CASE STUDY

Ensuring equal opportunities for Children in Out of Home Care: what is being done?

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Abstract

Children and young people in Out-of-Home-Care are a group of vulnerable children who suffer discrimination and experience under-achievement on a daily basis in Australia through no fault of their own; they are placed in the care of state governments. The paper examines the problems and issues out of home care (OOHC) children face and goes on to describe possible solutions. OOHC children are not designated as a special equity group in education for financial support from central or state governments. Because of this situation, the identity, numbers, problems and issues are not recorded or identified for additional support, despite the problems of disruption in their education. The University of Western Sydney has introduced several *widening participation* programs specifically for raising awareness and aspirations of OOHC children and young carers to engage or re-engage them with their education and assist them to progress to further or higher education. Also research has been initiated to evaluate the effectiveness of such programs and identify what works.

Keywords: equity groups; Out-of-Home-Care; young carers; education; Widening Participation

Introduction: Widening Participation

The influential *Bradley Report* (2008) recommended that the Australian government should address educational deficiencies and low levels and standards of technical, literacy and numeracy skills in the workforce by encouraging young people to complete their basic education and progress towards tertiary and higher education. Subsequently, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) set targets that 40% of 25 to 34 year old people would hold at least a bachelor-level qualification by 2020 and that at least 20% of students from low socio-economic (LSES) backgrounds should make up higher education enrolments. These targets were set to ensure that Australia kept pace with the rest of the world in developing its workforce skills to maintain its position as a leading nation in its technical and innovation expertise. It was recognised that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds would be needed to study at a high level and obtain qualifications to fill the skills gap to fuel the economy with bright employees and entrepreneurs in the information technology revolution.

The reality was that young people from a LSES background made up 25% of the Australian population whereas only 15% progressed to higher education (ABS 2014; McLachlan, Gilfillan and Gordon 2013). The factor relating to young people from disadvantaged background was recognised in the *Gonski Report* (2011) in that the 'difference

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in school opportunity' for students from a LSES background was 'alarming' (Hurst 2013). It was also identified in 2010 by the World Economic Forum report (Schwab 2012), that Australia, to maintain its world standing as an industrial nation it would need to encourage young people from sections of the community that had not traditionally entered higher education to do so. The Australian Federal Government Department of Education and Training introduced the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP[3]) to fund programs (DoE 2014) to encourage young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, called equity groups, to progress to tertiary education (Cuthill and Schmidt 2011).

The title widening participation is widely used by education practitioners to denote developmental programs to assist disadvantaged young people with the ability, to access and participate in further and higher education. The phrase was defined as meaning: '… increasing access to learning and providing opportunities for success and progression to a much wider cross-section of the population than now' (Kennedy 1997 p5). The equity groups to be funded with extra resources were identified earlier by the report *A Fair Chance for All* (DEET 1990) as:

- 'People from low SES backgrounds;
- People from regional and remote areas;
- People with a disability;
- People from non-English speaking backgrounds;
- Women in non-traditional areas of study and higher education; and
- Indigenous people' (Naylor, Baik and James 2013).

In addition to the economic and fiscal advantages of a well-qualified and skilled workforce, it had also been recognised by the *Dawkins Report* (1988) 'the achievement of a fairer and more just society' (p.iii), that is social justice as an additional driver; this factor was reiterated by the *Gonski Report* (2011). The above equity targets were repeated in the *Martin Report* (Martin 1994) and led to an evaluation framework for measuring the effectiveness of universities in recruiting and retaining equity group students (Pitman and Koshy 2014).

This paper will focus on a disadvantaged group that is not specifically mentioned in the foregoing literature, that of Out of Home Care children. This category of young people, although suffering in many cases from extreme disadvantage, is not recognised in legislation as a specific equity group.

Out of Home Care Children

The term out of home care (OOHC) is used by community and government practitioners to relate to a group of young people under the age of 18 years who have been deemed in need of protection and placed in the care of their home state or territory (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2015). Although the individual states have the greater responsibility for the care and safety of OOHC, the Australian federal government has oversight responsibility for income support, education and health care. There are many reasons for children being placed in OOHC which could be related to unstable family situations, or they could be the victim of neglect, psychological, sexual or physical abuse or being at risk of this abuse as a vulnerable child. There are unfortunately many examples (McClellan 2015) of OOHC children being further victimised though abuse and neglect after being placed in care (AIHW 2015).

As in all other families, conditions and relationships change in the lives of OOHC children, therefore states provide a variety of long and short term accommodation and support services for this vulnerable group, to fit the circumstances of the case in question. There are

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[3] In 2015, the name of this funding program changed to Higher Education Participation Program (HEPP).

five types of care: relative/kinship care, family group homes, foster care, residential care and independent living. It can be seen from the titles that not all care provision is, in fact, 'out-of-home'; as kinship or relative care is intended to keep the child within the home or the community in which they are raised, while providing the safety and support they deserve. While the statistics on numbers of children in care are included in the following tables to enable readers to judge the size of the issue, further details relating to OOHC children are contained in a related journal article by the authors (Peel and Beckley 2015).

Table 1: Number of Children aged 0-17 in out of home care, state and territories, 30th June 2009 to 30th June 2014 (Source: Peel and Beckley 2015)

Year	NSW	Vic	Qld	WA	SA	TAS	ACT	NT	Total
2009	15,211	5,283	7,093	2,682	2,016	808	494	482	34,069
2010	16,175	5,469	7,350	2,737	2,188	893	532	551	35,895
2011	16,740	5,678	7,602	3,120	2,368	966	540	634	37,648
2012	17,192	6,207	7,999	3,400	2,548	1,099	566	700	39,021
2013	17,422	6,542	8,136	3,425	2,657	1,067	558	742	40,549
2014	18,192	7,710	8,185	3,723	2,631	1,054	606	908	43,009

Table 2: Overview of funded out of home care households, on an average day during 2013-2014

Authorisation type	Number	%
Foster Carer	5,483	45.7
Relative/Kinship Carer	6,022	50.2
Both foster and relative/kinship carer	216	1.8
Respite only carer	261	2.2
Long term guardianship	20	0.2
Not stated	37	-
Total	**12,038**	**100.0**

Table 3: Children in out of home care, by age, states and territories, 30 June 2014

Age(years)	NSW	Vic	Qld	WA	SA	Tas	ACT	NT	Total
<1	432	256	234	161	67	20	30	29	1,229
1-4	3,210	1,496	1,585	878	484	194	124	202	8,173
5-9	5,993	2,278	2,679	1,278	888	355	188	277	13,936
10-14	5,819	2,259	2,620	1,050	836	334	181	271	13,370
15-17	2,738	1,421	1,067	356	356	151	83	129	6,301
Unknown	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	**18,192**	**7,710**	**8,185**	**3,723**	**2,631**	**1,054**	**606**	**908**	**43,009**

It is important to state that the education outcomes of young people in OOHC are not recorded in official statistics in Australia; this may be because there are no 'input' statistics from which to track progress. Universities do not record upon enrolment whether students are from OOHC backgrounds as this data is not required by the government. Subsequently, there is no data recorded on access, retention or graduation rates; thus there can be no comparison with other equity groups. Indeed, a recent royal commission (McClelland 2015) has also found that OOHC children themselves find it hard to access their own files (Bibby 2015). However, we do know that only 47% of children in OOHC continued in education beyond year 10 and only 35% completed their education to year 12 compared with 55.3% of all other young people in that same year (McDowall 2012; Michell 2012). Where data is

collected in the UK, three quarters of children in care between 16 and 18 leave care without any qualifications (Fletcher-Campbell 1997; Broad 1998). When coupled with the disruption to education and frequent changes in domestic arrangements (Peel and Beckley 2015), there is an overwhelming case to treat OOHC children as a specific equity group. Indeed, the situation of OOHC young people as 'care leavers' at age 18, may be exacerbated because government assistance generally ceases at that age (Creed, Tilbury, Buys and Crawford 2011) but may be extended to age 25 (McDowall, 2009; Mendes, 2008). A recent report recommends that OOHC children and care leavers should be offered greater opportunities to continue in education; there were also findings that most universities did not have policies, practices or procedures relating to care leavers (Harvey, McNamara, Andrewartha and Luckman 2015). Research has revealed that part of the problem is there is lack of challenge, ambition and expectations for care leavers and therefore failing to succeed is a self-fulfilling prophecy (CREATE Foundation, 2006; Creed, et al, 2011; Jackson and McParlin 2006). This paper has not attempted to cover the subject, problems and issues for OOHC children engaging with their education; this subject is covered in greater depth in another paper by the authors (Peel and Beckley, 2015). Having identified some of the problems, this paper will describe some of the solutions that were introduced by the University of Western Sydney from the year 2014.

Widening participation for OOHC children

The report quoted above (Harvey et al 2015) found that only two Australian universities had recruitment policies or guidelines for targeting prospective students from OOHC while only four (out of 43) universities had outreach programs aimed specifically at care leavers. Only one university had a scholarship program for care leavers. This is a lamentable situation that should be addressed; OOHC children are clearly a disadvantaged group which needs additional care, support and nurture (Harvey 2004; Harvey and McNamara 2015; Harvey et al 2015; Peel and Beckley 2015). In 2014 the University of Western Sydney (UWS) acknowledged OOHC children as a disadvantaged group and piloted several outreach WP programs to encourage students to complete their education and progress to tertiary education. A description of the details of these initiatives follows along with identification of what works in such programs and the benefits and impacts of the outcomes. Following work completed by the Office of Widening Participation (OWP) in collaboration with relevant stakeholders including Carers NSW, The Smith Family, Department of Education and schools located in LSES areas, four specific priorities to address the issues relating to OOHC children, care leavers and young carers were identified:

1. 'Work along-side stakeholders and schools to promote the program and provide support to other organisations as well as teachers and NSW Department of Education and Communities in what UWS has to offer for this target group.
2. Provide easy access to information regarding higher education for school age children who are young carers and out-of-home-care in aiming for higher education with UWS.
3. Work along-side stakeholders to promote the program where this target group are able to be reached and supported to emphasise what UWS has to offer.
4. Work along-side families to promote the program and provide relevant information and a better understanding regarding that higher education is possible for their children' (OWP 2014).

The collaborative work broke those four priorities down into action plans for the partner organisations and set the programs for 2015 on their strategic course. In common with all other WP programs delivered by University of Western Sydney, the objectives of OOHC programs are:

- 'students' aspirations and motivation for higher education are enhanced;
- students' knowledge about university increases including access pathways, university life and career options;
- students' academic potential is enhanced;
- students' family knowledge about higher education is broadened;
- widening participation projects are valued by community partners and stakeholders' (OWP 2015)

There is a comprehensive suite of policies to assist UWS program / project managers to effectively manage, deliver and evaluate the programs they are responsible for including the OWP project management and reporting procedure; the targeting procedure; working with children and vulnerable adults procedure; event management procedure; and the evaluation framework. The programs continued from 2014 were the Learning for Life program delivered by The Smith Family charity and the KiC (Kids in Care) club run by UWS. The Learning for Life program is a scholarship program delivered nationally, but the UWS program is associated with several interactive events at UWS Campuses with HSC study sessions and a learning club. It also offers UWS students volunteering opportunities through the Classrooms Without Borders program.

Kids in Care (KiC) Club

One of the widening participation programs run by UWS for young people in OOHC is KiC Club, which consists of weekly after school workshops hosted on university campuses and run by OWP Staff and UWS student ambassadors. Begun in early 2014, the KiC Club program promotes awareness and makes accessible the benefits of higher education to young people in OOHC who might otherwise be deprived of such opportunities. In this way, the KiC Club program operates in accordance with the previously mentioned recommendations of the Bradley Report (2008), the targets set by COAG and UWS's commitment to recognising young people in OOHC as an equity group in need of support (Peel and Beckley 2015). The outcomes from the entire 2014 KiC program involved engagement with 3,453 young persons, 265 parents and carers and 64 teachers or student ambassadors. In accordance with a steering committee established in 2015, KiC Club forms part of the wider strategic effort to develop, implement and evaluate outreach and engagement projects that aim to promote and enhance the aspirations, self-awareness and confidence of young people in OOHC (OWP 2015). Within this framework, KiC Club helps to cater for the current social and educational needs of primary and secondary school age children in OOHC, while also functioning in a transitional capacity by promoting tertiary opportunities these young people may later benefit from upon moving from high school to university study.

The KiC Club program pursues its objectives by providing young people who are in OOHC with the opportunity to engage in a range of learning activities in a fun and supportive higher education environment. In addition to the weekly workshops which take place in university labs, regular events are hosted at on campus sites like the UWS Penrith Observatory and as excursions to events such as museum visits and community robotics competitions. All workshops and events are provided free to participants. The program runs on a regular and consistent basis, for 4 terms of 8 weeks each, continuing from year to year, which makes the program unique among the other OWP projects and programs targeting other LSES equity groups in that KiC Club establishes a continuous positive association between program members and higher education. This format provides stability that case workers, foster/kinship carers and young people in OOHC can plan around and rely on. Regularity is also a priority with regard to the UWS staff and student ambassadors who work on the program, as consistency is recognised as an important facet of developing positive relationships with stakeholders from the OOHC community of Western Sydney.

While the KiC Club program has a strong science and technology association, frequently involving robotics and computer programming activities and utilising UWS School of Computing, Engineering and Mathematics (SCEM) resources, developing participant SCEM based skills and knowledge is, though important, not the primary objective of the program. As an OWP initiative, the core objective of KiC Club is to promote higher education aspirations generally by demystifying and normalising tertiary education for young people in OOHC. This is primarily achieved by regularly hosting young people in OOHC on campus within a sustained learning environment, which provides ongoing access to constructive knowledge and experiences of university.

As an OWP outreach initiative, KiC Club is open via application to young people in OOHC between the ages of 9-17. This inclusive approach with a focus on maximum accessibility has seen enrolment in participant numbers steadily increase since KiC Club's inception, with participants now being referred to the program from a wide array of OOHC service organisations. As a relatively new program catering for a disadvantaged group with sensitivity and confidentiality considerations to take into account, possibly the greatest challenge a program such as this faces is the network and trust building with external organisations and stakeholders. However, with the establishment of formal partnerships between UWS and a number of OOHC agencies and organisations (see below), participant numbers in KiC Club and other OWP programs catering for young people in OOHC are expected to increase further. Accordingly, plans are currently being formulated to expand the scope of KiC Club to include other fields of education beyond science and technology, as well as to establish clubs on more UWS campuses to improve accessibility to the program throughout the Western Sydney region.

In addition to the flagship KiC program, the progression of work in 2015 for the benefit of OOHC children was collaborative working with charities interfacing with the community commencing with: Youth off the streets; Dress For Success Sydney; Life Without Barriers; Street University; CREATE Foundation. These programs are ongoing and a brief description of their activities follows. Youth Off The Streets charity is delivering an education engagement program to young carers and OOHC students, providing them with a safe learning environment with meaningful content and transferable skills. The content includes service learning, skills and certification and student welfare and features engagement with education, aspiration building and visits to university campuses. The Dress for Success charity delivers the Get Smart Program which is offered to disadvantaged women in OOHC, care leavers or young carers in Sydney to assist them into employment. This program includes a developmental coaching and mentoring program which seeks to build confidence and aspirations in the participants with the objective of moving forward with their life towards employment or tertiary education. Life Without Barriers charity is running a project in collaboration with UWS for OOHC children who will attend transferable skills workshops aimed at increasing life skills, self-confidence and motivation to apply for higher education. Street University charity is delivering the Streetsmart Program which will offer OOHC children in the Mount Druitt area of Sydney a structured program developing a respect for learning, community engagement and a strong work ethic. The intention is to encourage young people to remain in education and progress to tertiary education; activities will be held in conjunction with UWS and on university campuses. The CREATE Foundation charity will deliver a program targeted at children and young people in OOHC aged 14 to 17 to develop and encourage a positive outlook of education and higher education for each young person. In addition, all under-graduate students, including those who self-report their background as a care leaver, have the opportunity of working on WP programs as student ambassadors. In this position, they operate in outreach and retention programs and can become a good role model for prospective students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Conclusion

Many outcomes have already been achieved by UWS from the original multi-agency workshop strategy for OOHC children; the effectiveness of the 2014 program has been measured through its evaluation framework and program review practices (OWP, 2014). In 2015 there are the further developments of the availability of a scholarship for OOHC care leavers to financially assist students studying at UWS (UWS, 2015). In addition a full time care co-ordinator has been employed to manage programs specifically assisting young people from OOHC backgrounds.

Policy makers and education practitioners in the WP field should acknowledge that OOHC children are in constant vulnerable circumstances and probably have experienced a disrupted or disjointed education coupled with low expectations from their own perception and those around them. Education providers such as universities should introduce programs to redress the disadvantaged background of OOHC children. It is early days to evaluate the impact and eventual outcomes and destinations of participants in the programs described above, but the feedback is that such programs are building confidence and aspirations of young people in OOHC. This is important to ensure equal opportunities for an under-represented minority in the population that deserves a fair go.

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