

Setting the Record Straight for the Rights of the Child National Summit, organised by Monash University, Deakin Edge at Federation Square, Melbourne, 8–9 May 2017

Setting the Record Straight for the Rights of the Child National Summit was a two-day event facilitated by Jenny Brockie and organised by Monash University in collaboration with community groups CLAN, Connecting Home, Child Migrants Trust and CREATE Foundation, Federation University and the University of Melbourne. Dr Joanne Evans, Summit Convenor, opened the event with an aim of creating a community that can respond to issues around recordkeeping and archiving for childhood out-of-home care including those raised by the Royal Commission into the Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. The invitation-only event brought together a diverse set of stakeholders from both government and non-government areas of out-of-home care, to hear past and current recordkeeping challenges and to discuss future improvements.

To help foster an understanding of why this community is needed, Dr Evans asked that the audience ‘listen and learn’ from the personal experiences of those affected by poor recordkeeping and archiving practices. Throughout the Summit we listened as Forgotten Australians, Former Child Migrants, members of the Stolen Generations and recent Care Leavers highlighted the power of records, and particularly their importance in helping form identity.

It soon became clear that the different Care Leaver groups all faced similar challenges in relation to records about their time in care. These barriers included how to request access to records, records released in a heavily redacted state, inaccurate and inadequate content in files and no ability to annotate the records to correct those inaccuracies. Care Leavers also find derogatory language in the files, they often do not know records exist about them, and can face lifelong consequences once they access their records. The inclusion of recent Care Leavers in this discussion was successful in displaying that issues generally deemed as ‘historical’ are still happening today.

Designed to acknowledge the shortcomings and failures of recordkeeping policies and practices, the first day of the Summit also created an undercurrent of hope and optimism for change. Jenny Brockie was successful in enabling audience participation and engagement, while ensuring the discussions remained within a session’s scope.

The second day of the Summit was about moving forward, and challenging the audience to take the next steps in making change happen. Justice Coate, Commissioner for the Royal Commission, opened day two by reminding us of the importance that records have for those who have suffered abuse to be able to provide evidence of the abuse and seek compensation. Hearing from Professor Patricia Lundy on the survivor-driven Northern Ireland redress panel reinforced the need for Care Leavers’ voices to be central in any redress scheme.

While it was apparent there is a long way to go in improving recordkeeping systems and practices, it was encouraging to hear of work occurring in this area. The session ‘Recordkeeping and Archiving Reimagined’ explored new programs being developed and ‘Planning the Future Part 1 and 2’ gave individuals the opportunity to discuss improved practices, such as no redaction or proactive disclosure. At times the discussion became unnecessarily technical, in my view.

Owing to unforeseen circumstances, the facilitator was unable to attend the Summit on day two, which, in my opinion, affected the success of the day to take it beyond ideas and to action. However, the Summit forced people to question the work they do and the impact they have on vulnerable people. The diversity of the audience was also positive, although it was unfortunate

that politicians and policy makers were missing, which made it difficult to discuss how change may occur on a systemic level.

Deakin Edge was a great venue for the Summit as it facilitated networking and communications, creating a positive atmosphere and enabling the sense of community to develop among attendees. This was enhanced by the Imagined Archives exhibit, filled with artworks co-created with Care Leavers. The exhibition allowed Care Leavers to respond visually to records issues and provided a different way for audience members to engage with archives and the topics being discussed.

A sketch writer was also present and illustrated pivotal moments while on-stage with the presenters. The sketches provided an alternative way for people to engage with the conversation and created a visual representation and record of the event.

While too early to tell how successful the Summit was in its aims of community building, archivists have expressed interest in developing projects and initiatives responding to issues raised during the Summit. The transition from the Summit into the Setting the Record Straight For the Rights of the Child Initiative to take the next steps in 'transforming the way records for childhood out-of-home care are created, captured, managed, archived and accessed' will also provide a focal point for the community to develop around.¹

Note

1. Monash University, 'Setting the Record Straight for the Rights of the Child', 2017, available at <https://rights-records.it.monash.edu/>, accessed 24 July 2017.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/01576895.2017.1367875>

