

# Engaging Family Carers Across Ireland in Higher Education: A Case Study

## Introduction

In 2018, the Faculty of Lifelong Learning in South East Technological University (SETU) set about working in partnership with Family Carers Ireland (FCI), aiming to create a transformative and holistic educational experience for family carers across Ireland. Together, SETU and FCI co-created and delivered a level 6 (10-credit) Certificate in Family Caring, to formally recognise the role that family carers play in the lives of their loved ones.

Irish Health Survey figures indicate that one in eight people in Ireland aged over 15 are family carers (Central Statistics Office, 2019). Extrapolating to current estimates of the national population suggests that some 516,594 people provide regular unpaid care. FCI is a national charity that supports these family carers, who care for loved ones such as children or adults with disabilities, frail older people, terminally ill people, and those suffering from chronic illnesses or addiction (FCI, 2022b).

## The project

SETU sought out and fostered a rewarding partnership with local, regional, and national family carers through FCI. The aim of the project was to support family carers across Ireland to engage effectively in educational equality by providing access to a fully funded Certificate in Family Caring. It was funded by the Dormant Accounts Fund administered by Pobal, a state-sponsored organisation with responsibility for administering and managing government and EU funding aimed at supporting social inclusion.

Access to a third-level programme was provided to family carers, who are often pushed into low-income brackets because they had to leave the paid workforce and



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**This article provides a case study about what works in co-creating an innovative, accredited programme between higher education and the voluntary sector. It shares examples of good practice in improving accessibility to higher education for first-generational learners. It analyses practical aspects of the partnership and summarises the outcomes of the co-created programme.**

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because of the high costs of their caring roles (FCI, 2022c). Funded part-time third-level opportunities, such as the Certificate in Family Caring, are therefore a viable and attractive higher-education option for many family carers.

The SETU–FCI project began in 2018 through a shared interest in developing an innovative and bespoke programme for family carers. The profile of learners is presented in Table 1. Of particular note is that the project enabled 94% of learners (162) to enter higher education (HE) for the first time.

DESCRIPTION	METRIC
Percentage of participants on a higher education course for first time	94%
Total number of participants completing the course	162
Number completing the course in face-to-face format	61
Number completing the course in online format	101
Female : Male ratio	156 : 6

Table 1: Profile of learners

The learners who engaged in this project reflect the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population. They are family carers providing intimate, physical, and emotional care to loved ones with acquired brain injuries, dementia, and mental health problems, and to their own children with special needs.

This project addresses areas identified in an independent review of access to higher education, which focused on 'extending the existing special provision for carers to lone parents caring for someone other than their child' (Byrne & Murray, 2017, p.31). The review did not report on any targeted mechanism for mature carers in HE, but it noted that 'part-time/flexible provision is likely to facilitate increased participation in HE for lone parents' (ibid., p.32).

## Delivery

The delivery schedule for the Certificate in Family Caring was agreed with FCI, and the locations were based on the Health Service Executive's model of Community Health Organisations (CHO) (Figure 1).

*Irish Health Survey figures indicate that one in eight people in Ireland aged over 15 are family carers.*



Figure 1: Location of delivery

The FCI advertised the programme directly to the family carers. The six-week programme was delivered nine times between December 2019 and July 2020. When the Covid-19 pandemic began, SETU recognised the value of continuing the programme and pivoted to online delivery. This meant the mode of delivery varied (see Table 2). A total of 162 people completed the course, 61 in face-to-face format and 101 online.

DELIVERY NO.	AREA	LOCATION	MODE OF DELIVERY
1	CHO 3	Limerick	In person
2	CHO 7	Kildare	In person
3	CHO 6	Wicklow	In person
4	CHO 4	Cork	In person
5	CHO 9	Dublin North Central	50:50 in person & online
6	CHO 1	Cavan	Online
7	CHO 8	Laois	Online
8	CHO 2	Roscommon	Online
9	CHO 5	Clonmel	Online

Table 2: Programme delivery

## Outcomes

FCl and SETU acknowledged the importance of engaging learners in evaluation, seeking qualitative and quantitative feedback throughout the project.

From a quantitative perspective, evaluation forms were returned by 36 face-to-face course participants (59%) and 40 online participants (39.6%). Over 83% rated the course as excellent on four key aspects in both modes (Figures 2, 3). Almost all agreed or strongly agreed that the programme met their expectations and gave them new skills or insight.

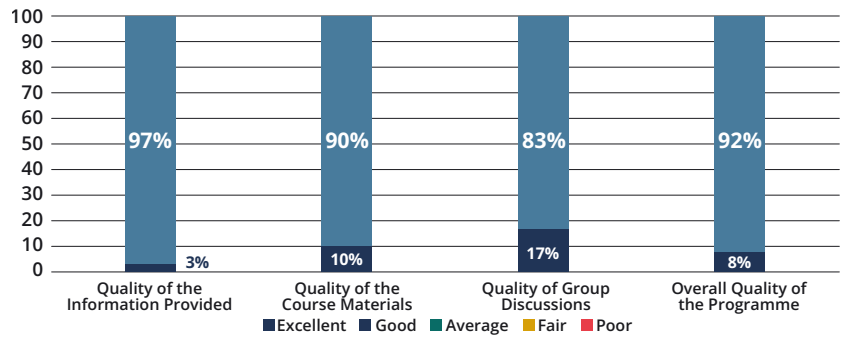


Figure 2: Face-to-face satisfaction levels

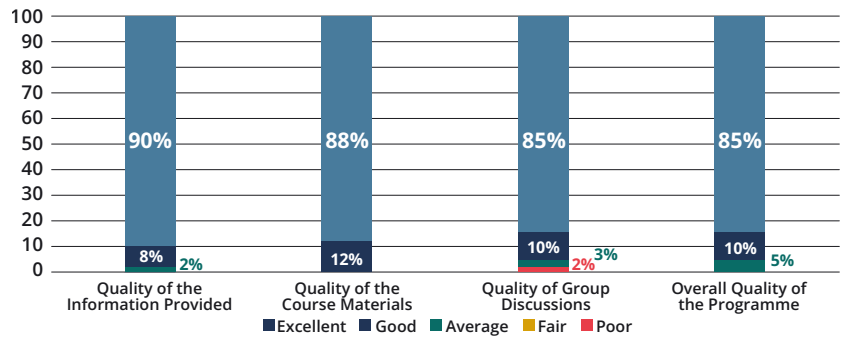


Figure 3: Online satisfaction levels

From a qualitative perspective, feedback showed that the project has fostered an inclusive and positive environment that valued and supported learners in achieving their highest potential:

*I also loved checking in with everyone, as it made me feel like I wasn't alone. We all connected, and for me the course was a safe place to speak and not feel judged.*

Social integration was a key theme. Participation in the course reduced social isolation for family carers and gave them self-care techniques to support them in their role:

*I felt it gave me a better understanding of how to incorporate the needs as well as the aspirations of the people I care for, to provide the best care now and moving forward in their future through understanding legislation and advocacy, and the importance of my own self-care to ensure I can provide the best care for them.*

Another participant said:

*I enjoyed the honesty of the participants in sharing what their daily life was like as a carer. It brought a solidarity. There was a solidarity in hearing about the challenges and rewards in carrying out this role.*

## Co-creation in higher education

This project focused on increasing family carers' access to higher education through innovative, agile, and flexible provision. There is minimal literature on how best to achieve co-creation between higher-education institutes (HEIs) and industry, despite growing recognition that industry involvement can, and should, play an integral role in higher education (Shrivastava et al., 2022).

A primary concern was to ensure development of a suitable and relevant module for family carers while marrying academic rigour to caring relevance and application of theory to practice (ibid.). This meant the content needed to be constructively aligned to a level 6 certificate on the National Framework of Qualifications, while maintaining significant focus on the learning that occurs outside the conventional classroom and within the communities in which family carers care for loved ones.

This project shows the merit of HEIs proactively seeking collaborations with charities and other organisations that represent sections of the population who are underrepresented in higher education or have a high proportion of first-generation learners. It reflects the importance of designing programmes specific to the needs of learners, not just offering generic programmes. Lastly, it shows the importance of creating connectedness with the community, as this is vital for a programme's long-term success through the communities of practice established throughout the project.

## Conclusion

This project took a partnership approach to creating a transformative, holistic educational experience for family carers across Ireland. This article has

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illustrated how the project is reflective of an innovative approach to co-creating programmes with the voluntary sector to support some of the more marginalised groups in Irish society.

It shows how both organisations – South East Technological University and Family Carers Ireland – fostered a positive environment that valued and supported learners in achieving their highest potential. It exemplifies an inclusive approach: all learners, irrespective of where they accessed the course, had the full SETU student experience, with a consistent and supportive learning environment throughout.

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