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## **Recruiting and supporting care leavers in Australian higher education**

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## Executive Summary

This report follows a multi-state, cross-institutional analysis of care leavers in Australian higher education. Those who have left out-of-home care – including foster, residential and kinship care – typically face extreme challenges to participate and succeed in higher education, highlighted both by our multi-state interviews and our national data analysis. Care leavers, for example, are relatively likely to suffer from anxiety and/or mental health disorders, to be from low socio-economic status backgrounds, and to have suffered disrupted schooling and family lives. While some of these issues are beyond the scope of universities to address, there are numerous policy changes that would improve access and success. Moreover, our evidence also highlights that care leavers can bring particular strengths and forms of capital to higher education which not only help them to succeed, but which could be harnessed more broadly by institutions. Transitioning from a deficit model to a richer understanding of both the challenges and strengths of care leavers has the potential to benefit all students on campus.

International evidence is clear on the extent of under-representation of care leavers in higher education, but also on the potential for growth. Our review of recent research confirms that policy changes at both government and institutional level can dramatically improve access and success rates. Moreover, since our initial report (Harvey, McNamara, Andrewartha, & Luckman, 2015), several more dedicated educational resources have been developed internationally to support schools and universities, such as a practical guide to educating children and young people in care in the United Kingdom (Cameron, Connelly, & Jackson, 2015). Research continues to confirm the importance of raising expectations, normalising and demystifying higher education as a destination, listening to the voices of care leavers, providing targeted and accessible support, and measuring university participation, success and outcomes.

In this project, our collection of data and institutional advocacy enabled development of important new methods of measuring access and success. Through advocacy of the research team, changes were made to university enrolment forms, and the educational access schemes operated by state tertiary admissions centres. Introduction of these two methods, as previously advocated in our initial report, now provides a template for collection of data at or before enrolment, by which institutions can quantify and monitor care leaver data. In addition, one partner institution was able to identify care leaver students through a new bursary scheme, providing a further point of data access. Similar to disability, care leaver status may be self-identified subsequent to enrolment, enabling targeted resources to be formed and outcomes to be tracked. Through the various modes of data collection, we have the first understanding of likely care leaver enrolments in Australian higher education, and templates that can be expanded across the sector to build an evidence base. Further, from the sample of students we were able to monitor, we received some important initial indications of course profile and achievement. Perhaps most notable here was the relatively high achievement of enrolled care leavers, the reasons for which became increasingly clear from our qualitative research.

Our qualitative research involved detailed interviews with university care leavers across three states and four institutions. Several themes were clear, including the desire of care leavers to be treated as normal students, an over-representation of anxiety and mental health issues, a relative unlikelihood to report such issues within the institution or to seek help through counselling and other services, a powerful resilience and determination to succeed, and potential issues of campus climate where experiences clearly differed from other students involved in coursework and informal conversations. For Indigenous care leavers, specific cultural connections and issues were strong themes, and access to a dedicated Indigenous unit on campus was seen as beneficial not only for direction to other university services, but as a space of cultural understanding and community. To raise university

access levels, participants noted the need for further education of carers, case workers, and related staff, and for higher expectations among school teachers and others.

One of the most notable lessons from our research relates to a discrepancy between the genuine disadvantage of many care leavers and their relatively low take-up of financial and support services. Interviews revealed the reality of care leaver experiences, in which financial hardship was common, mental health was frequently cited, and disadvantage was often extreme. Our quantitative analysis, however, suggests that eligible care leavers rarely apply for compensation for educational disadvantage through the tertiary admissions centre schemes, rarely apply for scholarships and financial bursaries, and often do not access disability, counselling and other support services once enrolled. The gap between lived experience and request for support highlights the need to normalise student support and service use, and to simplify and demystify bursary and scholarships applications. Research suggests that care leavers are particularly likely to be confused by tertiary application processes, including financial aid, and reluctant to seek services and deal with bureaucracies, particularly where privacy fears are involved. Mitigating these concerns is important not only to ensure that care leavers are receiving compensation that is deserved, but to ensure that other disadvantaged students are not similarly being marginalised by systems that reward cultural capital and inside knowledge rather than genuine disadvantage.

Equally, the qualitative research and quantitative data provided corroborated evidence of resilience and determination among care leavers. This resilience has arguably been understated by previous research focussed on barriers and disadvantage. However, the rapid rise in British university enrolments of care leavers since the adoption of targeted policies and strategies in 2004 – from 1% to 7% – provided early evidence of the potential for improvement. One of the reasons such enrolment growth was possible was that care leavers often have reserves of determination and persistence that enable them to overcome severe educational barriers and challenges. Our quantitative data revealed relatively strong academic performance, and our qualitative research also highlighted uncommon levels of persistence and independence among care leavers. These strengths reveal the capacity for similar growth in access and success if Australian policies were adapted to reflect international best practice. Interviews also revealed the need for further research into the qualities and assets that care leavers, and other under-represented students, can bring to higher education. Relatedly, some interview participants observed issues of campus climate, for example perceiving that other students had limited life experience and focussed on issues that appeared trivial or inappropriate to the care leaver cohort. Wider challenges exist for universities to promote inclusive excellence and to understand the potential benefits of diversity for student learning and growth. There also remains a challenge to translate academic success to retention and completion, as financial and other barriers often remain prevalent throughout the candidature of care leavers.

Our report concludes with guidelines for prospective care leaver students, and a set of guidelines for university staff. The student guidelines address many of the issues raised above, including demystifying higher education and providing practical guidance around course and university selection, enrolment, and access to bursaries, scholarships, and services. The guidelines for staff focus on the need to understand specific concerns of care leavers, but also to normalise higher education and to keep expectations of achievement high, particularly in outreach activities. Students interviewed highlighted university outreach as central to raising participation, and it is important that universities conduct their outreach activities not only with proximate secondary schools, but with flexible learning schools and other educational sites, working in conjunction with welfare agencies and other service providers where relevant.

## Project background and report structure

### Background

Out-of-home care refers to the placement of children who are unable to live with their families with alternate carers, often due to child abuse and neglect (Victorian Department of Human Services, 2007). Types of out-of-home care include foster care, relative/kinship care, residential care, family group homes, and independent living arrangements (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare [AIHW], 2016). Approximately 43,400 children and young people live in out-of-home care in Australia, and a substantial proportion of these young people come from low socio-economic status, regional, and/or Indigenous backgrounds (AIHW, 2016; Harvey, McNamara, Andrewartha & Luckman, 2015; State Government of Victoria, 2012). Families faced with financial hardship are more frequently challenged by mental health issues, misuse of alcohol and other drugs, violence, unemployment, and housing insecurity (Australian Council of Social Services, 2014; McLachlan, Gilfillan, & Gordon, 2013). These pressures can increase the likelihood of neglect and abuse leading to children being placed in out-of-home care (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2015; Garbarino, 1977). Young people in out-of-home care confront specific educational challenges from an early age, including placement instability and disrupted schooling (Bromfield, Higgins, Osborn, Panozzo, & Richardson, 2005; CREATE Foundation, 2006; Fernandez, 2008; Townsend, 2012). The relatively low school achievement and completion rates of young people in out-of-home care are well documented (AIHW, 2007, 2011).

The term ‘care leavers’ can be used to refer to people who spent time in out-of-home care before 18 years of age and subsequently transitioned out of the system (Harvey, McNamara, Andrewartha & Luckman, 2015). Legal protection and formal assistance from state governments typically decrease or discontinue entirely at 18 years of age (Creed et al., 2011; Victorian Department of Human Services, 2007; Mendes, 2009: 34). Care leavers are at increased risk of homelessness, unemployment, and dependence on Centrelink (Johnson et al., 2010; McDowall, 2013; Thoresen & Liddiard, 2011). No robust data are available on the number of care leavers in higher education in Australia. Available evidence, however, suggests that Australian care leavers rarely transition to higher education (Cashmore, Paxman, and Townsend, 2007; Harvey et al., 2015; McDowall, 2009; Mendes, Michell, & Wilson, 2014).

Despite the severe educational and broader challenges faced by many care leavers, evidence also suggests that their participation in higher education can be increased rapidly through targeted policies and commitments. Section 1 highlights how governments and universities within the United Kingdom, in particular, have introduced policies which have led to rising access and participation. Moreover, many care leavers in higher education record strong achievement levels and successful graduate outcomes. While still inchoate, international evidence suggests that care leavers may hold relatively high levels of resilience, determination, adaptability, and other qualities that are undervalued and under-researched in higher education. Understanding the different forms of ‘capital’ that students possess is crucial to increasing campus diversity (Yosso, 2005), and ensuring that all students are respected and understood for their strengths. In exploring the specific strengths of care leavers in higher education, we can therefore understand not only how policies need to change, but why that change is likely to be effective both in raising participation and in increasing campus diversity and quality.

The current project, *Recruiting and supporting care leavers in Australian higher education*, builds on an initial national project conducted by La Trobe University in 2015, and funded through National Centre Student Equity in Higher Education at Curtin University (Harvey et al., 2015). That project,

*Out of care, into university*, was the first national project to map the higher education sector in relation to care leavers. The project included an examination of relevant education and child protection data sources; a survey of public universities; and interviews with community service organisations. Findings revealed that existing data on the education of Australians in out-of-home care was limited, and there were few policies, procedures, or programs catering to care leavers in higher education. Included in the project report were 26 recommendations targeted to the Australian Government, state and territory governments, higher education institutions, and community service organisations. Our research from *Out of care, into university* also provided an evidential foundation for the current project.

Research for the current project was led by La Trobe University in partnership with Federation University of Australia, Queensland University of Technology, and Western Sydney University. The project was funded through an external research grant provided by the Australian Government Department of Education and Training through the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Programme - National Priorities Pool 2015. Two primary research questions were addressed: (1) How can universities increase access to higher education for care leavers? (2) How can universities support care leavers who are studying at university?

The five main components of the project were: (1) a review of international research, policy, and legislation relating to care leavers in higher education; (2) development of methods for higher education institutions to collect data on care leaver students; (3) in-depth interviews with care leavers in higher education about their views and experiences; (4) development of guidelines for people from out-of-home care backgrounds considering higher education; (5) development of guidelines for university staff delivering outreach to young people in out-of-home care and providing support for care leavers in higher education.

## Report structure

Section one of this report provides an overview of recent international and national research, policy, and legislation on supporting care leavers in higher education.

Section two outlines methods for collecting data on care leavers across higher education institutions, and provides a summary of data collected within the project.

Section three provides an analysis of interviews with care leavers who are enrolled at university, and captures their experiences accessing and participating in higher education.

Section four provides guidelines for professional and academic staff working with care leavers in higher education.

Section five provides guidelines about accessing higher education for students who spent time in out-of-home care.



## Section 1. Care leavers in higher education: lessons from international and national research

This section of the report provides a summary of recent international and national research, policy, and legislation on supporting care leavers in higher education.

### United Kingdom

The first major research project to examine the experiences of care leavers in higher education in the United Kingdom (UK) was the *By Degrees: Going to University from Care* project (Jackson, Ajayi, & Quigley, 2005). The researchers followed 50 care leaver university students per year over three years. Care leavers reported a lack of information and advice about universities and courses and uncertainty about the financial and accommodation support available. Students staying in distant accommodation had limited social relationships and participation in university life, and students without adequate financial support often spent considerable time in paid work. At the time of the report, only one university in the UK had a comprehensive care leaver policy. The researchers recommended that ‘All higher education institutions should have a comprehensive policy for recruitment, retention and support of students from a care background’ (p. xiv).

Since the *By Degrees* report, considerable progress has been made within British higher education sector. Care leavers are formally recognized as an under-represented group in higher education and their participation is closely monitored in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. Buttle UK, a trust that supports children and young people in need, has also played an important role in supporting care leavers in higher education. From 2006, Buttle UK began awarding a ‘Quality Mark’ to higher education providers that demonstrated commitment to care leavers. This accreditation system helped to drive sectoral change, and successful universities have introduced a range of initiatives including: prioritising care leavers in outreach programmes and other university activities; recruiting designated staff members to support care leaver students at pre-entry and post-enrolment; offering bursaries and hardship funds for care leavers; and giving preferential access for care leavers to schemes to support disadvantaged students (Rawson, 2016, p. 5). The Quality Mark, which operated between 2006 and 2015, has now been discontinued, with a shift towards embedding support for care leavers into mainstream provision (Rawson, 2016; p. 2).

England has maintained a strong focus on the higher education participation of care leavers for over a decade. In 2006, England’s Office for Fair Access (OFFA) wrote to all institutions with access agreements to encourage them to address the needs of care leavers in their access agreements. There have also been several additions to the legislation on the education of care leavers in England and Wales. The *Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000* introduced the first statutory requirement for local authorities to support young people aged 16 to 24 in education. The *Children and Young Persons Act 2008* established a statutory £2,000 local authority bursary for young care leavers at university. From April 2011, *The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 3: Planning Transition to Adulthood for Care Leavers* implemented a suite of regulations and guidance around educational transitions (All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers, 2012). Data on the care leaver status of students is now officially collected by the Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA), which means that all higher education institutions can identify care leavers within their institutions. OFFA is also able to monitor improvements in the proportion of care leavers reaching university (OFFA, 2015). Along with the above initiatives, the National Network for the Education of Care Leavers (NNECL) was formed in 2013 to support care leavers into higher education

in England (NNECL, 2013). In partnership with higher education providers, the NNECL developed a guide for supporting care leavers in further education and higher education. The main components related to: accommodation support; financial support; designated contact people; and identification of care leavers via a tick box at enrolment.

Evidence from the UK shows that some care leavers are reluctant to disclose their care leaver status to fellow students, support staff, or academics for fear of prejudice (Jackson & Cameron, 2014). Some types of support can be offered while maintaining confidentiality, such as tuition fee-waivers, residential scholarships, and social and academic support provided online. Group identity can also be framed as a positive force. A UK website called Propel was created by the Who Cares? Trust which encourages care leavers to inform universities of their status in order to access extra information, guidance, and support (Who Cares? Trust, 2016).

The combined policy and legislative focus on care leavers has increased the proportion of care leavers continuing to higher education. In England, this proportion increased from approximately 1 per cent of 19 year old care leavers in 2003 (Department for Business Innovation & Skills, 2014) to 6-7 per cent of 19-21 year old care leavers in 2014 (Department of Education, 2014). While this figure remains well below the 40 per cent higher education participation rate of young people in the general population, it demonstrates significant improvement over time (The Centre for Social Justice, 2015). As our subsequent interviews and quantitative data reveal, rapid enrolment growth is likely to be partially linked to the underestimated capacity of care leavers to overcome educational disadvantage through determination and resilience.

## Continental Europe

Following the *By Degrees* research project, the *Young people from a public care background pathways to education in Europe* research project (YiPPEE) examined the education pathways of care leavers across England, Denmark, Sweden, Hungary, and Spain. The researchers found that people from public care experienced severe educational disadvantage across all five countries. For example, young people from care were: 'under pressure to opt for short-cycle occupational training in order to become economically independent as soon as possible rather than higher level academic or vocational options with the potential to lead to more satisfying careers in the longer run' (Jackson & Cameron, 2012, p. 8). Factors that facilitated success in education included: stability of placement and schooling; placement with carers who gave priority to education; and sufficient financial support and suitable accommodation. The research also highlighted that 'reliable statistical information is an essential basis for improving the educational opportunities of young people who have been in care' (Jackson & Cameron, 2012, p. 10). Jackson and Cameron (2014) published a comprehensive account of their cross-nation findings in their subsequent book, *Improving Access to Further and Higher Education for Young People in Public Care*.

## United States

There has been a considerable amount of research focussing on the college experiences of people from foster care in the United States. Wolanin (2005) reported that young people in foster care were less likely to complete high school than their peers (50 per cent and 70 per cent, respectively). Those who completed high school were also less likely to enrol in higher education than their peers (20 per cent and 60 per cent, respectively). Barriers to college access included: inability to meet admission standards; a belief that college is 'not for people like me'; and financial constraints.

Three significant federal laws passed that were designed to increase college access for people from foster care in 2008: the *Fostering Connections Act*; *College Cost Reduction Act*; and the *Higher Education Opportunity Act* (Legal Center for Foster Care and Education, 2008). Some US states have

extended foster care beyond 18 years of age and this change has been associated with increased participation in higher education (Courtney & Dworsky, 2005). In the US, the ability to remain in foster care beyond 18 years of age differs between states. Courtney and Dworsky (2005) compared the educational outcomes of young people from Illinois, who are allowed to remain in care until they are 21, to the outcomes of young people from Iowa and Wisconsin, who typically age out of foster care at 18 years of age. Young people who were still in care at age 19 were more than twice as likely to be enrolled in a school or training program as those who had been discharged from care.

Research from the US has found that people from foster care who do access college also have lower college completion rates than their peers (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee & Rap, 2010; Courtney et al., 2011; Pecora et al., 2003; 2005). Courtney et al. (2011), for example, found that only four per cent of students from foster care had completed a four-year college degree by the age of 26, compared to 36 per cent of the general population. Success at college is impeded by: inadequate information; lack of family support; no stable home base, and inadequate support though financial aid, student services, and counselling.

There are several examples from the US of targeted and multi-pronged strategies that have proven successful for students from foster care. The Blavin Scholars Program at the University of Michigan, for example, offers academic guidance and mentorships, along with scholarships, housing, and other additional resources for youth aging out of foster care who wish to pursue post-secondary education (Blavin Scholars, 2016). The program has a 95 per cent retention and graduation rate. Better Futures model is another example from the United States where coaching and mentoring from older peers with foster care experience has been shown to promote acceptance and academic confidence (Phillips et al., 2015).

## Australia

Approximately 43,400 children live in out-of-home care in Australia and this number has been increasing for over a decade (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2016). Approximately 93 per cent of children are in out-of-home care on care and protection orders issued by a statutory authority or court (AIHW, 2016). Once a child has been placed in care, the state government acts as a corporate parent and assumes responsibility for decision-making and care arrangements. Typically, children in care confront educational challenges and disruptions from an early age. A substantial proportion of these children come from low socio-economic status, regional, and/or Indigenous backgrounds (AIHW, 2016; Harvey, McNamara, Andrewartha & Luckman, 2015; State Government of Victoria, 2012). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are particularly over-represented in the child welfare system. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are approximately seven times as likely as non-Indigenous children to be receiving child protection services (AIHW, 2016).

Australian research has consistently documented the relatively poor overall school achievement and school completion rates of young people in out-of-home care. Factors that mitigate school success include: placement instability; frequent school changes; absenteeism; bullying; lack of family support; trauma associated with past abuse and neglect; mental health issues; and behavioural issues; lower expectations from carers and teachers (CREATE Foundation, 2006; Creed, Tilbury, Buys, & Crawford, 2011; Fernandez, 2008; Frederick & Goddard, 2010; McFarlane, 2010; Townsend, 2012). Studies by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) have matched educational achievement data and community service data across multiple jurisdictions (AIHW, 2007, 2011). Results showed that children on guardianship or custody orders, many of whom were in out-of-home care, had poorer reading and numeracy test scores compared with their peers. Furthermore,

Indigenous children on guardianship or custody orders were less likely to achieve the reading and numeracy benchmarks than other children on guardianship or custody orders (AIHW, 2007, 2013).

Australians from out-of-home care face another set of educational barriers when they age out of care. Care leavers can be broadly defined as people who spent time in out-of-home care before they were 18 and have subsequently transitioned out of the system (Harvey, McNamara, Andrewartha & Luckman, 2015). Legal protection and formal assistance from the State government decreases at 18 years of age, with some people leaving care as young as 16 years of age (Creed et al., 2011; Victorian Department of Human Services, 2007; Mendes, 2009: 34). Leaving care often coincides with the final years of secondary school which can have a strong impact educational pathways. After the age of 16, students may elect to discontinue secondary school and enter the workforce or enrol in vocational education to obtain workplace-specific skills and knowledge. In the final years of secondary school, students obtain their Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank (ATAR) or, in Queensland, the 'Overall Position'. The ATAR or Overall Position is used to determine entry into most higher education institutions in Australia (Gale & Parker, 2013).

The abrupt reduction in support that care leavers experience at age 18 contrasts to the experience of most young people in the general population who stay in the parental home receiving continuous support into their early-to-mid 20s (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013). Care leavers have very high rates of homelessness, unemployment, dependence on Centrelink, and relatively poor educational outcomes (Johnson et al., 2010; McDowall, 2013; Thoresen & Liddiard, 2011). In recent years, most states and territories have introduced legislation or policy to assist care leavers beyond 18 years of age (Mendes, 2014). However, there are differences across jurisdictions in support types and upper age limits (Department of Social Services, 2014). Under the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009 – 2020*, governments are establishing a nationally consistent approach to supporting care leavers (Department of Social Services, 2014). A landmark study by Deloitte Access Economics (2016), commissioned by Anglicare Victoria, found that extending care to 21 years would halve homelessness, improve mental health outcomes, and double education participation rates. A national campaign led to Anglicare, the Home Stretch campaign, was launched in 2016 to call for governments to extend the leaving care age to 21 years. Extending care would require governments to provide ongoing carer reimbursements to carers, case management to the young person, and resources to access education or employment activity (Home Stretch, 2016).

The limited amount of data available suggest that Australian care leavers rarely transition to higher education (Mendes, Michell, & Wilson, 2014; McDowall, 2009). Cashmore, Paxman, and Townsend (2007) examined the employment and educational outcomes of 47 care leavers in New South Wales. Care leavers were less likely to have completed secondary school compared with same-age counterparts in the general population and less likely to be in full-time work or education four to five years after leaving care. While no national data are collected, a 2009 report by the CREATE Foundation detailed the results of a survey of 471 young people who were in care or had left care. Of those who had left care, only 35 per cent of the sample had completed year 12. At the time of the study, only 11 per cent of the sample were studying at TAFE and 2.8 per cent were studying at university (McDowall, 2009). Mendes et al. (2014) estimated that only one per cent of Australian care leavers transition into higher education, compared to 26 per cent of young people in the general population.

Until recently, few Australian studies had explored the experiences of care leavers in higher education. As a result, 'we know strikingly little about the experiences of care leavers who enter higher education in Australia' (Mendes, Michell, & Wilson, 2014, p. 249). Jurczynszyn and Tilbury (2012) interviewed 13 young people who were in care or leaving care in Queensland. Interest in higher or further education was facilitated by: having a person who helped explore careers and university life; receiving advocacy to overcome practical barriers; and carers and teachers with high

expectations. Mendis, Gardner, and Lehmann (2014) interviewed 18 university-educated women who had spent time in out-of-home care. Experiences differed depending on their personality, resilience, and individual care circumstances. Michell, Jackson, and Tonkin (2015) also published the stories of 14 care leavers who had transitioned to higher education, overcoming obstacles to succeed 'against the odds'. Wilson and Golding (2016) published detailed case studies describing their own 'unexpected, unpredictable and strange' paths from care to university.

The first major national project to map the higher education sector in relation to care leavers was titled *Out of care, into university* (Harvey et al., 2015). The project was conducted by La Trobe University and included an examination of relevant education and child protection data sources; a survey of public universities, and interviews with community service organisations. The project found that existing data on the education of Australians in out-of-home care was limited, and there were few policies, procedures, or programs catering to care leavers in higher education. Only one of the 28 universities surveyed as part of the project collected any data on care leaver students. This university recorded how many students who participated in widening participation chose to disclose their care background.

There is no national method for identifying care leavers within the Australian higher education system. In contrast to England, care leavers do not constitute a distinct equity group in Australian higher education. Six equity groups receive targeted support and funding in Australian higher education. These groups are: people from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders; women in non-traditional courses and postgraduate study; people from non-English speaking backgrounds; people with disabilities; and people from rural and isolated areas (Department of Education Employment and Training (DEET), 1990). Higher education data are collected on the equity groups and their access, participation, retention, and completion rates are monitored. A significant number of care leavers fall within the established equity groups, especially students from low socio-economic status, rural, and Indigenous backgrounds (AIHW, 2016; Harvey et al., 2015; State Government of Victoria, 2012). There are currently no methods, however, for separately monitoring small, highly disadvantaged groups such as care leavers on a national level (Harvey, Andrewartha, & McNamara, 2015).

Compared with the UK and the US, Australia has progressed slowly in providing targeted support for care leavers in higher education. Harvey et al. (2015) conducted a national survey of public universities in 2014 and found that few institutional policies and programs existed to improve access and achievement of care leavers. There was often an assumption that care leavers would be included within policies and programs that had been developed for other equity groups, such as students from low socio-economic status backgrounds. The researchers concluded, however, that 'the levels of access for care leavers are so low that direct and explicit support is required to improve their access and recruitment, at both national and institutional levels' (p. 44).

Over the past few years, a small number of Australian universities have begun to introduce targeted initiatives to support care leavers in higher education. These initiatives include: scholarships or bursaries specifically for care leavers (e.g. Federation University Australia, La Trobe University, Swinburne University, Western Sydney University); designated care coordinator positions to support care leavers (e.g. Federation University); and targeted outreach programs for school aged children in out-of-home care (e.g. La Trobe University, Western Sydney University). From 2015, students applying for scholarships through the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre have been able to explicitly self-identify as care leavers. Separately, some states have introduced fee waivers for care leavers wishing to pursue vocational education and training at Technical and Further Education Institutions (TAFE) institutes (e.g. South Australia, Victoria, and Western Australia) (Beauchamp, 2014).

## Section summary

Access to higher education for people from out-of-home care backgrounds is a global concern. In the United Kingdom, targeted research led to policy advancement which has significantly increased higher education access and support for care leavers, and which has also influenced broader European policies. Universities have responded to research and policy drivers to include care leavers within their access agreements, and to monitor participation and outcomes for accreditation and evaluation purposes. Handbooks and guidelines for university staff have begun to be introduced.

In the United States, many policy advocates have focussed on extending foster care beyond 18 years of age in an effort to improve transition into post-secondary education. Multi-state research has revealed the influence of extending state care on university participation in particular. Highly focussed support programs at some universities have seen high success rates, but overall retention and completion rates for care leaver students remain relatively low. In Australia, some recent institutional and policy changes have begun to formalise support for care leavers in vocational and higher education, and to enable collection of formal data on access and participation. However, approaches remain confined to institutions or states, and a national approach to attracting, supporting and monitoring care leavers remains elusive.



## Section 2. Methods for collecting data on care leavers in higher education

This section of the report details several different methods of collecting data on care leaver students which were developed and successfully introduced during the course of the project. We have argued previously that the collection and publication of accurate data on care leaver outcomes is central to developing national policy. One of the major findings of the final report from the *Young people from a public care background pathways to education in Europe* (YiPPEE) research project, which examined post care educational outcomes in a number of European countries, was that ‘reliable statistical information is an essential basis for improving the educational opportunities of young people who have been in care’ (Jackson & Cameron, 2012, p. 10).

Harvey et al. (2015) explored the landscape of data available on care leaver outcomes at national, state, and institutional level and found it to be limited. At the time of the report, there was no systematic collection of national data on care leavers in higher education. State-based child protection departments recorded some details regarding the outcomes of their clients, often through case notes. Some state level data were also collected via surveys. For example, the On Track survey in Victoria (Victoria State Government, 2015) and the Next Step survey in Queensland track the education outcomes of individuals 6 months after leaving school (Queensland Government, 2015). These surveys were administered through the state-based departments of education and included an indicator which denoted whether a survey respondent had been in care. Only aggregate data on the findings of these surveys are publicly available, however, and not the specific outcomes of care leavers. A longer term study is also being managed by the Victorian Department of Human Services, entitled ‘Beyond 18: The Longitudinal Study on Leaving Care’. The study includes a survey to understand care leaver experiences with: finding accommodation; finding a job/further education; building a supportive social network; and accessing support services (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2017). Harvey et al. (2015) conducted a national survey of public universities and found that only one of the 28 universities surveyed as part of the project was formally collecting any data on care leaver students. This university recorded how many of the students who participated in widening participation chose to disclose their care background.

Given the landscape outlined in the 2015 report, the project team expected to confront numerous barriers to the collection and sharing of data at institutional and sectoral level. Many of these barriers were indeed encountered, including difficulty in coordinating multiple university application systems and sub-systems which are controlled by separate stakeholders; the struggle to allocate additional resources and time to modify online systems; and concerns around privacy and confidentiality. Nevertheless, the advocacy of the project team resulted in changes to several institutional and tertiary admission centre processes that will provide baseline care leaver data for the first time, providing momentum for broader sectoral change. In addition, some real-time institutional and state level data was able to be collected, enabling initial reflections on the geo-demographics, application rates, academic success, and service take-up, of prospective and currently enrolled care leaver students. Notably, many of the templates and processes developed could also be modified to monitor access of other under-represented groups in higher education, such as carers, single parents, incarcerated people, military veterans, and students from refugee backgrounds.

## Educational Access Schemes

The project team devised a method of identifying care leavers through educational access schemes which are managed by state-based tertiary admissions centres. Educational access schemes, also called special entry access schemes in some states, enable applicants to receive bonus entry points to compensate for educational disadvantage (Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre, 2017; Universities Admissions Centre, 2017; Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre, 2017). The Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC) manages the Victorian Special Entry Access Scheme (SEAS). Category 2 of SEAS covers 'difficult circumstances' and allows students to document personal circumstances and experiences that may have negatively affected their educational outcomes. An unpublished examination of SEAS data at La Trobe University from 2011 and 2012 found that only 32 out of 20,000 SEAS applicants had mentioned care experience in their impact statements. While restricted to only one university, this analysis suggested that few care leavers were self-identifying through SEAS in order to receive compensation for educational disadvantage.

Throughout 2016, the project team liaised with VTAC and successfully advocated for sub-questions to be added to Category 2 of SEAS to cater to care leavers. The 2017 VTAC application form was subsequently amended to include the following question: 'Do your difficult circumstances relate to time spent in formal out-of-home care? (e.g. foster care, residential care, kinship care or having been a ward of the state)'. Applicants who answer 'yes' are prompted to specify the type and duration of care as part of their impact statements. A preliminary analysis of La Trobe University SEAS applications in late 2016 found that 163 SEAS applicants had disclosed their care leaver status. This analysis suggests that the additional question has resulted in many more care leavers self-identifying through SEAS, and therefore being potentially eligible to receive compensation. As our interviews of 35 enrolled care leaver students across three states highlights (section 3), care leavers remain relatively unlikely to apply for scholarships, bursaries and compensation through the educational access schemes, despite their eligibility. Changes to the educational access scheme forms could therefore potentially improve financial assistance and participation of care leavers dramatically.

## Enrolment forms

The project team also devised a method through which higher education institutions could identify care leaver students at enrolment, similar to the current processes for identifying Indigenous students and students with a disability. After extensive liaison across university departments and campuses, Federation University of Australia was able to introduce a new, mandatory question to identify care leavers. The following question was added to the enrolment checklist for 2017 enrolments:

Have you ever spent time in formal out-of-home care? (Note: out-of-home care could include foster care, residential care, kinship care, or being a ward of the State).

Students can answer this question by selecting Yes/No from a drop down field. As of 3 February 2017, 46 students had ticked 'Yes' to spending time in care through 2017 enrolments. All of these students were new enrolments or students returning from deferral. The project team at La Trobe University has developed a strategy for implementing an equivalent change to enrolment processes in 2017, subject to the approval of senior management. Again, such changes to enrolment forms



enable early identification and the direction of targeted financial support and other resources, while also enabling institutions to monitor progress on access, participation and completion measures. The establishment of a separate enrolment question, including language consistent with the educational access schemes, creates a template for other universities to adopt.

## Bursary applications

One of the issues with adding a question on enrolment forms or educational access schemes is the perceived purpose of the question, and there remains a need to link care leaver identification with access to, and provision of, tangible support. To this end, the project team also developed a method of identifying care leavers via targeted bursaries. La Trobe University introduced a new \$500 care leaver bursary system in 2016. The Expression of Interest form for the bursary included the following question:

Please outline the types of formal, statutory out-of-home care you were in, including the length of time in care. Please note: Formal, statutory out-of-home care occurs following a child protection intervention (i.e. through a care and protection court order). It does not cover other out-of-home care situations through alternative arrangements.

Due to the initial low number of care leavers, all domestic, undergraduate care leaver students were eligible to apply for the bursary in 2016. A total of 22 care leaver students were identified through the bursary system.

In 2017, the bursary was restricted to commencing care leaver students. Applicants were also required to provide documentation supporting their time in out-of-home care, such as:

a letter from a responsible person (such as a counsellor, GP, lawyer, teacher, social worker that is aware of your circumstances), documentation from the Department of Human Services, court documents, documentation from your out-of-home care provider or a statutory declaration.

Identification of care leavers not only enables bursaries to be provided, but also enables institutional staff to direct students to other resources, including academic advisers and mentors, residential support, and student services. Our interviews confirmed that for many care leaver students, having access to a central point of contact within a university was highly beneficial. For Indigenous care leavers, the presence of a dedicated Indigenous unit on campus was critical, providing a central liaison point and resource.

## Sample data

In addition to the establishment of data collection frameworks, one of the partner universities was able to obtain aggregate, de-identified data on a cohort of currently enrolled care leaver students. The small sample size (21 students in total) means that any trends must be interpreted cautiously. Nevertheless, the analysis below serves as a model that could be replicated with larger, cross-institutional samples in future, and provides some initial insight into patterns of enrolment. Using the sample data, we compared the geo-demographics, equity group membership, and academic performance of care leaver students with non-care leaver students.

### *Geo-demographics:*

Care leaver students were much more likely to be female than the non-care leaver group. In total, 86 per cent of care leaver enrolments were female, compared to 64 per cent of non-care leavers across the university. Care leaver students were also more likely to be older than non-care leavers, with 76 per cent of care leavers over the age of 21, compared to only 45 per cent of non-care leavers. While the overall numbers of care leaver students above the age of 36 were relatively small, they also comprised 19 per cent of the care leaver cohort, compared to only 10 per cent of non-care leavers.

When care leaver enrolments were examined by Broad Field of Education, we found that they were over-represented within the Health Sciences. Forty eight per cent of care leavers were studying a course within the Health Science field compared to only 35 per cent of the non-care leaver group. Care leavers were also over-represented within the Broad Field of Education that comprises Education itself, with 19 per cent of all care leavers studying Education compared to 11 per cent of non-care leavers.

### *Equity:*

We also examined the overlap between care leaver status and low socio-economic status, regional status, disability status, Indigenous background, and non-English Speaking Background. Care leavers were much more likely than non-care leavers to come from a low socio-economic status (SES) background. In total, 43 per cent of care leavers were identified as coming from a low SES background, compared to only 20 of the non-care leaver group. Because socio-economic status is defined at a point in time (enrolment) based on geographic location (postcode or census collection district), it may also be that this definition understates the extent of disadvantage among care leavers, as many mature age care leavers are likely to have experienced financial hardship in the near or distant past. It would also be interesting to disaggregate socio-economic status by decile instead of quartile to examine the full extent of socio-economic disadvantage faced by care leaver students.

Care leavers were comparatively over-represented at regional campuses within the university, with 43 per cent of care leavers studying at a regional campus compared to 27 per cent of non-care leavers. Similarly, when examined using the postcode of their permanent residential address, care leavers were more likely to come from regional area, with 48 per cent coming from a regional home postcode compared to 30 per cent of non-care leavers.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, care leavers were much more likely to have formally reported a disability. Over 33 per cent of care leavers reported having a disability at enrolment, compared to only 7 per cent of the non-care leaver cohort. Care leavers are therefore almost five times more likely to have indicated that they have a disability than non-care leavers, and in many cases this is likely to relate to mental health. However, it is also notable that around half of our interviewed care leavers claimed to have suffered from anxiety or mental health disorders, so it is likely that reported disability levels, while high compared with non-care leavers, could still be understated.

Too few care leavers identified as coming from an Indigenous background or as being from a non-English Speaking Background for us to be able to draw meaningful conclusions regarding the representation of care leavers within these groups. Existing evidence highlights that Indigenous people are extremely over-represented in out-of-home care across Australia, and significantly under-represented in higher education. How these patterns are reflected in the participation rates of Indigenous care leavers at university requires further data and research.

### *Achievement:*

Our analysis shows that, once admitted, the academic performance of the care leaver sample was relatively strong when compared to non-care leavers. Using the Department of Education and Training's success rate measure, care leavers reported a pass rate of 93 per cent, compared to 89 per cent for non-care leavers. Based on the achievement measure of Weighted Average Mark, we found that care leavers reported an average mark of 71, compared to an average mark of 66 for non-care leavers. Taken together, these figures tentatively suggests that care leavers who access university perform relatively well. Success at subject level may reflect qualities such as resilience, perseverance and maturity, which our qualitative research suggests are held by many care leaver students at university. However, more data are required, particularly around retention and completion, to understand the longer term effects of external barriers on graduation rates beyond subject success.

## Section summary

The collection and monitoring of data is central to developing policies that can attract and support care leavers in higher education. Given the ongoing absence of care leavers from the Australian higher education student equity framework (Harvey, Burnheim & Brett (eds) 2016), policies at institutional and state level are necessary for information gathering. The project team was able to advocate and influence change at multiple levels, including contributing to the establishment of specific questions on statewide educational access scheme forms, university enrolment forms, and university bursary application forms. By ensuring consistent language across each context, the team has provided a template for further expansion and highlighted the feasibility of multiple data collection techniques. The importance of identifying care leavers early in their enrolment is further revealed by the interviews with students (Section 3), where reluctance and lack of capacity to access services is a common theme, but where the benefits of such services are also extolled by those able to access them. The project has highlighted the capacity of institutions to capture care leaver data at multiple points of application and enrolment, and the potential for such methods to be expanded across the sector.

In addition to the establishment of measures that will provide an important baseline of evidence for the sector, specific data were collected on the enrolment patterns of care leavers from one partner institution. The data revealed a propensity of care leavers to enrol in disciplines such as Health Sciences and Education, the relatively high likelihood of care leavers to be female, regional and/or from low SES backgrounds, and the relatively high success rates of care leavers in subjects enrolled. This last finding in particular is notable, despite clear limitations of the sample size. Many care leavers are able to succeed in higher education precisely because of the qualities of persistence, resilience and maturity that were underlined within our interviews (Section 3). Having established the necessary templates for improved data collection across the sector, a challenge for Australian universities is to develop these templates to improve access and success of care leavers. Meeting this challenge would reflect not only a commitment to social justice but a desire to enrol a diverse and representative student cohort, necessary to ensure the highest quality of learning for all students.

## Section 3. The voice of care leavers: findings from in-depth interviews

This section of the report presents the major findings from our interviews with enrolled university care leaver students. The semi-structured, in-depth interviews were designed to capture views on higher education issues such as: application and enrolment processes; transition into higher education; and support services at university (see Appendix for the interview guide). Interviews were conducted across the four partner universities with a total of 35 care leaver students. Participants were recruited for interviews via a range of advertising and promotion methods across the different institutions. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed and analysed for content and themes. An interpretative phenomenological approach to the analysis was applied ([Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009](#)).

Table 1 presents a summary of participant characteristics and care experiences. The majority of participants were female students aged below 36 years.

**Table 1: Summary of participant characteristics (n=35)**

		Number	Proportion
<b>Institution</b>	University A	12	34%
	University B	13	37%
	University C	2	6%
	University D	8	23%
<b>Gender</b>	Male	6	17%
	Female	29	83%
<b>Age</b>	18-25	13	37%
	26-35	14	40%
	>36	8	23%
<b>Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander</b>	Yes	5	14%
	No	30	86%

### Participant care experiences

Table 2 presents a summary of participant care experiences. Nearly one third of the participants had experienced multiple care placements.

**Table 2: Summary of participant care experiences (n=35)**

		Number	Proportion
<b>Years in care</b>	1-5	16	46%
	6-10	8	23%
	11-18	6	17%
	Missing data	5	14%
<b>Multiple out-of-home care placements</b>	Yes	11	31%
	No	24	69%

Table 3 presents a summary of responses relating to the transition to higher education. The table shows that 46 per cent of the care leavers had not transitioned to university directly from school. In the interviews, mature age students typically reported not having any assistance, or having very little assistance, applying for higher education. These students reported finding the application process complex and difficult. In contrast, care leavers entering university directly from secondary school, who were typically younger students, typically reported receiving more help during the application process at school and having less difficulty applying for university. Interestingly, only around one third of participants sought compensation through an educational access scheme application, and only around half applied for an equity scholarship. Given the extent of disadvantage outlined in the interviews, it is likely that the vast majority of interviewees would have qualified for some form of compensation had they applied, so this evidence confirms the need for greater awareness raising and transparency of financial bursaries and compensation.

**Table 3: Transition to higher education (n=35).**

		Number	Proportion
<b>Transitioned straight from school to University</b>	Yes	16	46%
	No	19	54%
<b>Educational Access Scheme Applicant</b>	Yes	11	31%
	No	19	54%
	Unsure	5	14%
<b>Applied for equity scholarship</b>	Yes	19	54%
	No	16	46%
<b>Applied for other scholarships</b>	Yes	8	23%
	No	27	77%
<b>Assistance applying for university</b>	Yes	13	37%
	No	22	63%

Table 4 summarises how many participants had experienced homelessness, mental health issues, and community support. A total of 37 per cent of the participants had experienced homelessness at

some point, and 51 per cent identified as having a mental health disorder, most commonly an anxiety disorder. Some participants reported traumatic experiences prior to being in care, or during their time in care, which overshadowed educational concerns. Significant challenges such as homelessness and multiple placements caused major interruptions to school education. During difficult times, 57 per cent of participants reported accessing community services. Most of the participants, however, reported finding community services unhelpful. The high extent of disadvantage and trauma identified further confirms that any suggestion of simply accommodating care leavers within the 'low SES' equity category is unrealistic.

**Table 4: Experience of homelessness, mental health disorders, and community support access (n=35).**

		Number	Proportion
Homeless at some point	Yes	13	37%
	No	22	63%
Identified as having anxiety or other mental health disorder	Yes	18	51%
	No	17	49%
Community support accessed	Yes	20	57%
	No	15	43%

Participants were asked to suggest the types of support they thought would attract young people in care, and/or care leavers, into higher education. Table 5 shows the top five responses. The most common response was school outreach programs (mentioned by 26 per cent of participants). Also notable was the proportion of respondents (23 per cent) who argued the need for greater education of carers, social workers and case workers. The need for this education was highlighted in *Out of care, into university* (Harvey et al. 2015), where researchers found a culture of low expectations across and beyond the welfare sector, and identified a range of barriers to the education of carers and associated staff.

**Table 5: What type of support would encourage care leavers into higher education? (n=35).**

	Number	Proportion
Outreach to schools	9	26%
Financial support services and housing options	7	23%
Educate carers, social workers, case workers	7	23%
Communicate information about services available	7	20%
Tailored support services, scholarships, and bursaries	4	11%

Participants were also asked to suggest the types of support that could be provided to care leavers already enrolled in higher education. Table 6 shows the top five responses, with the most common responses being counselling and mentoring, more accessible information and services, and academic skills and careers guidance.

**Table 6: How can universities support care leavers who are already enrolled in higher education? (n=35)**

	Number	Proportion
Counselling and mentoring	9	26%
Accessible information and services	8	23%
Academic skills and careers guidance	8	23%
Financial planning support	7	20%
Temporary accommodation support	4	11%

Participants were asked further details about their preferred types of support that could be available to care leavers at university. In terms of financial support, the majority of participants preferred direct payment over vouchers. Participants indicated that direct payment would allow flexibility to meet their most urgent financial needs when required, rather than having to rely on a specific voucher. As primary concerns are often accommodation and financing the costs of living, direct financial aid is recommended as a mode of support for care leavers.

The possibility of an academic adviser program was popular among participants, with only one participant opposing the idea. The possibility of having a mentor who could advise on academic skills and curriculum appealed to participants. However, many were concerned about not getting along with their mentor as they had previously been in similar mentoring situations which had not worked out well. Many participants thought the mentoring program should not make participants feel like they were being monitored, should not be compulsory, and that different mentors should be made available if the initial pairing was not productive. Further research on the efficacy and flexibility of the various academic advising and mentoring schemes across Australian higher education could help to inform new models that are suited to increasingly diverse student cohorts such as care leavers.

The idea of establishing a peer group for care leaver students was met with mixed responses. While students identified that such a group could be useful, they also shared many concerns. It was generally thought that the group would need guidelines and parameters around the sharing of past experiences in care. There was a concern that participants would be expected or encouraged to disclose personal and private information in the group or that others might talk about traumatic in-care experiences causing re-traumatisation to others. Responses were influenced by the type of experience participants had growing up and socialising with other people in care. A strong factor here is the complexity of the identity/stigma issue connected to being a care leaver; some people want to leave that fragment of their identity behind and 'just be a normal student'. Other participants have integrated their care experiences into their present self-narrative and are more comfortable identifying as care experienced. Broader social prejudice and misconceptions about being in care impacted on the way participants identified with their care experience.

**Table 7: Preferences relating to financial support, academic advisors, and introducing a care leaver group (n=35).**

		Number	Proportion
<b>Finance support</b>	Direct payment	26	74%
	Vouchers	8	23%
	Missing data	1	3%
<b>Would like an academic adviser program?</b>	Yes	34	97%
	No	1	3%
<b>Would like a care leavers group?</b>	Yes	20	57%
	No	9	26%
	With parameters	6	17%

## Thematic analysis of interview data

This section of the report presents a thematic analysis of the interview data. All interview data were de-identified and pseudonyms have been used.

### *Disruptive or traumatic experiences while in care*

Traumatic experiences in care typically impact negatively on self-worth and self-confidence and socialisation. Many care leavers discussed their present challenges in higher education with reference to their experiences growing up facing a number of challenges. When asked about their pathway into university and what was going on in their life at that time, many decided to start from their childhood to explain the various events and choices that led to their enrolment in university. Counselling services had been available to some, but not all. The majority of participants had an understanding of the impact early childhood events had on their sense of self and the way they engaged with other people.

‘I had always wanted to go to uni, and it had never been an option, kind of like an option that I couldn’t achieve, but the situations that kind of arose close to that period obviously hindered me a lot ... the counsellor I was seeing said I had post-traumatic stress disorder again, like exacerbated from my childhood ... (‘Angela’).

Care leavers deal with the impact of traumatic experiences in different ways. Some are keen to face their issues and work through them, and others do not want to reflect on their past experiences. Many are keen to move forward and forget about the past. A major idea expressed by a couple of people was that ‘your past does not shape your future’. Participants were asked about counselling services available at the university. Some people said they knew about the services but didn’t think they should use them (not entitled, didn’t want to burden the system, have had bad prior experiences with counsellors). Other participants said they did not think they needed to access these services.

Care leavers described their overall experience growing up in care as positive and supportive. However, support can also be paired with mixed messages and low expectations, as ‘Zoe’ highlights:



‘I was really discouraged from doing it [university] because I was too far behind and I also didn’t feel like it was something that ... was expected of me to do, like I don’t know if that makes sense, but I kind of felt like it wasn’t something my family had done and like it just wasn’t how, what was expected of me, that low expectation. But I still wanted to do it and I think I had, I had a few foster carers particularly in year 10 and then in year 12, my foster parents were very encouraging and supportive of me of doing that, but a lot of it was me trying to actually believe I could do it’ (‘Zoe’).

Support from the ‘foster family’, ‘carer’ and other individuals in accessing university is significant, as ‘Jamie’ describes:

‘I think for a few years in my recent past I wasn’t linked in with my foster family and that was a huge barrier as well. Like I don’t know if I wouldn’t say it would be unachievable for me to have gone to uni without their support, but it was like a million times harder and you know they helped me with printing out all my readings and all that stuff, and helped me with food when I was struggling. So if I didn’t have their support still, I don’t know if I would have even bothered trying’ (‘Jamie’).

#### *Financial barriers and accommodation*

There are practical barriers which make entry to university difficult for care leavers. The most common barrier is the cost of living involved in undertaking university study. At the age of 18, when young people ‘age out’ of care, many will need to work to finance the costs of living and accommodation. At the age of 17, care leavers attending school are working towards their final mark which will potentially be used to determine entry to university. The stress and pressure that young people experience in this transitional phase is significant. In this context, the age of leaving care is one of the greatest barriers young people leaving care face in pursuing educational opportunities.

‘With working I was doing three or four night shifts a week, so I think that really contributed to why I failed first year as well, because I was just working, it was kind of just to make ends meet, because we had a fair bit of rent, you’ve got groceries, you’ve got bills, you’ve got electricity gas etc etc and then the lack of sleep for one, so then you don’t really turn up to any of your lectures and tutes and then you fall behind in that area’ (‘Chris’).

‘The main thing would be money. During my undergraduate degree, I was working as many hours as I can... at one point I had to miss an exam because I got an eight hour shift at work, and I needed the money so badly - I just had to miss it’ (‘Asher’).

Many of our interview participants worked to support themselves from an early age as they did not have a network to rely upon for financial support, even if other forms of support (such as accommodation or emotional support) were made available. This was true of care leavers across different age groups.

‘Because the thing is that there gets to a point where something does happen, whether it’s you need your wisdom teeth removed or you need this or you need that, like there will be something, you will get sick, you will have something happen and does the university really want people to abandon their studies, or turn around and go back to an abusive environment, because that is why every single person leaves, it’s because of some form of abuse’ (‘Cara’).

Many mature age students deferred applying to university, or decided they had to exit early, because they felt they simply could not afford it.

'I talk to some of my classmates that are still living in community housing and you know there was one young lady - she's 25, she's got 2 kids, she's been struggling and she's had sick children and that, and only the last couple of days she's told me that she's dropping out of uni which I'm a bit sad about. And I mean others don't understand it - they go home and dinner's cooked for them whereas some of us older ones have got to go home and cook dinner and go through all that sort of sh\*\* and still maintain the adult life' ('Matt').

'The expensive part about uni isn't the actual - it's more about where you're living rather than how much you spend on uni ... [and] at uni you spend money to print off stuff, you have to spend money on other things' ('Dale').

'I was travelling between Bendigo, that's a 6 hour round trip every day, so I was pretty much there for class and then straight gone' ('Alexis').

'I think transport, I found it an issue, but that was only because I lived on the north side of Brisbane and I was going to uni on the south side of Brisbane, so that was one of the reasons why I had the motorbike' ('Sophie').

### *Lack of formal assistance and information when applying for university*

One of the biggest challenges for those who are not guided through the application process is not knowing exactly how to apply. There was also a lack of knowledge about the application process among carers. 'Dale' says he would have better prepared for the application process if he had been involved in the process while still in care.

'The messing around with all the paperwork is the hardest part because we don't do any of that, because we're just told to go this way that way when we're in foster care, whereas they should be able to make their choices on what's going on and stuff' ('Dale').

Participants compared their experience of applying to other students and said that a major factor was not being able to rely on family to guide them through the process because many carers had not been to university. In this context, schools played a pivotal role in providing information about higher education. Higher education was made most accessible by schools discussing the application process in class and even making it a classroom activity. Careers counsellors were somewhat useful for communicating information but not across the board. Some schools were described as 'good' and 'supportive' by participants because they took an interest in student wellbeing, future planning for university, and academic performance. Other schools were described as 'not very good', uninterested in student performance, and doing little to encourage future planning.

'Other people, they might have family support and there's other times where they might not have that family support but they've still got family if they need money or need help their parents can do it, whereas I had to try and find a place to stay ... I had to buy all my text books with my money from Centrelink and that was like \$500 so that put me down a lot really quickly and so I had to sign up a lot for scholarships and it made it a lot harder during the very early transitioning days' ('Dale').

From year 10 to year 12, many young people had concerns and responsibilities which overshadowed university, or they did not think they would be able to get into university. They could not imagine university as a viable or possible future. Many participants recalled applying for university at the time of leaving care, often without formal assistance doing so. The lack of formal assistance applying was more of a problem for mature age students, and there were issues here about the accessibility

of information more generally. Those students transitioning straight from school found the process straightforward if they had received assistance, but not all schools are helping their students apply.

‘My HSC I was an emotional wreck, I was vomiting every day and I just wasn’t coping with the situations at all’ (‘Angela’).

‘There’s so much that you’re thinking about, well that I was thinking about, when I was leaving care you know because my birthday’s in the middle of the year as well and DHS were like, “your payment gets cut off in May”, and you’ve still got the rest of the year to go so I was like, I wasn’t going yay I’m going to go to university next year that’s gonna be great fun. You know it was kind of like it was one of the last things that I was thinking about, and I was only thinking about it because I had the foster parents who were encouraging that’ (‘Kelly’).

A small number of care leavers in the younger age group were guided through the application process by their schools and found it straightforward to enter university from high school.

‘I think it was online and our school did a lot of it. We were very supported in the way that we didn’t have to do things - like we got given our numbers and all that kind of stuff, we didn’t have to search for things. I don’t know if it’s common that the schools do it all for you but they did, they enrolled us and they clarified that this was right - it wasn’t like, you know, can you fill out all this information all over again. If they had the information they just sort of processed it for us’ (‘Brooke’).

Those students transitioning from school found the process straightforward if they were helped, but not all schools were perceived as helping their students to apply.

‘My partner went to uni, and he helped me through a lot of that part. But if I didn’t have him, I wouldn’t know how to enrol or do anything. I’m not very technologically savvy. I would have been lost without him’ (‘Chloe’).

‘Even like basic things, so there’s a lot of communication through websites and having to pay for parking permits all that sort of stuff I didn’t know, so I had to learn all on my own like I was the first in my family to go to university so it was all really new to me’ (‘Brooke’).

During the application process, some participants in the older age groups were concerned about the academic skills required. This concern meant that some participants put off applying to university and other experienced feelings of nervousness.

‘I guess having had my last experience of education so long ago, and I was so disengaged from my education when I was there, it was a little bit nerve wracking but there weren’t any barriers or difficulties’ (‘Samantha’).

Mature age students who did not enter university straight from high school discussed their pathways into university. For some participants it was a matter of always wanting to go to university but having to wait for the right conditions, personally and in terms of financial circumstances, before seeking out information about the application process.

‘So then I essentially enrolled in night school to try and improve my grades ... during that time I heard about industrial design, and I thought yeah that’s the ticket for me. So when I finished, I did chemistry and English, I was about to do physics, but I heard that it wasn’t necessary to do industrial design, so I applied to do industrial design, my grades weren’t terribly good, but because I was older than 25 I could get in through alternate entry, and I did’ (‘Kurt’).

The majority of participants did not enter higher education directly after finishing high school. Alternative entry points to higher education, such as bridging and enabling programs and articulation from TAFE courses, were popular among mature age students and those students not applying directly from school.

‘The Tertiary Enabling Program, it’s amazing. It’s a 6 month bridging course available to anybody. I think it’s more than a couple of years outside of high school and it’s a 6 month, just one semester, course made up of four subjects there’s a foundation in maths, a foundation in science, an academic integrity module and a critical thinking module and getting a certain score in that will give you an automatic pathway into university’ (‘Samantha’).

‘I came back to Victoria 5 years ago, and I’d already started TAFE over in Western Australia and did Cert III and IV over there, so I came to Bendigo and I enrolled in my diploma at TAFE. So I did my diploma of community services and then I came through the TAFE system through to Uni into my second year’ (‘Dianne’).

### *Academic skills and experience*

Many care leavers revealed a lack of academic preparation upon entering their undergraduate degree. Some of the skills highlighted, such as essay writing and referencing, are explicitly taught within university enabling programs, and it may be that some students would be better directed to those programs as pathways, where available, rather than entering undergraduate degrees directly. Nevertheless, our quantitative data and further interview responses suggests that many care leavers are able to work through their academic skills issues and successfully adjust to university study. The comments below highlight the initial struggles faced by commencing care leavers:

‘I think my first year I really struggled with the academics because that’s the part that to me the university has been the hardest, is just, because I don’t have a lot of my basic skills so I’ve kind of had to play catch up, and that means that sometimes [I] particularly have a hard time putting words down onto paper and sometimes it’s just daunting’ (‘Zoe’).

‘I had to teach myself how to research and write essays and so on. They provided me with a lot of guidance, because I didn’t even know how to use books or the internet properly’ (Peter).

### *The impact of low expectations on self-worth and self-confidence of care leavers*

*Out of care, into university* (Harvey et al. 2015) highlighted a damaging culture of low expectations that often surrounds children in care, including from carers, case workers, and teachers. At least two of our interviewees were told by school teachers that they should not aim for university. Alexis tells a particularly disturbing story which reveals the lack of support young people receive when their problems become ‘too big’. ‘Alexis’ describes living in an abusive home and making this known to her teachers. The teachers considered the challenges ‘Alexis’ would face living out of home and participating in higher education and decided it would not be possible. ‘Alexis’ was told that university would probably not be possible for her unless she stayed with her parents. She attempted to stay at home while she completed high school but found herself studying on the streets because the situation at home was so bad. ‘Casey’ describes the impact of her teacher having low expectations on her educational experience:

'In high school, we did have a careers advisor but he literally said to me "you will never get into medicine, pick something else". Instead of saying well here are the pathways to medicine. It was you'll never do it ... every time I came out of the careers advisor I was always in tears, I always waited 'til I left the room to cry, because I wasn't giving him the satisfaction of upsetting me ... I should've been a cook or like a cleaner in his opinion' ('Casey').

Despite these challenges, university was seen as way to turn your life around, to build career prospects and a future. For some participants, the achievement of being at university (and doing well) was enhanced by the fact that they had been told by high school teachers that they probably wouldn't get into university.

'My sister and I talk all the time - like my sister just got offered a head nurse position, and she's only in her third year out of uni, and she's like "I just love seeing people in the street, even past teachers and stuff". Everyone that ever said you won't get anywhere or you won't do anything or even just looked at you and we say the same thing to each other all the time you know how nice is it to just turn around and rub it in everyone's faces that said that we can't do it and we're doing it' ('Jane').

The low expectations that care leavers often face are very closely tied to individual narratives of accessing university and building up enough confidence to apply in the first place. As 'Jane' says, showing people she had known in the past just what she was capable of was quite a rewarding experience. These are the people who underestimated her. 'I'm actually quite smart', she said in a matter of fact way. However, confidence and self-worth remained issues in the background with which many care leavers were dealing:

'overall like the self-esteem in its true sense wasn't there, but I also had additional pressures that other students who were living at home with their mum or their dad or their grandparents even didn't have ... like to get a car I had to save myself, you know even though I was living with my friends and I now call mum and dad, I still had to prove, I felt like I always had to prove something, prove that I was worthy of being there, prove that I was worthy of them helping me' ('Angela').

'... I had a lot of self-worth issues, I didn't think that I was good enough ... I think that prevented me from really pushing myself to try and get into medicine, I gave up pretty quickly, and there are other pathways I could've taken' ('Casey').

Building self-worth and confidence may have a significant impact on the ways in which care leavers imagine their potential. Those care leavers who thought that they would not be accepted to university, and/or that they should not apply, were able to build confidence throughout their time at university by learning, being supported and encouraged, and discovering through experience that they could be academically successful. For some participants this did not come as a complete shock because they achieved high grades in high school, though still were unsure of their ability to participate in higher education. Many spoke about turning their lives around and being able to participate in higher education despite the obstacles or disincentives they encountered growing up, such as being told they would not be able to get into university.

Diminished self-worth was a barrier to taking up opportunities such as applying for scholarships or utilising university support services. The responses below help to highlight why only around half of care leaver university students identified in our quantitative study had applied for an equity scholarship, and only one third had applied for compensation through an educational access scheme:

'I've always just thought scholarships you'd have to fill out hundreds and hundreds of pieces of paper and probably get rejected so I've never bothered' ('Jenny').

'There's always someone more worse off who deserved it more than I did, so I sort of would leave it' ('Grace').

'I didn't go for any scholarships because I didn't feel like I was worth them and there were significant barriers because I didn't actually speak up. I didn't say "look I need this or that" because I was 17 and I wasn't raised to be particularly forward in what I needed and there was also an element of shame there was a very strong element of shame so it wasn't something I spoke about' ('Helena').

These responses reveal the need for secondary schools, tertiary admissions centres, university scholarship offices, and support services to improve awareness of bursaries, compensation and eligibility requirements, and to improve the transparency of processes and ease of application. Clearly, many prospective and enrolled university students who are entitled to significant compensation are not applying or receiving that compensation, and this gap affects university access, success and outcomes.

Interviewees also provided advice for prospective students, which was often oriented around self-worth and competency and turning your life around.

'Where you have been does not define who you are, there is no you, you are who you are in the moment and you can choose who you are in the moment. Yeah you might be a bit behind from other families, but everybody's got their struggles and you are no less important and worthwhile than any other person, and if you want to do something just do it' ('Casey').

### *Resilience and strengths*

Care leavers who had managed to overcome the barriers to university access were often strengthened by their experience and resilience. Many felt that their life experiences provided them with greater insight into complex social issues, insight their peers did not necessarily share.

'I think it's more life experience despite being the same age like you've done more, the rougher your life has been you get a little bit more mature and you get more understanding of how the world works' ('Dale').

Participants also spoke about their own resilience. As 'Trish' put it:

'Resilience ... Resilience I think is a big one because you don't sweat the small stuff when you've come from this kind of background. Little things don't matter to you' ('Trish').

Many care leavers balance university with paid work and family responsibilities. This means often being time-poor and exhausted, but also demonstrates a strong work ethic.

There were a broad range of motivating factors and past experiences that propelled students to fight for their future. These factors included advice from mentors like other family members, being responsible for other family members and children, the desire to do things differently and have a better life in comparison to early childhood experiences, indignation at being told they could not do something by a teacher, or being made to feel they were less than worthy. Certain experiences, such as raising children, also enabled participants to experience a sense of autonomy, productivity, accomplishment and self-worth.

Participants explained building life skills and resilience in difficult circumstances like balancing competing commitments while studying. For many care leavers, this was a point of difference between their everyday experiences at university compared with other students. 'Chloe' explains:

'A lot of my friends who are at Uni don't have to work or worry about anything. Mostly because they have back up plans – they have parents if they need to rely on them. I just have myself. So in terms of paying all my bills, and having a house, and managing my finances I am solely responsible. I don't have the option not to work while I study' ('Chloe').

These differences in everyday university/life experiences sometimes mean that care leavers feel alienated from the 'student experience'. This speaks to the way in which student life is imagined and communicated/represented to students at university through, for instance, advertising campaigns and on-campus activities and groups. Care leavers and their experiences are typically not represented. Many care leavers would like to be treated 'the same', not despite their care experience but in recognition of it. This requires greater on-campus awareness and understanding of what being in care means. Through this type of knowledge stronger peer to peer relationships may also be generated.

'My two parents, that I did live with prior to being in foster care, they did put a high emphasis on our education and they really motivated us to want to sort of do well and I guess having been through that struggle during foster care, like my foster carer didn't have a job, so she was a full time carer I guess you could say. And we often struggled - like we lived in a poor living environment and that kind of thing and I think to myself in my own life I don't want to have to go through the struggle, I want to be able to be successful based on what I can do personally' ('Brooke').

'I think having kids was the biggest shift, I didn't believe I was – I always thought I'd be a good mum, but I guess having kids has made me realise there's so much decision making, and I actually can make those decisions for another person and myself I guess, and I think that's probably been the biggest thing that's helped me, having kids, because it's shown me that I can do that' ('Casey').

Such responses confirm that university awareness-raising and support programs need to avoid approaches of 'support with a measure of pity', as this is not the kind of support care leavers appreciate. Many care leavers found that in group conversations in class, with peers, and with administrative staff, that they were pitied. This experience of pity and condescension signals a deficit attitude/approach to care leavers. The idea that they have fewer resources and are therefore not as resourceful as other students is contradicted by the resilience care leavers demonstrate as they overcome significant barriers to participate in higher education:

'I have a lot more freedom and ability to study, and work hard, I feel I can pretty much adapt to most situations. So you know, knowing that time put in equals results, you know doesn't really matter what it is, that kind of can really be applicable to a lot of different things. So I think that is quite important, I think that has, I have that advantage over other students, in that I can just like you know, I can sit down and spend 2 or 3 days 12 hours, not 12 sorry, 10 or 11 hours a day just smashing out an assignment or trying to understand concepts ... I do have a lot more freedom to be able to leave when I want, come home when I want, I don't really have anything holding me back' ('Chris').



### *Peer and institutional knowledge about being a care leaver*

Some participants noted that other students sometimes complain about seemingly trivial issues and this makes it hard to build relationships and establish common viewpoints with others. Relatedly, there can be a lack of knowledge and understanding about what being a care leaver entails. A lack of institutional knowledge inhibits the level of targeted support care leavers receive on campus and a lack of general knowledge about care among the student body can be a barrier to the development of friendships on campus for care leavers.

The lack of understanding from others, combined with the hesitancy to speak about out-of-home care, has an alienating effect for many care leavers. Some students found it difficult to share their experience in class, which can be a class discussion activity in social work courses. In this context the responses and reactions of other students can be problematic. Many interviewees felt that the attitudes/opinions expressed by other students in class were naïve and revealed underlying discriminatory attitudes.

‘I think it probably contributed to an overwhelming frustration with the idealistic young people that I was studying with ...they made certain assumptions about people in foster care ... and I think probably struggling with the idea that I was probably at uni because of a really gross administrative error, and that I’m actually here, because I’m not one of them’ (‘Alexis’).

Being in care was seen to be something that cannot be easily shared, is personal and private information, and was something that many perceived made them different from other ‘normal’ students. It was thought that normalcy is created (institutionally and socially supported) around many other student experiences and groups, but being a care leaver does not seem to be one of these categories.

‘Honestly I think the most difficult thing for me is probably the whole social part to it. Like I have no problem with talking to people in class but it’s the whole making friends concept, the whole socialising like asking people “hey do you want to hang out after this?” or whatever. It’s kind of like I’m not an introverted person, I’m very out there, but I just feel like I have been affected in a way that prevents me from socialising in a way that I want to’ (‘Olivia’).

‘It would be easier to use cash - I’d be embarrassed using a voucher like it’s some kind of hand out but if I’m with all my friends and we’re buying materials at the book shop and they use cash and then I’m like oh I’m just using my special foster care voucher that would be mortifying’ (‘Amy’).

‘I think the biggest point is just making sure it doesn’t feel like pity or you don’t feel like you’re being singled out because you’re different or you’re not good enough and you need to be propped up’ (‘Amy’).

‘I just want to try and be normal like everyone else kind of thing’ (‘Kelly’).

‘I left home at 14, I didn’t have the skills, and lecturers and tutors were one of the first offenders in terms of making you feel like sh\*\* because they just assumed because everyone lived at home, everyone had come from school and had not experienced care, had not experienced abuse. So there was an expectation that you just went to school and then you got into uni and everything was hunky dory’ (‘Helena’).

Many care leavers are enrolled in nursing, social work, psychology or sports health. Some of the content in these classes can trigger emotional responses from students in class. Triggers are often



related to personal experiences and can come about when a student personalises the learning material. Some participants experienced emotional, physical, or sexual abuse and violence in their childhood and have had strong reactions to course material in psychology and social work.

One student was removed from her psychology course and referred to a mental rehabilitation institution. Her experiences in care were very traumatic:

‘That’s when I changed over and thought I’d do counselling instead. And then that’s where it all started, it all triggered, I started psychology, and that triggered all my childhood memories of all the abuse and sexual abuse, the psychological, the emotional, the physical abuse, it triggered it all... But when I was doing the human service degree it was not triggering, it was more like I was being a facilitator with all the skills that I already had and I was just helping other people, so I was doing what I enjoyed doing you know like being an interpreter with sign language, so it was more sort of conducive at the time, it was a form of healing.’ (‘Sophie’).

‘My social work degree and I guess they do touch on a lot of child protection matters and I guess sometimes it’s a bit – it hits home a bit hard ... I have seen a lot of kind of stuff that kids have gone through so I guess that’s it’ (‘Hannah’).

Support on campus can play a major role. Care leavers were aware of counselling services, but the usefulness of counselling services received mixed responses. For some people, the option of having a counsellor on campus was helpful. Counselling was considered one of the best ways to get through time of stress or deal with issues that seemed overwhelming.

Care leavers said it would be helpful to have a liaison person, such as a care coordinator. The value of the care coordinator is that they ‘get it’, they understand what being in care means and can direct care leavers to relevant resources. Many care leavers have experienced the burden of paper work from an early age and are fatigued with this process, hence the importance of a contact person who can advocate on behalf of the student.

### *Support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders*

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander care leaver students found Indigenous centres to be an important source of support. These centres often provide free practical support, such as tutors and internet access, as well as providing psychological support and a ‘comfort zone’ for students. Indigenous centres are also able to direct care leavers to related campus services, providing a single point of contact that was frequently valued. Given the over-representation of Indigenous children in out-of-home care, it is crucial that university outreach programs, and subsequent campus support programs, are developed with the guidance of Indigenous community members and in culturally sensitive ways.

‘Everyone gets an equal chance and even me with a foster family. With my Aboriginality as well I actually think I get more resources as well because I get free tutors like I can organise keystones to success. And if I want to go in and I don’t understand something I can have someone to talk to and we sit there for an hour and work that out whereas other students don’t get that’ (‘Dale’).

‘...With the [Indigenous] unit, with the Aboriginal students there, at least I can go there and I’ve got somebody who I can bounce off my knowledge and feel a bit, you know, just feel a bit more comfortable and not giving up and not quitting, because there is that support mechanism there...’ (‘Sophie’)

## Section summary

The care leaver interviews revealed several major barriers to accessing higher education including high rates of homelessness, financial problems, and mental health issues, many stemming from periods of childhood. Despite the existence of these barriers, interviewees were relatively reluctant to apply for university compensation or bursaries, and mature age care leavers in particular also experienced a lack of support with university application processes. Participants recommended a range of approaches for increasing access to higher education for care leavers, including expanded school outreach programs, financial support services, housing options, and greater education of carers, case workers, and social workers. The need for a culture of heightened expectations among some school teachers, carers and related staff was also highlighted.

During higher education, concerns raised included accommodation difficulty, high costs of living, perceived academic skills deficiencies, and low self-confidence. Many care leavers experienced issues with self-confidence, and at times felt misunderstood by other students, and experienced feelings of alienation. Issues raised suggest further attention is required to improve campus climate, culture, and curriculum particularly in accommodating and understanding diversity. Care leavers, however, typically displayed high levels of resilience and emotional maturity compared to their peers. The interviewees recommended approaches for better supporting care leavers in higher education, including counselling and mentoring, more accessible information and services, and academic skills and careers guidance. For Indigenous care leavers in particular, presence of a single point of contact on campus (usually through a dedicated Indigenous centre) was seen as valuable.

## Section 4. Higher education guidelines for professional and academic staff working with care leavers

The following guidelines are designed for people working with care leavers in the Australian higher education sector. Care leavers are people who spent time in out-of-home care, for example foster care, kinship care, or residential care. In this guide you will find information about the different forms of support that professional and academic staff can offer care leavers. The guidelines provide advice for university staff delivering outreach and in-reach programs to young people in out-of-home care, and outline the support services available to care leavers who are studying at university.

The guidelines are informed by research conducted by La Trobe University, Federation University of Australia, Western Sydney University, and Queensland University of Technology, for the *Recruiting and supporting care leavers in Australian higher education project* (Harvey et. al, 2017). The research aimed to raise the educational aspirations of young people in care, and their support networks, and develop support services for care leavers in higher education. As part of this project, 35 care leaver students from four different universities in Australia were interviewed, and their firsthand accounts have helped to shape these guidelines. Please note all interview data were de-identified and pseudonyms have been used throughout these guidelines.

While written for staff in higher education working with care leavers in Australia, the guidelines may be relevant to other stakeholders and contexts. While this is not a new area of research within Australia, the provision of specific services for care leavers within higher education is inchoate. The guidelines could provide a basis for the development of further resources for supporting care leavers in higher education.

The guidelines are designed to be read alongside '*Higher education guidelines for students who spent time in out-of-home care*' which was written for care leavers (see Section 5 of this report).

### Disclaimer

The information contained in these guidelines is of a generic nature only. You must not rely on the information in these guidelines as an alternative to seeking advice from an appropriately qualified professional and/or making your own enquiries to other higher education institutions to confirm the accuracy of the information provided. The information contained in this publication is current as at the time of the publication (March 2017). The University reserves the right to make changes without notice, at any time in its absolute discretion, including but not limited to varying these guidelines. *These guidelines must not be published, quoted or disseminated to any other party without the University's prior written consent.* To the extent permitted by law, the University does not accept responsibility for any loss or damage occasioned by use of any of the information contained in this publication.

- These guidelines are designed to provide professional and academic staff with information to help support care leavers in higher education.
- After leaving formal care, young people are often referred to as 'care leavers'. Not all care leavers identify with this term, however, and may think of their experience in terms of having been in 'out-of-home care', 'foster care', 'kinship care' or being 'care experienced' or 'looked after' (NNECL, 2013, p.11-12).
- Formal support for young people in out-of-home care decreases at age 18. Care leavers are often faced with uncertainty around where they will live and how they will manage their financial independence.
- Some care leavers will have access to support networks and formal pathway plans outlining educational and career goals, while many others experience the 'soft bigotry of low expectations' which impacts heavily on their educational aspirations (Harvey et al., 2015b, p. 6).
- University outreach and in-reach programs for care leavers are best developed in consultation with non-government organisations and agencies in the out-of-home care sector.
- It is important for services and divisions of the university to work together to provide 'wrap-around' support, which requires strong links between services, and 'embedded' support, where support for care leavers is part of broader, sustainable practices.
- To support care leavers, professional staff can facilitate valuable links between Equity Units and areas such as Admissions, Marketing and Recruitment, Student Wellbeing, Accommodation Services, Scholarship and Advancement, Alumni and Advancement, Counselling and Careers Services.
- Some care leavers can have mental health issues, especially anxiety, tied to their past experiences. It can be helpful for these students to have access to counselling and mentoring, and flexibility from academic staff in regard to assessment.
- Many care leavers have backgrounds and life experiences which differ substantially from students who have not lived in care. Care leavers can therefore provide valuable and unique contributions to classroom discussions, though sensitivity and training may be required from academic staff.

#### Student voice:

*'I was really discouraged from doing university because I was too far behind and I also didn't feel like it was something that ... was expected of me, I don't know if that makes sense, but I kind of felt like it wasn't something my family had done and it just wasn't what was expected of me, that low expectation'.*

*'But I still wanted to do it and I think I had, I had a few foster carers particularly in year 10 and then in year 12, my foster parents were very encouraging and supportive of me of doing that, but a lot of it was me trying to actually believe I could do it'.*  
(Zoe).

## Background information

Out-of-home care is a term used mostly by professionals working in the community and government sectors to refer to the care of children who are unable to live with their families (Peel & Beckley, 2015, p. 372). Out-of-home care involves the placement of a child with alternate caregivers on a short-term or long-term basis. In Australia, formal out-of-home care ends at 18, with some young people as young as 16 leaving care (Victorian Department of Human Services, 2007; Mendes, 2009, p. 34). After leaving care young people are often referred to as 'care leavers', however not all care leavers identify with this term and may understand their experience in terms of having been in 'out-of-home care', 'foster care', 'kinship care' or being 'care experienced' or 'looked after' (NNECL, 2013, p. 11-12).

Knowing how to provide suitable support in a higher education environment is crucial to the success and well-being of care leavers. Care leavers often face significant financial responsibilities which they balance with study and social commitments. Many care leavers are self-reliant and skilled in balancing competing demands on their time. Given the high demands on the time of care leavers, however, having readily accessible information and support is paramount. These guidelines are designed to provide professional and academic staff with information to help support care leavers in higher education.

Within Australia there are approximately 43,400 children in out-of-home care and this number has risen steadily over the past decade (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, AIHW, 2016). Young people leaving care are one of the most vulnerable groups in our community (AIHW, 2016). Care leavers typically experience severe educational disadvantage and are disproportionately likely to come from low socio-economic status, regional, and Indigenous backgrounds (Harvey et al., 2015a; 2015b).

Ageing out, or leaving care, occurs at a time when many young people might otherwise be looking at educational options. Instead they are often faced with many decisions such as where they will live, how they will manage their financial independence, find employment, manage relationships, and seek other forms of appropriate support (Peel and Beckley, 2015, p. 376). One concern is that, during this period of transition to independence, care leavers often miss out on higher education and training opportunities which would lead to greater employment prospects as well as increased earning potential (Lomax-Smith, Watson, & Webster, 2011; Norton, 2012).

Some care leavers have access to support networks and formal pathway plans outlining educational and career goals, while many others will experience the 'soft bigotry of low expectations' which impacts heavily on their educational aspirations (Harvey et al., 2015b, p. 6). Support and peer networks can offer care leavers a significant resource which should not be overlooked, but development of specific university support services is also required to improve the accessibility of higher education for this group.

## Outreach and in-reach programs

University outreach and in-reach programs are typically aimed at students in primary and secondary schools and designed to: familiarise these students with university life; raise awareness of, and aspirations for, higher education study; and/or inspire interest in particular disciplines. Outreach involves staff from the university delivering advice and services off campus, often within the school grounds. In-reach involves bringing students onto university premises. Universities can specifically target outreach and in-reach programs to students in out-of-home care, for example by working with community services organisations and flexible learning schools.

For care leavers, university outreach and in-reach programs are best developed in consultation with non-government organisations and agencies in the out-of-home care sector. [The Reach Program](#), for example, was developed by Western Sydney University's Widening Participation Unit and Life Without Barriers to encourage young people aged between 15 and 17 years to consider university or

other tertiary education. Participants completed a three month program that included: a range of activities to gain exposure to university life; resources to support students if they chose to go to university; and career coaching. The program also involved the engagement of foster carers and collaboration with other not-for-profit organisations, Dress for Success and the CREATE Foundation.

When delivering outreach or in-reach, it is helpful to consider these major components: location; the message; audience; event structure and teamwork; and content. The following table describes why these components are important in the context of outreach and in-reach to care experienced young people.

<b>Location</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In-reach can be delivered on-campus, but some students may be more comfortable in their own schools or on common ground.</li> <li>• Outreach may be an effective way of familiarising students with university life with minimal inconvenience to prospective students, carers and other staff.</li> <li>• Logistics can be complex given the involvement of multiple stakeholders, e.g. agency staff, carers, teachers, and students.</li> </ul>
<b>The Message</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outreach can raise the expectations of both care leavers and their support networks, transforming the question '<i>Can I go to university?</i>' into '<i>Why shouldn't I go to university?</i>'</li> </ul>
<b>Audience</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is important to ensure that care leavers and their support networks are informed about what university involves and what support is available.</li> <li>• Support networks may include carers, friends, case managers, counsellors, grandparents, and other family members.</li> <li>• Information and presentations should always be age-appropriate.</li> </ul>
<b>Structure and Teamwork</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People participating in outreach may appreciate having their support networks and peers present at events, and being teamed up in group activities with friends.</li> <li>• Outreach events can be organised to offer concurrent information sessions and activities for care leavers and their support networks.</li> </ul>
<b>Content</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outreach presentations should provide information on the types of support available to care leavers at university. Financial and accommodation support are often primary concerns.</li> <li>• Be clear and specific about what can be involved in attaining a degree, including study time and on-campus commitments.</li> <li>• Discuss the benefits of a university education, e.g. university graduates are likely to earn a higher income than non-graduates.</li> <li>• Including care experienced people in outreach programs, for instance as presenters, can provide a reference point for people who have grown up in difficult circumstances.</li> <li>• Care experienced presenters may not wish to share various elements of their personal story so it is a good idea to establish parameters around question time.</li> </ul>

### **Good Practice Case Study: Outreach at the University of Sheffield**

The University of Sheffield offers Outreach through its '[Looked After Children & Care Leavers Project](#)' (2017). The program provides aspiration raising activities for young care experienced people. These activities include:

- 22-week 'Building Learning Power Club' - Y5/6
- 3-day summer school - Y10/11
- 'Routes into Further Education' - Y11
- 'Discover University' day - Y12.

Information about the program, including how to apply, is communicated to young people in care and their carers through community and government organisations.

### **LAC Champions**

The LAC Champions outreach program is supported by care experienced students attending the University of Sheffield. These students are known as 'LAC Champions' after the 'Looked After Children' Project ([LAC Champions' page](#)). These students convey a powerful message during outreach events: 'if I can do it, then so can you'. LAC Champions are provided with training and support so that they are able to:

- Work as mentors and work with student groups
- Assist in the delivery of the Y5/6 'Building Learning Power Club'
- Support summer schools and other outreach activities at the university.

'The range of activities on offer presents an opportunity for LAC Champions to develop key transferable skills such as teamwork, time-management and communication'.

The University of Sheffield was awarded the Buttle UK Quality Mark for the support provided to care leavers (['Students from Care' page](#)). This support includes:

- A dedicated care leaver contact who can offer tailored, individual and sustained support
- Help in accessing financial help, guidance and support
- A generous Care Leaver's non-repayable bursary
- Priority in obtaining University owned accommodation.



## Wrap-around and embedded support services

It is important for services and divisions of the university to work together to provide 'wrap-around' support, which requires strong links between services, and 'embedded' support, where support for care leavers is part of broader, sustainable practices. Developing support services for care leavers requires understanding *where* support can be most effectively targeted, and it is best to include care leavers in consultations about their support needs and preferences. Effective support is sustainable and creates a reliable network for care leavers.

The combination of wrap-around and embedded support can:

- Provide sustainable support services for care leavers
- Raise awareness about care leavers among staff
- Raise the profile of care leavers within the student body
- Create a safe environment for care leavers on campus and a sense of belonging
- Encourage care leavers to utilise support services.

### Student voice

Identifying as a care leaver can be difficult. During university, care experienced people of all ages may consider identifying as a care leaver for a variety of reasons, but also desire to have a 'normal' university experience and identify as a 'normal' student.

*'I've grown from my experiences, so let's not sit there and have a pity party about it' ('Angela').*

*'I don't like people pitying me like I am in a situation – I think it's a good thing that what's happened to me, you know – I am who I am today because of it and I don't want people going "oh you poor thing" like that's not what I am about' ('Hannah').*

### Good Practice Case Study: The University of Michigan Blavin Scholars Program

The University of Michigan (U-M) has a dedicated care leaver program called the '[Blavin Scholarship Program](#)' (2017). The program provides assistance to students who have experienced time in foster care and who are undertaking a Bachelor degree at the University of Michigan.

The program draws on the [Fostering Success Coaching Model](#) which prioritizes partnerships between coaches and students. Each student is paired with a trained [Campus Coach](#) (a Blavin Program Staff member) who is also their primary point of contact in the program. Research shows that coaching and mentoring from older peers with foster care experience can promote acceptance and academic confidence (Phillip et al., 2015).

Campus Coaching comprises:

**A holistic approach** that uses the seven Life Domains (adapted from Casey Family Programs, 2006) to view Education and Academics at the centre of the Blavin Scholar's U-M experience. Using this holistic approach they acknowledge the impact the other life domains: Career Development, Financial Awareness, Physical and Mental Health, U-M Community Experience, Personal Identity Formation, and Life Skills Preparation have on Education and Academics and strive to promote skill development in each life domain.



The **Blavin Scholars Program** recommends:

- Regular coaching interactions and building a relationship of ‘interdependence’ between students and their supports.
- Empowering students by positioning them as the expert of their needs and experiences.
- Blavin Scholars ‘set the agenda’ by voicing questions and concerns with their Campus Coach.
- Students look towards the future, especially during coaching interactions.
- Developing academic, professional, and life skills.
- Supporting students in securing basic needs and resources to be successful.
- Monitoring academic and personal progress at university.

In addition to the support program, the **Blavin Scholarship** provides students with financial support toward the cost of attendance.

The program is a good example of how support for care leavers can be provided through a targeted program.

Applications for the program are taken by the university Undergraduate Admissions Office.

*Want to know more?*

There are many other targeted programs for care leavers including:

- The [Berkeley Hope Scholars Program](#) which provides support for care leavers enrolled at the University of California, Berkeley.
- The [University College London](#) which provides guaranteed accommodation for care leavers for 365 days per year, a dedicated member of staff for support/mentoring, and a bursary.
- The [University of Liverpool](#) which has a similar program for care leaver support – with a bursary and a Care Leaver Coordinator.
- The [University of Bath](#) which provides guaranteed accommodation for care leavers for 365 days per year, a bursary and scholarship, and a Care Leaver Coordinator.

## Self-Identification

Does your higher education provider offer care leavers an option to self-identify before or upon enrolment?

Some universities have methods that allow students to disclose their care leaver status, for example through application or enrolment processes. These universities can pro-actively contact their care leaver students with information about the range of support that is available to them.

Introducing a method of identifying care leavers through application and enrolment processes requires the cooperation and approval of staff across many different university divisions, including Senior Management, Admissions, Information Technology, and Student Information Systems.

Care leavers can be encouraged to disclose their care leaver status to access targeted support services. In the United Kingdom, for example, the [Propel website](#) was created to encourage students to inform higher education providers of their care leaver status in order to access support services (Who Cares? Trust, 2016).

## Contact Person

Some universities have a designated Care Coordinator who: provides a single point of contact for care leaver students; provides general information and advice; and provides referrals to other support services. Some universities have staff within dedicated Indigenous centres who provide the point of contact for their Indigenous care leaver students.

## Language

The following are examples of some terms that may indicate you are speaking with a person who is currently in out-of-home care, or has spent time in out-of-home care before they were 18.

Care experienced	Lead tenant
Foster parent	Carer
Residential care	Case manager
Kinship care	Child protection
Grandparent (or other relative)	Care leaver
Ward of the State	Looked after
Independent living	Aging out

## Accommodation Support

Financially subsidised accommodation services provide one of the greatest forms of support for care leavers, particularly for those who are young and have not yet established safe and secure accommodation. Because care leavers often finance their own accommodation and living costs, this form of support can make a big difference.

On-campus accommodation services can potentially reserve a set number of rooms for care leavers for each enrolment period. In addition, university scholarship and advancement teams may be able to secure funding for accommodation scholarships, which may involve funding from philanthropic organisations or individual donations.

## **Financial Support**

While many students are supported by income-contingent loans (e.g. HECS-HELP) and Austudy schemes, additional financial support can be crucial for living costs, the purchase of educational equipment such as books and laptops, and participation in social activities.

**Equity Units** and **Alumni and Advancement Offices** can play a role in securing this funding, while university admissions, scholarship offices and student wellbeing offices may be involved in administering funds. Funds may be delivered as a bursary, scholarship, or annual payment for care leavers to promote equitable participation in higher education. Direct payments are typically preferred by care leavers over vouchers as they offer more flexibility and avoid any potential perceptions of stigma.

## **Counselling**

Many care leavers have experienced some form of counselling throughout their life. Our research showed that counselling was considered one of the best ways for care leavers to get through times of anxiety and stress.

## **Careers advisers**

Careers advisers can be particularly important as care leavers often receive only limited careers advice and information prior to university. Careers advisers can also help students to plan an approach to balance their work and studies which takes financial and accommodation concerns into consideration. Advisers may assist with questions such as:

How can a student's income be supplemented while they are studying if they have rental payments and cost of living expenses?

What is a viable study plan that will develop the student's skills but will not overload the student?

## **Culturally sensitive support**

Many care leavers in Australia are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders. In addition to the support described in the sections above, most universities have Indigenous centres and programs which provide culturally sensitive information and support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Staff within these units should be trained and regularly updated about the experiences and support available to care leavers, particularly given the over-representation of Indigenous children in out-of-home care.

Culturally sensitive support services can also be developed in consultation with agencies and organisations who operate in this space, for example the Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat (AbSec) and KARI Aboriginal Resources Incorporated.

## Privacy and flexibility

Special consideration forms, and other forms designed to enable compensation for educational disadvantage during exams and assignments, often require personal information and paperwork. Care leavers may not be comfortable disclosing and documenting personal information within the higher education system, and may not have access to supporting documentation. Many care leavers experience severe to moderate anxiety which is tied to past experiences.

Our research shows that the flexibility of academic staff regarding assessment may provide support for, or bypass the additional workload of, applying for an extension. Students reported that being given flexibility provided a sense of understanding and autonomy, and reduced anxiety associated with academic workload.

### *Practice points*

- Some care leavers described exhaustion from filling out paperwork throughout their lives. Where possible, it is best to reduce or avoid the burden of administrative tasks faced by care leavers.
- Some care leavers may be eligible for special consideration and/or disability support. At many universities, special consideration 'is intended for serious illness/injury/condition or extraordinary circumstances that has a *short term negative impact* on student's ability to sit/ attend/ participate/ complete the assessment task/s' (Medical Impact Statement, La Trobe University). Disability support may be provided for long-term illness, whereby a reasonable adjustment may be sought. Some students may be able to access disability support or an equivalent rather than lodging a special consideration application for multiple assessment tasks.

## Anxiety and wellbeing

Care leavers may experience anxiety as a result of, for instance: insecure and unsafe living conditions; multiple placements with different families/or in shared accommodation; and experiences of abuse, neglect and violence. Anxiety may or may not be clinically diagnosed and documented. Anxiety and depression often manifest in unpredictable and unforeseeable ways, preventing students from attending class and completing set tasks. Drawing on our research, the following table shows how anxiety can affect the student experience and which supportive practices can help.

<b>Special consideration and disability services</b>  <i>'So it's knowing my triggers and knowing that I might have a really bad week when an assignment's due, so making sure that my lecturers are aware of what's going on' ('Grace').</i>	<p>Is special consideration appropriate for the needs of care leavers? Disability services is another alternative for foreseeable illnesses that may have a long-term impact and require multiple extensions to assessment deadlines.</p> <p>Care leavers may not consider themselves entitled to disability services and this option should be pointed out to them.</p>
<b>Course content and triggers</b>	<p>Particular course content may trigger an unanticipated response for care experienced students. Creating awareness around potentially emotive or difficult course material can help students to prepare for their lessons ahead of time and avoid negative experiences.</p> <p>Social work, psychology and law courses could flag sensitive material at the outset of the course. This has the dual effect of raising awareness about the course material and the different backgrounds of students.</p>
<b>Temporarily unable to attend meetings or class in person</b>  <i>'I just need an extra 48 hours to get it done because you know I've had 48 hours where for no conceivable reason I have not been able to get out of bed' ('Grace').</i>	<p>Many classes are recorded for students to listen to online. Students not wishing to attend meetings face-to-face could be offered alternative arrangements such as a phone call or Skype meeting.</p> <p>Counselling and stress management techniques (e.g. mindfulness meditation) and study management tools may be relevant to students.</p> <p>Students may be put in direct contact with someone from Counselling and Support Services, or the Student Development Advisers office.</p> <p>Assure students that they are entitled to use counselling services and may find them beneficial. Students may not be able to relate to particular counsellors and support workers and should be encouraged to meet with a variety of counsellors if necessary to find a good match.</p> <p>Peer groups and on-campus groups can provide support and foster relationships. These are often accessible through the student union.</p>



## Raising awareness and class discussions

Care leavers may choose to share their care experiences in class in relation to course content. Our research shows that many care leavers who share their care experiences in group conversations in class, with peers, and with administrative staff, felt that they were not really understood or that they were pitied. Such experiences of pity may suggest a deficit approach of understanding care leavers. The idea that care leavers lack social and cultural capital, and are more 'needy' than other students, is contradicted by the resilience many care leavers demonstrate in overcoming significant barriers to participate in higher education.

### Practice points

- It is beneficial for class conversations about care leavers to adopt a strengths-based approach. Many care leavers have life experience and knowledge which can contribute substantially to classroom discussions if a safe and understanding discussion environment is created.
- Misconceptions or discriminatory views about care leavers shared in class discussions should be engaged with critically.

### Student voice:

*'I think it's more life experience despite being the same age like you've done more, the rougher your life has been you get a little bit more mature and you get more understanding of how the world works' ('Dale').*

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## Section 5. Higher education guidelines for students who spent time in out-of-home care

### Thinking about uni?

#### If you're thinking about going to university in Australia then these guidelines are for you!

These guidelines are designed to show you *where* and *how* to start the application and enrolment process. We have focussed on services that people who have experienced out-of-home care are entitled to use to support their transition into higher education.

You might find these guidelines useful if you have ever been in foster care, kinship care, residential care, family group homes, home-based care, independent living, recently left care, transitioned to independence, or are a mature age student from a care background. Collectively, people from these groups are known as 'care leavers' within Australian higher education.

In this guide ...

In this guide you will find **short stories and quotes** from university students who are care leavers and **general information** (with links to webpages) about:

- What do I need to do first? The application and enrolment process
- Where will I stay? Year round accommodation
- How do people pay for uni? Financing your degree
- How will I pay my bills?
- What support does the student union offer?
- Shaping your future one step at a time
- What happens after my degree?
- University jargon
- Seven reasons to consider higher education.

We have provided links to the resources offered by different universities to show examples of the kinds of support available and where you can find these online. Along the way we have included **peer advice** from care experienced students who may have been through a similar situation to you!

#### STUDYING AT UNIVERSITY

*'Where you have been does not define who you are, there is no you, you are who you are in the moment and you can choose who you are in the moment. Yeah you might be a bit behind from other families, but everybody's got their struggles and you are no less important and worthwhile than any other person, and if you want to do something just do it' ('Casey', aged 27).*

There is also a brief **glossary** at the end of these guidelines which explains common higher education terms and jargon.

#### Disclaimer

The information contained in these guidelines is of a generic nature only. You must not rely on the information in these guidelines as an alternative to seeking advice from an appropriately qualified professional and/or making your own enquiries to other higher education institutions to confirm the accuracy of the information provided. The information contained in this publication is current as at the time of the publication (March 2017). The University reserves the right to make changes without notice, at any time in its absolute discretion, including but not limited to varying these guidelines. *These guidelines must not be published, quoted or disseminated to any other party without the University's prior written consent.* To the extent permitted by law, the University does not accept responsibility for any loss or damage occasioned by use of any of the information contained in this publication.

## IS UNIVERSITY FOR ME?

University is a place to make new friends, develop skills and knowledge, plan for your future, and enhance your career opportunities upon graduation. The physical location of your university (buildings, lecturers and tutors) is referred to as the university **campus**. This is where you will attend class if you are an on-campus (face-to-face) student.

University is different from school in terms of study and assessment, hours you spend on campus (at the university), time spent in class, and relationships with teachers (or lecturers and tutors). For instance, you can choose which classes you attend to suit your own schedule. Universities encourage independent study, group study and peer learning and provide a number of support services to suit different needs.

There are many different pathways into university and different ways to apply depending on your stage in life. Some people complete bridging programs which enable them to apply for the course they are interested in, while some people apply to university after finishing high school.

A diverse range of courses are offered by Australian universities, including Law, Nursing, Education, Commerce, Science, Health Sciences, Engineering, Psychology, Sociology, Gender Studies, Medicine, Creative Arts, Architecture, Urban Planning, Accounting and Social Work. Undergraduate courses may take between 3 and 4 years to complete, during which time students may choose to work casually or part-time, seek government assistance and other forms of financial assistance.

## What do I need to do first? The application and enrolment process

### Finding the right pathway into university for you

Applying for university can be tricky. As a first step many universities offer pre-application help and advice to future or prospective students through careers and employment contacts listed online. For instance, [Federation University of Australia](#) has a contact number for people thinking of applying. The Queensland University of Technology has an [introductory page](#) for people considering study, as does [Western Sydney University](#). La Trobe University provides prospective or '[Future Students](#)', including [Indigenous Students](#), with contact names and a phone number for specific questions.

### Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) / Overall Position

The ATAR, or, in Queensland, the 'Overall Position', is the primary criterion for entry into most undergraduate university degrees in Australia. The ATAR and Overall Position are measures of secondary school academic achievement that help institutions to rank applicants for selection to tertiary education courses.

### 'Alternative pathways'

There are many different or 'alternative' pathways into higher education, which include: bridging and enabling programs, vocational education and training studies, school/principal recommendation schemes, and early starter programs.

### **Bridging Programs provide one pathway to university**

*'I lived in a number of different foster homes. I did really, really well at school but ... I didn't finish my VCE. I worked for a number of years, then got the urge to go to university. A friend told me about a Bridging Program and said it would be good to give it a go to test myself out. I enrolled, and found it straightforward and easy to get through.*

*I guess having had my last experience of education so long ago and I was so disengaged from my education when I was there it was a little bit nerve wracking but there weren't any barriers or difficulties.*

*There was no automatic guarantee in to uni but fortunately I was offered a place ... so that was my pathway into uni, it was the Bridging Program. I'd recommend a Bridging Program to other care leavers who have been out of school for a while' ('Samantha').*

'Kurt' explains that as a mature age student he applied to university through an 'alternative' entry scheme:

### **Alternative entry into university**

*'I essentially enrolled in night school to try and improve my grades ... during that time I heard about industrial design, and I thought yeah that's the ticket for me. So I did chemistry and English, I was about to do Physics, but I heard that it wasn't necessary to do industrial design. Then I applied to do industrial design, my grades weren't terribly good, but because I was older than 25 I could get in through alternate entry, and I did. I drew up a big portfolio of ideas and I got in through that. I did the undergrad, thought yeah this is awesome I'm going to do the grad dip' ('Kurt', aged 49).*

Here is some more information about alternative pathways into university:

- **School/principal recommendation schemes** provide students in school with early offers to attend university. Offers are made to students before final exam results. These schemes are available to students from selected partner schools.
- **Special entry and educational access schemes** help universities to take personal circumstances into consideration when considering university applications. If your education was affected as a result of disadvantage you may be eligible to apply. These schemes have different names in different states. For instance, in Victoria it is called the [Special Entry Access Scheme](#) (SEAS), and in New South Wales, Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory it is called the [Educational Access Scheme](#) (EAS). You will also need to apply for your preferred university course. These application processes can be found online through the Universities Admissions Centre which can be accessed online at: [www.uac.edu.au](http://www.uac.edu.au)

Special entry and educational access scheme applicants can take the [Special Tertiary Admissions Test](#) (STAT). It is a single application that is sent to all the courses you've applied to. You can choose a category through which to apply. They provide four categories, including Difficult Circumstances, and Disability or Medical Condition. For example, Category 1: [Personal Information and Location](#), includes 'Recognition as an Indigenous Australian', which applies to applicants of Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent OR identify as a person of Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander heritage.

- **Enabling programs** are pre-bachelor degrees which prepare you for a university course. Enabling programs are also referred to as [Bridging](#) Courses and [Tertiary Enabling programs](#) depending on the education provider. Preparation or bridging programs give you a taste of university and prepare you with the skills necessary to do well in your university degree. Many programs are provided at no cost and vary in duration, from several weeks to a year or more. **Bachelor degrees** are undergraduate university courses, for example, a Bachelor of Science (B.Sc.) or Bachelor of Arts (B.A.).
- You can also apply to university on the basis of partial or completed [Vocational Education and Training \(VET\)](#) studies. **VET** studies are skills-based and can often be used as a stepping stone to higher education. VET courses are offered through Registered Training Organisations (e.g. TAFE institutes and private providers). They are also offered through some secondary schools, industry bodies and adult and community education centres.

#### Look out for:

- Many universities have **university handbooks** with essential information about courses on offer.
- Student webpages and Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) webpages may have helpful hints.
- Some universities offer different options for entry without an ATAR. For instance, Federation College's ASPIRE pathway program integrates [Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning \(VCAL\)](#), [Foundation Access Studies \(FAST\)](#) and [Embedded Academic Transition \(EAT\)](#) units.

### Getting from high school to university

#### **Support from school careers advisors**

*'I always wanted to go to university. School gave me lots of encouragement especially the careers advisor. She showed me the different options for applying to university. Saved me a lot of time and effort. A lot of it I did do on my own, but the careers advisor let me know you can apply for this bonus point scheme, for scholarships and all that kind of stuff ... Out of school there was a lot going on as well, so I did see her once a week or once a fortnight ... she helped me a lot' ('Brooke').*

#### **Leaving care and going to university**

*'I applied to go straight into university after high school. There's so much that you're thinking about, well that I was thinking about when I was leaving care you know because my birthday's in the middle of the year as well and DHS were like your payment gets cut off in May and you've still got the rest of the year to go. So I wasn't thinking "yay I'm going to go to university next year that's going to be great fun", you know it was kind of like it was one of the last things that I was thinking about, and I was only thinking about it because I had the foster parents who were encouraging that' ('Kelly').*

Application processes for higher education enrolment with an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) vary depending upon what state you live in and what higher education institution you are aiming for. For instance, if you are in NSW or the ACT you can apply through the [Universities Admissions Centre \(UAC\)](#). The application process online will walk you through each of the required steps. Ways of applying in different states are as follows:

- **New South Wales and ACT** (University Admissions Centre (UAC))
- **Northern Territory and South Australia:** South Australian Tertiary Admissions Centre (SATAC) ([www.satac.edu.au](http://www.satac.edu.au))
- **Queensland:** Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre (QTAC) ([www.qtac.edu.au](http://www.qtac.edu.au))
- **Tasmania:** University of Tasmania ([www.utas.edu.au](http://www.utas.edu.au))
- **Victoria:** Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC) ([www.vtac.edu.au](http://www.vtac.edu.au))
- **Western Australia:** Tertiary Institutions Service Centre (TISC) ([www.tisc.edu.au](http://www.tisc.edu.au))

**Prerequisites** for higher education vary depending on the course and university you choose, and previous studies will be taken into consideration. Some courses will allow you to submit an application **directly** (through 'direct admission') to the higher education provider, while others require applications through your relevant **Tertiary Admissions Centre** (as listed above). To find options for undergraduate domestic students and international students visit your *university admissions webpage*.

If you did receive an ATAR score but are worried it will not be high enough to get you into your preferred course at university, you may wish to apply for an educational access scheme, or sit the [uniTEST](#). Be sure to check that the university you wish to apply to will accept uniTEST scores. For instance, Flinders University and the University of Canberra will consider uniTEST scores.

## Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Students

### *Support from Indigenous centres*

*'I am 18 years old and in my first year at university studying a Bachelor of Exercise Science and Behavioural Science. I get a lot of support from the Indigenous unit on campus. As an Aboriginal student I can access free tutors, organise keystones to success and if I want to go in and I don't understand something I can have someone to talk to and we sit there for an hour and work that out. I'm working towards becoming a sport psychologist or exercise scientist, because I'd like to help people improve their skills in the sporting world' ('Dale').*

In addition to the pathways we have described in the sections above, many universities have Indigenous student support units and programs which provide culturally sensitive information and support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people thinking of applying to university. For example:

- The **Oodgeroo Unit** at Queensland University of Technology provides Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders with academic, personal and cultural support, and is also a research unit. The [Oodgeroo webpage](#) contains information for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people considering higher education, including through the [Centralised Assessment Selection Program](#) (CASP). CASP is an alternate entry pathway to university study which considers prior learning and other personal achievements, and may provide students with a bursary for study or living costs. CASP also offers units of study in: Indigenous history, culture and current issues.
- Through their **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI)** webpage, Western Sydney University offers the [School of Medicine Indigenous Program](#). They also offer Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students the option of applying through their Alternative Entry program. The application process involves submitting your application online and then participating in a two day program.
- Deakin University's **Institute of Koorie Education (IKE)** offers Community-Based Education programs to all Indigenous Australians across the nation. Courses are available in faculty undergraduate and postgraduate studies across the arts, education, health, business and law.



Indigenous units may also offer cultural programs and events. For instance, Indigenous student service units at La Trobe University offer the [Sport Occupations and Aspiration Raising](#) camp (SOAR), which is a free four-day camp that introduces Year 9 and 10 Indigenous students to university and sports occupations. [Information evenings](#) for prospective Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students are a good way to find out more about university, how to apply and what course you are interested in. Support is also offered to culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) students at most universities. [CALD](#) support workers can assist with information about courses and pathways into employment.

## Where will I stay? Year round accommodation

Some universities offer residential ('rez') services to their students which includes on-campus accommodation. Many universities have an accommodation website containing information about how many days per year accommodation is available (e.g. 365 days per year) and how you can apply. Applications received before a certain date may be given special consideration and many universities **recommend applying early** to secure a place. In Victoria, VTAC provides a [list of universities](#) offering accommodation.

The University of Newcastle, for example, has a subsidised accommodation program designed for care leavers called [Live, Learn, Grow](#).

Accommodation may be subsidised, or [Accommodation Services Access Scholarships](#) may be available.

### LEARNING LIFE SKILLS

*'Start look at getting skills in all factors of life, so if you are living out of home in accommodation share housing or in a place by yourself, try cooking classes. You have to learn how to cook, I didn't know how to cook! Also, I feel exercise and organisational skills are quite an important thing' ('Chris', age 23).*

## How do people pay for uni? Financing your degree

### HECS-HELP (previously known as HECS)

After you have applied for your course you can organise finance for your degree. The costs of higher education are substantial. However, it is important to remember that *no* tuition money is required up front.

- If you are an Australian citizen the **Commonwealth Government** pays for part of your course (through what is called a 'Commonwealth Supported Place', CSP), with your tuition fees being initially covered by an income-contingent loans scheme, called **HECS-HELP** (Higher Education Contribution Scheme-Higher Education Loan Programme). You can get a HECS-HELP application form from your university. You only have to pay the HECS-HELP loan back once you start earning a certain income, and the debt is drawn from your salary when you begin work and earn over a certain amount. More information about applying for HECS-HELP is available from the Australian Government [Study Assist website](#).
- **Before gaining Commonwealth assistance you must be enrolled with an [eligible Australian education provider](#).**

## Scholarships

### ***Applying for scholarships***

Towards the end of year 12 'Olivia' (age 21) applied for university using the Victorian Special Entry Access Scheme and was accepted into a Bachelor of Sport Science. She also applied for an equity scholarship available through the university. She says:

*'I enquired on their page, I just said "Hey what scholarships do you offer?" and they sent me an email saying that I could be eligible'.*

There are different types of funding to support higher education participation. As you scroll through the online Tertiary Admissions Centre relevant to your location you can find different scholarship and bursary opportunities. Scholarships provide financial support to students while they are studying. There are many different types of scholarships, which can be based upon work experience, academic achievement, or life experience. These may include: [Institutional Access and Equity Scholarships](#) and [Commonwealth Scholarships](#).

Some universities offer more than 80 different kinds of scholarships, including: [work scholarships](#), [accommodation scholarships](#), [equity scholarships](#) and scholarships for [Indigenous Australians](#). Indigenous Australian are also offered supported through the [Aspiration Initiative](#) which offers scholarships for undergraduate study at Australian universities as well as postgraduate scholarships for study in Australia and overseas. Many universities offer their own scholarships for Indigenous Australian. For instance, Western Sydney University offers the [Pathways To Dreaming Indigenous Achievement Scholarship](#).

- Some scholarships are one-off payments but others can be for the duration of the degree.
- Particular paperwork may be required during the application process, but if you do not have the paperwork you may not be excluded. Make sure you get in contact with someone at the university to see what options they can provide for you.
- Many of these scholarships prioritise students most in need (i.e. ranked criteria is based on financial disadvantage criteria), which means that they are designed for students who have faced hardships or will need financial support.

**Scholarship funds do not have to be repaid.**

### **Targeted funding for care leavers**

Applying for targeted funding (funding *only* available to care leavers) is a great way to ensure you are receiving all the support to which you are entitled. There are some [bursaries](#) and [scholarships](#) specifically for people who have been in out-of-home care and these are often listed under the 'scholarships' page on your higher education provider webpage. For instance, Western Sydney University offers the NSW Department of Family and Community Services Out-of-Home Care Pathways [Scholarship](#).

Does the higher education institution you are considering have a website specifically for people who have experienced out-of-home care? [Swinburne University](#), [Federation University](#), and [La Trobe University](#) all offer access scholarships for care leavers. Some universities have gathered together information online regarding the resources available to assist [care leavers](#). A search of the term 'care leaver' or 'out-of-home care' on your university webpage should direct you to the relevant page.

## How will I pay my bills?

### ORGANISING FINANCES

*'Apply for all financial aid that you can including Centrelink, equity scholarships, also try and get a job. Apply for as many jobs as you can so you get a part time job, and then yeah kind of get money, because that's the one thing that's really going to mess you up if you don't have it, especially the stress of bills and accommodation etc' ('Chris', age 23).*

## Government Assistance: Youth Allowance and Student Start-up Funding

Many students qualify for the Youth Allowance which is a means-tested payment for full-time students and Australian Apprentices generally aged 16 to 24 years old. Youth Allowance may be paid for the duration of your degree on a fortnightly basis. You can apply by going to this webpage:

<http://studyassist.gov.au/sites/studyassist/studentincomesupport>

If you are eligible to receive student payments you may also be eligible to receive the **Student Start-up Scholarship** or **Student Start-up Loan** and the **Relocation Scholarship**.

**Youth Allowance and Start-up Scholarships do not have to be repaid.**

## Loans

Interest free **student loans** often ranging between \$2,000 and \$5,000 may be available through the university or student union to support essential living expenses like the cost of computers, textbooks, practicum costs, rent or bond, utilities, and food. Student Loans may also be referred to as 'Financial Schemes', 'Financial Assistance', 'Bursaries', or 'Student Grants'.

## Pathway Plan

A **pathway plan** or **leaving care plan** sets out your aims and goals for the next phase of your life after you turn 18. The plan might be written with a case worker or other members of your support network and may contain important information regarding living arrangements, employment and income, further education and, if relevant, cultural support. Plans may include financial support up to the age of 21 in Victoria, and 25 in other states, with current variations in Queensland and the ACT. This plan may include the [Transition to Independent Living Allowance](#) (TILA) which is a one-off payment of up to \$1,500 for young people aged 15–25 who are moving from care and who qualify for independent status under Centrelink guidelines.

A solid leaving care plan can help facilitate your educational goals. If you do not yet have a plan, why not reach out to your support network and start creating one?

**To find out more about the funding that is available to you, contact your preferred higher education institution.**

Students can also contact [Equity and Diversity](#), and Widening Participation offices to see if out-of-home care projects/supports specific to students from out-of-home-care are available.

## What support does the student union offer?

Many universities have a student union which offers a range of services that students are entitled to use, including [text book vouchers](#), [peer support and study skills programs](#), free [legal support](#), [Clubs and Societies](#) and bookstores. ***Unions usually operate independently of the University to privately and confidentially support your needs.*** Their services may include the following:

***Financial Planning and Aid*** - This service may also be called 'Financial Counselling' and can help you with budgeting, managing different sources of income, and accessing funding you are entitled to. Good financial planning is important!

***Student groups and societies*** - Making connections and building networks is streamlined by the student groups and societies on campus. Simply sign up to the group that you are interested in. This can be a great way to make lasting friendships.

***Advocacy*** - This is the process through which students are supported by staff working with the student union to address an academic, administrative or welfare related issues (e.g. special consideration, assessment issues).

*There are also groups outside the university sector that could provide support or advocacy e.g. CREATE for under 25s and CLAN for older Care Leavers.*

***Emergency accommodation*** - This service is designed for emergencies like not having a place to stay. Clothing and food may also be provided.

***Travel and Cost of Living support*** - Including subsidies for travel to and from university.

## Shaping your future one step at a time

### ***Deferring and changing courses***

*'I applied to go straight into university after high school. I got into university to do a Bachelor of Nursing and I relocated there for a month. I wasn't really coping that well with it so I deferred and worked for 2 years and then tried a diploma of nursing and figured it wasn't for me'.*

Kelly decided to do a different degree to the one she was enrolled in, which was a tough decision to make. However, she is now happily enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts and receives a lot of support from her housemates ('Kelly').

Studying can sometimes be stressful and sometimes you just need to talk to someone, find out what your options are, or be pointed in the right direction! Most university support services or welfare services are free and intended for you to use if and when you need them. Support services include mentoring and counselling.

Mentoring programs are offered by many universities and are a great way to settle into university life. Western Sydney University offers a [MATES](#) program for new students. MATES stands for Mentoring and Transition Equals Success. La Trobe University offers a [Connect Mentor Program](#).

Counselling is a confidential and private service for all students and focuses on social and emotional wellbeing. Individual counselling may be offered in person, [online](#), and via telephone. Self-help resources are also available for dealing with stress and anxiety, relationship concerns and study habits.

### **Finding a counselling service**

*'If I had to pick one thing that I would say to a student who was say 23 and had lived in care and was now going to go to uni, I'd say find a counselling service and be prepared that the emotions related to that experience which may not be apparent in the everyday here and now might come up, and you will then have help dealing with them' ('Lauren', age 44).*

Culturally sensitive support services are offered by most universities in Australia. Services range from counselling to academic support. Some universities have an Indigenous counsellor for students to access, while other universities offer support through specific Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools, [units](#) and [centres](#).

Most universities offer careers service and support. For example Federation University offer [Student Careers and Employment Services](#), while the University of New South Wales have a [Careers and Employment](#) webpage which provides information about career planning and professional development advice. Careers advice and course advice is offered to all students to help you find the right course for you.

Mature Age students (over 21 years of age) are entitled to access university support services, and are also supported by the university through special entry access schemes and bridging programs that recognise prior work experience as well as academic qualifications.

**Study Groups (also called Peer Assisted Study)** can be a great way to learn course material and make new friends. Many universities have study groups already set up for students to attend. It often pays to look for these groups in the 'Clubs and Societies' webpage of your university.

### **Putting time into study**

*'The amount of time put in equals marks ... When I started going to uni the year I passed was when I studied heaps. One of my big things was just to go to everything ... literally going to every single lecture, that is really, really important and I think a lot of students really don't understand that' ('Chris', age 23).*

Look out for:

- [Student advisors](#), [learning advisors](#) and [mentors](#) are there to provide information and direction.

### **What happens after my degree?**

#### **Considering postgraduate study**

*'I took some time off between school and university to figure out exactly what I wanted to do. So I started university as a mature age student. I wasn't sure I would be able to do it but I surprised myself and went on to complete a Masters degree with the support of my supervisor, after that I was then able to enrol in a PhD. I thought I'd like to get back into research, that's when I approached my supervisor, and I got in ... And yeah I'm loving it' ('Kurt', age 49).*

Once you have settled into your higher education course it will be time to think about the next stage of your life. Like 'Kurt' you may want to undertake more study, especially if you have high grades! After a Bachelor degree, you can often apply to study Honours or a new postgraduate coursework or research degree, such as a Masters degree or a graduate diploma.

You may have met with a career planner when you first enrolled to find out which subjects suit your interests and career goals. The careers office is a good place to seek advice and start your planning for life after your studies. Many education providers have a careers counsellor, a careers and employment team, or a careers mentor scheme available. For instance, the [careers team](#) at La Trobe University offer advice about [career options](#), provide interview practice and help students create a career pathway (see also careers advice and course advice in Section 5).

### Aiming high

*'I think aiming high is really important despite the circumstances, you might get knocked down a lot if you do have a very demotivating carer or a negative carer but I think striving for your personal best is the most important thing' ('Brooke', age 18).*

## University jargon

### Year 11 & 12 Certificates

<b>Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR)</b>	ATAR is a measure of secondary school academic achievement that helps institutions to rank applicants for selection to tertiary education courses.
<b>Higher School Certificate (HSC)</b>	Secondary school students who successfully complete senior high school level studies (Years 11 and 12 or equivalent) in New South Wales are awarded a Higher School Certificate (HSC).
<b>Northern Territory Certificate of Education (NTCE)</b>	Secondary school students who successfully complete senior high school level studies (Years 11 and 12 or equivalent) in the Northern Territory are awarded a Northern Territory Certificate of Education (NTCE).
<b>Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE)</b>	Secondary school students who successfully complete senior high school level studies (Years 11 and 12 or equivalent) in Queensland are awarded a Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE).
<b>South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE)</b>	Secondary school students who successfully complete senior high school level studies (Years 11 and 12 or equivalent) in South Australia are awarded a South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE).
<b>Tasmanian Certificate of Education (TCE)</b>	Secondary school students who successfully complete senior high school level studies (Years 11 and 12 or equivalent) in Tasmania are awarded a Tasmanian Certificate of Education (TCE).
<b>Tertiary Admissions Centres (TAC)</b>	Tertiary Admissions Centres play a major role in university admissions processes. They receive applications and forward them to the universities. Universities then decide who they will offer positions to.
<b>Universities Admissions Centre (UAC)</b>	The Universities Admissions Centre (UAC) processes applications for admission to most undergraduate courses at participating institutions (in NSW and the ACT).
<b>Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE)</b>	Students who successfully complete high school level studies (year 11 and 12 or equivalent) in Victoria are awarded a Victorian Certificate of Education or VCE.
<b>Western Australian Certificate of Education (WACE)</b>	Secondary school students who successfully complete senior high school level studies (Years 11 and 12 or equivalent) in Western Australia are awarded a Western Australian Certificate of Education (WACE).



## Other terms you might come across

<b>Admissions</b>	The Admissions office will assist you with your enrolment and application process, they may also be called the 'Enrolment Office'.
<b>Commonwealth Supported Place (CSP)</b>	A Commonwealth supported place (CSP) is a <i>government subsidised higher education</i> enrolment. CSPs are available to domestic students and most undergraduate students studying at university are enrolled in a CSP. This simply means the Commonwealth Government pays for part of your course, which is the case for most domestic students in Australia.
<b>Higher Education Contribution Scheme-Higher Education Loan Programme (HECS-HELP)</b>	Higher Education Contribution Scheme-Higher Education Loan Programme (previously known as HECS) is a loan scheme which means that no tuition money is required up front. The loan can be paid back over time, after you begin work and start to earn a salary over a certain amount.
<b>Mentoring</b>	Mentoring is when you receive advice from a person with knowledge and/or experience in a particular area. This may be a formal or informal arrangement.
<b>Means Tested</b>	Some forms of financial assistance may be 'means tested' which means that your family income will be taken into consideration. However, many people leaving care become independent upon turning 18, as a result of this independence you will be entitled to many forms of means tested financial support.
<b>Open days</b>	This is a specific day when potential and new students are invited on campus to explore the university. There are often information booths set up so that you can ask questions and get brochures.
<b>Outreach events</b>	Outreach events often involve different activities and presentations and are designed to give people extra information about university. They can be held on campus, at school or at community centres.
<b>Pre-enrolment</b>	Pre-enrolment refers to the period in which you are thinking about university and how you will apply.
<b>Student Finance</b>	Student finance refers to financial support for students and the different kinds of funding available to students.
<b>Student Advisors</b>	A Student Advisor is a person who provides advice and direction. Students Advisors can be your first point of contact at the university.
<b>Support Services /Student Welfare</b>	Support services are often offered through the student union and may include counselling and financial advice through programs and one on one meeting sessions with staff.

## Seven reasons to consider higher education

1. Having greater access to a wide variety of jobs after graduation, and having the capacity to earn more money
2. Living independently and being in control of your future
3. Gaining confidence through your experience and achievements
4. Finding clubs and societies to suit your personal and political interests
5. Learning and pursuing your own interests in a welcoming and supportive space
6. Having the chance to make lifelong friends
7. Choosing the town or city where you want to live.



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## Appendix: Interview guide

### Participant information

- What is your age? Do you identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander?
- Where were you born?
- Where do you currently live and what is your living arrangement? What have your previous living arrangements been like, i.e. from care to shared or independent living? Can you describe your living arrangements particularly around your time of entry into university?
- Do you have children? If so how old are they?

### Pathways to university

- Please describe your prior educational experience and your pathway into university. (i.e. when you finished secondary school, when you commenced university, and additional study you may have been enrolled in, such as TAFE). Do you believe your pathway into university differed from other students? If so, how?
- What barriers, if any, did you face accessing university?
- What encouraged you to attend university?
- What methods of applying for university were you aware of, and which ones did you use?
  - Were you aware of application processes which considered individual circumstances and if so did you apply? (for example SEAS/EAS, alternative entry schemes)
  - Were you aware of any equity scholarships and if so did you apply for any?
  - Please describe any issues you experienced in the application and enrolment process.

### Experiences at university

- What course are you enrolled in and how far along are you in the course? (i.e. full time/part time, online versus face-to-face attendance)
- What are your biggest challenges, if any, related to life as a university student?
- In what ways do you believe your experience at university might differ from students who have not experienced time in care?
  - In what ways might your care experience impact on your ability to achieve your best? How could this be addressed?
  - In what ways might your care experience give you an advantage over other students?
- What university services or programs do you use that you find the most beneficial?
  - What can the university do to help you excel? (i.e. are there additional university services or programs would you find beneficial?)
- What government or community services do you find most beneficial, and what additional services do you think are needed from them?
- If you were to receive financial assistance related to attending university, would you prefer targeted assistance for specific expenses such as book vouchers, travel tickets, or the provision of technology, or would you prefer direct financial aid? If targeted assistance, for what?
- What would be your response if you were offered a scholarship or bursary on the condition that you participated in defined university programs (such as regularly meeting with an academic advisor)?

### Future plans

- Do you intend to complete your current course? If not, why not and what are your plans?
- Do you intend to continue onto postgraduate study either now or in the future? Why/Why not?
- What do you want to do once you have finished at university?

### Recommendations

- Do you have any advice for young people still in out-of-home care, or people who have transitioned out of care regarding accessing and attending higher education?
- What advice would you provide to universities to help them encourage young people in care, and people who have transitioned out of care to apply for and enrol in higher education?
- What advice would you provide to universities to help them ensure care leavers excel once they enrol in university?
- How should universities reach young people still in out-of-home care?
- Would you be interested in getting together with other care leavers in groups?