La Trobe report urges unis to tap potential of ‘care leavers’

Targeted support and data collection could convert one of society’s most educationally marginalised groups into a troop of overachievers, a new report suggests.

The La Trobe University-led report paints “care leavers” — people who have emerged from foster homes or other sorts of out-of-home care — as the low-
hanging fruit of the equity world. Engaging them in higher education could boost their socioeconomic fortunes while elevating academic performance across universities.

But to reap these rewards, institutions must overcome extraordinarily high resistance — with only about 1 per cent of care leavers thought to participate in higher education — and a dearth of data that leaves universities with virtually no idea how many such people are on their books.

Institutions also must accommodate a host of social problems afflicting care leavers, including anxiety, mental health disorders and “often extreme” disadvantage. But universities that can overcome these barriers will tap into “reserves of determination” that translate into solid academic results for care leavers — and role models of resilience for students around them.

“While this is about increasing higher education participation, it’s also about raising expectations,” said lead author Andrew Harvey, director of La Trobe’s Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research. “Kids in care are usually pretty smart and have potential, and that needs to be recognised by everyone around them.”

The report, to be released today, is La Trobe’s second on the issue. The university’s data on its very small sample of identified care leavers is backed up by about 40 interviews with students at La Trobe and partner institutions Federation and Western Sydney universities and Queensland University of Technology.

Despite social disadvantage and a high prevalence of mental health issues, the students perform well academically, achieving pass rates and weighted average marks around 6 per cent higher than “non-care leavers” — the fruits of their “uncommon levels of persistence and education”, the report says.

Dr Harvey said the findings were consistent with broader research into low-socioeconomic students, which found that “they do pretty well once they get into university”.

“Getting in is hard, but if you’ve managed somehow to beat the system you’re probably going to bring a lot of strengths and hang in there.

“Access is the main problem.”

The report coincides with lobby group CREATE Foundation’s “snap that stigma” campaign, launched yesterday, which aims to change preconceived views about young people who have been in care. It also comes two weeks after
Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon announced a commitment to guarantee care leavers places at university with full £7625 ($12,500) bursaries.

Dr Harvey said the experience of Britain in particular showed that targeted support for care leavers could deliver prompt results. After England’s Office for Fair Access encouraged universities to address access agreements, higher education participation among care leavers rose from 1 per cent to 7 per cent.