

Athlone Institute of Technology

A Student's Case Study Analysis of

The Effectiveness of Supports and Services In Third Level Education  
For Students Experiencing Social Disadvantage

Athlone Institute of Technology as a Case Study Site

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## Signed Declaration

I declare that this dissertation and the research involved in it are entirely the work of the author. The work, or part of it, has not been submitted for a qualification to any other institute or university.

Signature ..... Date .....

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## **Abstract**

It is widely acknowledged at a national and international level that supports and services that are provided to higher education providers contribute to improved social and educational outcomes for those young people who are socially disadvantaged. For this reason, In Ireland, it has become an important policy issue over the last two decades. Successive governments have developed policies based on the findings of research conducted into participation, retention and progression into third level education for young people who are socially disadvantaged. The recent downturn in our economy has impacted on government funding that was aimed at securing essential resources for socially disadvantaged young students, which in turn has required third level institutes to become more innovative in the provision of these supports and services.

This research explored the effectiveness of both the formal and informal supports and services provided by Athlone Institute of Technology, as AIT has a large volume of students that are grant assisted. The research strategy was qualitative, involving semi structured interviews with support and service provider educators and with the young students who are socially disadvantaged that access them. It explored their views and opinions on the effectiveness of these supports and services, and whether they contributed to a more positive third level experience. More importantly, it was able to identify possible future recommendations for the provision of supports and services in AIT.

Thematic analysis found that the provision of supports and services in AIT was overall a positive experience for the young people that accessed and availed of them. It supported them with financial assistance which otherwise would have jeopardised their participation. It improved their self-esteem, confidence, general wellbeing and also provided a social outlet. More importantly, all the young people that participated in the research study will be continuing and progressing in their chosen course. The thematic analysis also found that the support and service provider educators of third level supports and services in AIT were, despite being financially constrained, enthusiastic,

dedicated and professional in ensuring that those identified as in 'need' would be assisted immediately and continuously throughout their third level journey.

Therefore, this research study proves that the supports and services provided by Athlone Institute of Technology was effective in making a difference to the third level experience of young people socially disadvantaged. This research has provided evidence that these services support young people in participating and remaining at third level. Therefore its contribution to improved or better outcomes for young people socially disadvantaged is an important acknowledgement. Recommendations for future support and service provision at AIT include greater collaboration and links between national, secondary and third level education providers in targeting disadvantage at earlier stages of the lifecycle that would offset future need. In addition, the most crucial recommendation suggested were more adequate levels of funding and staff resources.

## Literature Review

### **Introduction**

According to The Education Act 1998, section 2 educational disadvantage is defined as: “The impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education”. And this is identical to Pierson’s definition (2002, p.7) who defines Social exclusion as *“a process that deprives individuals and families, groups and neighbourhoods of the resources required for participation in the social, economic and political activity of a society as a whole. This process is primarily a consequence of poverty and low income, but other factors such as discrimination, low educational attainment and a depleted living environment also underpin it. Through this process people are cut off for a significant period in their lives from institutions and services, social networks and developmental opportunities that the great majority of a society enjoys”*. This is supported by the HEA (2013) study that defines disadvantage as *“an individual’s learning and development adversely affected by circumstances of social and economic deprivation”*. (McMillan and Marks, 2003 as cited in McCoy et al 2014 p.12), highlighted that *“qualifications continue to play a key role in the trajectories that young people pursue in the labour market. Progression to third level for young people is associated with better outcomes”*, (McMillan and Marks, 2003 as cited in McCoy et al 2014 p.12).

The EU Ministers of Higher Education 2007 paper explains that higher education should play a strong role in fostering social cohesion, reducing inequalities and raising the level of knowledge, skills and competencies in society and that students should be able to complete their studies without obstacles related to their social and economic background. With this in mind the following literature review will endeavour to explore the following areas for discussion: the relationship between social disadvantage and third level participation. The impact of current government policy in providing funding for the provision of these supports and services at third level. It will also highlight the importance of these supports and services in relation to retention, participation, progress and better life outcomes for these young people. The study will also highlight



the importance of family dynamics, expectations and motivations that can impact the decision making process of participating at third level. Finally, it will outline how these supports and services are provided using Athlone Institute of Technology as a case study site, as they have a high proportion of grant assisted students, suggesting that there is a significant volume of students that could be socially disadvantaged. Dearden et al (2014) has highlighted that there is still a lack of evidence on the effectiveness of these supports and services. Therefore the foundation for my study will provide a clear rationale for why research is required. I aim to identify if there are any gaps in current research by providing new information from my study.

### **The relationship Between Social Disadvantage and Third Level Participation**

Despite the increase in the overall number of young people entering higher education, there remains a persistent underrepresentation in higher education of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds (O'Connell, Clancy, and McCoy, 2006a; O'Connell, Clancy and McCoy, 2006b; McCoy et al., 2010a as cited in McCoy 2014 p.14). Dorrity (2011) highlights the strong relationship between young people's socioeconomic background and the influence this has on future higher education participation. He further explains that the characteristics of socio economic disadvantage remain embedded and are likely to continue, if not increase, further exacerbating the barriers and challenges experienced by young people who may want to participate and progress in higher education.

McCoy (2014) found that young people are especially vulnerable to changes in economic conditions, with the degree of impact varying by their gender and level of education. He found that those young people that had progressed to third level were better equipped for the labour market. This is also supported by the OECD study 2014 that highlighted the link between education and future life outcomes. Machin (2006) emphasises that education is a key driver of economic and social success for individuals, employers and nations, as they are less likely to become dependent on welfare benefits to sustain their living costs. He recounts the ability of education to work as an instrument with the possibility to offset social disadvantage, as it provides a

platform to better work and life opportunities. This is supported by empirical evidence from studies that found there was significant scope for education to play a role in impacting the economic and social circumstances of people (Barro, 1997, Barro and Lee, 1993 and Krueger and Lindahl, 2001 as cited in Machin 2011 p.1). The HEA (2013) study recommended that there should be greater links established between higher education institutes, schools and families that nurture the academic potential of young people from socially disadvantaged areas. A study conducted by Anlezark 2010 (as cited in McCoy et al 2014 p.1) in Australia in 2008-2010 on the economic downturn found that although Australia encountered a mild downturn, the young people of Australia faced the biggest decline in full time employment. She found that participation in higher education could provide some protection for them at these particular times, this could be a similar finding in Ireland after our own recent recession.

While some young people make their transition from second to third level education with comparative ease, others can find the experience challenging and overwhelming. This can often result in young people dropping out of third level. This can often be the result of background factors such as class, gender, status and special education needs. In addition to this higher education institutes have seen a significant shift in funding and policies due to the economic downturn which has impacted on the level of supports and services they can provide for those young people experiencing disadvantage (McCoy 2014). Furthermore, young people who fail to make a successful transition to fulltime work or third level after finishing school can become *“trapped in a cycle of unemployment, part-time work and labour market programs rather than constructive career development”* (Sweet, 1998, p.7 as cited in McCoy 2014 p.8). The HEA (2013) study recommended that collaborative working in higher education offers an opportunity to create and develop new ways of working, and that by harvesting this knowledge, expertise and experience it would make possible the design and structure of new solutions that would enhance inclusion for those young people who wished to participate in higher education. Therefore, I would suggest that more collaborative work needs to be done to try and understand the relationships between social disadvantage

and third level participation. A useful starting point is to establish why policy should target social disadvantage and education.

### **Policy for Social Disadvantage and Education**

The Government of Ireland's (2006 p.56) study advocated "investing in further support measures in the areas of further and higher education will enhance participation by those from disadvantaged backgrounds", While work is underway to support Irish students in higher education, third-level institutions have traditionally been the domain of the middle-classes (Hodges, 2001 as cited in McCoy 2014 p.2). The OECD, 2010 study highlights the increase in youth unemployment. Machin (2006) explains that education is so inherently linked to social disadvantage that its influence on social policy that affects educational opportunities, is all the more relevant. He further describes that social disadvantage has wide and far reaching consequences since cycles of disadvantage can run across generations, through families and communities. Marks 2010 as cited in HEA (2013 p.40) study suggests that Ireland's rather complex standpoint, which promotes a product driven culture in higher education, can in turn marginalise young people from a lower socioeconomic background, and can make them feel that the route of higher education is not for them.

Machin (2006) also highlighted that research findings should have an immediate response for the design of education and social policies. The relationship between education and life chances, and the extent of social disadvantage warrants greater policy discussion regarding features of social policy and education, and more importantly the aspects of educational policy that has the greatest impact on social disadvantage. York and Thomas 2003 as cited in HEA (2013 p.42) found through their research that the success of retaining young people from a lower socio economic background in higher education requires strong policy, supported by ardent action plans. It is an important factor for my research study that I understand the reasons for effective government policy as they are the main contributors to the funding of supports and services provided to third level educators. Further to this is the necessity to understand the relevance of supports and services for those socially disadvantaged.

## **The Need for Supports and Services**

For many young students the progression to third level incorporates making hard decisions irrelevant of whether they wanted to go to college or not. Many young people found that financially it was not a possibility, and that a lot of financial planning would be required prior to making the choice to go to college. The financial costs associated with third level were placing these young students and their families under huge pressure (Dorrity 2011). Furthermore, Dorrity (2011) described how young students were unaware of the costs of books and IT, and that they had not factored in the costs of these resources when considering higher education. Dorrity (2011) further explained that although most of these young students were entitled to grants, some of them were waiting on their applications to be granted, which further exacerbated their daily college costs. The financial aspect of attending college acted as a barrier in the decision making process of attending college. And furthermore, this impacted on the overall college experience for those young people.

According to the Department of Education and Skills, 2011.p.56 as cited in HEA (2013 p.42) *“A positive first-year student experience is crucial to achieving the goals of higher education; failure to address the challenges encountered by students in their first year contributes to high drop-out and failure rates, with personal and system-wide implications”*. In order for young people to navigate the challenges involved in transitioning from second to third level young people need support to plan and prepare for this adjustment (McCoy 2014). Dorrity (2011) acknowledges that there is a need for supports and services for socially disadvantaged young people throughout the higher education institutes in Ireland. Many young students voiced their concerns about the lack of information provided at higher education institutes when they attended open days. They also criticised the level of bureaucracy involve in the process of applying for additional financial assistance, and that this was a further barrier to the student experience. Dorrity (2011) highlighted that whilst stress management was available to young people in all higher education institutes, many of these students were unaware that such services existed. Dorrity (2011) identified that young people often felt

inadequate, isolated and alienated and that these feelings presented as a considerable challenge to overcome. Many young students felt overwhelmed and anxious navigating the student experience.

Dorrity (2011) explains that recent changes to the provision of funding for the facilitation of supports and services had effectively hindered young students that are already disadvantaged. Furthermore, the cuts and changes to the student grants had also impacted on those young students struggling to remain and progress in college. This further supports the hypothesis that for most young people and especially for the cohort experiencing social disadvantage the financial cost of higher education can be an insurmountable barrier to participation in higher education. (Harvey et al, 200: Smith 2008 as cited in HEA 2013 p.30) found in their research that young people from socially disadvantaged backgrounds often were more likely to feel isolated, which subsequently impacted on their opportunities to participate in the wider social aspects of higher education. This was further supported by the findings of Dickerson and Stiefer 2006 as cited in HEA (2013 p.30), who explained that when young people from a socially disadvantaged background enter the 'new culture of college' they can often experience feelings of isolation, inadequacy and incompetency.

Dorrity (2011), highlighted that aside from the need for extra financial assistance for young people that are disadvantaged, it is important to acknowledge the importance of the emotional and psychological supports provided to young people, and the enormous benefit they are in aiding those young people who require a more 'one to one' counselling service. The HEA (2013) study highlighted that the traditional support model does not always meet the needs of a student with mental health conditions. In this instance the support needs to be immediate, individualised, holistic and varied. He also highlights how staff that deliver supports and services to young people feel that decisions taken at a policy level fails to take account of the young people's individual circumstances and the hardships which they have experienced. In Ireland, Callinan et al (2013) as cited in HEA (2013 p.15) highlights that the 'transactional costs' for example rent, travel, food etc, were another barrier for those young people from socially

disadvantaged backgrounds and this also influenced their decision in participating in higher education. McCoy and Byrne (2011) as cited in HEA (2013 p.18) found that financial constraints contributed strongly to the social inequalities that exist within higher education participation.

Dorrity (2011), highlighted that young people acknowledged the strong support administered by staff that deliver the supports and services. And also recognised that without this facility it is unlikely that they would have been able to progress and remain in higher education. Dorrity (2011) also highlights the strong relationship between young people's socioeconomic background and the influence this has on future higher education participation. He further explains that the characteristics of socio economic disadvantage remain entrenched and are likely to continue, if not increase, given the current economic climate. And no doubt will be further impacted by present and future cuts across the education sector. Therefore the cycle of social deprivation coupled with educational inequality will further exacerbate the barriers and challenges experienced by young people who may want to participate and progress in higher education.

Young students often rely on formal and informal sources for information for example school guidance counsellors and their own parents regarding what decisions to make upon finishing second level. Whereas Young students from a middle class background tended to rely more on their parents for a source of information. (McCoy 2014). The necessity of furnishing young people with a positive and appealing education experience cannot be underestimated in order to strengthen later life opportunities (McCoy 2014)

The HEA (2013) study recommended that there should be a greater emphasis from higher education institutes on retention as opposed to education. And that communities should be developed both socially and in education to encourage young people to progress to third level. It also highlighted the need for the provision of supports and services within institutes, improved staff development in understanding this cohort of students and the use of multiple teaching methods for improving educational attainment.

This is an important factor for my study considering I am conducting the research in Athlone Institute of Technology, with 1 in 7 students accessing supports and services (source: AIT Access Officer). It will also be interesting to explore how family influences can also hinder participation at third level.

### **The Influence of Family**

Clancy et al (2002, p.52) explains that *“the source of educational disadvantage is rooted in differential economic, social and cultural capital of families”*. Connolly (2006) found that while poverty in itself is a significant factor that influences participation at third level for young people, it is not the only characteristic, and is a symptom of a range of problems affecting families (Connolly, 2006). This is substantiated by Bronfenbrenner’s (1994) Ecological Systems Theory that emphasises the need to view a young person as situated within a number of systems, which in turn influences and impacts on their development. Secure family support was found to be a critical factor for disadvantaged young students’ decision in progressing to higher education. Many of these young people found that there was often a lack of knowledge of the higher education system within their own families, as they themselves had not attended third level. Therefore this lack of ‘insider’ knowledge was highlighted as a challenge when it came to the decision making process of advancing to third level (McCoy 2014).

Family has a strong influence on the educational and career choices of young people (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997 as cited in McCoy 2014 p.13). And this was supported by (Semple, Howieson and Paris, 2002 as cited in McCoy 2014 p.13), that found in their study that informal support networks (family and friends) had more influence on young people's career development, decision making and transitions than formal networks (career guidance). A study by Flannery and O’Donoghue (2009) as cited in HEA (2013 p.21) found that the level of parental education was a significant factor on whether young people from disadvantaged backgrounds chose to go to college. Current national and international studies indicate that family background still continues to influence educational attainment and future life outcomes. Social class still remains a powerful indicator in considering young people's future life outcomes. Post second level

for young people can present with major risks, whilst for others it can increase opportunities. Research continues to indicate that young students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to drop out of higher education than their middle or upper socioeconomic peers (Harding, 2003; Rumberger, 2001 as cited in McCoy 2014) and are less likely to participate in higher education (Parker et al. 2012; Horn and Berger, 2004; Orfield, Marin, and Horn, 2005; Rosenbaum, 2001 as cited in McCoy 2014 p.8).

James (2000 as cited in McCoy 2014 p.9) discovered that a large majority of students were eager to succeed, but that those young people from a lower socioeconomic background were more drawn to the instant returns that paid work would bring, rather than pursuing higher education. He further cited that these young people were 'marking time' at school until they could leave to find a job. Furthermore those young people that did progress to higher education failed to successfully transition from second to third level. Subsequently this impacted on their own individual lives, as well as the wider society in general. The Council for the European Union 2011 as cited in HEA (2013) p.58) advocated that partnerships should be developed and supported between schools and parents as key to motivating children to progress to higher education. It is important for my study to consider these family factors and how they further challenge young people socially disadvantaged at third level.

### **Expectations and Motivation**

McCoy (2014) comments that in addition to background characteristics, there are other factors that can impact on progressing to third level education for young people. Having high aspirations is likely to motivate a young person to set higher goals after leaving school further asserting that aspirations can become established at a relatively young age. James (2002), as cited in McCoy p.11, analysed survey data from over 7,000 Australian students and found that parental education was the most reliable predictor of the aspirations of young people to attend university. McCoy further explained that attitudes towards school also matter. Khoo and Ainley (2005) as cited in McCoy 2014 p.8 found that in Australia students with positive attitudes towards their school (including



their general satisfaction with school, motivation, attitudes to their teachers, views on school provision of opportunities, and sense of achievement) tended to have higher educational aspirations and a corresponding increase in education and training participation.

McCoy (2014) found that the young people from a middle to upper socioeconomic backgrounds route higher education is seen a natural progression from school, meaning that decisions primarily focus on what college, and what course, rather than whether to even advance to higher education. Almost all the young people from middle class schools applied to higher education, in contrast, just half of those from working class schools applied for higher education, a trend accredited to a climate of lower expectations in the school and local area. McCoy (2014), found that the school experience for young people made a significant difference to the direction followed upon leaving second level and were especially important in determining whether that young person advanced into post-secondary level education or training.

## **Summary**

Therefore, it is important to consider the overall benefits of supports and services and their contribution to third level education for young people socially disadvantaged. The supports and services provided by Athlone Institute of Technology, which is the focus of my study, operates out of the college campus, via a number of avenues, and is accessible during normal college opening hours and throughout the college calendar. However, one of the said services is provided 24/7. Athlone Institute of Technology currently caters for approximately 4,500 fulltime students and approximately 2,000 part time students (source: AIT Student Services). The provision of supports and services in AIT uses a holistic, student centred approach in the delivery of targeted assistance. It is funded through a variety of sources, the Department of Education, grants, and voluntary contributions (source: AIT Access Office).

Therefore, this study will investigate the effectiveness of the supports and services provided in Athlone Institute of Technology which has a high proportion of students that are grant assisted. It will explore its contribution to better outcomes for those young

people socially disadvantaged. It will also highlight the experiences and challenges that young people encounter when navigating the third level journey. It will explore the contribution of support and service provider educators on alleviating these challenges. It will then also investigate the effectiveness of these supports and services. The diversity and similarities of opinions of the support and service provider educators and student participants will be important for the findings of the research study, and indeed for any future recommendations. The literature review has exposed the many negative effects that being socially disadvantaged can encompass, however, the aim of this study is to evaluate how effective and influential these services can be on a young person's ability to overcome this challenges at third level. Apart from the Student Assist Fund Statistical Analysis conducted in AIT, there has been no personal study conducted on the supports and services provided by the college, even though they have been in existence for many years. This in itself explains that there is a necessity for this type of study to be conducted. Finally, I believe, such formal and informal supports and services that are specifically targeted at young people socially disadvantaged are making a difference to their participation, retention, and progression and future life outcomes. Yet their effects are not fully recognised nor indeed appreciated. Empirical studies provide evidence that targeted supports and services can increase participation in higher education (Dearden et al 2014). This research study will establish this unreservedly.

### **Aim and Objectives of the Study**

#### **Aim:**

The aim of the study is to evaluate the supports and services in third level for young students experiencing social disadvantage. Athlone Institute of Technology will be used as a case study site.

#### **Objectives:**

To determine the perspectives of students experiencing social disadvantage on the effectiveness of supports and services provided in AIT.

To explore the experiences of those frontline staff who provide supports and services in AIT to young students socially disadvantaged.

To make recommendations to improve future provision of supports and services in AIT for young students experiencing social disadvantage.

# Methodology

## Introduction

This section outlines the methodological approach applied to obtain and analyse my research findings. It highlights the research design, materials used, and recruitment of participants. It will explain the procedure employed in carrying out the study, including ethical considerations and finally how the data was analysed.

## Research Design

The research was an explorative study of the effectiveness of the supports and services provided in AIT for socially disadvantaged young students. For the purpose of my study a qualitative research method was deemed appropriate, as Sofaer (1999, p1101), *“describes qualitative research methods as more valuable in providing rich descriptions of complex phenomena; tracking unique or unexpected events; illuminating the experience and interpretation of events by actors with widely differing stakes and roles; giving voice to those whose views are rarely heard; conducting initial explorations to develop theories and to generate and even test hypotheses; and moving toward explanations”*. Further to this and more relevant to my study, is that qualitative research can influence the delivery and provision of services and supports as advocated by Pope (2002) who explains that qualitative work can help in recognising cultural and social factors that affect health care positively or negatively. Such evidence can be helpful in improving service delivery. This would be useful in ascertaining the objective of the research study on the effectiveness of the supports and services provided in AIT.

## Interview Design

I decided to use semi structured questions in the interview process for this study. There were several reasons why this research strategy was selected. Firstly, Pope (2002) highlights that semi-structured interviews are typically based on a flexible topic guide that provides a loose structure of open ended questions to discover experiences and attitudes. In-depth interviews provide an opportunity to gain more detail about an issue

or experience, and are particularly useful for exploring the lived experiences of people, because this method produces people's own views and accounts. And secondly, it can have the additional benefit of uncovering issues or concerns that had not been expected or considered by the researchers. In order to ensure that really detailed information is gathered, interview methods require experienced researchers with the necessary sensitivity and ability with which to establish rapport with participants, to use topic guides flexibly and follow up questions and responses. Semi structured interviews are the most appropriate for this research topic. I wanted to explore this topic in an in depth way and felt interviews would facilitate unexpected information that emerge.

Questionnaires could have been considered but they would not allow for the exploration of issues that could be raised in the research process. I considered the use of focus groups, but due to the sensitive nature of the research topic, felt that respondents would be unlikely to feel comfortable talking in a group situation in front of other students, whom they may know. This method would provide a much more thorough examination of social disadvantage and its effects on student participation at third level in AIT. It also offers a clearer understanding on the approach to the provision of supports and services in AIT.

Interviews were carried out with students between 18-23 years of age that have accessed the supports and services provided in AIT, and would be best placed to make recommendations on how to improve the supports and services in AIT for the future. The venue for the student interviews changed according to their own personal request. Interviews were also held with the supports and service providers of AIT, this was a crucial element of the research project as these participants could add valuable insights and contribute to a greater understanding of the complex issues surrounding social disadvantage.

### **Recruitment of Participants**

For the purpose of this study there were two participant groups required for the research study. I used purposive sampling to recruit the student participants. Purposeful

sampling is a method widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases for the most effective and current use of limited resources, (Patton 2002). This involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest, (Cresswell and Plano Clark 2011). In addition to knowledge and experience, Bernard (2002) and Spradley (1979) note the importance of availability and willingness to participate, with the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner.

### Students

Student participants were aged between 18-23 years of age as they were deemed best placed to harvest the information required as per the aims and objectives of the research topic. These included 3 females and one male over the age of 18, and no older than 23 years of age, who had accessed the supports and services of AIT. They are all 1st year Applied Social Studies and Social Care Practice students. The support and service provider educators highlighted to me that students from this particular course are more aware of these facilities in AIT, and that greater student numbers from these courses use them as opposed to the other student faculties. It has not been investigated why this particular cohort of students seem to be more aware of these supports and services, however, it could be related to the course they have undertaken. Applied Social Studies and Social Care Practice students will largely go on to work with individuals 'disadvantaged'. For this study the young participants will have experienced social disadvantage which has required them to avail of the supports and services provided by AIT.

### Support and Service Providers

These are the student support and service providers employed in AIT who facilitate the students in need of assistance in either a financial, technological or guidance capacity. They have all been employed for several years in AIT, which adds greater value and integrity to the research study. One of the support and service providers has worked 33

years within the campus. This wealth of knowledge and experience will further establish the effectiveness of the supports and services as per the aim and objectives.

### **Research Materials**

To undertake the semi structured interviews, I designed a number of information and consent forms, so each participant was fully informed about the research project (appendices 1 and 2). I then designed two different interview schedules (appendices 3 and 4), one for the student participants and a separate one for the support and service providers. My reasons for this was that I needed to seek different information from the two different participant groups and also to ensure that my questions mirrored the aims and objectives of the research project.

### Student Participants

The researcher piloted one interview schedule with a past student of AIT that had graduated in Applied Social Care and was still between the age of 18-23 who had accessed the supports and services. This was so the researcher could establish that the questions formatted would be applicable in obtaining the most relevant information for the study. From this, the researcher was able to make a few changes to the questions that were more suitable. All the student participants were asked the same questions. The types of questions used in the interview schedule ranged from what supports and services they accessed, to describing their own personal challenges and experiences of social disadvantage, and what if any recommendations they would have for the future provision of supports and services in AIT. (Appendix 3).

### Support and Service Providers

All three support and service providers were asked the same questions. These questions ranged from detailing the supports and services they were involved with, to describing the challenges and experiences they had witnessed of the young students

accessing them. Finally, I asked if they had any suggestions for improvement and future provision of supports and services in AIT. (Appendix 4).

## **Procedure**

My first step in the procedure was to recruit student participants who are socially disadvantaged and who have accessed the supports and services provided in AIT. Due to the nature and sensitivity of the study, it was felt that it would be more appropriate if the support and service providers acted as gatekeepers in recruiting the student participants on my behalf. On 7th April 2016, an email was sent to the 1st year Applied Social Care and Social Care Students in AIT, requesting their voluntary participation in my research project. This process only yielded one research respondent. However, after I gave her a detailed description of the details of the research, this one respondent was able to recruit three more participants for me. In sociology and statistics research, snowball sampling is a technique where existing study subjects recruit future subjects from among their acquaintances (Gordon 1961). The researcher had three female participants and one male participant. I was able to speak to all the participants face to face, to confirm their participation. The interview was held in a venue and at a time that was convenient for them. The average length of the interview was twenty minutes, and the duration of the interview procedure for student participants was conducted over four days.

## **Support and Service Provider Educators**

The second step was to arrange to meet with the support and service provider educators in AIT. These four support and service provider educators each had different roles within AIT. I met all four staff individually, explained the study to them and arranged an interview at a mutually convenient time at their place of work. The average length for each interview was thirty minutes, and the duration of the interview procedure for all support and service providers was conducted over four days.



## **Ethical Considerations**

My research proposal was approved by the ethics committee at Athlone Institute of Technology in March 2016. There were recommendations for slight adjustments, carried out in March 2016, in consultation with my research supervisor. A number of ethical considerations were taken into account, (Richards 2002), sanctions that some important ethical concerns should be taken into account while carrying out qualitative research, these are: anonymity, confidentiality and informed consent. Firstly, informed consent is essential when doing any research of this kind. (Hoeyer 2005), says that informed consent has been recognised as an integral part of ethics in research carried out in different fields. For qualitative researchers, it is of the utmost importance to specify in advance which data will be collected and how they are to be used. Participants received a letter outlining the type of research being conducted, a participant information sheet explaining what they might be asked and a consent form that they needed to sign as part of their agreement to participate (Appendix 1 and 2).

Secondly, confidentiality was a key consideration in conducting this research. The ultimate goal is complete confidentiality for every research participant, which (Baez 2002) refers to as the 'convention of confidentiality'. From the outset, participants were reassured that the interview would be confidential and that the data would only be used for the research study being undertaken. At the transcript stage, each participant was given a pseudonym and all transcripts were stored on a password protected computer. (Orb 2001), establishes that there are several effective strategies to protect personal information, for instance secure data storage methods, removal of identifier components, biographical details amendments and pseudonyms (applicable to names of individuals, places and organizations). Following the analysis of the data, any printed transcripts were shredded and following submission of the thesis, those stored on the computer were deleted.

Thirdly, participants were advised that they were under no obligation to participate in this study, that they could choose to stop the interview at any time and they did not have to answer any questions they did not want to. I also informed them that the tape could

be stopped at any time if they so wished. I guaranteed everybody that participated, that I would transcribe all the taped information to further protect anonymity. This was because of the sensitivity of the research topic. All participants received an information sheet before the study. A discussion took place with each person, outlining what the study was about, and again when the interviews took place. All participants gave voluntary consent, including permission to be tape recorded. And again, anonymity and confidentiality was guaranteed including no identifying information to be used in the final report. I also offered them a final copy of the research report, which was welcomed by everybody.

Finally, as I was aware of the sensitive nature of the topic being explored, I maintained a respectful, non-judgemental and attentive attitude at all times. Patton (2002) states that the human component in qualitative research is both its strength and weakness. It is considered a point of strength because it allows human insight and experience to develop new understandings of the world, and a point of weakness because it depends heavily on the researcher's skills, creativity, training and intellect. I made good use of interview skills such as prompts and checks during the course of the interview.

### **Data Analysis**

I typed up a full transcription of each interview. I read and reread the transcripts to form a general idea, searching for emerging themes. I made a note of major points, as they were becoming evident, so I could formulate them into themes for the data analysis. Themes are general concepts that emerge from diverse and detail-rich experiences of participants and provide recurrent and visible ideas regarding the subject of inquiry (Bradley 2007). After I had familiarised myself with the transcripts, I designed a preliminary coding system with which to categorise them for the data analysis. Codes are tags (Miles and Huberman 1994) or labels, which are given to whole documents (i.e., paragraphs, sentences or words) to help index key concepts while preserving the context in which they occur. For both of the different group participants I looked for similar themes, such as experiences, personal challenges and recommendations. I

used different coloured markers to highlight the similar themes that were identified. I continued this process until I had deciphered all the information from the data.

### **Quality in Qualitative Research**

Further to this Tracy (2010), recommends that the researcher applies eight criteria to establish whether a piece of qualitative research is trustworthy or not, advocating that the research should have a worthy topic. For this study evaluating supports and services provided in AIT for socially disadvantaged young students is a worthy topic to research. Second, that it is of rich rigour, this is accomplished during the data analysis process where the results are diligently deciphered. Third and fourth, that there is sincerity and credibility in the study, which is ascertained by my awareness of the sensitive nature of the topic being researched and the importance of showing dignity and respect to the participants. Fifth that it resonates with readers, in that it is clear and transparent in my account of the research study. Sixth, that the study has meaningful coherence, and this is produced by providing relevant information that is logical and worthwhile. Seventh, that my research will make a significant contribution to the field, and I feel that that my research would because it could identify gaps in the present area of supports and services and will also highlight future recommendations. Eight, that my research is ethical, this is achieved by adhering to the strict guidelines and practices produced by Athlone Institute of Technology when students are carrying out research project work.

### **Conclusion**

Therefore, in conclusion, this section detailed the methodology applied to the collecting and analysis of the research data. It explained the research design, the interview design, the recruitment of participants, the research materials, the procedure followed, the ethical considerations and the data analysis. Finally, this section highlighted the importance of quality in qualitative research and how I tried to achieve this. The findings of the research and themes are presented in the next section.

## Results

### Introduction

This section describes the findings of the qualitative study which explored the views and perspectives of young students who are socially disadvantaged and who have accessed the supports and services provided by AIT. Also, the views and perspectives of the support and service education providers who are charged with facilitating the supports and services were also explored. It will also present the recommendations from the young students and the service and support education providers on the future provision of these supports and services in AIT.

The findings will now be presented, based on the aims and objectives of the research study, the research questions and the recurrent themes that emerged from the data collection. These are as follows:

1. The reason/s that young students access supports and services
2. Most relevant supports and services accessed by students in AIT
3. The supports and services experience
4. What have been the outcomes for the young students accessing the supports and services in AIT
5. Recommendations on future provision of supports and services
6. Other unexpected issues

### **Theme One: The reason/s for accessing supports and services**

One of the first questions that was asked of both the young students and the support and service provider educators was to determine the reason/s that young students accessed the supports and services provided in AIT. There were definite similarities between the young students' answers and those of the education providers, and both of these are compared here.

### Young Students

All four of the young student participants felt that finance was the 'main' reason for accessing the supports and services here at AIT. As S2 explained, (19 year old 1st year Applied Social Studies student) explained: *"my parents can't afford to give me any more money, as they just don't have it"*. One of the four young students also accesses the learning support service as she has dyslexia (21 year old 1st year Applied Social Studies student). S4 explained: *"I wouldn't be able to complete my Continuous Assessment assignments without their help, I know I would fail, I never got the same help in school"*. Also three of the four young students have accessed the medical centre here at AIT (S1, S2 and S4). S1 (20 year old Applied Social Studies student), said: *"I had to see a doctor quickly, and it would have meant going home to see my own doctor and coming back again, and I wouldn't have had enough money to come back again"*.

### Support and Services Education Providers

All four of the support and service provider educators identified finance as the 'first' reason that most young students look to access the supports and services here at AIT. FL1 explained: *"I really think financial is huge especially since the changes in the grant that went from 15 to 45 km. They dropped the money"*. She further went on to explain: *"One time we had 90 students accessing saf (Student Assist Fund) maybe six years ago, now we have upwards of 500. That's 1 in 7, 1 in 8 roughly, requiring extra financial help and you know they have to make their case"*. FL2 supported this claim by explaining: *"over half of our students are grant assisted which would tell you that they are qualifying for a grant, and which would further tell you that they are coming from a lower socio economic group"*. FL 3 explained: *"I see a lot of young students struggle financially on a day to day basis, no money for milk, no money for bread, just simple things like that"*. However, FL4 whilst also highlighting the need for financial assistance went on to explain: *"that believe or not while we do provide financial assistance, which are terribly important, alongside this and equally as important is the 'one to one' conversations you have with the young students. When young students come through my door looking for assistance, these young people are 'awkward' who are not used to*

*looking for help. It doesn't 'sit' easily with them, therefore they are a little bit uneasy, reticent and shy about asking for help. So I often find that it is the conversation 'around' the needs that is terribly important".*

## **Theme Two: Most Relevant Supports and Services Accessed By Students in AIT**

This second question was to determine which were the most relevant supports and services that were accessed by the young students. This question would help in establishing the effectiveness of the educational supports and services as per objective one of my research study.

### Young Students

All four young student participants were recipients of the Student Assist Fund provided by AIT. All gave similar explanations as to its relevance for them. S1 explained: *"without the SAF I wouldn't be able to come to college".* This was also reiterated by S4, who explained: *"I have a Credit Union loan that I got before college because I hadn't received my grant then, so if I didn't get that payment I wouldn't be able pay off the loan".* S3 (20 year old Applied Social Studies Student), explained that the SAF *"pays for my food and essentials for the week"*, and S2 explained: *"It helps to pay my travel expenses to and from college, otherwise I don't know what I would do".* S2 went further to say that she had also accessed the emergency fund here at AIT saying that: *"one Friday afternoon, I had lost my bank card, and didn't know what to do or how I was going to get home. One of the other students told me to go to the Student's Union and see if they would help me. I had to fill out a form, but they were very nice and gave me money so I could get home".*

### Support and Service Provider Educators

Again all four of the support and service provider educators said that the most relevant support and service for the young students was the Student Assist Fund. FL1 explained that in order for a student to access funding: *"they have to fill in the forms and they have to be interviewed by me, they have to bring in their parents income that shows how much they are earning and the family situation. Their income and expenditures. So we*

*try as much as possible to make sure that the person 'is in need'. We have to be rigorous otherwise, we would have 3000 people coming in every week". FL2 explained: "that most young students will access funding through susi and the financial supports that are available there, and also our susi grants office so they are going to be mostly interested in the student assistance fund and the emergency fund". FL3 supported both these findings by explaining: "that in my role I do refer some young students to the Student Assistance Fund. I generally help them to fill out the forms. We do a rough budget together, of their income and expenditures. Often this seems daunting to the young student, but it is basically putting down what they spend on rent, food, heating, electricity, travel etc. And when they see this on paper, they are able to acknowledge that yes I do need help, and I do need the money". FL4 proclaimed that in his capacity he felt that the most relevant supports and services here in AIT was the emergency fund explaining: "I think we have a very good system here, in that we have an emergency fund, which means you get it NOW. There is a limit to it, unfortunately, you can get it twice, up to 50 euros. But the most important thing is that there is money there for them immediately, not tomorrow, or next week, because they cannot wait that long. If you are hungry, you are hungry!"*

### **Theme Three: The Supports and Services Experience**

This question was to explore the experiences of the student participants and compare their experiences with those that the support and service provider educators identified. This was an important question because it was relevant in determining the second of my research study.

#### Young Students

All the young students got to hear about the supports and services on the first day of college at the orientation event. All four felt that there was a lot to take in on that first day, and therefore they were really unable to digest all the information that was being presented to them at induction. S1 explained: *"I really didn't understand what the college meant by supports and services, but my mum was with me and she explained it to me that evening". S4 explained: "it was my mum that went over to them and asked*

*them about the Student Assistance Fund, there was no way I was going to do that". S2 explained that "I have a brother in the college that uses the SAF, and that's how I got to know about it. It was easy for me because he told me what I had to do, and he was able to help me fill in the forms". S3 explained: "the students union advised me to go and see the SAF Officer and apply for assistance, when I went to see them about my financial situation".*

### Support and Service Provider Educators

FL1 explained: *"that most young students in particular, get to hear of their supports and services through their 'mummy'. The parents would know that this is the department to contact. Generally when the young student is asked on the questionnaire of the saf, how they were told about us, 90 percent would say that it was from a friend or a parent or a relation. Not from our website, or from our posters, or the talk that we give in induction, it's from people around them".* FL4 explained: *"most young students would have been referred to me, or they would have heard about me around the campus".*

FL2 said: *"the college runs awareness campaigns and advertisements around the college but, that this is often overlooked by the students because of all the other adverts that are put up around the campus. FL4 found that "sometimes it is often other students that will come to her office and identify someone as 'being in need', then, we will ask that student to go back to that young person and encourage them to come to us and we will see what we can do for them".*

### **Theme Four: Effectiveness and Outcomes**

This question would help me to establish the effectiveness of the supports and services provided in AIT as per the first objective, and would also aid in ascertaining what future recommendations could be identified on the provision of supports and services as per the third objective for my research study.

### Young Students

All the four young student participants found the supports and services in AIT invaluable in providing them with financial assistance in helping them to participate and to continue



in college. S1 explained: *“that there was no way I could have completed this year without the help of the SAF, it just would not be possible”*. S4 also explained: *“because my mum and dad are not working money is very tight, so I can't go to them for extra money. I am very grateful to have the extra money from SAF”*. She also exclaimed: *“there is no way I would have been able to do the written assignments without the learning disability service. I didn't want to go to my lecturer and tell her, it would be too embarrassing, and everyone looks when you stay behind to see the lecturer”*. S2 explained: *“I really don't think I would have stayed on the course if I hadn't got help. I was ready to drop out, you get really fed up not having any money”*. This was also supported by S3 who claimed: *“I wanted to leave after the first month. I wasn't used to paying bills and getting food and stuff. And I couldn't believe how much money I was spending. Thank God for the SAF when it did come through!”*.

#### Support and Service Provider Educators

All four support and service provider educators agreed that the most significant and substantiated outcome of the supports and services provided by AIT was the SAF Analyst that was conducted which produced statistical evidence on the relevance of this programme. FL1 explained: *“approximately 85 percent of student on saf have succeeded in their course and that has been consistent over the past five years because we went back over five years of records”*. This was supported by FL2 who explained: *“it is of huge value to AIT to continue to contribute to the SAF because in terms of the way we are funded now in Higher Education you are funded by ‘bums on seats’, literally. So it is an investment to support people financially”*. FL3 and FL4 both talked about how they ‘follow up’ on young students who have been referred to them. FL3 explained: *“I follow up to see how they are getting on after we have recommended them to a specific service or support, be it counselling or medical help. I may just bump into them in the corridor or coffee dock - it is all very informal”*. FL4 supported this by explaining: *“I generally see them as I am walking around the campus, and just say Hi how are you and then it leads into a conversation with them about the other issues that they have been dealing with and how they are getting on. They all know that they can come to my office anytime, and if I am not there they can leave a note on my desk to*

*contact and my phone and email numbers are up one door. You generally know which of the young students that require regular and more ardent reviews of their situations or circumstances”.*

### **Theme Five - Recommendations**

This question was specifically aimed at establishing what both the student and support and service provider educators would like to see in the future provision of supports and services in AIT as per objective three for my research study.

#### Young Students

All four student participants felt that the first day of college at orientation was probably not the best time to furnish them with the information on the supports and services provided by AIT. S1 explained: *“I was with my friend on the orientation day and between registering and queuing to get my photo taken it was such a tiring day”*. S3 described: *“there was so much to take in and I had to go from one place to another place. I really was overwhelmed by it all, when I look back on it. I really don't remember too much about that day”*. S4 explained: *“Because my mum was with me I didn't bother listening to any of the talk on supports and services. She wanted to know everything and then told me what to do when we got home”*. S2 whilst laughing about it described: *“my mum came with me and I was so embarrassed because I thought people would be looking at me, as really I was so conscious about my mum I never took anything in that day at all. I think they should discuss the supports and services when we have actually properly started college and stuff like in our lectures”*. Only one of the four student participants had accessed the learning support department as they had dyslexia and needed help with assignments. The three student participants expressed that they wished that they knew more about this support as they would have used this service to improve their own assignments or would have used the academic writing service. S1 explained: *“although I don't have a recognised learning difficulty I find it hard to understand some of the things we are asked to do or how to do them. I don't want to ask the lecturer because they might think I am stupid. It would be nice to be*

*able to go somewhere and get someone to explain something to you, u know just like one to one or something”.*

### Support and Service Provider Educators

All four of the support and service provider educators have come to the realisation that the first day at orientation is perhaps not the best opportunity to make students aware of the supports and services that are provided in AIT. FL1 explained: *“on the first day there is lots of information for them to take in and it just goes over their heads”*. And that: *“we are not putting ourselves out there enough. We have a lot of services but we are not hugely accessible. We do not have one specific point that students can go to and say hypothetically life is crap at the moment can you help me? And then we are not advertising enough at the moment, and getting the word out there”*. Again all four support and service provider educators felt that more money for resources would certainly alleviate a lot of the challenges that young students experience. FL2 explained: *“well more money i suppose would be great but the pot for providing that is very little and has diminished significantly over the last few years so you could say that we want more money for financial supports but what do you do then to take away money from one area to give students more money in another. Do you take away counselling. Do you take away disability and learning supports? All are valid and needed, so you know you are robbing Peter to pay Paul unfortunately, so what is needed actually is a different approach by the Higher Education Authority and the Government around funding for education and I don't know what the answer is I am not an actuary”*. Three of the four support and service provider educators highlighted the need for more tutorial lessons especially around exam time. FL3 explained: *“I would say that students that are disadvantaged need that little bit more help especially around exam time, so yea for me there is a definite requirement for more tutor support for students”*. All of the four support and service provider educators declared that the provision of counselling within AIT whilst very good, was insufficient in meeting the number of students that required this service and support. FL3 explained: *“there is a huge backlog of students for the counselling service so ideally a third full time counsellor would be great for the campus”*. All four had corroborated that year on year

AIT had witnessed an increase on students wishing to access this support and service. FL3 explained: *“on a daily basis we have young students coming in who ask, look I am not feeling great is there anywhere I can go and you say yes but there is a wait”*. Two of the participants talked about the success of the new campaign of ‘mind your mates’, which is encouraging students to look out for each other. This campaign is evident throughout the campus with students purchasing and wearing a blue wristband that highlights to their fellow students that they are approachable and willing to talk. FL4 explained: *“How lovely it was to witness how this campaign brings out the best in the students and their desire to help each other”*. FL3 supported this by explaining: *“If a student sees another young person in the coffee dock on their own and looking upset they could go over and make the effort to enquire if they could sit down for a few minutes and chat. For that young person it could make the world of difference from having a crap day to having the best day in AIT”*. To this end they both felt that since the campaign had rolled out very well they would like to see its continuation.

### **Theme Six: Other Unexpected Issues**

This question would help to identify and highlight if there were any other issues that either exacerbated or assisted young students in their circumstances that experienced social disadvantage. This would also help me to achieve the aim of the research study in evaluating the effectiveness of the supports and services provided in AIT.

#### Young Students

All four student participants felt that they were ill prepared for the transition from second level to third level and that even though they had all received career guidance, that at best it was inadequate and at times inaccurate. S1 explained: *“I think I was too young for college. Now when I look back maybe I should have done the Fetec before I came to college. A couple of my friends did it and I think it would have prepared me better for third level and what would be expected of me”*. This was supported by S2 who explained: *“this course can be quite tough, I didn't really realise all the different subjects and topics we would be covering. The mature students seem to understand the topics better and they tend to ask more questions and answer the lecturers when they ask the*

class questions. The lecturers must think we are really thick cos we don't answer as many questions as the older ones on the course". Three of the four participants found the first three months of college hard as they had to move away from home, pay bills, commute, feed themselves, and generally start to act like adults. S3 explained laughing: "the amount of times I lost my apartment keys when I first moved home was unreal but I got clever after having to pay for replacements all the time, so we left a window open in the bathroom so we could get in if we lost our keys". All four participants declared how friendly the support and service provider educators were and how approachable they were if they needed help, or to see anyone. S4 explained: "I was dreading starting college and acted the maggot at first drinking a lot and not turning in for class but after I failed a couple of things and then asked for help, I now really enjoy coming into college. I know I am not the brightest in the class but I am so thankful for all the help that they have given me. I reckon I would just have dropped out and be 'bumming' around town now with no hope of getting a job".

#### Support and Service Provider Educators

All the four support and service provider educators praised the 'friendly' and 'community' atmosphere that was evident within and around the college. They also talked about how important this was in being able to 'reach out' to those young students who were experiencing personal challenges because of their social disadvantage. FL2 explained: "I think it is because of several factors - the atmosphere in the college, the ethos. There isn't big divisions within the college, if you take the canteen there, the majority of the staff sit out with the students for lunch. There is a staff canteen but very few people go to that. Everybody likes to sit out with everybody. Like I was showing someone round the college the other day and the President and the Registrar of the college was sitting amongst the students and chatting having their morning break. And you do not get that in every college. So there is not a distance between staff and students, and within staff between levels of staff". All four participants talked about the resiliency and determination of this particular cohort of students and FL2 explained: "actually, in terms of what they experience, it is an individual's own choice if they want to label themselves or declare themselves or distinguish themselves in any particular way.

*Generally speaking young people don't want to be identified as the one who can't afford to be here, you know they don't want any of the negative associations". FL4 described them as: "passionate and dedicated, often having overcome great adversities in their life". All four of the participants spoke about their frustrations at a national level of the lack of credence that is given to the relevance of these supports and services to young students experiencing disadvantage. FL1 explained: "at a national level there needs to be more done. We have been doing so much and we are trying, but you almost feel that you are being undermined at a national level. Because I am out there trying to encourage people to come college, get a good education, saying it will give you a better chance in life, and then financially there is just not enough money. You get so frustrated". FL2 supported this by explaining: "the funding model has changed a lot, so if your student numbers go up or down it immediately affects what you have in terms of your budget to run the college".*

## **Summary**

The findings from this research study indicate that the supports and services provided by Athlone Institute of Technology is a valuable asset to the students that access them. All the young students that participated in the research maintained that the provision of these supports and services had assisted them in attaining the required end of term grades that has enabled them to progress and continue with their course. They indicated that there were definite benefits for them not just academically but also mentally and financially. As highlighted above the most critical support and service provided was financial, but they also emphasised the significance of the other supports and services, for example health and counselling that is a contributory factor to young students staying and progressing on their course.

In addition to the testimonials provided by the students and support and service provider educators. The research study was able to highlight the statistical evidence on the effectiveness of the supports and services provided by AIT through the analyst that they conducted on the Student Assistance Fund that covered the previous five years. However, there were some issues that became evident as areas of concern, these

related to limited funding, lack of additional resources, changes at a national level on the funding of Higher Education and a lack of awareness of the supports and services provided in AIT. The next section will therefore discuss the findings of the research study. I will also suggest some recommendations that may further strengthen and enhance the present and future provision of supports and services provided in AIT.

## **Discussion**

### **Introduction**

This section highlights the key findings of the research study and discusses the emergent themes, relating them to the literature in the field. The research study aim and objectives will be highlighted throughout this process. It will also consider and discusses the relevance of supports and services for those young students experiencing social disadvantage in AIT in assisting them to continue and progress in their courses. In particular the significance of finance will be addressed as it was a major recurrent theme within the study. The financial costs associated with third level participation is placing these young students and their families under huge pressure (Dorrity 2011). In relation to the effectiveness of these supports and services in AIT, it will discuss the challenges that both the student and support and service provider educators have experienced. It will discuss the limits of funding, lack of additional resources and the impact this will have on future provision of supports and services in AIT. The limitations of the research study will be considered and some suggestions for future research will be highlighted. A conclusion will be outlined, where finally, I will outline some recommendations that could be considered for strengthening and enhancing the future provision of supports and services in AIT.

### **The Relevance of Supports and Services for Socially Disadvantaged Students**

The most compelling truth to emerge from this research study is how extremely relevant the need for supports and services in AIT has become for young students experiencing social disadvantage. According to the Department of Education and Skills, 2011.p.56 as cited in HEA (2013 p.42) *“a positive first-year student experience is crucial to achieving the goals of higher education; failure to address the challenges encountered by students in their first year contributes to high dropout and failure rates, with personal and system-wide implications”*. There are a whole range of supports and services available to students in AIT and these are very much decided based on the ‘needs’ of the individual student. The provision of supports and services plays a central role in providing financial, academic and personal assistance to students experiencing social disadvantage which enables them to participate and progress in third level education in



AIT. Dearden et al (2014) explained that supports and services provided at third level is widely used as a tool to promote higher education participation. The supports and services not only contribute to retaining students in education but in also allowing students to improve their academic performance, and assisting them to make positive choices and changes in their personal circumstances.

The AIT website provides a comprehensive and detailed description of the supports and services that students can access. In addition to this they run awareness and publicity campaigns to highlight these facilities within the college. AIT also have pamphlets and booklets with which students can take, read and refer to should they need to furnish themselves with this information. Some of these services and supports that can be accessed are the Access Office, Disability Service, Pastoral Care, Counselling Service, Careers Service, Health Centre and Tutors (this is not an exhaustive list). In addition to these supports and services, students that are financially challenged can access the Student Assistance Fund (saf) in AIT which provides additional financial assistance for full-time higher education students who are experiencing financial difficulties whilst attending college. Students can apply for Student Assistance to help them with either temporary or ongoing financial difficulties. The Student Assistance Fund provides a further source of funding for higher education students in addition to the student grant. Each year, the State allocates a certain amount of Student Assistance funding to all publicly funded higher education colleges based on the size of the college's full-time student population. Students in need of financial support can then make application in the college for assistance under the Fund (source: [www.ait.ie](http://www.ait.ie)). Aligned with this funding is the emergency hardship fund that provides emergency funds for students who find themselves without no money but in dire immediate need of it.

What became very evident in the course of the research study was the growing recognition of the role that the supports and services department played within AIT, in assisting the needs young students experiencing social disadvantage. The Department has seen a significant increase on the demands for these supports and services in AIT. The recent recession is a significant factor for the decrease in households' incomes and

expenditures, Dorrity, (2011) highlighted the strong relationship between young people's socioeconomic background and the influence this has on future higher education participation. The availability of extra cash that parents would have had to contribute to their children's education has greatly diminished over the recent years. It is evident from both the young students and the support and service education providers who participated in this research study, that there is a clear need for these supports and services.

### **The Effectiveness of the Supports and Services Provided in AIT**

In order for young people to navigate the challenges involved in transitioning from second to third level, young people need support to plan and prepare for this adjustment (McCoy 2014). All four of the student participants accessed the financial services provided in AIT and maintained that without this assistance they would not have been able to stay and progress in college, also indicating that dropping out of college could have become a realisation. There is no doubt that the accessing of these supports and services acts as a buffer to overcoming the many challenges that young students socially disadvantaged encounter. This proves that financial assistance is an effective support provided to students experiencing social disadvantage. It is clear from the research study that the supports and services provided by AIT have been developed to account for budget cuts and the changed personal circumstances that some families have found themselves. The supports and services educators spoke highly of the culture and climate that is visible throughout the campus. All four support and service educators referred to the 'community spirit' that was evident throughout the campus. There is a strong collaborative approach to their work in delivering the best supports and services to those young students deemed disadvantaged. A culture and climate of promoting dignity, respect, confidentiality and inclusion exists throughout the campus. The frontline staff talked passionately and affectionately of these young students, and described them as 'dedicated', 'hardworking' and 'eager, in spite of the many challenges they were experiencing. And this was reciprocated by the young students who described the frontline staff as 'approachable', 'friendly', 'helpful'" and 'kind. This is an

important finding from the research study for measuring the effectiveness of the supports and services provided in AIT.

The findings provide evidence that the young students gained direct and indirect benefits in progressing and continuing on their course as a result of accessing the supports and services provided by AIT. Such benefits included being able to continue in college and not drop out. The student participants recalled improvements in their ability to understand their subjects better, such as psychology, mental health and social studies, for example. As S2 explained: *"I really don't think I would have stayed on the course if I hadn't got help. I was ready to drop out, you get really fed up not having any money"*. And S3 supported this claim by explaining: *"I wanted to leave after the first month. I wasn't used to paying bills and getting food and stuff. And I couldn't believe how much money I was spending. Thank God for the SAF when it did come through!"*. However the young students also described other personal improvements for them such as confidence, self-esteem and communication. The research also found that although individual factors such as participation and motivation are very individual in nature they can also be linked to a young student's family background experience. These are relevant factors that are crucial to consider for better or improved life outcomes. Young students highlighted the importance of the service that is one to one. The research findings discovered that the young students appreciated the personal qualities of the support and service education providers. However concerns were expressed about the long waiting times for this service. This was a relevant finding in my research study as it formed one of the recommendations for future provision of services as per one of my objectives.

Statistical evidence was provided on the effectiveness of these supports and services provided by AIT through the data analyst that was conducted on the Student Assistance Fund which went back over the previous five years of student claimants. This analyst produced statistical evidence that proved that year on year, due to the contribution of the saf for students in AIT, retention and progression had soared. This was also a significant factor for establishing the effectiveness of the supports and services as per the aim and objectives. AIT has typically between 60 to 70 percent of students on

grants. In comparison to universities I.T's will have a much higher level of socially disadvantaged students. McCoy (2014) explains that young people from working-class backgrounds were less likely than their middle-class peers to go on to higher education, a pattern that was largely related to their lower levels of Leaving Certificate performance. As FL1 explained: *"One time we had 90 students accessing saf, maybe six years ago, now we have upwards of 500. That's 1 in 7, 1 in 8 roughly requiring extra financial help"*. The fact that this has happened within the last six years could be attributed to Ireland's recent recession which affected government spending and impacted service and support provision. It is clear that AIT will need to continue to produce statistical evidence to support the current and future provision of supports and services. Therefore it is vital that AIT continues to take a more strategic and research driven approach if they are to support their claim for more government funding for present and future services. The results of monitoring and evaluation will provide important inputs for future policy developments within higher education, This was an important finding of the research study for improving service and support provision in AIT and for future recommendations.

Another finding from the research study was the relevance of student feedback in monitoring and evaluating the supports and services provided in AIT. The literature suggests that being able to measure student success at third level and the contribution made by student supports and services is a critical but neglected area (CVCP, 2000, p24). FL3 explained: *"I often meet people informally in the corridor or in the coffee dock and just ask them how they are getting on, and this usually leads on to talking about the other issues that they have had to access supports for"*. This is corroborated by S3 who explained: *"they were so helpful and friendly to me, and didn't make me feel as if I was being a nuisance or anything"*. It is very clear that support and service education providers are keen to support those young students experiencing social disadvantage, but not all those staff are relating the value of their work into a statistical analysis of success. In this instance student feedback is highlighted throughout the research study as an important element of the monitoring and evaluation process, especially in the absence of not being able to produce statistical data analysis evidence. FL1 explained:

*"I think the young students are supported quite well in comparison to some other colleges. Like that's what we are getting from the feedback. Some of the young people who have transferred from other colleges, or from some of the students that have gone on to other colleges have reported back that I am not as well minded as I have been in AIT".* Consulting with young students experiencing social disadvantage is paramount in determining that the content, format and design of supports and services are representative of their needs. It also helps to ensure that student supports and services for this particular target group of students is language appropriate, accessible, user friendly and well publicised. However, it has to be emphasised that regardless of how informative student feedback is for the supports and services provided at AIT it cannot substitute academic research into the young students lived experiences. This is an important research finding as it aligns with my third objective in identifying future recommendations.

The research study also found that certain groups of students do face different problems that hinder their academic progression. These needs often require a more specific solution focused approach, this can take the form of a particular support such as the learning and disability services. This service is 'tailor made' to meet the specific learning needs of that particular student for example a student with dyslexia. As S4 explained: *"I wouldn't be able to complete my Continuous Assessment assignments without their help, I know I would fail, I never got the same help in school".* And also exclaimed: *"there is no way I would have been able to do the written assignments without the learning disability service. I didn't want to go to my lecturer and tell her, it would be too embarrassing, and everyone looks when you stay behind to see the lecturer".* In this regard we can deduct from this finding that AIT provides a student centred holistic approach to the provision of their supports and services

### **Funding and the Lack of Resources**

In addition to this higher education institutes have seen a significant shift in funding and policies due to the economic downturn which has impacted on the level of supports and services they can provide for those young people experiencing disadvantage (McCoy

2014). The research findings of this study also discovered that current funding is inadequate to meet the challenges that young students experiencing social disadvantage are exposed to. McCoy (2014) found that young people are especially vulnerable to changes in economic conditions. And that it is not only financial resources that are limited, but that human resources are stretched too. All four support and service education providers were stalwart in this claim. They all reported to the research study that there were escalating demands for counselling services and extra tutor support. Funding allocation is at the discretion of the funding body of the Department of Higher Education, and has seen a decrease year on year for the last five years. The Student Supports and Services Department of AIT have to apply for funding grants which is often positioned alongside the number of students that attend the college. AIT has witnessed a significant increase in students requiring the needs of learning support. In this regard, AIT has had to employ more staff to extend services that are available to students and to give additional staff training. In this particular climate where finances are constantly challenged, AIT support and service education providers have had to make hard decisions on the provision of their resources to those young students socially disadvantaged. The constant 'squeezing' of resources year on year makes responding to the need for new initiatives for meeting the needs of students experiencing social disadvantage increasingly hard. As FL2 explained: *"more money i suppose would be great but the pot for providing that is very little and has diminished significantly over the last few years so you could say that we want more money for financial supports but what do you do then to take away money from one area to give students more money in another. Do you take away counselling? Do you take away disability and learning supports? All are valid and needed, so you know you are robbing Peter to pay Paul unfortunately, so what is needed actually is a different approach by the HEA and the Government around funding for education"*. This was an important research finding in determining the perspectives of the support and service education providers on the current situation for funding these facilities in AIT. This would further assist with producing recommendations for future provision of supports and services in AIT.

What also became apparent from the young students who participated in the research was that some of them were unaware of the number of supports and services provided in AIT. The research study discovered that the supports and services were open to all students of AIT, challenging the assumption that they only existed to support students that presented with 'problems'. FL2 explained: *"we don't disadvantage anybody, everybody can equally access these services. But those who are more socially disadvantaged are going to access certain parts of the service"*. And further exclaimed: *"AIT supports and services education providers are proactive in their approach within the campus in promoting their supports and services as meeting the needs of all students, irrespective of background or personal circumstance"*. In many cases the support and education providers refer on any young student that they feel may require other supports and services provided in AIT, for example, counselling or learning support. AIT support and service education providers recognise that there needs to be a greater awareness from lecturers in helping to identify students that may be 'in need' of the supports and services provided in the college. This can often be a contentious issue for lecturers who may feel that this is outside of their remit. Yet as the research suggests, the central position of the academic tutor is that they are *"the cornerstone of student support"*, (Dodgson & Bolam, 2002, p30). They also suggest that the *"success and effectiveness of the system is still very much dependent upon the attitudes of the individual staff and students that are involved"*, (p52). Therefore, AIT needs to constantly consider how their supports and services can be made more effective and successful. This finding was particularly important in making recommendations for future provision of supports and services for AIT.

The support and service education providers identified the range of supports that AIT provided to maximise the participation and progress at third level for young students experiencing social disadvantage. These resources represented a comprehensive plan to facilitate these young students. These resources were also helpful in addressing any other difficulty that may be hindering their progress at third level. An inability to cope in certain circumstances places these young students at a distinct disadvantage to their peers. The picture that emerged from the research findings was that the often complex

situations that young students found themselves in, and were unable to cope with, for example, feeling isolated and not fitting in further supported the need for this important services. The mental well-being of students is a growing area of concern for many higher education institutes. There is growing recognition that many students face increasing pressure during their time in Higher Education, for example low self-esteem, isolation and feelings of inadequacy. In relation to more specific mental health issues, for example bipolar, eating disorders and psychosis. The research study discovered that there has been a significant increase in the number of young students experiencing mental health difficulties. This in turn has had an impact on the demand for counselling services for young students. Support and service education providers felt that the addition of one more full time counsellor would alleviate the enormous waiting times that is currently being experienced by this service in AIT. In this regard it could prevent students reaching a crisis situation that would require a more intense clinical intervention for example hospitalisation or the use of drugs. As FL3 explained: *“there is a huge backlog of students for the counselling service so ideally a third full time counsellor would be great for the campus”*. And further described: *“on a daily basis we have young students coming in who ask, look I am not feeling great is there anywhere I can go and you say yes but there is a wait”*.

### **Limitations of Research**

This is a cross sectional piece of research on one case study site, while it provides very interesting findings for this point in time, they are only relevant now. While it could be used in future comparative studies, longitudinal research would also be very beneficial. A longitudinal research approach would show whether the use of these supports and services has had an improved or better outcome over time. AIT could provide past young students who have accessed the services and supports during their course with a questionnaire after the first year of leaving college and then subsequently every year thereafter for five years. The questions could reflect the past students circumstances both professionally and personally within the five years without crossing confidentiality and anonymity boundaries. This research could be conducted in much the same ways as the student surveys are managed presently in AIT, for example by the use of email,



this does not require too much time or inconvenience for the participant. This would also allow for the data to be collated and analysed using up to date data analysis programmes with which to present the findings. It would also be helpful for this research topic, if the project was undertaken in collaboration with other higher education institutes in Ireland. This type of longitudinal and multi case study research could provide a national database which colleges could use to influence policy changes in higher education and also when arguing for additional funding and resources. This is supported by the HEA (2013) study that recommended that collaborative working in higher education offers an opportunity to create and develop new ways of working, and that by harvesting this knowledge, expertise and experience it would make possible the design and structure of new solutions, that would enhance inclusion for those young people who wished to participate in higher education.

## **Conclusion**

This research study report begins by acknowledging the important contribution that the Student Supports and Services Department has made to the lives of young students that have experienced social disadvantage in AIT. This report highlights the quality of the support and service education providers in AIT. It highlights their commitment and dedication in the delivery of these supports and services often under resource and funding limitations. In addition the research findings acknowledge the qualities and attributes of young students that have experienced disadvantage in their strengths and abilities to navigate the third level journey despite the many obstacles that they encounter. The research was able to provide evidence on the effectiveness of the supports and services provided in AIT by determining and exploring the perspectives of both the young students who accessed the services, and those of the support and service education providers who delivered them, as per the aim and objectives research study. Further to this the research findings were able to identify recommendations on the future provision of supports and services, as per the third objective.

## **Recommendations**

The following are recommendations that have been identified following the research study:

Improved government policies and initiatives that encourage higher education institutes to develop more proactive strategies to support students.

More statistical analysis and monitoring evaluations that provides evidence on the effectiveness of supports and services in AIT, (not just for the student assistance fund) so that there is not an over reliance on student feedback, and further this can be used to access grants for more funding and resources for the student supports and services within AIT.

The creation of a one-stop-shop at the AIT site that would enable all supports and services to become more accessible to staff and students (as identified by FL1 who explained: *"it would be great to see the development of a 'triage' approach to the delivery of supports and services here at AIT, Central for both the students and the staff"*).

A peer mentoring scheme that matches the academic ability of the mentor to the shortfall in tutor support available in AIT.

Finance workshops for students that instruct the students on managing money on a small budget, banking and managing money in general.

The employment of an additional full time counsellor for the college as it has been identified in the research study as being at crisis point at the present time (or at least a temporary part time counsellor that would address the huge back log).

A longitudinal research project that collaborates with all the IT's in Ireland, that would further investigate and evaluate the effectiveness of supports and services for young students socially disadvantaged.

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# **Appendices**



## **Appendix 1: Information and Consent Form for Service Providers**

### **Who I am?**

My name is Bridget Carey I am doing a study for my MA in Child and Youth Studies at AIT. For my study I am asking support and service provider educators of their experiences of working with young people experiencing social disadvantage in AIT.

### **Who is being asked to take part and what will we do?**

I am asking the service providers to take part in individual interviews. The interviews will be held in a convenient class room within AIT. A time and date will be arranged that suits you. I will ask you what your experiences are on providing supports and services to young people that encounter social disadvantage in AIT. Also I will be asking you what recommendations you may have for future supports and services.

### **Do I have to do this?**

No it is up to you to decide if you want to do it or not. If you decide to do it, you can change your mind later if you want to. You can stop at any stage.

### **What will be done with the information?**

I will tape the interview, I will write up a summary of what you and the others said in my report for my Masters. I will not put your name, or the names of any of the other front line staff, in my report. I might write down some things that you said, but I will not put your name to it. I will make a different name. The things that are said in the interview will only be used for my college report. I will not tell anyone in AIT, or anywhere else, about anything that you said at the interview.

**What will happen to the report?**

My supervisor will read the report and it will go into the library at AIT. I hope to present my report to professionals so that they can know how your participation in this study may influence the future provision of supports and services in AIT.

If you have any queries you can contact me at: 0863983252.

**Consent Form**

I agree to take part in this study on the experiences of providing supports and services for students in AIT. I understand that I will be interviewed for approximately 20 minutes. We will talk about my perspectives and experiences, I am taking part as long as I will not be named in the report. I know I can change my mind and drop out of the study if I want to.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

I ..... am also fully aware that the interview will be taped and I consent to the use of such equipment in my interview.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix 2: Information and Consent Form for Students**

### **Who I am?**

My name is Bridget Carey I am doing a doing a study for my MA in Child and Youth Studies at AIT in social disadvantage. For my study I am asking young students aged between 18-23 years of age who use the supports and services provided in Athlone Institute of Technology on what their views are of those supports and services and how effective they think they are.

### **Who is being asked to take part and what will we do?**

I am asking young students between the ages of 18 and 23 years of age to take part in individual interviews. I will interview between 4 and 6 young students. The interviews will be held in a convenient class room within the campus. A time and date will be arranged that suits you. I will ask you what your perspectives are on the supports and services, and how effective they are. Also I will be asking you what recommendations you may have for future supports and services.

### **Do I have to do this?**

No it is up to you to decide if you want to do it or not. If you decide to do it, you can change your mind later if you want to. You can stop at any stage.

### **What will be done with the information?**

I will tape the interview, I will write up a summary of what you and the others said in my report for my Masters. I will not put your name, or the names of any of the other young students, in my report. I might write down some things that you said, but I will not put your name to it. I will make a different name. The things that are said in the interview

will only be used for my college report. I will not tell anyone in AIT, or anywhere else, about anything that you said at the interview.

**What will happen to the report?**

My supervisor will read the report and it will go into the library at AIT. I hope to present my report to professionals so that they can know how their participation in this study may influence the future provision of supports and services at AIT.

If you have any queries you can contact me at: 0863983252.

**Consent Form**

I agree to take part in this study on the effectiveness of supports and services for students in AIT. I understand that I will be interviewed for approximately 20 minutes.. We will talk about my perspectives and experiences, I am taking part as long as I will not be named in the report. I know I can change my mind and drop out of the study if I want to.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

I ..... am also fully aware that the interview will be taped and I consent to the use of such equipment in my interview.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

### **Appendix 3: Questions for students aged 18-23 years of age**

1. Are you enjoying the course?
2. What does it involve?
3. What, if any, are the personal challenges that you have encountered in participating in participating in this course?
4. Are you aware of the supports and services in AIT and how to access them?
5. How are you supported in the course in AIT for example access/student support/tutorial services?
6. Were the supports and services easy to access in AIT?
7. Would you like to progress further in this course?
8. Are there any additional supports you feel you need to support you in your course in AIT?
9. Is there anything that is hindering you from progressing on your course in AIT?
10. Have you any recommendations for the future provision of supports and services in AIT.
11. Is there anything else that you feel is important that you would like to mention?
12. On reflection, could anything more have been done to help or support you in your course in AIT?

#### **Appendix 4: Questions for Support and Service Provider Educators**

1. Tell me about the supports and services you provide for students experiencing social disadvantage in AIT?
2. What are the most relevant supports and services accessed by students experiencing social disadvantage in AIT?
3. Are there additional supports and services that could be provided by AIT?
4. How would you describe this student cohort in AIT?
5. Why do you think young people access the supports and services here in AIT?
6. How are students supported in AIT?
7. What have been the outcomes for the students who accessed the supports and services in AIT?
8. What are the challenges that students experiencing social disadvantage have encountered in AIT?
9. What recommendations would you make, if any, on the future provision of supports and services provided by AIT?
10. Is there anything else you feel is important that you would like to mention?