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CARE LEAVERS IN AUSTRALIAN HIGHER EDUCATION: TOWARDS EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE

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Introduction

The educational disadvantage faced by care leavers is well documented (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2016; Cashmore, Paxman, & Townsend, 2007; CREATE Foundation, 2006; Mendis, Gardner, & Lehmann, 2014). The extent of disadvantage is reflected in the fact that only one percent of Australian care leavers are currently estimated to transition into higher education, compared to 26% of young people in the general population (Mendes, Michell, & Wilson, 2014). Once enrolled at university, many care leavers are likely to require specific, tailored support to fulfil their academic, social, financial, residential and other needs (Jackson, Ajayi, & Quigley, 2005). Assessing these needs, and developing the services required to support them, relies on talking directly to care leaver students and understanding the barriers and motivators to academic achievement. Despite this requirement, Australian university equity practitioners currently face a paucity of evidence around the identity, needs, and educational attainment of their care leaver students. The absence of such information limits the ability of practitioners to develop targeted resources, to train and educate other university staff about this group, and to attract and recruit additional students. In this article we outline the specificity of care leaver student needs, and suggest three ways that evidence could be gathered to inform and improve higher education practice.

Initially, we highlight the educational needs of university care leaver students, and the means by which those needs can be met by institutions and practitioners. Drawing on developments in the United Kingdom, we note the implementation of effective practice based on the assessment of individual needs, and the way that such practice is itself founded on a strong knowledge and evidence base. By contrast, we draw on our own national research report to show a willingness and understanding of the need for
tailed practice among Australian equity practitioners, but an inability to adopt this practice in the absence of individual data. Where care leavers are systematically identified and monitored within higher education, stronger policy and practice are able to be developed, and the profile of the group is raised.

We then outline three potential means of strengthening the Australian evidence base to support good practice. First, the Australian Government could identify care leavers as an equity group within a revised national higher education student equity framework. The existing student equity framework identifies six equity groups, including students from low socio-economic status, regional and non-English speaking backgrounds, as well as Indigenous students, those with a disability, and women in non-traditional areas. While this approach has proved durable and provided robust longitudinal data, the framework remains limited by the inability to acknowledge small, highly disadvantaged groups such as care leavers (Harvey, Burnheim, & Brett, 2016, p.14). Specific acknowledgement of the care leaver group would enable national data collection on the participation, success, retention and graduate outcomes of care leaver students, as occurs in the United Kingdom. Practitioners within universities would have access to the identified data, enabling targeted programs, resources and strategies to be developed.

A revised student equity framework would provide the most comprehensive data for institutions, but action remains possible in its absence. In particular, the state-based tertiary admissions centres (TACs) could include care leavers more explicitly in their educational access schemes and scholarship applications. The majority of Australian applications to higher education are processed through the Centres, and each one has provision for the compensation of educational disadvantage through the access schemes and scholarships process. The applicant information collected by tertiary admissions centres is then transferred to universities, so more specific information would enable institutions to identify a large proportion of their care leaver students.

Moreover, universities themselves could institute reform by identifying care leavers through revised enrolment forms, student service use, and other voluntary methods. Alongside changes to data collection, universities could conduct further research with their care leaver students to develop resource guides and assist practitioners to provide appropriate academic and broader support. Universities could also share their aggregated data and evidence through collaborative practice within the sector. We conclude this article by highlighting an example of cross-institutional, multi-state collaboration, in a project funded by the Australian Government Department of Education and Training.

**Methodology and context**

This article draws on a national research project on the university access and achievement of care leavers in Australia (Harvey, McNamara, Andrewartha, & Luckman, 2015). The project was led by La Trobe University and funded by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education at Curtin University. The project was based on a mixed methods approach which included 11 semi-
structured interviews with representatives from major out-of-home care service providers across Australia; a survey of senior equity representatives from the 37 public universities in Australia, which achieved a response rate of 76%; and a desktop review of available data on care leaver higher education outcomes. In addition to the empirical research, the project included a review of the national and international literature on the educational outcomes of care leavers for the period 2000 to 2014.

Around 43,400 Australian children were in out-of-home care during the 2014-2015 reporting period and this number has continued to rise over the past decade (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2016). Young people in care confront specific educational challenges from an early age, including placement instability and disrupted schooling (Bromfield, Higgins, Osborn, Panozzo, & Richardson, 2005; CREATE Foundation, 2006; Fernandez, 2008; Townsend, 2012). The relatively poor school level outcomes of this group have been well documented, and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare found that the literacy and numeracy standards of young people in care are roughly comparable to that of Indigenous Australians (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2007, 2011, 2015).

Available evidence suggests that Australian care leavers rarely transition into higher education, which is the level of education that brings the highest wage premiums and lifetime rewards (Lomax-Smith, Watson, & Webster, 2011; Norton, 2012). The low rate of higher education participation has been highlighted in a number of small, qualitative studies that have captured the voice of a sample of care leavers and described their educational experiences (Cashmore et al., 2007; Jurczyszyn & Tilbury, 2012; Mendis et al., 2014; Michell, Jackson, & Tonkin, 2015). This research reveals a number of barriers that can limit care leavers’ access to, and experience of, higher education. These barriers include: disrupted school-level education due to placement instability; emotional trauma; homelessness; financial issues; a sudden transition to independence at around 18 years of age; low educational expectations and aspirations; poor birth parent and carer educational attainment; and a lack of on-campus mentorship and support (Cameron, Connelly, & Jackson, 2015; Harvey, McNamara, et al., 2015; Mendes, 2009; Mendes, Johnson, & Moslehuddin, 2011; Peel & Beckley, 2015). While the barriers are clear, there is no systematic monitoring of the post-secondary outcomes of care leavers.

**Evidence-based practice: Lessons from the United Kingdom**

Many of the issues facing university care leaver students clearly require specific support from equity practitioners. Research in the United Kingdom, for example, emphasises the importance of programs specifically targeted to care leavers, such as: contact officers on campus; partnerships and collaboration across sectors; transition, academic, financial and pastoral support; and accommodation assistance (Buttle UK, 2015; Cameron et al., 2015; OFFA, 2015). British practice has largely developed from the influential report, *By Degrees: Going from Care to University*, and the subsequent work of Buttle UK and their ‘Buttle Quality Mark’ accreditation program (Jackson et al.,
2005; Starks, 2013). Consistent with this research, many British higher education practitioners have developed specific expertise with this group and interventions to support care leavers in higher education are now commonplace (Starks, 2013).

Following the By Degrees report in 2005, many universities began voluntarily collecting data on their care leaver students via the Buttle Trust, partly to attain the Buttle Quality Mark of accreditation. The initial establishment of voluntary data collection through the Buttle Trust created publicity around the low number of care leavers in higher education and led to subsequent recognition by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) and then formal inclusion of care leaver data through the Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA). These advances in data drove institutional advances in policy and practice. For example, from 2014, care leavers have been recognised as an official equity category by OFFA, with all higher education institutions encouraged to develop programs and policies for care leavers (OFFA, 2015). While only one institution offered a bursary for care leavers as part of its access agreement in 2006, this number rose to 52 institutions by 2014-15. In addition, 39 institutions set targets for care leaver participation and 49 specified outreach activity for care leavers in their 2014-15 agreements (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2014). Moreover, data on care leaver status is now collected officially by the Higher Education Statistics Authority, which means that all institutions are readily able to identify care leavers within their institutions. OFFA is also able to monitor improvements in the proportion of care leavers reaching university and researchers have access to radically improved data for further analysis (OFFA, 2015). The Quality Mark is being discontinued, with moves to embed practice into mainstream provision (Buttle UK, 2014), and informal accumulation of data has been replaced by formal collection through HESA. Buttle UK’s best practice guide emphasised that all interventions to support care leavers accessing higher education are predicated on being able to identify care leavers and on data collection techniques (Buttle UK, 2015). With these techniques now well advanced, organisations such as the National Network for the Education of Care Leavers (NNCEL, 2016) have emerged.

Across both the United Kingdom and Australia, evidence clearly shapes higher education equity policy, funding, and institutional practices. The British experience reveals the connection between a strong evidence base to inform effective practice for care leavers, and a subsequent increase in enrolment. Since the release of the By Degrees report in 2005, and the subsequent rise of policy and practice based on robust data at individual student level, the proportion of care leavers transitioning to higher education has risen from 1% to 7% (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2014). The By Degrees research, informed by the voices of care leaver students, was the initial catalyst for development of more quantitative evidence and formal recognition. Much of the subsequent improvement in access to higher education has arguably resulted from the addition of care leavers as a specific equity group, whose participation and success are now monitored, analysed and supported in higher education. In
Australia, the national equity framework established in 1990 identified six equity groups for which longitudinal data was subsequently collected on participation, success and retention. The existence of this strong evidence base has enabled formulation of institutional participation targets, university admissions policies, and national funding priorities (Harvey et al., 2016). In most cases, this attention has driven an increase in relative participation of the identified equity groups. Thus, despite differences in structure, e.g., Australia’s federal system of government, we would expect Australia to experience a similar pattern of increased care leaver participation as the United Kingdom should similar methods of targeted care leaver data collection and related policies be adopted.

Research from Australia underlines the difficulty of adopting good practice for care leavers in the absence of robust evidence. While the proportion of care leavers who transition to university is not accurately monitored in Australia, it is estimated to be only 1%, compared to 26% of young people in the general population who transition to university (Mendes, Michell, & Wilson, 2014). Research undertaken by Casey Family Programs in the United States, based on interviews with over 1,000 adults who had previously received long-term foster care, highlighted that

At the post-secondary level, few institutions or programmes are aware of their independent students with foster care experience, let alone know how to offer support services customized to meet their unique needs (Pecora et al., 2005, p. 228).

More broadly, researchers such as Behn (2003) have highlighted the importance of reliable and valid performance data as a means to improve outcomes across public sector environments in the United States.

In Australia, our own research reveals a similar paucity of institutional data that impedes the ability of practitioners to implement effective care leaver strategies. In our study, many surveyed practitioners were aware of the importance of tailored approaches. For example, representatives from the community sector highlighted a number of different programs that could support care leavers, including mental health responses; behaviour management; mentoring; carer training; parental engagement; advocacy; and academic tutoring (Harvey, McNamara, et al., 2015, p. 48). Similarly, university equity practitioners provided a number of recommendations for programs and practices that could support care leavers. These recommendations included: targeted financial support through scholarships or bursaries; partnerships with community sector providers; residential and housing support; and linking care leavers with student support services (Harvey, McNamara, et al., 2015, pp. 42-43).

However, only one respondent in our survey of equity practitioners confirmed the collection of individual care leaver data and outlined a program specifically designed to support this group. An evaluation of this program, run through Western Sydney University, found that it was effective in improving access to university and supporting students once they were admitted. However, the process for identifying and collecting data on care leavers remained a significant issue which affected the provision of support to students at the University. The evaluation revealed that
the University found it difficult and resource-intensive to identify care leavers, and nominated data collection as an area that required further development (Peel & Beckley, 2015).

In summary, Australian university equity practitioners express enthusiasm for improving care leaver outcomes and good knowledge of strategies likely to be effective. Most universities, however, cannot currently identify their care leaver students and therefore are not in a position to provide systemic, individualised support and develop effective practice. As the Scottish Government (2016) acknowledges:

[it is] essential that, within our data and information systems, we separately identify those with a care experience so that they can receive the most suitable support to access and succeed within higher education (p.52).

In the following section of this article, we outline three methods by which Australian universities could identify their care leaver students. Identification provides a first but important step towards understanding the needs, aspirations, and achievement of students, evidence of which is required to improve higher education practice. Once processes are established to identify care leaver students, we advocate the allocation of dedicated resources, as well as further research at institutional level that explores their needs and aspirations, particularly through the involvement of students themselves in the design of this research. Together, these measures could lead to more evidence-based practice within higher education.

**Strengthening the Australian evidence base**

There are three potential means to identify care leavers systematically in Australian higher education. The first approach would involve collecting data at national level through a revised national higher education student equity framework, which would specifically designate students of care leaver status. This revision would enable data on care leaver status to be collected through the Higher Education Information Management System, and the data could be made available to equity researchers and practitioners. While care leavers are over-represented in the existing higher education equity groups, with a significant proportion coming from low socio-economic status, regional, and Indigenous backgrounds, the unique education barriers and cumulative disadvantage experienced by this group warrants specific and targeted attention (Harvey, Andrewartha, & McNamara, 2015). The need for specific identification of, and targeted support for, care leavers in higher education is already well-recognised internationally. The Scottish Government, for example, stated that:

*The majority in care placements will not be resident within the most deprived postcodes and may not be identified by other markers of deprivation. [They] may be impacted by placement breakdowns, trauma, instability or poor mental health (Scottish Government, 2016, p. 52).*

A comprehensive national approach, coordinated by the Australian Government, would be similar to the model adopted in the United Kingdom from 2014. Such an approach could be
further strengthened if the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare extended existing reporting on educational outcomes to those who have left care. This option was recently recommended by the Senate’s Standing Committee on Community Affairs, which argued that care leaver data should be collected to at least 21 years of age (Siewert & Australian Parliament Senate Community Affairs References Committee, 2015).

An alternative way of identifying care leavers exists through the state-based tertiary admissions centres (TACs), which act as clearing houses for university applications. On behalf of the universities in each state and territory, the TACs receive applications; forward them to the relevant institutions; and communicate selection decisions to applicants, with all selection decisions deferred to the participating universities (Palmer, Bexley, & James, 2011). The tertiary admissions centres manage the majority of university applications and scholarship applications. The centres also manage educational access schemes, by which compensatory marks can be awarded to students who successfully document their educational disadvantage. Both the scholarship applications and the educational access schemes could be amended to enable specific identification of care leavers. Indeed, from 2015 the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre has included a specific question to allow scholarship applicants explicitly to affirm their care leaver status. Expanding this specificity to educational access schemes and scholarship applications across each tertiary admissions centre would enable institutions nationwide to identify (and compensate) a large proportion of their care leaver students. By capturing care leaver status in this manner, and restricting the use of this data to the point of access to higher education, confidentiality can be maintained.

Finally, universities themselves could develop processes for care leavers wishing to disclose their care leaver status such as through revised enrolment forms, student service use, and other voluntary methods. International evidence shows that some care leavers can be reluctant to disclose their care leaver status to fellow students, support staff, or academics for fear of prejudice (Jackson & Cameron, 2014). Some types of support can be offered with confidentiality maintained, such as tuition fee-waivers, residential scholarships, and social and academic support that is delivered online. For students who are content to disclose their care leaver status, higher education institutions can help to frame group identity as a positive force. In the United Kingdom, a website called Propel has been created by the Who Cares? Trust which encourages students to inform universities of their status in order to access a range of benefits to improve their higher education experiences (Who Cares? Trust, 2016). Targeted and multi-pronged strategies have been successful for care leavers internationally. The Blavin Scholars Program in the United States offers academic guidance and mentorships, along with scholarships, housing, and other additional resources for youth aging out of foster care who wish to pursue post-secondary education (Blavin Scholars, 2016). Student-led support groups can also create a sense of belonging in the higher education environment, whether or not other types of support are required. The Better Futures model is one example from the United States where coaching and
mentoring from older peers with foster care experience has been shown to promote acceptance and academic confidence (Phillips et al., 2015).

Self-identification of care leaver status can be embraced as a catalyst for change within higher education, as has been the case with other relatively small, educationally disadvantaged groups. As part of the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Educational Empowerment Program, for example, some students in the United States who are undocumented immigrants have chosen to disclose their status in a collective push for educational equity (United We Dream, 2016). Students, academics and higher education institutions promoted this initiative with their own national ‘coming out’ days in support of undocumented immigrants. In a similar manner, establishment of care leaver groups and strategies could potentially educate other students and academics about their experiences, and improve understanding of diversity on campus.

De-identified data collected by universities could in turn be shared within the sector to build a stronger body of evidence and a community of practice. An example of such collaboration exists with La Trobe University, Federation University Australia, Queensland University of Technology and Western Sydney University undertaking a research project funded by the Department of Education and Training, through the 2015 National Priorities Pool of the Higher Education Participation Programme. This project aims to provide the first Australian cross-institutional tracking of university care leaver students and their experiences and outcomes; and to develop a consistent approach to collecting data on care leavers across the four institutions. The project also aims to create more effective program implementation across the four universities, and the sector more broadly, through the development of a university handbook for care leavers, based on consultation with care leaver students and international best practice; and guidelines for university staff delivering outreach and support to care leavers.

Importantly, the identification of care leavers is central to ensuring their voices can be adequately captured, and their experiences and needs understood. Care leaver data will be collected and monitored across the four institutions and the researchers will develop guidelines for practice and effective support of care leaver students. Interviews with care leaver students at each institution will help to inform these guidelines for practice. Such cross-institutional collaboration may provide a template for the sector and justification for more formal collection of data at state or national level.

**Conclusion**

The educational disadvantage of care leaver students is extreme and well-documented, commencing in early childhood and continuing into higher education. Of the few care leavers who transition to Australian universities, many face significant and specific challenges that require dedicated academic, financial and broader resources. While committed to supporting care leaver students, university equity practitioners nevertheless struggle to meet student needs in the absence of a strong
evidence base. In particular, the inability to identify individual care leaver students restricts the ability of universities to develop appropriately targeted resources and to allocate them effectively.

The United Kingdom highlights the impact of a stronger evidence base on practice, with care leaver students transitioning to higher education in unprecedented numbers and receiving support on an individual basis once enrolled. Similar progress is possible in Australia, but is reliant on new mechanisms to identify individual care leaver students, capture their experiences and needs, and monitor their academic performance. These mechanisms could involve a revised national higher education student equity framework, amendments to tertiary admissions centre application processes, and cross-institutional collaboration. Reforms to strengthen the care leaver evidence base are a necessary precondition to improving practice within Australian higher education.

References


