Advocates call for policy change to improve access to higher education

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Despite considerable growth in the diversity of students participating in higher education, Australian universities continue to face the challenge of meeting equity group targets.

Researchers and equity group advocates say increasing the number of people from non-traditional backgrounds studying at university will require a culture and policy change.

Federation University lecturer and sociology researcher Dr Verity Archer is part of a worldwide movement of working class academics.

She grew up in the small town of Burnie in Tasmania and was the first in her family and of anyone she knew to go to university.
Dr Archer began her higher education at University of Tasmania before completing a PhD at Australian National University.

She told her story at Federation University’s World Human Rights Day lecture on Monday.

“Residential college was an especially bad place to be for someone from a working class background. There were jokes made frequently about Burnie girls,” she said.

*Things have changed considerably since I finished university in 2006, but structural inequalities have largely increased.*

Dr Verity Archer, Federation University

Dr Verity said despite the jokes, there was a diverse cohort of students at University of Tasmania, and studying at ANU was where she most felt the class divide, to the point where she thought about quitting her PhD.

“The details of my story might be different but the feelings of cultural misalignment are quite common among people from working class backgrounds attending university,” she said.

“Things have changed considerably since I finished university in 2006, but structural inequalities have largely increased... It is now impossible to cover the rent on a one bedroom apartment in a capital city on the Youth Allowance. It is increasingly common for students to work low paying jobs and long hours while students from middle class and privileged backgrounds are most often subsidised by their parents.”

Experience from the Group of Eight and other universities suggests a key factor deterring disadvantaged students from attending university is not course costs,
which are deferred through the HELP scheme, but the upfront living costs while studying such as rent and food, according to Group of Eight Australia 2016 Priority Directions report.

Statistics show a regional and metropolitan divide. Regional and remote students are just as likely as metropolitan students to receive an offer to go to university, but are far less likely to accept it.

Only 56 per cent of remote students and 70 per cent of regional students follow through on an offer by enrolling compared to 80 per cent in cities, according to the report.

Victorian program Raising Expectations is working to support more people who from out of home care backgrounds to complete higher education.

READ MORE Proving university can be an option for out of home care leavers Raising Expectations project manager Joanna Humphries said there were many barriers for care leavers to enter university.

“There is a very low educational expectation of them, by them and for them... changing expectations is a really important aspect,” she said.

Mr Humphries said economic hardship was exacerbated for young people in care who were often in crisis when required to leave, particularly residential care.

“Even if they have an aspiration to go onto university, that will be put on hold until they have financial stability and accommodation,” she said.

Raising Expectations is a partnership between the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare and Federation University and LaTrobe University.

In 2016, 43 students attending both universities were identified as care leavers. The number is now 230, with three quarters at Federation University campuses.

Care leavers are not recognised as an equity group, while students from a low socio economic and Indigenous background, students with a disability and those from regional and remote areas are.

“We have 50,000 children in out of home care around the country. The numbers are growing. There needs to be a growing acknowledge from government that these people needed to be supported as other equity groups are,” Ms Humphries said.

The presentation on access to education was one of five sessions hosted by Federation University at Ballarat Technology Park on Monday.

The forum recognised 70 years since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was proclaimed by the United Nations as a common standard of achievements for all peoples and all nations.