Nicola defied 'a sad statistic' to get to university. She wants it to be easier for others like her

RN By Erica Vowles for Life Matters

Nicola Berry says going to university was "absolutely not" something she considered while growing up.

Nicola Berry was placed in foster care when she was just three years old.

By the time she hit 18, all legal protection and formal assistance from the state had ended.

"You've just got none of those supports there. It's just you on your own. That can be really daunting," she tells RN’s Life Matters.

So when it came time to think about tertiary studies, she says going to university was "absolutely not" on the cards.

There hadn't been much academic encouragement growing up, and in the lower socio-economic area Nicola had lived in, "not many people went on to university".

Studying at school, she says, was "pretty difficult".

Teachers "weren't aware of my situation and weren't aware that I needed that extra encouragement", she says.

"Uni was not something I was considering."

Hear more from Nicola Berry and fellow care leaver Danny Hoekstra about overcoming education barriers, Life Matters

And Nicola's not alone. Care leavers’ unique barriers have a dramatic impact on their education.

While 40 per cent of the general population will study some form of higher education, for care leavers that figure is dramatically lower — just 1 to 3 per cent.

And 50 per cent of care leavers find themselves homeless, unemployed, pregnant or in the criminal justice system within a year of leaving care.

One project is trying to change that.
Only 1 to 3 per cent of Australian care leavers go on to further education.

Care leavers’ big barriers

The Raising Expectations project is led by Victoria's Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare.

La Trobe University senior researcher Naomi Tootell is involved, and says there are 60,000 young people living in out-of-home care in Australia.

They face many barriers to achieving higher education — frequent school changes, absenteeism, lack of family support, trauma associated with past abuse and neglect, and lower expectations from carers and teachers.

"In addition, leaving care often coincides with the final years of secondary school, which can have a strong impact on educational pathways," Ms Tootell says.

But she says one of the biggest barriers is that legal protection and formal assistance from state governments typically stops at 18 years of age.

That, she says, contrasts sharply "with the experience of most young people in the general population who stay in the parental home receiving continuous support into their early to mid-20s".

How to shift the stats

Since the Raising Expectations project began in 2015, a number of changes have been implemented at its partner universities — Federation, La Trobe and Swinburne.
The universities have recognised care leaver status as a specific form of disadvantage so that allowances can be made to admit students who may have lower marks and to offer them special consideration for bursaries and scholarships.

![Raising Expectations has initiated specific bursaries and scholarships for care leaver tertiary students.](Getty: Sirinarth Mekvorawuth/EyeEm)

The universities have also introduced scholarships and bursaries for care leavers and made it easier for care leavers to self-identify, in turn making it easier to link them up with support.

"That can be like an engagement program where [care leavers] might come onto campus and see what life at uni can be like; looking at different accommodation options and different study options; and just getting a bit of a taste for it," says Nicola, who also works for the Raising Expectations project.

"Because a lot of these children will be the first in their family [to attend higher education] and they won't know what life will be like."

Statistics provided by the project seem to suggest these interventions are having an impact.

The number of care leavers enrolling in study at both La Trobe and Federation University increased from 40 to over 200 students in three years.

'There's so much potential there'

Today, at the age of 25, Nicola is also studying a Bachelor of Human Services and Master of Social Work at La Trobe University.

She says as she worked and travelled after finishing school, she met people who had studied at TAFE or university and they "demystified the higher education system".

![The number of care leavers enrolled at La Trobe and Federation universities has increased from 40 to over 200.](Getty: Sirinarth Mekvorawuth/EyeEm)
Even more powerfully, some of them had a "similar story" to hers.

"I met some really great people who inspired me to go on to study; who made it seem like it was actually something that was achievable for a regular person," she says.

"Without it I wouldn't be at university."

Nicola has managed to defy statistical probability — and she'd like to see more happen so that other care-leavers can too.

She wants wider forms of mental health support put in place to better support prospective and current university students with backgrounds like hers.

"Getting that additional [mental health] support is particularly important [for those] with a trauma background," she says.

"Supporting the mental health system would be a really great step in the right direction."

She says she doesn't know any other care leavers who have gone on to university.

"I know some who have gone on to TAFE but the continuation rate isn't particularly great," she says.

"It's a really sad statistic though, because there's so much potential there.

"I'd like to see everyone believing they can go on to reach their goals."