University could transform those leaving care - but no welcome mat laid out

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Universities, despite equity scholarships and access programs, rarely consider or target young adults leaving care.

Spotlight: a new report has examined how young adults leaving care could be helped into tertiary study. Photo: 2UE

They are one of the most vulnerable groups of young people in society, yet they are the forgotten ones in universities. There's no category for them in the disadvantaged groups universities collect statistics on.

There has been no national-level data collection or reporting of the educational achievements of these young people. And there is limited research on the post-secondary experiences of this group.

They're the "care leavers", young people who have lived away from home in foster, residential or kinship care and are embarking on adulthood.

About 40,000 Australian children are estimated to need out-of-home care, and their numbers are growing. The rate of Indigenous children in out-of-home care is 10.6 per cent times the rate for non-Indigenous children.
Few care leavers get the chance to go to university, despite some expressing a wish to do so when they are younger.

Apart from many care leavers having to deal with a traumatic early life, they also face the "soft bigotry" of low expectations from people such as caregivers. People often underestimate care leavers' talents and skills and don't encourage them to go to university.

Third Degree recently attended a seminar at La Trobe University about a new report on care leavers and how their access to university could be improved. Care service providers such as Berry Street and Mackillop Family Services as well as a university equity officer discussed the report. People had travelled from NSW, Queensland and Western Australia.

Everyone welcomed the report, *Out of Care Into University: Raising Higher Education Access and Achievement of Care Leavers*, the first of its kind in Australia to seek to put care leavers on the university agenda.

La Trobe University's access and achievement unit undertook the research for the report. The National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education at Western Australia's Curtin University funded the investigation.

There are many signs that care leavers aren't on universities' radar. Of the 28 out of 37 public universities that responded to a survey for the report, only two had recruitment policies or guidelines specifically targeted to care leavers.

Only five universities reported having admission policies aimed at care leavers. Four institutions had outreach programs where care leavers might be brought to university campuses to get a taste of student life. One university, which brings care leavers to campus, has started a computer club for them.

While universities report offering equity scholarships, only one university had one specifically targeted to care leavers. None of the universities surveyed had accommodation options geared to this group.

Nevertheless, many of the universities reported that care leavers would probably fall into one of the defined equity groups such as low socio-economic students. But no one knows exactly how many because little data is gathered on care leavers. Only one university collated information about these young people.

Unless data and evidence are collected on care leavers, a national policy on care leavers and higher education will never be achieved. Attitudes towards care leavers can only change, the report says, through "reforming legislation and policy within both the higher education and community services sector".

It can be done. The report cites the example of what has been achieved in Britain, where care leavers and their access to higher education has been on the agenda since 2000.
In that year, charitable organisation Buttle UK sponsored a research project which led to a 2005 report, *By Degrees: Going from Care to University*, which followed 50 care leaver students for three years.

Despite very small numbers of care leavers going to British universities, some performed well academically. This finding tallies with comments from interviews with representatives from care services for the Australian report.

"Personally I don't know of a case where a young person has gone to university from out-of-home care and they haven't succeeded. So the numbers are really small, which means that those that have gone have been really motivated," the representative said.

Since the British report was released, care leavers are now recognised as an under-represented group in universities. There has also been substantial movement in universities on targeting care leavers for bursaries, accommodation, personalised support and in admission policies.

Staff have also been hired to work with care leavers. (One Australian university has recently advertised for a care co-ordinator "who will be responsible for working with students in out-of-home care and young carers").

Patricia McNamara, one of the co-authors of the Australian report, told the seminar that as a result of changes in the British system, the number of care leavers had increased in universities. In 2009, about 7 per cent of 19 year-old care leavers attended university in England, compared with 1 per cent six years earlier*.

So, what can Australian universities do to improve access for care leavers to university?

The survey and interviews for the report offered a number of suggestions. Apart from having more accurate data about care leavers and higher education, people recommended different forms of financial support for care leavers.

These can be best summed up in one participant's response in the interviews.

"I really think scrapping HECS fees for kids who have been in care needs to happen so that they've got some incentive to keep on going ... ." 

"For young people who can't live at home, maybe if there's some allocation within the residential colleges on university campuses for kids who have been in care to have a scholarship ... (this) might help as well as that would provide them with living support, emotional support, mentoring and good people around them."

The report has 26 recommendations for improving care leavers' access to university.

Most care leavers are missing out on university qualifications that can bring them job security, stability and money. It's time they were put on the national higher education agenda.