

Submission 4.37 EPIC

Introduction

EPIC (Empowering People in Care) is the only independent organisation in Ireland which works with, and on behalf of, children and young people in care or with care experience. A core part of the work of EPIC is the provision of an individual advocacy and support service for children and young people in care and with care experience. The policy development undertaken by EPIC seeks to make positive change for children and young people in care and with care experience at a systemic level.¹

EPIC hopes that this submission will contribute to the conversation taking place within the Higher Education Authority, and from EPIC's perspective, specifically how children and young people in care or with care experience are able to access higher education, complete courses successfully, and are able to become happy contributing members of society. EPIC welcomes the opportunity to make this written submission. We have limited the paper to the issues that are within the remit and expertise of EPIC.

Education has the power to transform lives, break cycles of poverty and disadvantage. All children and young people should have the necessary supports to ensure that there is equality of opportunity. Ireland has a long history of excellent education, but at higher level it is underrepresented by those from marginalised and disadvantaged backgrounds. Children and young people with care experience require additional supports, from early on in their education, to ensure they can have the opportunity to achieve at higher level, whatever it is they seek to pursue. Their educational and life outcomes should not be hindered because of their care experience, and yet it often is.

Recommendations

Collate data on children in care and their educational attainments; from Drumcondra testing, to Junior and Leaving Cert cycles, and on into higher education. Collated data should be disseminated and cross compared with the general population.

Identify the need for additional supports for children at risk of care, and in care, early on.

Provide incentives to attend after school homework clubs.

Additional educational supports must be provided to children in care, or with care experience, who experience disruption or absenteeism etc as a result of being in care. Supports must be provided from an early age so that children do not fall behind.

Children and young people in care or with care experience need to be recognised as a specific cohort and named in relevant strategic plans, strategies and policies.

Dr Paul Downes, Dublin City University, established a working group and the recommendations from that group must be discussed and actioned by Government in conjunction with Universities and Technological Universities.

Ireland should launch something similar to the UK's Care Leaver Covenant, which is a commitment from public to private and voluntary sector organisations to support people leaving care, including financial and practical supports.

Access to a consistent, named, knowledgeable point of contact at 3rd level, should be a provided to all young people with care experience.

Initiatives such as the one established by EPIC and the Munster Technological University (Cork Kerry Campus) should be replicated. The findings from this pilot should be rolled out by the Government, across universities nationwide, with additional supports, including bursaries.

The approach of the Cork Life Centre should be documented, and the learnings replicated by Government.

A holistic approach must be adopted. Wraparound supports to enable successful completion of higher education must be provided to care leavers, from accommodation (including supported accommodation) to mental health support, to guidance counsellors or mentoring.

Background

As a specific cohort, children in care have, on average, some of the lowest levels of educational attainment in comparison to their noncare experienced peers, and their outcomes continue to be a major concern in all the countries in which relevant data is collected. The implications of this are far reaching and extend beyond education, since the educational outcomes of children and young people with care experience are strongly linked to subsequent employment (Hook & Courtney, 2011), housing (Davison & Burriss, 2014), mental and physical health (Dixon, 2008) and offending (Cusick et al. 2012).

Under achievement at primary and secondary level means that young people who have been in the care system are significantly less likely to go on to further and higher education than not only their non-care experienced peers, but also than other disadvantaged cohorts of young people. According to the UK Office for Fair Access (Offa) just 12% of care-leavers in England progressed to higher education in 2012, compared with 48% of the general population (aged 17-30). Unfortunately, comparable statistics are unavailable in Ireland and therefore we must draw on statistics from other jurisdictions, such as the United Kingdom (UK). The UK Office for Students (OFS) found that care leavers had:

lower school attainment

a lack of positive role models and low expectations from carers and advisers

low aspirations and concerns about being able to afford higher education

lack of information and advice before and when applying to higher education

difficulty accessing the financial support they needed and problems with accommodation.

Other research in the UK has shown that despite the mass expansion of higher education over recent decades, care leavers remain an underrepresented cohort of students, with less than 11.8% (ages 18-23) attending university (Harrison, 2019), significantly below the 43% for all 18-year-old entrants (DfE, 2018). Importantly, it should be recognised that while care leavers

‘occupy one end of a continuum, with other disadvantaged groups’ (Harrison (2017:68) 26% of other disadvantaged young people still go on to study at university.

In general terms, care leavers are far more likely to start a degree later in life than most young people. They are also more likely to drop out or take longer to complete higher education and their time at university is more likely to be affected by their personal health, financial concerns, and accommodation difficulties. The situation in Ireland also requires focus. An exploratory study carried out in 2013 by the ESRI and Trinity College, funded by the Ombudsman for Children’s Office, found that children and young people with care experience in Ireland tend to face more challenges than their peers in fulfilling their potential in education, due to their personal and familial circumstances.² Despite this, children and young people in care and care leavers have been largely overlooked in Irish educational policy measures or statements to date, and were not, for example, identified in the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019.

Other plans and reviews have similarly overlooked this significantly disadvantaged cohort of children and young people. By way of example, they were not identified in:

The Higher Education Authority 2018-2022 Strategic Plan

CUMASÚ Empowering through learning Statement of Strategy 2019-2021

The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030.

Similarly, successive State of the Nation’s Children Reports have included Traveller children, foreign national children, children with a disability and children as carers, but failed to recognise and name children in care as a specific cohort.

Overall, in Ireland, data on care-experienced young people’s entry to further and higher education is limited to the data published via the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) reporting since 2016. There is no data published on special educational needs among children and young people in state care. There is no data published on school attendance rates or school exclusions for children and young people in care. There is no data published on literacy levels among children and young people in care. All this data should be collated, shared and cross compared with the general population, and policies developed on foot of the findings to ensure children in care or with care experience are appropriately supported and their educational outcomes are not negatively impacted as a result of their care experience.

A working group set up by Dr Paul Downes in Dublin City University has sought action from the Department of Children Equality Disability Integration and Youth on a range of issues, including specifically:

how children and young people with care experience can be better recognised as a distinct group as part of a higher education access strategy

how they can be strategically supported by schools and other services in the transition from post-primary to higher education

why it seems that children in care in Ireland are often encouraged to opt for ‘easier’ and shorter occupational training to become economically independent as soon as possible, rather than pursuing higher education qualifications

a need to recognise and address the particular needs of care leavers in accessing further and higher education.

In 2018, the UK Government launched the Care Leaver Covenant which acts as a “commitment from public, private, and voluntary sector organisations to support people leaving care.” As part of this, higher education institutions are expected to support and encourage care leavers, by amongst other things, identifying and supporting care leavers before they enter and offering financial and practical supports once they have entered. In March 2019 the UK Government published the ‘Higher Education Principles’. These principles called on universities and higher education institutions to do more for young people leaving care by giving them personal support, helping them pay for accommodation and providing money to buy books and join social clubs. With just 6 per cent of care leavers aged 19-21 going into higher education, and those that do being twice as likely to drop out than their peers, Universities Minister Chris Skidmore and Children and Families Minister, Nadhim Zahawi, have called for a shift in culture at universities to welcome care leavers and provide wraparound support to help them thrive. As a result, many universities in the UK, including most universities and higher education institutions in Northern Ireland, now offer tailored supports for care leavers. These include care leavers bursaries, grants, assistance with accommodation etc. and almost all feature a designated person to support care leavers within the institution.

Access to a consistent, named, knowledgeable single point of contact at 3rd level, who will advocate on behalf of students with care experience, can significantly improve the outcomes of these young people. To try to manage the support effectively, the majority of institutions have staff designated as named contacts for care experienced students. These named contacts frequently advocate for individual students (both within institutions and externally) and are highly valued and appreciated by students. Indeed, for many students they have made the difference between withdrawal and persistence in their chosen course.

Following discussion and planning over the past twelve months, EPIC and the Munster Technological University (Cork and Kerry Campuses) have launched an initiative to support care leavers entering further and higher education. Each campus has appointed a designated person to support care leavers in their journey through third level education. The designated staff members will work alongside the university’s student services function and act as personal support advisors for care leavers in their journey through college. EPIC is hopeful that this initiative will be replicated across the further and higher education sector with a view to enhancing the educational experience of this vulnerable student cohort and improving outcomes for care leavers in further and higher education.

Numbers of Children in Education in Care

According to the latest published figures by Tusla “96% (3,683/3,837) of children in care aged 6 to 15 years (inclusive) were in full time education at the end of Q4 2020.”³ However, “[t]here [is] no official data available to describe or track the educational attainment and progress of care-experienced young people i.e., those who have spent time in care during childhood.”⁴ This lack of data and tracking of young people’s educational attainment “leads to a number of gaps and shortcomings in the routine administrative data published about young people in care:

There is no data published on how young people in state care fare when they sit the Leaving Certificate compared to the general population

Data on care-experienced young people's entry to higher education is limited to the data published via HEAR reporting since 2016

There is no data published on special educational needs among children and young people in state care

There is no data published on school attendance rates or school exclusions for children and young people in care

There is no data published on literacy levels among children and young people in care.”⁵

Effects on Aftercare

Tusla's latest published figures, show that in the 18-22 age group, 2,243 are in receipt of an aftercare service. However, of this only 1,697 are in education or training.⁶ This leaves a number of 546 (24%) of care leavers that are not in a third level educational placement or a training course. Therefore, we can infer that 24% of young people who have left care in the last 4 year, (looking at the age group 18-22) have not or are no longer in education.

Progress

Very welcome progress has been made recently, with the Higher Education Authority highlighting in their review of their access plan, that there is a need for children in care to be a specific group that must be distinguished and supported. “Children in care have particular needs and challenges in accessing higher education and their status as a sub-group within the overall target groups should be recognised.”⁷

HEAR

EPIC is fully supportive of the HEAR scheme for college for young people leaving the care system. “The Higher Education Access Route (HEAR), is a college and university scheme that offers places on reduced points and extra college support to school leavers from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds who are resident in the Republic of Ireland. HEAR has been set up by a number of colleges and universities, as evidence shows that socio-economic disadvantage can have a negative effect on how well a student does at school and whether they go on to college. HEAR applicants must meet a range of financial, social and cultural indicators to be considered for a reduced points place and extra college support.”⁸ Although this scheme is very welcome EPIC would ask that there are a definite number of places set aside on each course each year for those applying through the HEAR scheme. This would help to reduce the stress of applicants and also help young people with their decision making on courses they wish to apply for.

Another major issue which is not currently tracked within the education system for young people leaving care is the drop out rate during college. Many care leavers may obtain a third level educational placement, and many feel under pressure to do so to obtain the aftercare package. However, EPIC has seen many young people feeling very stressed in the college system, as they may be on a course they are not interested or happy with. This can in turn lead to many issues. A care leaver cannot successfully finish a year in college and then defer to another course the following year. To continue to obtain the aftercare allowance, progress must be made each year in the attempt to complete the course. A care leaver cannot take a year out from their course as this will also break the chain of progress which again will stop their aftercare payment.

All of the above issues show that young people coming from the care system are at a huge disadvantage to their peers and of course may not have the support of family.

Other factors taken into consideration: Children in Care of the State / HSE / Tusla

A foster or separated child in the Care of the Health Service Executive or TUSLA must supply a letter from TUSLA stating that they are currently in the Care of TUSLA or had previously been in the Care of the State/HSE.⁹

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All of the above issues show that young people coming from the care system are at a huge disadvantage to their peers and of course may not have the support of family to help them navigate tricky crossroad.

Model of Good Practice - Cork Life Centre.

To help young people to access third level it is essential that the secondary system will meet their needs. Unfortunately, for many young people in care, due to many issues including numerous placements, lack of continuity of education and lack of supports, finishing secondary school can be a challenge that may not be attained. However, it has been shown that where the young person is at the centre of their education, where the courses are tailored to meet their needs, that amazing results can be achieved. A great example of this in Cork city is that of the Cork Life Centre.

“Cork life Centre is a voluntary organisation offering an alternative learning environment to marginalised young people. The Centre and its staff offer students 1:1 tuition in Junior and Leaving Cert subjects and support them in their preparation for these State Exams. The approach to education is a holistic one. The value is in the social education of young people as much as on the academic. The Centre provides students and teachers with:

An open and friendly environment.

Positive trusting relationships with peers and staff.

Continuous support with issues and challenges a student might face during work

With the Centre, many young 12-18-year-old early school leavers have achieved formal school certification. The success of the project is the mix of nurturance, individual programs, educational certification, stimulation, fun, hard work, mutual respect, and expectations.”¹⁰

The Cork Life Centre is an educational service catering for children between the ages of 12-18 years who for various reasons have not thrived or coped in a mainstream educational setting.

The Centre and its staff offer students 1:1 tuition in the core Junior and Leaving Certificate subjects and supports them in preparation for State Examinations.”

This centre has proven year on year with limited resources that with a curriculum tailored to meet the needs of each individual young person, and counselling supports that young people out of main- stream education can still achieve great results at secondary level.

Unfortunately, over the last few years the Cork Life Centre has been massively over subscribed in applications for its school. The need to replicate similar models countrywide is very necessary and would help many young people in care and especially those living in residential centres.

Conclusion

Children and young people with care experience must be appropriately supported to ensure that they can successfully pursue and complete higher education. This requires multiple supports, a holistic approach, data collating and analysis, and vision. EPIC hopes that the suggestions made in this paper will provide food for thought and the organisation looks forward to continued engagement with the Higher Education Authority on this important issue.