Foster care leavers need extra support in higher education

- By: Kylar Loussikian
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Reeny Jurczyszyn successfully made the transition from foster care to higher education. Picture: Lyndon Mechielsen Source: News Corp Australia

TARGETED policies, including guaranteed bursaries, fee waivers and incentives for universities to reach out to people who have left foster care, are needed if local universities are serious about addressing the “soft bigotry” of low expectations and extremely low rates of enrolment and graduation.

Specific programs designed to address low rates of access by six predefined disadvantaged groups have marginalised care leavers further, according to a damning report funded by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education. Scant evidence suggests just 150 care leavers begin university study each year, well short of the 2000 who would if enrolments were proportional to population.

The report — by Andrew Harvey, Patricia McNamara, Lisa Andewartha and Michael Luckman of La Trobe University — finds that because care leavers (people who leave the foster care system) are not recognised as an equity group, little data is collected and less support is provided to create access to higher education opportunities.
While the report says the national equity strategy adopted by the federal government in 1990 had succeeded in creating a research agenda and providing targeted national funding to support the six identified disadvantaged groups, Dr Harvey, director of La Trobe’s Access and Achievement Research Unit, said specific focus on providing support to this particular group had been shown to work.

“We could start by looking to Britain where the Office for Fair Access now recognises care leavers as a distinct student equity group,” he said.

“Numerous universities there have developed dedicated 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 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.”

Studies have long held young people in out-of-home care face multiple barriers to successfully completing education, including placement stability, but also the trauma of past abuse and neglect, behavioural issues, absenteeism and lack of family support. Lower aspirations and expectations have also been found to create a barrier to continuing education.

Reeny Jurczyszyn spent 18 years growing up in residential and foster care before moving through the TAFE system to university, where she studied social work at the University of Queensland. Dr Jurczyszyn, who went on to complete a doctorate and now works at the Lady Cilento Children’s Hospital in Brisbane, said her experience with higher education would have benefits that would last generations.

“The year most people finish high school is the year people in foster care move into independent living, so the big issues are finding a place to live, reconciling with your birth parents and engaging in university,” she said.

Dr Jurczyszyn said it was one thing to get into university or TAFE after a traumatic childhood; it was another altogether to sustain it. “It was tough because the year I left school my birth mother passed away. But I started a TAFE course and it was the first time I looked around and started to become an adult and realised education was a way out of this.

“People with other (disadvantaged) backgrounds had other services and scholarships. That would certainly be something to change — to be more aware of the plight of care leavers, particularly around access to computers and food,” Dr Jurczyszyn said. “I always saw my peers, they had support in stable accommodation and meals, while I had to go back to a unit and work to pay my rent. I was alone in a lot of ways.”

CREATE Foundation, which represents people with out-of-home care backgrounds, said it was vital the political agenda included post-care support, “particularly in the light of the dearth of jobs for young people”.

“Increasing the support for young people transitioning from care up to the age of 25 years will improve young people’s ability to engage in post-secondary education,” CREATE’s chief executive Jacqui Reed said.