Care leavers' pathways into further education

Andrew Harvey

Director, *Access and Achievement Research Unit,* La Trobe University

Gerard Jones

Deputy CEO, Mackillop Family Services

Patricia McNamara

Senior Lecturer, *Department of Social Work and Social Policy*, La Trobe University



LA TROBE UNIVERSITY AUSTRALIA

Research in progress:

University access and achievement of people from out-of-home care backgrounds

LA TROBE UNIVERSITY AUSTRALIA

Funding source



This research has received national competitive funding from the **National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education**, Curtin University, Perth, Western Australia.

https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/

Why research this cohort?

- OOHC care cohort is large and growing.
- international evidence and equivalent national school-level data suggest that the out-of-home care cohort is likely to be seriously under-represented within Australian universities.
- broad access to higher education is a social justice imperative.
- higher education is linked to lifetime advantages, such as improved employment opportunities and earning potential (Lomax-Smith, Watson, & Webster, 2011; Norton, 2012).
- important to examine factors that might increase aspirations, access and success at university.

LA TROBE UNIVERSITY AUSTRALIA

Study purpose

- **To commence a mapping of the Australian out-of-home care cohort in higher education**, drawing closely on the work undertaken in the UK through the Buttle Foundation's research, and through subsequent European research in the YiPPEE project (Young People from a public care background Pathways to Education in Europe)
- **To explore whether more targeted policies and strategies are required to support the university aspirations, access and success of people from a background of out-of-home care**

LA TROBE UNIVERSITY AUSTRALIA

YiPPEE (Young People from an (institutional or) Public Care Background: Pathways to education in Europe) EU-European Commission

- "**reliable statistical information** is an essential basis for improving the educational opportunities of young people who have been in care' and
- **young people 'should be encouraged to aim as high as possible, regardless of their care status**' (Jackson & Cameron 2012).



LA TROBE UNIVERSITY AUSTRALIA

Collaboration

- The project is a partnership between La Trobe University;
- a major national service provider, Mackillop Family Services;
- Berry Street the largest independent child and family welfare organisation in Victoria.
- Three senior researchers from the YiPPEE project (Cameron, Hojer and Monserrat) are members of the Reference Group



Aims

- to increase visibility of the out-of-home care cohort

- provide a strong information base for future policy and research work.



LA TROBE UNIVERSITY AUSTRALIA

Methodology

- literature review of people from care backgrounds in higher education, with a particular focus on the British evidence.
- geo-demographic profile of Australians from out-of-home care backgrounds.(Initial analysis suggests a concentration of people from care living in regional and low socio-economic areas).
- desktop analysis is focussing on tertiary admissions and other relevant policies at government level, particularly examining the treatment of people from out-of-home care through entry access schemes.
- Currently surveying all public higher education institutions, seeking information on any specific policies pertaining to people from care background (recruitment, outreach, scholarships, support, accommodation etc.); any data collected on the cohort at institutional level; service provision and structures to support people from care backgrounds..
- ten semi-structured interviews with major out-of-home care service providers to explore perceived barriers to higher education and strategies for improvement eg provision of greater support and information for out-of-home carers, the development of educational resources and/or nationally focussed websites, and targeted university outreach programs.
- Ethics approval was sought for the interviews and the university survey instrument.

LA TROBE UNIVERSITY AUSTRALIA

Outcomes hoped for…

- Identify:

the national geo-demographic profile of people from out-of-home care;

institutional and government policies that consider and/or affect the cohort in higher education;

major stakeholder views on barriers to higher education and potential strategies for support;

relevant gaps in information and policy

- Make recommendations targeted to higher education institutions, governments, and service providers.
- Host forum of major national stakeholders, February 2015.

LA TROBE UNIVERSITY AUSTRALIA

OOHC educational outcomes???

- There has been no national-level data collection or analysis of the educational outcomes of young people in care.
- majority of studies have focused on school level education, finding 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).



LA TROBE UNIVERSITY AUSTRALIA

Survey themes

- Most universities do not have any policies, support structures, or procedures in place that specifically address the needs of students from out-of-home care backgrounds.
- Many universities, however, have general equity policies and strategies that may cater to some of these students indirectly.

Suggestions:

- introduce targeted scholarships and financial support;
- build partnerships with out-of-home care service providers
- work closely with secondary schools to support students who are in out-of-home care.
- Increase accommodation options
- ensure students are linked with a variety of student support services
- increase institutional awareness and recognition of students from out-of-home care backgrounds as a disadvantaged cohort

LA TROBE UNIVERSITY AUSTRALIA

Key Informant voices*

*unprocessed qualitative data



Aspirations

Well... I think children in care are not terribly encouraged to be aspirational because they've often come from families where ...education is not important, they've never had an education and they're alright. What we have to do is help the child gain a high level of aspirations for themselves in terms of their education ....So I think in order to do that it's about having skilled staff and skilled carers to assist do that



LA TROBE UNIVERSITY AUSTRALIA

Going to university?

'I think you should start talking about university when they're still in like the higher primary school and get that whole image of what university is, because I think ***a lot of children say oh no I'm not going to university because that's what their birth parents say, that's what the foster parents say, and they have actually no clue what university is, they've never seen one, never been to one, they don't know anyone who has, so based on this information that they get from their birth parents or their foster parents, and it's not really based on anything.*** *So I think if we can organise this situation where when you're in year 6 or in year 1 of high school, where you go to a university to do something, a workshop or something, where you're actually going into that building and see what it is and you get the chance to form your own opinion about it, without just basing it on what other people tell you what it is, who also haven't been there'*



Support!

'Yeah definitely, definitely, and that again is widening their social network, and I think if, you know they always say it only takes one person to be able to change the opinion or the schooling history for a child, if they have that one teacher that believes in them or that one person within the school that you know drags them through when it was hard, it would be great if that person is within the school, but it can definitely be one of those aunties or uncles or a respite carer that talks about it with them and shows them what else is possible, and just gives them the different perspectives'



True collaboration at school level

'Its not about...developing up some little projects that might provide a resource for teachers about what it's like, impact of trauma on children in care which is very helpful, but it is more about how do we get the actual teachers and social workers to work closer together, and be together and respect each other's discipline and work towards the best interests of the child. I think that to me is what would be really helpful'



LA TROBE UNIVERSITY AUSTRALIA

What should be done?



LA TROBE UNIVERSITY AUSTRALIA

Outcomes in England

- major research initiatives, additional support measures and legislative changes have increased the number of young people choosing to continue in education beyond school level.
- the proportion of care leavers in higher education increased from 1 per cent in 2003 to 7 per cent in 2009
- also an increase in the number of young people gaining the appropriate qualifications to enable access to further education (The All-Party Parliament Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers, 2012).
- resultant from the inclusion of care leavers as a distinct equity category, with student participation being monitored, analysed and supported



LA TROBE UNIVERSITY AUSTRALIA

Possibilities for Australia...

- include out-of-home care as a national equity cohort within a revised framework including other marginalised groups such as people from refugee backgrounds, mature age and/or part time students, first in family students and other agreed cohorts.
- track and address disadvantage at postgraduate and international levels.
- could use the more advanced data collection techniques now available, such as nuanced measurements of socio-economic status and the introduction of the Commonwealth Higher Education Student Support Number, to collect and report data on a greater range of groups at a greater number of levels (Australian Government, 2014c; Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2012).
- incorporate compound disadvantage



LA TROBE UNIVERSITY AUSTRALIA

National commitment to improve participation

- 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.



LA TROBE UNIVERSITY AUSTRALIA

References

- All Party Parliamentary Group on Care Leavers (2014*) Handbook on higher education for care leavers* http://www.thewhocarestrust.org.uk/pages/h.e.-handbook-for-care-leavers.html
- Australian Government. (2014c*). Study Assist: Commonwealth Higher Education Student Support Number* (CHESSN). Retrieved 7 August 2014, from http://studyassist.gov.au/sites/studyassist/infowhilestudying/pages/commonwealth-higher-education-student-support-number-(chessn)
- Cashmore, J., Paxman, M., & Townsend, M. (2007). The educational outcomes of young people 4–5 years after leaving care: an Australian perspective. *Adoption & Fostering, 31*(1), 50-61.
- Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations. (2012*). Measuring the socio-economic status of higher education students*. Canberra: Author.
- Jackson, S., & Cameron, C. (2012*). Final report of the YiPPEE project. Young people from a public care background: pathways to further and higher education in five European countries*. London: Thomas Coram Research Unit, University of London.
- Lomax-Smith, J., Watson, L., & Webster, B. (2011*). Higher Education Base Funding Review*. Canberra: Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.
- Norton, A. (2012). *Graduate Winners: assessing the public and private benefits of higher education*. Melbourne: Grattan Institute.
- Office for Fair Access. (2013). *National strategy for access and student success*. Retrieved 7 February 2014, from http://www.hefce.ac.uk/
- Tilbury, C. (2010). Educational status of children and young people in care. *Children Australia, 35*, 7-13.
- Townsend, M. (2012*). Are we making the grade? The education of children and young people in out-of-home care*. Ashfield, New South Wales: Department of Family and Community Services.
- Wise, S., Pollock, S., Mitchell, G., Argus, C., & Farquhar, P. (2010). *Care-system impacts on academic outcomes: research report*. Melbourne: Anglicare Victoria and Wesley Mission Victoria.

LA TROBE UNIVERSITY AUSTRALIA