Shifting Narratives: Collaborative research methods with care leavers in Higher Education
Rhyall Gordon & Emily Fuller, University of Newcastle

Research suggests that as few as 1-3% of people who have been in out-of-home care (OOHC) go on to attend university. This is in stark contrast to the approximately 37% of Australians who have completed a bachelor’s degree by age 34. Despite this disparity, care leavers are not a recognised equity group in Australia and very little Australian research has been carried out on the low transition rates, as well as the broader student experience for care leavers. The University of Newcastle’s Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education carried out a series of participatory research workshops in 2018 with university students who had recently left OOHC. This paper shares our approach to working with these students to explore and document their experiences. By pursuing methods that facilitate student participation, we sought to support the students to tell their own story. The methods were divided into two key parts. The first was to dedicate sufficient time and space for relationships to form to allow students to feel comfortable and confident to engage in the research workshops. The second involved a commitment to a fully collaborative process that involved both students and practitioners co-designing the direction of the research. We argue that these two methods were pivotal in amplifying these students’ narratives and allowed certain themes to come to the fore such as the importance of self-advocacy and how to shift the deficit narrative of young people leaving care and their capacity to engage in university.

Learning outcomes
- develop new collaborative research skills.
- learn new approaches that support students, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds, to explore and share their own stories, in order to inform policy and practice within institutions.
- investigate how these approaches can be adapted and applied to other contexts and groups across their own university.

Presenter
Emily Fuller, University of Newcastle

Emily Fuller works with the Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education at the University of Newcastle. As program facilitator for the Live, Learn, Grow program, Emily works closely with the out-of-home care sector to support students with a care experience to find out about, access and engage in higher education. Emily has worked in a variety of roles in the out-of-home care sector and has a deep commitment to working within this community to support access to lifelong learning.

Emily will be presenting on behalf of Rhyall Gordon and herself.