



RESEARCH PAPER

Live, Learn, Grow: An autoethnographic examination of the 'navigator' role supporting care leavers at an Australian university

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Current research shows that Australians with out-of-home care backgrounds are less likely to commence and complete tertiary education, and more likely to be unemployed or employed in low paid roles. This paper focuses on a program at a regional university in Australia which was developed to address some of the barriers care leavers face in learning about, accessing and engaging with higher education. The discussion utilises an autoethnographic approach to highlight and explore the 'navigator' role which is part of the *Live, Learn, Grow* program. It investigates the program's value in providing support for first year university students with a care experience and contextualises findings in relation to research outlining the supports available for care leavers in higher education, both in Australia and internationally.

Keywords: higher education; out-of-home care leavers; student equity; widening participation; autoethnography

Introduction

There were 46,448 Australian children living in out-of-home care (OOHC) on 30th June 2016 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2017). There is currently insufficient data to determine the precise number of care leavers who participate in higher education, however, McDowall (2009) found that, of 196 care leavers surveyed, only 2.8% had enrolled in university. This number is in comparison to approximately 37% of Australians aged 25 to 34 years who had a bachelor degree in 2016 (Universities Australia, 2016). Recent research also suggests that Australian adults who have previously been in OOHC are more likely to be unemployed or underemployed and to experience homelessness (Beauchamp, 2014). The barriers and disadvantages faced by care leavers begins while they are still in care, as they regularly experience disrupted schooling, and often are not provided sufficient or appropriate support to compensate for this (Townsend, Cashmore & Graham, 2016). The support provided after leaving care in Australia varies from state to state, however, support is generally reduced, if not ceased, once an individual turns 18 (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2017). The limited data on Australian care leavers also makes it difficult for universities and other higher education providers to develop and evaluate strategies for supporting care leavers to access and navigate higher education.

Many children and young people in OOHC have experienced various forms of disadvantage, trauma and/or neglect before entering care (Barr, 2018; Townsend et al., 2016). Furthermore,

many children experience multiple placement moves while in care, leading to disruptive educational transitions and gaps. Townsend et al. (2016) found that children in their study had experienced an average of 4.6 school changes before finishing their first year of high school. The effects of trauma can also be misinterpreted as wilful misbehaviour by school teachers (Barr, 2018). Children in care are more likely than their peers to be suspended from school, causing further disruptions to their education and increased likelihood of complete disengagement from school (Beauchamp, 2015; NSW Ombudsman, 2017). In addition to the educational disruption and disadvantage they may have faced, young people in care considering transitioning into higher education are faced with the prospect of commencing further studies at a time when they are forced to suddenly transition into independence at the age of 18, often with little or no support or guidance (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services & Indigenous Affairs, 2010).

The *Live, Learn, Grow* program at the University of Newcastle, in New South Wales, Australia, has been developed to address some of the barriers faced by care leavers in engaging in higher education, by providing support to first year students who are enrolled in undergraduate or enabling programs. In its first two years, 2016 and 2017, 18 students participated in the program, with 10 of those continuing to study beyond their first year. While three students left due to personal circumstances, including relationship and mental health issues, the rest of the students who chose not to continue with their university studies at this time took up other opportunities, including joining the defence force and job opportunities.

This paper outlines the *Live, Learn, Grow* program and, using an autoethnographic approach, I explore my role as ‘navigator’; that is, the person who helps to guide students through their first year experience. I view this role as a critical element of student success because although a number of program participants did not continue at university, the majority of those who left did so after choosing to explore other options for career or study. These participants all expressed that they felt able to make this decision after having the support to experience university and to decide what was best for them. The discussion is situated in the context of research outlining existing programs that support care leavers in Australia and the United Kingdom. In addition to evaluating *Live, Learn, Grow*, it is hoped that this paper will provide a useful background and practice framework for other institutions who wish to develop a support program for care leavers.

Supporting care leavers in higher education: The literature

There is a small but growing literature on care leavers in Australia and elsewhere, but there is limited research that considers their relationship with education. Care leavers’ engagement with higher education remains under-researched, particularly within Australia. This is made complex by the nature of OOHC in Australia, which is legislated, managed and monitored independently in each state. As a result, the experience of care and support received by care leavers varies depending on where they live. It is difficult, therefore, to capture data about OOHC and care leavers and the data that is available cannot be generalised across the country.

A Fair Chance for All, a discussion paper released by the Australian government in 1990, identified six groups as being disadvantaged and requiring specific support to increase their access to higher education (Department of Education, Employment and Training, 1990). Australian universities currently receive targeted funding in order to support the access and engagement of members of these groups. Although care leavers may belong to one or more of the identified groups, in Australia they are not formally recognised as an equity group, and there is no system in place to monitor young people who have been in care after they have transitioned to independence (Harvey, McNamara, Andrewartha & Luckman, 2015). As a result, whether

support is provided, and what this may look like, differs between universities, and there is no uniform method for reporting on care leaver enrolments and support programs. Harvey et al. (2015) surveyed all Australian public universities to identify the structures, policies and practices universities had implemented to specifically address the needs of care leavers. Of the 37 public universities in Australia at the time, 28 institutions responded to the survey, and of these only two identified that they had guidelines or policies around recruitment that targeted those with a care experience, five noted admission policies explicitly addressing care leavers, one reported that they had a scholarship explicitly aimed at care leavers, and four identified outreach programs with a specific aim towards care leavers. None identified other support programs which targeted students from care backgrounds.

A more recent review by Harvey, Campbell, Andrewartha, Wilson and Goodwin-Burns (2017) notes an increase in university support programs explicitly addressing the needs of young people who are in care or have left care, although the support offered varies between higher education institutions. Several universities have implemented scholarships and bursaries specifically for care leavers (Federation University, 2017; Harvey et al., 2017; La Trobe University, 2017; Western Sydney University, 2017) and created roles for a dedicated staff member to work with care leavers or young people still in care (Beckley, Peel & Pourau, 2015; Federation University, 2017; University of Newcastle, 2018). Some Australian universities have also implemented strategies to target young people in OOHC, as well as their carers and casework staff, as part of institutional widening participation practices. Targeted widening participation in higher education programs for the OOHC sector include open days specifically for young people in care, educational programs, support to apply for university and foster carer information sessions, as well as dedicated websites providing information for care leavers interested in accessing university (Federation University, 2017; La Trobe University).

Over the past decade, significant work has been done in the United Kingdom to recognise and support care leavers who wish to access and engage in higher education. The Buttle UK Quality Mark was established in 2006 to recognise those institutions that had implemented appropriate strategies to support the decision-making, access and engagement of care leavers with an interest in higher or further education (Buttle UK, 2017). The *By Degrees: Going to University from Care* study (Jackson, Ajayi & Quigley, 2005) followed 129 care leavers attending university as part of three successive cohorts for up to three years. Information gathered from the participants was used to form a list of recommendations for schools, universities, foster and residential care providers, as well as national and local government. The recommendations for higher education institutions included developing specific policies to address the needs of care leavers, having a specific liaison person to provide support to leaving care teams, educating admissions tutors and widening participation staff about the care system and the potential difficulties faced by care leavers, and providing proactive information and support around finances and academics to new students with a care background (Jackson et al., 2005). Many of the recommendations from the report have now become policy, firmly placing care leavers on the agenda for recognition and support in accessing and engaging in Higher Education (University College London, 2017).

In the United Kingdom, legislative documents and accompanying guidance outline the legal responsibility of local authorities to support young care leavers to access and engage in higher education, such as the *Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000*, *Children and Young Persons Act 2008*, *The Care Leavers (England) Regulations 2010* and *The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations* (Department for Education, 2010). These documents also provide guidance around what best practice support looks like, including continued practical, mentoring and financial support to care leavers to the age of 24 or beyond (i.e., until they have completed their chosen

course of education), as well as the implementation of a £2000 bursary for care leavers entering higher education, paid either as a one-off lump sum or in instalments throughout their degree (*Children and Young Persons Act 2008*, Department for Education, 2010). By 2015, 199 institutions in the UK had been awarded the Buttle UK Quality Mark, and the organisation felt that since care leavers were now recognised and supported by the sector, the decision to discontinue the award was made (Buttle UK, 2017).

In terms of practical support for care leavers in higher education, the literature identifies four key areas, including stable accommodation, ongoing practical assistance, financial stability and social supports (Harvey et al., 2015; Jackson et al., 2005; Jackson & Cameron, 2011). In Australia young people generally leave care when they turn 18, and after this time the support they receive reduces or even stops completely (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2017). While many young people in Australia continue to receive support from their family as they gradually develop independence, care leavers often do not have the same safeguard of a stable family support network to turn to. As a result, care leavers are often required to support themselves, and to transition quickly into independence, often without a strong support network (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services & Indigenous Affairs, 2010).

Other literature identifies strategies that may be effective in providing support to higher education students, particularly those who have been in care or who come from non-traditional backgrounds. Research on care leavers in higher education institutions in the UK identifies a number of common factors that are important for providing effective support. The designation of a key contact within the university was noted as significant, as this person is able to act as a guide, conduit, and link to information, systems and support services within the university (Cotton, Nash & Kneale, 2014; Go Higher West Yorkshire, 2017; Harrison, 2017; National Network for the Education for Care Leavers, 2016; Rawson, 2016; Starks, 2013). The importance of training and support for these staff was identified, to ensure they had a working understanding of care experiences and the care system (Harrison, 2017; Go Higher West Yorkshire, 2017). This was backed up by Australian research by Harvey et al. (2017) who interviewed care leavers across four Australian universities. In this study, participants felt that it was important to have a contact person who had an understanding of the care system along with the institutional knowledge to support care leavers to navigate through available supports at university.

Context: *Live, Learn, Grow*

The *Live, Learn, Grow* program supports students from OOHC backgrounds who are undertaking undergraduate or enabling programs at the University of Newcastle (UON). The program was conceived in 2015 by the Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education (CEEHE) to address some of the varied and complex barriers faced by care leavers wishing to engage in higher education, and to support care leavers to actively participate in university. *Live, Learn, Grow* was the first university program of its kind in Australia to offer a range of supports to care leavers at university, including subsidised on-campus accommodation, supported employment and academic and social support.

Live, Learn, Grow was developed in 2015, in consultation with community organisations, NSW Family and Community Services, and local care leavers. The program approach was informed by three key studies including *By Degrees: Going from Care to University*, conducted in the United Kingdom (Jackson et al., 2005), the European study *Young People from a Public Care Background: Pathways to Education in Europe* (Jackson & Cameron, 2011), and an Australian report, *Out of care, into university: Raising higher educational access and achievement of care*

leavers (Harvey et al., 2015). These three studies highlighted certain factors which increased the likelihood of care leavers experiencing success in higher education, these being stable accommodation, ongoing practical assistance, financial stability and social supports. The *Live, Learn, Grow* program aims to address each of these factors, outlined in more detail below, in order to provide the most effective support to participants.

The pilot of the program commenced in 2016, and was funded through the Australian Government's Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) National Priorities Pool; a scheme designed to fund projects and programs aimed at supporting equity group participation in Australian universities. In its first year, *Live, Learn, Grow* saw ten commencing students participate in the program. Four of these students were enrolled in undergraduate programs, while the remaining six were enrolled in either Newstep or Open Foundation, two of the university's enabling (university access) programs.

Identifying and engaging with potential participants

A key factor in activating *Live, Learn, Grow* is engaging young people in care with the possibility of university study. Casework staff and carers may not discuss university with young people in care, either because of a lack of familiarity due to not having attended themselves, or because of low expectations and an assumption that higher education is not achievable for them (Mendes, Michell & Wilson, 2014; Harvey et al., 2017). *Live, Learn, Grow* staff work closely with a number of local OOHHC agencies, and endeavour to develop positive, collaborative relationships with key stakeholders in the sector, including carers and casework staff. These relationships have been invaluable in identifying and engaging with potential students. Through their outreach activities *Live, Learn, Grow* staff have been able to provide information about the program and different university pathways to OOHHC staff and carers, who in turn are able to pass this information on to the young people they are working with. This approach has allowed awareness of the program to reach more children and young people than could be engaged with individually.

To date, the majority of students in the program have been referred by agency staff working closely with them. In 2017, several of the students had also participated in on-campus days hosted by *Live, Learn, Grow* in the previous year. These days are intended to provide potential students with opportunities to engage in activities related to various university degrees, as well as give them information about the different pathways to higher education, and the support that may be available to them once enrolled. The young people who attend also meet the *Live, Learn, Grow* Program Facilitator, as well as some current participants, allowing them to hear directly from other people from care backgrounds and their experience of attending university.

Stable Accommodation

Because, like other students, care leavers need stable accommodation in order to meet the demands of university, *Live, Learn, Grow* participants are provided with subsidised on-campus accommodation, with included meals and utilities. The students have a private bedroom in a shared apartment, where they have the opportunity to interact with peers, as well as having the support of a Resident Mentor who coordinates social activities, monitors students' general wellbeing, and answers any general questions about university and on-campus life. This living arrangement also gives students access to the social and academic supports provided by UON's Student Living services. This includes help from the Student Living Support team, professionally trained full-time staff who are available to assist with welfare concerns, access to academic support, all while working closely with other on-campus support and referral services. To help them to be able to participate fully in on-campus life, participants are also supported to

maintain financial stability.

Financial stability

Live, Learn, Grow students are supported to apply for casual on-campus employment. While some students chose to continue in jobs they had already started before commencing university, or not to work at all, those students who chose to apply were offered positions supporting the university's widening participation programs. As part of this employment, students were offered the opportunity to work at *Live, Learn, Grow* hosted events, such as on-campus experience days for young people in care. Several took up this opportunity, expressing their desire to share their experience with other young people who may have similar backgrounds to themselves. The job roles are flexible, allowing participants to balance work around their academic requirements, and are well-paid in comparison to jobs typically undertaken by university students, such as entry-level roles in hospitality and retail. Employment also provides another opportunity for social involvement, as *Live, Learn, Grow* students are often working alongside other undergraduate students.

Social Supports

Social supports, such as friendships with peers or involvement in activities which also provide the opportunity for connection with others, can help to support the wellbeing of young people, particularly care leavers. Many young people involved in the YIPPEE project, a comparative study investigating the pathways to education available to care leavers across five European countries, highlighted their relationships with friends and peers as particularly significant given the instability of their relationships with family (Jackson & Cameron, 2011). In addition to the studies identifying social support as a key success factor for care leavers attending university, research also suggests that involvement in on-campus clubs and teams positively influences levels of engagement and sense of belonging for first year students (Krause & Coates, 2008; Mayers, Wilson & Potwarka, 2017). *Live, Learn, Grow* students are given information about on-campus social and sporting clubs and supported to join a club relevant to their interests. This approach was taken to support their engagement in the university community, and to assist in developing friendships and social support networks. Students in the program participated in a number of activities and clubs, such as soccer, Amnesty International, anime club, and Student Living ResChallenge events. One student was even able to travel around the country participating in Quidditch tournaments against other universities.

Practical Support

Practical support and advice is provided by the *Live, Learn, Grow* Program Facilitator who meets with participants prior to the commencement of their university studies and makes contact at regular intervals in order to provide personalised assistance. Students are also able to contact the navigator via phone, email or text, as well as in person at their office on-campus or by arranging to meet at another convenient location. Throughout their year in the program, *Live, Learn, Grow* students are provided with individual support to create a budget, to learn about financial literacy, and to begin planning for the following year, when they no longer have the financial support offered by *Live, Learn, Grow*, and would need to cover their own accommodation costs.

Ongoing practical assistance is provided by the navigator, however, this role is not designed to replace any of the existing services provided by the university, such as counselling, academic support services, and careers services. Rather, the navigator provides support to students to identify, locate and access those services that are already available to them. Because of their experience of being in care, most *Live, Learn, Grow* students had received case management services at various stages throughout their lives. Upon entry to the program, it is explained that

Live, Learn, Grow is not designed to provide case management, and as such there would not be case notes, strict plans, or designated meeting times and intervals. Instead, it is explained, the program adapts to the individual's needs to provide the style of support each participant would like. Rather than coordinating and managing supports and services available to participants, the navigator aims to support participants to identify, access and coordinate their use of supports and services themselves.

Methodology

In this paper, I use the method of autoethnography to apply a critical lens to my role as the *Live, Learn, Grow* Program Facilitator; examining the external relationships and communities developed as part of this role, as well as focussing internally on my thoughts and experiences in fulfilling it. Autoethnography is a qualitative methodology, which makes use of the researcher's own notes, recollections and reflections to describe and interpret their work, knowledge and assumptions (Chang, 2008; Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011; Witkin, 2014). Although this self-reflective style of writing can be part autobiographical, autoethnography goes beyond this by exploring culture through an examination of the author's own positioning, and their relationship with others. Autoethnography provides an 'insider' view of the subject, allowing the reader to gain a deeper understanding of the subject area from the point of view of someone involved.

There were a number of important considerations in deciding to write about *Live, Learn, Grow*, and contemplating the most appropriate and effective methodology. As noted above, there is a dearth of empirical literature evaluating the effectiveness of university-led programs to increase the participation of students from care leaver backgrounds in higher education. At the time of writing, *Live, Learn, Grow* had been operating for over two years and there was a desire to analyse the success factors and limitations of the program, including through this autoethnographic project, and to present the findings to an academic and practitioner audience.

The analysis presented here relies mainly on personal notes and reflections on practice recorded by me while performing the role during 2017. I made an effort to capture the reflections on practice as truthfully as possible; that is, uninfluenced by other people's thoughts and insights, by recording them at the very start of the project, before any other writing or literature research was undertaken. Autoethnography has come under criticism for what some see as limitations inherent in the method itself. Autoethnographic writing is reliant on the author's memory, which may be flawed, is definitely subjective, and presents the interpretation and perspective of the author, rather than an objective, neutral account (Adams, Holman Jones & Ellis, 2015; Stanley, 2015; Witkin, 2014).

However, there is a growing recognition that it is not realistic for a researcher to be completely objective, neutral and removed from their work and that all writing has some form of subjectivity and interpretation (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Wall, 2008; Witkin, 2014). Autoethnography allows, and even encourages, the researcher to acknowledge their own partiality (Ellis et al., 2011), to describe their own position within the research (Pitard, 2017), and to present their own truth, rather than making claims of hard facts (Grant, 2010). This subjectivity can alternatively be viewed as a strength of the method, especially for this research which aims to present one perspective on the *Live, Learn, Grow* program, from the viewpoint of the Program Facilitator, a staff member who provides ongoing personal support to participants. This role allows me, the author, access to first-hand accounts of the students' experiences.

Ellis et al. (2011) describe autoethnography as "both process and product" (p. 273). It is anticipated that the 'product' of this research will be to provide an overview of the *Live, Learn,*

Grow program for those researchers and practitioners who have an interest in care leavers in higher education, as well as to provide one means of evaluating the program to date. It is also hoped that my autoethnography will contribute to supporting positive change and development, both personally and within the program. My autoethnographic process involved thoughtful and critical self-reflection, activities which can support constructive growth and development, which in turn may have a positive impact on my work, and the programs I work within (Brock et al., 2017).

Reflections on the ‘navigator’ role

I describe my role here as a ‘navigator’. There are already lots of wonderful supports available at the university, but they can be hard to find and access. And sometimes even the everyday systems at the university can be hard to figure out. So, what I do is help you navigate your way through the university systems, and I link you to the supports that we have available already, if you’d like them.

This is how I introduce myself and my role to the students in *Live, Learn, Grow*. My goal in this role is to walk alongside these first year students from care backgrounds, standing with them and offering relevant support and information as needed while they find their place at university. I started working with *Live, Learn, Grow* soon after the program received funding, and before the first participants commenced, so I have had the exciting opportunity to develop the navigator role and turn it into what it is now. The role has changed over time, as I’ve reflected and learnt from my experiences, and it has also adapted to suit the needs of individual participants.

There were several key factors that I identified from my reflections as essential to care leaver higher education students, some of which are supported by the literature. As outlined above, *Live, Learn, Grow* was created to provide financial support, social support, and ongoing practical assistance, the key success factors identified by three studies from across Australia, Europe and the United Kingdom (Harvey et al., 2015; Jackson et al., 2005; Jackson & Cameron, 2011). However, my role goes further in developing relationships with participants and providing individualised scaffolding and support.

My aim in working with *Live, Learn, Grow* students is to support them to make decisions and become more confident and independent. I provide the relevant information to assist them in making decisions, and can even offer advice, but never make decisions for them. This can be difficult at times, particularly when students make different decisions to what I would have made. For example, I can talk to participants about their timetable, and how going to class will help them to understand and keep on top of the material, but I cannot prevent them from deciding to miss class to instead work or socialise or even to sleep. All I can do is ensure that they have what they need to make an informed decision, and to be prepared to offer support if they later realise they're behind and need to catch up.

At UON, the decision to have one person perform the navigator role, rather than adding care leaver support to the role of an existing team, such as Student Central, follows recommendations by studies that there should be one person who acts as a central contact point (Cotton et al., 2014; Go Higher West Yorkshire, 2017; Harrison, 2017; Rawson, 2016; Starks, 2013; National Network for the Education for Care Leavers, 2016). In my role I attempt to build a relationship with the students. I spend time getting to know their personalities, the important relationships and supports in their life, their hobbies and interests. I find that developing these relationships is beneficial in many ways. By getting to know the individual person, I am able to provide more effective, personalised, help and support. For instance, I know that one student will likely not

call Student Services and ask for help if I give them the number but may be willing to talk to someone through the online chat system. I can tell when another student is particularly anxious and probably not taking in what I'm telling them, so I can follow up with a detailed email outlining the same information, and an offer to discuss it again when they're feeling better. I can see the progress of students from the start of the year when many appear uncomfortable about asking for help, instead telling me "everything's fine" when I ask, even if it's clearly not, to later in the year when they will reach out to me as soon as they're unsure about something.

The relationships I build with individual participants in the program is a significant aspect of my work. I do not advocate a 'one size fits all' approach to anyone who may consider taking on similar roles. However, some of my key reflections around getting to know participants well enough to tailor an approach to working with them, and to allow them to feel safe and comfortable to discuss any difficulties, may be useful as a starting point for someone considering how they may develop their own work in this area. Similarly, my own experience of maintaining boundaries and slowly building their independence rather than dependence on me as their navigator, may be a prompt to others working in similar roles to consider how they approach this.

Prior to working at the university, I worked in a number of different roles in OOHC agencies, including providing direct support to young people who were in care or leaving care. My knowledge of the sector means that *Live, Learn, Grow* students can talk to me about 'carers' and 'birth family', or processes such as Leaving Care Plans, Transition to Independent Living Allowance and Victims of Crime compensation, without first having to provide detailed explanations, a process which many have indicated can be exhausting, and which often produces a feeling of 'otherness'. My own experience and knowledge of working within the care system was significant to the success of the role, although it is possible that staff in similar roles could gain this knowledge through appropriate training, and ongoing support, as suggested by some studies (Harrison, 2017; Go Higher West Yorkshire, 2017), as well as by developing a strong relationship with local OOHC agencies.

When I first begin working with a new student, I explain that I don't want them to be defined by their care experience while at university, part of which is to avoid treating them differently to other students because of their status as a care leaver, or a participant in *Live, Learn, Grow*. I don't disclose information about the students to others, including to staff at the university, without informed consent from the participant. If I attend any sort of meeting with a student or accompany them to speak to university staff, I allow the participants to introduce me however they would like, with many simply introducing me as 'a friend'. I have observed that a few participants choose to be very open about their care experience, and have discussed their background and their participation in *Live, Learn, Grow* openly with others. Most, however, have expressed gratitude at not having to tell their story each time they speak to someone, and of having the opportunity to meet others and develop their own identity as a university student, rather than having their care experience define them.

One area where my own reflections differ from, or even conflict with, the literature may be in how students are identified and contacted. The recommendations from the *By Degrees: Going to University from Care* (Jackson et al., 2005) included having staff from Student Welfare or similar services contact any new students with a care experience, and also be notified of any signs of potential difficulties, such as failing to keep up with assessment tasks. Through my discussions with *Live, Learn, Grow* students and reflections on my work with them, I identified that many in this group identify some level of discomfort with being identified by their status as

a care leaver, and are appreciative of the efforts of *Live, Learn, Grow* to ensure that this information is not shared with other staff at the university. For this reason, I would suggest that careful consideration is taken before sharing information about a student's background and making unsolicited contact with them based on this information, to avoid potential alienation, or creating a perception of stigmatisation for the student.

While the provision of financial and academic support is an important part of the *Live, Learn, Grow* program, many participants have indicated that they would have left university within the first few weeks without the support of the navigator. From talking to students about their experiences, as well as from my observations of what I felt to be key moments of stress or success for them, it appears that a significant aspect of this is simply having a friendly person who is able to listen to and normalise their experience.

Many of the stresses experienced by *Live, Learn, Grow* students, particularly in the first few weeks of their studies, are similar to those experienced by all students, such as navigating new online systems, locating classrooms, and even just finding a parking space in the busy-ness of a new semester. However, many *Live, Learn, Grow* participants have indicated that they already feel out of place at university before they begin, and often question whether it is something they are able to do. When students are already questioning whether they belong, and their ability to cope, even a small difficulty can become the thing that tells them "I can't even handle this one thing, there's no way I can handle university". Having a friendly, trusted person who is able to normalise these experiences, reassuring them that all students experience these difficulties, and that things do get easier, may be enough to encourage them to persevere just a little longer.

The navigator role has developed and changed significantly over the past two years. The emotional support, practical advice, and normalisation of experiences that may cause anxiety or confusion has been identified by students as key to their decision to continue past their first few weeks, leading to a greater emphasis on this aspect of the role, while the financial support has proven to be less significant in many cases. Processes have been developed around some support that is provided to all students, such as enrolling in classes, while other processes we attempted to develop, such as a formalised orientation experience, have been stepped back in favour of more informal and individualised support during this time. I anticipate the role will continue to develop as times goes on as I continue to learn from the students I work with, as well as through ongoing community consultation and relevant research and insights from others working in the area. It is also important to note that my experience in this role would most likely be different to anyone else in the same or a similar role. Even my own experience varied with each student I worked with. However, this reflexive autoethnography is an attempt to provide insight into the way I approach the role, how I have experienced it, and the lessons I have learnt.

Conclusion and outlook

Care leavers are not a formally recognised equity group in Australia, and there is no consistent approach to supporting them to access or undertake higher education. The *Live, Learn, Grow* program was developed as one possible model for supporting those with a care experience to engage in university, and to address some of the barriers these students may face. The program offers individualised support to first year students with prior care experiences by providing stable accommodation, financial stability and social supports, and through employing a person to act as a navigator, being a point of contact and helping them with any issues that might arise. The navigator works closely with each participant, providing practical support and advice, addressing issues as they arise, and normalising some of the difficulties faced by university students.

There is still very little research about the experiences of care leavers accessing and undertaking higher education in Australia. This paper has outlined my experience of working in this space, but it is not without limitations. The experiences described are those of only one person, and someone who does not have personal experience as a care leaver. In order to better understand the experiences of care leavers, further research should be conducted to capture their voices, both within and out of higher education. Research should also be undertaken to more closely examine the experiences of young people in care before they enter higher education, and to explore how they might be supported to explore and access different pathways available to them.

Young people in care, as well as adults with previous care experiences, often face multiple barriers and difficulties, which can contribute to poor life outcomes for many. These outcomes include increased rates of homelessness and unemployment and decreased rates of entry to university and further education (Beauchamp, 2014; Harvey et al., 2015; McDowall, 2009). *Live, Learn, Grow* aims to support care leavers to access and engage in university life, and the opportunities this can provide. Higher education provides opportunities for positive social engagement, sustainable employment, increased financial stability and pathways out of disadvantage (Beauchamp, 2015; Cunninghame, 2017; Parsons, Green, Sullivan & Wiggins, 2016). Engaging in higher education, with appropriate support, may also provide care leavers with the opportunity to positively impact the higher education system, due to the unique strengths, perspectives and experiences they bring with them (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2017), as well as to develop a positive identity for themselves as learners (Jackson & Cameron, 2011).

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to everyone involved in CEEHE's writing program for their support, advice and feedback. Particular thanks to my mentor, Dr. Nadine Zacharias, whose assistance and encouragement was invaluable, and also to Professor Penny Jane Burke and Dr. Anna Bennett who so kindly provided us all with guidance throughout the program. I also want to acknowledge the constant support and encouragement that I have received from Louise Rak in my role with *Live, Learn, Grow*.

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