

# Student Carers in Higher Education Institutions in Ireland: An Emerging Policy Issue

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## Introduction

According to Census 2022 data, there are almost 300,000 people in Ireland who provide regular unpaid personal help or support to a family member or friend with a long-term illness, health problem or an issue related to age or disability (CSO, 2022). This policy paper focuses on one group of informal carers, i.e., student carers in higher education institutions (HEIs), about whom little is known in the Irish context. The paper defines student carers, examines the extent to which they feature in relevant Irish policy and provides a crude estimate of the number in Irish HEIs. The paper summarises key findings from the international literature on this topic, including from the limited, but emergent, Irish research. It identifies the key support needs of student carers and outlines responses, drawing on lessons from the UK, where research and policy is more advanced.

## Who are student carers in HEIs?

There is no single definition of a student carer. In the UK, HEIs tend to adopt the definition provided by the Carers Trust, i.e. any student enrolled in a HEI ‘who cares, unpaid, for a friend or family member who due to illness, disability, a mental health problem or an addiction cannot cope without their support’ (Carers Trust, 2015: 7). This is the definition adopted for the purposes of this policy paper. It is a narrow definition. Broader definitions include students who are caring for younger siblings and/or students who are parents. As some of these students may be caring for a younger sibling or parenting a child who has additional needs, there is undoubtedly an overlap between narrow and broad definitions of student carers.

Student carers in HEIs are a diverse group with wide variations in their personal situations (Runacres et al., 2021). They include those enrolled on undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, and international students. Student carers are more likely to be female, who also provide greater levels of care (Armstrong-Carter et al., 2022; Knopf et al., 2020). Some are young adult student carers, which generally refers to those aged between 18 and 25 years (Kelleher, 2023) and at a critical life stage (Haugland et al., 2020). Others are mature students. In a 2001 UK study, 6% of widening participation students reported being a main carer for an adult dependent. These students were mostly mature and female (Alsop et al., 2008). Some studies have found that more students from immigrant families provide informal care

(Haugland et al., 2020). While relatively little is known about intersections of caring with other social categories and inequalities, a range of factors influence their experiences of education at HEIs including family structure, geographical location, age, income, amount of time spent caring, and intensity of the caring role (Carers Trust, 2020).

## Visibility and inclusion of student carers in Irish national strategies and plans

Several Irish policy documents pertain to student carers in HEIs. Unlike the UK or Australia, family carers in Ireland have not received statutory recognition. The *National Carers' Strategy* (Department of Health, 2012) sets out government policy for those who care for older people, children and adults with an illness or a disability. It makes no reference to student carers in HEIs or indeed young adult carers. The Strategy gives some attention to children and young carers (under 18 years). It includes an objective to support children and young people with caring responsibilities and protect them from adverse impacts of caring. One of its Actions is to 'raise awareness and understanding among education providers of the signs that children and young people have caring responsibilities and the impact of caring on them'. The Strategy is currently being updated by the Department of Health, providing an opportunity for the next iteration of the Strategy to include student carers in HEIs and for actions to be extended to institutions providing education to adult student carers (Pierce et al., 2021). With respect to youth policy, the *National Youth Strategy*, which sets out Government aims and objectives for young people aged 10 to 24 years, identified young carers as a marginalised / disadvantaged group of young people (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015). More recently, *Young Ireland* identified young carers as having additional challenges (DCEDIY, 2023: 8).

Of direct relevance to HEIs is the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*, which highlighted the limitations that the current low level of part-time study opportunities places on adults with caring responsibilities seeking to access higher education (Department of Education and Skills, 2011), reiterating the *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008-2013* (HEA, 2008). However, the strategy made no other reference to student carers. The *National Access Plan 2022-2028* identified being a carer as one of the life situations contributing to disadvantage and underrepresentation of students in higher education, and, importantly, identified student carers as a priority group (HEA, 2022). Notwithstanding this, the inclusion of student carers in equality, diversity and inclusion policies is still in its infancy in Ireland, similar to countries like Australia (Taylor et al., 2021).

## How many students carers in Irish HEIs?

According to HEA statistics, there were 256,785 students in HEIs in Ireland in 2022/23. The number of student carers is unknown and it is not easy to arrive at an exact number for a variety of reasons, including issues around self-identification and societal norms around caring (Kelleher, 2023). Estimates of the proportion of student carers in HEIs are available from some other countries, but these vary. In the UK, it has been estimated that between 3% and 6% of the student population are student carers but that it could be higher (NUS, 2013). Estimates from Norway (5.5%) and the USA (5.7%) fall within this range (Haugland et al. 2020; Armstrong-

Carter et al., 2022). A study in France estimated that 15% of university students are young adult carers (Chevrier et al., 2023). Extrapolating the above UK prevalence rates to the population of students gives a crude estimate of between 7,704 and 15,407 student carers in HEIs in Ireland. These figures seem reasonable when compared with data available from Census 2022 (Table 1), which show that 9,916 students aged 15 years and over identified as a carer. Of these, just over a half (51%) were aged 15-19 years of age and inevitably include students in secondary school. Just over a quarter (26%) of student carers were aged 20-24 years. These numbers are likely to be an underestimate.

**Table 1: Number of student carers in Ireland, 2022**

<b>Age group</b>	<b>Number of student carers</b>
<b>15-19 years</b>	5,059
<b>20-24 years</b>	2,604
<b>25-29 years</b>	517
<b>30-34 years</b>	308
<b>35-39 years</b>	309
<b>40-44 years</b>	334
<b>45-49 years</b>	307
<b>50-54 years</b>	211
<b>55-59 years</b>	161
<b>60-64 years</b>	62
<b>65-69 years</b>	22
<b>70 years and over</b>	22
<b>Total</b>	<b>9,916</b>

Source: Census of Population, 2022

A priority of the *National Access Plan* is to consider ways to collect more reliable data on higher education students who are carers (HEA, 2022), an issue with which HEIs in Ireland are grappling. Although response rates tend to be low, the Student Survey could potentially be a

useful source of data on student carers, but drawing on lessons from the Census, careful consideration should be given to the framing of any question used.

## **Access to HEIs and experiences and impacts of being a student carer**

Few studies have been conducted in Ireland on student carers in HEIs. A small study addressing the topic directly, undertaken a decade ago by Care Alliance Ireland (CAI, 2013), involved interviews with a small sample of HEI access officers. Apart from that, it is only in the past two years that relevant studies have been undertaken (Kelleher, 2023; Moloney, 2023; Russell and Smyth, 2024; Bowman Grangel et al., 2024). These studies indicate a growing interest among researchers in Ireland on this topic and are discussed below alongside international literature.

For student carers, benefits associated with attending higher education include gaining independence, skills, and a sense of accomplishment (Runacres et al., 2021). However, it can be hugely challenging for carers to make it to third level education. From a scoping review of the literature exploring young carers' experiences in secondary school, Moloney et al. (2023) identified the impact of caring on education and future aspirations as a key theme. A recent UK study found that young adult carers were 38% less likely to obtain a university degree and enter employment compared to young adults who did not provide care, and the association was highest for those providing intensive levels of care (Xue et al., 2023). Yeandle and Buckner (2007) found this was especially the case for young women. Even deciding to go to higher education can be fraught for female carers (Munro et al., 2024). A study on caregiving among young adults using data from the Growing Up in Ireland Study (GUI) and a broad definition of caring, found that young adults providing care at age 17 were much less likely than their peers to go on to higher education (Russell and Smyth, 2024). While no official data exists in Ireland to describe or track the educational attainment and progress of student carers (HEA, 2022), international studies show that young adult carers tend to have lower educational attainment levels than other young adults (Kelleher, 2023). Therefore, caring, as Xue et al. (2023) argue, sets in train long-term trajectories for socio-economic disadvantage.

Caregiving can impact students' choice of where and what to study such as selecting an institution that allows them to stay at, or close to, home (Burford and Hook, 2019; Day et al., 2019; Hamilton and Adamson, 2013; Kettell, 2018; NUS, 2015), avoiding courses with placements or internships (Kettell, 2018), or choosing care-related courses (Saragosa, 2022; Sempik and Becker, 2014).

For student carers attending HEIs, juggling education and caring (and sometimes also working) can cause stress and pressure (Carers Trust, 2020), due to having to plan studies around caregiving responsibilities, interruptions, and limited workspace (Burford and Hook, 2019). 'Time poverty' is a recurrent theme in the literature (Runacres et al., 2021). Lack of time can mean tiredness, missed deadlines, being late or missing lectures and tutorials (Carers Trust, 2020). A survey of the experiences of a small sample of young adult carers (n=48) in Ireland,

found that, while 24% of respondents reported having enough time to balance education and caring, 51% struggle to balance these responsibilities (Kelleher, 2023).

It is not surprising then that caring can negatively impact academic performance (Carers Trust, 2020; Day, 2019; NUS, 2015) or student carers express dissatisfaction with academic performance (Day, 2019). Together with having to often forgo work experiences and other extra-curricular activities, this can lead to concerns about future employment prospects (Day, 2019; Kettell, 2018). According to Kettell (2018), student carers in the UK are on average four times more likely to drop out of higher education than other students, with implications for both students and HEIs.

Caregiving can be rewarding (Haugland et al., 2020). However, it can impact negatively on physical health, mental health and the social life of young adult carers (Carers Trust, 2015). This can include physical pain due to caregiving (Yiengprugsawan et al., 2012). Kelleher et al. (2023) found that 98% of young adult carers surveyed (n=48) were stressed, 64% were at risk of clinical depression, and 79% reported feeling lonely. Bowman Grangel et al., (2024) found that caregiving, when directed towards a parent, was associated with a higher risk of depression in adolescents and depression at this young age was a predictor of depression as a young adult.

Student carers may have elevated financial hardship (Carers Trust, 2015; Runacres et al., 2021). Studies from the UK show that money is an added pressure that student carers worry about. They are more likely to be in receipt of a student grant and in receipt of discretionary funding from HEIs (NUS, 2015; Kettell, 2018), but may not be eligible for state financial supports for carers despite continuing their caring role. To be eligible for the means-tested Carer's Allowance in Ireland, carers must not participate in training or any education courses for more than 18.5 hours a week. UK research has found that student carers in HEIs are less likely than non-caring students to be in employment, but many still work to cover their own or household costs (NUS, 2015).

With respect to implications for caring, these can be both positive and negative. Positive impacts of being a student whilst caring is the greater flexibility offered by the HEI schedule compared to a work environment. The physical and mental break from caring offered enables students to be more compassionate and understanding when they return to their caring role (NUS, 2015; Runacres et al., 2021). Negative impacts include students' feeling unable to provide necessary levels of care, challenges posed by placements as part of degree programmes, feeling that studies are taking them away from their caring responsibilities, a sense of guilt, and having less patience (Kirton et al., 2012; Kettell, 2018; NUS, 2015).

### **The support needs of student carers in HEIs**

To support student carers attending HEIs, it is first necessary to identify them. This requires providing multiple opportunities for disclosure throughout the entire student life cycle (Carers Trust, 2015). It can be enabled by making student carers visible in the information that HEIs provide to applicants such as in prospectuses, at Open Days, by student support services and

Students Unions. A question to identify student carers can be included at the time of admission or enrolment to HEIs. Opportunities for disclosure can be provided in certain applications (e.g. mature student applications, applications for extenuating circumstances or financial support). There can be communication to students at the start of and throughout the academic year to encourage self-identification. Some students, even when they self-identify as a carer, may choose not to disclose their caregiving responsibilities out of concern about being treated differently (Burford and Hook, Day, 2019), highlighting the need for universities to adopt clear and transparent formal procedures and ensure that student carers can disclose without discrimination (Runacres et al., 2021).

Student carers report limited access to support at college or university, but when available, student carers tend to access supports (Runacres et al., 2021). Flexible support regarding attendance, timetabling, deadlines and online access are preferable to help to meet the individual needs of student carers and take account of the time pressure they are under (Carers Trust, 2015). There is little in the literature about the role of student support services, but it is clear that supports need to be accessible and practical, including access to information about financial supports, targeted to student carers and tailored to each student carer's unique situation (Runacres et al., 2021). Formal support needs to be early and ongoing. This is helped by having staff with an understanding of student carers. Staff training using an all-staff approach has been recommended. In addition to formal supports, the importance of peer support and support from family and friends has been highlighted (Runacres et al., 2021) Partnership with the community and voluntary sector and strengthening links with schools is also recommended.

## **Supporting student carers in HEIs**

Staff in teaching and support roles across HEIs come into contact with and support student carers in their everyday roles. Student advisors, for example, regularly provide support, including on financial issues, to student carers. A Dutch study found that most lecturers provide support to student carers, but there is a lack of clarity around role fulfilment and a need for 'clear acknowledgement of who is responsible for supporting such students and what support options are available' (van der Werf et al., 2023: 11). There are examples from HEIs across Ireland of policies, education programmes, workshops, seminars and other interventions aimed at supporting student carers, some of which have been developed in partnership with voluntary and community sector organisations such as Family Carers Ireland or CAI. However, information about how HEIs in Ireland are responding to student carers needs to be systematically collated.

There are lessons to be learned from the UK where there is greater awareness and policy responses to student carers than in other countries. For example, it is not uncommon for HEIs to have a Student Carers Policy. In Scotland, this is a requirement of the Scottish Funding Council. Much progress in the UK appears to be driven by the Carers Trust, which has conducted/commissioned research (Carers Trust, 2020) and developed practice resources for use by HEIs in identifying and supporting student carers (Carers Trust, 2015; Phelps et al.,

2015). Carers Trust Scotland has initiated the *Going Higher for Student Carers Recognition Award*, aimed at Scotland's 19 universities and underpinned by three principles: identify, support and report on student carers, and recognise good practice. It has also developed *Care Aware*, an e-module for staff with digital badge.<sup>1</sup>

Alsop et al. (2008) point out that supporting student carers does not necessarily involve substantial financial investment; students commend creative and compassionate thinking about the particular needs of student carers. However, an overarching institutional commitment to ensuring that HEI systems and structures accommodate the specific needs of student carers is critical (Alsop et al., 2008). In the UK, Carers Trust has developed model frameworks to guide HEIs in implementing a structured approach to supporting student carers in HEIs (Carers Trust, 2015).

## Conclusion and policy implications

Student carers in HEIs have received marginal attention to date in policy and research in Ireland, although this is likely to change given the recent identification of student carers as a priority group in equality, diversity and inclusion policies, alongside a growing interest in the topic among researchers and staff in many HEIs. In the absence of reliable data, this paper provides a crude estimate of between 7,704 and 15,407 student carers in HEIs in Ireland. The Irish and international literature shows that getting to third level can be hugely challenging for those with caring responsibilities. While for those who get there, there are positive aspects to being a third level student carer, the negative impacts are wide-ranging and affect academic performance, physical and mental health, social life, and financial wellbeing. Many HEIs in Ireland are in the process of finding ways to identify and enhance supports for student carers. Institutional support is a necessary condition for ensuring that student carers are adequately supported at HEIs.

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<sup>1</sup> [College & University Staff Resources | Carers Trust Scotland](#)

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