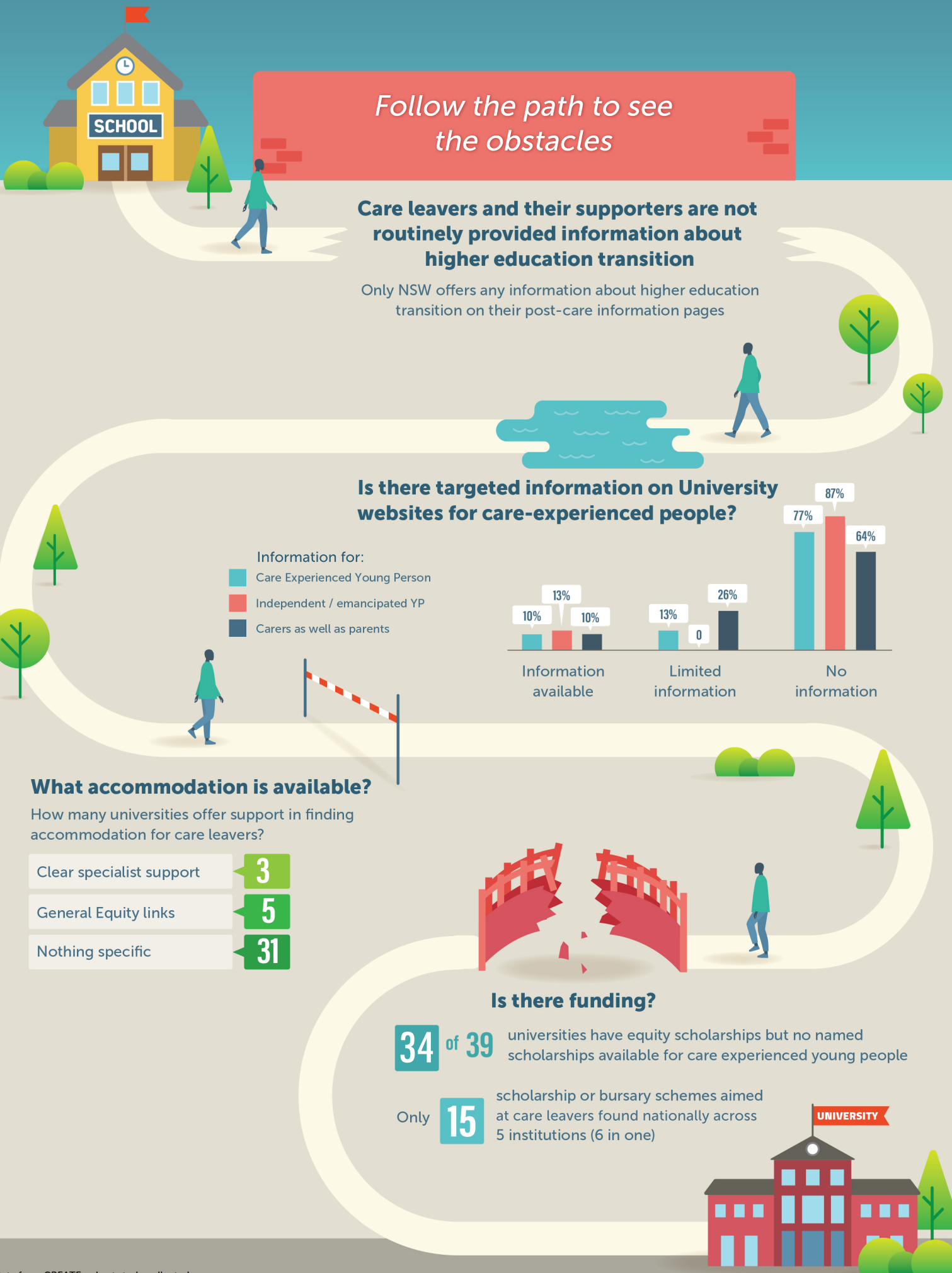


# Mapping the obstacles in Out of Home Care experienced young people's pathway into higher education



<sup>1</sup> Data from CREATE cohort study collected in relation to 2019 academic year.  
McDowall, J. J. (2020). *Transitioning to adulthood from out-of-home care: Independence or interdependence?* CREATE Foundation.

## Our Partners



# Supporting Care Experienced Young People into Higher Education

## *A Collier Funded Study*

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# Executive Summary

Care-leavers have experienced removal from their parental home during childhood. This may be as a result of neglect, abuse, death of family members or inability of family members to care for them. There are approximately 45,000 children in care in Australia and child protection orders are growing (AIHW, 2020). When removed, children may stay with relatives in a kinship care arrangement, foster care or residential care, for example, a group home. A significant body of research demonstrates that care-leavers are less likely to attain educational qualifications, less likely to have good health, and are more likely to have contact with the criminal justice and mental health systems. Their participation rates in higher education are low: care-experienced school leavers are three-times less likely to enrol in university (Harvey et al., 2015). Those who do enter higher education face significant challenges from childhood trauma that may adversely affect their studies.

This project provides suggestions for practice including to higher education institutions, career practitioner professional groups and jurisdictions about how to present information that promotes higher education transition, and to higher education providers on more inclusive measures to attract and support care-leavers. Building on Harvey et al.'s (2017) findings that there was a 'lack of formal assistance and information when applying for university', this study explores the knowledge universities have about the challenges for care-leavers and what specific support is available for them. The purpose of this study is to address existing challenges faced by care-experienced young people in accessing information about and support for access to higher education. The research presented here includes novel discovery work about information and support gaps for care-leavers. The findings, shown below, will provide universities with information about barriers to higher education for care-leavers. The findings presented in this report uncover valuable information about the systemic barriers for young people with out of home care experience and possible avenues that could enhance the equitable access to higher education. Project findings are summarised as follows:

1. There is a systemic lack of understanding of the needs of care-experienced students in higher education across all education systems.
2. There is a significant gap in post-school transition planning for young people with care experience while at school, at home and in governmental support.
3. There are multiple significant barriers to accessing appropriate career information for care experienced young people.

With the assistance of philanthropic grant funding from Fund 4 of the Collier Foundation, this project has enabled novel research about higher educational transitions of care-experienced young people with a specific focus on equitability of access to information. The project has undertaken a national scan of current information provision for care-experienced young people, conducted a national survey of career practitioners, and achieved qualitative data generation with participants drawn from higher education stakeholders and those who support carers. The data sourced on career information and support in higher education transition available to care-leavers in each state have been mapped and an infographic created that will be a publicly available resource, which also appears as the cover image for this report. This infographic, which maps barriers to opportunity for young people with care experience, has been used as part of the dissemination pathway of this project.

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## Acknowledgements

We acknowledge we are working and learning as settlers on lands that were never ceded and we acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land Charles Sturt University's Bathurst campus is located, the Wiradjuri/Wiradyuri people and at Victoria University the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation. We pay respect to their Elders, past, present and emerging and to First Nation peoples throughout Australasia. We note that people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds are significantly over-represented in the care system (Mendes et al., 2019) and that there is a complex history of care experience for First Nation peoples in Australia since colonisation began which has led to much hardship and trauma.

We have used both terms Indigenous Australians and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in this report, recognising that these terms can be contentious. Our intention is to be respectful of differing views on these terms from within community.

We would like to thank the Collier Charitable Foundation for the opportunity to undertake this work, without their support it would not have taken place. We come from two different disciplines of Criminology and Career Development Education to look together at this shared area of concern and how it plays out particularly in the area of career information for higher education.

We thank our External Reference Group members for their significant support by sharing their expertise and connections, Mr David Carney of the Career Industry Council of Australia and Dr Joseph McDowall of CREATE. The research and this report have been strengthened by their generosity of time and expertise. Several other key advisors have supported the project over the year and suggested useful avenues for the research including Professor Andrew Harvey of La Trobe University.

During the project we have been supported by a number of research associates. Dr Melissa Tham of CIRES in Victoria University and Dr Elizabeth Reid provided support in our literature search and review. The research team at CREATE undertook the public search of information for us using their expertise supporting care-experienced young people. Louise Nolan and Anne Thomas both of CIRES at Victoria University provided excellent administrative support with transcriptions and interviews and Robyn Klepetko the Centre Manager at CIRES oversaw the project staff from Victoria University.

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# 1. Background

Care-leavers have experienced removal from their parental home during childhood. This may be as a result of neglect, abuse, death of family members or inability of family members to care for them. There are approximately 45,000 children in care in Australia and child protection orders are growing (AIHW, 2020). When removed, children may stay with relatives in a kinship care arrangement, foster care or residential care, for example a group home. A significant body of research demonstrates that care-experienced young people experience significant challenges transitioning to independence (McDowall, 2016) are less likely to attain educational qualifications, less likely to have good health, and are more likely to have contact with the criminal justice and mental health systems. Young people with care-experienced backgrounds are substantially less likely to access higher education (Harvey et al., 2015; Mendes et al., 2014)) and those who do enter higher education face significant challenges from childhood trauma and logistical challenges that may adversely affect their studies (Jackson, 2003).

Care-experienced people are one of the most disadvantaged groups in society but are rarely advocated for in equity and diversity initiatives. While access to higher education has been a critical focus, there is an importance to not only improve access but also care-leaver's experience in higher-education, about which little is formally known (Mendes et al., 2014). It has been of great benefit to include care leavers in the design and solutions to issues of access to and participation in higher education (Michell, 2012; Michell & Scalzi, 2016; Tilbury et al., 2009) to understand lived experiences and co-design support. Disadvantage for care-experienced young people is further compounded by the fact that they are over-represented in the criminal justice system. Prior research shows that education positively impacts the sentencing of young people before the courts (Wingerden et al., 2015). Increased access and participation to university, then, not only has implications in the criminal justice system, but is crucial in improving the long-term outcomes for all care-experienced young people (Harvey et al., 2015; Mendes et al., 2014).

These young people experience disadvantage across multiple domains of life including post-school education (Tilbury et al., 2009). In Australia, two major studies (Burke et al., 2019; Muir & Hand, 2018) have explored the long-term outcomes for care-experienced young people, but neither adequately addresses higher education. Care-experienced young people are three times less likely to access higher education compared to the general population (Harvey et al., 2015). Yet, exclusion from university means they are denied the best possible chance of breaking the poverty cycle, while noting that only half of those leaving care complete year 12 which contributes to the poor access to further education. An issue which has been raised is that schools need to ensure they are free from bullying and stigma (Mendis et al. 2015).

Previously funded NCSEHE research found that care-experienced young people are significantly impacted by low expectations and a lack of awareness of educational possibilities, including difficulties exploring university education options (Harvey et al., 2015). This is a significant challenge to address, particularly when evidence suggests a strong relationship between parental knowledge of career pathways and young peoples' career transitions and future aspirations (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006).

Some progress has already been made in improving access to university education across a number of equity groups. Promoting awareness of the educational pathways available and developing career management capabilities in young people is a core aim in improving career development in Australia (McMahon & Tatham, 2008). There has also been an increased focus on the role of parents in the post-school transition process through initiatives such as the Australian National Career Development Strategy (DEEWR, 2019). The importance of parental involvement in career development processes for young people has also been reaffirmed in research on social marketing of tertiary education and the place of influencers (Cupitt et al., 2016). However, little is known about the role carers play in this aspect of their charges' education. An argument for educating carers and support workers to communicate high expectations of their wards is supported by Mendis et al.'s (2015) finding that students who received private education and resources shared those perceived expectations for themselves. Just as parents and friends were identified as important influences for children not in care, the interest taken by carers and caseworkers seemed more important to in-care students' academic achievement than their teachers, again emphasizing the importance of supportive adult relationships (Tilbury, 2015).



In the longitudinal Victorian study on leaving care, Muir and Hand (2018) found that young people also had insufficient information about and difficulty accessing services and supports, which caseworkers further contextualized by noting the gaps in service resources, restrictive eligibility, waiting lists and limited capacity to support care leavers. Further, despite state legislation and practice guidelines about involving wards in making formal transition plans a year before they are set to leave care, only 46% of care leavers and 22% of those in care had such a plan, with caseworker's seemingly more focused on the wards more immediate needs such as housing (Muir & Hand 2018). Muir and Hand (2018) found that young people also had insufficient information about, and difficulty accessing, services and supports; which caseworkers further contextualized by noting the gaps in service resources, restrictive eligibility, waiting lists and limited capacity to support care leavers.

This is exacerbated and further challenged by the awareness that career practitioners have of the needs of care-experienced young people. Career development in Australia is governed by a national industry council which supports associations of career practitioners nationwide, namely, the Career Industry Council of Australia which coordinates practitioner research, policy responses and continuing professional development along with accrediting professional training courses in career development. Career practitioners in schools are a key conduit for career information for parents and their children, but there is no Australian research which has examined their levels of awareness regarding the career development needs of care-experienced young people. This project draws on research in other national contexts, including from the UK to provide a background (Jackson et al., 2003) and illustrate best practice.

There has also been significant work in Australia considering the career aspirations of adolescents in out of home care. Creed et al. (2011) conducted a survey of 404 like-aged students (13-18) – half who had experienced out of home care and half who had not, about their occupational and educational aspirations, as well as their life barriers. They found that care-experienced students reported less career planning, more barriers, lower aspirations both self and externally perceived, but more school engagement. The out of home care group aspired to lower complexity occupations, of a more social rather than investigatory or artistic nature (the kinds of professionals they had as models for example, case workers). They recommended that interventions to support student aspirations should occur early (ages 14-15) to allow for relevant subject choices etc., that case workers and carers engage more in offering stable relationships of encouragement and expectations, to promote self-efficacy and career exploration.

Research conducted by Harvey et al. (2015) proposed eight recommendations to support care-experienced young people accessing university education, two of which are investigated in this project. First, that training be provided for people working with care-experienced young people and their carers. This is investigated by interviewing career development associations to ascertain existing levels of practitioners' training and awareness in supporting care-experienced young people, and analysing their training and development needs in this area. The second recommendation of Harvey et al.'s (2015) research to be explored is that education-specific resources be provided to care-experienced young people, their carers, birth families and related workforce. This project focuses on the recommendation in terms of information about career transitions and identifies and analyses existing education-specific resources provided to young people and their influencers. This second part was achieved by undertaking a public review of Australian career information centres and then interviewing care organisations to ascertain what information is currently available to them. Since 2015, the Raising Expectations project in Victoria has engaged with this research which underpinned a Higher Education for Care Leavers Strategy. The project has been running for a number of years and has been cited as a site of best practice working to change the disparity in care leaver participation in university against the general population. Deloitte's social return on investment analysis has estimated a return of \$1.80 on each dollar invested in the programme and thus were found to substantially outweigh the costs.

Over a number of years the CREATE Foundation has engaged with care experienced young people who they support to undertake research reports which investigate transitioning from care (McDowall, 2011; 2016; 2020). The research has looked at progress after the national standards, including a young person's report written by and for care-experienced young people about Being in Care in Australia (2018). Building on Harvey et al.'s (2017) findings that there was a 'lack of formal assistance and information when applying for university,' this study aims to explore the knowledge universities have of the challenges for care-leavers and what specific support is available to them. The purpose of this study is to address existing challenges faced by care-experienced young people in accessing information and support for entry to higher education. The research presented here includes novel discovery work about information and support gaps for care-leavers. The findings provide universities with information about barriers to higher education for care-leavers.



## 2. Methodology

The research team formed a project advisory board (the Board) to oversee key stages of the project. The role of the Board was to include the perspectives of industry experts and people with lived experience at all stages of the project in order to strengthen the project and include the voice of young people in the research. The Board comprised the researchers, and ex officio representatives from the Career Industry Council of Australia [CICA] and CREATE Foundation. An honorarium was paid to the Board members, with the exception of the researchers. Ethical approval to conduct the interviews was granted by the Charles Sturt University Human Research Ethics Committee.

The research design consisted of a literature search and then four active research phases. The literature search informed the development of the two key research questions for this project: which were: 'are our public educational institutions recognizing the challenges of care experienced young people?' and 'How are different parts of the sector supporting care-experienced young people in the transition to higher education'. Phase 1 comprised a search of 43 Australian university websites to identify current resources for Out of Home Care-experienced [OOHC] young people. Each Australian university website was scanned by research assistants who recorded the information in a spreadsheet. This data was used to produce an infographic outlining existing resources and identified gaps which you can find as the cover page to this report and on the project website. Phase 2 involved conducting semi-structured interviews with five representatives from care organisations or professionals involved in providing support and advocacy to care-experienced young people. These interviewees were found from a public search of national organisations supporting young people in care and through associated snowball participation through recommendation of the participants. The participants were asked to identify barriers to accessing university education for out-of-home young people. All those participants in phase 2 from the care sector were given pseudonyms starting with the letter "C" in the report.

For Phase 3, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with higher education equity and diversity staff sourced by an open call through the national association for Equity Practitioners in Higher Education Australasia email network. In institutions that were identified as having good practice in Phase 1 were particularly targeted and followed up for participation in the survey. In the institutions where there was information available for OOHC-experienced young people on their sites, marketing teams were contacted to participate in the phase 3 interviews. Researchers experienced a good deal of hesitancy to speak on the issue of support OOHC experienced young people in higher education and some significant misunderstandings in the recruitment process where university staff thought the project topic related to students providing care for others or students with disabilities requiring personal care for access to higher education. In the end 12 staff from 7 Australian universities participated in the phase 3 interviews which aimed to identify existing knowledge levels of the complex needs of care-experienced people, identify gaps in knowledge, ascertain what admissions support is offered to out-of-home young people, and any existing initiatives to attract them. All those participants in phase 3 from the higher education sector were given pseudonyms starting with the letter "H". Through the course of the project it became clear that some equity practitioners were now based in the marketing departments due to Federal Government initiatives to support higher education participation (e.g. HEPPP funding) and therefore the distinction between staff based in different higher education divisions were not differentiated in analysis or pseudonyms allocated.

All Phase 2 and 3 interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, then loaded to NVivo software for thematic analysis, the interview schedules with the semi-structured questions are included in the appendix to this document. The interviews were coded by both researchers, based on key themes identified in the literature, and allowed for new themes to emerge from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The thematic analysis revealed five key findings, based on which this research has produced evidence-based recommendations to improve admission processes and provide a foundation for policy change to advocate for out-of-home young people. Phase 4 consisted of a web-based survey of 33 career practitioners, sourced through the Career Industry Council of Australia who were asked about their knowledge and understanding of child protection and the impact of trauma on learning and behaviour for care-experienced children. Further, they were asked about their awareness of support programmes and transition support for care-experienced school leavers transitioning to higher education. The respondents had self-selected as interested in the needs of care-experienced young people and were recruited via a CICA webinar on the topic. The survey was conducted before they had listened to the webinar. The following Findings section details our key findings under three main headings.

## 3. Findings

### 3.1. There is a systemic lack of understanding of the needs of care-experienced students in higher education

This research identifies young people leaving out of home care as a sizeable group of vulnerable children and young people who suffer discrimination and underachievement on a daily basis in Australia (Peel & Beckley, 2015) but whose needs are considerably misunderstood, particularly in higher education. As an interviewee working in higher education put plainly, describing colleagues in the institution he works in: 'I can tell you [that] most of the staff are not from equity backgrounds as well. So, they don't really have an understanding of [the care-experienced] young people.' Hayden.

There are a range of significant issues care-experienced people face, including the discouraging state of housing and employment stability amongst care leavers, with 18 to 20 per cent experiencing homelessness within a year of leaving; which negatively impacts their relationships, employment and education (Piel, 2018). Piel's (2018) research addresses challenges foster youth face in transitioning to higher education arguing it should also include acknowledging the impact of parenting for adolescent mothers, and other family responsibilities. Their research shows that care leavers receive insufficient financial support to both attend college and meet their basic needs, meaning they often have to drop out or take on additional work, and are unable to dedicate as much time to their study. While higher education staff have gaps in knowledge, there are also significant gaps in services specifically relating to the education of children and young people in out of home care that have upstream impact on access to tertiary education (McDowall, 2020). Another interviewee who works within the care sector evocatively described the way that care experienced young people can be overlooked by the system:

*You know they can meander through 12 years of primary and secondary education and be basically functionally illiterate at the end of it. That doesn't reflect on their intelligence or capabilities either.* **Charles**

An interviewee involved in the care sector explained the gap in understanding for teachers in classrooms:

*I don't really feel that school is reflective of ability for a lot of my kids ...this [student] in my class, whatever, but they could be having the worst day of their life and you don't know it or you don't think about it because you haven't been taught that way... And even if you do recognize there is as a problem, you also don't necessarily know how to respond to it.* **Carol**

Researchers such as Mendes et al. (2014) have identified issues care-leavers have to deal with that can carry across different phases of their lives, impacting engagement and transitions. These issues include the maltreatment and trauma in their pre-care lives, instability and inadequate support they may have received in care, and an absence of family and community networks to support transitions (Mendes et al., 2014). There may not be continuity of schooling and so teachers and other school staff engaged with a child or young person may lose track of them as they need to move to schools closer to their changing placements:

*One of the biggest issues was changing placement and kids having to move schools because their placement was changed. ... In some cases, you know, kids can have up to 40 different placements in the childhood, which of course really impacts their education.* **Camilla**

Many of these issues in transition affect and extend to post-school study. However, in this career-development-focused project, factors have also been identified which relate to paucity of aspirations for care experienced young people. Further, a lack of understanding of the barriers faced that impact transition to higher education has been observed. The global trend that care-leavers have poorer educational outcomes than their peers has been linked to low-expectations for these young people (Mendes et al., 2014). This is further exacerbated by governments' lack of political will or financial resources directed to ongoing support, misunderstanding of care leavers' specific needs, and systems that inadequately prepare youth for independence. (Mendes et al., 2014). This point was confirmed by one of the interviewees who worked in the care sector:

*We have a minimalist approach sometimes to the outcomes these kids will achieve, rather than actually expecting what the rest of the community would expect from their own children. And I think that that's one of the problems.* **Charles**

As previous research in higher education (Harvey et al., 2015) and in other settings have found (Peel & Beckley, 2015), care-experienced young people are not a specific equity group targeted for support by governments, and so their identity, numbers, problems and issues are not recorded and only rarely are they offered specialist support.

*I know a university is a huge beast and while student support services might have a better awareness, I think in general... most universities even still struggle with the access and equity categories, which were devised back in the nineties.* **Camilla**

There are key gaps in higher institutional comprehension of disadvantage experienced by care-experienced people. Further, there is a literal gap in systemic knowledge through sporadic or mostly absent data collection on enrolment, success and completion (Harvey et al., 2018) of care experienced students in higher education (Peel & Beckley, 2015) as reported by participant from the care sector:

*Definitely a lack in data collection... even [] Centrelink doesn't Collect data on kids in care when they get youth allowance or Ausstudy, so they can't see the progression.* **Carol**

The inability to follow up and track progress leaving care contributes to a lack of recognition of the issues of care-experienced young people and can be identified as being rooted in misunderstandings of their needs. A significant problem, as has been noted by others, is that out of home care leaver status is not a formal equity group recognised by the Australian Government (Harvey et al., 2015). People who have left care recently or, as many care-experienced people do, have started higher education as mature students (Abbott-Chapman, 2011), may meet more than one of the equity group criteria that are recognised by government. Even though cumulative disadvantage has been recognised in the literature very few institutions make specialist provision for care experienced people, as a higher education staff member reports:

*There's other pockets of disadvantage that these guys might tick, four or five of the other main equity groups. But they're still not getting caught in the net that's being cast for those five groups because they've got very specific [and] multiple forms of disadvantage... like what you're saying, like not having parents or something that makes them unique, which means that they need to be specifically targeted. They're not going to get picked up just because they're also low SES and regional and have disabilities. And probably Indigenous as well. All those things actually just make them less likely to get caught in the net that's trying to sweep more than those groups into higher education.* **Hattie**

The intersectional nature of disadvantage experienced by care-leavers can be conceptually linked to the development of the controversial term 'super-disadvantaged' which is used in the United Kingdom (UK) (Lambrechts, 2020). However, supporting care-experienced young people is not just a matter of identifying them. Services that were found to understand their needs well understood that the act of identification, even self-identification, can be problematic and can make the institution's role even more so, as a higher education staff member explained:

*I know a lot of the young people I work with don't like to be identified publicly as care leavers. But in terms of targeting and letting them know what's out there for them, [this is] the trickiest thing with me. Some of them don't understand what that term means. So it's not so much the alienation as they don't realize that that's about them.* **Hannah**

This is a key problem with characteristic based support – young people with care experience find terms confusing and do not know what is on offer to them. There is much work to be done in higher education in understanding the needs of care-experienced people, both in transitions from school and later as mature students. Although higher education institutions should become aware of the specific needs of care-experienced students and this work recommends that it become part of diversity awareness training for

student facing staff, there are more complex needs which should be unpicked and understood by the higher education system and its constituent institutions. Systemic inequalities will not be undone by higher education provision of extra support. A system that understands students' needs and progresses in deepening understanding of disadvantage is warranted.

Our first finding identifies the absence of out-of-home care students in higher education as contributing to a systemic lack of understanding of the needs of care-experienced young people. This issue is augmented by Federal equity policy which supports an overly rigid national equity framework – in which out-of-home care recipients may be overrepresented in individual markers but are not recognized as a group with complex needs and who do not have tailored support.

### 3.2. There is a significant gap in post-school transition planning for young people with care experience.

It is recognised that educational disruption and instability at a secondary level leads to inadequate preparation for tertiary study (Harvey et al., 2015), which impacts young people in out of home care, but there are also strong indications that positive familial and school expectations also are a key predictor of tertiary transition (Ball, 2003). People with care experience face a tyranny of low expectations in terms of tertiary transition to post-school work, vocational studies or higher education (Mendes et al., 2014). This section explores how this is replicated on a systemic basis for young people in out of home care.

This project's analysis of the existing literature confirmed the widespread understanding that home is the key source of career information. In many cases, young people in care have not had stability in their placements (Peel & Beckley, 2015) and, by definition, have certainly had a shift from their home of origin. By contrast, people who are not care experienced often stay in their parental home into their early 20s (ABS, 2013). As an interviewee working in the care sector described, there are core basic needs that are provided by care:

*Care placements have historically tended to focus on survival. You know, they're not going to be the kind of nurturing places where either young people want to stay or indeed foster carers necessarily want to offer it. **Curtis***

This study confirmed the extant research (Muir & Hand, 2018) that for some providers of care, there is a reticence and sometimes inability to extend contractual care further than basic housing and survival needs to career aspiration and future planning. Currently, out of home care practices vary across Australian states and territories, but because care is discretionary rather than mandatory after 18 years of age, post-care is arguably inadequate. Some case workers suggested that discussing transition too early could be detrimental to young people's ability to feel settled within their placements, sometimes to the detriment of further skills planning (Muir & Hand, 2018). One higher-education-based interviewee explained the mindset they had observed in carers:

*There's also a level of resistance in the sense that it's kind of coming from a good place. But it's really paternalistic which is that [they] don't offer these kids, something they can't have; that's not the way they would say it, but they kind of say [it] All these kids are struggling with so much. **Hattie***

Significant proportions of children and young people in care are from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural backgrounds. When Mendes et al. (2019) reported on the experiences of Indigenous care leavers when transitioning out of care, there were similar themes to those reported by non-Indigenous care leavers. Human and financial resources were reportedly limited, alongside unrealistic early transitions to independence. Research by Mendes et al. (2019) report similar concerns about the prioritisation of basic needs which limits attention paid to other important cultural and social issues and the importance of cultural support plans, as established in the state of Victoria. People in care lose formal support from state care at 16-18 years of age. This ending of support is problematic for young care leavers because it coincides with either the final years of schooling or the beginning of attempts to gain skills training or employment (Mendes, 2019).

Once individuals leave care, connection to family, culture and community are de-prioritised relative to finding accommodation and securing financial support. Arguably, however, these former aspects are integral to the development of cultural identity for Indigenous care leavers (Mendes et al., 2019). There are further significant administrative barriers to making transitions for Indigenous young people, for example difficulties in obtaining documents such as birth certificates required to apply for government financial support, especially when care leavers are accommodated outside of their home state (Mendes et al., 2019). These issues have driven the campaigns to extend the care leaving age to 21, which has been recently successful in Victoria in 2020 and extended care now operates in ACT, TAS, SA and WA.

The negative outcomes for leaving care at age 18 include limited education participation, homelessness and/or housing instability, incarceration; or for those who are Indigenous, estrangement from culture and community (Mendes et al., 2019; Mendes & Snow, 2016; Mendes, 2018). A social investment approach is suggested by Mendes (2018) as an alternative to current practices in post-care transitions. This model would aim to promote the social inclusion of care leavers in mainstream social, economic and communal life



through the provision of housing, education and employment, and emphasising family and social relationships within each of these domains (Mendes, 2018). It is thought that advancements in these areas are likely to increase individuals' access to social and economic opportunities, as well as decrease experiences of social exclusion and reliance on crisis intervention, welfare, health and criminal justice services.

Post-care transitions are critical to consider holistically as the needs of care experienced young people vary according to individual circumstances and characteristics, indicating a need for tailored support (Mendes et al., 2014). This was explained by an interviewee knowledgeable about support for care experienced young people:

*We need to have an obligation to actually look at what these kids' lifelong learning outcomes and requirements are rather than actually having a more traditional sequential approach to what that might mean for these kids... I think we need to probably be a little bit more lateral about how we actually see that happen. **Charles***

It is important that ideas about support transitions are not reduced to a binary where young people leaving care are expected to attend higher education immediately after school and are felt not have had a successful transition if they do not. In the view of that same interviewee:

*it's a very difficult pathway to go from an 18 year old in secondary school and a care leaver into a tertiary education system ... It may be a different form of tertiary education that leads them into a more formal tertiary education later on, but actually maintain[ing] a link with self learning, I think is extremely important. **Charles***

Despite the paucity of data, available evidence suggests that Australian care leavers rarely transition to higher education (Harvey et al., 2015; McNamara et al., 2019). An interviewee who worked in a higher education setting contributed: 'We have quite a systemic problem of kids not aiming for university in that regard because they do get pigeonholed quite easily.' (*Heidi*). Higher education is linked to positive lifelong outcomes for graduates such as improved employment opportunities and earning potential (Pitman et al., 2019). Harvey et al., (2015) argue that upon this basis, "it is important to examine the progression of [care leavers] into higher education nationally, and the factors that might increase aspirations, access, and success at university" (2015, p. 11). Some care leavers do go to university, but more could if they were encouraged to do so (Michell, 2012; Michell & Scalzi, 2016; Mendes et al., 2014; Tilbury et al., 2009). An interviewee who works in higher education commented on some of the barriers for carers supporting young people:

*I think they are try not to overload them with expectations. So it's kind of coming from a good place. But in the end, it's going to have a negative impact on their lives because some of the young people that we have spoken to in the past... [say] the reason I got here is because everybody said I couldn't do it. Or they are just aware of the absence, they are aware that nobody's presenting that as an option to them. So they mustn't think 'I can do it'. **Hattie***

However, the research shows that it is critical to successful transitions for adults supporting care experienced young people to have high expectations 'When adults affirm their educational possibilities, children in care internalise that adults hold high expectations for them and develop hope.' (Mendis et al., 2015, p.491). The support from adults can include support for the young person to participate in extracurricular activities, developing networks and being receptive to an adult who communicates positive feedback and high expectations. These activities have been found to be significant indicators for higher self-esteem and academic success (Mendis et al., 2015). Successful outcomes for care leavers can result from secure and stable placements; educational support and progress whilst in out-of-home care; planned and gradual transitions from care that reflect individual levels of maturity and skill development; the provision of stable accommodation, and positive relationships with dedicated caseworkers (Cashmore & Mendes, 2008; 2015).

Ineffective interagency relationships are one of the most frequently cited barriers to improving educational outcomes among students in out of home care (Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012). Child protection and education professionals are generally willing to work together to support students' needs and most expressed high levels of respect for the other groups' knowledge and practices (Gill & Oakley, 2018). While some Australian

jurisdictions have requirements for schools to develop Individual education plans for those in care this is not the case in all states, nor always is it undertaken, and despite education and training services being the main referral made by case workers, 'the plans do not necessarily translate into positive outcomes' (Muir & Hand, 2018, p.10). Further, not all care leavers are aware of the individual education plans, even if they are in place (Wilson et al., 2019). This is a significant problem when structural systems are in place and are being taken up but do not have engagement from those most crucially involved. This research finds that it is critical that post-school plans for study and work and career development should be included in all individual education plans, a systemic intervention that should be supported and evaluated.

Training for staff of mainstream agencies and improved resourcing are helpful strategies to improve functioning and care provision to promote successful transitions for young people post-care. This training and resource input should be extended to carers as expectations about future transitions are established in the home environment (Tilbury, 2015) and carers should be supported to understand the options for transition. There is a significant gap in post-school transition planning for young people with care experience. Availability of career information and supports for young people in care should be available as part of carers' training. In our search of all jurisdictional websites there were no materials available on publicly available government websites to help support carers with career conversations (Tilbury, 2015) that are often expected of those in a parental role.



### 3.3. There are multiple significant barriers to accessing appropriate career information for care experienced young people

The period of care experience has been recognised as having the potential to either be a further barrier or a crucial time of educational achievement depending on the kind of experiences and, most significantly, relationships they develop in that time (Mendes et al., 2014). Mendes et al. (2014) note that those in care need adult and collaborative support networks for instance between welfare and educational providers, and with participants in extracurricular, community and work settings.

There are challenges as have been noted in the processes in following the guidance which suggests that those in out of home care plan formal transition plans a year before they are set to leave care. Muir and Hand's (2018) response suggests only 46% of care leavers and 22% of those in care had such a plan, with concentration more focused on the child's more immediate needs. These issues were reflected in this research project with participants skeptical of effectiveness of formal transitions plans and highlighting the difficulties in implementation.

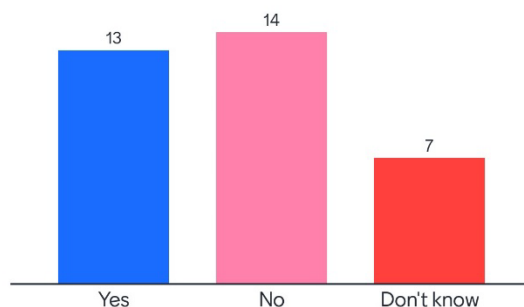
Effective cross-system collaboration is integral to the provision of educational support for children in OOHC suggested extant research by Gill and Oakley (2018) which found that child protection and education professionals are generally willing to work together to support students' needs there are few formalised processes for extra transition support from specialist career development practitioners. Although Gill and Oakley's (2018) work suggested that most professionals involved in the process expressed high levels of respect for the other groups' knowledge and practices.

#### Career practitioner's preparedness

However, it is not clear how well prepared career practitioners are to support care-experienced young people and Gill and Oakley (2018) identified minimal understanding among some educators regarding child protection and the impact of trauma on learning and behaviour (Gill and Oakley, 2018). Our survey with the Career Industry Council of Australia had 33 completed respondents who had self-selected as interested in the needs of care-experienced young people by attending an event for them. A small majority of the respondents felt they did not have access to specific resources for care-experienced young people.

#### Do you have access to particular resources for care-experienced young people?

Mentimeter



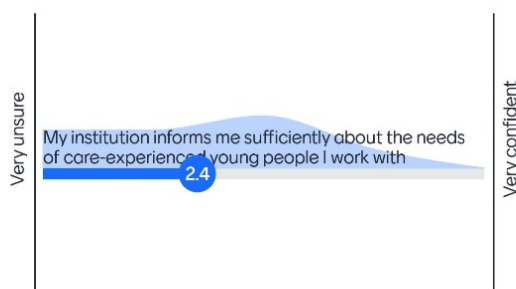
34

Figure 1 Access to information to support care-experienced young people

In asking about whether they were appropriately prepared for their work with care-experienced young people by their institution (e.g. school or college), our participants indicated, as shown in Figure 2, more respondents were unsure than confident in a 1 to 5 scale between very unsure and very confident.

## Organisation / institution's provision of information

Mentimeter



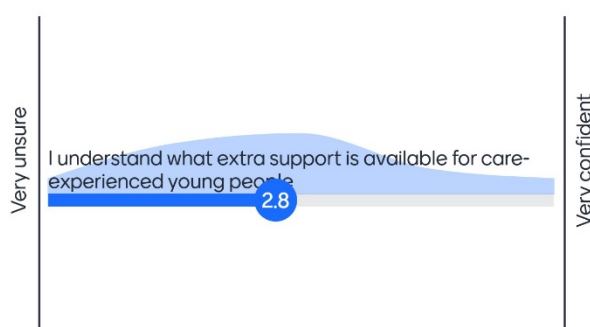
31

Figure 2 Career practitioner responses to their institution's provision of information–

This response from career practitioners is put into context by research by Gill and Oakley (2018) who found that adequate information dissemination through training and information sessions can help ensure that practitioners are aware of changing social policies and practices. As can be seen in Figure 3, in response to the question about whether career practitioners felt they were aware of support available for people in out of home care, the average confidence level was less than 3 out of 5, in a scale of 1 to 5 between very unsure and very confident.

## Knowledge of extra support available

Mentimeter



33

Figure 3 Responses from career practitioners about their knowledge of support available

This is concerning especially in the light of research that suggests that jointly established protocols for education planning and information sharing have the potential to improve educational service delivery for students in out of home care (Gill and Oakley, 2018). A coordinated, national approach to supporting young people in out of home care is lacking as highlighted by participant from the care sector:

*doesn't seem to be an appetite federally to understand what it means [to be in care] and how it can affect a very marginalized group of young people to make their way in the world. Catherine*

This motif of finding their way was echoed by another higher education based interview participant speaking about commencing higher education students 'they managed to fight a lot of them manage to find themselves on their career journey, somehow by their own self-motivation' (Harold). These contributions seem to construct a tentative, discretionary access to career support which is characterised by a higher

education interview participant as 'patchy...it really came down to career advisor, mainly in the school' (Hector).

### Availability of career support within schools

The lack of support was explained further by the former interview participant who works in outreach in higher education:

*There's no support around helping young people navigate the pathways. There's no real support around meeting the requirements to be able to you know, go on to take into a certificate, diploma or go on to university* **Harold**

Some higher education institutions have instituted systems that help care-experienced young people complete their applications which as Hattie, a participant who has been involved in one of these services explains that 'there's an assumption [you know] and if you've got absolutely no experience of higher education or university, how to navigate the system, where to go, how to use the online platforms' (Hattie).

Access to career education programs and career development interventions are acknowledged as sporadic in schools and despite HEPPP funding supporting outreach into disadvantaged schools, this does not always extend to specialist support for care-experienced young people (Harvey et al., 2015) nor does it encompass professional career development support.

The importance of professional, high quality career development was emphasised by a care support sector professional:

*schools need to have some sort of model where the career [practitioner] or they're looking at you know outcomes for kids in care because so many teachers tell my kids "maybe drop out and get a trade maybe school's not for you" and what I'd like to see is substantial training for teachers and executive staff so they fully comprehend what foster care is and they comprehend what it is these kids are going through'* **Carol**

Participants working in outreach work with schools, based in higher education echo this and say that there is a systemic lack of inclusion in career development programs 'a lot of young people from out of home care, weren't being included in any university programs or any educational programs.' (Hayden). There are big differences between practitioners who have the resources and knowledge and those who don't as a higher education outreach professional explains about the different engagement levels 'really shows who's on the ball and who's not on the engagement, we have with them when we got one school in particular.' (Hector). He went on to say that the difference was the staffing for the engaged schools: they've got a dedicated 100% careers advisor, where most of the time was the English tutors doing careers as well (Hector).

The resourcing of career practitioners make a big difference to the level of support available as a professional based outside the higher education sector but connected with it reported:

*They are lucky enough if they've got 15 minute consultation if not a five minute consultation with them: all right here are the options. What are you gonna do, let's go now.* **Heather**

### Institutional provision of information

Our work looking at the information displayed on university websites found many of the websites that did have information that could help; however, if there had been a degree of sign-posting from career practitioners and guidance in the form of career education about how higher education work. It is not clear that this is available in many schools and as our participant Hayden confirmed it is difficult to find in other influencers of care-experienced young people and the individuals have to have been identified to receive the appropriate extra support:

*There's a lot of advertising but [the care experienced young person] wouldn't get any information from the [care] agencies. The agencies are not getting any information from the universities,*

*that's for sure. From schools it's going back to if the kids that [have] some potential the guidance officers are usually onto it or trying to help them in that way. **Hayden***

It is important not to blame the schools and practitioners as Curtis who works supporting the care sector states: 'information in that context might be more just about the schools and how the schools are sharing information with students within the school.' Further the information can be an overload and turn off young people and be an added barrier:

*it's they are trying to digest all the information from so many different institutions, these days It's information overload for them. And I think it's because it's information overload for kids, so the kids will go. I'll just do what my mate is doing **Heather***

This project's independent review of institutional materials is not much more helpful for care-experienced young people as our public review of websites showed. Only five institutions were found to have easy to understand information about the support available for care experienced young people and only one of these were assessed by the researchers experienced in working with young people in OOH as being easily understandable as seen in table below:

*Table 1 Analysis of Public Universities' websites*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Information on public university websites for Care-Experienced YP</b>
Albany	Some general information
Bairnsdale	Could not locate information
Ballina	Could not locate information
Bowral	Could not locate information
Bunbury	Equity programmes outlined and external links for support for care-experienced young people
Burnie	Equity programmes outlined but no mention of care-experienced young people
Camden Haven	Could not locate information
Colac	Could not locate information
Mittagong	Information available for care-experienced young people if they contact the relevant department for admissions
Moama	Could not locate information
Emerald	Detailed information provided for care-experienced young people
Forster	Could not locate information
Geraldton	Could not locate information
Cooranbong	Information about awards for care-experienced young people found on public website.
Grafton	Could not locate information
Gympie	Could not locate information
Horsham	Could not locate information

Kempsey	Detailed information provided for care-experienced young people
Lismore	Could not locate information
Maryborough	Could not locate information
Morisset	Could not locate information
Mudgee	Could not locate information
Muswellbrook	Could not locate information
Bomaderry	Could not locate information
Parkes	Could not locate information
Lincoln	Could not locate information
Pirie	Could not locate information
Rockhampton	Could not locate information
Sale	Detailed information provided for care-experienced young people
Singleton	Detailed information provided for care-experienced young people
Yeppoon	Could not locate information
Tamworth	Could not locate information
Taree	Detailed information provided for care-experienced young people
Morwell	Could not locate information
Ulladulla	Could not locate information
Victor Harbor–Goolwa	Could not locate information
Wangaratta	Could not locate information
Warragul	Could not locate information
Whyalla	Could not locate information

In summary, there are multiple significant barriers to accessing appropriate career information for care experienced young people. These issues cannot be necessarily resolved by any single action but by a coordinated response from the care sector, tertiary institutions and schools, including managing and disseminating information effectively and appropriately through the system.

## 4. Conclusion and suggestions for practice

This project investigated the higher education transitions of care-experienced young people. The study aimed to explore the knowledge that universities and other institutions have about the challenges for care-leavers and what specific support is available to them. The project was funded by the Collier Foundation's Fund 4 and was conducted in two higher education institutions led by Charles Sturt University in 2020, against the backdrop of the Coronavirus pandemic.

The background literature search that was undertaken for this project led to the development of the study's key research questions which were: 'are our public educational institutions recognizing the challenges of care experienced young people?' and 'How are different parts of the sector supporting care-experienced young people in the transition to higher education'. Although the initial focus was on the higher education sector over the course of the project this broadened somewhat and the barriers to considering any post-school education for care-experienced people were included. Further, the evidence about the post-care experience life-course, which indicated that care-experienced people were more likely to return to tertiary study as mature learners (Abbott-Chapman, 2011), was also folded into the project scope. However, the main focus of the project remained school leavers who had some experience of out of home care.

In this project, a layered technique of collecting data from different participant groups and from different angles, and the methods used, were little impacted by being carried out during the COVID pandemic. While the main part of the project used interviews from two different participant groups – one group who supported the care sector and the other originating in the higher education sector – this approximated the professional knowledge positions of staff involved at each end of the care to higher education transition. Schools and their career development staff play a part in the development and realisation of aspiration for care-experienced people, holding a more important role, as the study has shown, for care-experienced young people. In order to establish whether career practitioners were well-prepared to support care-experienced young people a national survey was undertaken through the Career Industry Council of Australia. The most important perspective, namely the voice and experience of people with current or previous care-experience, was difficult to access meaningfully because, in designing the project there was a strong desire not to undertake a symbolic and disruptive engagement with this cohort. Therefore, to understand the student viewpoint in a project which did not have the scope to undertake extensive, representative fieldwork with students the research team drew upon an expert agency, CREATE, who supports care-experienced young people and whose research assistants have detailed knowledge of care experience. CREATE research staff reviewed all 40 university websites and assessed the information provided against a number of specific information provision questions that had been derived from needs which surfaced in the literature review.

The work was conducted with an ontological perspective that while post-school education is important, the project does not hold transition to higher education or other forms as transformatory in or of itself. The researchers understood and frequently reflected that when people are in the out of home care system, they can also experience ongoing trauma which may have substantial and long-lasting implications. The researchers were therefore keen not to frame those care-leavers who were not transitioning immediately into post-school education as failures. Further to the legacy of trauma in backgrounds of this cohort, and the chaos and instability associated with moving out of different placements, there are substantial logistical challenges to post-school education posed by having to move out of care, often at exactly the time these decisions are made. One of the more critical aspects of the system is that in most jurisdictions of Australia children turning 18 leave the care system and support for their carers ceases. Although there are supposed to be transition plans in place so that essentially a child knows when they turn 18 where they are going to go and how they are going to support themselves financially, in practice this does not always happen (McDowall, 2020) and a period of instability can follow. This is also a very turbulent time in their lives for that reason and through experiences of homelessness. With the child leaving school, as well as experiencing those kinds of complications, this is where we see perhaps some of the reasons why there is a low representation in higher education (Harvey et al., 2015). This project looked specifically at the pathways of those with a care experience background as a means to understanding more broadly the way social disadvantage can impact that transition from school to higher education.



One of the most significant issues within the Australian jurisdictions is that there is no national collection of data on care experience. That does not happen in Australia despite many calls for such a collection (Peel & Beckley, 2014; McDowall, 2018). These practices are now emerging in at least two jurisdictions in different ways, including Victoria's data advantage of having extended the care leaving age to 21.

However, in higher education the Bradley report did not recognize care experiences as a specific disadvantaged group and as a consequence this has fed through into subsequent, large-scale reviews. Although many people who have care experience do not necessarily want to be forced to tick a box on a form and feel like they are labelled as being care experience, confidential recording can be extremely valuable. Negative connotations of having care experience remain, and this report does not wish to amplify understandings of these negative outcomes and enhance systematic labelling of people with care experience, however, from the research that was undertaken there are several clear suggestions for practice that may enhance transitions for care-experienced people and may help public educational institutions recognize the challenges that care experienced people face.

The particular focus of the project was to establish what information is being given to school leavers and whether they are regarded as prospective tertiary students by the system. As this has implications for the higher education system, we also wanted to explore how different parts of the sector are supporting care experienced young people and despite the limitations of this small project there have been some findings from which the following suggestions for practice.

#### 4.1. Suggestions for practice

Arising from the project's research, we have several suggestions for practice; these are all related to the findings of the project explored in the previous report section.

Our findings show that carers frequently struggle to have appropriate access to career information to carry out career conversations with the young people in their care. This includes problems with provision by jurisdictional governments, carer support agencies and also public educational institutions who frequently target parents only. Carers should be systematically provided with career development resources as part of the provision both by departments who support their work with the young people in formal ways such as a career development support kit for carers and by inclusion in materials public educational institutions provide for parents.

This research highlighted that career planning is not a statutory part nationally of all the transition from care processes and its omission signals a lack of systemic expectations for the young people in care. Future planning should be mandated as an element in transition planning and steps should be taken for more care leavers to be made aware of the transition plan available which is lacking at the moment (McDowall, 2018)). This research strongly supports the exploring the option of extension of care until 21 to cover important opportunities for post-school education. However, it is important to note that those with placements that have broken down or those placed in residential care should be able to exit care at 18 with comprehensive support and resources if staying in care is not a viable option for them. There may be more than just the immediate benefits for the young person by having career planning as part of their plan, a sort of a beneficial halo effect of being able to talk about the future can help get out of the moment and help support thriving, not just surviving.

In the research undertaken we noted a lack of understanding of trauma influenced decision-making in career development practice in Australia. Although not all young people with care experience have experienced trauma, many have along with many young people who have not experience care. Understanding the implications of disadvantage on career decision making is a fruitful extension to practice and should be considered to be included in any review of professional requirements.

The project found that equity definitions were not necessarily well understood by professionals or young people. This project found further that there are issues for care-experienced young people because people might fall between categories or not think in terms of where they fit. However, given the intersectional nature of disadvantage for young people, who may form part of multiple equity groups, it is suggested that practice moving away from a characteristic based entitlement and towards a needs-based approach may be effective and empowering. There should be a needs-based support if you're in need of accommodation support, because you come from a regional, rural, or remote area, or from a care experience background, you may have similar needs and have very different characteristics.



## 4.2. Project engagement and dissemination activities

The results of the project have been used to provide career development experts with evidence-based recommendations for: 1) equipping career practitioners to better support care-experienced young people during university admission processes; and 2) changes to practices of provision and scaffolding of career development information for care-experienced young people and their carers. Through these recommendations, the short-term aims are to address and remove existing barriers faced by care-experienced young people in accessing university education, while the long-term aims are to increase the number of care-experienced young people accessing higher education. In doing so, the long-term outcomes for these care-experienced young people will be significantly improved.

Key project outcomes such as this report will be disseminated to governments, national bodies associated with universities, and organisations involved with care-experienced young people, to encourage an ongoing commitment from key stakeholders to support care-experienced young people in accessing university education. Dissemination of findings will be conducted through conference presentations, webinars and academic publications.

Research outcomes are included in this report for key stakeholders. To engage stakeholders, the outcomes are also presented in the form of a high-quality infographic, which forms the front cover of this report and is also available on the SCEP.edu.au website for download. This infographic will be forwarded to all members of the CICA member associations.

In November 2020, the project team conducted a webinar for CICA, specifically for school and university careers counsellors which had 119 registered attendees. Project team members aim to publish findings in addition to the research report, including in peer-reviewed academic journals with recognised citation indices.

# Appendix 1. Log of Data Collection and Participants

## Higher Education Interview Participants

1. H01 Haley
2. H07 Hillary
3. H15 Holly
4. H16 Hattie
5. H11 Heidi
6. H19 Henry
7. H20 Hayden
8. H21 Helen
9. H22 Hector
10. H23 Harold
11. H24 Hannah
12. H25 Heather

## Care Support Participants

13. C01 Charles
14. C03 Camilla
15. C08 Catherine
16. C09 Carol
17. C12 Curtis

## Institutional pseudonyms

1. Albany
2. Bairnsdale
3. Ballina
4. Bomaderry
5. Bowral
6. Bunbury
7. Burnie
8. Camden Haven
9. Colac
10. Cooranbong
11. Emerald
12. Forster
13. Geraldton
14. Grafton
15. Gympie
16. Horsham
17. Kempsey
18. Lincoln
19. Lismore
20. Maryborough
21. Mittagong
22. Moama
23. Morisset
24. Morwell

25. Mudgee
26. Muswellbrook
27. Parkes
28. Pirie
29. Rockhampton
30. Sale
31. Singleton
32. Tamworth
33. Taree
34. Ulladulla
35. Victor Harbor–Goolwa
36. Wangaratta
37. Warragul
38. Whyalla
39. Yeppoon

## **Interview schedule**

### **Introduction**

- Tell us about your professional history?
- Where are you working now?
- What is your current role?
- What does your organisational unit within your organisation do?

### **Transition**

- How is your institution involved in the transition of care-experienced people?
- Are there any current specific arrangements to support care-experienced people?

### **Educational participation information**

- What are typical patterns of participation in tertiary education in the area?
- How do people get information about education opportunities?
- What are the main (dis)incentives for young people pursuing tertiary opportunities?
- How is information about changes in tertiary education opportunities and options acquired and transmitted?

### **Setting**

- Who are the key education providers in the area?
- What differentiates your provision from other providers?
- How does your provision interact with other providers in the area?

## **Survey questions – for career practitioners**

- I understand the challenges facing care-experienced young people
  - o Scale: Very unsure (1) – Very confident (5)
- I understand what extra support is available for care-experienced young people
  - o Scale: Very unsure (1) – Very confident (5)
- My institution informs me sufficiently about the needs of care-experienced young people I work with
  - o Scale: Very unsure (1) – Very confident (5)
- Do you have access to particular resources for care-experienced young people?
  - o Yes / No / Don't know
- What particular resources do you have for care-experienced young people? (IF ANY)

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