The University
of Melbourne
Archives

What to Expect
when Accessing
Records

THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

People often embark on the journey to locate and access their records expecting to:

- find all the answers to questions about their childhood
- be given access to their records straight away
- find detailed, accurate records about their time in 'care'

But, many of these common expectations will not be met when you locate and retrieve your records.

Past record keeping practices of Government departments and 'care' providers were primarily for administrative purposes rather than to keep an accurate record of all events. Unfortunately, the older records may be superficial, inaccurate, or incomplete, and leave many questions unanswered.

The records kept and the information recorded will vary according to the time period when you were in 'care', what sort of institution you were in, the policies and practices of different 'care' providers, and even the personal habits of different staff members keeping records.

Some people find that their years in 'care' only generated a few lines of writing eg in Admission or Discharge records. Other people are presented with reams of information (although it will not necessarily be an accurate reflection of one's experiences).

Other records can help you to fill in the gaps about your time in 'care' eg annual reports, minutes of meetings, staff files, superintendents' reports, organizational histories, and photographs. These records give background information about the institution where you lived, and can help you to make sense of the details on your personal file.

How will I feel when I look at my file?

Many people who read their records don't expect it to be such an emotional experience and are not prepared for the significant emotional impact including feelings of anger, and hurt, but also sometimes feelings of confirmation or relief.

Some people find that their files are not just full of bureaucratic facts and figures but contain records that evoke the pain of a child being removed from family.

Sometimes the contents of your file will contradict the way you remember the past. It might contain information that was kept from you as a child, or reveal that you were lied to when you were in 'care', e.g. finding letters from family members that were never passed on to you, or letters that you had written.

The process of seeking access to your records can lead to positive experiences. You can find clues and answers about your personal history, especially your childhood, your medical history, and, it can lead to reconnecting with family and friends from your childhood. Some people find it helpful to attend reunions of the Home where they lived as children, or get-togethers organised by support groups for Care Leavers.

Accessing records

The University of Melbourne Archives (UMA) coordinates with Find & Connect Support Services to provide extra services for Care Leavers and their families.

These services are very experienced in assisting people to locate and retrieve records, providing support through the process, and they have an in depth understanding of the child welfare system and can help to explain the history and policies surrounding your time in 'care'.

They can also assist in searching for family and options to meet, and to share stories with others with whom you were in 'care'. Some also advocate on behalf of Care Leavers, and host reunions.

To contact the Find & Connect Support Services, call 1800 16 11 09 (freecall Monday-Friday 9am-5pm) or see https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/contact

If you prefer, you can apply directly to the UMA for access to records. Requests can be made online or in person at the Reading Room, Baillieu Library. Once your request is processed a staff member will deliver the records to you in the Reading Room. The Reading Room is a quiet, public area that holds up to 12 people. Alternatively, you can request to view records at the repository on Dawson Street, Brunswick.

Please Note: Access to some information in the records is conditional, for example, where a file contains information about others (third parties). At the University of Melbourne you are required to fill in a *Deed of Undertaking* to view such files.

1. Care Leavers refers to those who spent time as children or youths in orphanages, children's homes, foster care or another type of institutional or out-of-home-care during the 20th century.