

# Education first?

## Lone parents' lived experience of the challenges and benefits of participating in higher education

### Policy brief

There is a concerning educational attainment gap between lone parents and the general population, particularly at third-level. Given the economic and other benefits of higher education, and the fact that lone parents have a very high risk of poverty, this is a significant policy problem. Despite the government's commitment to increase access to higher education for lone parents, as set out in the *National Access Plan 2022-2028*, there is a dearth of targeted policy interventions and of research on how to boost access and retention for this cohort. In addition, for lone parents who claim social welfare, they have increasingly become the subject of social welfare policy interventions that prioritise work over education, or 'work first'. Against this background, this project conducted mixed-methods research to document the experience of lone parents in higher education, exploring their pathways into higher education, potential challenges and rewards, and factors that support retention. Through a survey of 105 lone parent students, interviews with twelve lone parent students and five audio diaries documenting typical days in college, the research generated a detailed set of findings with the aim of advancing an 'education first' approach to supporting lone parents. Education first refers to a policy approach that supports and enables lone parents to pursue education if it is their preference to do so.

### Key findings

Lone parents are not a homogenous group and this follows through in the lone parent student population. Across the range of participants in the research, some were participating in higher education for the first time as mature students; others returned to do a second degree or pursue a postgraduate course; some became a lone parent while in college. The findings also suggest that they are a more diverse cohort than the general third level student body. When compared with Higher Education Authority student statistics, for example, the survey findings reveal a lower proportion of lone parent students pursuing post-graduate qualifications and greater proportions from minority backgrounds.

Key challenges faced are finance, childcare, the timing of study, and time poverty. Participation in higher education comes at a significant financial cost with 83% of those surveyed citing finance as a major or significant challenge. The majority of students participating in the survey (63%) also reported being less well-off while in college. Lack of childcare was another significant barrier with the majority (70%) relying on informal care (family, friends or neighbours) in addition to or in place of formal childcare and only 3% of those surveyed reported using college childcare facilities. 70% of those surveyed cited access to affordable childcare as a major or significant challenge. The greatest challenge, however, is juggling the multiple demands of being a lone parent and being a student and the time poverty this generates. 97% of survey participants reported family responsibilities and commitments as a major or significant challenge. This can be exacerbated by a lack of flexibility in how courses are organised and delivered with 70% of those surveyed citing the timing of study as a major or significant challenge.

From a lone parent perspective, higher education is designed around a 'carefree' student model. While lone parent students are not the only cohort with caring responsibilities, the findings reveal a lack of lone parent visibility and recognition in higher education; there are no specific supports targeted at them and wider supports do not necessarily cater for their specific needs. Many participants also expressed a sense of being 'out of place' and lacked a sense of integration into college life. Lack of childcare on campus is a significant issue and this is compounded by lack of age-appropriate childcare, especially for older children. In addition, student accommodation does not cater for lone parent families. A lack of flexibility regarding lecture timetables and online delivery, assessment deadlines, and placement timetables were also significant concerns.

A particularly concerning finding is that 65% of the students who completed the survey considered leaving their course at some point. The interview findings and the diaries illuminated the experience of being a student with the stresses of balancing competing demands and the realities of caring as a lone parent, of 'trying to have time for everything and everyone' and 'constantly stressing about being everywhere at once', which are not compatible with the 'carefree' structures of higher education. Particularly stressful times occur when children are ill, when school holidays or days off are not compatible with the academic calendar and the timing of assessments and examinations. Such experiences are even acute in the case of some lone parents. For example, those with children with additional needs and migrant students who do not have wider family supports to draw on in Ireland.

Despite the challenges, the resilience of lone parent students and the strength of their motivation are also a very important findings emerging from the research. Participants spoke of parenting and their children as being an important motivator: *‘those little ones are dependent on me so at times when I forget why am I doing this, I look at them and go “ok, ok” and having a ‘just do it mentality’.* Their experiences are testimony to the importance of higher education across several dimensions. While career and financial benefits are important motivations, they are not the only ones expressed by the research participants. The importance of education for lone parents’ own wellbeing now and the future, and for their children’s wellbeing are particularly significant findings. Doing something for themselves, and for some, doing something for their community were also strong themes.

For participants who have experience of claiming social welfare whilst being a student, comprising 87% of the survey participants and all of the interviewees, several significant findings arise. These relate to the inadequacy of financial supports and the lack of support in general in the social protection system for lone parents who transition to higher education. Due to a lack of information and appropriate advice, some lone parents were not initially in receipt of the most appropriate payment, e.g. One Parent Family Payment or Jobseeker’s Transitional Payment, that would allow them to apply for a SUSI (Student Universal Support Ireland) grant. Household means testing is also a major problem for lone parents who live with their parents and are classed as dependents, rendering them ineligible for a SUSI grant if the intergenerational household does not meet the means test. In the context of the housing crisis and lack of affordable housing this is a double injustice, which becomes a triple injustice due to the financial and time costs of commuting to college. For Lone Parents claiming Back to Education Allowance, having to switch to claiming Jobseeker’s Allowance over the summer months is also a problem, as is the general financial inadequacy of the system where the full cost of living and cost of participating in education as a lone parent is not covered. 68% of participants relied on additional financial supports. It is concerning that the only participants who felt in any way financially secure were those with multiple sources of financial support, including bursaries and the Student Assistance Fund. Moreover, the availability of these supports are often not well timed and so do not prevent significant financial distress occurring during the academic year.

## Policy implications and recommendations

**The Access Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education (2022-2028) (HEA, 2022) includes lone parents as a subgroup of those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged and require additional support to access higher education. Acknowledgement of lone parents in this plan is important. This research suggests however, that more needs to be done to not only support their access to higher education but to support their participation and retention. The following recommendations emerge from the research:**

### Data and targets

More data is needed on lone parent participation in higher education. This should be collected and tracked by both the Higher Education Authority and the Department of Social Protection. Currently, there is a dearth of data and the full extent of lone parent participation in higher education is unknown, with Higher Education Authority information being linked to recipients of the One Parent Family Payment only. This lack of data extends to data on lone parent students who are also in receipt of a welfare payment. The Department of Social Protection lacks reliable and consistent data on how many lone parents in receipt of payments are in higher education.

In addition, a specific commitment should be made to increase lone parent participation in higher education over time. Targets should be set both for lone parents in general and lone parents in receipt of a welfare payment.

### Financial supports

The cost of participating in higher education lone parents needs to be fully recognised in the financial supports available. SUSI and social welfare payments for lone parents in higher education should be adequate in their own right without lone parent students having to apply for multiple sources of funding, including charitable sources. Adequacy should take into account the costs of participation including the costs of resources necessary to complete a course, costs associated with placements, commuting costs, extra childcare costs and general increases in the cost of living.

Specifically in relation to SUSI, several changes could be made to improve the financial situation of lone parents in higher education. Means testing for lone parents should not include the full household where lone parents live with their own parents, nor should child maintenance be assessable as means. All lone parents who qualify for SUSI should be allowed to automatically access special rate, non-adjacent SUSI grants. Given lone parent preferences and their experiences of time poverty, SUSI grants should be rolled out for all part-time higher education courses and courses delivered online.

Specifically in relation to Department of Social Protection services and payments, the adequacy of payments needs to be addressed to reflect the disproportionately high risk of poverty faced by lone parent families in addition to the costs of participating in higher education. Scholarship awards for PhD students should not be treated as assessable income for One Parent Family and Jobseeker’s Transitional payments, following the model of ‘Catherine’s Law’ that has amended means testing for those in receipt of Disability Allowance payments. Any expenses lone parent students receive while on placement for their course should not result in a review of their payment. In addition, all Department of Social Protection

staff should be trained to understand the specific challenges and responsibilities of lone parents and how to respond with empathy and respect. A greater awareness is needed of lone parents who attend or who wish to attend higher education. Adequate information needs to be made available on all entitlements and potential supports so that lone parent students benefit fully from what they are entitled to. Adequate information is also needed on any implications of attending higher education for lone parents' payment to avoid stress around payment compliance. It is also vital that lone parent students are fully informed about the most beneficial payment to them. Lone parents in receipt of Back to Education Allowance should not be required to switch to Jobseeker's Allowance during the summer months.

## Childcare and housing

Lone parent students need greater access to affordable and age-appropriate childcare. The dearth of childcare facilities in higher education institutions needs to be addressed and late evening facilities need to be made available, mirroring lecture timetables where classes may not finish until 6 or 7pm. While the National Childcare Scheme has improved affordability in general, several changes could be made which would improve affordability and access for lone parents. These include excluding One Parent Family Payment, Jobseeker's Transitional Payment and child maintenance as means for the National Childcare Scheme. In addition, a National Childcare Scheme subsidy specifically for one-parent families could be established that would provide care at affordable rates or free of charge as per the European Child Guarantee.

Higher education provision of student accommodation should include units that are suitable and affordable for lone parent families. Beyond student accommodation, the wider lack of affordable housing for lone parents and their housing insecurity needs to be addressed. The number of social housing units made available to one-parent families needs to be scaled up, particularly for those already living in emergency accommodation.

## Higher Education supports

Lone parent students need greater recognition and visibility in how academic programmes and wider supports and services are delivered in higher education. In addition to housing and childcare services provided by higher education institutes as outlined above, existing pastoral and academic supports need to more specifically target and reach out to lone parent students. The provision of particular supports, including student counselling need greater availability and the importance of one-to-one supports, whether academic, mentoring, budgeting, skills-based or pastoral, need to be recognised and strengthened with adequate resources.

Lone parent students are typically highly motivated but time poor. They are also likely to encounter episodic disruptions to their study given the demands of parenting alone. Greater flexibility needs to be built into how courses are organised to support lone parent access, participation and retention. This includes affording lone parents access to online recorded lectures and hybrid learning options where appropriate. Lecture timetables should also take account of the care responsibilities of lone parents which are not compatible with classes that start at 9am and end at 6 or 7pm. Similarly, the timing of placements, particularly placements run during summer months, should consider the care responsibilities of lone parents. Greater flexibility also needs to be built into assessment deadlines with extension policies recognising lone parent care responsibilities as a standard accommodation. Treating lone parent students with dignity and respect is a principle that should underpin the practice of all higher education staff and services.

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