

| CASE STUDY

RAISING HIGHER EDUCATION ACCESS AND SUCCESS FOR CARE LEAVERS UNDER COVID-19

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The coronavirus crisis has both highlighted and exacerbated social inequities. One of the groups most impacted is people with an out-of-home care experience, including those currently in foster, kinship or residential care as well as those who have transitioned out of the system (care leavers). The outcomes for many care



Current La Trobe University Master of Social Work student and care leaver, Jessielea Skillicorn (pictured) has benefited from the support of Raising Expectations. Image courtesy of the Bendigo Advertiser, 11 May 2019.

leavers are already poor – one study found that half will be unemployed, imprisoned, homeless or will have become a new parent within a year of leaving care (Home Stretch 2020). And while it is predicted that young people in general will be the hardest-hit by the economic fallout of COVID-19, the impact is likely to be unevenly distributed amongst young people themselves (Mendes & Waugh 2020). Those from low socio-economic, regional and Indigenous backgrounds, for

instance, will likely be the most affected, and young people with an out-of-home care experience are over-represented within each of the above three groups (Harvey et al. 2015).

Since 2015, La Trobe University has been a founding partner on a program that aims to change the outcomes for care leavers, by increasing access to higher education. Generally speaking, the life chances of those with university degrees are far greater than those without, yet research conducted by La Trobe University and published in *Out of care, into university* (Harvey et al. 2015) found that people with a care experience are far less likely than the average young person to go to university. Similar participation gaps were found to exist in New Zealand, Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom, but each of these jurisdictions also had large-scale programs designed to address these inequities. By contrast, no such programs were found to exist in Australia, partly due to federalism – while out-of-home care is managed at state and territory level, higher education is primarily managed at Commonwealth level. The Raising Expectations program arose from this policy gap and was initially supported by a Sidney Myer Fund Large Grant.

Care leavers do not enrol in university at the same rate as their non-care experienced counterparts for multiple and complex reasons (Harvey et al. 2017). Upstream reasons include a culture of low expectations amongst carers, teachers, social workers and others



working to support those in out-of-home care, while one of the largest downstream barriers, aside from low prior educational attainment, is the dearth of emotional and material support available to care leavers compared with the average 18-21 year old (Harvey et al. 2015). Addressing the under-representation of care leavers in Australian higher education therefore requires a sophisticated response (Wilson et al. 2019).

Led by a consortium including the Victorian Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, Federation University Australia, La Trobe University, and more recently Swinburne University, Raising Expectations is cross-sectoral, multi-institutional and collaborative. Program initiatives address the identification and admission of care leavers (previously an 'invisible group' in higher education); the provision of targeted financial and wraparound support; outreach to community service providers, government agencies, schools and carer groups; and ongoing research and advocacy to inform policy and continue building the evidence base. Results of the program to date are striking. Within the original partner universities, the number of care leavers enrolled has increased almost seven-fold since inception, from 40 students in 2016 to more than 270 in 2020.

The benefits of the program extend far beyond the individual care experienced and the university students enrolled. A recent return on investment analysis conducted by Deloitte Access Economics (2020) found that, for every dollar invested in the program, a minimum of \$1.80 in social and economic benefits is returned. By Deloitte's calculations, in the first four years of operation, the

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program generated a net social benefit of \$7.8 million, to be returned to society in the form of increased productivity in the labour market and reduced reliance on government services by those the program has supported to complete their degree.

As a result of the initial success of the program, in August 2019 the Victorian Department of Education and Training committed more than \$1 million to continue funding until December 2022. This welcome investment will enable us not only to increase university access, but to continue challenging pervasive stereotypes and deficit model thinking across the welfare and education sectors. Despite deep structural inequity and a culture of low expectations, young people in care typically have high educational potential to be harnessed. Our research has found, for example, that care leavers enrolled in universities often demonstrate resilience, independent thought, commitment to social justice, and a diversity of experience that improves the learning experience of

all students, and indeed their lecturers (Harvey et al. 2017). By providing supported pathways, we can raise the expectations and outcomes of those in out-of-home care, while strengthening society more broadly.

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