



NCSEHE

National Centre for Student
Equity in Higher Education



Curtin University



**Improving equity for care leavers in
higher education: Tracing the impact
of *Out of Care, Into University* (2015)**

Kitty Drok for the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education

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Improving equity for care leavers in higher education: Tracing the impact of Out of Care, Into University (2015)

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Sowing the seed: NCSEHE-supported research on student equity in higher education

The National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) connects research, policy and practice to improve higher education participation and success for people from marginalised and disadvantaged groups. The Centre works to build a robust evidence base to inform policy design and implementation, as well as institutional best practice. It produces and disseminates research and recommendations to all stakeholders — from policymakers and practitioners, to current students, prospective students and the general public.

Funded under the Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP), the NCSEHE operates a competitive research grant program to build upon the research expertise in higher education student equity issues that exists across Australia. Funding for research projects is available annually, with grants of the order of A\$40,000 and projects to be completed within 12 months.

Within the research landscape, these are relatively small and short-term research efforts. But it should not be assumed that the findings, outcomes and impacts of these projects are similarly small. They often lead to an increase in knowledge, an expansion of the evidence base, and eventually to lasting changes in both policy and practice.

This report documents and demonstrates the ‘snowball effect’ and progressive impact over time of these NCSEHE-funded projects on student equity in higher education.

In 2014, the NCSEHE funded the first ever national study to examine how people from out-of-home care backgrounds fare in the Australian higher education sector. In the five years since the study was completed and its findings published, there has been significant movement to address this previously-under-considered equity issue. Here we map the developments that have occurred around supporting care leavers to access post-compulsory education and training, including higher education, since the findings from the original project were published in *Out of Care, Into University* (2015). These developments have arisen in response to a broader international movement to extend support and increase educational opportunities for young people in out-of-home care beyond the age of 18 years. Together with the research and advocacy work of others, *Out of Care, Into University* has been an important catalyst for Australia becoming a part of this movement.

Out of Care, Into University: Examining care leavers and higher education in Australia

In 2014, the NCSEHE provided funding to La Trobe University's Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research (CHEEDR; then known as the Access and Achievement Research Unit, or AARU) to map the Australian higher education sector in relation to people from out-of-home care backgrounds, including kinship care, foster care and residential care. At the time, care leavers were not specifically recognised as an equity group in higher education in Australia.

The \$64,000 mixed-methods project was led by Associate Professor Andrew Harvey, Director of CHEEDR, and included a review of the national and international literature on out-of-home care and higher education; an examination of national data sets; an online survey of public universities in Australia; and interviews with senior representatives from major out-of-home care service providers.

The project sought to map higher education for care leavers (i.e. those who had spent time in out-of-home care prior to 18 years old and who had subsequently transitioned out of the system) to increase the visibility of this group, and to provide a strong information base for future policy and research.

Published in March 2015, the final report [*Out of Care, Into University: Raising higher education access and achievement of care leavers*](#) identified care leavers as a critically under-represented group in Australian higher education and a priority area for action.

As detailed in the report, around 40,000 children are estimated to require out-of-home care in Australia, and this number has risen every year over the past decade (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2014). These children are one of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged social groups, with many facing compound disadvantage. State-level data suggest that a large proportion of young people in out-of-home care are from low socio-economic status and regional backgrounds (State Government of Victoria, 2012). Young people with disabilities are also over-represented in care (Mendes, Snow, & Broadley, 2013). Nationally, the rate of Indigenous children in out-of-home care is 10.6 times the rate for non-Indigenous children (AIHW, 2014).

Children in care confront specific educational challenges from an early age, and their relatively poor school outcomes have been well documented (AIHW, 2007; AIHW 2011). Care leavers rarely transition to higher education. They are largely excluded from the level of education linked to lifetime advantages, such as improved employment opportunities and earning potential (Lomax-Smith, Watson, & Webster, 2011; Norton, 2012). Despite their extremely low university participation rates, there is no national agenda for improvement. Meanwhile, for those care leavers who have, against the odds, successfully transitioned to university, there was a paucity of Australian research on examining their experiences.

Out of Care, Into University identified the following three major reforms required to improve the access and achievement of care leavers in higher education:

1. The collection and publication of nationally-consistent data on higher education access and outcomes for care leavers is vital, and central to developing national policy on this issue. Existing data on the education of Australians in out-of-home care is limited, typically held at the State or Territory level within human services departments, and only up to the age of 18.

There are no documented plans to collect educational data beyond the age of 18, despite the stated priority of 'transitioning to independence' and an acknowledgement within documents supporting the National Framework for Protecting Australia's

Children 2009 – 2020 that the transition period continues up to age 25 (FaHCSIA, 2010; FaHCSIA 2011). This paucity of data limits policy and legislative reform, and institutional action.

There is an urgent need for a national framework to track the educational outcomes of care leavers at post-secondary level, and extending the AIHW's remit on collecting out-of-home care status data in this area would be a valuable initiative to begin building this evidence base.

2. Policy reform is required within the higher education sector. There is urgent need for greater recognition of this under-represented student group.

The invisibility of care leavers within higher education is partly related to the nature of the national student equity framework, *A Fair Chance for All*, established in 1990. The framework identified six disadvantaged groups under-represented in higher education, including people from low socioeconomic areas, people from regional and remote areas, people with disabilities, people from non-English speaking backgrounds, Indigenous people, and women studying in non-traditional areas (Department of Education, Employment and Training, 1990). Over the years, university admissions policies and national funding have been directed to support the six groups, but no categories have been added to the framework since its foundation. While care leavers tend to fall within at least one of the six broad categories, the extent and nature of their often-compounded disadvantage requires tailored policies and specific data collection. Broader reform of the national equity framework could also be considered.

While there is often an assumption that care leavers will be included in broader equity categories, such as regional and low socio-economic status backgrounds, the existing evidence suggests that this is not, and will never be, enough. Few specific policies exist at the higher institutional level to improve access and achievement of the out-of-home care group. Individually, universities need to advocate for this group, providing stronger and more transparent support to raise university aspirations and increase the recruitment, access, and achievement of care leavers.

3. Further policy and legislative reform is required within the community service sector to support the transition of people from out-of-home care to adulthood. Current legislation within State and Territory jurisdictions does not typically mandate ongoing public support for care leavers once they have reached the age of 18. However, international research and the concerns of the community service sector agree that care leavers require support beyond the age of 18. Equally, community service organisations need access to greater individualised data, and increased capacity to provide education and training to carers and the related workforce. There is also an overarching need for cultural change, as this group is routinely underestimated and overlooked by others. In some cases, even those closest to care leavers are either unaware of educational possibilities for them, or unable to explore these possibilities.

The report set out a national agenda for improvement, and provided recommendations targeted to the Australian Government, State and territory governments, higher education institutions, and community service organisations. The recommendations are reproduced in full here.

Recommendations

Section 1. A group neglected? Lessons from the national and international research

1. That the Australian Government facilitate a national framework for care leavers, involving consistent data definition and collection across state and territory governments, legislation to assist all care leavers beyond 18 years of age, and mandatory provision of post-secondary support for care leavers, including financial, accommodation and mentoring assistance.
2. That each state and territory government develop formal collaboration between the education sector and the child protection sector, for example through partnering agreements, with clearly outlined roles and responsibilities for the promotion of the educational success of young people in out-of-home care.
3. That the Australian Government work with the community service sector to provide educational access for carers (volunteer and salaried) whose academic mentorship of young people in the care system is compromised by their own educational disadvantage and who are interested in undertaking further study.
4. That state governments introduce fee waivers for care leavers pursuing vocational education and training at Tertiary and Further Education Institutes (only in South Australia, Victoria, and Western Australia at present).
5. That the Australian Government provide guaranteed bursaries for care leavers attending university.
6. That the Australian Government commission further research that captures the voices of care leavers nationally to inform tertiary education policy. This work could actively involve care leavers in the design and conduct of the research.
7. That the Australian Government lead the development of specific strategies to support the transition of Indigenous care leavers to tertiary education, involving Indigenous peak bodies, community service organisations, and state and territory governments.
8. That state and territory governments embed the role of tertiary education in the education plans and resources developed for children in out-of-home care.

Section 2. Out of sight, out of mind? The need for a stronger evidence base

9. That the Australian Government commission the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare to commence national-level data collection of the higher education access and outcomes of care leavers to determine the level of under-representation and inform policy. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's collection of educational outcomes could be extended from 0–17 year olds in out-of-home care to care leavers up to at least 25 years of age.
10. That universities collect and report on care leaver data. This work could inform potential subsequent reporting of care leaver data through the Higher Education Information Management System (HEIMS) and Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard.

Section 3. Policy and cultural reform: the higher education sector

Australian Government

11. 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.

Higher education institutions

12. That universities promote institutional awareness and recognition of care leavers as a disadvantaged group through internal communications strategies.
13. That universities collect data from care leaver students at the time of application or enrolment so that targeted support can be offered and progress monitored.
14. That universities employ a dedicated liaison officer with responsibility for increasing higher education and success of the care leaver group.
15. That universities introduce and publicise a range of targeted financial and accommodation support measures for care leavers, e.g. tuition fee waivers, cost-of-living scholarships, and residential scholarships.
16. That universities develop partnerships with community service organisations and secondary schools to connect with school-aged children in care, and their carers, via targeted outreach activities aimed at increasing aspirations for higher education and information sessions to increase awareness of the financial and other support available at higher education level.
17. That universities use partnerships with community service organisations and schools to identify prospective care leavers at late secondary school level and invite them onto campus for sponsored residential and non-residential orientation and mentorship programs.
18. That universities encourage transitions from TAFE, and participation in enabling programs and foundation studies where needed to increase preparedness for university study, especially for those transitioning to university later in life.
19. That universities provide increased academic support where needed to compensate for the increased likelihood of disrupted schooling and/or time away from study, and 'wrap around' supports such as personal advisors, mentors, pastoral care, tutoring, and counselling.
20. That peak bodies such as the Equity Practitioners in Higher Education Australasia (EPHEA) advocate, mobilise and coordinate their own resources and expertise to support care leavers.

Section 4. Policy and cultural reform: the community service sector

21. That peak bodies facilitate further collaboration among community service organisations to develop consistent data collection and tracking of educational outcomes.
22. That community sector organisations collaborate with tertiary education providers to offer carers, caseworkers, managers and teachers the training required to promote educational aspirations of young people in care.
23. That community service organisations individually and via peak bodies at state and national levels profile access to education-specific resources on their websites and through helplines to support young people in care, their carers, birth families and the related workforce.
24. That community service organisations promote tertiary education aspirations of out-of-home care children and their carers through early and ongoing intervention e.g. encouragement to attend university open days.

25. That community service organisations access and profile the voices of care leavers who have made the transition to tertiary education successfully and use these young people as mentors where possible.
26. That community service organisations support foster and kinship carers to continue supportive involvement with young people during tertiary education – even if they have moved out of their home.

International precedents

Important work around care leavers and higher education had been occurring internationally in the 15 years prior to the release of *Out of Care, Into University*, and this inspired the original NCSEHE-funded research. In the United Kingdom (UK), the Frank Buttle Trust sponsored a British research project in 2000 which led to the report *By Degrees: Going from Care to University* (Jackson, Ajayi & Quigley, 2005). The introduction of targeted programs and interventions following the release of *By Degrees* saw the UK higher education participation rate for care leavers increase from one per cent to seven per cent in ten years (Department for Education, 2013).

In Europe, the YIPPEE research project—*Young People from a Public Care Background: Pathways to Education in Europe*—was conducted across England, Denmark, Sweden, Hungary, and Spain from 2008 to 2010. The YIPPEE project looked broadly at the education pathways of young people from care backgrounds, in order to better understand how more young people from care backgrounds might be encouraged to remain in education after the end of compulsory schooling (Jackson & Cameron, 2012).

In the United States (US), the Institute for Higher Education Policy released a report titled *Higher Education Opportunities for Foster Youth: A Primer for Policymakers* (Wolanin, 2005) in 2005. The report provided a comprehensive examination of how and why young people in foster care struggled in the US system of post-secondary education. It was reported that young people in foster care do not perform well in school generally, with only about 50 per cent of young people in foster care completing high school compared to 70 per cent of their peers. Of the young people in foster care who complete high school, and are therefore college qualified, only about 20 per cent enrol in higher education compared to 60 per cent of their peers.

Prior Australian research into care leavers and higher education

Historically, there has been a paucity of research on the educational needs and outcomes of young people in out-of-home care in Australia, and there has been even less research examining care leavers and higher education. In 2012, Michell (2012) published an article identifying the fact that research equivalent to that conducted in the UK and published in the *By Degrees* report had not occurred in Australia. Meanwhile, care leavers do not constitute a distinct equity group within the Australian higher education system, so we do not know how many care leavers have ever enrolled in or completed higher education in Australia. Prior to the NCSEHE-funded research, we also knew very little about the experiences of care leavers who had gone on to higher education. A review of the national and international literature into care leavers and higher education was published in an article authored by Mendes, Michell and Wilson in 2014, titled “Young People Transitioning from Out-of-Home Care and Access to Higher Education: A Critical Review of the Literature”. The authors identified only two small Australian studies to have examined the experiences of Australian care leavers who had gone on to, or who were planning to go on to, higher education (Mendis 2012; Jurczynszyn, 2014; Jurczynszyn & Tilbury 2012). An edited collection of stories by care leavers who had completed university (Michell, Jackson & Tonkin, 2015) was published in the same year as *Out of Care, Into University*.

Response to *Out of Care, Into University*

These national and international precedents provide important context for the development of the NCSEHE-funded research project. At the time of its release, *Out of Care, Into University* received substantial media coverage. The report has since been widely referenced in Australia and internationally, including in more than 30 academic publications. *Out of Care, Into University* thus became part of an international movement to improve educational opportunities and outcomes for young people in out-of-home care and care leavers. It was also an important catalyst for Australia becoming a part of that movement.

Figure 1 summarises the developments that have occurred around care leavers and higher education in Australia since the publication of *Out of Care, Into University*. These developments are mapped across the domains of research, policy and practice, and are described in more detail in the following sections.

While causal relationships between the *Out of Care, Into University* project and broader developments may be complex, the report certainly provided context and evidence to support these initiatives. The project also successfully seeded a research collaboration that has positively impacted the lives and opportunities of care leavers in a myriad of ways.

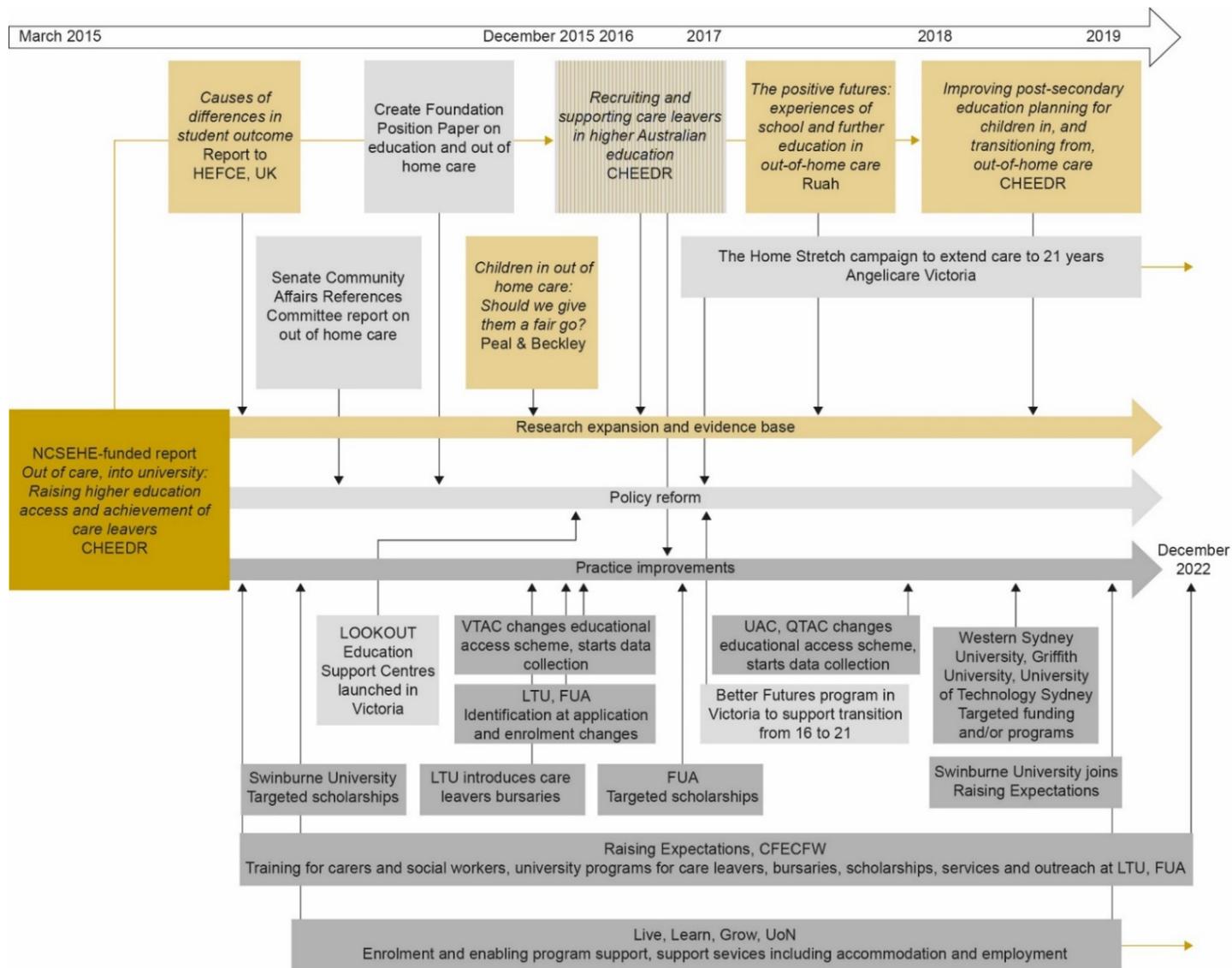


Figure 1: Developments in research, policy and practice concerning care leavers in higher education since the release of *Out of care, Into University*

Research impacts — expanding the knowledge and evidence base

Expanding research in the tertiary sector

In 2015, *Out of Care, Into University* was referenced in research by Western Sydney University titled *Children in out of home care: Should we give them a fair go?* (Peel & Beckley, 2015). The research highlighted gaps in services specifically relating to the education of children in care and care leavers. It identified the extent of the issue, and suggested possible solutions.

In July 2015, *Out of Care, Into University* was also cited internationally, in *The causes of differences in student outcomes* report to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015). In its broad exploration of why different groups of students achieve different outcomes in higher education in the United Kingdom (UK), the report identified care leavers as an increasingly-recognised equity group in higher education internationally, including within Australia.

Recruiting and supporting care leavers in Australian higher education

The groundwork laid by the original NCSEHE-funded project enabled the CHEEDR research team to successfully apply for National Priorities Pool (NPP) funding from the Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment to conduct a second major research project into care leavers and higher education in Australia in 2016. The \$127,000 project was led by Associate Professor Andrew Harvey and Lisa Andrewartha at La Trobe University, with Associate Professor Jacqueline Z. Wilson and Pearl Goodwin-Burns at Federation University of Australia, Alan Beckley at Western Sydney University and Gabrielle O'Brien at Queensland University of Technology as partners. The research aimed to address two questions:

- How can universities increase access to higher education for care leavers?
- How can universities support care leavers who are studying at university?

The final report based on this research was released in March 2017. *Recruiting and supporting care leavers in Australian higher education* follows a multi-state, cross-institutional analysis of care leavers in Australian higher education. It captured for the first time the voices of care experienced higher education students, and explored how universities attract and support care leavers.

The report included two sets of guidelines. The first set of guidelines aimed to raise awareness of care leavers as an equity group for university staff, including their relative strengths and specific needs. The second set of guidelines aimed to demystify university for young people in care and care leavers, and provided practical guidance around admissions, enrolment, financial support and other services.

Expanding research in community sector organisations

In 2017, Western Australian organisation Ruah Community Services published *The positive futures: experiences of school and further education in out-of-home-care*. This report referenced *Out of Care, Into University* multiple times, as well as the subsequent NPP-funded CHEEDR-led research project described above. The Ruah research aimed to build on this research base by engaging those with lived experience of care systems to explore how the 4,500+ young Western Australians in care might be better supported to aspire to, and engage in further education. The report's key findings were in alignment with the

findings of *Out of Care, Into University*. Recommendations included better data collection to inform interagency interventions, better interagency support processes, the introduction of financial, accommodation and mental health support services to facilitate the take-up of tertiary education, and identifying care leavers as an equity group in tertiary education policies.

Improving post-secondary education planning for children in, and transitioning from, out-of-home care

On the strength of the two key pieces of research undertaken by the original research team and partners of CHEEDR, the group secured further research funding in 2018 from an internal grant funded by the La Trobe Research Focus Area: Transforming Human Societies. *Improving post-secondary education planning for children in, and transitioning from, out-of-home care* aims to map and analyse post-secondary education planning processes for Victorian children in, and transitioning from, out-of-home care (OOHC). It includes interviews with key stakeholders from the Victorian education and welfare sectors. The \$34,000 project is led by Associate Professor Andrew Harvey (La Trobe University) and includes Associate Professor Jacqueline Wilson (Federation University Australia), Associate Professor Philip Mendes (Monash University), and Dr Iain Matheson (Massey University). The team is also working with the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (CFECFW) and Anglicare Victoria on this project.

Policy reform

In August 2015, the CHEEDR report *Out of Care, Into University* was referenced by the *Senate Community Affairs References Committee report* into Out of Home Care. In a submission to the Inquiry, Associate Professor Andrew Harvey also outlined the three key reforms recommended in the CHEEDR report. The senate committee subsequently made recommendations that:

- AIHW work with States and Territories to address gaps in the Child Protection National Minimum Data Set and other data sets of children in care, specifically referencing how outcomes for children and young people in care compare with the general population (Recommendation 2)
- the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) develop and implement a nationally consistent approach to additional education support for children and young people in care, and to increasing participation by young people in care in education and training opportunities (Recommendation 17)
- AIHW work with states and territories to develop a data set on outcomes for young people transitioning from care up to 21 years of age, with an indicator specifically referencing education and employment (Recommendation 19)
- COAG to include a project to develop and implement a nationally consistent framework for transitioning from care, with one focus being on improving access to higher education (Recommendation 20).

In 2015 the *CREATE Foundation Position Paper on Education and Out-of-Home Care* also cited the CHEEDR report when asserting the lack of consistent data on higher education attainment for care leavers, and listed actions including:

- Implementation of policy so young people who have been in care remain engaged in education and are able to achieve results in line with community standards
- Integrating education planning into case planning for those preparing to leave care and who have left care
- Federal, state and territory governments to fund targeted education re-engagement strategies for care leavers to 25 years of age, including providing priority enrolment at TAFE and universities, and fee waiver programs.

LOOKOUT Education Support Centres

LOOKOUT Education Support Centres were launched in Victoria in June 2016. They are tasked with the responsibility of ensuring primary and secondary state schools have the resources and support required to ensure young people in out-of-home care get the best out of their education. The first LOOKOUT Centre was established in Victoria's southwest in 2016, with three other LOOKOUT Centres covering the rest of the state opening in 2017. The LOOKOUT Centres are modelled on the Virtual Schools Network in the UK, where every student in out-of-home care is enrolled in a virtual school or LOOKOUT Centre, as well as in the physical school that they attend daily. Each LOOKOUT Centre is led by a Principal and is staffed by education and allied health professionals who work collaboratively with schools, carers, child protection and community service organisations. Each school is required to have a Designated Teacher who is the first point of contact between the local LOOKOUT Centre and the school. Schools are required to hold Student Support Group (SSG) meetings for each student in out-of-home care at least once per term. The student is invited to these meetings, together with their carer(s), case workers, and key education workers including teachers and integration aides. Each student in out-of-home care is required to have an Individual Education Plan (IEP) and this is reviewed at least once per term at the SSG.

LOOKOUT Education Support Centres are a significant recent development in supporting young Victorians in out-of-home care to reach their full educational potential. Prior to the introduction of the LOOKOUT Centres, school staff did not necessarily know which students were in care, and schools were often not adequately resourced to support those students. Primary and secondary schools in Victoria are now required to track and monitor the progress of students in out-of-home care, and are provided with the relevant training and support to do so through the LOOKOUT Centres.

Free Vocational Education and Training (VET) for young people in care and care leavers

In Victoria, the Skills First Youth Access Initiative enables young people aged under 24 years with a care background (as well as those who have had contact with the justice system and/or have a history of homelessness) to study government-subsidised accredited Vocational Education and Training (VET) and pay no tuition fees. The tuition fee-waiver enables eligible young people to study the following accredited Government subsidised training:

- the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL)
- the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE)
- Certificate I — IV
- Diploma or Advanced Diploma courses
- a Statement of Attainment.

The VET tuition fee-waiver for young people in care and care leavers existed in Victoria prior to the publication of *Out of Care, Into University*, albeit branded differently. Similar programs also existed in South Australia and Western Australia. One of the recommendations in *Out of Care, Into University* was that similar programs be replicated across the states. At least one state, New South Wales, has since introduced free VET for young people in out-of-home care and care leavers. The *Smart and Skilled Fee-Free Scholarships* program enables young people aged 15–30 years with a care background to access training without having to pay any student fees. All qualification on the NSW Skills List from Certificate I to Certificate IV level, including qualification that support apprenticeships and traineeships, are covered.

Better futures

In April 2017, the Victorian Minister for Families and Children Jenny Mikakos announced funding for an innovative new program to support young people leaving out-of-home care. Better Futures proactively engages with young people as they are about to turn 16. The service connects them with a support worker who will assist them as they transition from out-of-home care into adulthood up until the age of 21. Better Futures is currently being trialled in the Gippsland, Southern Melbourne and Bayside Peninsula areas, with plans to eventually roll the program out across the state. It forms part of a suite of programs currently being tested in Victoria as part of the \$168 million Roadmap to Reform (<https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/supporting-victorian-young-people-leaving-care/>).

The home stretch campaign

In August 2016, Anglicare Victoria launched 'The Home Stretch' campaign. The campaign aims to garner support for extending out-of-home care to the age of 21 years. Currently, most government support for young people in out-of-home care in Australia ends abruptly at age 18 years. This contrasts sharply with young people in the general population who tend to remain in the family home receiving continuous support into their early twenties. As a result, care leavers are at increased risk of homelessness, unemployment and poor educational outcomes (Johnson et al., 2010; Thoresen & Liddiard, 2011). Indeed, 50 per

cent of care leavers are unemployed, in jail, homeless or have become a new parent within one year of leaving care (Home Stretch, 2019).

The Home Stretch campaign aims to change these outcomes for care leavers by encouraging states to extend care up to the age of 21 years. Many English-speaking countries, including Canada, New Zealand, the UK and certain states in the US, already provide care past the age of 18 years, and this tends to correlate with higher levels of educational attainment. If implemented nationally, extending care past the age of 18 years may be the single most important factor likely to lead to improved higher education participation and success rates for care leavers.

To date four states including Victoria, Tasmania, South Australia and Western Australia have signed up to some form of extended care, but often only as a pilot program. For example, the Victorian government pledged \$11.6 million in 2019 for a five-year program to extend support for young people in care to the age of 21, in an attempt to offer a more gradual and supported transition to independent living. Combined with the roll-out of Better Futures, and extended beyond a pilot, the Home Stretch program in Victoria offers the possibility of a comprehensive program of support for young Victorians in care up until the age of 21 years.

Lead author of *Out of Care, Into University*, Associate Professor Andrew Harvey was a member of the Home Stretch's original Campaign Committee and now serves in its Expert Advisory Group. His research team has informed and been actively involved in the campaign from its inception.

Practice outcomes — real life changes

Raising expectations

In July 2015, a consortium of organisations was awarded a Sidney Myer Fund large grant to develop, implement, and evaluate a suite of interventions to improve education for young Victorians in out-of-home care. The \$724,000 project was led by the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (CFECFW), Victoria's peak body for child and family services. Project partners included Federation University Australia, led by Associate Professor Jacqueline Z. Wilson, and La Trobe University, led by Associate Professor Andrew Harvey. The three-year, \$724,000 project built on the research and advocacy work of the partners, as well as that conducted by other key Australian researchers into out-of-home care, including Associate Professor Philip Mendes (Monash University) and Dee Michell (University of Adelaide).

Originally entitled *Improving education outcomes for young people in out-of-home care*, the three-year project became known as the 'Raising Expectations' project, and included training for foster carers and social workers; education resources for people in care; and new university programs for care leavers, including targeted bursaries and scholarships, wraparound services and outreach. The overall aim of the project was to raise transition rates to tertiary education for those with a care experience and to improve the educational achievement of care leavers.

The project has been deemed a great success. The number of care leavers studying at the two partner institutions increased more than five-fold during the life of the original project — from 40 students in 2016 to over 200 care leaver university students in 2018. In recognition of this success, the Raising Expectations project won the Education Initiative Award at the *2018 Victorian Protecting Children Awards*.

In May 2018, the Victorian Department of Education and Training agreed to provide \$200,000 in funding to extend the Raising Expectations project for a fourth year, and Swinburne University of Technology joined the project in December 2018. In August 2019, the consortium members were awarded a further \$1.05 million in funding from the Victorian Department of Education and Training to support the project until December 2022. At the time of writing, there are more than 300 care leaver students enrolled at the three partner institutions.

Live, Learn, Grow

In 2015, the Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education (CEEHE) at the University of Newcastle (UoN) received HEPPP NPP funding to pilot the *Live, Learn, Grow* program. From 2016, the program has been fully supported by CEEHE and UoN. The program assists secondary students with exploring enrolment options and enabling programs to improve access to UoN. It then provides a range of tailored support services for care leavers to access and actively participate in higher education at UoN, including:

- assistance with finding and maintaining appropriate accommodation
- access to on-campus employment
- academic and social support.

Live, Learn, Grow also provides information and support to carers, sector staff and young people in care to assist in finding out about pathways, access and support for higher education. In 2018, the Live, Learn, Grow program was awarded the Association of Children's Welfare Agencies (ACWA) Innovation Award for innovative practice which is responding to an area of need in the community.

Changes to university practice

Since 2016, as part of the Raising Expectations project, La Trobe University and Federation University Australia have implemented a number of changes at the institutional level to ensure that care leavers have improved access to, and support within, their respective institutions. The initiatives implemented are based on evidence uncovered as part of the original NCSEHE-funded research into care leavers in higher education, and the National Priorities Pool-funded project that followed this.

Collectively known as the ‘Collaborative Higher Education for Care Leavers Strategy’, the suite of evidence-based initiatives has successfully:

- improved data capture on care leavers at the point of application and enrolment
- increased outreach to flexible learning schools, care(r) organisations and other groups
- improved information access for young people in care and care leavers wishing to access higher education, including through the development and distribution of *guidelines*
- improved support for enrolled care leavers through the provision of bursaries and scholarships
- increased awareness of the specific needs of care leavers as an equity group through the development and distribution of *guidelines for university staff*
- influenced institutional, state and national research and policy agendas.

In recognition of the success of the collaborative Higher Education for Care Leavers Strategy, La Trobe University and Federation University Australia won the *Equity and Opportunity* category of the 2017 Australian Financial Review (AFR) Higher Education Awards. The Strategy was also *Highly Commended* for the Engagement Australia Award for Community Engagement at the 2018 Association for Tertiary Education Management (ATEM) awards.

Other universities have also followed suit. *Swinburne University* introduced the first targeted scholarship for care leavers in 2015, as a result of personal advocacy and lobbying. Swinburne then joined the Raising Expectations project in December 2018 and extended its programs for care leavers.

University of Newcastle’s Live, Learn, Grow program is ongoing.

Western Sydney University now offers a scholarship funded by the NSW Department of Family and Community Services. Other universities with care leaver-specific funding and/or programs include *Griffith University*, RMIT University, and the *University of Technology Sydney*.

Changes to state-based Tertiary Admissions Centres

In 2016, as part of the research project *Recruiting and supporting care leavers in higher Australian education*, La Trobe University and Federation University Australia successfully advocated a change to the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC) Special Entry Access Scheme (SEAS) online application form to enable care leavers to be captured as a *specific ‘difficult circumstance’* in the admissions process. A total of 419 SEAS applicants identified as having spent time in out-of-home care in the VTAC 2016–2017 Main Round. This represents the first set of consistent state-wide data on care leavers applying for higher education in Australia.

In 2018, the Universities Admissions Centre (UAC, NSW/ACT) also introduced a change to the Educational Access Scheme (EAS) application process to enable care leavers to self-identify and receive consideration in their application to university. The Queensland Tertiary

Admissions Centre (QTAC) now also includes a care leaver-identifier as part of the QTAC EAS application process. CHEEDR and the Raising Expectations team are continuing to advocate for all Australian Tertiary Admissions Centres (TACs) to include the same consistently-worded question within their application processes. This would enable care leavers to self-identify and receive consideration for admission at all Australian universities, at the same time as enabling development of a nationally consistent database on care leavers applying for higher education.

In 2018, the Victorian chapter of EPHEA, with the support of many Victorian tertiary institutions, successfully lobbied VTAC to change and simplify its requirement for care leavers and other 'maximal impact' groups (e.g. sexual assault survivors and those experiencing homelessness) to demonstrate their experience of 'difficult circumstances' in their application for admission. The EPHEA group is also working at the institutional level to ensure that individual university application processes are aligned with the same principle, to minimise the likelihood of re-traumatisation and to remove barriers to application for care leavers and other groups maximally impacted by 'difficult circumstances'.

Conclusion

The NCSEHE-funded research that led to *Out of Care, Into University* was inspired by the work that had been occurring internationally around care leavers and higher education in the preceding decade and a half. In particular, the *By Degrees* report and the subsequent policy changes that led to a significant increase in the number of care leavers accessing university in the UK were prime motivators for the research. Other Australian researchers who had done important foundational work on young people in out-of-home care and education were beginning to turn their attention to post-compulsory education, including higher education, at around the same time. These researchers have subsequently collaborated with each other to produce some of the first national research into the experiences of care leavers accessing higher education in Australia, as well as in the development and implementation of initiatives to improve the higher education access and success rates of care leavers. As a result of this research and advocacy work, young people in out-of-home care and care leavers are today far more likely to be included as a specific item on the agenda of education bureaucrats and professionals, including higher education departmental and institutional staff. Meanwhile, human services departments, community service organisations and peak bodies such as the CFECFW are far more likely to prioritise education for young people in out-of-home care and care leavers, and to have higher education for this cohort of vulnerable young people and adults on their own agendas. This is reflected in policy and practice changes such as the introduction of the LOOKOUT Centres in Victoria, as well as the introduction and/or expansion of the VET fee-waiver for students with an out-of-home care experience in several states.

Related to the international movement to improve educational outcomes for young people in out-of-home care and care leavers, including higher education participation rates, is the movement to extend care beyond 18 years of age. The Home Stretch campaign was launched in Victoria in 2016. Its successful take-up is arguably the single biggest factor likely to improve the higher education access and success rates for young people in care. Internationally, extended care tends to correlate with higher university participation rates, and there is no reason to consider that Australia would be any different in this regard. In Victoria, the Better Futures and Home Stretch programs combined promise the possibility of a comprehensive program of support for young Victorians in care beyond the age of 18 years. Neither of these programs existed at the time that *Out of Care, Into University* was published. Indeed, the former is yet to be rolled out across the state and the latter is still in pilot phase. Yet both are part of a broader international movement to improve educational and other outcomes for young people in care — through extending care beyond the age of 18 years and improving the higher education access and success rates of care leavers. Together with other research occurring in Australia at around the same time, *Out of Care, Into University* provided important foundational research that helped catalyse Australia into becoming a part of this broader international movement.

Student stories

Two La Trobe university students who have spent time in out-of-home care featured in the NCSEHE *My Story — Student Voice* series. Their personal narratives are testament to the work of La Trobe University in supporting care leavers into, and through, higher education.



Joseph Farren is building upon his personal experiences in the child protection system to improve the lives of other young people. After transitioning from TAFE to La Trobe University, Joseph is now studying a Bachelor of Human Services and Masters of Social Work, in the hopes of becoming a qualified youth/social worker.

[Read Joseph's story.](#)



Having spent much of her childhood in foster care, **Nicola-Jean Berry** is realising her goals at La Trobe University, while advocating for support of others from out-of-home care.

[Read Nicola-Jean's story.](#)

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