A forgotten cohort? Including people from out-of-home care in Australian higher education policy

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Abstract
People from out-of-home care backgrounds are largely absent from Australian higher education equity policy. Compared with the UK, Australia has moved slowly to consider legislative and programme incentives for young people who leave state, foster or kinship care and who wish to access higher education. One major reason for the relative inaction of the Australian higher education sector towards this cohort is the rigidity of the national equity framework established in 1990. This article argues that policy reform is required to improve the participation of people from out-of-home care backgrounds in Australian higher education. Effort could be directed into revising the national equity framework, in particular by including out-of-home care as a specific group to be monitored. In addition to revising the national policy architecture, further devolution of equity policy to institutional level may enable greater engagement with the out-of-home care cohort.

Keywords
Equal education, educationally disadvantaged, child welfare, foster care, postsecondary education, higher education

Introduction
People from out-of-home care backgrounds are largely absent from Australian higher education equity policy. Out-of-home care refers to the care of children and young people up to 18 years who are unable to live with their birth families. The category is broad and

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covers kinship care, foster care, residential care, family group homes and independent living. Typically, placement in care represents an intervention of last resort for children who have experienced chronic maltreatment and family disruption. Around 40,000 children were estimated to require out-of-home care in Australia in 2013 and this number has risen every year over the past decade (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2013a).

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 outcomes of the Australian out-of-home care group have been well documented (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2007, 2011). Patterns of educational disruption and disengagement at school level are a precursor to inadequate preparation for higher education.

Compared with the UK, Australia has moved slowly to consider legislative and programme incentives for young people who leave state care and wish to access higher education. Australia has no transparent data on university applications, offers and enrolments from this cohort. In addition, Australia has (a) little information on university strategies to support the cohort in recruitment or participation; (b) inconsistent treatment of the cohort under the state-based educational access schemes operated through the tertiary admissions centres; (c) few visible strategies to provide tertiary information and support to out-of-home care agencies, state-based departments and other related not-for-profit organisations; (d) no major national research on the university experiences of the cohort; (e) few university societies such as the Barnardo’s societies in UK institutions through which students can volunteer and contribute to out-of-home care organisations and (f) little national analysis of the schools attended and regions in which people from care backgrounds live (Harvey, McNamara, Andrewartha, & Luckman, 2015).

One major reason for the relative inaction of the Australian higher education sector towards the out-of-home cohort is the rigidity of the national equity framework established in 1990 (Department of Employment Education and Training, 1990). The national framework identified six disadvantaged cohorts who were under-represented in higher education at the time, namely 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 as well as people 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 and no categories have been added to the framework since its foundation. However, by labelling and prioritising some groups, other groups were necessarily excluded by the framework. Among those omitted were people from out-of-home care backgrounds, a group who suffer severe disadvantage and under-representation at university. Data suggest that care leavers are over-represented in the existing equity categories, with a significant proportion coming from low socio-economic status, regional and Indigenous backgrounds (State Government of Victoria, 2012). However, this group is not directly counted nor specifically recognised by the Australian Government as a cohort of concern.

We argue in this article that policy reform is required to improve the participation of people from out-of-home care backgrounds in Australian higher education. Effort could be directed into revising the national equity framework, in particular by including out-of-home care background as a recognised equity cohort and by further expanding the focus, scope and
sophistication of the framework. In addition to revising the national policy architecture, further devolution of equity policy to the institutional level may enable greater engagement with the out-of-home care cohort. If universities had greater autonomy to define disadvantage in addition to the existing six reporting groups, the creation of specific institutional policies for the out-of-home care cohort could be facilitated. We examine the possibilities for greater institutional autonomy within the context of access agreements, which the Australian Government has proposed to introduce, based on a similar English model.

Background: Creation of the national equity framework

Current equity policy in Australian higher education derives from the creation of a unified national system in 1988. Reforms of the late 1980s saw colleges of advanced education and other providers become integrated into a unified system of national universities, leading to dramatic expansion of higher education provision (Dawkins, 1988). These reforms also saw the introduction of a higher education contribution scheme that enabled income-contingent payments of student loans. The so-called Dawkins revolution, named after the then responsible Minister for Education, John Dawkins, represented deliberately transformational change and involved a lengthy policy process including production of a Green Paper (Dawkins, 1987) and subsequent White Paper (Dawkins, 1988). Throughout this process, student equity was uppermost in policy concerns. The White Paper advocated the need for a national equity strategy and also recommended that institutions act to support increased access and success of disadvantaged client groups based on careful analysis of data. The paper noted that analysis should ‘examine any significant variations in educational participation and outcomes, including differences in the rate of student progress and graduation’ (Dawkins, 1988, p. 55).

A national equity strategy was subsequently developed in the Australian Government’s higher education policy statement, *A Fair Chance For All: national and institutional planning for equity in higher education* (Department of Employment Education and Training, 1990). This statement defined national equity objectives for higher education and identified the six aforementioned disadvantaged client groups who were under-represented in higher education. *A Fair Chance For All* focused on access and representation, noting the need to change ‘the balance of the student population to reflect more closely the composition of society as a whole’ (Department of Employment Education and Training, 1990, p. 8). This principle was central to the subsequent establishment of equity indicators in 1994 – the so-called Martin indicators – when baseline data first compared the university participation rates of the six identified equity groups with their share of the total population (Martin, 1994).

The establishment of equity groups led to the collection of rich data on access, participation, success, retention and graduate outcomes, at both institutional and national levels. Further consequences of their establishment included the creation of a detailed research agenda around each category and the provision of targeted national funding to support the groups (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008). For example, in 2012 the *Other Grants Guidelines (Education)* section was developed within the Higher Education Support Act (2003). Section 1.5.1 of the guidelines outlined that ‘Programs in this chapter aim to assist with overcoming barriers to access and participation by domestic undergraduate students in higher education, in particular, those students who are Indigenous, who come from a low-SES background, or who have a disability’ (Australian Government, 2012b,
The Indigenous Support Program, the Higher Education Disability Support Programme, and the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Programme were all established to support students within these long-standing equity groups and funding is distributed to institutions according to enrolment data. A separate regional loading fund ($64 m in 2012) supports regional campuses, thus indirectly supporting students from rural and isolated areas (Australian Government, 2012a). The non-English speaking background cohort receives no direct funding from the Australian Government but the existence of this category continues to carry both research and funding implications. For example, in 2009 the Australian Government introduced ‘mission-based compacts’ in which each university was compelled to set participation targets for low socio-economic status background students and students from another equity category of institutional choice. In 2011, two universities specifically selected non-English speaking background as a target equity category for increased participation: RMIT University and Victoria University (Mestan & Harvey, 2014). Total reward funding available for meeting institutional targets was $27 m in 2011 (Australian Government, 2011). In total then, an estimated minimum of $250 m per year is currently allocated to support the identified equity groups.

Stasis and change: The equity framework 25 years on

The equity framework has been comprehensively reviewed on several occasions (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2014; Bradley et al., 2008; James, Baldwin, Coates, Krause, & McInnis, 2004). Remarkably, there has been little change to the groups in the 25 years since they were first canvassed. The proportionate representation of the non-English speaking background cohort at university has led some researchers to conclude that the category should be removed from the national equity framework (James et al., 2004; Norton, 2014, July 28; Watson & Pope, 2000). To date, this call has not been heeded, partly because the equity categories were not exclusively designed to consider access. Students from a non-English speaking background still face disadvantage at different points of the higher education continuum, most notably at the level of graduate outcomes (Mestan & Harvey, 2014).

Some researchers have highlighted the need to focus on some groups excluded from the national framework, such as students from refugee backgrounds (Ben-Moshe, Bertone, & Grossman, 2008). However, no new categories have been added since 1990. Instead, revisions to the framework have been largely hermeneutic, with a focus on categorical definitions. This focus has been sharpest in the case of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds, where Australian Bureau of Statistics data have recently been harnessed to consider disadvantage within a smaller statistical area level than the previous postcode measure allowed (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2014).

The only substantive change to the equity framework has been to the prioritisation of particular equity groups. There was a reduced focus on the category of ‘women in non-traditional fields’ after initial national targets – 40% for most non-traditional fields and 15% for Engineering – had been achieved. While women in non-traditional fields still constitute an equity category, no national policies cover this area (Norton, 2013) and equity performance data for this target group have not been published since 2005 (Gale & Parker, 2013). In 2008, the Bradley review recommended that all six equity groups continue to be monitored but that future attention should focus on the three groups that remain significantly under-represented, namely students from low socio-economic
backgrounds, students from regional and remote areas as well as Indigenous students (Bradley et al., 2008).

The student equity framework has received bipartisan support in Australia, with continued commitment to the six equity categories despite changes in government over the 25 years since the categories were established under the Labor Government (Department of Employment Education and Training, 1990). The longevity of the framework is partly explained by the broad and bipartisan nature of the categories. The other critical factor in achieving long-term bipartisan support was the establishment of rich, comprehensive and longitudinal data sets. Little longitudinal data were available before the introduction of the categories (Department of Employment Education and Training, 1990) and governments of all persuasions have appreciated the value of these data in the evaluation of progress in student equity.

Despite broad agreement on the student equity framework, governments have certainly differed in their approaches to policy. Labor governments have maintained a strong belief in structural barriers such as class and have frequently employed targets to drive change. Following the Bradley review, the Labor Government committed to a target to increase the proportion of students from low socio-economic backgrounds to 20% by 2020 and allocated additional resources explicitly to help meet this target (Bradley et al., 2008). Institutional mission compacts – that is agreements between the Commonwealth and individual universities – were also established, under which universities identified progress targets for two student equity cohorts of their choosing (Gale & Parker, 2013). Coalition governments have espoused greater institutional autonomy but within the established student equity framework and categories. For example, despite a reduced focus on targets (Hurst & Tovey, 2013), the current Coalition government is maintaining commitment to the six equity categories. This commitment is evidenced by the inclusion of the categories in the currently proposed Commonwealth Scholarships Scheme (Department of Education, 2014, June), and in the requirement that universities incorporate the six categories in Access and Participation Plans for 2015–2017 (Department of Education and Training, 2015).

The bipartisan support for student equity resembles that in the UK where the Labour government developed a strong widening participation agenda following the Dearing report (1997) which culminated in the allocation of student equity funds through a central source under the ‘Aimhigher’ programme (Doyle & Griffin, 2012). Student fee levels have since risen dramatically and the Aimhigher programme has ceased, yet funding for student equity remains substantial. Despite a transition to individual university access agreements – and a new language of social mobility rather than aspiration – the Conservative-led Coalition government has maintained a commitment to widening participation, primarily through the Office for Fair Access (Sellar & Storan, 2013). In both countries, different political philosophies have influenced the dominant language, mechanisms and policy responses, but broad commitment to student equity has remained bipartisan and consistent over time.

The Australian Government’s commissioned review by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW, 2014) focused on the development of a performance measurement framework for equity in higher education. The AIHW identified 61 potential indicators for monitoring educational attainment and outcomes, precursors of higher education and higher education system performance. However, while the review advocated an expanded range of performance measures for the equity categories, the scope of the review excluded interrogation of the overall architecture and constituent categories of the framework.
Despite the maintenance of fixed national categories, institutions have developed some tailored strategies and individuated approaches to equity. For example, the special entry access schemes operated by tertiary admissions centres enable applicants to outline their individual elements of disadvantage, such as disrupted schooling or a difficult home environment, and potentially to receive bonus entry points on a sliding scale to compensate for this disadvantage where demonstrated (Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre, 2014; Universities Admissions Centre, 2014; Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre, 2014). Further, advances in predictive and learning analytics have enabled the identification of risk factors at the individual rather than the group level (Clarke & Nelson, 2013; Long & Siemens, 2011; Siemens, Dawson, & Lynch, 2013). Most universities include assessments of individual disadvantage at the point of entry and track individual risk throughout students’ degrees, alongside strategies to address collective disadvantage through targeting the identified equity groups. Institutional programmes exist to improve access of groups such as students from refugee backgrounds (Ben-Moshe et al., 2008) and mature age students (Cullity, 2006). Institutional programmes also exist for specific categories relevant to particular universities. For example, several universities located in the eastern states of Australia target Pacific Islander students (Australian National University, 2014; Griffith University, 2014; University of Western Sydney, 2014).

Nevertheless, the continuing existence of the equity categories remains central to the national equity framework. Substantial Commonwealth funding is based on institutional performance in the categories, and the development of longitudinal data sets enables sophisticated research agendas to be developed for each category. The Commonwealth Scholarships Scheme highlights that universities may have some discretion in the definition of disadvantage but that the original Martin indicators remain the benchmark (Department of Education, 2014, June). Funding, research, scholarships and action follow the categories. The dominance of the framework explains why postgraduate equity has been largely neglected despite its growing importance (Harvey & Andrewartha, 2013). The existence of a limited framework means that much data are simply not collected for different cohorts at different levels. The absence of data itself makes policy difficult to implement and action less likely to occur.

**Out-of-home care**

No national data are available on the reasons children are placed in out-of-home care. However, situations in which a child may be placed in out-of-home care include (a) the child having been the subject of child protection and requiring a more protective environment, (b) parents being incapable of providing adequate care and (c) alternative accommodation being required during family conflict. Approximately 90% of children in out-of-home care in Australia are on care and protection orders which is indicative of past abuse and neglect (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2013a).

Children in out-of-home care are one of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged social groups and show poorer health, social and educational outcomes compared with children in the general population (Bromfield et al., 2005). Many of these children are from multiple disadvantaged groups. Nationally, Indigenous children are over-represented in out-of-home care. The rate of Indigenous children in out-of-home care is 10 times the rate for non-Indigenous children (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2013a). While Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders comprise only 4.7% of all children aged 0–17 years
in Australia, they constitute 33.6% of all children in out-of-home care (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2013a). Young people with disabilities also appear to be over-represented in out-of-home care (Mendes & Snow, 2014; Mendes, Snow, & Broadley, 2013).

No national-level data collection or analysis of the educational outcomes of young people in care has occurred to date. Several research studies, however, have investigated the educational outcomes of this cohort. The majority of these studies have focused on school level education and found that students in care experience numerous educational challenges and disruptions at school (Tilbury, 2010; Wise, Pollock, Mitchell, Argus, & Farquhar, 2010), are significantly behind their peers academically (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2007, 2011) and are less likely to complete secondary school (Cashmore, Paxman, & Townsend, 2007; Townsend, 2012). In 2013, the AIHW proposed a national methodology for the collection and reporting of the educational outcomes of young people in care up to 17 years of age (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2013b).

Young people in out-of-home care in Australia receive legal protection and formal assistance from the State only until 18 years of age (Creed, Tilbury, Buys, & Crawford, 2011). Several Australian studies have found evidence of inadequate preparation for young people leaving care and a lack of support in the transition to independent living (Mendes, Johnson, & Moslehuddin, 2011). Research suggests that people from out-of-home care backgrounds are at increased risk of homelessness, unemployment and poor educational outcomes after care (Johnson et al., 2010; Thoresen & Liddiard, 2011).

Few Australian studies have focused specifically on the higher education access and achievement of people from out-of-home care backgrounds (Cashmore et al., 2007; Jurczyszyn & Tilbury, 2012). Mendes, Michell and Wilson (2014) critically reviewed the existing literature and concluded that ‘we know strikingly little about the experiences of care leavers who enter higher education in Australia’ (p. 249). More recently, a national research project by Harvey et al. (2015) highlighted the extremely low rates of university access by care leavers and outlined the need for major reform.

Due to the dearth of Australian research, much of what is known at higher education level is based on international research, most commonly from Europe and the United States. The international evidence shows that people from out-of-home care backgrounds face numerous barriers to participation and success at higher education (Jackson & Cameron, 2012). In England, for example, only 6% of care leavers aged 19 are in higher education compared with 39% of all 18- to 19-year-olds (Department for Education, 2013). The United Kingdom, in particular, has put much effort into researching the post-secondary education of young people in out-of-home care and this evidence has been used to inform legislative and programme responses (Jackson & Cameron, 2012; Office for Fair Access, 2013).

The paucity of Australian research into people from care backgrounds and higher education is concerning on a number of levels. The out-of-home care cohort is large and growing. The disadvantages associated with out-of-home care may also be increasing over time as an imbalance between the number of carers – which is decreasing – and the number of children who are separated from family – which is increasing – can be observed in Australia, which, in turn, leads to instability in care arrangements (Delfabbro et al., 2010). Broad access to higher education is also a matter of social justice. Higher education is linked to lifetime advantages, such as improved employment opportunities and earning potential (Lomax-Smith, Watson, & Webster, 2011; Norton, 2012). For these reasons, it is important to examine the progression of this cohort into higher education.
within the national context, and the factors that might increase aspirations, access and success at university. Despite a dearth of national data at higher education level, the international evidence and national school-level data suggest that the out-of-home care cohort is likely to be seriously under-represented within Australian universities.

**Reframing the framework**

The out-of-home care cohort could be included in a revised and expanded national equity framework, comprising a new category with moderated specifications. The number of care leavers would not initially be high enough for the level of statistical detail collected under the traditional categories, so the initial focus would be on access and on the higher education sector rather than institutional metrics. In England, the Office for Fair Access recognises care leavers as a distinct university target group (Office for Fair Access, 2013). According to the UK Government’s Department for Business Innovation and Skills, ‘Under-represented groups across higher education include students from less-advantaged backgrounds, students with disabilities, students from some minority ethnic groups, and care leavers’ (Business Innovation and Skills, 2011, p. 2).

In the UK, extensive research within the *By Degrees* project led by Sonia Jackson in 2005 highlighted that university admissions and other staff regularly under-estimated the academic potential of care leavers and that educational opportunities for those in care were limited (Jackson, Ajayi, & Quigley, 2005). Further, the research found that only one UK university had a comprehensive policy relating to care leavers. Main recommendations of the *By Degrees* report included that ‘All higher education institutions should have a comprehensive policy for recruitment, retention and support of students from a care background’ and that ‘university (UCAS) and college application forms should include an optional tick-box to indicate that an applicant has been in local authority care’ (p. xiv).

These recommendations were soon actioned. The Office for Fair Access now recognises care leavers as a distinct university target group and has maintained a focus on the care leaver agenda for a number of years (Office for Fair Access, 2013). In 2006, the Office for Fair Access wrote to all institutions with access agreements to highlight the work of the Frank Buttle Trust (now Buttle UK) and to encourage them to consider how their access agreements addressed the needs of care leavers. Since the introduction of care leavers as a formal equity category, numerous universities have expressly addressed the participation of the cohort through their outreach, scholarships, accommodation and other support. Only one institution offered a care leaver bursary as part of its access agreement in 2006, but this number rose to 31 institutions in 2011–12 and 52 institutions in the agreements for 2014–15. In addition, 39 institutions have set targets relating to care leavers and 49 have specified outreach activity for care leavers in the 2014–15 agreements (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2014). The introduction of a care leaver identifier as part of the Higher Education Statistics Agency student record from 2013 to 2014 will also support research and evaluation around care leavers (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2014).

Taken together, major research initiatives, additional support measures and legislative changes have increased the number of young people choosing to continue in education beyond school level in England. Only 1% of 19-year-old care leavers were in higher education in 2003 (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2014) but this figure
increased to 6% by 2013 (Department for Education, 2013). Much of this improvement in access to English higher education has arguably resulted from the inclusion of care leavers as a distinct equity category, with student participation being monitored, analysed and supported.

The United States provides another international example of a progressive policy development for care leavers. In 2008, three federal laws were passed that improved educational opportunities for young people in the foster care system in the United States. The *Fostering Connections Act* includes increased eligibility for funding for post-secondary education pursuits, encourages states to extend care to the age of 21 and includes increased transition planning requirements. The *College Cost Reduction Act* expands the definition of an independent student to include, for the purposes of federal financial aid, a young person who is ‘an orphan, in foster care, or a ward of the court at any time when the individual was 13 years of age or older’ (Legal Center for Foster Care and Education, 2008, p. 2). This clarification significantly increases the number of former and current young people in care who are classified as independent and can be considered for financial aid. The *Higher Education Opportunity Act* includes numerous amendments designed to increase access to post-secondary education for foster care students. For example, Federal TRIO post-secondary support programmes for at-risk youth now include young people with foster care experience as a priority group to be served (Legal Center for Foster Care and Education, 2008).

In Australia, out-of-home care background could be included within a revised student equity framework. Group identity could be based on self identification at enrolment, as is the current method for identification of Indigenous people and people with a disability (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2014). As the previous sections have indicated, several other groups lack recognition, and the framework itself has not been adapted since the explosion of international student numbers and the expansion of postgraduate education. A revised framework might therefore include other marginalised groups such as people from refugee backgrounds, incarcerated students, and other agreed cohorts. Formal identification of these groups would necessarily involve a tiered approach to data collection and a redefinition of categorical status, rather than simply involving additions to existing categories.

Compound disadvantage could also be addressed within a revised framework which is particularly important for the out-of-home care cohort. As James and co-workers noted in the review of the framework in 2004, many people occupy overlapping equity categories (James et al., 2004). In particular, a high proportion of regional people are also from low socio-economic backgrounds. Equally, state-level data suggest that a large proportion of out-of-home care people are from low socio-economic status, regional or Indigenous backgrounds (State Government of Victoria, 2012). As a significant proportion of the out-of-home care group falls within other equity groups, a framework that enabled the calculation of compound disadvantage for the purposes of support in admissions, recruitment, retention or graduate outcomes would enable a more appropriate calibration of disadvantage. For example, an Aboriginal person from out-of-home care living in regional Western Australia faces particularly acute disadvantage, and a framework that facilitated multi-factorial consideration of disadvantage would address the complexity of individual equity. While individual institutions have developed a level of sophistication in their access schemes, the national framework remains the most likely vehicle to drive systemic change backed by financial resources.
Devolution of equity

Alongside the national equity framework, proposed national policy changes may facilitate increased funding and a greater devolution of responsibility for student equity to institutional level, enabling greater diversity of effort. The proposal to introduce access agreements, similar to the English model, might enable universities to expand their efforts beyond the traditional equity categories. By empowering universities to define disadvantage according to criteria beyond the national framework, equity strategies might be better tailored to the circumstances and demographics of the catchments of universities.

Proposed fee deregulation includes a component for a Commonwealth Scholarships Scheme. Similar to England, this measure will compel universities to spend 20% of their profits from student fees on individuated equity measures (Australian Government, 2014). Also similar to England, proposals call for the establishment of access agreements in which universities will be guided by the existing equity indicators but will maintain the ability to address other disadvantaged groups according to their own needs and preferences (Australian Government, 2014, June). While the fate of deregulation and the access agreements is uncertain at the time of writing, the Government has clearly articulated its desire for greater institutional discretion around the definition of disadvantage and subsequent allocation of funding.

Although national data are limited, initial analysis suggests a concentration of people from out-of-home care in certain Australian regions. The data also reveal demographic differences by state. In the Northern Territory, Indigenous children comprise 81.9% of children in out-of-home care and in Western Australia the Indigenous proportion is 47.5% (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2013a). Other Australian jurisdictions have lower Indigenous proportional representation with Victoria having the lowest at 16.6%. Thus, some universities are better placed to address low out-of-home care participation, and some universities will confront different types and levels of compound disadvantage. The diversity and complexity of the issue suggests a need for a multi-layered approach that provides for state and institutional autonomy beyond an overarching national framework.

The advantages of a devolved approach to equity are visible from the access agreements in England (see ‘Reframing the framework’ section). Access agreements are sufficiently flexible to allow institutions to respond to particular regional, demographic and employment challenges. Each institution tends to focus on the equity groups and sub-groups that are under-represented at the institution and to target widening participation activities to under-represented groups that live in close proximity to the institution. Equity priorities also vary depending on the type of institution. Selective and specialist institutions focus on widening access while smaller and more inclusive institutions, which already attract a high proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, focus on improving the retention, success and completion of these students (Higher Education Funding Council of England and the Office for Fair Access, 2013). It should be noted, however, that institutional action is most likely to occur when supported by national policy principles. Substantial reform is unlikely in the absence of a national commitment to improve participation of, and research into, people from out-of-home care backgrounds. Harvey et al. (2015, p. 8) recommended:

That the Australian Government pursue reform of the higher education equity framework to consider the desirability of: revising the current categories; expanding the framework, for example to consider postgraduate level; revising the types of institutions eligible for support;
and encouraging universities to design their own targeted outreach, access, and support policies for care leavers.

**Conclusion**

People from out-of-home care backgrounds are not specifically recognised as a cohort of disadvantage within national higher education policy. Their absence from the policy framework is concerning given the manifest nature of their educational disadvantage, the level of their likely under-representation at university and the historic importance of policy in determining national and institutional resource allocations. A reform of the national equity framework to include the out-of-home care cohort would raise the profile of the cohort and lead to increased funding, research and institutional action. Overseas experience highlights that national priorities drive institutional reform, and that funding, research and participation levels follow national policy settings.

In addition to reform of the national equity framework, the proposed devolution of additional resources for equity could support people from out-of-home care. If institutions are able to access a new pool of funding through the proposed Commonwealth Scholarships Scheme, funding for specific equity purposes will increase, along with institutional control of that funding. Such a measure would enable institutions whose catchments include large numbers of people from out-of-home care backgrounds to offer targeted scholarships, accommodation and a range of student support. However, institutional moves are likely to be complementary to a national agenda rather than replace it. Close cooperation between the education sector and child protection sector is desirable to promote the educational success of this student group and reduce the historical ‘siloh’ effects. Ultimately, raising university access and success for people from out-of-home care backgrounds will require research and evidence based on national collection of data and informed by the policy settings of the Australian Government.

**Funding**

This article is based on research funded through an external research grant provided by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education at Curtin University.

**Conflict of interest**

None declared.

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