



Report on Young Adult Carers and Third Level Education

April 2nd 2013

Background

As part of the European TOYAC project (See www.youngadultcarers.eu), in late 2012, a questionnaire on the theme of young adult carers was prepared by one of the partners in the project. Seven responses were received from individuals/organisations from Ireland, four of whom are working directly with young carers, one of whom is involved in building capacity and interest within the wider NGO sector to develop support services, and two have a general interest in the carers area¹.

As part of the collaboration on the TOYAC project, Care Alliance Ireland agreed to further investigate the impact caring has on young adult carers participation in third level education.

Method and Sampling

In acknowledgement of time and funding limitations, and notwithstanding the recent drafting of a more comprehensive research proposal² it was considered at this time that what was realistic was to look to interview a number of professionals who are active in the access sphere of third level education. It was considered that because of the low likelihood of carer self-identification and the consequent difficulty in accessing suitable young adult carers, it was not considered realistic to make contact with and interview young adult carers themselves. We considered that third level access officers, or the like, were likely to have specific knowledge and understanding of issues faced by young adult carers, and the impact such caring may have on their participation and retention in third level education.

There are currently in the region of 30 third level institutions in the Republic of Ireland. In recognition of the very specific area under investigation, and for the purposes of sampling, it was considered appropriate to select those with both large numbers of students (>3000) and with dedicated access officers. This created a sample of 18. Contact details of 12 were easily accessed online via websites, and this generated the final sample. This sample (12) were emailed, written to and contacted by phone (See Appendix I). Six agreed to take part in the interviews, and all six were successfully interviewed during mid-to late March 2013 by the Executive Director of Care Alliance Ireland, who has qualifications in Social Work (BSS), Youth and Community Studies (MA) and Social Research Methods (PG Diploma).

¹ The responses to the questionnaire are to be found in a separate document.

² See <http://www.carealliance.ie/userfiles/file/Young%20Adult%20Carers%20Research%20ProposalMarch2013.pdf>

A draft interview schedule was prepared, using standard 6 questions/topics of conversation, as per Appendix I.

Notes were taken using a PC.

Respondents

The following is a collation of the responses from 6 respondents to each question/theme.

(Note the term 'college' is used widely in this report, and refers to all types of academic orientated third level education, as oppose to apprenticeships.)

In your work, have you encountered significant numbers of students mentioning their caring roles?

Three of the six respondents reported having considerable contact/awareness of young adult carers in third level education. Three reported little contact.

Some clarification was required with some respondents to explain that our interest was not in those caring for a child per se, but more those whose parental care responsibilities went over and above traditional parenting, all well as other family caring. We referred back to the definition of caring as described in the cover letter.

One respondent was on secondment from an access project involving teenagers and readily identified a number of young carers, of ethnicity other than Irish, whom she had contact with in the recent past. She reported that their caring was not openly spoken about, at least initially, and these young people had often come to Ireland without parents or siblings initially. Some had parents who were in ill health, or died, leading them to become the head of the household. She commented that as these young people had less support networks that may explain how they come to the pastoral care teams' attention. Her institution has a well-developed access support infrastructure and each of the students who gain entry through special access routes have a dedicated staff member to act as an advisor to them.

One respondent reported that much of their work was around aspiration raising for populations of young people from communities where participation in college was low. Young carers were not specifically identified as a particular at risk group. She did observe however, that for some carers decisions about what college to attend were influenced by geography, that is they would choose to attend a college near home, even if it was not originally their first choice of colleges.

One spoke of and demonstrated acute awareness of young adult carers, and described an intensive pastoral care programme operating for a cohort of students, in particular for those in their first year who did not gain entry through the traditional access routes. He spoke of in the region of a dozen (12) whose caring responsibilities would often emerge as the relationship with the access officer developed. Often the students would not originally see themselves as carers. Again, he would offer individual support as necessary, and/or refer on to other college wide supports (counselling etc.). He reported the need to strike a balance between use of the specific supports he and or his own team could offer and those supports available college wide.

One respondent, who is in her role 9 years, reported to have identified a small number of young adult carers in that time, and the challenge for them was to stay in college. She felt that there was insufficient

support for such students in second level, but did report that when in college an induction handbook was given to each student.

One respondent identified a high prevalence of mental health issues with families of the students she has contact with. This clearly enters the domain of family caring, either implicitly or explicitly so.

One respondent reported that the numbers of young adult carers identified was not significant, and acknowledged the issue of under reporting/lack of carer-identification.

What interventions are currently in place in both second level and third level to support such carers – both to enter and remain in third level education?

A range of supports were identified, generally in the financial, and social/ personal domains; either direct supports or through referral systems in place in the college. There has been some retrenchment in the extent of these support services in recent years. A number identified the impact caring can have on the students ability to fully participate in the social part of college life. Some carers would go home each weekend to care for a relative, or not stay around the campus after lectures. A number of respondents gave specific examples of supports they were able to provide to young adult carers; for example, advocating to lecturers, deferral of exams, additional financial supports (through an EU scheme called The Student Assistance Fund)³, and intervention in time management skills. Others were reported as requiring more intensive intervention. Support with applying for these funds, through an application form, was reported to sometimes resulting in carer identification. The colleges appear to have considerable discretion on how these funds are used. One respondent described one carer student as 'eager and a joy to work with. Another spoke of young carers' maturity.

One identified a learning profile process undertaken when students start college, that can help inform the nature of supports required.

A number of respondents spoke about the value in students engaging with the supports and in looking for support, but there was sometimes also a reluctance to report their caring roles.

The use of personal statements and surveys to screen students was reported to be used by one respondent, as a response to less staff being available to offer 1-2-1 support. More use of group work was also reported.

Peer mentoring (3rd year mentoring 1st years etc.) was reported by two respondents.

What are the key issues in your opinion regarding Young Adult Carers in Third Level Education?

Finishing their course was identified by several as an issue of key concern. It would appear that no specific figures are available that identify carers at a particular risk of this.

Unable to experience full participation in college life was also reported by some and the challenge in socialising with their peers in college, who may not be able to identify with them. There is an element of there being a 'confessional context' – whom can I safely tell about things at home?

³ *The Student Assistance Fund is funded by the Irish Government and part-funded by the European Social Fund under the Human Capital Investment Operational Programme 2007-2013.*

One reported that the current access criteria; low income, parents education etc., already picked up some carers in this group: *'many young carers will tick these boxes as it is'*.

One respondent felt that it was important that young carers were made aware of the alternative admission schemes that are in place already.

One respondent felt that there was insufficient *'joined' up thinking'* with respect to supports. She also felt that strong local carer support services are key to supporting young carers to participate in college and in college life.

One respondent reported that the challenges can be situation specific; that is it depends on how far they travel to get to college, the time of the classes etc. The same respondent reported that of those carers she has encountered all have completed their courses.

A list of issues young carers might be reasonably expected to encounter were reported by one respondent as the following; isolation, parents mental health stigma, lack of peer understanding, not bringing friends home, and struggling with deadlines. This particular access officer spoke of their college having quite well resourced and privately funded scholarships/bursaries, in addition to the EU Student Assistance Fund.

One respondent articulated a key role of hers as encouraging the students to use the supports available.

One respondent felt that young adult carers were more likely to have to repeat a year at college and also felt that there was less support for them than there was for young parents in college.

What impact might an awareness campaign around Family Carers within Third Level Institutions have?

One respondent suggested a flier; several suggested that collaborating with the students unions on campus would be an important strategy in any effective campaign. It was felt that students respond more to Students Union campaigns than to official college ones. Others suggested including the wider student supports services teams. One felt that any campaign could be an opportunity to educate their peers about the reality of caring. Another suggested collaborating with the nursing/social care departments of the colleges. Several reported recent successful mental health campaigns and the extensive use of social media. There is a network of college college counsellors, and other networks who may be interested in collaborating on such initiatives. In general, most respondents were positive about the potential any such campaign may have in awareness raising, reducing stigma promoting inclusion and protecting mental health.

Any other comments/suggestions?

Several respondents were very positive about the TOYAC initiative and the conversations themselves. Some said that the conversation in itself was positive in terms of awareness raising. One spoke about the need to reach out to young men in particular. One talked about having been a carer herself in the recent past and the value she got in reaching out to supports. One said that as she talked with the interviewer, more young carers she had encountered in her work were coming to mind and felt that often the key is how the parents of the students handle the caring situation (for example pressure to

come home at weekends to support with adult sibling with mental health issues). One felt that on reflection the college completion rates were much lower for some carers.

Observations and Findings

Many third level institutions have well developed support systems in place, in particular for those who have gained entry through what are termed non-traditional entry routes (It is significant to note that in Ireland, over 90% of third level participation is mediated/controlled by 1 set of academic/ written exams that most teenagers undertake at aged 17/18, known as the *Leaving Certificate*. Each third level course requires achieving a certain number of points in this exam, with some requiring very high grades in 6 or more subjects).

A number of respondents reported that in recent years, the resources available, in particular staff, has been reduced and this limited the intensity of support that could be offered.

To be clear, the supports mentioned by respondents were in the main only available to a certain group of non-traditional entry students, which accounts for in the region of 10%-20% of the student population depending on the institution in question. Whilst there is some evidence pointing to a higher proportion of young adult carers coming from poorer communities, it is also likely that there is a significant number of young adult carers who have gained entry to third level education through the traditional routes. As such, these students are not likely to have the same level of intense support in college, but in the main would be in a position to access some level of support, through welfare officers in the students union, counselling services and institution specific support mechanisms (for example a named 'college tutor') These young adult carers would appear to be largely hidden and as such we know little about them and or their experience of college. How to access them and elicit their thoughts and explore their experiences of third level education remains a challenge and is worthy of further investigation.

Based on anecdotal accounts from two respondents, there may be a credible hypothesis to test that the young adult carers who do get to college, tend to have particular traits and or strengths that enable them to remain in college and excel academically.

We are confident that though engaging in this piece of work, the 6 access officers who took part in this project, were exposed quite explicitly to the issue of young adult carers in education. Several reported that by just having the conversation with us, that they were now more aware of it, and would likely be more responsive in supporting such students.

Each was agreeable to receiving relevant emails/communications on issues pertaining to young adult carers in the future.

Liam O'Sullivan, Executive Director, Care Alliance Ireland

Appendix I

Letter/follow up e-mail sent to 11 professionals working in access departments of various Third Level Academic Institutions in the Republic of Ireland



Name ,

Position,

Address

March 4th 2013

Re: Young Adult Carers – Participation in Third Level Education.

Dear ()

Care Alliance Ireland is working with 5 other European organisations on TOYAC, Together for Young Adult Carers. **TOYAC** is a partnership project funded by the European Commission and is focused on the development of strategies and services for young and adult carers. Many of these young carers are a vulnerable group that often have limited opportunities, horizons, and aspirations. Because of their caregiving responsibilities, many underperform in school, and are at high risk of exclusion from the labour market. On the other hand, it has been demonstrated that caring develops children and young adult's knowledge, understanding, sense of responsibility, maturity and a range of life, social and care-related skills.

For further details of the project and the partners involved see <http://www.youngadultcarers.eu/>

Care Alliance Ireland, has committed to investigating further the impact caring has on young adult carers participation in third level education. I am contacting you to ask for your thoughts and input on this subject.

Caring is defined in Census 2011 as;

provides regular, unpaid personal help for a friend or family member with a long-term illness, health problem or disability (including problems which are due to old age). Personal help includes help with basic tasks such as feeding and dressing

Based on 2011 Census Data, 10,005 young people aged 15-24 reported providing such care. As this is self-reported, and caring is often associated with stigma, it is strongly believed that there is a significant level of under-reporting.

What You Can Do to Help Us.

At this stage, we are not proposing to undertake primary research or to interview young adult carers, however I would welcome the opportunity to speak with you by phone over the coming weeks. If you wish to nominate another colleague to speak with us please feel free to do so. I envisage that any conversation need not take more than 10-15 minutes of your/your colleagues time. Alternatively, email responses are entirely acceptable.

I would propose that the following questions would form part of any conversation you may be willing to have:

- In your work, have you encountered significant numbers of students mentioning their caring roles?
- What interventions are currently in place in both second level and third level to support such carers – both to enter and remain in third level education?
- What are the key issues in your opinion regarding Young Adult Carers in Third Level Education?
- What impact might an awareness campaign around Family Carers within Third Level Institutions have?
- Any other comments/suggestions?

In the meantime, should you wish to explore this issue in more detail, the links below can provide more details including research, reports, policy and practice tools.

http://www.carealliance.ie/publications_youngcarers (Reports, Research, Seminars)

<http://www.youngadultcarers.eu/docs/1738-yac-report-3846.pdf> (Young Adult Carers aged 16-24)

<http://www.youngcarers.co.uk/UserFiles/Documents/UPBEET%20Research%20Report.pdf> (Young adult carers' experiences of barriers to further education, training and employment)

<http://www.youngcarers.co.uk/UserFiles/Documents/Towards%20Seamless%20Support%20-%20young%20adult%20carer%20research%202011.pdf> (Transition Experiences of Young Adult Carers)

<http://youngcarers.ie/> (Under 18 centric)

My colleague Denise Dunne will make direct contact with you over the coming days with a view to setting up a mutually agreeable time to talk.

Many thanks in advance for your support with this initiative.

Yours sincerely



Liam O'Sullivan

Executive Director

Care Alliance Ireland