

April 11, 2023

Kate Chipperfield,
Assistant Secretary,
Australian Universities Accord Policy,
Australian Government Department of Education,
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Dear Ms Chipperfield,

Australian Universities Accord Panel Discussion Paper

Barnardos Australia (Barnardos) thanks Professor O'Kane AC and the Australian Universities Accord Panel members for the opportunity to provide feedback on the Australian Universities Accord Panel Discussion Paper.

Barnardos is a not for profit, children's social care charitable organisation providing direct support to 15,000+ children and their families in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and New South Wales (NSW) each year, in addition to foster care and open adoption (the latter for non-Aboriginal children) for over 1,000 children and young people. We work in areas with significant Aboriginal populations such as Central Western NSW, the South Coast, Western Sydney and Inner Sydney. For close to 100 years, we have been working together with children, young people and families to break the cycle of disadvantage, and create safe, nurturing and stable homes, connected to family and community.

Barnardos' knowledge of this area

As a large non-government provider of safety and prevention and out-of-home care (OOHC) services to children and families vulnerable to family violence and abuse, Barnardos has extensive expertise working with groups with significant educational disadvantages. In addition, we provide practical educational support to children and young people who are underrepresented in our universities, notably:

- First Nation Australians
- Students raised in poverty

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- Care leaver students
- Students living in rural and remote regions
- Students with disabilities
- Students experiencing homelessness

Children and young people in OOHC are one of the most disadvantaged groups educationally in Australia (Townsend, 2011). The vulnerable cohort of children and young people in OOHC we work with, continue to face significant educational challenges and experience poor educational outcomes. For example, a 2022 internal review of the educational outcomes for a sample of children aged 8 to 14 years old in our NSW OOHC programs showed that 48% of the sample group were performing at below grade level, 2% at above grade level, and 22% of the children presented with some level of learning disability and additional needs.

In our experience students in these groups may have higher educational aspirations, but the barriers to school completion, higher education enrolment and attendance are often overwhelming. However, research shows that these students have a greater prospect of overcoming the circumstantial barriers and achieving to their full potential when provided with the right educational support and resources tailored to their academic, financial, socio-emotional and other needs (Harvey et al., 2016; Jackson et al., 2005).

We welcome the Discussion Paper's focus on bold questions to reimagine Australia's higher education sector. We have focussed our comments below on three critical aspects of the delivery of the Accord that will be required to ensure all Australians have the opportunity to participate in higher education.

Meeting Australia's knowledge and skills needs, now and in the future (Key area for Review #1)

We note a significant national gap in training and education for professionals working with children, young people and families who are in contact with the child protection system. Recent research¹ shows that the Australian child welfare workforce is often overloaded and dealing with complex situations, yet lacks the proper training or skills and has only limited experience to draw on (Russ et al., 2022). Further, the number of First Nation Australian workers, culturally diverse workers and workers with a disability do not align with the disproportionate representation of these groups in the child protection system and where these groups are represented in the workforce they are not in leadership roles. Critically, educational programs

¹ Russ, E., Morley, L., Driver, M., Lonnie, B., Harries, M., & Higgins, D. (2022). *Trends and needs in the Australian child welfare workforce: An exploratory study*. Canberra: ACU Institute of Child Protection Studies. <https://doi.org/10.24268/acu.8x396>

for the child welfare workforce (including teachers, early childhood educators, nurses, doctors and community service workers) are not meeting the increased demand for workers with the necessary skills and knowledge to appropriately respond to risk factors for child maltreatment (Russ et al., 2022).

Social workers are a key profession in mental health and child protection systems. We therefore support measures that target the social work profession's capability to identify and implement preventative interventions at the earliest possible stage with at-risk children, young people and families. Strategies should include the extension of scholarships for First Nation Australian social work students to develop a strong and culturally safe workforce and investment in social work student placement programs to increase the accessibility and viability of rural and remote placements. Investment in social work student placement programs which employ dedicated social work supervisor positions to remove barriers to placements in child protection and early intervention would also strategically build workforce capacity.

Access and opportunity (Key area for review #2)

We strongly support a focus on removing the systematic barriers to higher education and reducing disparities in completion rates and graduate outcomes for underrepresented groups, most notably for young people with out-of-home care experience. Care leavers are also more likely to identify as Aboriginal, have a disability or caring responsibilities, and be from low socio-economic backgrounds and/or rural and regional areas, compounding their educational disadvantages.

We believe raising the proportion of Aboriginal care leavers who enter University and increasing this cohort's retention, completion, and success rates should be a national priority.

Research shows that to increase degree completion and improve graduate outcomes for care leavers a 'whole of life' cycle approach is required including improving school achievement rates and lifting the educational expectations of those who work with them (Harvey et al. 2015; Harvey et al. 2022) as well as Universities providing recruitment programs and dedicated wraparound emotional and financial support programs tailored to their specific needs (Harvey et al. 2022).

Consultation

We welcome the Panel's commitment to inclusion and engagement across all sectors and groups affected by higher education policy.

We believe it is essential to listen to the voices of children and young people from underrepresented groups with lived experience of the barriers to and motivations for

transitioning to higher education. To enhance access and opportunity, their expertise should shape the Accord's design, delivery and evaluation.

Our Executive Leader, Children and Families, Penny Hood is available to provide more detailed verbal feedback to the Panel. If the opportunity is available, we could also provide input from our clients who are currently underrepresented in higher education.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to provide this written submission, and please contact Dr Robert Urquhart, Head of Knowledge, Outcomes & Research on rurquhart@barnardos.org.au, tel (02) 9218 2392 or mobile 0431 404 199 should you require further information on our feedback.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Deirdre Cheers', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Deirdre Cheers
Chief Executive Officer
Barnardos Australia