> Ok so I have already raised this within my course because it has put itself forward as being for people like me but then they would run a lecture until 6 o'clock. As I told them, all formal child care finishes at 6 on the dot. If I have to be marked in attendance until 6 o'clock then where am I going to put my kids?

The scheduling of lectures before 10am and after 5pm was a particular concern for students in courses that implement an attendance policy. The course that Olivia is completing has an attendance policy requiring students to arrive within a set time of lecture start and attend a certain percentage of lectures. Arriving on-time for 9am lectures is a struggle for Olivia as she must bring her children to school in the morning before travelling to college, and subsequently she asked her lecturer for 15 minutes leniency. Academic staff at the HEI Olivia attends did not accommodate her request.

> There are a lot of things like, for example, I told you I asked for 15 minutes. What I got didn't really satisfy me at all because if I have somebody telling me 'you know what, we will see what we can do - we could talk to the head person – she will see what she can do' but somebody telling me 'listen, I didn't ask you to have children and be here – it is your choice – and it is your choice to have children'.

She concludes that 'the structure is for people who don't have children, people who have the time to be there'.

Diary extract

I'm supposed to be in college today. I have a lecture from 5:00 to 6:00 but I live 2 hours from the college so. Um, especially if the lecture finishes at six, I probably wouldn't be home till half eight with traffic and stuff so I asked the lecturer if he could record for me and thankfully, he was very nice and he said he would because some of them aren't so accommodating. My daughter's after school care closes at 7:00 so I genuinely wouldn't be able to go either way. Um, I'd have no one to look after her so thankfully he was nice and he's going to record it for me.

Kelly

Assessments

Experience of assessments varied across HE institutes, with some participants providing positive feedback, and others struggling with assessment scheduling.

Diary extract

Last night I stayed up until 2:00am to finish off everything because I just wanted to have a good start in the morning. So sometimes I have to push past the urge to go, to to fall asleep.

Eileen

When asked how the course's structure, delivery and assessment work for lone parents, Catherine stated 'it is working great' and that there is 'a lot of flexibility for all the assignments'. Catherine is enrolled at a private college and attends lectures primarily online. She described the information and support she received when applying for extensions on assignments:

> You know, so much flexibility that they have worked to help me through everything that I was going through and taking it step by step.

Similarly, Emma stated that the university she attends is 'very understanding' when she cannot meet assignment deadlines. Lisa explained that the modules she attends are spaced out and assessments happen on a regular basis, meaning there is rarely an overlap between assignments deadlines and modules.

On the other hand, Niamh struggled to complete assignments which 'were all around the same deadline'. During the college semester, her daughter fell ill, meaning Niamh's caring responsibilities increased and so meeting the assignment 'deadline was a bit more of an issue'. Kelly felt that not all assignment deadlines should fall within the same timeframe as this standard model of assessment often does not work 'for people with caring responsibilities'. When struggling to meet assignment deadlines Olivia felt that 'sometimes – not all lecturers now - but some don't really understand the situation'. When explaining to a lecturer why an assignment was submitted late, Lauren noted their response was that: 'Saying "oh this came up with my kids" is like saying "the dog ate my homework"'.

Diary extract

Now she's [four year old daughter] exhausted so I don't think I'm going to get to the end of this lecture or even half to the break of this lecture without her going, 'I want to go to bed'. So, um yeah, this is the reality of your life. If someone can't come and mind her, you kind of just have to make do with Bluey or whatever in the background so. We got no study done today because we flew around Athlone, me and my mom. Since my dad died ...my mom is really lonely so we do spend an awful lot of time together. She's like, 'ohh, you're off, let's go here. Let's come up and do this for me'. You know that kind of way. And which is not ideal for someone who's putting their head down. But yeah, so look, who else would she have at this stage? ... So, this is, this is, this is it. What happened? [child crying in the background]...
... Now what that was over was my child decided it was a good idea to lie on the table and she fell off it. And so, the joys. Um, so, yeah, my whole plan of like 'I'm going to stay home and study' is not as fool proof as I thought it was but again there the factors outside of study that just mean that you don't kind of get to do it as much as, say, someone going in who's straight out of school, yeah.

Emma

Online/hybrid learning options

Interview participants highlighted the need for HEIs to facilitate more online/hybrid options of learning. Mary described the inconvenience and cost of having to travel to and from college to attend what could be only one lecture in a day:

> You know, it's making you travel up say for the hour and a half, two hours, to sit there for it could only be an hour, which is really annoying. One hour to go all the way up and the cost of fuel your time and you could easily just have sat in front of a computer and done it, you know?

Lisa explained the difficulty of trying to organise childcare when she must attend lectures in person. She suggested there should be more online options for students as 'you can't exactly bring your kids along to lectures!'. Jennifer praised the way her course is structured and taught, with her only issue being she must attend lectures in person:

> I would prefer if there was maybe an option of a blended learning. Some modules online or at least an option like for example when the kids are sick I can ask 'can I link in through the on-line during the class' if the lecturer would allow to link people in through the online facilities. I asked before and there was no reply so basically I feel there is a lack of flexibility for single parents.

An issue raised in a number of interviews is that online courses have opened up new avenues of opportunity for lone parent students as the following illustrates:

> It was during lockdown that I noticed that there were courses available and, obviously, with covid and stuff like that it really opened up on-line courses. I found up to that point it was nearly impossible for me to go to college because everything I had to do was to either go somewhere two nights a week or one night a week and with childminding and everything like that it just isn't... And trying to bring a child home at 9 or 10 o'clock at night time and up the next day – it just doesn't work. The on-line is amazing – it works... The on-line is so flexible – it is great – especially since covid the options I think have opened up because people are more familiar with using on-line... It opens up the avenue. (Lucy)

Without the option of an online course, Lisa would not have been able to attend college:

> There is no one else to look after them when they come home from school, homework, the works; so it is a case of if I didn't have that flexibility of an on-line course I wouldn't be able to do it.

Diary extract

I'm always tired. So today I actually got to have a little lie in, which was really good. Um, my daughter's school is closed today and the lecture I have today is recorded thankfully because the school closure was like really last minute. So I wouldn't have had anyone to watch her for me. So I'm glad it's recorded and I feel a little better that I got a bit more sleep.

Kelly

Higher education supports

University supports, as described by interview participants, typically fell into three categories: financial, academic, and pastoral. Levels and types of support varied across colleges, with some taking an ad hoc approach when supporting lone parent students. Moreover, although general college supports were available to students, participants emphasised the lack of tailored supports for lone parents in HE.

Financial supports

When asked if there are supports provided by the university that were helpful Jennifer, for example, referred to financial supports. Jennifer praised the budgeting service at the university she attends, claiming they gave her 'lots of information' that enabled her to plan her finances and budget. Moreover, while the SAF is a valuable resource, she notes that it only operates until the funds run out so assistance is not certain.

Niamh stated that she was made aware of the supports at her college multiple times but claimed 'I didn't really access any as in I just trudged through it'. If there was something else to be done to support lone parents in HE, Niamh believed it should be financial help: 'I feel if there was financial assistance in some way it would really make the world of a difference'.

Academic supports

Although academic support is provided at each of the HEIs participants attend, notably, supports are not specifically catered to the needs of lone parents in HE. Lisa stated:

> There is nothing for lone parents but for students there is just the availability of library staff for referencing using In-Note, there was a supervisor for the thesis assigned so you are able to link with them and work with them in order to meet a deadline if you had any queries.

When asked if there are supports provided by the university that were helpful, Lauren responded:

> Not for being a lone parent. I found there were some supports from the disability services like tutoring hours but nothing in particular for being a lone parent or just being a mature student – not in the same way – no.

Lucy's experience of support in HE is positive, stating, 'I find it very encouraging - people in education – that they want to help you'. Lucy attended a session facilitated by the library that helped improve her academic performance. Mary mentioned she did receive disability support in HE, however, she struggled to avail of academic supports due to limited time availability and sessions taking place during lecture hours.

Pastoral care

The findings suggest that support for lone parents and understanding of their circumstances varied. Niamh, for example, described the supportive role her tutor played when she became pregnant during the first year of her master's degree:

> After obviously ringing my mother, the first thing I did was email my tutor to ask for her advice on what I should do because I was going into placement in January, so I knew it was going to be a bit difficult and didn't know what the procedure was. My tutor was the first person I contacted. Honest to God I don't think I would still be in the course if my tutor wasn't as supportive as she has been.

Catherine claimed the supports while attending HE are 'really accessible':

> They have always encouraged us to talk to them, to talk to any of them – either the staff or the lecturers or anyone really when we have any kind of trouble.

Both Mary and Olivia mentioned there are college counselling supports for students, which Mary availed of when struggling with the social aspect of college. On the other hand, Aoife stated the supports she received were 'all external - there was nothing from the college'. Participants described how approaches to and levels of support varied between HE staff. Kelly stated: 'I think it is interesting there is so much of a leeway for some lecturers to be, like, so supportive and understanding and then others are very, like, by the book and it can be tough'.

Diary extract

The last few weeks going back to college it's been really hard. I really feel like I've been struggling um, motivation wise and and I'm just really tired. And yeah, I tried to make an appointment with student counselling but the appointments are full and you can only kind of book them 24 hours in advance. So it's kind of hard when you have a child to just book it like that and then, you know, traveling two hours and then traveling two hours back. It's it's not that easy, Um. So I've kind of just been trying to deal with it on my own.

Kelly

Experiences of social protection payments and services

Topics discussed by participants during interviews focused on bureaucratic processes and information availability, the adequacy of payments, treatment by social welfare services, and how the social welfare system potentially impacts lone parents' participation in HE.

Administrative burdens and the availability of information

Some participants mentioned the administrative burden involved in claiming a payment specifically, the volume of information and paperwork required from social welfare recipients. Niamh described the process of qualifying for and receiving OFP as 'difficult':

> It is really difficult because they require a lot of information and they want a lot of proof on everything.

Similarly, Olivia explained that applying for social welfare support is 'not easy'.

> You have to fill out a lot of paperwork, you have to wait time as well for the decision to be made and whatever paperwork they ask you to send you have to send everything. If you don't, then again if you have to wait until they come to a final decision. The waiting time is not easy because you are not working.

The frustration of incorrect records was also experienced. Mary, for example, spoke of the bureaucratic challenges of receiving BTEA:

> Yeah, sometimes with the Back to Education Allowance, it can be challenging because they'll email you saying 'ohh, we didn't get your thing back' or this kind of thing and you're like well, I sent it like and and then it might be phone calls over and back or they'll be like, oh, we didn't receive it. And I'm like 'yes, you did'. Like sometimes, that is frustrating.

While interview participants detailed the considerable information required of social welfare applicants/recipients, they also noted the lack of relevant information and/or incorrect information they received regarding the social welfare supports for which they are eligible as lone parents in HE. Kelly spoke of how she was incorrectly advised to apply for BTEA instead of OFP. At the end of her second year in HE, Kelly was struggling with the cost of travel to and from college and contacted Citizens Information for advice. Kelly had originally been informed by the DSP to apply for BTEA, but when she spoke to Citizens Information, they informed her that she would be better off receiving JST, which would also enable her to apply for a SUSI maintenance grant:

> So for those first three years, I lost out on the maintenance grant just because the social welfare didn't tell me what I was entitled to. I would imagine there are so many mothers out there that are in my situation that are losing out on this maintenance grant which I think is absolutely wild.

Kelly switched to the JST and received the SUSI maintenance grant which has meant she has 'been struggling a lot less':

> I have been able to afford a coffee in college which I was never able to do before. Yeah to me I just thought it was absolutely wild that this was like hidden information.

Another participant, Jennifer, also applied for the BTEA and realised after corresponding with the budgeting service at her HEI that she would get more money staying on the OFP.

Adequacy of social welfare payments

The adequacy of payments was a topic mentioned by most interview participants, with several claiming the rate of social welfare payments for lone parents in HE is insufficient. Catherine explained that because she gets maintenance from her previous partner, she receives OFP at a reduced rate[5]. Catherine struggles to financially support herself and her two children while in college, stating that social welfare services 'don't take into account at all the fact that I am paying for college'. Similarly, Lisa claimed that the OFP is insufficient for lone parent families given the cost of living in Ireland:

> Then it doesn't take into account the cost of living. It is that amount since... I don't know when they ever last assessed it but it doesn't go with it. The rise of inflation isn't adjusted to One Family allowance or let's say the rise of diesel or the rise of food or anything. It is not taken into account and your expenses... They are very set on what they charge for expenses. So you could have an expense and they say that is not on my list of what I can deduct for - whatever.

Both Olivia and Lauren mentioned that although grants, such as SUSI, are an important financial support for lone parents in HE, grants in many cases are still not enough to cover the cost of living and the additional costs associated with attending HE. Olivia receives JST and the SUSI grant, however, she claims that 'to be honest it is not enough'. Lauren details the inability for social welfare to cover the cost of living and extra costs of attending college:

> Social welfare is not enough to keep food on the table in the current cost of living crisis and on top of that to sustain you while you go to college. Yeah there is SUSI and everything but I feel it is such a delicate balance – very, very delicate balance – because there are just other things, you know what I mean? Like yes I might get to and from college and stuff but there is the extra heat, the extra light from having to stay up, there are things like when the lap top breaks. How are you going to fix that? So, it is just really, really hard to address.

Both Lisa and Mary spoke of the limitations of SUSI grant eligibility for lone parents living with their parent/s. Lisa who is not entitled to the SUSI grant as she is a part-time student in HE living at home with her parents points out the contradictions of this situation:

> Even though I let's say support myself and the children because I live with them I am classed as living at home; so you get nothing.

Similarly, Mary is living at home with her parents as it was too difficult for her to pay rent. The social welfare payment she receives is not enough to financially support her in HE and subsequently Mary needed financial assistance from a charitable organization, Saint Vincent de Paul.

Alternatively, Aoife had a different experience to most interview participants, feeling that she was financially secure as a student. This was possible only because of the range of support Aoife has received, her social welfare payment, the SUSI grant and two other payments: a Uversity Scholarship and the 1916 Bursary. She described the difference such supports make:

5 Since June 2024 this situation has improved with the removal of child maintenance payments from means tested social welfare payments including OFP and JST following the implementation of this provision in the Social Welfare and Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2023. However, this change does not apply to other payments outside the social welfare system.

> I remember at one stage my washing machine broke. Because I had the grants and the bursaries, for the first time in years I could just go out and replace something. I didn't have to go to the social welfare, I didn't have to beg for it, I didn't need help. I could replace it and it just made life so much easier – that is absolutely definitely a positive – having the financial support – yeah.

Interactions with social welfare services and staff

When describing interactions with social welfare services, most interview participants experienced negative encounters with social welfare staff. When asked about her experience of social welfare services, Kelly replied:

> I try and do it all on line on welfare.ie because when you go into the office they are so mean – they actually seem like you are taking the money out of their pocket and giving it to you, you know.

Jennifer described the 'lack of understanding' and 'empathy' expressed by staff, suggesting that staff should be trained on 'how to approach people especially lone parents because they are in such a vulnerable situation'.

Some participants noted that the treatment they received from social welfare services altered once they entered HE. According to Kelly 'they have been a little bit nicer since I started college'. Lauren reported a similar change in her interactions with social services since starting university:

> I actually find - in the services and the people that I meet – a huge difference in the way they treat me – in a more positive light

Lauren went on to explain:

> Just that I find they are a bit more positive in dealing with me; whereas the rigorous checks that they would do for the lone parent family [OFP], I find they are a little bit more 'efficient' with me now. They are like 'oh you are in college' – stamp, stamp – 'send back your form - it is fine'.

Lucy noted that one social welfare staff member had said that she was not a 'typical kind of client that would come in'. When Lucy asked what the staff member meant by this comment, he said that she was not typical as she had 'everything boxed off' and was 'in college'. Lucy then asked if there is any available social welfare support if she wanted to continue her education.

> They are saying on the one hand they want to support us but on the other hand they can't. He said 'oh I will check with my manager'. He rang me back about two weeks later and said 'don't stop yourself from going into education but we can't help you'.

Lucy does not feel that social welfare services have respect for her as a lone parent, providing an example of when her payment was stopped without informing her.

> There is no trust, there is no respect. Like when the guy cut me off, it was like he won the lotto – bing, bing, bing – he must get a bonus based on cutting me off as if I was defrauding the State as a lone parent. I just said to him 'you didn't even care less whether I had food on the table to feed my daughter'.

However, not all participants reported negative experiences in their encounters with social welfare services. Both Eileen and Emma had positive experiences, with Emma stating that 'there are lovely people' at her local social welfare office because they dealt with her queries so efficiently and ensured she was on the most financially advantageous payment given her circumstances.

Impact of social welfare system on participation in higher education

Participants were asked whether the social welfare system supported their participation in college or hindered it. Interview participant responses varied. Jennifer, Lauren, Aoife and Niamh all felt there was no particular change, with Niamh stating for example that 'there was no real assistance as a student'. Kelly stated that the system both supported and hindered her participation in HE. It supported her participation by providing a scholarship and hindered it by a lack of information on available financial supports and inadequate financial support to meet the cost of living as a lone parent student. Catherine claimed that the system hindered her participation in college, stating, 'if I didn't have financial supports here and there from friends or from family, I probably would have had to stop'.

Lisa felt that due to lack of funding and information for lone parent students, the system has hindered her participation in HE:

> They provide absolutely no information whatsoever on any courses, of what you can do, what you get funding for – it is 'figure it out for yourself'.

Both Mary and Olivia stated that the system supported their participation in college. If Mary was not receiving JST, she would have had to work which she claimed would negatively impact her parenting, her studies, and her health. Olivia felt supported when entering HE simply because her payment allowed her to attend college: 'They didn't discourage me to go to college – they just told me the money I would be receiving – "this is what it is – this is how much everyone that is in your situation will receive"'.

What would improve the lone parent student experience?

Towards the end of each interview participants were asked what would improve their experience as a student and whether they had any advice they would give to lone parents considering HE. In relation to educational supports these cover core academic supports; modes of delivery; wider learning and pastoral supports; childcare, accommodation and financial support. A number of participants mentioned the need for extension policies that formally and explicitly recognize the caring responsibilities of lone parents and the demands on their time which can often be unpredictable. Having specific and coherent extension procedures that recognize this as grounds for extension would considerably ease the stress associated with deadlines and assist lone parents in their time management. On modes of delivery, a number of participants expressed a desire for more online options. This included the option of fully online courses and access for lone students to recorded or streamed lectures. Again, this would facilitate access and participation and align with the caring roles of parents.

For students undertaking placements, issues to be addressed include the timing of those placements, especially if they are compulsory, during the summer months – a time which is a major challenge in terms of childcare for lone parents.

A number of participants mentioned the value of tutorial supports and that having greater access to these across their course of study would be helpful. Wider pastoral supports were also highlighted, in particular counselling services, with many participants mentioning the need for more counselling hours than what is currently available across HEIs.

Overwhelmingly however, the main support that was highlighted was college-based childcare which needs to be improved across several dimensions including, increasing its supply and affordability along with longer opening hours, allowing lone parents the option of evening based childcare and specific services for older children including homework clubs. In addition to childcare, some students noted how student accommodation is modelled on students as single individuals. Recognising the specific needs of lone parents and offering accommodation units that meet the needs of lone parent families was thus also highlighted.

Finally financial supports featured strongly. Current levels of assistance are inadequate. Against the

backdrop of the high risk of poverty and the general inadequacy of financial supports, the research participants put forward a number of ways in which they felt financial supports could be improved. With regard to the SAF, participants suggested that its disbursement could be more timely and made available early in the academic year. A dedicated lone parent SAF was also mentioned. In relation to SUSI, while progress has been made in extending SUSI grant eligibility to students on part-time undergraduate courses, which is a significant development in light of our survey findings on preferences for studying part-time, other eligibility issues that affect lone parents were raised by interview participants.

In particular, household means testing means that grants are not accessible for lone parents who live with their parents. Lone parents can live with their own parents for many reasons, including lack of affordable accommodation and because of the informal childcare supports that wider family members offer. However, it effectively means that many lone parents living at home are cut off from grant assistance or receive it at a reduced rate. Lone parent households living within a wider familial household are thus not recognized as such despite being the primary carer for their children and bearing the cost of bringing up their child(ren) along with managing the costs of education. Eligibility for financial supports in the case of students who become lone parents whilst already in college was also an issue raised by the interview participants.

The wider costs of education were also an issue. Generally, participants felt the full financial needs of lone parents attending college were not acknowledged. Payment rates stay the same, for example, for lone parents claiming social welfare, despite significant increases in costs associated with travel and college expenses whilst in education. Travel costs were frequently mentioned, with one participant mentioning how beneficial it would be if lone parent students claiming a social welfare payment were also entitled to travel passes entitling free use of public transport during their college years.

Finally, participants were asked what advice they would give to lone parents considering college. Support featured prominently in the replies, with practically everyone mentioning how important getting support was and asking for help, along with effective time management, self-care, taking things step by step and not feeling under pressure 'to have everything perfect' (Eileen). At the same time however, one participant (Kelly) mentioned the limits of this advice in the absence of concrete supports: 'So I think saying to people "make sure you have support" – I know that it is meant to encourage people – but it does actually discourage some people because some people don't have support.' The points raised above are crucial, both for how HEIs organize supports for lone parents and how those supports are made visible and accessible.

Conclusion

The findings provide deeper insights into the experiences behind the primarily statistical picture presented in Section 2. The interviews highlight the personal, relational wellbeing benefits of participating in HE demonstrating that the motivations and benefits are not solely financial or work related; there are equally important wider wellbeing implications for both lone parents themselves and their children. At the same time, the challenges encountered are undoubtedly stressful experiences.

The negative financial consequences of participation in HE have a serious impact and these are compounded by difficulties with childcare arrangements, housing and travel costs, amongst others.

The result is high degrees of stress encountered in juggling the demands of family and education where time is almost always stretched, supports are limited and there is a significant reliance on informal care. The diary accounts in particular document the everyday reality of these challenges where participants mention high levels of tiredness almost all of the time. The resilience and experiences of achievement are also very important elements of the lived experience of lone parent students. Nevertheless, there are critical areas that need attention in order to boost rates of access and retention, and improve lone parent experiences of HE.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This research set out to document lone parents' pathways into HE, the potential challenges they face, their experiences of HE, and the supports that help them progress through college. These themes were explored for lone parent students as a whole and for the substantial sub-set of lone parent students who are simultaneously recipients of income support from the DSP.

The research was informed by a policy context which recognises lone parents as an under-represented group in HE, yet lone parents remain on the margins of HE equity of access policy. Their marginality is compounded by the complex policy nexus that impacts on lone parents and their likelihood of participation in third level education, including social welfare and activation policies, housing and childcare policy.

In particular, the emphasis on 'work first' policy in the social protection system, especially when it activates lone parents into in-work poverty, detracts from the potential the system could have to support lone parents in pursuit of HE.

There is very limited data on lone parent education participation, no specific education or social protection policy measures to support their participation and no targets have been set to improve their participation. In this context the substantial third level education attainment gap between lone parents and the general population is unlikely to be reduced and the multiple personal, social and economic benefits of HE for lone parents and their children are not being realised.

The research was also informed by a literature review of existing national and international research that sheds some light on the lone parent student experience specifically and the experiences they share as part of wider overlapping student cohorts including parents, mature students and other non-traditional students. There is a substantial body of research which indicates the financial hardships these student groups encounter which are not helped by complex financial support systems. Commonly occurring issues with lack of access to housing, lack of geographical mobility and issues with integrating into university life are heightened for lone parents who have the added challenge of limited access to childcare, who are juggling student and parent roles, and for whom time poverty is especially acute and a major source of stress.

These findings are counter-balanced by the benefits of HE lone parent students experience with existing research citing the personal growth HE offers, the model effect it has on the children of lone parents, as well as the path HE qualifications offer as a route out of poverty and toward financial stability, as well as offering opportunities for career advancement and for combating the stereotyping of lone parents. Such benefits are, however, tempered by the fact that many courses and career opportunities that lone parents pursue are feminised and not particularly well paid including social care, early years education and nursing.

Against this policy and literature backdrop this research presented new findings in the Irish context combining three strands of inquiry: a survey incorporating quantitative and qualitative data; a series of in-depth interviews; and a set of audio diaries kept by lone parent students documenting the 'everyday' and juggling the multiple roles and responsibilities of being a lone parent student.

The survey provided a broad profile of lone parent students in HE demonstrating the diversity of this student cohort. It also pointed to the fact that the majority of lone parent students surveyed (64%) are concentrated in social sciences and nursing and health related areas of HE, with fewer undertaking courses at postgraduate level compared to students in general (11% versus 30%). Another notable finding was that over twice the number of lone parents studying full-time would prefer to study part-time (15% versus 39%). In terms of childcare, a reliance on informal care featured because of a lack of affordable and appropriate childcare facilities, and the almost absent availability of on-campus childcare, with only 3% of those surveyed availing of college provided childcare. These childcare challenges combined with financial challenges, the time poverty of juggling family and educational commitments, and the timing of study are the main challenges that emerged from the research.

These challenges in turn contributed to the fact that 65% of those surveyed had considered leaving their college course at some point. They also translated into powerful feelings of stress, constant time pressure, tiredness, financial precarity and parental guilt which were illuminated by the experiences participants relayed in the interviews and audio diaries. Participants spoke, for example, of feeling 'at times that I wasn't

doing anything right really'; of ending 'up making my financial position the worst it has ever been in my entire life but I have gone too far, you know, that kind of way' and of feeling that 'the structure is for people who don't have children, people who have the time to be there'.

Despite these challenges and experiences the motivations and resilience of lone parent students were equally powerful findings. Familial (76%) and financial reasons (75%) featured as the main reasons for going to college. While career related reasons were heavily cited as a benefit of going to college, mentioned by 96% of survey participants several other benefits were mentioned including broadening horizons (66%) and improving confidence (64%). Participants spoke of 'feeling great and proud of what I have achieved so far' and 'I love being me, a student, an individual before being a mother'.

Given these findings, the supports within HEIs are crucial in countering the challenges and enhancing the benefits of HE. Within HEIs while academic and wider student services can be hugely supportive and a major factor in determining whether lone parents have a positive experience of HE, lone parent students are, at the same time, an invisible group.

None of the research participants were able to mention services or supports specifically catered to them or designed with the specific needs of lone parent students in mind particularly in relation to childcare, student accommodation, timetables, hybrid/online lecture delivery, assessment or placement policies.

The need for greater flexibility and recognition of lone parent student situations in the design of student policies across these areas was a common theme across participants when asked what would improve their college experience. Lack of resources was also an issue including the availability of student counselling and limited or poorly timed student hardship funds.

Supports within HEIs can in turn be situated within a wider policy landscape that lone parent students engage with. In line with the 'education first' theme of this research the main wider policy focus explored was the social protection system and the degree to which it hindered or helped access to and participation in HE. 87% of the survey participants were recipients of a weekly social protection payment indicating the high degree of reliance on the social protection system whilst lone parents are in college. However, the degree to which the system is an enabling one is questionable, principally for reasons of financial inadequacy, lack of or misguided information and advice, stereotypical attitudes towards lone parents and eligibility issues with SUSI grants. The complexities of applying for a payment and maintaining compliance are additional sources of stress. Participants spoke, for example, of there being 'always the fear that they will make you withdraw from the course' and that 'lone parents in college need to be better supported and understood by the social welfare department'.

The financial inadequacies of the system link directly to the financial challenges experienced by lone parent students and the fact that financial security seems only possible when participants were successful in attaining support from multiple sources. One participant, for example, spoke of the fact that because she had a scholarship and a bursary in addition to her social welfare payment and her SUSI grant that 'I could just go out and replace something. I didn't have to go to the social welfare, I didn't have to beg for it, I didn't need help. I could replace it and it just made life so much easier'. However, this was a rare experience and arguably should not have to be the case.

In the round, these findings indicate that much needs to be done to reduce the barriers and improve the benefits and lone parent experience of participation in HE and ultimately reduce the educational attainment gap between lone parents and the general population. The following recommendations emerge from the research.

Data and targets

More data is needed on lone parent participation in HE. This should be collected and tracked by both the HEA and the DSP. Currently, there is a dearth of data and the full extent of lone parent participation in HE is unknown, with HEA information being linked to recipients of OFP only. This lack of data extends to data

on lone parent students who are also in receipt of a welfare payment. The DSP lacks reliable and consistent data on how many lone parents in receipt of payments are in HE. In addition, a specific commitment should be made to increase lone parent participation in HE over time. Targets should be set both for lone parents in general and lone parents in receipt of a welfare payment.

Financial supports

The cost of participating in HE for lone parents needs to be fully recognised in the financial supports available. SUSI and social welfare payments for lone parents in HE should be adequate in their own right without lone parent students having to apply for multiple sources of funding, including charitable sources. Adequacy should take into account the costs of participation including the costs of resources necessary to complete a course, costs associated with placements, commuting costs, extra childcare costs and general increases in the cost of living.

Specifically in relation to SUSI, several changes could be made to improve the financial situation of lone parents in HE. Means testing for lone parents should not include the full household where lone parents live with their own parents and are classed as dependents, nor should child maintenance be assessable as means. All lone parents who qualify for SUSI should be allowed to automatically access special rate, non-adjacent SUSI grants. Given lone parent preferences and their experiences of time poverty, SUSI grants should be rolled out for all part-time HE courses and for courses that are delivered online.

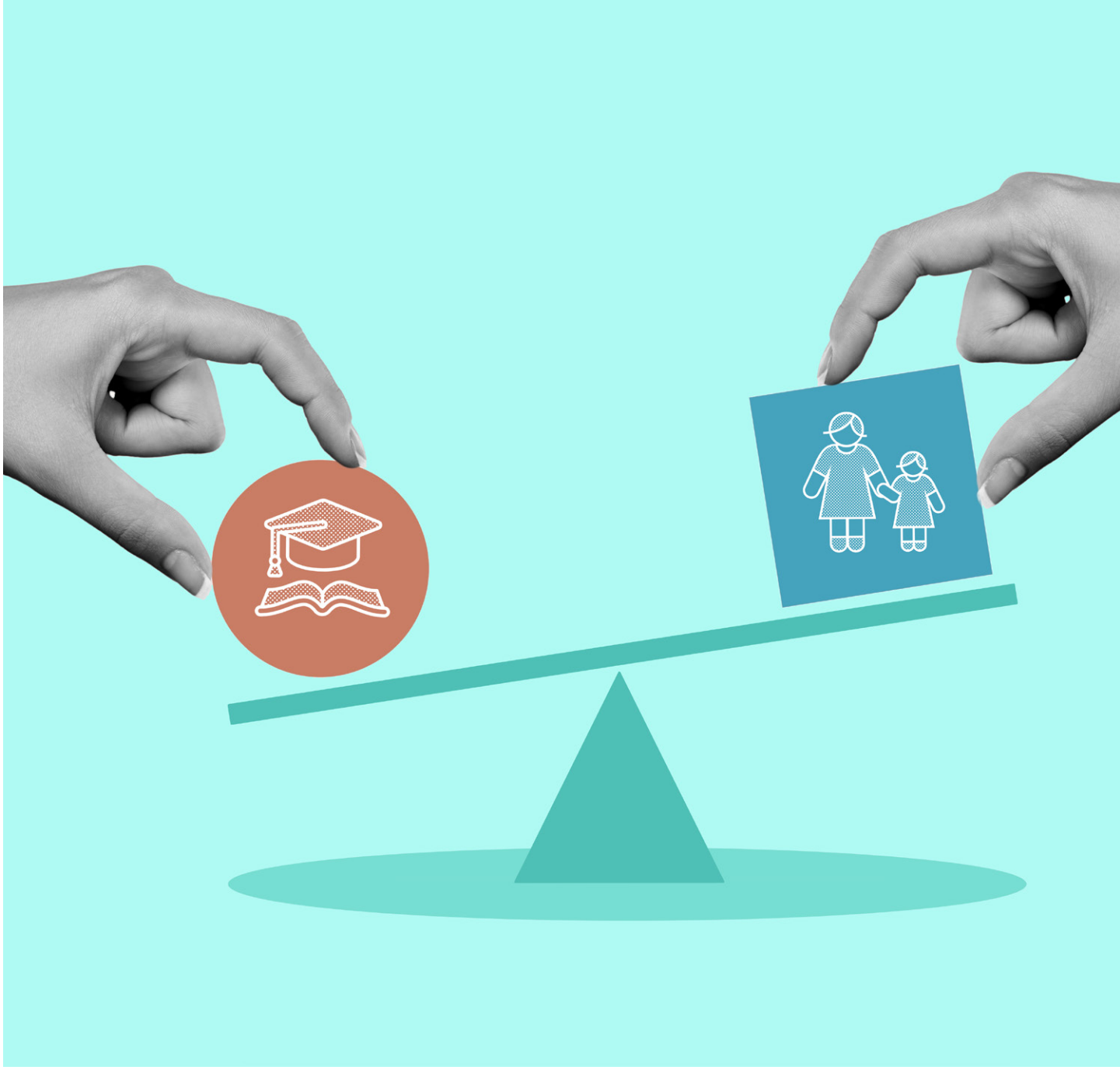
Specifically in relation to DSP services and payments, the adequacy of payments needs to be addressed to reflect the disproportionately high risk of poverty faced by lone parent families in addition to the costs of participating in HE. Scholarship awards for PhD students should not be treated as assessable income for OFP and JST payments, following the model of 'Catherine's Law' that has amended means testing for those in receipt of Disability Allowance payments. Any expenses lone parent students receive while on placement for their course should not result in a review of their payment. In addition, all DSP staff should be trained to understand the specific challenges and responsibilities of lone parents and how to respond with empathy and respect.

A greater awareness is needed of lone parents who attend or who wish to attend HE. Adequate information needs to be made available on all entitlements and potential supports so that lone parent students benefit fully from what they are entitled to. Adequate information is also needed on any implications of attending HE for lone parents' payment to avoid stress around payment compliance. It is also vital that lone parent students are fully informed about the most beneficial payment to them. Lone parents in receipt of BTEA should not be required to switch to JA during the summer months.

Childcare and housing

Lone parent students need greater access to affordable and age-appropriate childcare. The dearth of childcare facilities in HEIs needs to be addressed and late evening facilities need to be made available, mirroring lecture timetables where classes may not finish until 6 or 7pm. While the National Childcare Scheme (NCS) has improved affordability in general, several changes could be made which would improve affordability and access for lone parents. These include excluding OFP, JST and child maintenance as means for the NCS. In addition, an NCS subsidy specifically for one-parent families could be established that would provide care at affordable rates or free of charge as per the European Child Guarantee.

HE provision of student accommodation should include units that are suitable and affordable for lone parent families. Beyond student accommodation, the wider lack of affordable housing for lone parents and their housing insecurity needs to be addressed. The number of social housing units made available to one-parent families needs to be scaled up, particularly for those already living in emergency accommodation.



Higher education supports

Lone parent students need greater recognition and visibility in how academic programmes and wider supports and services are delivered in HE. In addition to housing and childcare services provided by HEIs as already outlined, existing pastoral and academic supports need to more specifically target and reach out to lone parent students. The provision of particular supports, including student counselling, need greater availability and the importance of one-to-one supports, whether academic, mentoring, budgeting, skills based or pastoral supports need to be recognised and strengthened with adequate resources.

Lone parent students are typically highly motivated but time poor. They are also likely to encounter episodic disruptions to their study given the demands of parenting alone. Greater flexibility needs to be built into how courses are organised to support lone parent access, participation and retention. This includes affording lone parents access to online recorded lectures and hybrid learning options where appropriate. Lecture timetables should also take account of the care responsibilities of lone parents which are not compatible with classes that start at 9am and end at 6 or 7pm.

Similarly, the timing of placements, particularly placements run during summer months, should consider the care responsibilities of lone parents. Greater flexibility also needs to be built into assessment deadlines with HE extension policies recognising lone parent care responsibilities as a standard accommodation. Treating lone parent students with dignity and respect is a principle that should underpin the practice of all HE staff and services.

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