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| Title | Students with care experience and higher education |
| Authors | Ó Súilleabháin, Fiachra;Brennan, Rebekah;Dorney, Lyn;McGovern, Sheila |
| Publication date | 2025 |
| Original Citation | Ó Súilleabháin, F., Brennan, R., Dorney, L. and McGovern, S. (2025) Students with care experience and higher education. Cork: SOAR Project, Access UCC, University College Cork. |
| Type of publication | Report |
| Link to publisher's version | https://www.soarforaccess.ie/evaluation-publications/ |
| Rights | © 2025, the Authors. |
| Download date | 2026-11-06 18:33:35 |
| Item downloaded from | https://hdl.handle.net/10468/17647 |

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PATH
Programme for Access to Higher Education

# Students with Care Experience and Higher Education

***"Progression in life, despite my circumstances"***

Fiachra Ó Súilleabháin
Rebekah Brennan
Lyn Dorney
Sheila McGovern

*“I guess I’d just say that it’s your choice! You don’t have to go into higher education, but if you want to do that, there’s nothing stopping you. You have the support there, you have a great opportunity to meet friends, to learn about yourself as well – and just because you might have had a difficult past, it doesn’t mean that it’s going to affect your future. This is your chance to change your future and pretty much have a great life yourself, whatever you do, it doesn’t matter what you do, it just matters that you’re happy doing it.”*

**May**

Care-experienced university student

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was carried out by the SOAR Project and Technological University Dublin in collaboration with community partners EPIC (Empowering People in Care), the Irish Aftercare Network and Care Leavers' Network Ireland. The SOAR Project is an inter-institutional collaboration on Access.[1] It brings together the South Cluster of higher education institutions – Munster Technological University (MTU), South East Technological University (SETU) and University College Cork (UCC) – along with community partners to collaborate on devising and delivering strategies to increase access to higher education for under-represented groups. The research team would like to thank our community partners, the participating cluster and partner universities, and in particular all of the respondents and participants in this research. This project is funded by the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) Strand 3.

1. SOAR is operationalised through five work streams: Travellers in Education; Enabling Transitions; Connecting Communities, Connecting Curriculum; 1916 Bursary Fund; and Partnership for Access.

# BACKGROUND

For the first time, experience of the care system is identified as a life situation that can lead to disadvantage within the socioeconomically disadvantaged priority group in the National Access Plan (Higher Education Authority (HEA), 2024). This is the first report to look at the experience of care-experienced students in higher education.

## About the Research

This research aims to inform the enhancement of support services in higher education institutions for care-experienced students and to raise awareness around supports in order to increase the number of care-experienced students who access, and graduate from, higher education. While research interest in the educational attainment of care-experienced children and youth, and adult care leavers, has increased in the last two decades in Ireland (see for example Brady and Gilligan, 2020), there is a dependence on anecdotal evidence from care-leaver students themselves and from Access Practitioners to understand their higher-education journey. This research is confined to an exploration of participants' experience of accessing and participating in university as a student with care experience. This research did not explore the students' journey into care or their care experience.

The research enquiry was informed by three research questions:

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

## Background to Research

### Educational Attendance and Attainment of Children in Care

International literature suggests that young people with care experience typically have lower educational attainment and lower rates of progression to higher education than their majority-population peers (McNamara et al., 2017; Sebba et al., 2015; Stone, 2007; Trout et al., 2008; Brady et al., 2019). Jackson and Cameron (2011) in their YIPEE study (Young People in Public Care: Pathways to Education in Europe) found that 'while remaining in formal education until, at the

very least, age 18, has become the norm in those European countries studied, this is not the case for children in care' (cited in Brady et al., 2019, p. 55). Both practice experience and research studies tell us that placement stability has a direct link with educational attainment. A meta-analysis of seventeen studies (82% from the United States of America) by Cassarino-Perez et al. (2018) supports the view that the factor most closely associated with educational success is placement stability (Pinkney and Walker, 2020, p. 2).

### Data on Care-experienced Students

There is no central database at institutional level to track the educational trajectories of care-experienced students and there is a lack of systematically collected data on access, participation and engagement in education (Darmody et al., 2013; Daly and Gilligan, 2005). Applicants to higher education under the CAO system with care experience can choose to disclose their care status if they apply to the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) scheme.[2] However, higher-education institutions do not capture the care-experienced applicant who decides not to apply for that access route to higher education, or who opts not to disclose their identity, or even the cohort of care-experienced students who return to education as mature students (over 23 years of age). There are no other systemic/institutional methods to record the number of students with care experience in higher education in Ireland.

While the educational attainment of children in care and care leavers in Ireland has been highlighted by academic researchers (such as Prof. Robbie Gilligan and Dr Eavan Brady, Trinity College Dublin), by the Children's Ombudsman (2013) and advocacy organisations like Empowering People in Care (EPIC), there were no official statistics available for this cohort of students until the publication of The Educational Attendance and Attainment of Children in Care, 2018–2023 Frontier Report by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) on 2 August 2023. Key findings from the CSO report include:

- Of all children that were also aged 18 to 22 by January 2023, 11% were enrolled in further education and 37% in higher education in 2021;
- While the proportion of young adults enrolled in further and higher education in 2021 was similar for children who left care (52%) compared with all children (47%) aged 18 to 22, a larger proportion of children who left care attended further education courses (37%), in particular PLC courses (17%), compared

2. Please see more details about the HEAR scheme and eligibility criteria, including how it pertains to care-experienced applicants, here: https://accesscollege.ie/hear/how-do-i-apply/eligibility-criteria/.

with all children (11% and 7% respectively). Some in further education may have subsequently progressed to higher education;

- Children who were on a single placement also had lower levels of early school leaving (20%) compared to children who were on more than one placement (40%);
- Multiple placements disrupt the educational experience for children and at times this can mean multiple schools, depending on the geographical location of the placement;
- Children who spent more than five years on placements had lower levels of early leaving (19%) compared to children who spent a shorter period (44%) (CSO, 2023)

## Definitions used in the study

### Definition of Care Experience

In this study, the working definition of a student with care experience means having spent time with foster carers (including relative foster carers), in residential care, or in special care before they turned 18 years of age.

### Fostering

Fostering is 'caring for someone else's child in your own home, providing family life for a child or young person, who for one reason or another cannot live with his or her own parents. Foster care is only considered for children in situations where they are assessed to be at risk' (Tusla, 2023).

### Care Leaver

This is a term sometimes used to describe a young person leaving care at 18 years of age. A care leaver can continue to receive support from Tusla through aftercare services.

### Aftercare

Young people leaving care at 18 years of age are entitled to aftercare services based on their assessed needs. Aftercare services can be availed of if a young person turns 18 years while in care or has spent twelve months in care between the ages of 13 and 18. The Child Care (Amendment) Act 2015 (commenced in 2017) introduced an obligation on Tusla to prepare aftercare plans based on need.

## Aftercare Allowance

An aftercare allowance is a specific financial package of support made available to some care leavers through aftercare services. To qualify for an aftercare allowance at 18 years of age an eligible adult must:

- Have turned 18 in the care of Tusla having spent 12 months in the care of the Agency between the ages of 17 and 18 years;
- Be attending an accredited education course, third-level course or training programme as outlined in the young adult's Aftercare Plan;
- Agree to engage with aftercare service requirements and provide progress updates from the course which he/she is attending (Child and Family, 2017).

# METHODOLOGY

## Research Design

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

a. A focus group with eight Access Practitioners with experience of working with care-experienced students in the South Cluster and TU Dublin

   Access Practitioners were selected via Access Officers/Directors in the participating HEIs for the focus group.

b. 48 responses to an online survey distributed to all students in participating HEIs

The online survey was distributed by each institution in the South Cluster and TU Dublin to all students, as well as students registered with Access services to capture as many care-experienced students as possible. The survey covered areas related to the experience of care-experienced students accessing and participating in university which were identified through literature and practice experience of the research team as well as input from the Research Advisory Group.

c. Semi-structured individual interviews with four care-experienced students using photo-voice

Recruitment for the individual interviews was through a range of gatekeepers, including community partners[3] and self-selection through the online survey. Uptake for interview was challenging within the timeframe – eight interviews were organised but four withdrew from the study by cancelling or failing to present for interview.

## Research Limitations

This research received ethical approval from the Social Research Ethics Committee (SREC) at UCC prior to commencing data collection in November 2023. Participation in the research study was voluntary and informed consent was obtained from participants of all three methods of data collection. Aliases are used in this report for the care-experienced students who were interviewed for this study and the generic title 'Access Practitioner' is used when direct quotations from the focus group data are used in the report.

3. Empowering People in Care (EPIC) and the Irish Aftercare Network.

## Limitations

While this is the first study of care-experienced students in higher education since the launch of the National Access Plan, it is small-scale and exploratory in nature. Given that there is no central data set at institutional level, it was unclear from the outset how many students would be recruited for each element of the study and how to plan for generalisability, which is a noteworthy limitation. The short turnaround for the research (six months with a further two-month extension) limited the overall recruitment, particularly for the third strand (the qualitative interviews). The lack of response for individual interviews limits the qualitative data from which we can draw findings. However, it is important to acknowledge the individual and unique journey to, and through, higher education for each care-experienced person. This study cannot be representative of all care-experienced individuals as it reports data collected from a small cohort of student respondents. This research did not capture the various pathways to higher education as this was outside the scope of the project.

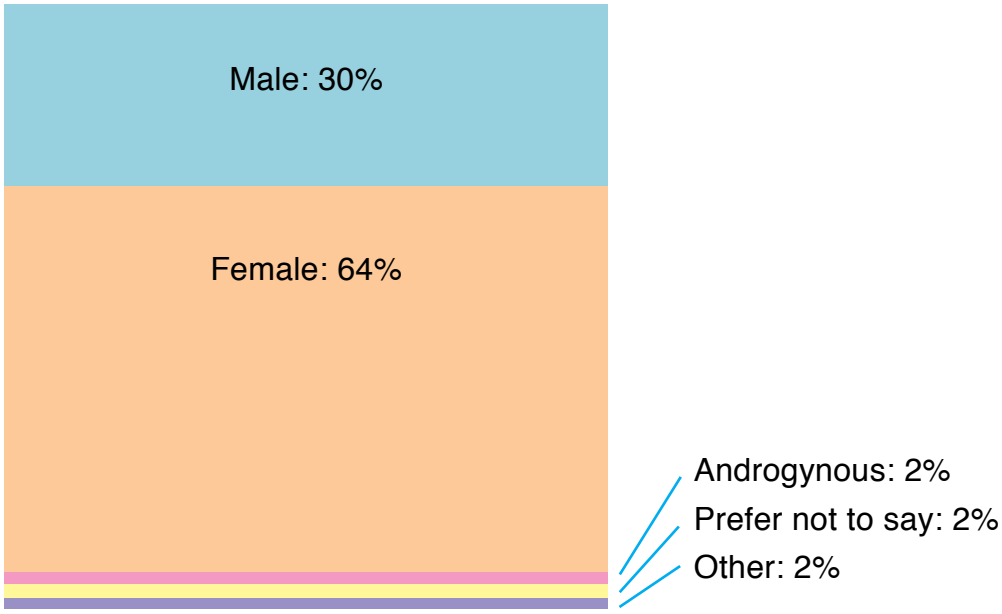
# FINDINGS

The findings below are drawn from all three methods of data collection. Direct quotations from the qualitative interviews are interspersed with the survey findings to illuminate lived experiences of higher education for care-experienced students. This section also draws on the professional experiences of Access Practitioners, who support care-experienced students in the participating universities. Where names appear, these are aliases.

## Survey Demographics

The first section of the survey asked respondents for demographic information, which will be outlined in the following tables and charts. Nearly two-thirds of respondents identified as female, 30 per cent identified as male with one person identifying as androgynous and another person identifying as 'other'.

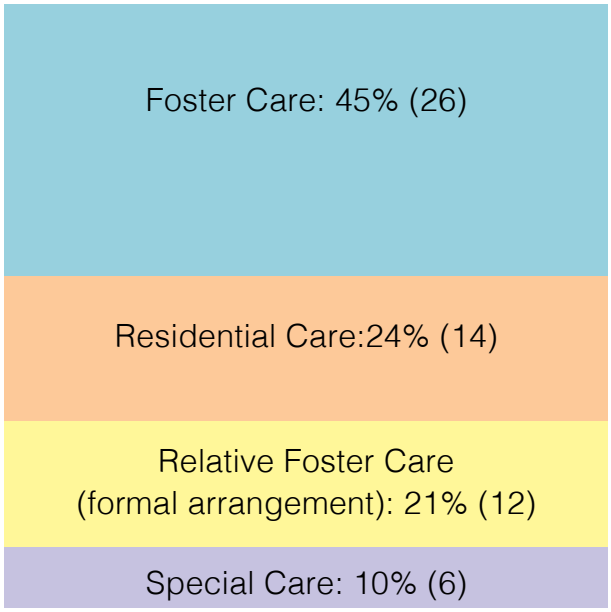
Figure 1.
Gender of Survey Participants



## Type of Care Experience

While most respondents to the survey reported that they had experience in foster care and formalised relative care,[4] it is noteworthy that one third (34 per cent, n = 20) of respondents had lived in a residential unit and/or in a special care unit.[5]

Figure 2.
Type of Care Experience




## Educational Attainment Prior to Higher Education

While 21 respondents had completed their Leaving Certificate examination prior to entering higher education, 19 had completed a QQI course before coming to university/higher education, which suggests that further education acted as a significant gateway for students with care experience.

### Year and Level of Study

Forty-five per cent (n = 20) of survey respondents were first-year undergraduate students, with 5% (n = 2) of graduates responding. While one respondent was a registered PhD student, the online survey received no responses from Level 9 postgraduate students with care experience.

4. See Section 36.1(d) of the Child Care Act 1991 for a definition of relative care as it legally understood in Ireland.

5. Tusla (2024) describe Special Care as a 'short-term, stabilising and safe care in a secured therapeutic environment'. These are secure units where residents cannot leave the unit without supervision/accompaniment. Given the restriction on the child/young person's liberty, a placement in Special Care can only be made pursuant to an Order of the High Court.

Figure 3.
Year and Level of Study

| Year of Study | N = | Per cent |
|---|---|---|
| First year undergraduate | 20 | 45% |
| Second year undergraduate | 7 | 16% |
| Third year undergraduate | 10 | 23% |
| Fourth year undergraduate | 4 | 9% |
| Fifth year | 0 | 0% |
| Postgraduate/Master's (Level 9) | 0 | 0% |
| PhD (Level 10) | 1 | 2% |
| Graduate | 2 | 5% |

Survey respondents were engaged in diverse areas of study with the largest number (32%; n = 14) in the arts and humanities, followed closely by social sciences, journalism and information (27%; n = 12). Sixteen per cent (n = 7) were business, administration and law students and another sixteen per cent (n = 7) were engineering, manufacturing and construction. Nine per cent (n = 4) of respondents were in education but none of the respondents were studying agriculture, forestry, fisheries or veterinary courses.

Figure 4.
Discipline of Study

| Discipline | N = | Per cent |
|---|---|---|
| Arts and Humanities | 14 | 32% |
| Social Sciences, Journalism and Information | 12 | 27% |
| Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction | 7 | 16% |
| Business, Administration and Law | 7 | 16% |
| Education | 4 | 9% |
| Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries and Veterinary | 0 | 0% |

## Motivation to Attend Third-level Education

Fifty-seven per cent (57%) of survey respondents were motivated to attend university in pursuit of a career, with a further twenty-nine per cent (29%) reporting that they wish to follow the same path as others. These desires arguably mirror the wishes and motivations of the general student population in

higher education. However, fourteen per cent (14%) of respondents reported other reasons for attending higher education, which may be more aligned to their care experience. These reasons include a perception of university as an opportunity to transition into independent living:

> ***University allowed for time to adjust to independence while being supported by aftercare and SUSI; and create opportunities for myself that I wouldn't otherwise have.***
>
> Survey Respondent

Another respondent reported that their desire to help others motivated them to pursue higher education:

> ***To help people who have been through adversity.***
>
> Survey Respondent

Another respondent articulated their desire to demonstrate capacity and capability:

> ***[I] wanted to prove to myself that I was capable of pursuing something in life that was really challenging and that I found interesting.***

In her follow-up interview, May said going to university is:

> ***… a chance to change your future and have a great life yourself.***
>
> May, Interview Participant

For survey respondents, third-level education was seen as being transformative. The achievement of entering the third-level space was seen as breaking down discriminatory narratives:

> ***… proving stigma wrong and doing well in a course that I'm passionate about/enjoy. Proving to myself I'm capable.***
>
> Survey Respondent

> ***It gives me a sense of normality and progression in life, despite my circumstance.***
>
> Survey Respondent

Taking part in third-level education was described as increasing feelings of confidence and self-efficacy:

> ***… getting into my first-choice programme. I worked so hard to be here and it has given me confidence in myself that I can achieve almost***

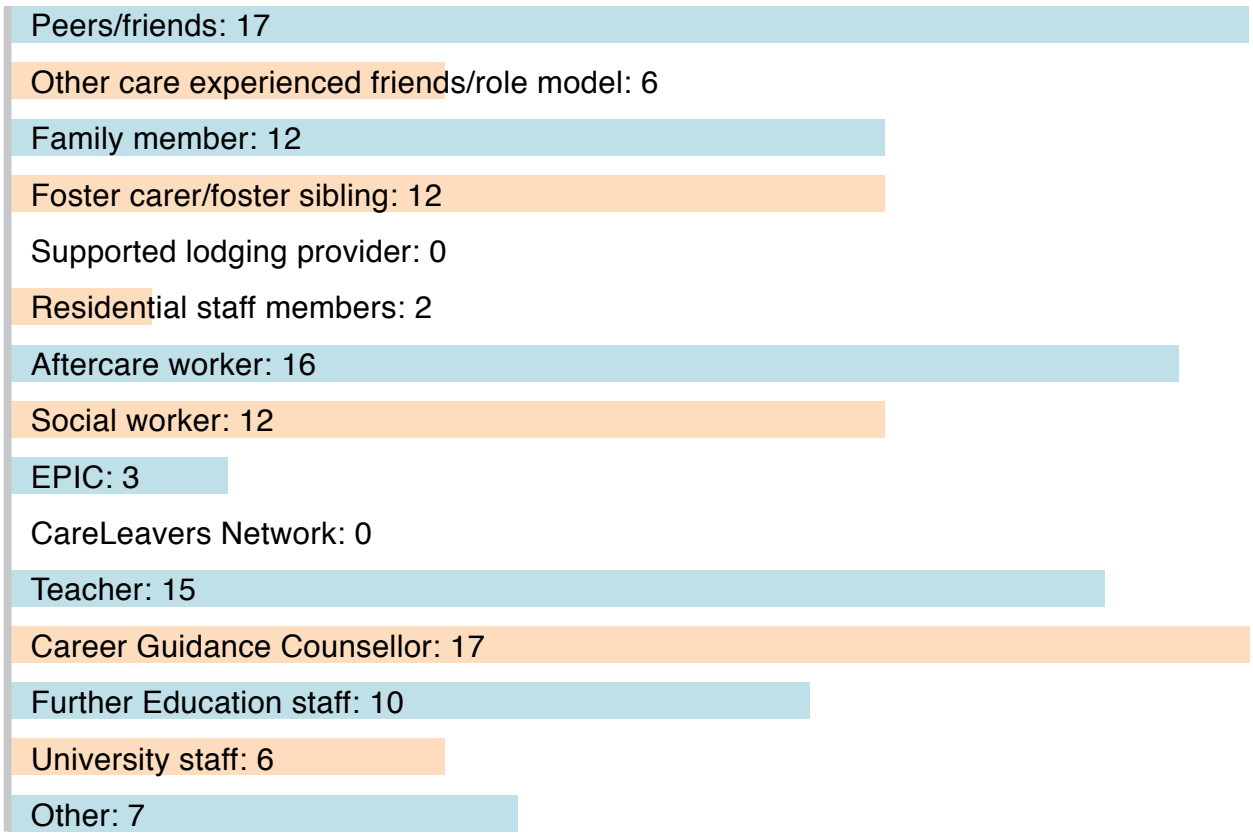
***anything if I just work hard enough and put the time into it. I never thought I could get into a really difficult programme like this, especially because I had a really difficult childhood with very low self-esteem.***

Survey Respondent

**Hearing about University as an Option**

Survey respondents reported that they heard about higher education from a variety of sources (see Fig. 5 below). Teachers, particularly career guidance teachers, appear to be pivotal in pointing care-experienced youth towards higher education. Aftercare workers, social workers and advocacy organisations (such as EPIC) are also central in telling young people in care about third-level programmes. Respondents highlighted the importance of peer mentorship and support given that they reported that they heard about higher education as an option from their friends and peers. Thirty-nine per cent (38.6%) reported they had a lot of support regarding information on Access programmes i.e. HEAR and DARE.

Figure 5.
Higher Education Supports for Care-Experienced Survey Respondents



## Supports in Accessing and Navigating HE

Supports were the cornerstone of research participants' higher-education experience. Several survey respondents identified the supports they accessed as the best part of studying at third level:

> ***…the financial and emotional support and opportunities I received to aid in my ability to sustain myself and progress my studies.***
>
> Survey Respondent

### Financial Support

Financial support was identified as being key to sustaining third-level study in research findings. Half of survey respondents reported having some support regarding information on financial supports and grants. When asked about how they financially resourced their studies, survey respondents indicated that they availed of support from multiple sources. Half of the respondents (50%) received significant financial support from aftercare services within TUSLA; followed by financial support from family (41%).[6] For example, one survey respondent wrote:

> ***I received a grant to pay for college tuition from the Tusla Bursary scheme.***
>
> Survey Respondent

Respondents also received HEI-organised financial support. One quarter (25%) of respondents received financial support through the HEAR scheme, 27% from the Student Assistant Fund, 9% from the 1916 Bursary and 2% from the Access scholarship. Despite this, some respondents also indicated that they have also relied on charities such as SVP:

> ***SVP has given me food vouchers in the past when I was struggling to pay my rent and didn't have much left over for food.***
>
> Survey Respondent

For some survey respondents the financial support was a lifeline in terms of sustaining their third-level studies:

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

6. Respondents could choose as many options as possible and tick Other and explain further sources of financial support.

### Access Service Supports

When asked, half (50%) of survey respondents reported that they were aware of the Access services in their university (20.5% strongly agree and 29.5% agree), and many found it very helpful as illustrated by the below quotes:

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

> ***… the support from the Access Office. SAF, Access grant, loan of a laptop, I would definitely not be still here without the Access Officer. She rings me nearly every day, then I meet with her. She asks how I am, gets me help and talks to my lecturers.***
>
> Survey Respondent

However, this means that half of survey respondents were not aware of supports in their university:

> ***A lot still aren't actually aware of the supports available to them, so maybe more promotion of that to make awareness.***
>
> Survey Respondent

In her interview, Ellie said she was not aware of Access services:

> ***I didn't even know about them.***
>
> Ellie, Interview Participant

Almost half (47.7%) strongly agreed or agreed that they were engaging or engaged with Access services in their university.

> ***I think the Access Scholarship Programme is a fantastically run and well-organised support system and personally I have no suggestions for how to improve it. The level of communication I've experienced is unlike any other educational institution I've been a part of, I am very appreciative of my ability to have had the opportunity to participate and it has surely benefited me beyond measure.***
>
> Survey Respondent

Separately, in the focus group, Access Practitioners discussed the importance of the initial meeting with care-experienced students and how they seek to espouse the value of being the 'one good adult' for care-experienced students during

their journey into and through higher education. Other supports found within HEIs and identified by survey respondents include peers, lecturers and chaplaincy. Developing networks, friendships, peer groups and accessing informal mentors appears to be critically important for success in higher education for care-experienced students as well as gaining graduate attributes such as autonomous, self-directed independence.

## Challenges in Accessing and Navigating HE

### Accommodation

Almost 30 per cent of students surveyed had accommodation issues. Practical aspects such as housing and finance are not straightforward, easily accessible, or easy to navigate for all students but seemed to be particularly noteworthy for the care-experienced students who responded to the survey in this research.

> ***Balancing everything with very little support. Trying to keep myself afloat recently when I moved into homeless accommodation and still trying keep up to date with college.***
>
> Survey Respondent

> ***Trying to secure accommodation so that I could be in commuting distance by public transport to university because I don't drive and can't afford to. I had to move every single year because I could not find accommodation for longer than a year. It was so stressful, and I had no rental or financial supports.***
>
> Survey Respondent

Three in five (61.4%) of survey respondents reported that they had no support with information on accommodation. Some 47.7% of students had never or rarely had a problem with accommodation.

### Finances

Finance was always a challenge for 25% of survey respondents and 20% responded that they did not receive financial support.

> ***For me, growing up with no backup financial supports like other students have with their parents is hard. I have no one to turn to when a surprise expense occurs, and it gives me so much anxiety. There have been times where I had to cut down eating food to save for my rent and deposit. I have also had to walk over an hour to college and back every day because I didn't have the money for public transport. I didn't feel sorry for myself because I just did what needed to be done to get through it,***

***but it would have been really nice if there were more financial supports available at college for these kinds of things.***

Survey Respondent

***I would like to receive more emails specifically addressed to care-experienced people, offering up-to-date information on financial supports … small touches like that would make the world of difference in feeling cared for by the college. It does seem like the college does everything to make it as difficult as possible for students to actually receive supports such as the SAF.***

Survey Respondent

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

***I work 40 hours a week to make ends meet. This takes a huge toll on my mental health and also takes a toll on my ability to perform in studies.***

Survey Respondent

In the focus group, Access Practitioners highlighted the complexities of financial support and aftercare for care-experienced students. As discussed earlier in this report, one essential criterion for receiving an aftercare allowance from Tusla is that the young person leaving care must be registered in higher education, further education or an apprenticeship. One Access Practitioner questioned the merits of this requirement:

***Coming to education as a means to get financial support is a worrying set-up.***

Focus group, Access Practitioner

Some care-leaver students are 'allowed' only one opportunity to fail or to change programme before their aftercare allowance is withdrawn. Access Practitioners are therefore concerned around the aftercare allowance policies:

***[they leave] very little room for failure for care-experienced young people.***

Focus group, Access Practitioner

However, two of the four students interviewed for this report stated that they had changed courses with the support of their aftercare workers. Both students reported that their transition to another course was successful because of the support and knowledge their aftercare worker had of the system. It appears that the financial stability afforded to students through the aftercare allowance can be jeopardised when/if a care-experienced student's studies are disrupted by failing. However, it is evident that a flexible approach to policy implementation

has positive implications in terms of facilitating care-experienced students' retention in higher education, and that the working relationship between the care-experienced student, their aftercare worker and Access services is important when navigating challenges such as failing modules.

### Belonging

Some 45.5 per cent of respondents reported feeling fully engaged in university life, and 45.4 per cent felt like they belong/belonged in university. Practitioners opined that the university landscape is not a familiar one for care-experienced students:

> ***Unfamiliarity and lack of support makes them vulnerable and oftentimes they can't cope with it.***
>
> Focus group, Access Practitioner

Academic success was *often* a challenge for 21 per cent (20.5%) of students, with a further 16 per cent (15.9%) reporting it to be *always* a challenge. One participant spoke about how accessing education was fine, but her choice of programme was difficult because of her experience of being a child in care.

### Stress and Mental Health

Survey respondents also spoke about mental health struggles:

> ***Adjusting to the schedule being that I have a mental health condition that makes it challenging. Without support from the school, it is worse.***
>
> Survey Respondent

> ***I struggle with my mental health because of the constant pressure to not fail and become homeless because of my grants being taken away and SUSI only paying for third level once. Making friends is also a constant struggle due to my issues with attendance and differences because of my circumstances …***
>
> Survey Respondent

> ***Dealing with mental health struggles and trying to attend classes and assignments as if I'm completely fine getting to know people.***
>
> Survey Respondent

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

Accessing supports appeared to be challenging for some survey respondents:

> ***… the Access Offices are way too busy, they have so many students to help and not enough time. They need more staff. It's not the same in every college, I have friends who are out of care and don't get help from the Access people in their college. It should be the same help in every college for people who were in care. We need someone to go to, to support us all the way through not just the start.***
>
> Survey Respondent

> ***… recommending the mental health services and how to access them as I still don't know and am too embarrassed to enquire.***
>
> Survey Respondent

Moving from the care system to aftercare coincides with turning eighteen and often starting university, sometimes moving to another city/town for college. In other words, multiple transitions simultaneously take place for care-experienced students. One Access Practitioner noted in the focus group that these changes can stretch care-experienced students too far:

> ***Third level is a new beginning – too much change all of a sudden; a lot of change in one go; everything comes to a head.***
>
> Focus group, Access Practitioner

The complexity and precarity of transitioning out of care, into higher education, while also choosing and changing courses was highlighted by Ellie in her interview, where she spoke about the impact on her mental health:

> ***I went in, changed my course because at the time I wasn't able for it mentally while moving out of care, working and trying to study, and then also Covid, but I do know looking back now I would have been well able for it, but at the time I just, I couldn't do it, so I did change my course.***
>
> Ellie, Interview Participant

**Planning and Organising Study**

Managing daily routine was a challenge for 84 per cent (84.1%) of students. Time management was a challenge occasionally, often or always for 82 per cent (81.9%), with 18 per cent (18.2%) reporting it always to be a challenge. Only 2 per cent (2.3%) of respondents reported that study /life balance was never a challenge. In her interview, Ellie highlighted how organising study is a challenge:

> ***For me, time management is one of my big issues. So, I use that [phone alarm] because it shows alarms, consecutive alarms needing to remember that things are on and stuff.***
>
> Ellie, Interview Participant

Using a photograph of an alarm clock to represent this journey, Anna said in her interview:

> ***Getting to know people has been an enabler for me, it's helped me get through college. And it's also about supports through people, but then also you need to support yourself, which is kind of the alarm clocks, you need to still be there on time.***
>
> Anna, Interview Participant

**Caring Responsibilities**

Almost three in ten (29.6%) of survey respondents reported that caring responsibilities were always or often a challenge for them. According to Access Practitioners in the focus group, historical issues, past traumas/unresolved issues often become a challenge for care-experienced students. Access Practitioners noted that students' siblings may be at home (or in care) and the students may continue to have caring responsibilities (for example, supporting parents). Based on their professional experience, Access Practitioners reported during the focus group that care-experienced students often prioritise family issues over education and this can lead to them falling behind.

**Accounting for Care Experience in Higher Education**

During the focus group, Access Practitioners noted that the absence of a clear mechanism for recording care experience at registration results in a significant gap in coordinating and organising the nature and delivery of institutional supports to students with care experience. One Access Practitioner said: 'Trying to track care-experienced students is a big issue we find here at the moment' (Focus group). Another Access Practitioner said: 'We didn't ask the question when they were registering, they thought we would pick it up somewhere else.' For care-experienced students who do not self-disclose, this can mean that their needs are not met by the support services. The absence of institutional mechanisms for recording care experience not only makes it difficult to measure educational attainments and gather essential information to support access initiatives, but can have implications for care-experienced students who, having grown up or lived in care, may assume there is an awareness of their circumstances amongst university staff.

# DISCUSSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report includes the voices of care-experienced students as well as the Access Practitioners who support these students navigate their journey to, and through, higher education. While this study was carried out within a tight timeframe and is small-scale in nature, the findings from the survey, focus group and interviews provide insights into the lived realities for care-experienced students in higher education. Our research demonstrates that care-experienced students share similar aspirations with other students about attending higher education – such as the pursuit of a career and to increase their life chances. However, their motivations seem to be also influenced by their care experience.

Some care-experienced students are motivated by a desire to change society by pursuing a career to help others who have experienced diversity. Others reported being guided by pragmatic and practical reasons such as their time in university assisting them in their transition from care to independent living, and that they are required to be in study/apprenticeship in order to be eligible to receive an aftercare allowance (financial support). In the dataset, third-level education was felt to be transformative. The sense of achievement from accessing the higher-education space was seen to support self-efficacy and a purpose in life, and a sense of 'normality' for students with care experience.

The FE to HE pathway to higher education appears to be as significant a gateway to a degree for care-experienced students as the Leaving Certificate, with many care-experienced students in our study sample having received a QQI award before coming to higher education. Care-experienced students hear about university as an option from the adults one would expect – career guidance teachers, foster carers, aftercare workers, social workers, advocates, etc. – but the role of peers and friends is as important as some of these adults – if not more so. This suggests that there are merits in harnessing peer mentorship and youth role-modelling as a means of disseminating information about access pathways to higher education.

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

outcomes (Luke et al., 2014). There was notable evidence of mental health struggles in the data for this research. Our findings suggest that navigating third level, which includes managing transitions – from care to independent living, and from school to higher education – is a challenge for care-experienced students. Care-experienced young people are at significantly higher risk of mental health issues compared to their peers. Studies indicate that these young people are more likely to experience conditions such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) due to the instability, trauma, and adverse experiences often associated with being in care (Ford et al., 2007).

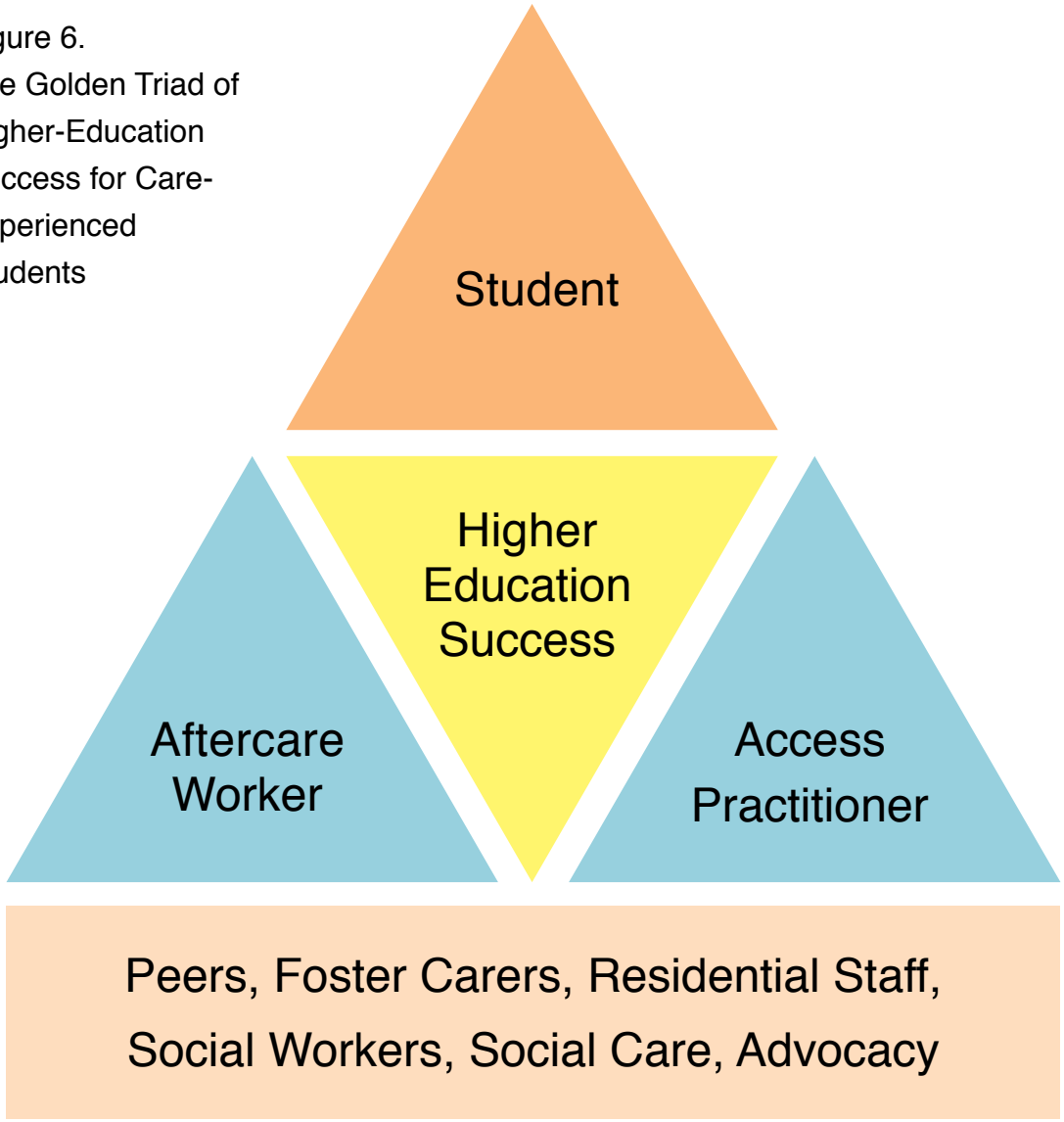
It was seen in this study that the cost of living, including housing, caused survey respondents a notable amount of stress and that academic achievement was being hindered by those stressors. The rising rents in Ireland have significantly exacerbated the cost-of-living crisis for third-level students, with care-experienced students facing even greater challenges due to their often-limited financial resources and lack of familial support. These students are disproportionately affected, as they often rely on part-time work and state support to cover living expenses, which are insufficient to meet the escalating costs (Murphy, 2021).

Important to their academic success appears to be the quality of the working relationship between the student and their aftercare worker in Tusla,[7] and with Access services if and when they engage with those support services. Coordination of care between these key supports is warranted in order to best ensure that the needs of students with care experience are met in the higher-education system (see Fig. 6 on following page).

Ideally, a network of support staff should be positioned as the foundation upon which the student builds their successes in higher education. To access the higher-education space, peers, foster carers, residential staff, social workers, social care and advocacy workers are key in providing information and support. Once the student enters higher education, the availability of 'care-aware' university-based supports, such as Access services, is essential in supporting academic success and retention. The availability of easily identifiable services to support care-experienced students was highlighted in our research. This does not necessarily mean the development of a distinct Access service separate from other 'hard to reach' student populations but rather having designated personnel (where resources are available) to respond to care-experienced students, and ensuring that supports and information are made easily available across

7. Please note that this study focused on the experiences of higher-education students and Access Practitioners and that direct research with Tusla staff was outside its scope.

Figure 6.
The Golden Triad of Higher-Education Success for Care-Experienced Students

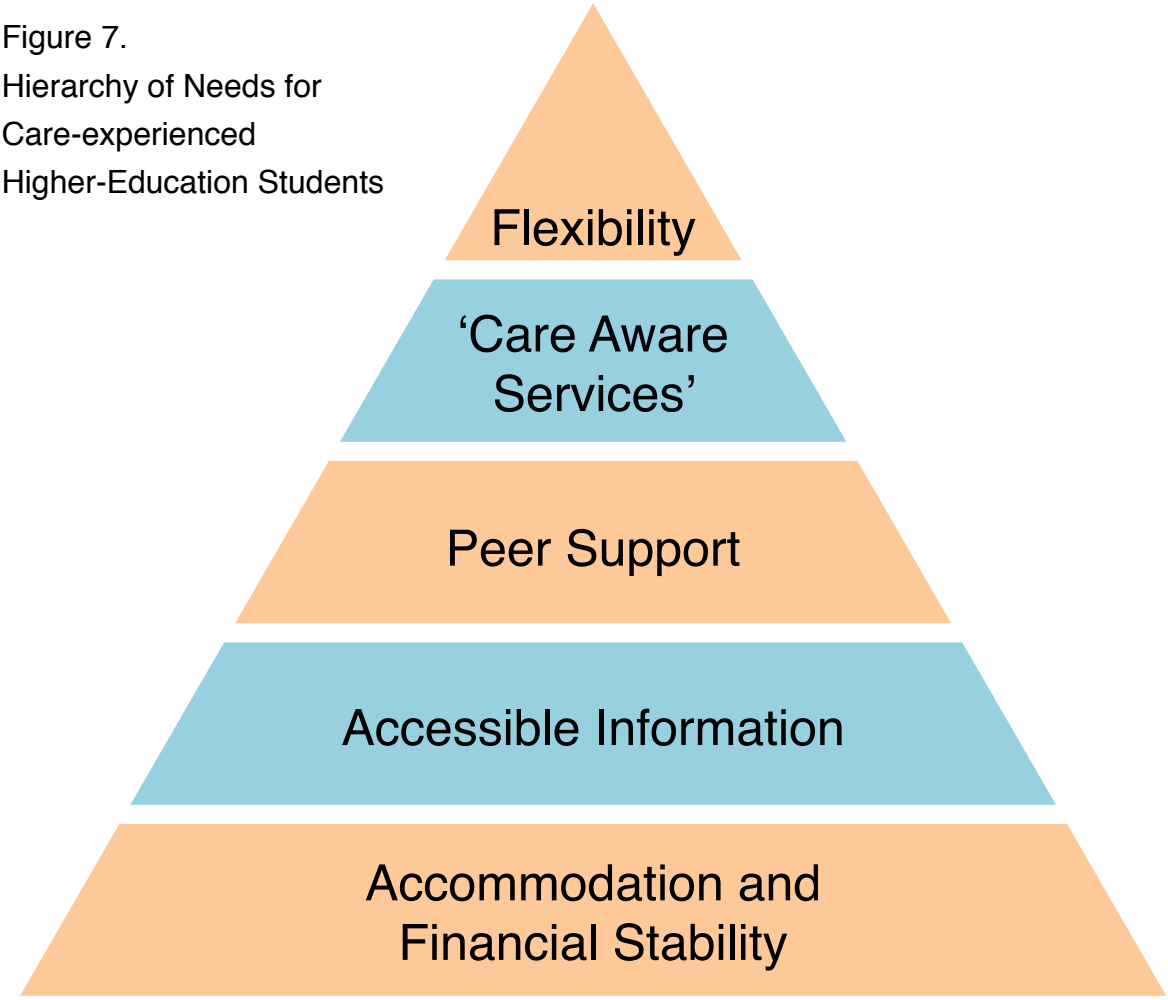



campuses to raise awareness that universities are care-aware. This may alleviate issues Access Practitioners have faced when care-experienced students seek help when it is almost too late to offer supports with their academic studies, communications with programme leads, etc. Given that care-experienced students in our research study course across the wide variety of disciplines in universities, a trans-disciplinary approach to the provision of awareness-training about care experiences across university campuses would be welcome. Along with Access Practice, aftercare workers must work to support the student through their higher-education journey.

The research demonstrated clearly that there are two processes involved: one is accessing higher education (access to information, financial support, etc.) and the other is participating and succeeding in higher education. In order to fully support students with care experience, it is important that we acknowledge and

respond to their needs (see Figure 7 below), which are: accommodation and financial stability; accessible information; peer support; 'care aware' services; and flexibility from all stakeholders in relation to working with students from care-experienced backgrounds.

Figure 7.
Hierarchy of Needs for Care-experienced Higher-Education Students



## Recommendations

### Policy

- There is a compelling need for consistent targeted financial aid and housing policies that address the unique needs of care-experienced students to ensure equitable access to higher education.
- Consideration of the limitations of the aftercare allowance is warranted in respect of repeating or changing course, in addition to instances where a student may take a year out. Care-experienced students should not be financially penalised in these circumstances.
- A system-wide mechanism for recording care-experience/care status history is needed to accurately identify access and retention rates for care-experienced students in higher education.
- The educational opportunities offered to care-experienced students in this report who were facilitated to transition from further education into higher education via FE to HE pathways demonstrates that tertiary routes facilitate and support educational trajectories for access groups. Further research is needed to explore how these routes can further enhance access policies.

### Practice

- That a university-wide Care Aware programme and training be delivered ..... in order to raise awareness around embedding support for care-experienced students across campus.
- That a network of relevant professionals be developed to create the Golden Triad of Support for care-experienced students, including aftercare workers, Access Practitioners, peers, foster carers, residential staff, social workers, social care and advocacy workers.
- That an organised approach to information-sharing and open communication between Access services and Tusla would benefit care-experienced ..... students' academic journeys and transitions to higher education.
- That it is ensured that there is a dedicated person as a point of contact for care-experienced students in HEIs.

- That consideration be given to the development of a dedicated, curated and maintained centralised portal (website) with up-to-date information available for care-experienced people and professionals who work with /support them.
- That a peer mentoring network for care-experienced students be developed within all HEIs.
- That mental health supports and student counselling be resourced adequately to meet the needs of care-experienced students.

## Select Bibliography

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## APPENDIX 1: Information Sheet for Focus Group Participants

**Purpose of the Study:**

The SOAR Project is an inter-institutional collaboration on Access. It brings together the South Cluster – University College Cork, (UCC) Munster Technological University (MTU) and South East Technological University (SETU) – together with Technological University Dublin and with community partners who are collaborating to devise strategies/recommendations to increase access to higher education for care-experienced individuals.

This study aims to explore the enablers and barriers that care-experienced individuals face when accessing, participating in and succeeding in higher education.

An online survey with care-experienced students and graduates, a focus group with Access Practitioners and individual interviews with care-experienced students will provide data. This will enable Access Practitioners in each institute to further understand the needs of this student group when transitioning to, participating in and succeeding in higher education.

Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to take part, along with other Access Practitioners, in a focus group, which will be facilitated by Lyn Dorney, SOAR Project research team.

This focus group will be audio-recorded on MS Teams and is expected to take 30–60 minutes to complete.

**What will the study involve?**

This study will gain first-hand experiences of care-experienced students and graduates through:

- An online survey being distributed to care-experienced students in the South Cluster and TU Dublin by HEIs and community partners
- An online focus group with Access Practitioners in the South Cluster and TU Dublin
- Individual interviews with care-experienced students and graduates using photo-voice with care-experienced students and graduates. Photo-voice uses photographs to study environments in which members of a community live.

The individual interviews and focus groups will be facilitated by Lyn Dorney, researcher.

**Why have you been asked to take part?**

You have been asked to take part because you are an Access Practitioner in a participating HEI in the South Cluster of the SOAR Project or in TU Dublin.

**Do you have to take part?**

No. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no obligation to participate, and should you choose to do so, you can refuse to answer specific questions, or decide to withdraw from the focus group. Once the focus group has been concluded, you can choose to withdraw your contribution within one week of conclusion of the focus group. However, as the transcript will be an amalgam of voices generated from the focus group audio file, it may not be possible to delete your data.

**Will your participation in the study be kept confidential?**

Yes. We will ensure your identity will not appear in the final report or subsequent publications. Any extracts that are quoted from the interview will be entirely anonymous.

The only exception is where information is disclosed which indicates that there is a serious risk to you or others. In the event a serious risk is identified this will be discussed with the Principal

Investigators Professor Máire Leane and Dr Fiachra Ó Súilleabháin and appropriate steps followed. We ask participants in the focus group to respect the confidentiality of other participants and to not share information disclosed in the group. However, we cannot guarantee this.

**What will happen to the information which you give?**
All data that is collected throughout this research will be kept confidential and will only be available to the SOAR Project team. During the research process data will be stored on password-protected computers. On completion of the project, data will be retained for a minimum of a further ten years and then destroyed, according to policy at UCC.

**What will happen to the results?**
It is expected that the results of this study will be published in a project report in 2024, academic articles, and conferences as well as on the SOAR Project website.

**What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?**
We do not envisage any negative consequences for you in taking part. Clear guidelines will be provided to you throughout the research.

**Who has reviewed this study?**
Approval must be given by the Social Research Ethics Committee of UCC before studies like this can take place.

**Any further queries?**

If you need any further information, you can contact the Principal Investigators Dr Fiachra Ó Súilleabháin at: fiachra.osuilleabhain@ucc.ie and Professor Máire Leane at: M.Leane@ucc.ie

## APPENDIX 2: Research Consent Form for Focus Group

I …… …… agree to participate in an online focus group for the SOAR Project.

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me in writing and I have had opportunity to ask questions and seek clarification.

I understand that participation is voluntary. I give permission for the focus group to be recorded (on MS Teams).

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use my data within a week of the interview. **However, as the transcript will be an amalgam of voices generated from the focus group audio file, it may not be possible to delete my data.**

I agree to maintain and uphold the complete confidentiality of all participants within the focus group.

I will keep all information shared by participants during the focus group private and will not discuss outside of the focus group.

I understand that anonymity will be ensured in the write-up by disguising my identity. I understand that disguised extracts from my interview (e.g. my name / location won't be used) may be quoted in reports and publications (e.g. article, book chapter, social media publicity of the study's findings, website, etc.).

I understand that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for a minimum of ten years, in line with UCC policy.

I am over the age of 18.

☐ I agree to participate in this study

☐ I do not agree to participate in this study

Signed: ……

Date: ……

## APPENDIX 3: Information Sheet for Survey of Care-experienced Students in Higher Education

Thank you for considering participating in this research project. The purpose of this document is to explain to you what the work is about and what your participation would involve, to enable you to make an informed choice.

The SOAR Project is an inter-institutional collaboration on Access. It brings together the South Cluster – University College Cork, (UCC) Munster Technological University (MTU) and South East Technological University (SETU) – together with Technological University Dublin (TU) and community partners to collaborate on devising and delivering strategies to increase access to higher education for under-represented groups. The project is funded under the Programme for Access to Higher Education: PATH 3.

Those with care experience (i.e. people who spent time in the care of the state during their childhood) are an under-represented group in higher education. The purpose of this survey is to gain an awareness and understanding of the enablers and barriers of 'care-experienced' students accessing higher education and to help determine effective responses and strategies to strengthen access, participation and success across this group.

Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to complete an online survey which should take between 12 and 15 minutes to complete. This survey includes questions about your experience of accessing and participating in higher education. Participation in this survey is **completely voluntary**. There is no obligation to participate, and should you choose to do so you can refuse to answer specific questions or decide to withdraw from the survey at any stage up to the point of data submission (clicking the submit button). All information you provide will be confidential and your anonymity will be protected throughout the study. Your IP address will not be identified. Once you press the submit button on the survey, your data will be collated with that of other participants and can no longer be retracted. The anonymous data will be stored on a University College Cork-supported cloud storage platform called OneDrive. The data will be stored for a minimum of ten years. It is expected that the results of this study will be published in a project report in 2024, in academic articles and in conferences, as well as on the SOAR Project website.

We do not anticipate any negative outcomes from participating in this study. Should you experience distress arising from participating in the research, you can contact the Principal Investigators Dr Fiachra Ó Súilleabháin at: fiachra.osuilleabhain@ucc.ie and Professor Máire Leane at: M.Leane@ucc.ie who will signpost you to appropriate services.

This study has obtained ethical approval from the UCC Social Research Ethics Committee. If you have any queries about this research, please contact Lyn.Dorney@ucc.ie. If you agree to take part in this survey, please complete the consent form below.

## APPENDIX 4: Indicative Survey for Care-experienced Students/Graduates

SECTION 1: CONSENT

Do you consent to participate in this study? Yes / No
Are you over 18 and a care-experienced higher-education student/graduate? Yes/ No

SECTION 2: DEMOGRAPHICS

This section will ask questions about your age, gender, ethnicity, and course of study.

**What gender do you identify with?**
• Female • Male • Transgender • Non-binary • Androgynous • Gender fluid • Bigender • Prefer not to say • Other:

**What age range do you fall within?**
• 18–25 years • 26–40 years • 41–55 years • 56 years + • Prefer not to say

**With which ethnic group do you most identify?**
Options are listed alphabetically. • Asian or Asian Irish: Chinese • Asian or Asian Irish: Indian/ Pakistani/Bangladeshi • Asian or Asian Irish: any other Asian background • Black or Black Irish: African • Black or Black Irish: any other black background • Other including mixed group background: Arabic • Other including mixed group background: Other • White: Irish • White: Irish Traveller • White: Roma • White: any other white background • Prefer not to say

**What type of statutory care did you experience? Please tick all that apply**
• Foster Care • Relative Foster Care (formal arrangement) • Residential Care • Special Care

**Where are you at in your university journey?**
• First year undergraduate • Second year undergraduate • Third year undergraduate • Fourth year undergraduate • Fifth year undergraduate • Postgrad/Master's • PhD • Graduate 2023

**What are you studying/did you study? (drop-down menu**)
• Business, Administration and Law • Education • Arts and Humanities • Social Sciences, Journalism and Information • Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction • Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries and Veterinary • Health and Welfare • Information and Communication Technology • Natural Sciences, Mathematics and Statistics • Services • Not Applicable

**What education had you completed before entering HE**?
• Junior Certificate • Leaving Certificate • QQI course • Other education/training (please explain your answer)

SECTION 3: MOTIVATION AND SUPPORT.

This section will ask questions about what motivated and supported you in accessing higher education.

**Who made you aware of university as an option?** Please tick all options that apply.
• Peers/friends • Other care-experienced friend/role model • Family member • Foster carer/foster sibling • Supported lodgings provider • Residential staff member • Aftercare worker • Social worker • EPIC • Care Leavers Network • Teacher • Career guidance teacher • Further education

staff • University staff (e.g. Access staff, recruitment staff, lecturing staff, etc.) • Other (please comment)

**What motivated you to attend university?** Please tick all options that apply.
• Following same path as peers • Pursuit of a career • Other (please comment) Who supported you in accessing university? Please tick all options that apply. • Peers/friends • Other care-experienced friend/role model • Family member • Foster carer/foster sibling • Supported lodgings provider • Residential staff member • Aftercare worker • Social worker • EPIC • Care Leavers Network • Teacher • Career guidance teacher • Further education staff • University staff (e.g. Access staff, recruitment staff, lecturing staff, etc.) • I did not receive any support • Other (please comment)

**What level of support did you get with practical information about accessing university?**
No support / Some support / A lot of support

- Career guidance
- Information about available courses
- Information about the CAO system
- Information about Access programmes, e.g. HEAR and DARE schemes
- Information about financial support and grants
- Information about accommodation options

SECTION 4: PARTICIPATION

This section will ask you questions about your time in university and what helped or challenged you to participate in university.

**What university-based support do/did you access while studying in university?** Please tick all options that apply.
• Access Officer based in university • Financial support • Academic support • Chaplaincy support • Student Counselling Service • Student Health Service • Disability Support Service • Students' Union • Support from classmates/other students • Support from lecturers • Peer mentoring supports • I did not access any support • Other (please comment)

**What non-university-based supports do/did you access while studying in university?**

Please tick all options that apply

• Aftercare support from Tusla • Support from care-experienced peer/role model • Support from non-university friends • Support from family • Support from foster carer • Support from supported lodgings provider • Support from former residential staff member • Support from EPIC • Support from Care Leavers Network • Support from charitable organisation, e.g. SVP • Other (please comment)

**Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements**:

Strongly agree / Agree / Neutral / Disagree / Strongly disagree

- I am/was aware of the Access services in my university.
- I am engaging/engaged with the Access services in my university.
- I feel/felt fully engaged with university life.
- I feel/felt like I belong/belonged in university.

**Please indicate how frequently the items below are/were a challenge for you while studying in university**.

Never / rarely / occasionally / often / always

• Finance • Accommodation • Friendships/Peer Support • Managing Daily Routine • Time Management • Study/Life Balance • Academic Success (passing assignments and exams)

• Physical Health • Mental Health & Wellbeing • Caring Responsibilities • Emotional Support from Important People in My Life • Advice and Mentorship from Other Care-experienced Students/ Role Models

## SECTION 5: YOUR EXPERIENCE AND SUGGESTIONS

This section will all ask four open questions about your experiences in university and for any recommendations you have about improving access services.

What was the best thing about being at university? What was the most challenging thing about being at university? What was the most important support you had in university? Can you make some suggestion on how Access and Participation services could improve support for care-experienced students?

## SECTION 6: OPTIONAL INTERVIEW

Would you like to take part in an optional interview about what it was like to be a care-experienced student in university? If so, please provide your name and email and the name of your university in the box below. Please note that your name will never be used in our research outputs. All data collected is anonymised, meaning that no one will be identified.

## APPENDIX 5: Information Sheet for Interviews with Care-experienced Students/Graduates

**Purpose of the Study:**
The SOAR Project is an inter-institutional collaboration on Access. It brings together the South Cluster – University College Cork, (UCC) Munster Technological University (MTU) and South East Technological University (SETU) – together with Technological University Dublin and community partners collaborating to devise strategies/recommendations to increase access to higher education for care-experienced individuals.

This study aims to explore the enablers and barriers that care-experienced individuals face when accessing, participating in and succeeding in higher education. An online survey with care-experienced students/graduates, a focus group with Access Practitioners and individual interviews with care-experienced students will provide data. This will enable Access workers in each institute to further understand the needs of this student group when transitioning, participating in and succeeding in higher education.

Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to take three photographs that represent your educational journey, which will form the basis for an individual interview facilitated by Lyn Dorney, SOAR Project research team. This interview will be recorded on MS Teams and is expected to take 30–60 minutes to complete. (Guidance on taking photos is attached)

**What will the study involve?**

This study will gain first-hand experiences of care-experienced students through:

- An online survey distributed to care-experienced students in the South Cluster and TU Dublin by access workers and EPIC (Empowering People in Care)
- An online focus group with Access Practitioners in the South Cluster and TU Dublin.
- Individual interviews using photo-voice with care-experienced students and graduates. Photo-voice uses photographs to study environments in which members of a community live.

The individual interviews and focus group will be facilitated by Lyn Dorney, researcher.

**Why have you been asked to take part?**
You have been asked to take part because you are/were registered as a student in a third-level institution/higher education and self-identified as a care-experienced student/graduate willing to participate in an interview.

**Do you have to take part**?
No. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no obligation to participate, and should you choose to do so, you can refuse to answer specific questions or decide to withdraw. Once the interview has been concluded, you can choose to withdraw your contribution at any time in the subsequent week after the conclusion.

**Will your participation in the study be kept confidential?**
Yes. We will ensure your identity will not appear in the final report or subsequent publications. Any extracts that are quoted from the interview will be entirely anonymous. The only exception is where information is disclosed which indicates that there is a serious risk to you or others. In the event a serious risk is identified, this will be discussed with the Principal Investigators Professor Máire Leane and Dr Fiachra Ó Súilleabháin and appropriate steps followed.

**What will happen to the information which you give?**
All data that is collected throughout this research will be kept confidential and will only be available to the SOAR Project team. During the research process, data will be stored on password-protected computers. On completion of the project, data will be retained for a minimum of a further ten years and then destroyed, according to policy at UCC.

**What will happen to the results?**
It is expected that the results of this study will be published in a project report in 2024, in academic articles and in conferences, as well as on the SOAR Project website.

**What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?**
We do not envisage any negative consequences for you in taking part. Clear guidelines will be provided to you throughout the research. Should you experience distress arising from the research process, the contact details for support services provided below may be of assistance.

**Who has reviewed this study?**
Approval must be given by the Social Research Ethics Committee of UCC before studies like this can take place.

**Any further queries?** If you need any further information, you can contact the Principal Investigators Dr Fiachra Ó Súilleabháin at: fiachra.osuilleabhain@ucc.ie and Professor Máire Leane at: m.leane@ucc.ie

**Care-Experienced Students in Higher-Education Research De-Briefing Document**
Thank you for participating in our research about care leavers' experiences of higher education. We hope you have not experienced any negative consequences from participating in this research. Please find here contact details of the Principal Investigators of this research should you need to reach out for assistance.

**Researcher Contact Details**
Fiachra Ó Súilleabháin: fiachra.osuilleabhain@ucc.ie
Máire Leane: m.leane@ucc.ie
Additionally, please find below a list of university-based student support services and community resources, which you may find useful.

**Student Counselling Services**
**MTU Cork Campus:**
https://www.mtu.ie/student-services/counselling/

**MTU Kerry Campus:**
Student Counsellor: Caroline Flahive
Email: caroline.flahive@mtu.ie
SERVICE ADMINISTRATOR
To request an appointment email: supportserviceskerry@mtu.ie
Telephone: 066 7191688/7191722

**SETU Waterford:** https://www.wit.ie/current_students/student_life_and_learning/counselling_service#make-an-appointment.
Carlow Campus: Phone Student Services Office on 059 9175600 or email: counselling.cw@setu.ie
Wexford Campus: Phone Student Services Office on 053 9185802 or email: studentservices.wx@setu.ie

**TU Dublin**
https://www.tudublin.ie/for-students/student-services-and-support/student-wellbeing/counselling-service/
Angier Street Campus: T: (01) 2206873.
Blanchardstown Campus: T: (01) 2207202
Bolton Street Campus: T: (01) 2206872
Grangegorman Campus: T: (086) 0820543
Tallaght Campus: T: (086) 0820543 / (01) 2205249

**UCC**
Student Counselling Services: https://www.ucc.ie/en/studentcounselling/devandtraining/

**Additional Supports in the Community**
The Samaritans: T: 116 123 (24 hours services)
Pieta House: T: 1800 247 247 or Text Message support: Text 'HELP' to 51444.

**Care Leavers' Advocacy Groups**
Empowering People in Care (EPIC): www.epiconline.ie
Dublin Office: T: (01) 8727661
Cork Office: T: (021) 2428434
Limerick Office: T: (061) 514518

Care Leavers' Network Ireland
http://www.careleaversnetwork.com/cln/

Irish Aftercare Network
https://www.irishaftercare.com/
Tel: 01 6060858
Email: info@breakingthrough.org
Twitter: https://twitter.com/AftercareIrl
Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/irishaftercare/
LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/company/irish-aftercare-network/

## APPENDIX 6: Guidance for Photo-Voice

Photo-voice is a qualitative method used for community-based participatory research. This process involves participants taking photographs and discussing these in an individual interview.

The purpose of photo-voice for this study is to gain first-hand experience of care-experienced students accessing, participating and succeeding in higher education. This is to gain an understanding of the needs of this group and to identify strategies to increase and support their access to higher education. The collection of such data will allow for in-depth discussions to be carried out in online individual interviews, where participants will be given the opportunity to talk about their experiences of higher education as a student with care experience (Duration approx. 30–60 mins).

Prior to the photo-voice commencing, each participant will receive an information sheet and consent form. During this time any concerns or questions that participants have will be answered.

**THREE PHOTOGRAPHS: Photographs of an object/artefact or place to represent your educational journey. Photographs should not contain individuals that are identifiable.**

1. A photograph to represent the facilitators/enablers/supports in accessing and participating in higher education.
2. A photograph to represent the challenges/barriers in accessing and participating in higher education.
3. A photograph of your vision for higher education for care-experienced individuals.

**Guidelines for Responsible Photo-Taking**

Photos must be taken by participants.

**Please do not take photographs where individuals can be identified** (issue of consent).

- Please do not take photographs of illegal content.
- Participants should not place themselves in any danger throughout their participation in this study.
- Please do not take any photographs which embarrass, shame or stigmatise individuals or groups.
- Photos to be emailed to lyn.dorney@ucc.ie ahead of the individual interview.

## APPENDIX 7: Research Consent Form for Photo-Voice Interviews

I …… …… agree to participate in an online interview using photo-voice for the SOAR Project.

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me in writing and I have had opportunity to ask questions and seek clarification.

I understand that participation is voluntary. I give permission for the interview to be recorded (on MS Teams).

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use my data within one week of the interview, in which my material will be deleted. This is in line with General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) introduced in 2018. All Teams recordings will be deleted after the transcript is complete. The transcript and any photos you provide will be retained for a minimum of ten years.

I understand that anonymity will be ensured in the write-up by disguising my identity. I understand that disguised extracts from my interview (e.g. my name / location won't be used) may be quoted in presentations and publications (e.g. article, book chapter, social media publicity of the study's findings, etc.).

I understand that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for a minimum of ten years, in line with UCC policy.

☐ I am over the age of 18

☐ I agree to participate in this study

☐ I do not agree to participate in this study

☐ I agree for my photos to be used in publications

☐ I do not agree for my photos to be used in publications

Signed: ……

Date: ……

Print name: ……

## APPENDIX 8: Indicative Questions for Photo-Voice Interviews

Individual interviews will be held with participants following the collection of data through the use of photo-voice. The following is a guideline for questions that may be asked by the researcher as part of the conversation.

1. Can you tell me about this photo?
2. What does it mean to you?
3. Was there a photo that you would have liked to include but were unable to capture?
4. What is the overall message you are portraying about your university journey from these photos?
5. How was accessing a place in university for you?
6. How was your overall experience of completing university?
7. Did you engage with Access services when you were in university? If so, how did you experience that service?
8. What could Access services do to improve the university journey for care-experienced students?
9. Were there any other supports available to you, before, during and after university?
10. What was the most challenging part of your university journey?
11. Any suggestions on what would have helped?
12. What was the most helpful support that you received on your university journey?
13. From participating in this study, did you discover anything new about your experience of university?
14. What advice would you give to care-experienced individuals interested in attending university?
15. If you were to do a photo-voice again in a year, do you think the pictures would be different?

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