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Title	The 1916 Bursary Fund: an evaluation of the initiative and its impact from the awardees' perspective
Authors	Cummins, Annie;Brennan, Rebekah;Horgan, Aoife;Leane, Máire;McGovern, Sheila;McGrath, Patricia
Publication date	2025
Original Citation	Cummins, A., Brennan, R., Horgan, A., Leane, M., McGovern, S. and McGrath, P. (2025) The 1916 Bursary Fund: an evaluation of the initiative and its impact from the awardees' perspective. 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	2026-10-12 06:01:14
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/17592

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SOAR
Inter Institutional Collaboration on Access

THE 1916 BURSARY FUND

An Evaluation of the Initiative and its Impact from the Awardees' Perspective

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PATH
Programme for Access to Higher Education

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Acknowledgements

The SOAR Project is an inter-institutional collaboration on Access. It brings together the South Cluster of higher education institutions, i.e. Cork Institute of Technology, Institute of Technology Tralee (now Munster Technological University) Institute of Technology Carlow, University College Cork, and Waterford Institute of Technology. In collaboration with community partners, the project devises and implements strategies to increase access to higher education for under-represented groups. SOAR is funded by the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) Strand 3 and is operationalised through six work streams: Travellers in Education, Enabling Transitions, Connecting Communities, Connecting Curriculum, 1916 Bursary Fund, and Partnership for Access. The 1916 Bursary Fund reviewed in this report is funded under PATH Strand 2.

We wish to extend our gratitude to all the students who kindly participated in the research and shared their individual stories. We also wish to thank the following for assisting with this research:

SOAR Project1916 Bursary Fund Work Stream

- Aisling McHugh, Institute of Technology Carlow
- Deirdre Creedon, Munster Technological University – Cork Campus
- Stephanie Sommers, Munster Technological University – Kerry Campus
- Martin Flynn, University College Cork
- Robin Croke, Colm Bonnar, Waterford Institute of Technology.

South Cluster PATH Advisory Group

Access Service Practitioners in participating higher education institutions (HEIs).

Foreword

On behalf of the South Cluster PATH Steering Group, it is my great pleasure to present this important report from the SOAR project, which provides an evaluation of the 1916 Bursary Fund.

The SOAR Project is an inter-institutional collaboration on Access; it brings together the South Cluster – Institute of Technology Carlow, Munster Technological University, University College Cork and Waterford Institute of Technology – together with community partners to collaborate on strategies to increase access to higher education for under-represented groups. The SOAR Project is funded by the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) Strand 3 and also manages the implementation of the PATH Strand 2-funded 1916 Bursary Fund for the region.

The 1916 Bursary Fund was established to encourage participation and success in higher education by students who are the most economically disadvantaged and who are from communities significantly under-represented in the student body. It provides critical financial support to Access students that experience additional obstacles in navigating the student journey.

This report, *1916 Bursary Fund: An Evaluation of the Initiative and Its Impact from the Awardees' Perspective*, demonstrates the intersectionality of socio-economic disadvantage and access to higher education. It highlights the true extent of financial need and the actual lived experience of Access target students. It indicates the impact of the bursary on students, their families, and the community. In articulating the student voice, the report deepens our understanding and knowledge of the student experience and will serve to inform future Access policy and practice. Most importantly, it exemplifies the remarkable resilience and steadfastness of 1916 Bursary students to fulfil their educational aspirations, realise their potential and embrace the opportunities that higher education presents. Their success will undoubtedly inspire others in their families and communities to do the same.

David Denieffe
Vice-President for Academic Affairs and Registrar
Institute of Technology Carlow

Executive Summary

In December 2017, the 1916 Bursary Fund was announced by the Department of Education and Skills to commemorate the centenary of 1916. It is funded under PATH Strand 2 and is designed to support students from under-represented groups to participate in higher education. Students awarded the 1916 Bursary Fund receive €5,000 per annum for the duration of their full or part-time[1] undergraduate course. This report evaluates the impact of the 1916 Bursary Fund on the lives of the 2017 and 2018 awardees from the South Cluster. The South Cluster includes Cork Institute of Technology; Institute of Technology Tralee;[2] Institute of Technology Carlow; University College Cork and Waterford Institute of Technology. The South Cluster is allocated 35 bursaries each year. The purpose of the 1916 Bursary Fund is to encourage educational participation and success for the most economically disadvantaged students from communities significantly under-represented in higher education. The 1916 Bursary Fund is awarded to students who present with greatest need in terms of economic disadvantage and who are from specific target groups, namely: students with disabilities; students from under-represented socio-economic backgrounds; lone parents; the Irish Traveller community; ethnic minorities; first-time mature entrants; QQI entrants; and part-time students. Lone parents must account for 20% of awardees.

The purpose of this evaluation is to assess the adequacy, impact and usage of the 1916 Bursary Fund from the perspective of awardees. Using a mixed methods design and informed by Yosso's (2015) 'strengths-based approach', which highlights the 'cultural based capital' awardees possess coming into higher education and other forms of social capital they subsequently develop, this research considers how the 1916 Bursary Fund impacted on the awardees' experiences of higher education.

Key Findings of this Evaluation on the Impact of the 1916 Bursary Fund

In 2017/18 and 2018/19 a total of 938 students applied for the 70 bursaries available under the 1916 Bursary Fund in the South Cluster. 585 applicants were deemed eligible for consideration. The data reported here is based on information gathered from 47 of the 70 awardees who self-selected to participate in this research. Key findings of this report are listed below:

- 12% of eligible applicants were awarded a Bursary. This indicates that the 1916 Bursary Fund was gravely insufficient to address identified need.
- Participants found the prospect of higher education daunting due to the significant economic barriers faced, in addition to other factors such as age, childcare responsibilities and concerns around academic ability.

1. A bursary will be awarded for the normal duration of a full-time undergraduate course and up to a maximum period of six years for part-time undergraduate programmes.

2. In January 2021 CIT and IT Tralee merged to form Munster Technological University (MTU).

- The 1916 Bursary Fund was used by awardees to pay for basic living essentials such as food, clothes and transport.
- Many awardees continued to experience significant poverty and lived at subsistence level depending on a precarious mesh of supports drawn from family and community networks. This continuous financial precarity contributed to psychological and emotional stress. Some awardees required additional funding from other sources to continue in higher education.
- The importance of mentorship in overcoming non-economic barriers was identified by awardees. This underscores the importance of mentorship initiatives.
- Some participants identified concerns with regard to navigating career progression; social networks; interviews and the job market, highlighting the need for graduate mentorship supports.
- Up to 2020 the 1916 Bursary Fund does not automatically extend to postgraduate education. Awardees are required to re-apply and compete with new bursary applicants within the cluster. This caps aspirations and creates a barrier to education progression. Indications of a change in this policy are to be welcomed.
- The data collected re-affirms the ongoing need for Access Services in supporting under-represented student cohorts to access, transition and progress in higher education.

Key Recommendations: Policy

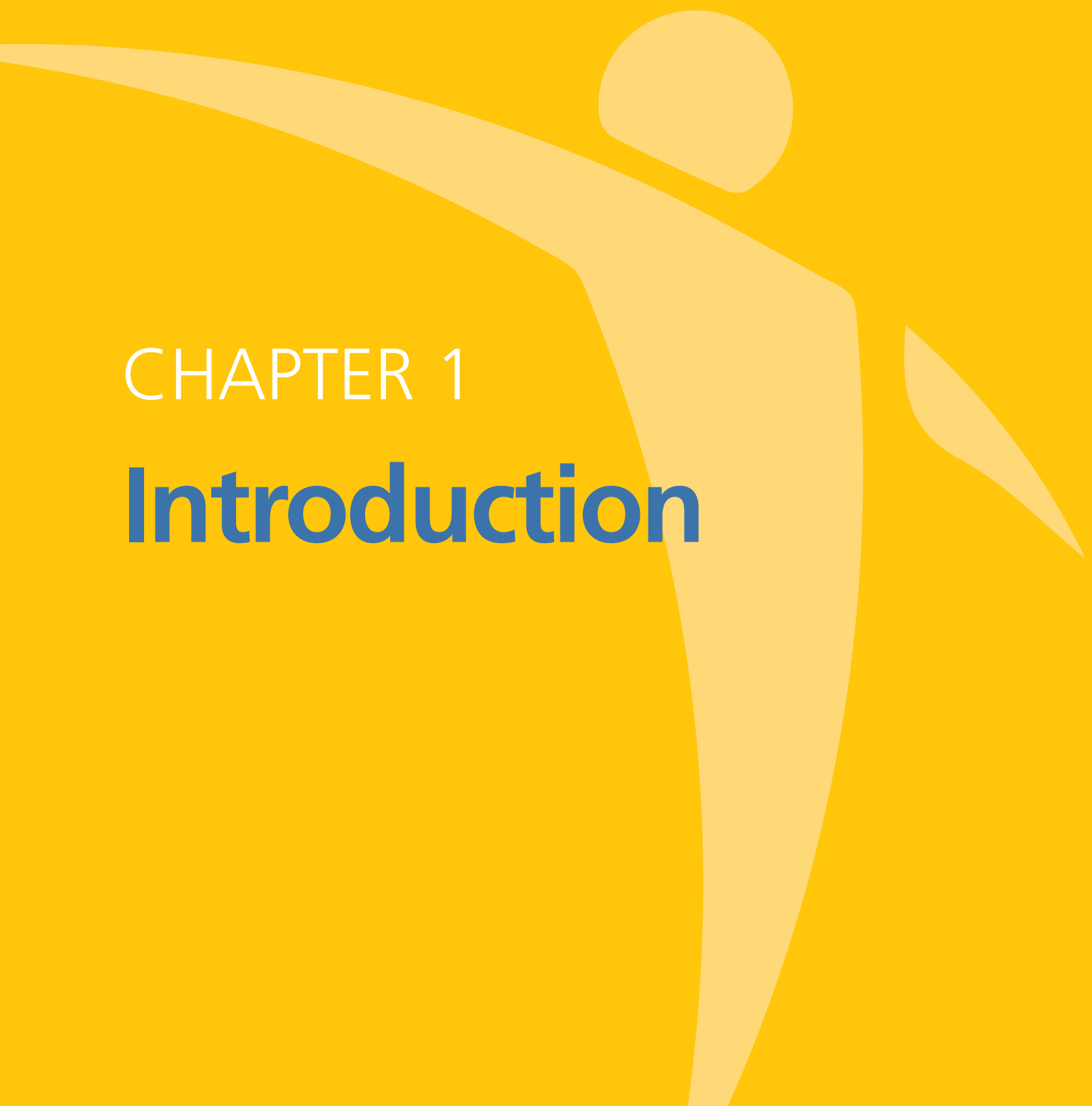
- Consideration should be given to significantly increasing the number of 1916 Bursary Funds awarded as the number of eligible applicants far outstrips the number of awards available.
- The review of the Student Universal Support Ireland [SUSI] grant is merited given the financial precarity experienced by students.
- Revision of the criteria and procedures for provision of Bursary Fund support by the HEA to undergraduate awardees who wish to progress to postgraduate level, is welcomed.
- Development of policies or specific initiatives to address economic disadvantage must include critical consideration of the role which Access Practitioners and Services will play in the rollout and administration of same and must include adequate resourcing in this regard.

Key Recommendations: Practice

- Consideration should be given to sharing and showcasing existing models of good practice in relation to the role which Access Practitioners play in supporting career progression of Access students. This is an emergent and critical area of Access Practice with potential for further development.
- The significant role which mentors play in supporting Access students merits further attention in terms of consideration of ways in which HEIs can facilitate and scaffold tailored mentorship supports for students from specific Access target groups.

Limitations of Sample

Mature students accounted for 64% of the survey sample and 93% of the interview participants; however, only 52% of bursary awardees in 2017/18 and 2019/20 nationally were mature students. The very high rate of mature participants in the interviews is notable and may reflect greater reticence on the part of younger students to engage with research. For comparison, mature student figures for the cluster were as follows: 15 for 2017/18 and 21 for 2018/19, giving an overall percentage of 51% across both years. Another limitation of the data set is the over-representation of females, who account for 81% of survey participants and 87% or interview participants. We did not have access to national figures in this regard, but for the Cluster the percentage of female awardees were 74%. The significantly higher percentage of female participants may be explained, in part, by the requirement that 20% of bursary awardees should be lone parents. There may also be a potential bias in the data relating to experiences of completing the application form, given that the participants' success in being awarded the bursary may colour their perceptions of the ease or otherwise of the application process. To provide a somewhat more balanced account of the application process we undertook a case study interview with one unsuccessful applicant.



CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Since the 1990s, there has been a significant increase in the number of students accessing higher education in Ireland (Higher Education Authority (HEA), 2015). Low socio-economic background, disability, ethnic identity and age can significantly impede equality of access and opportunity (HEA, 2015; Scanlon et al., 2019). Equity of access policies such as the Europe 2020 strategy objectives (European Commission, 2020) on poverty reduction and social inclusion and the Bologna process (HEA, 2015) aim to make higher education a space that represents the whole of society. However, as Loxley et al. (2017) demonstrate, these policies have led to a 'deepening of participation' consisting of increased participation by socio-economic groups that have traditionally accessed higher education, rather than '… a widening; that is, drawing in of those who had not' (Loxley et al., 2017: 48).

To date, the HEA has published three plans to improve equity of access for under-represented groups into higher education: the 2005–2007 Action Plan on Equity of Access to Higher Education; the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008–2013; and the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015–2019, recently extended to 2021. In 2017, the Department of Education and Skills committed €16.5 million to the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) fund to support the objectives of the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015–2019, which has been divided into three strands as detailed in Figure 1 below. The fund is administered by the HEA.

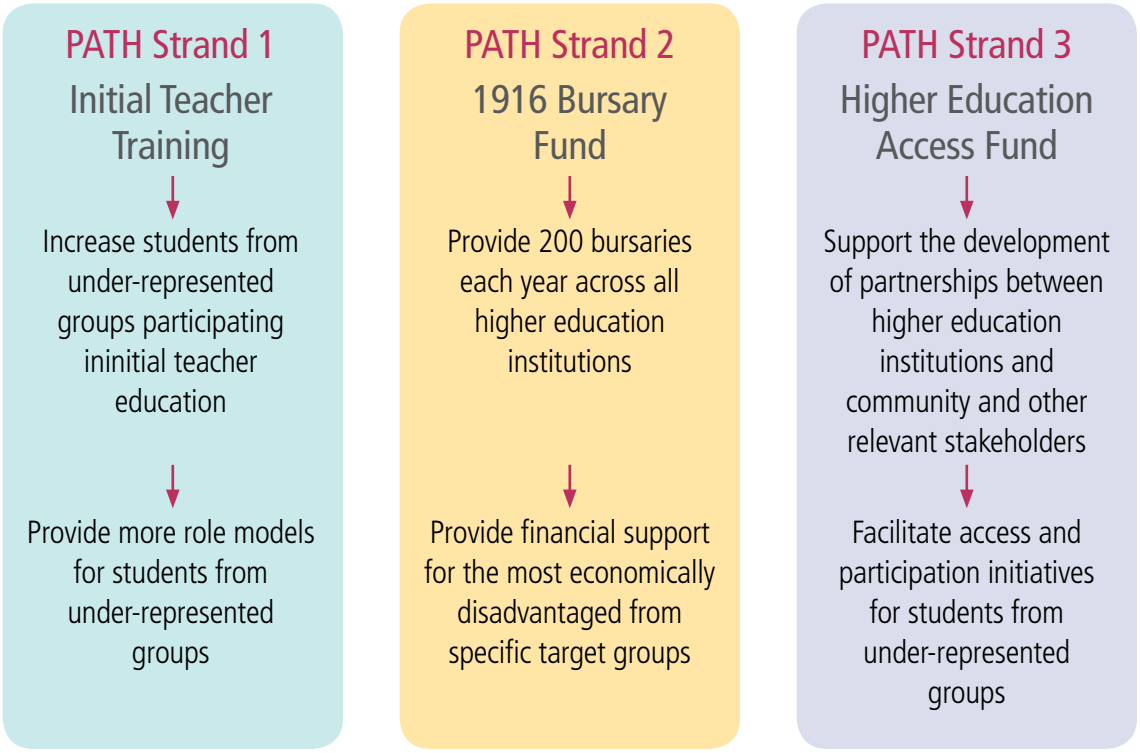


Figure 1: Overview of PATH Funding

This report focuses on PATH Strand 2 funding (the 1916 Bursary Fund) and the impact it had on the South Cluster awardees who received the bursary in 2017 and 2018. Students awarded the 1916 Bursary Fund receive €5,000 per annum for the duration of their full or part-time undergraduate course. The purpose of this funding is to encourage participation and success by students from sections of society that are significantly under-represented in higher education. Funding was provided for the award of 200 bursaries nationally in each of the three academic years commencing 2017/18. The bursaries were allocated to regional clusters of HEIs; the South Cluster receives 35 bursaries annually, which are equally distributed across the five participating HEIs.[3]

In the South Cluster, in 2017/18 and 2018/19, the 1916 Bursary Fund was administered locally by each individual institution, with cluster-level collaboration on application and selection processes. In 2019/20, the South Cluster PATH 3 funded SOAR Projectassumed responsibility for the implementation of the 1916 Bursary Fund on behalf of the cluster and undertook the research reported here.

1.2 The 1916 Bursary Fund

The 1916 Bursary Fund is distinguishable from other access initiatives which attempt to disaggregate students in accordance with distinct categories, such as social class, ability, educational pathways, etc. Eligibility for this award depends on the intersectionality of financial and educational disadvantage experienced across the life course. The concept of intersectionality stems from critical race theory and is concerned with the manner in which variables, such as social class, race and gender, intersect to compound inequality. According to Crenshaw (1989: 140), 'single-axis analysis' perpetuates disadvantage by representing and recognising only a 'subset of a much more complex phenomenon'.

The 1916 Bursary Fund attempts to disrupt the trajectory of educational disadvantage by providing additional financial support[4] to those in most need from target groups across participating institutions. Thus, eligibility is dependent on students being both economically disadvantaged and meeting at least one of the following criteria:

- Socio-economic groups that have low participation rates in higher education.
- Students with a disability.
- Lone parents in receipt of a means-tested social welfare payment.
- Irish Travellers.

3. The fund was extended for an additional three-year period commencing 2020/21.

4. Recipients of the 1916 Bursary Fund are eligible to receive the SUSI grant.

- First-time mature student entrants.
- Students entering on the basis of a QQI or Further Education Award.
- Persons from ethnic minorities who are lawfully present in the state.
- Part-time students.

1.3 1916 Bursary Fund: Eligibility and Application Procedures

Eligibility criteria for the 1916 Bursary Fund are updated annually in guidelines[5] published by the Department of Education and Skills.[6] Applicants are required to meet specific financial and target group criteria in order to be deemed eligible for consideration for the bursary. In 2017, the financial criteria that applied for eligibility to the SUSI grant were used, meaning applicants had to be from a household whose combined income for the previous year was less than €45,790. In 2018, the eligibility criteria were made significantly more stringent and were mapped on to the eligibility criteria for the special rate of SUSI – that is, applicants had to be from a household with an income of less than €23,500 in the previous year and had to be in receipt of specific Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP) payments. Applicants must also belong to one of the target groups under-represented in higher education. To make an application, applicants are required to provide evidence of meeting financial and target group criteria; they may also provide a personal statement and letter of support from a third party; and in one HEI, shortlisted applicants are interviewed. Eligible applicants that demonstrate the greatest need are awarded the 1916 Bursary Fund. Unsuccessful applicants are signposted to alternative financial supports such as the Student Assistance Fund.[7]

As Figure 2 (page 11) indicates, in 2017/18 and 2018/19, 585 students were deemed eligible for consideration for the 70 available bursaries in the South Cluster. The combined success rate for eligible applicants in 2017/18 and 2018/19 was 12% (11% in 2017/18; 14% in 2018/19). This is consistent with national figures of 16% of all eligible applicants being successful in 2018/19 and 9% being successful in 2017/18. Those who received awards typically belonged to more than one target group. The level of disjuncture between the number of eligible applicants and the number of bursaries is problematic,

5. https://hea.ie/funding-governance-performance/funding/student-finance/1916-Bursary-fund/ These, however, vary from those which were applicable in 2017/18 and 2018/19.

6. The newly established Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science assumed responsibility for PATH in July 2020.

7. The Student Assistance Fund provides financial support to full or part-time students who are experiencing financial difficulties while attending college. https://hea.ie/funding-governance-performance/funding/student-finance/student-assistance-fund/

both in terms of the adequacy of the bursary scheme to address need and in terms of the disappointment caused to significant numbers of unsuccessful applicants.

In the South Cluster, there is considerable variation in the number of eligible applicants per institution (see Figure 2 below). It would appear that the current practice of allocating an equal number of bursaries to each institution is iniquitous. It does not ensure that the bursaries are awarded to the applicants experiencing the greatest disadvantage within the South Cluster. A refinement of allocation criteria to ensure that bursaries are awarded to applicants with the greatest level of disadvantage irrespective of what institution they are attending would be more equitable.

2017/18	UCC	WIT	CIT	ITT	ITC	Cluster Total
Number of applications received	198	146	37	34	109	524
Number of eligible applications	132	78	16	29	79	334
Number of awards	7	7	7	7	7	35
Percentage of eligible students who received awards	5%	9%	44%	24%	9%	11%

2018/19	UCC	WIT	CIT	ITT	ITC	Cluster Total
Number of applications received	150	47	108	48	61	414
Number of eligible applications	51	34	88	29	49	251
Number of awards	7	7	7	7	7	35
Percentage of eligible students who received awards	14%	21%	8%	24%	14%	14%

Figure 2: Applications 2017/18 and 2018/19 by Higher Education Institution

1.4 Conclusion

This report focuses on PATH Strand 2 funding (the 1916 Bursary Fund) and the impact it had on the South Cluster awardees who received the bursary in 2017 and 2018. As already stated, the discrepancy between the number of eligible applicants and the number of bursaries is of concern in terms of the adequacy of the bursary scheme to address need. The following chapter will describe the methodology for this evaluation, which sought to assess such adequacy; and also the usage and impact of the 1916 Bursary Fund on awardees who participated in this research.

CHAPTER 2

Methodology

2.1 Introduction

This chapter details the methodology employed in the study, including discussion of research approach, ethical protocol, data collection methods, study participants and data analysis.

2.2 Research Approach

The aim of this research was to explore the impact of the 1916 Bursary Fund on awardees' participation and engagement in higher education. Particular attention was paid to perceived adequacy of the bursary in addressing financial need and to the ways in which the awardees used the money they received. A mixed methods approach was taken to ensure the participants'[8] experiences were accurately captured and represented. As Greene (2015: 750) points out, 'a mixed methods approach to social inquiry provides more than one lens and perspective on the phenomena being studied and so promises better understanding of these phenomena'. Furthermore, the combined use of qualitative and quantitative methods 'adds rigor, breadth complexity, richness, and depth to any inquiry' (Denzin, 2012: 82). The specific mixed methods approach adopted was a sequential, explanatory mixed methods approach. In this approach, the quantitative data collected during the first phase of the research informs the qualitative enquiry in the second phase (Creswell and Creswell, 2017).

2.3 Ethics

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participants were made aware that the research project had received ethical approval from the Social Research Ethics Committee at UCC and was governed by ethical principles including anonymity; confidentiality; the safety of participants; informed consent and freedom to withdraw from the study (see Appendices 1 and 2 for information sheet and consent form).

8. The terms 'participant' and 'awardee' will be used interchangeably from Chapter 2 onwards in this report. Both terms refer to participants in the research.

2.4 Methods

The fieldwork for this research took place between September 2019 and March 2020 and consisted of two phases. A case study with an unsuccessful applicant to the 1916 Bursary Fund was conducted in January 2021. In the first phase, the 70 1916 Bursary awardees from the 2017 and 2018 cohorts still registered in a South Cluster HEI were invited to complete an online survey. In the second phase of the research, face-to-face, in-depth interviews took place with a cohort of awardees (n=15) from across the five institutions, to include the above mentioned case study in January 2021. Detailed overviews of each phase of the research are provided below.

Phase 1: Online Survey

The online survey[9] conducted using the Lime Survey platform, consisted of 62 questions organised into seven sections: Demographic Profile (11 questions); Transition Experience (8 questions); Academic Experience in College (11 questions); Social Life in College (9 questions); Impact of Fund and College on Family (7 questions); Experience of Applying for 1916 Bursary Fund and its Impact (12 questions) and Plans for the Future (4 questions). Open-ended and closed questions were used throughout the survey.

The survey was distributed to the 70 registered awardees in October 2019 and they were given three weeks to complete it. A total of 47 completed surveys were returned, which equated to a 67% response rate. Survey data was analysed using Excel.

Phase 2: Interviews

Face-to-face, in-depth interviews were conducted with fifteen self-selected awardees across the five institutions who had completed the online survey. In-depth interviews described as 'a meaning-making partnership between interviewers and their respondents' (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2006: 128) represent an ideal method for capturing participants' lived experiences and perspectives. Demographic details of these fifteen individuals are presented in Figure 3 (page 16).

As Figure 3 indicates, most participants were mature students. However, a broad range of target groups were represented among them. Participants were interviewed at varying stages of their programme of study (see Figure 4, page 16).

The Access Practitioners in each of the institutions were instrumental in supporting and accommodating the interview process. Interviewees were provided with an information sheet and consent form, which explained the purpose of the research and how the data would be used and stored. All interviewees signed a consent form prior to the beginning of data collection (see Appendix 2). Each interview took place on the participant's

9. The online survey is available on request by contacting the SOAR Projectat info@soarforaccess.ie

Interviewee	Gender	Target Group/s
1	Female	First-time mature student; Lone parent; Disability
2	Female	First-time mature student; Disability
3	Female	First-time mature student; Lone parent; QQI entrant; Disability; Ethnic minority
4	Male	First-time mature student; Ethnic minority
5	Female	First-time mature student; Lone parent; Ethnic minority
6	Female	First-time mature student; Lone parent; Socio-economic group that has low participation rates in higher education
7	Female	First-time mature student; Lone parent; Ethnic minority
8	Female	First-time mature student; Disability; Ethnic minority
9	Female	Disability; Socio-economic group that has low participation rates in higher education
10	Female	First-time mature student; Lone parent
11	Female	First-time mature student; Lone parent; Socio-economic group that has low participation rates in higher education
12	Female	First-time mature student; Lone parent; QQI entrant
13	Female	First-time mature student; Lone parent
14	Female	First-time mature student; Lone parent; Socio-economic group that has low participation rates in higher education
15	Male	First-time mature student; Socio-economic group that has low participation rates in higher education

Figure 3: Demographics of Interview Participants

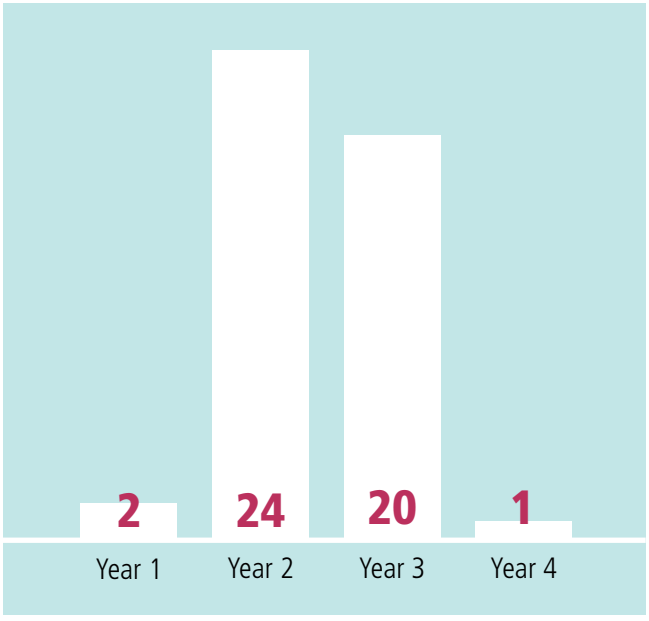


Figure 4: Stages of Undergraduate Programme Completion by Participant

college campus and was scheduled to ensure no disruption to the participant's lectures, tutorials, lab work or any other academic or personal commitments. Interviews lasted on average between 40 to 60 minutes and addressed: experience of primary and post-primary schools; family experience; economic hardship; pathway to higher education; motivation for accessing higher education; concerns about accessing higher education; experience of applying for the 1916 Bursary Fund; academic and social experiences since starting college; sense of belonging; family and friends level of support and impact of the 1916 Bursary Fund on their lives and prospects for the future.[10] Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data from the interviews was thematically coded and analysed using NVIVO 12, a qualitative data management software programme.

Case Study

An additional case study interview was conducted in January 2021 with an unsuccessful applicant. The purpose of this interview was to gather illustrative data on the circumstances that many unsuccessful applicants are likely to experience as they navigate the expense of college life without the 1916 Bursary Fund. The case study participant self-selected for interview through an Access Practitioner at his institution who acted as gatekeeper for recruitment purposes. Data collection was conducted online via MS Teams in line with COVID-19 government restrictions at the time of writing. The interview was 60 minutes in duration and was transcribed and coded in line with the methodology for other interviews.

Limitations of Sample

Mature students accounted for 64% of the survey sample and 93% of the interview participants; however, nationally only 52% of bursary awardees in 2017/18 and 2019/20 were mature students. As already stated, across two years (2017/18 and 2018/19) the percentage of mature student awardees across the cluster was 51%. The very high rate of mature participants in the interviews is notable and may reflect greater reticence on the part of younger students to engage with research. Another limitation of the data set is the over-representation of females, who account for 81% of survey participants and 87% or interview participants. The significantly higher percentage of female participants may be explained, in part, by the requirement that 20% of bursary awardees should be lone parents.

However, it is important to note that this is in line with South Cluster awardee figures (see Figure 5). Of 70 Awardees, 52 were female, 17 were male and one other individual identified as another gender.

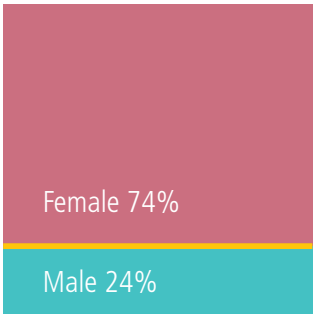


Figure 5: Gender Breakdown of South Cluster 1916 Bursary Fund Awardees

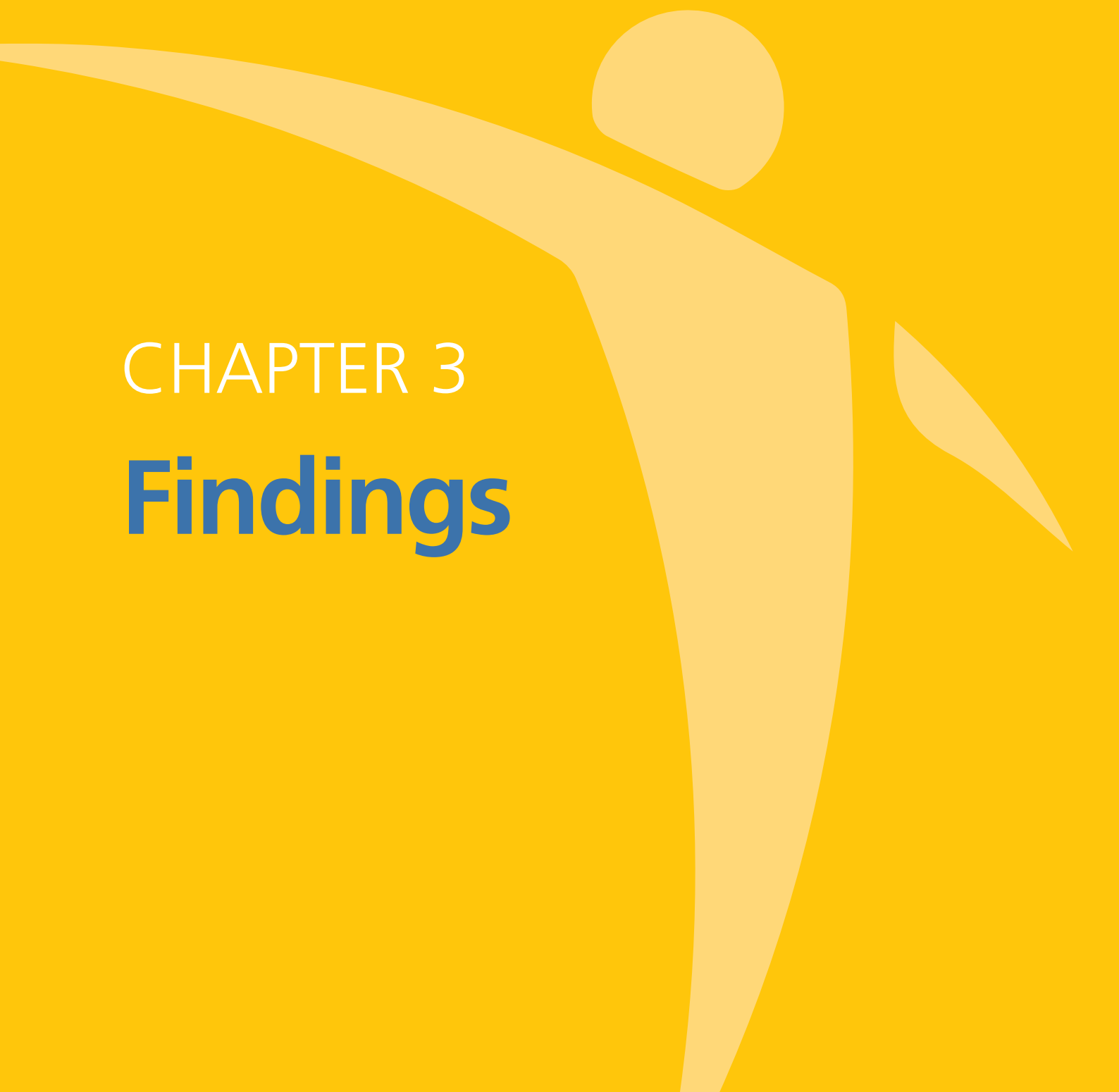
10. A sample interview guide is available on request by contacting the SOAR Project at info@soarforaccess.ie

2.5 Data Analysis

The sequential explanatory mixed-methods approach informing the research also shaped the data analysis. Both quantitative and qualitative data are presented in this report and Yosso's (2005) cultural wealth framework and Bourdieu's (1986) social capital theory provide a conceptual framework for guiding analysis of the data.

2.6 Conclusion

The high response rate to the survey (67%) and the rich data collected from the qualitative interviews ensures that this research makes a valuable contribution to knowledge on the adequacy, usage and impact of the 1916 Bursary Fund. Limitations in the data set include an over-representation of females (81% females in survey data and 87% in interview data) and mature students (64% mature students in survey data and 93% in interview data). There may also be a potential bias in the data relating to experiences of completing the application form, given that the participants' success in being awarded the bursary may colour their perceptions of the ease or otherwise of the application process. The following chapter provides a thematic analysis of the findings.



CHAPTER 3

Findings

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the research. It provides a demographic and socio-economic profile of participants and examines their experiences of transitioning to higher education with reference to aspirations, motivations, strengths and challenges. The impact of the 1916 Bursary Fund in supporting their journey is examined, as is the impact it had on awardees' participation in and enjoyment of college life. Consideration is also given to participants' experiences of the 1916 Bursary Fund application and interview process. Bourdieu's (1979) concepts of habitus and economic capital and Yosso's (2005) cultural wealth framework are used to theoretically frame and explore participants' accounts. The data indicates the economic precarity of the participants, the key role which the 1916 Bursary Fund played in scaffolding their education journeys, and the continuing financial challenges participants experience despite receiving the Bursary Fund.

3.2 Demographic Profile of Participants

Survey data indicates that most of the survey participants (81%) were female, as depicted below in Figure 6. Thirteen out of the fifteen interviewees were also female (87%).

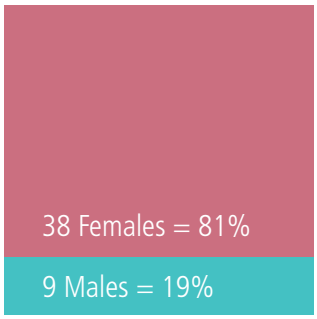


Figure 6: Gender of Participants

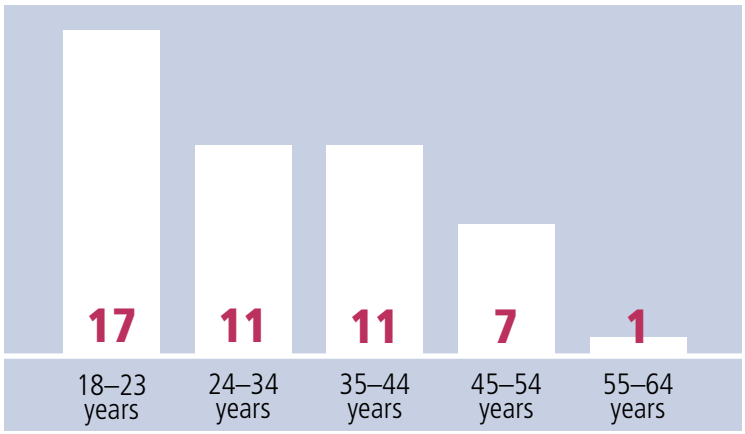


Figure 7: Age of Participants

As illustrated by Figure 7 above, the majority of the survey participants were mature students (64%) with 30 of the 47 participants being over the age of 23. This indicates that mature students are more likely to receive the bursary award. Mature students also dominated in the interview cohort, with fourteen out of fifteen (93%) of the interview participants being over the age of 23.

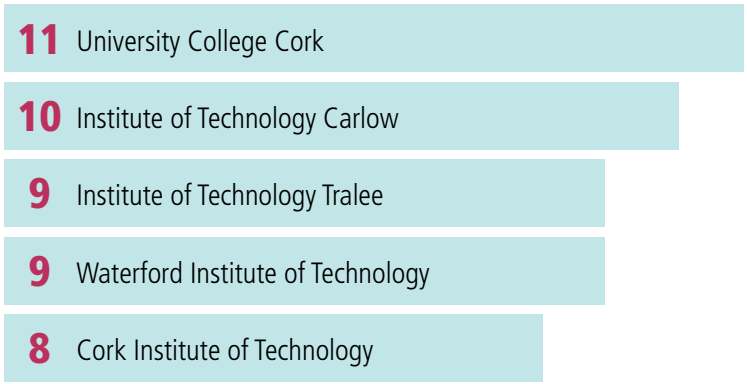


Figure 8: Institutions Attended by Participants

As Figure 8 demonstrates, survey participants were widely distributed across the five institutions in the South Cluster, ranging from 11 participants attending UCC to 8 students attending CIT. Topics studied by participants are illustrated in Figure 9 below, which indicates that the majority of survey participants were undertaking studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences (N=19) or Business and Law (N=14).

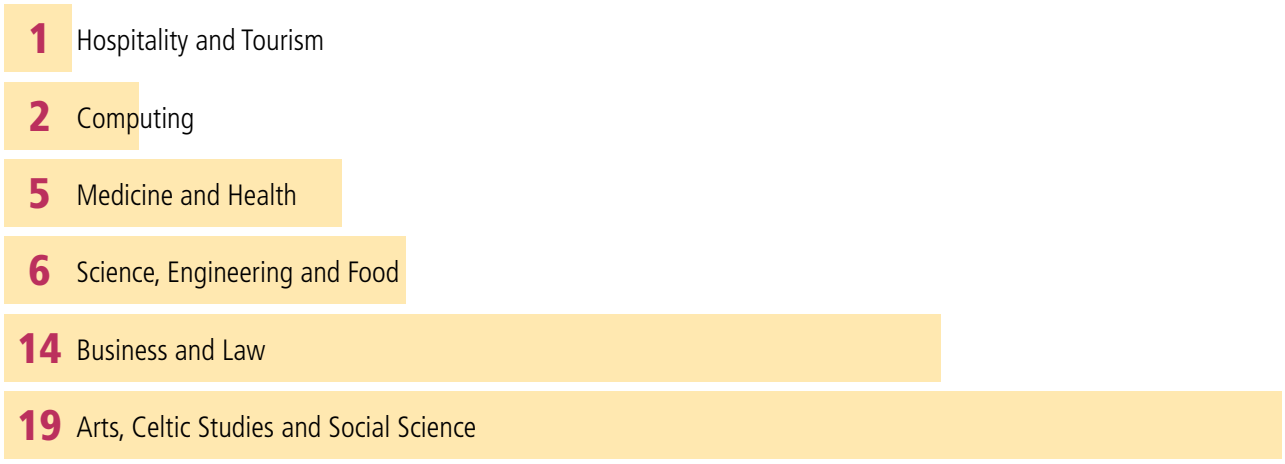


Figure 9: Areas Studied by Participants

3.3 Socio-Economic Profiling of 1916 Bursary Awardees

While this research only captures a snapshot of the vulnerabilities experienced by the 1916 Bursary Fund awardees, it does highlight how multiple disadvantages intersect to compound inequality (Crenshaw, 1989). Figures 10 and 11 (page 22) illustrate the number of target groups which were applicable to each survey participant and underscore the range of disadvantages they experienced. The data collected during the interviews revealed that some participants experienced trauma; adverse childhood experiences (ACE) (Felitti et al., 1998); domestic abuse; homelessness; mental health issues and/or abject

poverty. Despite these vulnerabilities, they draw on a wealth of dispositions and capital to support their perseverance and engagement in higher education. However, the impact of these disadvantages on their experiences of transitioning to and navigating higher education cannot be underestimated.

Figure 10: Number of Participants in Each Target Group

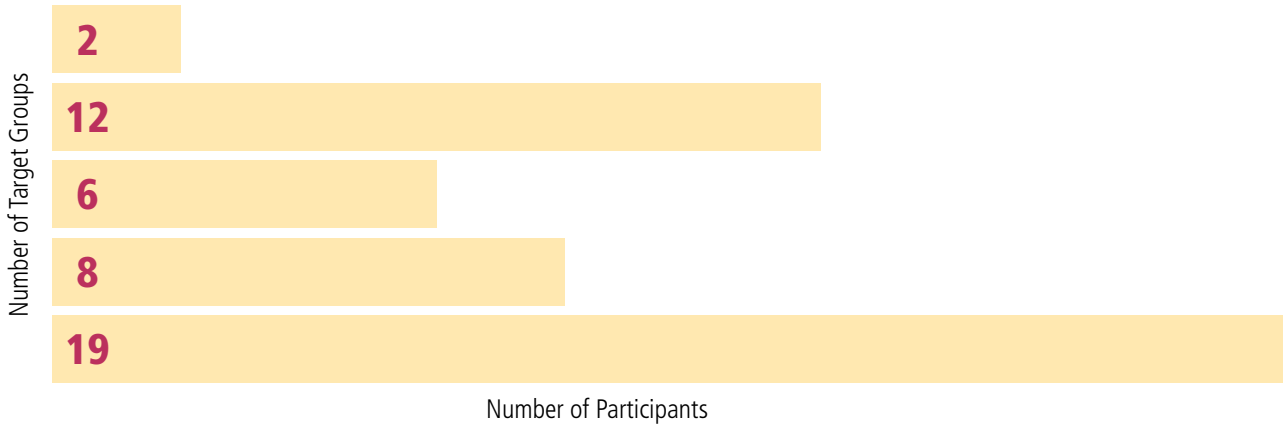


Figure 11: Number of Target Groups Applicable to Participants

Bourdieu's (1979) concept of habitus is useful in understanding both the challenges and enablers that shape the participants' negotiation of their higher education journeys. Habitus refers to the habits, skills and dispositions that we embody and which we unconsciously learn or acquire through our life experiences. These habits, skills and dispositions are referred to as cultural capital and are shaped by our class-based experiences. Thus, the habitus is an embodiment of cultural capital or set of 'dispositions

characteristic of the different classes and class fractions' (Bourdieu, 1979: 6). Bourdieu believed that cultural capital was either 'inherited from the family or acquired in school' (1984: 13). Those who have inherited the knowledge of the dominant middle- and upper-class culture easily adapt to the educational environment which mirrors these values. Those who are not born into families who possess this knowledge are deemed 'disadvantaged' (Yosso, 2005: 70). It is acknowledged that parents without experience of higher education are less equipped to contribute to their children's development of such cultural capital. Logistically, socio-economically challenged parents and families do not have the experiential means to prepare their children for higher education, nor the economic capital to reside in localities that would reduce their accommodation and transport costs relative to attending higher education institutions (Lynch and Moran, 2006). However, this report views the cultural capital of first-generation students as different rather than insufficient (Devlin, 2013; Thomas and Quinn, 2007). The data from this research underscores the structural lack of choice around attending higher education experienced in many low-income households and challenges deficit-based understandings, which focus on individual decision-making without reference to the wider prevailing circumstances of the family.

The analysis of the experiences of the 1916 Bursary awardees below is informed by Yosso's (2005) cultural wealth framework, which identifies six different forms of capital: aspirational; linguistic; familial; social; navigational; and resistant. Concepts of economic capital as posited by Bourdieu (1986) are also integrated. Economic capital is defined in the context of this research as monetary resources needed to access higher education. As the focus of this report is on the 1916 Bursary Fund and the financial contribution it makes to the educational costs faced by awardees, economic capital is most salient to this discussion and is a primary focus. Historically, concepts of cultural and social capital have been used to position economically and socially disadvantaged students as lacking capacity to navigate and commit to higher education programmes (Devlin, 2013; O'Shea et al., 2016). This research deploys a strengths-based approach, balanced by a recognition of the economic capital deficit that these students have to overcome.

3.4 Transition to Higher Education for Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Cohorts: Aspirations, Motivations, Strengths and Challenges

Economic Capital

Economic capital is defined as a financial resource that can be drawn upon to navigate a cultural space (Bourdieu, 1986). All students who pursue higher education need a certain amount of economic capital, which typically is not a meagre sum of monetary resources.

Economic capital will be required for registration fees, books, laptops, equipment and other expenses directly related to attending higher education. The data from this research found that basic living expenses such as accommodation, heating, food, clothing, childcare and healthcare are necessary to support participation in higher education. Calculations of the economic cost of participation in higher education must acknowledge that for many students, particularly mature students, a wide array of economic needs have to be met. Insufficient economic capital among socio-economically challenged students is associated with reduced engagement and early withdrawal (McKay and Devlin, 2014; Thomas and Quinn, 2007). The data from participants in this research are consistent with this finding, as illustrated by the quotes.

> *'If it wasn't for the bursary, I wouldn't be able to go to college as my condition is too bad to travel long distances.'* (Quote from Female; Disability)

> *'I don't think I would afford to keep up with college if it wasn't for the fund.'* (Quote from Female: Socio-economic group that has low participation rates in higher education; Lone Parent; First-time mature entrant; QQI entrant)

Cultural and Navigational Capital

It is widely recognised that early intervention is crucial if equity of access to higher education is to be achieved for children from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds (HEA, 2015; Bleach, 2013; Heckman, 2006; Start Strong, 2011). Research suggests that first-generation or 'first-in-family' students are particularly vulnerable due to the limited academic preparedness (Thayer, 2000) and lack of family support to help guide them through the hidden curriculum of tertiary education (Harrell and Forney, 2003). As Figure 12 below indicates, 43% (N=20) of the survey participants were first-generation students, and only 13% (N=6) had a parent who had attended higher education. No information was available for two participants.

Transitioning to higher education can be a daunting experience. However, students from under-represented groups can encounter additional uncertainty due to lower levels of

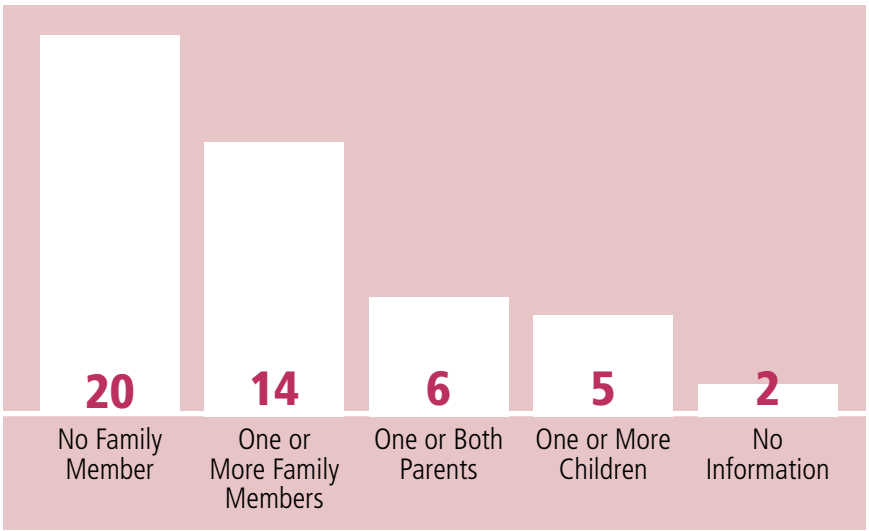


Figure 12: Family History of Attending Higher Education

academic preparedness (Thayer, 2000). According to Bourdieu, the possessors of the dominant cultural capital 'enjoy the dual-title to cultural nobility, the self-assurance and the ease given by familiarity' (1984: 81). Thus, students who possess the cultural capital of the dominant culture feel more at ease within higher education compared to those who do not. Recent research in accessing higher education in Ireland found that students from higher socio-economic backgrounds 'display few anxieties about their suitability or entitlement to participate [in higher education]' (Fleming, 2013: 37).

Many first-generation students, however, experience 'feeling like "a fish out of water" due to the institutional habitus' (Fleming and Finnegan, 2014: 53). Reay et al. (2001: 2) developed the concept of institutional habitus to refer to 'the impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual's behaviour as it is mediated through an organisation'. Institutional habitus refers to the way schools 'convey particular views of higher education to students' (Smyth and Banks, 2012: 265). First-generation students are more reliant on their schools for information on pathways to higher education than their higher socio-economic counterparts and therefore the school's aspirations for its pupils can significantly impact on their progression in education. Research has found that students who are 'written off' by the education system may not have the navigational capacity to access higher education (Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Willis, 1977; Smyth and Banks, 2012; Smyth and McCoy, 2009). According to Yosso (2015: 80), navigational capital 'refers to the skills of manoeuvring through social institutions'. Interestingly, a majority of 55% (N=26) of the survey participants in this research did not attend DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools)[11] post-primary schools. Only 19% (N=9) indicated that they attended DEIS schools with 26% (N=12) being unsure if their school had a DEIS categorisation. These figures are consistent with the DEIS school attendance rates experienced by the overall cohort of bursary awardees for 2017/18 and 2018/19 (see Figure 13 below). Of the 70

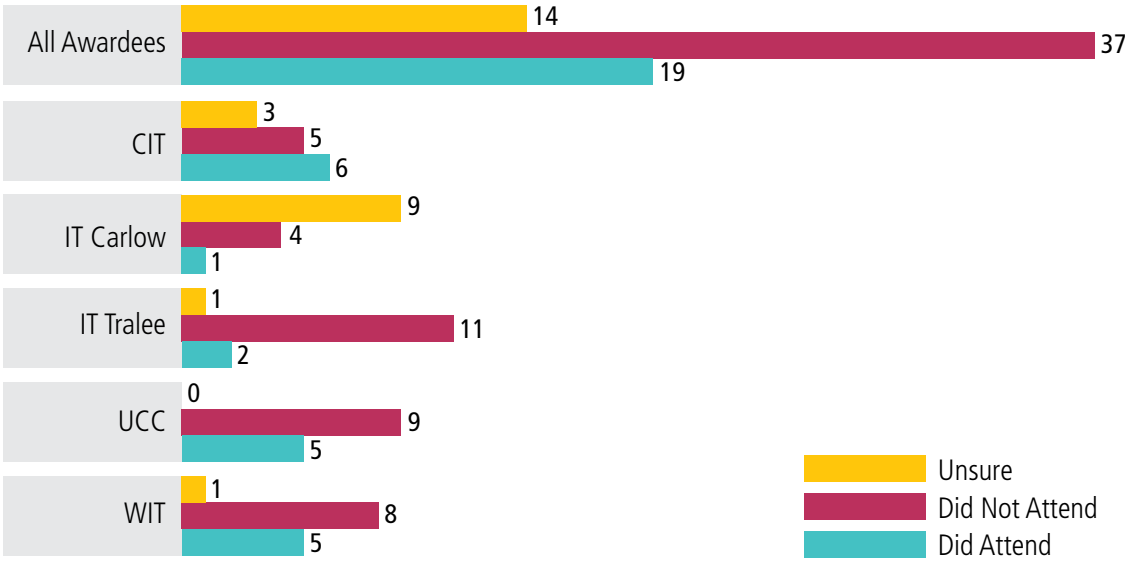


Figure 13: Awardee Attendance at DEIS Second-Level

11. Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) is an initiative of the Department of Education and Skills aimed at lessening educational disadvantage and bringing about social inclusion in primary- and second-level education.

awardees, 27% (N=19) reported attending a DEIS school, 53% (N=37) did not attend a DEIS school and 20% (N=14) were unsure if their school had a DEIS designation of not. The low number of bursary awardees attending DEIS schools highlights the need for all schools, and not just DEIS schools, to be included in initiatives to provide students with the information they need to access funding to progress into higher education.

During interviews, participants spoke about their experiences of attending post-primary school. Some spoke very positively about individual teachers within their school who actively supported their progression:

> *'The teachers, I would say, I don't think you'd find any other people like them in this world … they're really kind, really helpful and always tried to push me a little bit to get things done and maybe a little after school and all that. Like, I remember one of the teachers … he actually spent his break and during Irish time, which I don't do, letting me do an extra class and I was able to do an extra subject in construction that way.'* (Quote from Male; Ethnic minority)

However, a number of first-time mature entrants spoke of living in fear of the teacher and the cane:

> *'I just didn't like to go in there because of the environment and it was like fifteen or twenty years ago and it was very strict … They were still used to punishment when I went.'* (Quote from Female; First-time mature entrant)

> *'And we had the corporal punishment and all that and we had teachers behind constantly and we'd be left outside. Not just me, I had to see physical abuse with other students. School was not a very good experience, mainly because of how teachers were, and I was a quiet child, you know. Just horrible experiences.'* (Quote from Female; First-time mature entrant; Ethnic minority)

Other mature students spoke about the difficulty of having to navigate teachers' preconceived ideas about social class and ability and indeed the prevailing expectations among peers about what was possible for them to achieve academically:

> *'I remember being out with a kidney infection when I was doing my Junior Certificate, and my history teacher pulled me aside and said, "I think you should do pass now, you've been out for a week and I don't think you'll be able for the honours." And there had actually been a particular girl from the country, a lovely girl but she's been out for 3 weeks and was really sick in hospital and had gotten her appendix out at the time, but never a word was said to her … it was attached to the fact that I came from town and my dad was unemployed.'* (Quote from Female; First-time mature entrant)

'I suppose from my town … especially for males, would have mostly and literally gone into trades and I suppose from my experience that majority of those guys, the system of … like Leaving Cert, like six subjects, just wouldn't have been their forte.' (Quote from Male; Socio-economic group that has low participation rates in higher education)

Aspirational Capital

Despite previous experience in school, the data from the online survey revealed that 68% of participants had always aspired to transition to higher education, which is a testimony to their aspirational capital (see Figure 14).

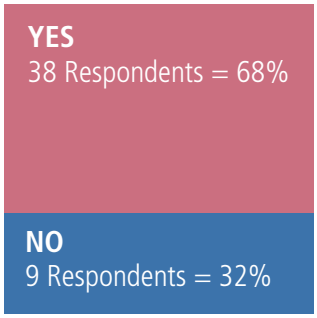


Figure 14: Aspirations to Transition to Higher Education

According to Yosso (2005: 78), aspirational capital is the ability 'to dream of possibilities beyond … present circumstances, often without the objective means to attain those goals'. Most of the participants from this research were unaware of the 1916 Bursary Fund prior to starting college, which would suggest that the prospects of this additional financial support did not influence their decision to enter higher education. Participants' motivations for attending higher education were complex and varied. Some were motivated by the prospects of becoming financially independent, which they believed was only possible with educational credentials. Others talked about the desire to provide better opportunities for their children and to break intergenerational cycles of disadvantage within their family. However, all participants felt they were investing in themselves to reach their full potential. Reasons identified by interview participants for wanting to access higher education included:

'… to get more knowledge, education is knowledge [but] also to be independent'. (Quote from Female; First-time mature entrant)

'I knew I wanted to get a good job and I really like learning anyway so it's the next step. I want to keep learning. It was the answer, I suppose, to get a good job.' (Quote from Female; Disability)

'It really made [son] going to school for me to realise maybe I should have an education … I have my Leaving Cert, but a good higher-level education.' (Quote from Female; First-time mature entrant; Lone parent)

'I felt it was time for me, you know, I spent from the age of 16 up … really putting everything into them [children] and have their needs got. And I thought the best way now is to invest in me, invest in my knowledge or gaining my knowledge, shall I say. Because that's going to open doors for me which will in turn hopefully open doors for them; it will also break cycles in my family.' (Quote from Female; First-time mature entrant; Lone parent)

'I want to attend college so I can take care of my kids and be off the … you know. At the moment, I'm being taken care of by the state.' (Quote from Female; First-time mature entrant; Lone parent)

Familial and Social Capital

Transitioning to higher education can cause personal and familial strain as students from under-represented groups find it difficult to acculturate to a new environment (O'Shea, 2015). Couvillion-Landry (2003) notes that students from under-represented groups try 'to live simultaneously in both worlds while being accepted in neither' (cited in O'Shea, 2015: 502). For some participants (34%), the transition to higher education had initially been a source of conflict within their nuclear or wider family (see Figure 15). This is understandable when individuals follow trajectories which are different to those to which they or their families are accustomed. For example, if the traditional family trajectory involved transitioning from school to the workforce or to raising children at home, entry into higher education may be experienced as disconcerting both by the individual and their family.

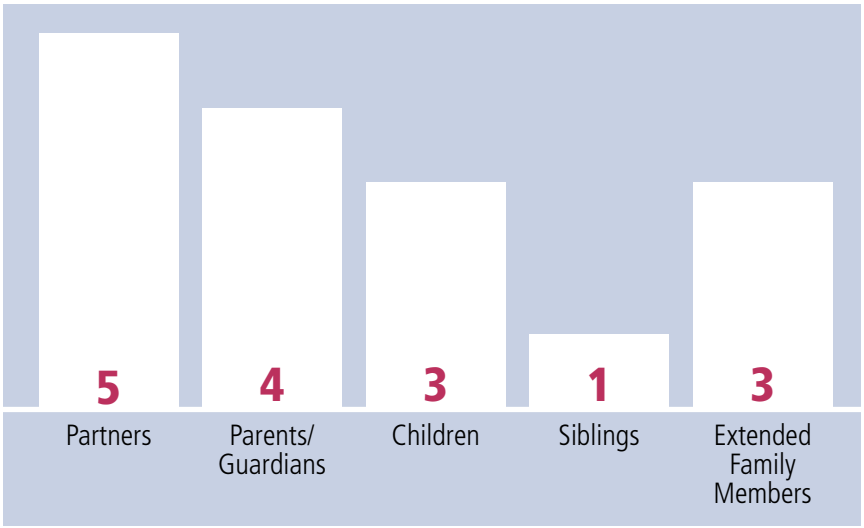


Figure 15: Family Conflict due to Transitioning to Higher Education

As time progressed, 43% of participants believed their engagement in higher education had inspired family members. A further 23% stated that other family members had subsequently enrolled in college. 13% of participants had children who attend/attended college. Despite not having experiential knowledge of the culture of higher education, some participants credited family members for supporting their educational journey. Yosso (2005) refers to the support given by family members as 'familial capital' and contends that this strength provides the inspiration and motivation to continue in education.

'I've gone through trauma on a personal basis with my parents or the lack of … I suppose it's been a tale of being self-driven and having grandparents there that are just unbelievable. They laid the groundwork, they gave me the freedom to become

myself, there were no boundaries.' (Quote from Male; Socio-economic group that has low participation rates in higher education)

'My mam and dad … my mam was a big worker, my mam had 3 jobs, my dad suffered from his mental health an awful lot of his life but would have strived for us to definitely stay in school and stuff like that.' (Quote from Female; Lone parent; First-time mature entrant)

For instrumental support, many participants were able to identify a 'mentor' within the community who had supported and guided their pathway into higher education, a resource that Yosso (2005) terms social capital. According to Yosso, social capital 'can be understood as networks of people and community resources … that provide both instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society's institutions' (2005: 79).

'We have a counsellor in [name of college]. I told the counsellor what I would like to do, she just gave me a guideline [on what to do].' (Quote from Female; First-time mature entrant; Lone parent; Ethnic minority)

'But if I don't have the counsellor in the Adult Centre, I wouldn't be here.' (Quote from Female; First-time mature entrant)

'A friend of mine, she actually talked me into going back to education. She did a course, she's now a teacher.' (Quote from Female; First-time mature entrant)

'In 2015–16 I was living in [name of centre], that's one of the direct provision centres, and while I was there, I got the opportunity to attend English classes which were run by [name of organisation] in the city. So, that was good and then one of the teachers encouraged me to apply for post Leaving Cert course … so I applied in [name of college] and I did Applied Sciences course. And then, after that I did the CAO.' (Quote from Female; First-time mature entrant; Ethnic minority)

3.5 Concerns and Anxieties about Transitioning to Higher Education

Due to the high percentage of participants (62%) who were parents (see Figure 16 below), it is not surprising that availability and cost of childcare was one of the main concerns that participants had prior to starting college. Other concerns included academic ability, educational gap, age, meeting new people, language and speech difficulties, lectures, time management, maintaining mental health, and financial resources.

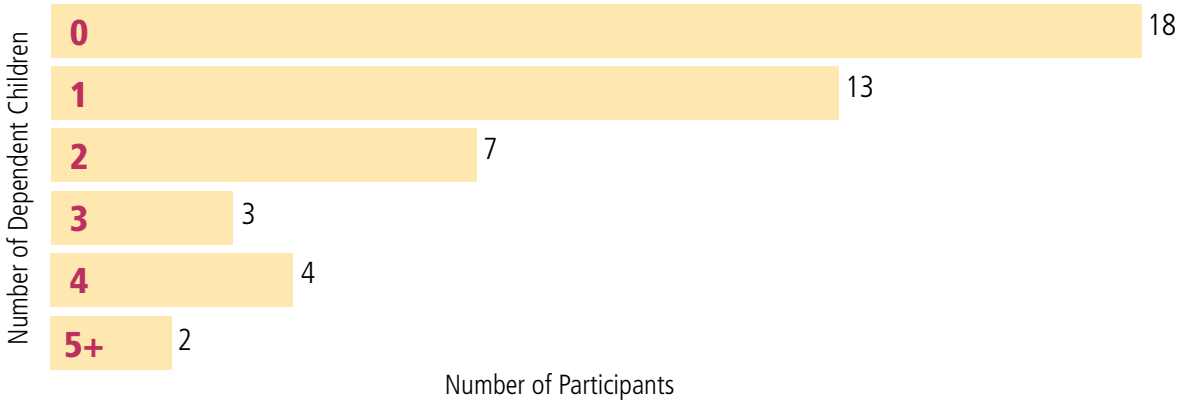


Figure 16: Number of Dependent Children per Participant

The range of concerns around entering and participating in higher education are illustrated by the following quotes:

> *'The biggest concern would be finance, for definite.'* (Quote from Female; First-time mature entrant; Lone parent)

> 'I had concerns about my children, who will look after them?' (Quote from (Female; First-time mature entrant; Lone parent; Ethnic minority; QQI entrant)

> *'It's nerve-wracking enough thinking about coming into a class again, and then coming into a class and knowing that you are the oldest person in that room.'* (Quote from Female; First-time mature entrant; Lone parent; Socio-economic group that has low participation rates in higher education)

> *'… I was thinking of my age and how I'm going to cope with the small kids and speaking in general, here and in class, I can't say certain words.'* (Quote from Female; First-time mature entrant; Lone parent)

Transitioning to higher education can be difficult for anyone, students from under-represented groups can find that 'relatively small issues can be exaggerated' (O'Shea, 2015: 509). As the data above indicates, participants in this research were able to draw

on personal strength to persist despite adversity. The data illustrates a cohort of students who have the 'ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers' (Yosso, 2015: 77). Mapping their experiences onto the various dimensions of capital identified by Yosso (2015) provides a productive framework for understanding the strengths that under-represented students call on, the challenges they face and the ways in which Access Practitioners can enable their transition to higher education.

3.6 The 1916 Bursary Fund Application Process

The majority of the 1916 Bursary awardees found the application process straightforward. It should be acknowledged, however, that this perception may be biased as a result of their experience of successfully securing a bursary. A small minority of participants required support to complete the application form and others found it difficult to detail their circumstances in the required personal statement:

> *'Oh my god the personal statement, that was the hardest thing to do because you know? I'm not very good at talking about myself so I found that a little bit difficult.'* (Quote from Female; First-time mature student entrant; Lone parent; Socio-economic group that has low participation rates in higher education)

> *'It was really long and hard.'* (Quote from Female; Ethnic minority; Lone parent; First-time mature student entrant)

> *'I was a bit worried putting all of my personal stuff in there, bits at home and bits of struggling mentally.'* (Quote from Female; Disability)

Given the data above indicating that some successful applicants experienced challenges with the application process, it was decided to conduct a case study interview with an unsuccessful applicant to explore their experience of the application process. The case study indicated that experiences of trauma can impact on an applicant's ability to convey the details of their adversity:

> *'OK, maybe the thing I would like to say is maybe when people apply for stuff like this – because some people when they are talking they don't like to say everything. Like even myself I didn't want to say everything. I kind of didn't want to go deep – I just summarised everything in the essays that I wrote.'* (Quote from Male; Ethnic minority; Unsuccessful applicant)

3.7 The 1916 Bursary Fund Analysis of Impact: The Perspective of Awardees

The data from this research indicates the extensive economic challenges participants experienced as they entered and progressed through higher education. The impact the 1916 Bursary Fund made on the lives of awardees was shaped by the particular circumstances of each individual. However, it was consistently evident across the data set that all participants were experiencing pervasive economic hardship. Some participants experienced extremely precarious economic situations. Impending homelessness, lack of household essentials and food poverty were identified in some narratives. For one participant, the 1916 Bursary Fund was transformative in terms of enabling access to stable accommodation and basic household equipment. The pervasive nature of the economic disadvantage experienced by participants meant that despite the key support the 1916 Bursary Fund provided, they continued to experience financial precarity, and had to find other income sources to supplement the bursary. Given that many of the awardees were in receipt of either the Back to Education Allowance or the SUSI grant, and that the 2018/19 cohort received the SUSI special rate,[12] it is significant that they were using the 1916 Bursary Fund to meet basic living costs. This highlights the inadequacy of existing student financial supports to meet the true costs of participating in higher education. Moreover, these findings suggest that those students who were eligible for the 1916 Bursary but did not receive it are most likely experiencing ongoing financial difficulties. The following quotes from awardees provide some insights into the impact of the 1916 Bursary Fund on their financial situations:

> *'I was able to purchase a mattress with one, lots of things that I needed in my house. I was able to get winter clothing and boots and jackets, so … I had been in a situation when I was going to be homeless and I didn't know how … even for a month of two find somewhere, I know that have that now.'* (Quote from Female; Ethnic minority; Disability)

> *'Like last year, (Access Services) gave me vouchers for shopping because I couldn't afford my shopping. My car broke down 2 weeks ago and I freaked out so there is an option that if I am stuck that I know I'll get a bit of food.'* (Quote from Female; Disability)

> *'It greatly helped when it came to buying stuff for college and also being able to put food in the fridge in order for me to make lunches for myself in college.'* (Quote from Male; Socio-economic group that has low participation rates in higher education; First-time mature entrant)

12. There is a special rate provided by SUSI for students with very low incomes and extenuating circumstances. See https://susi.ie/quick-links/special-rate-awards/

'It helped me pay for somewhere safe and secure to live.' (Quote from Female;Socio-economic group that has low participation rates in higher education; Disability)

The tenacity and budgetary acumen demonstrated by awardees in trying to meet financial obligations was clearly evident in the data:

'I have notebook where I … every euro I spend, I have to write that down because I count them …. There is difficulty with the rent because my rent is €700 and it has to be less.' (Quote from Female; Lone parent; Disability)

'Before Christmas, like, I had to go to SVP to borrow a bit of money for oil and that because it's just a crazy time of year. But just being able to … like, I've a little bit of money put aside.' (Quote from Female; Lone parent; First-time mature entrant)

The psychological and emotional impact of continuously struggling to make ends meet also emerged starkly in the data. Unsurprisingly, some participants reported becoming overwhelmed and emotional when they heard they had been granted the bursary:

'I honestly think that the bursary helped me immensely, I mean really, I don't think I could continue without it, I really genuinely mean that. I cried … I couldn't believe how lucky I was really and I still can't believe it, it is amazing, it really is … when you're hand to mouth, there is nothing spare and there have been times where I've had 16 cents in my bank account. And I'm not joking. It's like it's huge, unbelievably huge. I'm very grateful and just wish more people would benefit.'
(Quote from Female; First-time mature entrant; Lone parent)

In some cases, the 1916 Bursary Fund, in addition to enabling transition to higher education for the awardee, had a transformative trickle-down effect in terms of supporting wider family networks and improving the likelihood that younger siblings might access higher education. This is an important finding as Access students are often required to contribute to the household income as opposed to simply be supported by it. Ability to do so can be a deciding factor in accessing or remaining in higher education:

'Once I was awarded the bursary, it genuinely did lift so much weight off my shoulders …. And also lifted my confidence … I'm from a street, my dad was unemployed, I'm an early school-leaver, I'm a teenage mother, I've seen and had mental illness within my family, but here I am. And that's my learning that I'll pass on. So, when I got the phone call for the bursary it saved me and my family. And it allowed me to continue my path to education.' (Quote from Female; First-time mature entrant; Lone parent)

'The 1916 Bursary is helping me a lot to focus on study rather than focusing on work …. It broke a lot of barriers for me, such as financial barriers, and my parents won't have to worry about my college fees or stuff I have to buy …. Our course does

have to buy a lot of equipment, electronic kits and all of them, it's been very helpful. Finance would be the main one cause [of concern for] my mum and there are other people in my house as well, four other sisters and one brother. I think because of that, they don't need to worry about me anymore. They can get a bit of help [from me] as well financially, school trips and all of that. Save money, because back when I was in [name of school], I wasn't allowed to go to any of the school trips because they wouldn't have enough money to pay the rent and all that, and then school trips.' (Quote from Male; Ethnic minority)

In another case, the 1916 Bursary Fund provided a financial safety net and the means for continued educational engagement, for an individual who experienced diminished financial support from his wider family:

'My grandad [and carer] was sick in September in 2018, he died that Christmas. So, that was crucial, as regards to the bursary now because he was the head of household and finances … there was an agreement made between his sons and daughters to finance me until I was on stable footing but that was never really set in stone and then when I realised my aunt who was in charge of that wasn't forthcoming with the finances, I had to assess different options and how I could [continue in college]. Like the bursary combined with my SUSI grant, it's the way that I function. It's the one thing that's allowing me to pursue my career path. And pursue a life for myself, that's how important it is.' (Quote from Male; Socio-economic group that has low participation rates in higher education)

The impact of the 1916 Bursary Fund in terms of increasing aspirational capital at community level was articulated by one participant, who highlighted that the award not only supported her individual journey, but also inspired her to become an educational role model for other members of her community. In this regard, participants in this research have acted as role models for their communities:

'Well, [the bursary has] given me the confidence to know that I do have that financial stability that I don't have to opt now in third year to get a job. It has now opened up the pathway to me to keep moving forward academically as high as I can climb. 100% hope so, anyway. It's given me the confidence to go out into my community and say education is not there to be intimidating to you, it's there to open up access for you.' (Quote from Female; First-time mature entrant; Lone parent)

3.8 Impact of the 1916 Bursary Fund on Participation and Engagement in College Life

The 1916 Bursary Fund had a direct positive impact on participation and engagement in college life. Figure 17 below indicates that the majority (percentage) of the survey participants reported that their college experience was greatly improved by receipt of the 1916 Bursary Fund. Respondents were asked to rate their experience on a scale of 1 to 5. 81% (38 respondents) rated their college experience as being 5 (greatly improved), 11% rated their experience as 4, and 8% rated their experience as 3.

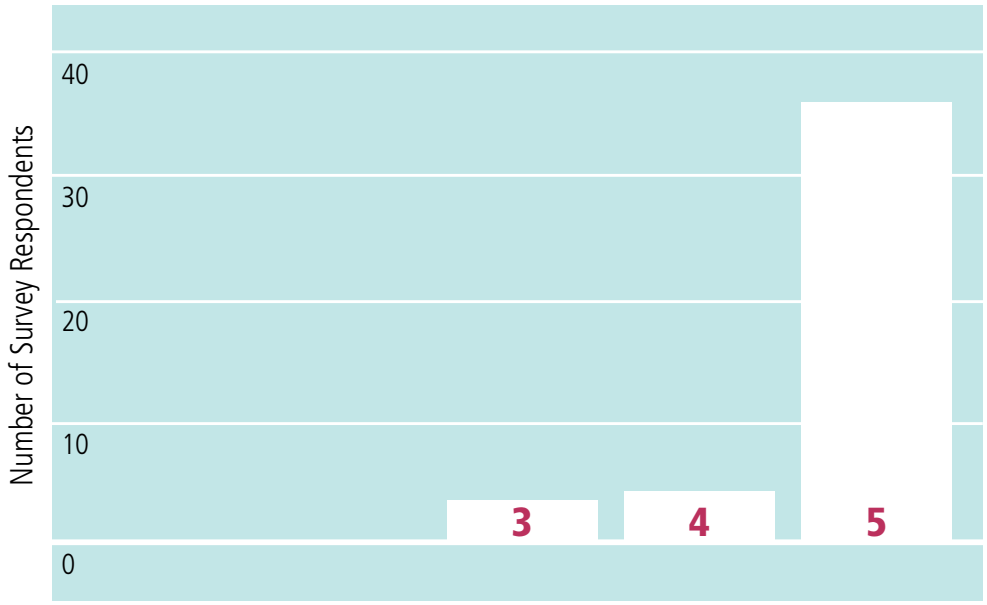


Figure 17: Impact of the 1916 Bursary on College Experience

The financial assistance provided by the 1916 Bursary Fund enabled some participants to focus on college, rather than taking extra hours at their jobs to pay for basic living costs such as rent. Others used the funding to purchase additional tutoring, laptops or computers, which directly impacted on their participation and engagement in classes and college activities:

> *'I was able to get the tutoring I needed from staff to make certain subjects understandable.'* (Quote from Female; Lone parent)

> *'It helps me do college activities and improve health instead of working.'* (Quote from Male; Ethnic minority)

> *'It made a big difference to my grades as I did not have to work so much and had more time to study.'* (Quote from Female; Socio-economic group that has low participation rates in higher education; Lone parent; First-time mature entrant; QQI entrant)

> *'It gave me opportunity to buy computer and improve my studies by using it.'* (Quote from Female; Lone parent)

As indicated by the quote below from the survey data, one participant used the bursary to pay for medical treatment, which was significant in scaffolding her college engagement.

> *'It has allowed me to experience more in college, taken away a huge financial burden but has also improved my quality of life as I have been able to afford better treatments for my different medical issues such as insomnia and depression.'* (Quote from Female; Socio-economic group that has low participation rates in higher education; Disability; Lone parent)

The data from this research indicates that 34% of participants had joined a social club in college, with most claiming to have 'no time' to do so. This raises questions about whether the participants had lower levels of social engagement than the wider higher education student cohort. The Union of Students in Ireland (USI) published data in 2019 which found that 51.4% of the general student population engaged with social activities in college (Price and Smith, 2019). Without comparative data relating to the experiences of non-socioeconomically challenged students, it is not possible to say whether these figures indicate similar or different levels of engagement in college life. However, it is very possible that reduced economic capital may result in a difference between the lifestyles of socio-economically challenged students and the lifestyles of others (Jarness, 2015). Data from the survey found that just over half of participants (51%) knew another student in the college and that 55% found it easy or very easy to make connections with their classmates. However, only 25% regularly socialised with their classmates outside of the campus. Without comparative data relating to the experiences of non-socioeconomically challenged students, it is not possible to say whether these figures represent similar or different levels of engagement with classmates outside of campus.

According to Eccles (2009), emotional engagement in an educational context refers to identification with school and a sense of school belonging. One participant attributed being awarded the 1916 Bursary Fund as contributing to her sense of belonging in the higher education space:

> *'I could feel that I am not alone, that someone needs us and thinks about us.'* (Quote from Female; Socio-economic group that has low participation rates in higher education; Lone parent; QQI entrant; Ethnic minority)

3.9 Retention/Progression and Engagement with Supports

Higher Education Access programmes attempt to pre-empt challenges and issues that may arise during the students' journey and to implement good practices and supports that will promote desirable transitions and engagement. The majority of the participants (91%) found the support from Access Practitioners exceeded their expectations. As Figure 18 below shows, students availed of an extensive and varied range of supports from Access Services.

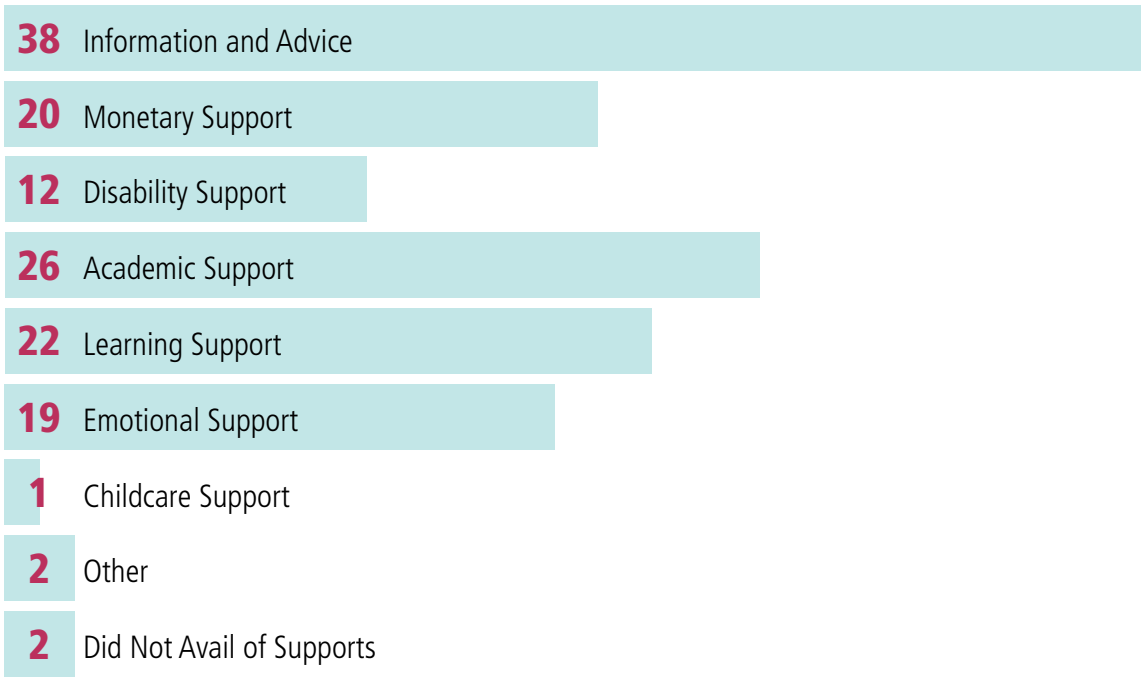


Figure 18: Support Survey Respondents Availed of from Access Services

Retention and progression indicators are very positive amongst awardees. 11 of the 2017/18 1916 Bursary awardees have now completed and exited their chosen course. 15 awardees are still in the process of completing their course while 7 have completed their initial course and progressed to a Level 7 or Level 8 course. 4 of the Awardees have deferred their course until a later date. 29 of the 2018/19 1916 Bursary awardees are still in the process of completing their courses. 5 have deferred their course and one student has exited college without completing her/his course.

3.10 Retention/Progression and Engagement with Supports

Many participants were vocal in expressing how the 1916 Bursary Fund incentivised them to continue their studies to the next stage and to succeed academically. The data demonstrates that the 1916 Bursary Fund gave hope to some participants and counteracted lived experiences of exclusion and lack of opportunity. This sense of hope and aspiration for a better future extended to the children and families of some of the participants, who felt that they were now positioned to role model a pathway out of poverty:

> *'It gives me an extra push to succeed.'* (Quote from Male; Irish Traveller; Socio-economic group that has low participation rates in higher education; First-time mature entrant; QQI entrant)

> *'It gave incentive to advance to the next year.'* (Quote from Male; Socio-economic group that has low participation rates in higher education)

> *'I am very positive since I'm given an opportunity of 1916 Bursary Funds because I feel I have a chance to study one more year after higher cert in business law and finish bachelor if I get the same support so basically it encouraged me to move on with my study.'* (Quote from Female; Lone parent)

> *'I cried tears of happiness because it's given us a chance of any real future and I am now a positive role model for [my children]. They're talking about finishing school and going to college and not going on the social, which is lovely to hear.'* (Quote from Female; Socio-economic group that has low participation rates in higher education; Lone parent; First-time mature entrant; QQI entrant)

The 1916 Bursary has clearly raised the aspirations of many participants, with some participants, who indicated that they were planning to progress to postgraduate study after completing their three-year undergraduate degree, believing that the 1916 Bursary Fund would cover their fourth year in higher education. Unfortunately, at the time of data collection the 1916 Bursary only covered undergraduate courses. However, this is currently being reconsidered by the HEA. If the bursary award does not seamlessly extend to cover postgraduate studies, many students will inevitably face further financial challenges to continuing their studies.

For other participants, academic success was measured in terms of the increased socio-economic opportunities that would arise from achieving third-level credentials.

> *'Just be successful, find a job … Just find some job that is suitable for me. [Become] financially independent. No poverty.'* (Quote from Female; Mature student; Lone parent)

'Well, I really want to successfully get through the course and graduate and then get a good job out of it. And then just to be able to move on with my life. Rather than being in a situation where one minute you might be homeless, you don't know where you're going, so I want to be in control of my life.' (Quote from Female; Mature student; Ethnic minority)

'Well, I'd kind of like to ideally buy my own house. Just be able to provide for my son.' (Quote from Female; Mature student; Lone parent)

'I wanted to have more choice and scope and to get out and work.' (Quote from Female; Mature student; Lone parent)

As the quotes below indicate, some participants reported concerns about the challenges of building social networks and creating links to the job market. A need for support with job applications and with development of career pathways was identified. One student believed that the limited nature of his social networks would hinder his employment opportunities and felt that work experience would support his transition to the workplace. Another participant felt that interview skills would be useful, as a job interview is another daunting hurdle to surmount while transitioning into the job market:

'Maybe how to get into work experience because I don't know how to apply for all of this stuff. I do try to ask lecturers but they kind of all say the same kind of route all the time. Well, there are other ways, but I wouldn't know much people in this industry that would help me get in there. When I finish college, I would say I would need a lot of help to get into a job.' (Quote from Male; Ethnic minority)

'Well, I suppose job interviews, I don't know if that ties in with it but it was a totally different world when I started out, so it's all changed. So, something like that I'd feel I need to work on. Maybe a little bit more assertive, I think I have got a bit more confidence since coming here.' (Quote from Female; Mature student)

'Maybe something like even applying for master's and stuff, that would help. Or even job-finding or skills to get into the workplace. Cause I know a lot of people with disabilities would find it hard getting into the workplace. So even just a course like that, like questions you should ask, that would be helpful.' (Quote from Female; Mature student; Disability)

3.11 Unsuccessful Applicants to the 1916 Bursary Fund: A Case Study

The levels of adversity and poverty that successful applicants continued to experience raises questions about how unsuccessful applicants who met the criteria for disadvantage and exclusion cope with navigating college life and meeting the costs of living. A case study interview with one such unsuccessful applicant (a male from an ethnic minority group) was conducted in January 2021. This individual's experiences provide an insightful snapshot of the reality of student life in this context and illustrate the importance of economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). The student was asked about his living conditions prior to applying for the 1916 Bursary Fund:

> *'Back in [name of county], we only have a two-bedroomed … and we are five in the house – I have two sisters – and I was 20 at that time. Now I am 21. My other sister was 18, one was 19, so I can't be sharing a room with them or anything and the kitchen and the sitting room – they are all together – so the house is really small, I can't do my online course or I can't study, I can't do anything, I need my own space. I am feeling like I have to move out. I don't work or anything and my mum – she doesn't speak English – and she has heart disease and my father is not feeling well as well and he is old as well so no-one is working in the house basically. Everyone is depending on social welfare. So I wanted to move out but I didn't know how to do it because I don't have any money. I talked to my parents and they said they know the situation and they cannot support me through that.'*

There were also indicators of trauma in his account of his life before coming to Ireland:

> *'So when I was in school, a civil war broke out in the country; so school stopped. After that I couldn't go to school anymore so I decided to work. So I was kind of working until … I was working and then from that now – because the country was turned into something else – so I didn't want to be on the street so I decide what do I want to do. I just joined a football team, an academy. So that was all I was doing until I came here now.'*

The participant described how he felt when he did not receive the 1916 Bursary award. His morale was affected and he lost confidence in the systems of support:

> *'I just applied for the thing and then I kind of opened myself and explained everything about when I … Like when they sent me an email and said I wasn't awarded and stuff – I went OK. They said I could appeal if I wanted to but I decided that I don't want to appeal because it is not like – I kind of need the money to get myself … I just need like help, you know.'*

The impact of not receiving the 1916 Bursary Fund and of surviving on the SUSI grant and the Student Assistance Fund at his institution was described as creating an existence of living 'hand to mouth'. The student described surviving on next to nothing, noting his efforts to borrow money and resultant feelings of hopelessness and thoughts of dropping out:

> *'I even decided I want to drop out because the money I have saved I put everything because I pay my course myself. I just registered myself, I paid everything myself – my transport, everything was on me, food and everything. My parents – I know if they had money, they would help me but they don't have it and I don't want to ask them because I know they don't have it. So I was just doing my own thing and, when I get my SUSI – that would last me just three weeks. Because my bus is €40 per week and I will eat and all that. So, every time I have to call my (parents) saying that can you send a €100 – I will give you like in two weeks. So when I get my SUSI, I give him his €100 straight. So every three weeks, I am out of money. I am saying that I don't want to be dependent on SUSI because it doesn't help me at all.'*

If this participant had been successful in receiving the 1916 Bursary Fund, he had planned to use it to cover basic living essentials:

> *'If I was awarded, the thing I was going to do – I was just going to come in here to the landlord here and just pay her the full … I was just going to pay her fully – that is the first thing I was going to do … I was just going to do my calculation – just plan everything – what I need to spend and what I need to put just in case of emergencies and stuff like that because, seriously, since I came to this country I am doing every time on my own even if I am not working. I do everything on my own. I don't get help from anyone. I only have one friend. When I told him can I borrow money from you – I will pay you like in a week's time – so he is the one who gives me and then I pay him after. So if I got [the bursary], it was going to help me because I kind of paid for my green card €300 on my own so like everything I get … If I get money – even the money I get from the HEI – I have to pay other stuff. Other stuff. I have to pay for food, I have to … you know.'*

When asked how not receiving the 1916 Bursary Fund had impacted on his experience of college life, the participant spoke about how his levels of concentration had dropped and he was consumed by stress about his financial circumstances:

> *'I have to think how I was going to pay the rent and how I am going to eat tomorrow or stuff like this. I have to think about college work, and I have to think how can I do good in this module. I was being so stressed, seriously. I was so stressed. Sometimes, I would have my laptop open, I am in class but my mind is not in class. I am just looking at the screen but I am not learning anything – I can't even see the image because I am thinking somewhere far.'*

The 'aspirational capital' (Yosso, 2015) described earlier in this report was also evident in this particular case. Despite the challenges this participant encountered, he retained his ambitions and remained resilient about achieving his dreams:

> *'So, I am like – this course, I have to take it and I just have to think about my opportunities, about what I want to do so I was thinking, after I get my Level 8, I was going to try and do my master's as well. And then I am just going to see if I could open my own gym or something like this – that is the plan – but to do all of these things I need money. So right now, I kind of wanted to save money but I took that money out to pay for rent.'*

3.12 Conclusion

Students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds come to higher education with a range of capital which helps sustain them. However, lack of economic capital puts severe strain on their capacities to continue in their studies. The 1916 Bursary Fund was very significant in addressing some of these challenges, but the mature student cohort who participated in this research experienced it as inadequate, with many students continuing to live in conditions of grave economic insecurity. The continued economic precarity experienced by many awardees draws into question the adequacy of the SUSI student support system and the Back to Education Allowance and underscores the need for a review of systems of student financial support. Students deemed eligible to apply for the 1916 Bursary Fund but who are unsuccessful in securing it face very severe barriers to continuing in education. Further research which considers their experiences is merited.

CHAPTER 4

Discussion and Recommendations

4.1 Introduction

This report presents a snapshot of the lives and experiences of the 2017/18 and 2018/19 1916 Bursary Fund awardees from across the South Cluster. Traditional literature on Access initiatives in higher education tends to frame students from under-represented groups through a deficit lens, constructing them as lacking cultural capital (O'Shea, 2015). In contrast, a strengths-based approach acknowledges and celebrates the cultural wealth that students from under-represented groups bring to the higher education space (Yosso, 2005). This report recognises and documents the cultural and aspirational capital that participants possess and build upon as they progress through their educational journey. It also demonstrates the grave challenges that limited economic capital creates in relation to higher education access, engagement and success.

4.2 Addressing Economic Precarity of Under-represented Groups

The data indicates that participants experienced extreme economic deprivation. Receipt of the 1916 Bursary Fund was highly impactful in assisting them to continue in higher education; however, many continued to experience systemic economic precarity despite this support. It is recognised that economic capital is 'the more flexible and convertible form of capital' (Lynch and Moran, 2006 p. 1). If the objective of the 1916 Bursary Fund is to make a significant contribution to eliminating financial barriers to education, the number of awards and the adequacy of the amount awarded merit serious and immediate review. This also suggests that the adequacy of the SUSI grant requires scrutiny. Additionally, despite lifting some financial barriers, the 1916 Bursary Fund caps progression by not seamlessly extending to cover postgraduate study. Up to 2020, awardees progressing to postgraduate study were required to re-apply for the 1916 Bursary Fund in open competition with all new applicants applying for the cluster allocation of bursaries. This uncertainty around continued financial support impedes the planning, selection and uptake of postgraduate study by awardees.

4.3 Embedding Targeted Access Initiatives within the Wider Access Service

This research highlights the intricate symbiotic relationship between targeted Access initiatives such as the 1916 Bursary Fund and the wider framework of supports provided by Access Practitioners in higher education. Participants' engagement with Access

Practitioners was reported as overwhelmingly positive and was instrumental in enhancing participants' confidence levels, facilitating them to continue with their studies in times of stress, and scaffolding their learning through the provision of: orientation programmes to support transition to college; ongoing supports including personal, disability-related assistance/ measures; referral to other services; provision of or referral to academic skill supports; and budgeting and programme progression advice.

The positive impact of the 1916 Bursary Fund on participants' educational advancement was enabled and augmented by the comprehensive and integrated network of student supports delivered by Access Practitioners. The data highlights the professional agility of Access Practitioners as demonstrated by their successful embedding and scaffolding of the 1916 Bursary Fund scheme within existing practice and service frameworks. Educational disadvantage is complex, and students require academic, social and personal supports as well as financial ones. Access initiatives which target only one dimension of disadvantage cannot succeed if they are not systematically incorporated into more holistic support frameworks.

4.4 Mapping and Consolidating the Wider Impacts of the 1916 Bursary Fund

The data gathered in this research indicated that many awardees deployed the 1916 Bursary Fund as a familial rather than as an individual resource. In some cases, the 1916 Bursary Fund contributed to changes in prevailing family narratives and perceptions about the possibility and value of undertaking higher education. Some participants were acutely aware of the power of creating new norms around higher education within their family and peer networks and were committed to assuming mentorship roles in this regard. Yosso identifies transformative resistant capital as 'cultural knowledge of the structures [of oppression] and motivation to transform such oppressive structures' (2005: 81). This research highlights the value of peer mentorship and the community-based mentoring programme being developed under PATH 3 and represents a tangible translation of evidence-based learning into a new practice initiative designed by Access Practitioners.

4.5 Reviewing the 1916 Bursary Scheme Guidelines and Application Process

This research demonstrated that in 2017/18 and 2018/19 only 12% of all eligible applicants received a bursary in the South Cluster. The low success rate experienced by eligible applicants raises questions about the number of available bursaries, the suitability

of the eligibility criteria and the need for more focused targeting of marginalised groups. Compiling an application represents a significant investment for applicants in terms of time, effort and emotional resources and engagement. The requirement for a personal statement obliges applicants to disclose and catalogue experiences of adversity. Undertaking such an exercise poses very tangible challenges for applicants for whom English is not a first language and for those with learning disabilities. It also has the potential to retraumatise individuals who feel obligated to recount traumatic life experiences.

4.6 Recommendations for Policy

- Consideration should be given to significantly increasing the number of 1916 Bursary awards as the number of eligible applicants far outstrips the number of awards available.
- The forthcoming review of the adequacy of the Student Universal Support Ireland [SUSI] grant is welcomed given the financial precarity experienced by some students.
- Revision of procedures for provision of Bursary Fund support to undergraduate awardees who wish to progress to postgraduate level is to be welcomed.
- Initiatives to address economic disadvantage must include critical consideration of the role which Access Practitioners and Services will play in their roll out and must include adequate resourcing in this regard.
- Research on graduate destinations for 1916 Bursary awardees, which tracks educational and career outcomes, is necessary to determine longer-term impact of PATH 2.
- Future research should consider the disproportionate number of females who receive awards under the 1916 Bursary Fund and how to further engage male students in the process. It is also important to capture the experiences of younger students.
- There is some evidence to suggest that completing the personal statement may be difficult and potentially retraumatising for a minority of eligible applicants. Consideration should therefore be given to whether review of the application and assessment process is merited.

4.7 Recommendations for Practice

Consideration should be given to HEI resourcing of the showcasing and sharing of existing models of good practice in relation to the role which Access Practitioners play in supporting career progression of Access students. This is an emergent and critical area of Access Practice with potential for further development.

- The significant role which mentors play in supporting Access students merits further attention in terms of consideration of ways in which HEIs can facilitate and scaffold community-based and peer-to-peer mentorship initiatives for students from specific Access target groups.
- The extent and complexity of the challenges experienced by some students, as revealed by the data, highlights an urgent need for consideration of the type and level of support being provided to Access target groups who experience multiple disadvantages. This is a pressing issue that needs attention at both institutional and sectoral level.
- In addition to an increase in available bursaries overall, a review of the distribution of awards across the cluster to ensure greater equity of bursary access for eligible students is warranted.
- HEIs should consider strengthening opportunities for development of employability skills and professional networks and for accessing relevant industry work experience to support career progression of Access students. This support might best be provided across a range of units including careers services, departmental-level placement services, etc.

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Appendix 1

INFORMATION SHEET: Student Participants

Purpose of the study. The SOAR Projectis an inter-institutional collaboration on Access. It brings together the South Cluster – Cork Institute of Technology, Institute of Technology Carlow, Institute of Technology Tralee, University College Cork and Waterford Institute of Technology – together with community partners to collaborate on devising and delivering strategies to increase access to higher education (HE) for under-represented groups. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the educational experience of participants and the impact the 1916 Bursary has on their transition, participation, engagement and progression in HE.

What will the study involve? The study will involve your participation in an individual interview with a researcher to discuss your opinions, experiences, ideas and the challenges that under-represented groups may encounter in transitioning, engaging, performing and progressing in higher education. The interview will take place in a relaxed and informal atmosphere. Participants will be asked to share their educational journey and the impact the Bursary Fund has had on their college experience. The interviews will be recorded using a digital recorder and participants can stop the interview at any time. A researcher from UCC will conduct the interviews. Participants' identity will remain confidential at all times.

Why have you been asked to take part? You have been asked to take part in this study because you have been awarded the 1916 Bursary.

Do you have to take part? No. Participation is voluntary. You will be asked to sign a consent form. You also have the option of withdrawing before the study commences (even if you have agreed to participate) or discontinuing two weeks after the discussion.

Will your participation in the study be kept confidential? Yes. We will ensure that your identity will not appear in the final report or subsequent publications. Any extracts from the interview that are quoted, in any subsequent report and publications, will be entirely anonymous. Every effort will be made to ensure participants' anonymity. However, information shared on personal or promotional sites may make the participant identifiable.

What will happen to the information that you give? The data gathered will be kept confidential for the duration of the study. It will be securely stored on password-protected computers and only be available to the research team on the SOAR project. 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 results of this study will be shared with the Cluster group and will be published in a project report, in academic articles, and on the project website.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part? We do not envisage any negative consequences for you in taking part.

Who has reviewed this study? Approval has been given by the Social Research Ethics Committee of UCC.

Any further queries? If you have any queries or concerns about this research, you can contact Dr Máire Leane, the Principal Investigator (PI), at m.leane@ucc.ie or you can contact the Head of the School of Applied Social Studies, Prof. Cathal O'Connell, at c.oconnell@ucc.ie.

Appendix 2

CONSENT FORM: Student Participants

I …… agree to participate in an interview for the SOAR project.

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

I understand that participation is voluntary.

I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted. This is in line with General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) introduced in 2018.

I give permission for my interview with the SOAR research team to be audio-recorded.

I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.

I understand that anonymity will be ensured in the write-up by disguising my identity.

I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in progress reports, academic journals and/or the project website.

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 understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

Signed: ……

Date: ……

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