'Someone who believes in you': The national push to get care leavers into higher ed

By Miki Perkins
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When Sarah Morris was placed in residential care at the age of 12 - because alcoholism, neglect and family violence were a daily reality at home - she quickly discovered it came with a label. As a "resi kid" Morris felt she wasn't expected to aspire to an education or a good job, and would never be considered ambitious, smart or entitled to flourish.

“It can become a form of identity - I felt I couldn’t achieve things. I didn’t want that for my life but that was all I was surrounded by,” she says. “I didn’t have role models in my life for higher achievement.”

Sarah Morris, one of an increasing number of people who grew up in residential care and has managed to study at university. CREDIT:JUSTIN MCMANUS

The number of young Australians who go on to higher education after living in out-of-home care (which includes foster, kinship or residential care) is extremely low, the evidence suggests. As few as 1 per cent of care leavers go on to higher education, compared to about 40 per cent of the general population aged 25 to 35 years.

There are many reasons for this: a culture of low expectations, a lack of day-to-day support, and people’s fear of taking on debt without a parental safety net.
Slowly, though, this is changing. Over the past four years, the Raising Expectations program in Victoria has supported care leavers who enrol at La Trobe, Federation, and now Swinburne, universities, as well as those in TAFE. And the results are impressive. In 2016 there were just 43 care-leaver students enrolled in undergraduate courses at these universities. By 2020, with the support of the program, this number has risen to more than 270.

*I felt I couldn’t achieve things.*

Sarah Morris, out-of-home care leaver

Now the program, which is run by the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare and is the only one of its kind in the country, is expanding nationally. Curtin University in Western Australia, and the University of Wollongong in NSW, have already expressed interest.

The centre has joined with the founding universities to create a national group that will oversee the expansion of the program in other parts of Australia.

The program works by increasing the awareness of higher education for young people in care and their supporters. It offers academic, personal and financial support, as well as a range of workshops, resources and events.

There is no requirement at a state or federal level to collect data on care-leaver students enrolled in TAFE or university, which effectively renders them invisible. Through this program, the Victorian universities lobbied for a change to the higher education application process so that care leavers could be identified.

Project manager Joanna Humphries says although care leavers are usually disadvantaged students who need support, they are more than capable of success in higher education.

“Unfortunately the number of young people in care is rising, and it's not likely to go down any time soon,” says Ms Humphries. “Having someone who believes in you is incredibly important.”

Morris, now 28, says when she went into residential care she started taking dangerous risks - using drugs and alcohol, socialising with friends who were engaged in criminal behaviour and being sexually exploited. “As a young person looking for love, care and affection, I ended up looking for it in all the wrong places.”

Luckily, her residential care home came to feel like a family, with staff who went to incredible lengths to make the young people secure, including bringing newspapers and fresh flowers into the house every day. Morris credits it with saving her life.

Now aged 28, she recently finished a master’s in social work, with support of the Raising Expectations program.
Not that it was easy. She studied full-time while also working full-time and looking after her eight-year-old daughter. And having gone through a traumatic childhood, she sometimes found it alienating to sit alongside 18-year-olds with no concept of the challenges she faced.

Morris would like to see a mentoring program introduced at universities, so that young care leavers who had finished higher education could support those still studying.

“They need communication, praise and encouragement. If you give people critical labels they’ll believe they’ll never achieve that.”

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