



## **FINANCIAL SUPPORT TO CARE EXPERIENCED YOUNG PEOPLE IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

### **Introduction**

VOYPIC was asked to comment on the options set out to the Benchmarking Forum on the financial support to care experienced young people in higher education.

Although some do well, looked after children as a group have poor experiences of education. Reasons for poorer levels of achievement may include coping with trauma and emotional difficulties. Furthermore, post primary school attendance for looked after children is below that of the general population.

It is fair to say that there is growing interest in redressing these poor educational outcomes for children in care with increasing attention to developing strategies that promote education and learning and continuation into further and higher education. Personal Education Plans (PEPS) were introduced to Northern Ireland in 2011 and are gradually being developed for all children in care. We hope that PEPS will be comprehensive and inclusive of all the educational needs and plans for children in care.

## **Widening access to HE for looked after children**

Supporting care experienced young people into and during higher education is another issue of growing interest. The entitlements to support for education of care experienced young people are set out in the Children (NI) Order 1995 and the Children (Leaving Care) Act of 2002.

*Care Matters in Northern Ireland - a bridge to a better future* sets out a number of actions and outcomes (see Appendix I) required to promote access and increase support for care experienced young people pursuing higher education increase. It also considered the feasibility of introducing a bursary to provide additional financial support to young people in higher education to meet the cost of tuition fees. There remains, however, a degree of local interpretation and no standardised provision of financial support across all five health and social care trusts.

An analysis of the current level of costs and financial support for care experienced students in higher education across the five HSCTs in Northern Ireland was set out in January 2014. This analysis was presented to the Benchmarking Forum along with a number of options for how HSCTs could provide and manage their financial support to young people in their care planning to pursue higher education. VOYPIC has reviewed all options and makes the following comments:

### **Most favourable option**

Of the six options set out, we believe that option two with some amendments would be the most favourable for care experienced young people. Our preference would be a standardised, regional policy that requires:

- ✓ All young people to take all non-repayable grants and bursaries
- ✓ No requirement to apply for or manage a student loan
- ✓ HSCTs to meet all educational expenses particularly fees, educational equipment, accommodation and travel.

The Children (Leaving Care) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005 set out the assistance young people should receive with education, training and accommodation. We believe that option two reflects the HSCT's or corporate parent's responsibility to support a young person to meet their full educational potential by helping to secure funding for fees and providing finance for educational equipment. It would ensure that the young person has a level of financial security to meet the costs of accommodation and other essential educational expenses.

As it stands, this option proposes a high degree of support and responsibility by the HSCT or corporate parent for the young person pursuing higher education. It would, however require further thought and development to ensure optimum support and opportunity for independence.

A thorough analysis of costs and finance should help to establish the level of financial support required from the HSCT to meet all educational costs. Priorities are fees, books and equipment, accommodation during and out of term time and for a period following graduation and travel for family contact and educational purposes.

## **Recommending development of option two**

We believe that care experienced young people should not be dependent on a student loan to pursue their education. Young people, however, cannot be denied their right or entitlement to apply for a student loan which may be a reasonable and valuable source of funding. HSCs should ensure that young people considering higher education receive support to develop their budgeting and independent living skills to help them plan and manage their finances. As part of this, they should be made aware of their responsibilities for the repayment of any student loan they choose to apply for.

All 16+ services and personal advisors should provide the support necessary to identify educational courses and opportunities; complete applications for courses, bursaries, grants and means testing to secure the maximum level of non-repayable funding.

As part of their transition to full independence, we believe that young people should be encouraged to undertake part-time employment depending on their course of study. As well as a source of income and a social network, working will help develop self-sufficiency as well as valuable skills and experience for future employability.

**VOYPIC**

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## Appendix I

### **Care Matters in Northern Ireland – a bridge to a better future**

Actions and outcomes required for increasing participation in higher education

- Ensure that trusts and their care and leaving care teams are made aware of young care leavers entitlements in higher education
- Introduce a bursary, requiring Trusts to provide 75% contribution towards the full cost of tuition fees for all young people in care who go on to higher education
- Give young people a choice of vacation accommodation, through allowing more young people to remain with carers, in accommodation in their own Trust area or to remain in University accommodation
- Encourage young people to take part in the Aim Higher programme, attend university open days, summer schools and other 3rd level outreach work
- Encourage universities and colleges in NI to have a member of staff in post with expertise in supporting care leavers
- Encourage universities and colleges to offer new undergraduate mentoring support from older students
- Discuss with universities and colleges how to improve provision of information on bursaries, hardship grants and other financial support available to young people leaving care
- Encourage universities and colleges to acquire the Quality Mark developed by the Frank Buttle Trust, which recognises HEI's that demonstrate a commitment to supporting and increasing the number of young people entering and succeeding in HE after being in care