



Evaluating Tuition Waiver Programs for Former Children and Youth in Care Across Canada: Reducing Barriers and Addressing Trauma

Jacqueline Gahagan¹, Kristyn Anderson², Susan McWilliam³, Krista Ritchie⁴, and Shingruf Chughtai⁴

(1) Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, (2) Faculty of Health, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, (3) IWK Health, Halifax, Nova Scotia, (3) Faculty of Education, Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, (4) Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, Nova Scotia



Introduction	Objectives	Methods	Key Findings
On numerous measures, the educational attainment of children in the child welfare system is lower than their peers in the general population ¹ . Researchers have identified several system-related barriers to educational success for this population, including frequent changes to residential placement and assigned social workers; a lack of early, comprehensive support planning; missed instructional time; ineffective collaboration between organizations; and poor monitoring of progress ² .	To explore barriers and facilitators to post-secondary admission and completion by former youth in care (FYIC). The objectives of the study are to: 1) Examine pathways to post-secondary education among tuition waiver recipients based on first-voice perspectives. 2) Describe the elements of programs that are working or not working, why and how.	Participants: 22 students who have accessed the FYIC tuition waiver program. Methodology: A qualitative utilization-focused evaluation Measurement: Semi-structured interviews Data Analysis: Verbatim transcription; thematic analysis	(1) Though the program itself is a welcome opportunity, barriers to education persist, (2) Youth need choice in schedule, institution, and wrap-around services that will meet their needs, (3) Strength-based approach to supporting former youth in care is critical, and (4) many already know what they want to study and who they want to become. Below are direct quotes from participants describing their experience with tuition waiver programs:

PROGRAM DESIGN ISSUES	WHAT IS WORKING	NEED FOR WRAP-AROUNDS	NEED FOR MORE ADVOCACY
<p><i>“Like when I applied, like I was accepted, I got my letter...when I contacted the university...I think I contacted the registrar’s office...they didn’t even know what that program was. They had no idea. They had no idea I was part of the program. They had no idea what the program was. And I was like, oh is this a real thing”.</i></p> <p><i>“Yeah, because when you’re awarded the bursary you have to sign a contract. And the contract says that...like you have to do a full course load every term, and you have to pass all your courses, and they’ll pay for one undergraduate degree. But...you cannot stop. Like you can’t withdraw at any point or your bursary is cancelled. And that’s the terms of agreement”.</i></p>	<p><i>“Well, again, I feel like this was like my calling and something that I always wanted to do. I feel like I have so much to give back to like the youth that were like in my situation....this tuition waiver gave me the opportunity to do something that I’ve already been thinking about doing. I just didn’t have the means to do”.</i></p> <p><i>“Yes, it has already benefitted me. Graduation is the culmination of a dream. And that will be like the ultimate signal of success. But getting me through the door, getting me motivated, getting me to believe in myself, it already succeeded. It’s already done more than I could have asked for”.</i></p>	<p><i>“Because, you know, like it’s hard for people who grew up in foster care. We don’t have a sense of belonging. We feel inadequate no matter where we are. And you know, like I always feel like an outsider. I feel like an outsider in my own biological family....and in every foster family I’ve been in. I feel like an outsider in the classroom at school. I always feel like I stick out, like I don’t belong. And no matter what situation it is – a friend, anyone, coworkers – I always feel like I don’t belong and that people can sense it in me that I’m different”.</i></p> <p><i>“So nobody knows. None of my teachers, none of the school, nobody knows that I’m coming in and I’m like, okay, I’m barely getting by. How am I going to do this? If we had the supports, you know, to help us in those areas, or even someone checking and saying like “Hey, how are you making out? What can we do? Do you need anything?”</i></p>	<p><i>“Invest in people who haven’t had voices. So one of the biggest problems with coming out of care is...it’s really an invisible minority. Like it’s a minority that has no...it crosses all color and race barriers, it crosses all economic barriers. But the people who are in and from foster care are really invisible....It’s not a demographic of people that we think about....And those people just fall through the cracks again and again...I would love it if every post-secondary institution in the universe would say, hey, let’s give these people a shot, because given a voice, they have something to say”.</i></p> <p><i>“There’s so much more about college and university than learning what’s in a book. There’s learning about who you are as people, and experimenting, and hearing different kinds of thoughts, and meeting people from different parts of the world. And when you don’t have those experiences and you’re just stuck in your own little bubble with a crying baby and drama all the time, your life is this big (small). And those people have fallen through the cracks”.</i></p>

CONCLUSION

Having access to post-secondary education for former youth in care is an important step toward furthering their education. Offering a tuition waiver without the needed wrap-around support is insufficient. Additional considerations are needed with respect to what to include as wrap-around services. The lack of a national standard for educational and professional development requires a further partnership between all levels of government and post-secondary educational institutions. As a next step, our team will be undertaking a utilization-focused evaluation of existing tuition waiver programs in Atlantic Canada to further our understanding of the core elements of these programs and share these lessons learned with our multi-sector partners.

REFERENCES
 Brownell, M., Chartier, M., Au, W., MacWilliam, L., Schultz, J., Guenette, W., Valdivia, J. (2015). The Educational Outcomes of Children in Care in Manitoba Winnipeg, MB. Manitoba Centre for Health Policy, June.
 Rutham, S., & Hubberstey, C. (2016). Fostering Success: Improving Educational Outcomes for Youth in/from Care. Victoria, BC: University of Victoria.

Jacqueline Gahagan Jacqueline.Gahagan@msvu.ca Kristyn Anderson Kristyn.Anderson@avrce.ca
 Susan McWilliam Susan.McWilliam@iwk.nshealth.ca Krista Ritchie Krista.Ritchie@msvu.ca
 Shingruf Chughtai Shingruf.Chughtai@msvu.ca



CONTACT INFORMATION