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Title: *Changing Lives: Improving Care Leaver Access to Higher Education*

Abstract

Australian and international research evidence documents the limited access of young people transitioning from out-of-home care (OOHC) to further and higher education. This paper examines the processes, outcomes and key findings of the *Raising Expectations* project, which involved a collaborative university and industry approach to promote higher education among care leavers at two Australian universities. The project involved consultations with students who had experienced out of home care and reported having met numerous systemic challenges in both the education sector and the welfare/care system that prevented or delayed their advent into higher education. The findings reiterate the importance of policy and practice reforms that target those in or transitioning from OOHC.

This article outlines strategies adopted by the participating universities that have led to a fourfold increase in enrolments, growth in outreach activities to targeted schools, and significant improvement in retention rates. The paper also highlights ongoing barriers to higher education access and success, through interviews with care-leaver students and policy analysis. In particular, the paper highlights the barrier of limited government support for care leavers beyond the age of 18. Extending support for care leavers until the age of 21 or beyond is central to increasing university participation, among other objectives. Contrary to many international comparators, Australian state and territory governments have been reluctant to fund such extended care, largely due to the social invisibility and low profile of people in out-of-home care. Recent policy commitments to extend support across several states, however, suggest that evidence-based advocacy can improve policy, but that better data collection and qualitative evidence are essential to changing culture and improving educational outcomes.

Introduction

Young people transitioning from out-of-home care (OOHC) are known to have poor educational outcomes compared to their non-care peers (Mendes, Michel & Wilson, 2014, Mendes & Snow, 2016; Jurczynszyn & Tilbury, 2012). Abundant evidence from studies undertaken in Europe, Britain, Asia and the Americas confirms that the problems facing care-leavers with regard to transitioning from care, dealing with general 'adult' life situations, and

completion of education are both ubiquitous and in many ways similar across jurisdictions and international boundaries (Munro, Mølholt & Hollingworth, 2016; Kelly, Dixon & Incarnato, 2016; Keller et al., 2016; Flynn & Tessier, 2011). In Australia, nine public reports prepared by governments, parliamentary committees and a Commissioner for Children from 2012-18 document an egregious lack of support for care-leavers to access further and higher education (HE). For example, the Beyond 18 Study, Wave One, report released by the Victorian Government in May 2018 found disappointing education outcomes. Only 25 per cent of the sample of 72 school leavers had completed Year 12, and 27 per cent had not completed Year 10. However, the majority of young people in the overall sample of 202 were still at school, and most of them had completed Year 10. Education planning seemed to be inconsistent (Muir & Hand, 2018). Similarly, the Western Australian Auditor General's report on Young People Leaving Care, released in August 2018, noted that 65 per cent of young people do not receive sufficient leaving care support, which leaves them at risk of missing out on education and training. The report only considered outcomes in high school education because no data was available on tertiary education (p.10).

The paucity of education data for those in OOHC is part of a broader dearth of information and evidence, and is also related to Australia's federal system of government and the location of responsibility for OOHC within public service structures. About 3,130 young people nationally in Australia aged 15 to 17 years transition from OOHC each year (AIHW, 2017, p. 48), but no specific figures are provided for those who leave care at 18 years of age. The vast majority of children in OOHC (94 per cent) have been placed in either foster or relative/kinship care or other types of home-based care. Only about six per cent reside in residential care, which is generally reserved for older adolescents with complex needs. No precise figures are available as to what percentage of care leavers come from each category (AIHW, 2017).

OOHC in Australia is the responsibility of the community services or child welfare department in each State and Territory, and each has its own legislation, policies and practices. Consequently in-care and leaving care standards are not uniform, although the national OOHC standards, introduced in December 2010, suggest minimum benchmarks such as the requirement for each care-leaver to have a transition from care plan commencing at 15 years of age (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2010). Additionally, the latest National Child Protection Framework Action Plan for 2015-18 identifies improved outcomes for care-leavers as one of the three key strategies to be implemented, and refers to improved housing supports as a priority in order to prevent youth homelessness (Department of Social Services, 2015a). There is also some Commonwealth funding available to care-leavers through the Transition to Independent Living Allowance (TILA) which provides financial assistance up to \$1,500 for young people aged 15-25 years who have departed OOHC within the past 24 months (Department of Social Services, 2015b).

Despite these initiatives, neither the National Standards nor the Framework provide any specific funding to jurisdictions assist the introduction of additional supports, nor do they impose any accountability measures to enforce action by the States and Territories (Beauchamp, 2016). To date, all legislative provisions related to leaving care are discretionary, not mandatory. That limitation is why the national Home Stretch campaign is currently arguing for state care to be extended to the age of 21 years (Anglicare Victoria n.d.). A central problem in Australia for researchers and educators wishing to improve HE outcomes for children transitioning from OOHC, and for adults who experienced OOHC as children, has therefore been the lack of data. Information as apparently basic as the number

transitioning from care in a given year lacks coherence or agreement across statutory authorities and jurisdictions (Mendes 2018a, p. 6). Hence the numbers of care leavers who access HE annually has also been essentially unavailable, although it is estimated to be very small — in the order of 1 to 3 per cent, compared to approximately 40 per cent of the general school-leaver population. Of those who do enter higher education, the number who graduate is necessarily smaller still.

A further lacuna in the available data is specific understanding of the reasons for care leavers' low rates of university access. Many reasons could be surmised or inferred from known features of care leavers' general life-prospects and outcomes (Mendes & Snow, 2016; Mendes, 2018a), but this remains largely in the realm of educated speculation, bolstered somewhat by the occasional anecdote from the few care leavers who have achieved sufficiently highly academically to be in a position to publish accounts of their experiences (e.g., Golding, 2005; Wilson, 2013). One major cross-institutional study in 2017, *Recruiting and Supporting Care Leavers in Australian Higher Education* (Harvey et al., 2017), included interviews with more than thirty care-leaver students across four Australian universities, finding that students often faced university access barriers including low expectations of those around them, disrupted schooling, financial and other challenges. However, the study also found that those who had managed to access higher education typically held qualities of persistence, resilience, independence, and strengths through life experience that differed from other university students (Harvey et al 2017).

In his dialogic treatise *Identity*, Bauman (2004) speaks of those whose radical lack of social status — that is, whose existence is 'in the lowermost regions of the power hierarchy' — qualifies them for no socially acknowledged identity at all (p. 39). This 'absence of identity' is the tacitly sanctioned consequence of descending to, or being born into, 'the underclass', which in Bauman's schema comprises, inter alia, the 'school dropout, or a single mother on welfare, or a current or former drug addict, or homeless, or a beggar' (p. 39). It is safe to say that a very large percentage of care-leavers and OOHC children would unhesitatingly identify with one or more of those categories, and would see the correlation as innately bound up with the (non-)status of being or having been an OOHC child.

It is axiomatic that absence of identity in a social/societal setting renders the person effectively voiceless, invisible, and robbed of their capacity to participate meaningfully in the broad societal narrative. They are, in other words, in all but the most basic legal sense deprived of functional citizenship. As such, their physical presence in society tends to be viewed, at all levels from the street corner up to the venues of governance, as at best an inconvenience, and at worst (that is, if they or advocates on their behalf seem to be becoming too visible or audible) a 'problem' to be solved. Neither category constitutes a genuine acknowledgement or perception of their actuality as human beings with as much right as anyone to acceptance as full members of society.

The first-named author of this article (Wilson) is a care-leaver with first-hand experience of this diminishment of citizenship and many of the obstacles to education identified in the paper. She is also one of a very small percentage of care-leavers to achieve a senior academic position, with a PhD in ethnographic history. This combination of stakeholder experience and proven research credentials leaves her especially well placed, as an 'insider researcher' (Hodkinson, 2005; Kanuhu, 2000) to conduct the study reported here, and to interpret the data gathered. The project and resulting data also serve as exemplars of a maxim for which researchers in the field have been advocating for some time: that care-leavers, as the subjects

of research in the field, should have not merely a ‘voice’, in the sense of participating in interviews or surveys, but *agency*, as researchers with direct involvement in the design and conduct of the studies (Wilson & Golding, 2015). The article also reflects her experience in ethnographic methodology, which is underpinned by the concept of ‘thick description’, foregrounding the descriptive, the anecdotal, and the personal as qualitative avenues to cultural interpretation (Geertz 2008 [1973]).

Raising Expectations

The ‘Raising Expectations’ project, which is based in the State of Victoria, Australia, responds to a need that has been recognised in a number of countries including the United Kingdom, the United States and New Zealand, but to which Australian policy-makers have remained largely indifferent (Mendes et al., 2014). This lack of concern at institutional and government levels partly accounts for the paucity of data, and also, more significantly, for the lack of educational support available to care-leavers as they approach and reach the moment of transition out of care. This lack of support effectively consigns the majority of care-leavers to independent living with minimal skills, financial instability, an absence of emotional bolstering of the sort normally afforded to their age-peers growing up in familial environments, and hence confidence in their own capacity to make their way. Often their secondary educational achievements have been relatively modest compared to their peers due to lack of continuity, emotional difficulties associated with their OOHC situation, and so on. In such circumstances, it is hardly surprising that few aspire to, or even contemplate, the possibility of accessing higher education.

In 2015, in an effort to improve the educational outcomes of care leavers and to rectify this lack of data, the first two authors collaborated to initiate the Raising Expectations project at two Australian universities, Federation University Australia (FUA) and La Trobe University (LTU), in concert with an ‘industry partner’, the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (the Centre). The project was supported by a Myer Foundation large triennial grant, and subsequent support has been received through the Victorian Department of Education. LTU is located across five Victorian campuses, with its base in a major city (Melbourne), and FUA is based in a large regional centre (the city of Ballarat), 100 kms from Melbourne, with a number of other rural and urban campuses. This project aimed to develop university outreach and recruitment strategies to raise the number of care-leavers accessing higher education; and to identify and support those care-leavers already enrolled within both universities.

As part of the strategy, we also conducted interviews and surveys with enrolled care leavers to determine what obstacles they had encountered both in accessing and completing higher education, and what strengths they brought to their university study. The interview component of Raising Expectations built on a series of interviews conducted in the Recruiting and Supporting Care Leavers project. The qualitative data gleaned from this prior study informed our design of Raising Expectations and formed the basis of further interviews and personal contacts with care-leavers. The interviews were open-ended, but based on a series of structured questions seeking, inter alia: basic demographic information; what type of care participants had experienced (that is, residential, foster or other such as kinship care); and primary and secondary schooling experience including how many schools attended,

leaving age, targeted supports (if any) provided, and level of encouragement (if any) to pursue higher education

The research was conducted in order to develop and refine programs to promote the possibilities inherent in higher education for future care-leavers, and to improve the experience of those already enrolled. Simultaneously, the Centre developed broader resources and connections within the welfare sector, including information and advice for carers, social workers and related stakeholders.

A further factor militating against care-leaver university participation is that, despite the manifold disadvantages and obstacles they face during and after OOHC, care-leavers have not been recognised as an ‘equity’ group for the purposes of special consideration and prioritised access to services and provisions (Harvey, Andrewartha & McNamara, 2015). They have therefore had to compete on a ‘level playing field’ basis in the neo-liberal education ‘market place’ for entry into HE, and once enrolled, have all too often found themselves in a ‘sink or swim’ situation vis-à-vis development of study skills, dealing with the logistical and financial complications inherent in university life, and in many cases assimilating to a radically unfamiliar social world.

The Raising Expectations project was designed to address these issues in a number of ways:

- Establish mechanisms within the respective universities to support existing care-leaver students once identified, and increase enrolments of care leavers.
- Provide a platform for the Centre to educate the social service sector providers through their research networks and programs, and hence also to reach out to secondary schools.
- Provide university outreach programs to targeted schools. This aspect is a vital component of the project’s aim to raise awareness among OOHC children, and their educators, of the HE possibilities for care-leavers.
- Directly lobby policy-makers to include care-leavers as a priority equity group, and to collect data on their applications, offers, and acceptance rates, as well as their subsequent success, retention and outcomes.
- Produce research outcomes which bolster and extend the direct support processes for care-leavers, and inform both the industry partner education program and the project leaders’ political advocacy on care-leavers’ behalf.

Methods

Establishing the operational parameters took some months of discussion and negotiation between the three bodies involved. It was important to ensure that all parties were optimally utilising their various assets, and that they were all confident in each other’s capacities and roles. An attempt to run duplicate programs across the institutions would have been both impractical and a waste of resources. As the main research organisations and also those with direct access to student care-leavers, the two universities took the lead in most project initiatives related to higher education.

Gathering data and making contact with whatever care-leavers this process revealed was the obvious first priority. The two universities followed different but complementary

methodologies, reflecting differences in the respective backgrounds and areas of expertise of the project leaders, and disparate student demographics associated with the institutions' widely different geographical locations.

The FUA project arm, which is led by a research academic who is herself a care-leaver, sought from the outset to gather data directly by arranging for the university's admissions department to include a specific tick-box question on enrolment forms encouraging prospective students to identify as care-leavers. This approach furnished opportunities to make direct contact with care-leaver students and establish constructive, ongoing relationships. To facilitate this approach, FUA employed a social-work graduate with strong personal insight into the care-leaver experience to act as care-leaver co-ordinator and liaise directly with care-leaver students.

The LTU partners were unable to secure modification of the university enrolment form, but were instead able to secure funding from the university's allocation of higher education participation and partnerships programme (HEPP) funding to provide bursaries for enrolled care-leaver students, which then enabled their subsequent identification within the student system. Responsibility to support the care leaver students was allocated across a range of student development advisers, while the central university outreach program was also expanded to include new schools in which students in OOHC were known to be studying.

Beginning prior to, and partially concurrent with, implementation of the Raising Expectations project was the aforementioned Recruiting and Supporting Care Leavers research project involving the first two authors, in which care leaver students from LTU and FUA were interviewed (Harvey et al 2017). The semi-structured, in-depth interviews were designed to capture views on higher education issues such as: application and enrolment processes; transition into higher education; and support services at university. This latter issue of support and services was particularly salient at FUA and LTU where new services had recently been established under Raising Expectations. While interviews were conducted across four partner universities, the majority of interviews (n=25) with care leaver students were conducted at LTU and FUA. Participants were recruited for interviews via a range of advertising and promotion methods, and interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed and analysed for content and themes. An interpretative phenomenological approach to the analysis was applied (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

In addition to the student interviews, Raising Expectations itself was independently evaluated. The evaluation sought to assess the effectiveness of the program and partnership model, and specifically:

- The extent to which each initiative was effective;
- The areas where improvements could be made;
- The barriers to, and enablers of, each initiative and of the project objectives more broadly;
- The effectiveness of the partnership, how well it worked and how it can be improved; and
- The effectiveness of the program structure and design and its capacity for sustainability and scalability. (ACER, 2018, p.7)

Part of the evaluation involved interviews with stakeholders, a review of relevant documentation, and analysis of enrolment and activity data (ACER 2018, p.7). This paper

therefore documents the impact of Raising Expectations based on the voices of care leaver students enrolled at the two partner universities, and the conclusions of the independent evaluation.

Project Findings

Raising Expectations has, through the interviews with care-leavers and survey responses, affirmed many of the project leaders' previous judgements concerning the nature of the challenges facing OOHC children and care-leavers regarding accessing, or even contemplating, HE. Janette,¹ for instance, was burdened by an all-too common aspect of OOHC: an oppressive level of judgemental scrutiny, which in turn contributed to recurring accommodation problems.

For me it was just about somewhere to live. People don't understand how hard it is to find accommodation that's not shit. ... I stuffed up my year 12. I found it too difficult as I moved around a lot. My foster carer was too strict and I just didn't get on with her. I smoke and she was always complaining about me. That's all the DHS [Department of Human Services] workers talked to me about — my behaviour. I don't think they were interested in me going to uni. (Janette)

Janette's experience is typical of the phenomenon Kerry Carrington (1993) identifies in her study of children and adolescents who become subject to the 'gaze' of the welfare system: behaviour that would pass relatively unremarked, indeed unseen by officialdom, among those growing up in mainstream households is all too readily deemed morally deviant, 'delinquent', even criminal, when it occurs in OOHC environments and other welfare-intensive settings. This 'visibility of otherness' (Carrington, 1993, p. 42) is a major reason for the long-established tendency among wards of the State and others immersed in the welfare system, especially adolescents, to automatically regard the personnel who populate the welfare apparatus as the 'enemy'. Such mistrust is chiefly because of the system's traditionally moralistic and punitive approach to 'caring' for the child. Although incarceration for 'status offences' such as homelessness or being 'a neglected child' is now a thing of the past, police involvement in cases of OOHC youth misbehaviour or absconding remains routine, with residential OOHC especially likely to result in young people coming to the attention of the police and the juvenile justice system. While a certain percentage of such misbehaviour does qualify as genuinely criminal, much of it is on a par with merely staying out too late, visiting family members after being told not to, and so on, resulting nevertheless in possible arrest and reappearance before the Children's Court (Colvin et al., 2018; McFarlane, 2018).

In a perfect illustration of the singular, and peculiarly enduring, nature of the OOHC experience and how it can affect the adult's perception of self and academic expectations, the FUA care-leaver co-ordinator received a call from a distressed care-leaver student who required a Police Check before commencing his first placement for his education course. He was afraid he would fail the Check because he had a 'police record'. Care workers in the

¹ Not her real name. This and all subsequent care-leaver names used here are pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

residential unit in which he had spent much of his OOHC time had not only routinely called the police whenever he had gone ‘missing’ — that is, overstayed his curfew — but for such ‘offences’ as refusing to get out of bed for school. Thus he had transitioned out of care at age eighteen convinced he had a criminal record. The co-ordinator was able to determine that no such record existed.

This also illustrates the vital role played by the Raising Expectation project’s incorporating a dedicated specialist worker to liaise with and mentor care-leavers, and so provides a best-practice model for institutions seeking to emulate the project’s success. The independent evaluator noted this feature of the project as a ‘critical success factor’ and one of the ‘key lessons’ to emerge from the project (ACER, 2018). As one student succinctly put it:

I mean yes there’s welfare officers at university, yes there’s you know, counsellors at the university. Yes, there’s disability support services and officers at university, but there no one clear ‘care person’, someone who gets your experience. (Angela)

By no means all the problems associated with OOHC are legal, of course, but among the many other issues that can arise for an individual, there is almost no limit as to their capacity to impinge on educational progress.

I first attempted to go to uni straight out of year 12, as I got a really high [tertiary entrance] score — 96.6. I’m probably a bit of an abnormality in your data. But what happened was I had a mental health breakdown after year twelve, mostly because of all of the things I’ve gone through in the past. Uni had offered me a place, but I didn’t have the financial backing or support to go through with it. (Helena)

Helena’s case is typical of many OOHC residents — whether academically inclined or not — in that the factors that result in a child entering OOHC in the first place are most often extreme, involving at best radical neglect and at worst terrible abuse within the family environment. Admission into OOHC does not magically resolve these issues, and many care-leaver students bring with them into the tertiary setting an array of emotional problems that require both the specialist knowledge of a social worker familiar with OOHC-specific difficulties, and empathy and understanding on the part of educators.

A lack of this latter aspect — insightful educators — is a recurring theme among the care-leavers interviewed.

I had troubles in high school. I got into a [selective] high school on a scholarship, because I was quite bright, but failed year seven. It was a really bad year with Mum. I lived with Dad after that, but it was a bad year. We were homeless when we stayed with Mum, living in a car. The school weren’t supportive at all. For instance, I was having trouble handing in assignments and school started giving me detention as a punishment. ... Nobody ever asked if something was going on at home. ... I applied for special consideration in Year 12, as I had had some stuff going on ... I was sexually abused when I was younger and was going through the court

process when I was in my final years of high school. But I got declined. So, I didn't get great marks. There was nothing. No support for me. No-one took that into consideration at all. (Karen)

Similarly dismissive of the individual's personal sensibility, and even more explicitly discouraging, was Casey's experience:

In high school, we did have a careers advisor but he literally said to me 'you will never get into medicine, pick something else'. Instead of saying, 'Well here are the pathways to medicine,' it was 'You'll never do it.' ... I should've been a cook or like a cleaner in his opinion. (Casey, quoted in Harvey et al., 2017, p. 29)

Similarly, Helena, who as we have seen achieved a very high tertiary admissions score, had earlier been confronted by outright discouragement of the sort all too familiar to OOHC children:

When I was in grade six we used to have a tutor come to the [residential] house ... once a week. ... I told her that I wanted to go to Wesley College [an elite non-government school]. ... I told her that I'd like to sit the scholarship exam for Wesley. The first thing she told me was 'you're aiming too high, you're not good enough for that'. You can imagine that made me more stubborn. I sourced out the scholarship exam myself and I sat it. And, I actually got in.

At that point, however, Helena encountered a different kind of obstacle which exemplifies the singular nature of OOHC life and the sometimes insurmountable challenges it presents to educational aspiration:

Because I was adopted that same term, I didn't end up taking the scholarship because I had just been placed with my new family. So, I went to a [rural] public school. (Helena)

An abiding characteristic of the above accounts is the gulf between OOHC and the taken-for-granted life experience of children growing up in mainstream families — a dichotomy, it might be said, built of the sociological notion of *habitus*, with all that the concept implies in terms of cultural capital, divergent expectations, capacities and perceptions of the world. This radical disparity becomes most crucial, and has the greatest impact upon the individual's HE prospects, just at the moment when secondary schooling is ending, for it is then that the OOHC child suddenly becomes a care-leaver.

Discharge from care in Australia occurs, under normal circumstances, at age 18, at which point the stresses of senior-year study are suddenly compounded beyond measure by the abrupt cessation of domiciliary, financial and emotional support. Governments, policy-makers and education administrators in Australia show almost no awareness of the burden this arbitrary truncation of entitlements places upon care-leavers (Mendes, 2018). And for those in their final year of secondary schooling, which is the most taxing scholastically and is competitively assessed state-wide, the wounds are further salted by seeing their peers at

school receiving the maximum support family life can provide, precisely because parents are fully aware of the stresses their offspring are enduring.

There's so much that you're thinking about, well that I was thinking about, when I was leaving care you know because my birthday's in the middle of the year as well and DHS [Department of Human Services] were like, 'Your payment gets cut off in May', and you've still got the rest of the year to go. (Kelly, quoted in Harvey et al., 2017, p. 27)

Thus the system as it stands ensures that the young care-leaver, at a moment of intrinsic high anxiety and worry, is returned to the experience of isolation, poverty and abandonment that led to their admission into OOHC in the first place. Indeed, a 2010 study found that approximately *half* of young care-leavers typically find themselves homeless within the first year of transition out of care (McDowell, 2010).

[I]t is generally accepted [among stakeholders] that successful outcomes for care leavers result from secure and stable placements; educational support and progress whilst in out-of-home care; planned and gradual transitions from care that reflect individual levels of maturity and skill development; and the provision of stable accommodation and a range of ongoing relationship and material supports after leaving care including a dedicated caseworker or personal adviser till at least 21 years of age (Mendes, 2018a, drawing on Cashmore & Mendes).

FUA's care-leaver coordinator's role was both to conduct research interviews and to provide ongoing support for care-leaver students. This approach has resulted in a very substantial increase in care-leaver enrolments at FUA over the project's (so far) three-year run, from twenty to 160 undergraduates plus twenty postgraduates.

While the FUA approach highlighted the potential of care-experienced staff to drive enrolments and provide intensive support to care-leaver students, the primary strength of LTU's approach has been in the areas of direct outreach to schools, and lobbying and advocacy with policy-makers. The latter activity has resulted in the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC)² taking the major step of formally recognising care-leavers as an equity group and including a question on VTAC application forms inviting care-leavers to identify as such for special consideration. This stands as a significant achievement of the project.

² VTAC is the section of the State government Department of Education and Training responsible for handling applications for undergraduate degree courses and other full-time higher education courses.

The independent assessor mentioned above was commissioned in the second year of the project to evaluate its design, running and achievements. Crucial to its success, the evaluation averred, is its ground-breaking provision of hitherto unavailable data and the evidentiary benefits this furnishes:

Currently, there is no requirement by Federal or State governments to collect data on care leavers studying in higher education and university. ... Little data are carried forward on young people from in-care to post-school education and training settings. Similarly, the absence of any baseline and ongoing data collection of care leaver participation in higher education effectively renders care leavers invisible. ... As a result, evidence to support a case for advocating for care leavers as a student equity group is challenging. (ACER, 2018, p. 22)

In the absence of state or federal government data, collection of data by the project is a critical and fundamental element not only as a way of monitoring and tracking progress, but to gain a better understanding of the number of care leavers who want to study at university and to enable more leverage to advocate for them. (ACER, 2018, p. 4)

The assessor noted, too, the substantial and growing impact the project has had on the field in terms of providing information for stakeholders and promoting awareness in public forums.

Raising Expectations has developed a reputation as a **preferred source of information** on care leavers entering higher education. ... [F]rom 1 January to 15 March 2018, **1,002 people visited** the *Raising Expectations* webpages with the 'for students and care leavers' page receiving the most hits. This is almost double the number of views compared with the last quarter of 2017 (529). ...

As at 23 March 2018, La Trobe University's care leaver webpage had been accessed more than 1500 times by more than 660 individual users. (ACER, 2018, p. 10, emphasis *sic*)

Aside from Raising Expectation's internet presence, national broadcast and print media have also played a part in disseminating the 'message'. National broadsheet *The Australian* has run feature articles on the project (Akerman, 2017), and a number of stakeholders including care-leaver students and academic project leaders have been interviewed on Australian Broadcast Corporation radio programs (ABC, 2018). In 2017 the Raising Expectations project won the highly competitive *Australian Financial Review* Higher Education Award for 'Equity and Opportunity'. Most recently, a promotional video presented by a care-leaver student in the second year of her nursing degree at FUA was uploaded to YouTube (Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, 2018) and featured in an article in the local press (Kirkham, 2018). The video is currently averaging close to 100 hits per week.

Implications for Policy and Practice

There has in recent years been a degree of acknowledgement at policy level of the problems associated with transition from OOHC, with programs being initiated in various jurisdictions to start gradually preparing children for transition from age 15. However,

To date, all State or Territory legislative provisions are discretionary, not mandatory. And the Commonwealth implicitly approves the uniform policy approach of all jurisdictions that ‘young people in out of home care are declared independent when they turn 18 years of age’. (Mendes, 2018a, citing the Council of Australian Governments)

The assumption that care-leavers are ready to become ‘independent’ at 18 is doubly unrealistic and inequitable. In the first place, OOHC residents are, by definition, the least likely group of young people to be emotionally and financially fit to make their way in the world, especially today’s globalised world of perpetual flux which Bauman (2005) dubs ‘liquid modernity’, with minimal or no support. Coupled with this intrinsic vulnerability is a wide range of maturity levels relative to age within the group. Secondly, the casting out of young people at *any* bureaucratically mandated age is contrary to modern social norms: the nominally adult offspring of mainstream families today routinely spend several years ‘transitioning’ to full independence, often with repeated returns to the family home between periods of what might be termed ‘trial’ independence, before finally exiting in their mid-twenties. ‘The key factor here is the continued availability of most family homes as a “safety net” to which young people can return over a considerable period of time’ (Mendes, 2018a)

The Australian example is out of step with a number of more progressive international jurisdictions, notably the UK, USA and New Zealand, where OOHC has been extended to age 21 (Baidawi, 2016). This step has occurred in response to a wealth of research over decades in those countries affirming the manifold benefits — to society as well as to individual OOHC residents — of extended care with post-care supports (Mendes, 2018a). Yet Australian governments have until recently virtually ignored that research, and only now, in response to intense lobbying, are they beginning grudgingly to respond with the piecemeal and inadequately supported measures noted above. At this writing the best hope for significant reform seems to be the ‘Home Stretch’ campaign initiated in 2016 by the Church of England’s residential care arm, Anglicare. A well-resourced push for OOHC to be extended to age 21, Home Stretch has gathered wide support across the relevant stakeholder groups,.

To date, Home Stretch has achieved four major political breakthroughs. The most significant was the pledge by the Tasmanian Liberal Party State government, successful in the March 2018 election, to extend care to 21 years. The South Australian Liberal Party, which was elected to government in March 2018, has also promised to fund foster care placements until 21 years. Additionally, both the major parties in the lead-up to the November state election in Victoria have made election promises. The opposition Liberal Party in Victoria have promised to pilot an extension of support until 21 years for 75 young people over a two-year period, whilst the Labor Government has promised to extend support to 250 young people until 21 years via an investment of \$11.6 million over 5 years. Most recently, the Western Australian government has promised a trial program of extending care for some care leavers. The challenge remains to ensure that those governments that sign up to the Home Stretch program devote sufficient resources to facilitate improved outcomes for care leavers. It will be essential for Home Stretch to monitor not only legislative and policy changes, but particularly reforms to funding levels per care leaver in each jurisdiction (Mendes, 2018a).

Extending the age of transition from OOHC is arguably the one policy change that can make the greatest difference to the educational prospects of care-leavers, and it is a relatively simple one. Increased funding and infrastructure would of course be required, but compared to the cost to society of generations of homeless, unemployed and effectively unemployable young people whose educational potential and life prospects have been unfairly thwarted, the cost would be eminently bearable — as has been shown in other countries where the reform has been enacted. Analysis commissioned by Home Stretch revealed that the benefits to government of extending care would far outweigh costs (Deloitte Access Economics, 2016).

Given these factors, Australian governments' reluctance to extend support for care-leavers remains puzzling. It is arguable that the key dynamics at play are *cultural*. Mendes suggests that a core factor is 'stigma', that OOHC children 'are subjected to social prejudice and hurt by the wider society, and relegated to the "bottom of the heap"' (Mendes, 2018a, drawing on Michell, 2015). Such relegation, Mendes argues, encourages policy makers to perceive individuals through a moralistic lens focused on apparent social deviance and hence to regard their situation as 'an implicit warning to the societal mainstream' of the cost of non-conformity (Mendes, 2018a). Such a notion looks dispiritingly plausible when one considers how recently the welfare of such children was intimately linked to the incarceration-oriented justice system — with the residue of that model, as we have seen, still in place (McFarlane, 2018).

Social invisibility, in the sense of which Bauman (2004) speaks, in a liberal democracy is, of course, rarely total, and our society incorporates mechanisms by which legal and perceptual reforms can be proposed, advocated and enacted — eventually. The Raising Expectations project is one of many ways in which the cause of OOHC children and care-leavers can be promoted. Its chief merit, we believe, is that its focus is on one of the core aspects of effective citizenship: education. But it is only one project, it has an uncertain future — funding and continued availability of qualified personnel are both finite — and in the end, its benefits, while real and significant, remain confined to a small percentage of the total number of care-leavers. What is needed, we would argue, is a shift in policy makers' perception of education, toward a synthesis between education and welfare, such that genuine, *fully supported* access to education — to the highest level — is seen as an unquestioned entitlement of *all* children and young adults, no matter by what route they arrive there.

Conclusion

Raising Expectations has demonstrated that dramatic improvements in university outreach, access and support for care leavers are possible with committed, collaborative action. The project has highlighted the importance of capturing care-leaver voices and employing care-experienced people in the design of institutional policy. Moreover, both Raising Expectations and the Home Stretch campaign have highlighted the capacity to achieve policy change through advocacy based on rigorous qualitative and quantitative evidence. Despite the effectiveness of the project, however, broader policy changes are required to improve education outcomes of those in and transitioning from care

One critical step to improve access to higher education for care leavers would be to extend State care obligations beyond 18 years. It would also be useful to ensure that every care-leaver had a post-18 educational support plan based on a partnership between child protection and education (McDowall, 2009). Another important step would be to establish a post-18 national data base similar to that maintained by the British Government's Department of Education. Such a database would allow us to monitor the progress of care-leavers in a range of areas, and specifically identify how many had entered and/or completed higher education. Linking the school identification numbers at State level with the Australian Government's Commonwealth Higher Education Student Support Number (CHESSN) would also enable tracking of students across multiple education sectors, providing robust longitudinal data.

Other necessary reforms pertain to the role of universities. All universities could have a formal policy for enrolling and supporting students from an OOHC background, including a specific student services officer who has a specialist knowledge of the impact of State care experience. Such a policy could be promoted by the Australian Government through institutional compacts, similar to the access and participation plans that operate in the UK. Advocacy by the peak body, Universities Australia, could also encourage universities to amend their enrolment forms, and tertiary admissions centres to include specific care-leaver questions similar to Victoria. Such changes would provide valuable data to track the progress of care-leavers in accessing and succeeding in higher education. These changes and other policy reforms have previously been outlined by the authors in depth elsewhere (Harvey et al., 2017).

In addition, generous and reliable financial support is required to assist care leavers entering higher education. Possible measures include the removal or reduction of fees and/or deferral of Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) repayments, the provision of a small number of quarantined or preferential places for care-leavers, and the availability of accommodation and financial scholarships to meet educational and living costs. At the very least, Australia could follow the lead of the UK Government in offering a major bursary for each care-leaver undertaking higher education, and associated support with accommodation and the cost of stationery, books and a computer. This assistance should not be limited only to care-leavers aged up to 25 years, but should also be available for those older care-leavers who elect to return to education later in life.

Finally, governments could ensure that the voices and views of care-leavers are elevated in the design of policy. While a dearth of evidence has contributed to policy inertia, there are also clear cultural failings including the presence of stigmatisation and low expectations for care-leavers. Empowering care-experienced leaders is central to redressing this culture and creating effective policies in and beyond education. Incremental progress is being achieved through specific projects and State-based approaches, but systemic change will require the active involvement of peak bodies, reformers beyond the welfare sector, care-experienced leaders, and the Australian Government.

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