

Submission: Australian Universities Accord Interim Report

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (the Centre) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Australian Government Department of Education (the Department) in response to the Interim Report.

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare

The Centre is the peak body for child and family services in Victoria. For over 100 years we have advocated for the rights of children and young people to be heard, to be safe, to access education and to remain connected to family, community and culture. We represent over 150 community service organisations, students and individuals throughout Victoria working across the continuum of child and family services, from prevention and early intervention to the provision of out-of-home care. Many of our member organisations work closely with children and young people whose educational journey has been affected by multiple and complex challenges, affecting their capacity to access and/or complete university study.

Reflections on the Interim Report

The Centre welcomes the fact that the Panel is drawing attention to the need for a high-quality and more equitable higher education system and agree that the five priority actions to come from the Interim Report are worthwhile areas of focus to meet this goal. However, based on evidence and on the extensive work we have been doing to support more equitable educational opportunities for people with an out of home care experience, we strongly advocate for equity targets to include students who have been in care. Care experienced students only received one mention on page 50 of the Interim Report in a statement that calls for more focus on data collection at an institutional and systemic level.

There are approximately 45,000 children and young people in care nationally, with numbers expected to rise year by year.¹ These children and young people face significant barriers to educational attainment and participate in secondary and post-secondary education at lower levels relative to their peers. They have higher unemployment rates and are more dependent on social welfare supports.² They often experience trauma, relationship difficulties, unmet mental health care needs, a history of disrupted education linked to multiple placements, low expectations conveyed by the care system,³ and are less likely to have networks of support to help with periods of transition or crisis.⁴ Research shows that care leavers are less likely to complete Year 12, and more likely to

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2023). Child protection Australia 2021–22. Retrieved from <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/child-protection/child-protection-australia-2021-22>

² Deloitte Access Economics. (2021). Raising Expectations. Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare. Unpublished paper.

³ Commission for Children and Young People. (2020). Keep caring: Systemic Inquiry into services for young people transitioning from out-of-home care. Commission for Children and Young People.

⁴ Harvey, A., Tootell, N., Cakitaki, B., To, A., McGinniss, D., and Tija, T. (2022). Success, retention, and completion of care leaver students in Australian higher education. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education.

be suspended, excluded, or expelled from school, and feel disconnected from peers.⁵ They also face marginalisation across multiple aspects of their identity with disproportionately high numbers of Aboriginal children, children residing in outer regional and remote areas, and children with disability being placed in care. Without targeted supports, there is a significant risk that children and young people with care experience will fall further behind compared to their peers, leaving them less likely to engage with education or training, gain employment, or to be connected socially and culturally into their communities.

While we agree that further attention on data collection is critical to ensure increased participation of equity groups, more emphasis needs to be placed on young people and adults with a care experience to ensure their access, participation and completion of study is a priority for our higher education system. This not only includes improving national data collection on participation rates but also making care experienced students an official equity group in their own right so that their barriers to participation are addressed at both an institutional and systemic level.

Despite often meeting the criteria for several other equity groups (e.g. Indigenous, low Socio-Economic Status, Disability, Regional/Remote status), these categories do not adequately account for the unique experiences and disadvantage that children and young people in care face through their removal and disconnection from family. Governments do not lightly make the decision to remove children from their families; prior to removal these children are likely to have experienced considerable trauma. A 2014 report by the Victorian Auditor General's Office described the characteristics of children in residential care in this way:

Children in residential care have generally been exposed to multiple traumas in the form of family violence, alcohol and drug abuse, or sexual, physical and emotional abuse since they were very young. They may have a parent who is in prison or a struggling single parent with mental health issues. Some have been born to mothers who were very young, often with a violent partner. They usually have other siblings in care, and one of their parents may also have been in care as a child. They are usually known to child protection at an early age. They come to residential care typically as a young adolescent, having experienced a number of placements in home-based care that have since broken down or were only available for short periods of time. They often come to residential care with little warning and with few belongings. On their 18th birthdays, if not before, they leave the protection of the state.⁶

Removal provides an added layer of trauma particularly where children are placed in residential care or in a foster care setting with unfamiliar adults and children. Once in care, children can be subject to multiple placements and dislocation,⁷ being removed from familiar communities and schools and

⁵ Harvey, A., McNamara, P., Andrewartha, L. and Luckman, M. (2015). Out of care, into university: Raising higher education access and achievement of care leavers. Access and Achievement Research Unit, La Trobe University. <https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/publications/out-of-care-into-university-raising-higher-education-access-and-achievement-of-care-leavers/>.

⁶ Victorian Auditor General's Office (2014) *Residential care services for children*, <https://www.audit.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/20140326-Residential-Care.pdf?>

⁷ The Commission for Children and Young People found that as of 31 December 2018, *there were 403 children and young people in care who had experienced 10 or more placements over the duration of their time in care*. Taken from 'In our own words' Systemic inquiry into the lived experience of children and young people in the Victorian out-of-home care system (2019). <https://ccyp.vic.gov.au/assets/Publications-inquiries/CCYP-In-Our-Own-Words.pdf>

peer groups, with some children experiencing additional significant challenges arising from the placement itself.⁸

Recognition of care experienced students as a distinct equity group will enable the distribution of funding and ensure that institutions develop appropriate policies that will see the participation rate of care experienced students increase, as is the case in international settings such as the United Kingdom.

Students with a care experience who do defy the odds and participate in university mostly do so without the recognition, awareness, and structural support that others receive. This puts them at significant risk of disengaging and often results in extreme hardship in order for them to meet the financial and social demands of university study.⁹ This lack of recognition also impacts on the messaging that children and young people who are currently living in care receive about their potential to study at university, with many holding a belief that it is not an option for them due to their experiences and background. This is why an initiative such as the Raising Expectations program, which specifically targets this group, is so necessary, successful and impactful.

Raising Expectations for children and young people

Raising Expectations, a program run by the Centre, has been supporting care experienced students to access and succeed at university since 2015. Our program has challenged an ingrained culture of low expectations that has overlooked children and young people with a care experience and reinforced the message that they don't belong or can't succeed at university. Our model has included partnering with universities, and more recently, TAFEs, to provide on-the-ground support, awareness-raising, advocacy, facilitation of cross-sectoral networks and the delivery of peer mentoring programs for care experienced post-secondary students.

The program is currently funded by the Victorian State Government and represents a low-cost investment for a program with strong reach and impact.

Raising Expectations has contributed to tangible improvements in the education and life opportunities for individuals who have been in care, facilitating the number of care experienced people enrolled in university and TAFE to rise from just 43 in 2015 to over 750 in 2023 across our four partner universities. In addition to increasing the number of care experienced students enrolled in further or higher education since the program began, Raising Expectations has also delivered system-level changes by building the capability of the higher education workforce to respond in ways that better support post-secondary educational achievement for care leavers through the delivery of training, education, and resources.

⁸ Ibid. In 2018–2019, CIMS data recorded 246 incidents of children and young people in residential care being subject to alleged sexual abuse or exploitation, p.28.

⁹ Harvey, A., Campbell, P., Andrewartha, L., Wilson, J. & Goodwin-Burns, P. (2021) Recruiting and supporting care leavers in Australian higher education.

Students connected with Raising Expectations have spoken openly about the impact that the program has had on their self-belief and aspiration to complete higher education, a key factor in supporting them to break intergenerational cycles of disadvantage and poverty.

My bachelor's degree is not just a degree, it stands for everything that I was told I'd never reach ... It gives my life purpose. To some it may be as simple as a "no biggie", to me it is about reclaiming my life. (Marie, Nursing Student)

Raising Expectations is successfully transforming a culture of low educational aspiration and expectation to one where care experienced young people and adults have the support and confidence they need to thrive in higher education. With a higher education system that recognises care experienced people through equity status, additional funding, and permanent policy and systemic change, young people in out of home care can see that participating in higher education is an attainable and supported pathway towards a brighter future.

Recommendations and considerations

The Centre recommends that the Department and Panel consider the following:

1. Expand higher education equity group categories to include care experienced students

The official equity groups outlined by the Commonwealth Government should be expanded to include students with a care experience in recognition of the unique barriers and challenges that they face in accessing and completing higher education. This would include a data collection mechanism to support the tracking of access, participation, retention and completion nationally and assist in the development of institutional policies and approaches to support.

2. Expand support programs for care experienced students nationally

Raising Expectations has focused on embedding support at Victorian university and TAFE providers but has the potential to be adapted and scaled across all universities in all States and Territories. With investment from the Commonwealth Government, Raising Expectations could partner with all universities to support the development of specific participation programs (such as peer mentoring, student support roles, outreach, and more), build the capability and knowledge of university workforces, and provide transition support to young people.

3. Provide care experienced students tuition-free university places

Care experienced students have significant financial barriers to accessing and participating in higher education. Financial stress contributes to the likelihood of students disengaging from study, but also prevents many from attempting to engage to begin with. The Department and Panel should consider the value of offering tuition free study options for all students who have been in care, or at a minimum, funding a set number of fee-free places across disciplines. These opportunities should be set aside specifically for care experienced students and require higher education providers to set and meet targets.

4. Provide care experienced students with a higher education bursary or scholarship for every year of their university study

Similar to models operating in the United Kingdom, we recommend that a higher education bursary or scholarship is offered to every care experienced student accessing higher education,

regardless of institution or academic discipline. This bursary should extend to every year of higher education study undertaken and be paid at the commencement of the study period (e.g. prior to census date) to support students with the costs of study, including technology, internet access, course materials, and textbooks.