Reach for LaTrobe event in Bendigo aims to bring children in care to university as part of Raising Expectations project

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Local News

Reach for LaTrobe unlocks care leaver aspirations

MEET THE STUDENTS: The panel at the Reach for LaTrobe day in Bendigo on Friday. Picture: supplied.
TERTIARY STUDY: Jessielea Skillicorn studied at LaTrobe University. Picture: NONI HYETT

A program run by LaTrobe University and several partners is aiming to break down the barriers which prevent children from the state care system studying at a tertiary level.

Workers say it's not just one barrier but many that's keeping these children from further study. In two years however they've already seen a five fold increase in enrollments at LaTrobe and Federation universities.

The Raising Expectations project came to Bendigo on Friday to reach children in the care system in the city.

**Read more:** [Students go from care to life on campus](#)

Jessielea Skillicorn was among the panel at the Reach for LaTrobe day held in Bendigo on Friday.

Mx Skillicorn is now working in their dream job for the City of Greater Bendigo. They with local business to help them be more inclusive for people with a disability. They began the role after finishing university study in 2018.

They had 19 years of experience in disability, so Mx Skillicorn is not sure if their degree made a difference.

But Mx Skillicorn thinks their passion for inclusion stemmed from being part of a marginalised group themselves. From the age of nine to 16 they lived in foster care.
Mx Skillicorn didn't consider university study when they first left school. They didn't finish high school, have the best grades, and as a foster leaver, their immediate need was to find housing.

They believe housing instability is one of the big factors that stops young care-leavers attending university.

"Getting to school when you don't have a transport ticket, you've got no food and you don't even have anywhere to shower, is extremely difficult," they said.

"It has a huge impact on your life and your ability to navigate your life."

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The panel was one part of the broader project aimed at getting more care leavers into tertiary study.

The initiative aims is aiming to drive cultural change within universities, getting more institutions involved, and more to commit to increasing care leaver participation.

LaTrobe, Federation and Swinburne universities, along with the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, the peak body for children and families in Victoria, are part of the program.

It's already seen rates of care leavers at Federation and LaTrobe universities rise fivefold.

The two universities had about 43 care leavers enrolled two years ago between them. Now more than 200 students enrolled have come from a care background.
Associate Professor Andrew Harvey initiated studies into care leavers in higher education in 2014.

He looked at the situation in the United Kingdom - which successfully increased the number of care leavers at university - and wondered why Australia didn't have an equity group for care leavers.

He decided to get it on the agenda. The Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research at LaTrobe has researched and lobbied since then to improve access and participation of care leavers in tertiary study.

It found a myriad of factors holding children in care back from tertiary study.

A culture of low expectations, disruption of schooling, financial disadvantage, a care system that ends abruptly at the age of 18, even different definitions of what it means to be in care all contributed.

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Centre for Excellence project manager for Raising Expectations Joanna Humphries said the barriers stopping children in care studying at a tertiary level start early on. It's not unusual for children to move around a lot, disrupting schooling and meaning they have to adjust to a new school, and a new foster family.

Many are deeply affected by trauma. Neglect, abuse and violence can all hamper their capacity to learn, Mrs Humphries said.

Then they have to leave the care system on, or before, their 18th birthday, a time when many young people are completing VCE or VCAL.

They might not know what's available for tertiary study, or how to access it. They may lack confidence in their abilities, or think university is for the elite.

But pursuing tertiary study can help these young people build confidence in what they can achieve, Mrs Humphries said.

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"What we're trying to do is work with young people and reach young people in schools ... to make them understand... they can go back to study and it's really important they think about doing that, and know that that's a possibility," Mrs Humphries said.

"Critically it will help to break the cycle of inter-generational poverty and that cycle of disadvantage."

There hasn't been a quick fix to raise enrollments.

Change has meant the universities thinking about how to support care leavers. It's meant changing enrollment details to identify care leavers, and even changing the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre special considerations to include the group. It's meant lobbying to extend
the care-leaving age to 21. It's meant creating individualised support and access to services for students.

And it's meant going into areas where there are many kids in care.

"We're trying to normalise higher education as an option, rather than it not even being discussed."

**Associate Professor Andrew Harvey**

The Reach for LaTrobe day in Bendigo was one way the initiative has worked to normalise higher education for children in care. On the day kids met a panel of past and present university students, some of whom were care-leavers, while parents, carers and teachers learnt about how they can support the children.

"We're trying to normalise higher education as an option, rather than it not even being discussed," Associate Professor Harvey said.

"For a lot of those kids they're not going to transition straight from finishing VCAL into university but it might be something they're ready for in 10 years time or three years time or one years time."

It's hard to know how many children there are in care in Bendigo or central Victoria. Data on children in care is notorious, Associate Professor Harvey said.

**Read more: Call out for foster carers in Bendigo**

In Bendigo, with areas like Eaglehawk and Kangaroo Flat that are among the poorest in the state, there must be "substantial numbers", Associate Professor Harvey said.

About 100 children will be in foster care placement in the Bendigo Loddon region, according to Anglicare Victoria.

**Why study?**

Mx Skillicorn came to tertiary study at the age of 30. They wanted to do it, but always felt like they weren't really good enough. When they took the plunge, they loved it.

They began a Bachelor of Arts at LaTrobe University in 2015, and finished in 2018.
"I just had this desire inside of me that just kept going stronger and stronger and eventually I couldn't ignore it any more," they said.

"By the time that I got there I was just so eager to eat that information up and do what I had to do."

The benefits of higher education go well beyond financial, Associate Professor Harvey.

Not only was it good for care leavers to study, it was good for the university to have them enrolled.

"Having diverse classrooms means better learning," Associate Professor Harvey said.

"When we're talking about housing affordability or voting patterns or health... it's a better discussion if there's the perspective of a care leaver in the room.

"What we don't want is any group locked out of [higher education]."