

Out of care and into university

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Every year, young people unable to live with their birth families are placed in kinship care, foster care, and residential care. Over 40,000 children now require out-of-home care in Australia, and the number is growing every year. Only around one per cent of these children will transition to higher education when they leave the out-of-home care system.

Why do so few care leavers enter university? Low school achievement is partly to blame, but new research suggests that failures of policy, legislation and culture are also endemic. A national agenda is required to address each of these issues, with support from universities, schools, governments and community service organisations.

For people placed in care, educational disadvantage often begins with disrupted schooling and placement instability. Disruption is then compounded by the soft bigotry of low expectations, with tertiary education rarely raised or encouraged by others. Yet while poor educational outcomes are common, they are not inevitable. Indeed, international evidence suggests that the cycle of low expectations and achievement can be broken with strategic interventions.

In the United Kingdom, the past decade has seen substantial improvement in university outcomes for care leavers. Most British universities have 'access agreements' with the Office for Fair Access, in which their commitments to student equity are outlined. The Office for Fair Access now recognises care leavers as a distinct student equity group, and numerous universities have developed scholarships, accommodation, and dedicated outreach programs to children in care.

Indeed, while only one British institution offered a care leaver bursary as part of its access agreement in 2006, this number rose to 52 institutions by 2015. In addition, 39 institutions have set targets relating to care leavers and 49 have specified outreach activity for care leavers in the 2015 agreements. The recent introduction of a care leaver identifier as part of the formal student record from 2014 will support further research and evaluation.

These measures have already made a difference. Only 1 per cent of British care leavers were in higher education in 2003. By 2013, this figure had increased to 6 per cent.

Similar progress is possible in Australia through equivalent policy reform. Under current higher education policy, there are six identified under-represented groups for which the Australian Government keeps data: people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People; women, particularly in non-traditional courses such as Engineering and postgraduate study; people from non-English speaking backgrounds; people with disabilities; and those from rural and isolated areas. The establishment of these six categories has proven both powerful and durable – university admissions policies and national funding have been directed to support the six groups over the last 25 years. However, by labelling and prioritising some groups, other groups such as care leavers have been necessarily excluded.

Care leavers are over-represented within the existing equity categories, with a significant proportion coming from low socio-economic, regional, and Indigenous backgrounds. However, this group is not directly counted nor specifically recognised by the Australian Government as a cohort of concern. A more versatile student equity framework might enable data to be collected and policies developed for specific groups such as care leavers, refugees and incarcerated students. Equally, universities themselves could develop specific recruitment and support strategies for these groups.

Broader legislative reform is also needed to support the transition of people from out-of-home care to adulthood. Current state legislation does not typically mandate ongoing support for care leavers once they have reached the age of 18. The lack of post-18 legislative support stands in contrast to the United Kingdom, where ongoing resources enable easier transition into higher education. The voices we captured from the community service sector were consistent with international research: care leavers require support beyond the age of 18. Equally, community service organisations need access to greater individualised data, and more capacity to provide education and training to carers and the related workforce.

Finally, there is an overarching need for cultural change. Stakeholder voices, national research, and the international literature all reveal a group underestimated and overlooked by others. In some cases, even those closest to care leavers are either unaware of educational possibilities for them, or unable to explore these possibilities. For Indigenous care leavers, cultural challenges and responsibilities can be particularly acute, and intensive resources are required to support transitions. The rate of Indigenous children in out-of-home care is ten times the rate of non-Indigenous children – providing educational opportunity and support to this group is particularly critical. Further research is also required to drive cultural change. This work needs to capture the voices of care leavers, but also to involve them in the design and conduct of that research.

Egalitarianism is an empty word if some are excluded from the highest level of education. Policy reform for care leavers requires a stronger evidence base, concerted university effort, and legislative action at state and national levels. Through these material reforms, a greater cultural change is possible.

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