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Success, retention, and completion of care leaver students in Australian higher education

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Abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACCO	Aboriginal Controlled Community Organisation
AFCFA	*A Fair Chance for All*
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare ATAR Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank
CV	Curriculum Vitae
DESE	Australian Department of Education, Skills and Employment
EFTSL	Equivalent Full-Time Student Load
HR	Human Resources
NESB	Non-English Speaking Background
NNECL	National Network for the Education of Care Leavers
SA1	ABS Statistical Areas Level 1
SES	Socioeconomic status
TAC	Tertiary admissions centres
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States
VET	Vocational Education and Training

Executive summary

International evidence confirms that care leavers (those who have left foster, kinship or residential care) often record poorer completion rates and graduate outcomes than other university students (Okpych & Courtney, 2018). Recent research from both the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK) confirms that lower completion rates and outcomes are the result of multiple factors, including intersectional inequality. Care leavers, for example, are more likely to declare a disability, hail from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds, and record low grades in secondary school, all of which are correlated with lower university completion (Sebba., Berridge, Luke, Fletcher, Bell, Strand, Thomas, Sinclair & O'Higgins, 2015). Despite quantitative analysis of course selections, completions and outcomes in the US, UK, and elsewhere, equivalent work has not yet been conducted in Australia.

In the absence of government collection of data, the primary source of quantitative, longitudinal data on care leavers in Australian higher education has resided with La Trobe University and Federation University Australia. Since 2016, as part of their collaborative Higher Education for Care Leavers Strategy ("the Strategy"), both universities have been systematically identifying care leaver students enrolled across the two institutions. The Strategy draws on the evidence compiled in *Out of Care, into University* (Harvey, McNamara, Andrewartha & Luckman, 2015), the subsequent report, *Recruiting and supporting care leavers in Australian higher education* (Harvey, Campbell, Andrewartha, Wilson & Goodwin-Burns, 2017) and related research by the investigators at both universities (e.g., Wilson, Harvey & Mendes, 2019). Focussed on all aspects of the student lifecycle, from pre-access through to access, attainment, and outcomes, the Strategy has also resulted in the first longitudinal data set on care leavers in Australian higher education.

Drawing on these data, this report examines the access, geo-demographic profile, course selection, success, retention, and completion rates of care leavers across the two universities. In doing so, we provide the first clear picture of the journey of these previously 'invisible' students. Data analysis is complemented by interviews with care leaver students and graduates to explore challenges around completion, employment, and broader graduate outcomes.

Consistent with related international research, our findings confirm the need for a whole of life cycle approach to supporting care-experienced students. Widening access to higher education remains a necessary priority, along with raising secondary school achievement rates and the educational expectations of those who work with young people in out-of-home care (Harvey et al., 2015). However, our longitudinal research also highlights significant gaps in success and completion rates, which are themselves likely to lead to subsequent disparities in graduate outcomes.

Our interviews with graduates further confirmed that, while care experienced university students tend to be highly independent, motivated, and determined, they are also more likely than the average student to face compound disadvantage. Care leavers are more likely to be from regional and/or low SES areas, to identify as Indigenous, and to have a disability and/or caring responsibilities. Care leavers are also more likely than the average student to lack any fallback options — in the form of extended family they can draw on for emotional and/or material support, for instance. Interviewees highlighted the importance of acquiring a sense of belonging to the university, through peer networks, support from key academic and/or professional staff members, volunteer work, or on-campus paid employment. A sense of belonging was seen as critical to ensuring their continued enrolment and success at university, particularly during times of crisis.

Universities need to assume responsibility for their care-experienced students, identifying, monitoring, and supporting them throughout and beyond their studies. The La Trobe/Federation partnership, supported by the *Raising Expectations* program (Raising Expectations, 2021), has involved dedicated student advising, bursaries, and wraparound support, and such practices could form a template for other universities to adapt. Further expansion and refinement of this institutional support, including tailored employability services, is likely to be required if success, completion and graduate outcome rates for care leavers are to improve.

Governments can also contribute to the success and outcomes of care leaver students in higher education. Federally, there remains scope for the Australian Government to collect and report data on care-experienced students, and to advocate greater recruitment efforts among universities. These approaches have been adopted successfully in the UK.

Extending care to at least the age of 21 is another policy priority, which is itself closely linked with higher education outcomes. International research confirms that, among other benefits, providing extended care increases the likelihood of degree completion. Several state and territory governments have now made progress on extending care, following the advocacy of the *HomeStretch* campaign (Mendes, 2021a) but further work is required to advance a nationally consistent model of extended care (Mendes, 2021b) that will ensure stability of accommodation for care experienced students irrespective of the state or territory in which they were taken into care. Relatedly, state and territory governments will need to strengthen their focus on minimising school and placement disruption, increasing the emphasis on postsecondary education within transition and leaving care plans, and developing a culture of higher expectations. In this context, tertiary education would become normalised as a pathway and young people in care would be provided with greater autonomy, voice, and agency (Michell, Jackson & Tonkin, 2015; Wilson & Golding, 2016).

As the number of young people, and particularly Indigenous young people, in out-of-home care continues to grow (McDowall, 2016), it is time for stronger commitment by governments and institutions. Increasing the university access, success, completions, and outcomes of care leavers needs to be considered a national priority.

Recommendations

1) **That the Australian Government systematically collects and monitors data on care leaver students, from enrolment to graduate outcomes.** Our data analysis confirmed that care leavers are over-represented within the identified equity groups in Australian higher education, and previous research has revealed that only eight per cent of foster children continue on to university (Tomaszewski, Kubler, Perales, Western, Rampino & Xiang, 2018). Such data reiterate the need for care leavers to be considered as a priority group, and more broadly highlight the need for a student equity framework in which compound disadvantage and intersectional inequality can be captured and addressed.

2) **That universities increase their own efforts to recruit care leaver students.** The outreach and recruitment strategies adopted by La Trobe University and Federation University Australia, supported by the *Raising Expectations* program, highlight the potential to increase enrolments dramatically through targeted actions. Given the age profile and basis of admission of many care leavers, such actions could include diversifying and raising awareness of alternative entry pathways, such as vocational education articulations and enabling programs. Programs such as *HomeStretch* (introduced fully in Victoria in 2021) that provide direct resources and support for individuals as they are making choices about their own life directions, represent a significant opportunity not only for those individuals, but for universities that are interested in sustainable ways of expanding and consolidating their markets locally.

3) **That schools, universities, and community service organisations ensure extensive and expansive careers advice for people in out-of-home care.** We found the university course choices of care leaver students to be relatively broad, consistent with students overall. While many students pursue disciplines related to their care background, such as Social Work, universities need to avoid stereotyping and the risk of 'closing doors' in their attraction, careers, and recruitment activities.

4) **That universities develop a focus on care leaver success, beyond access and participation.** We found the success rates of care leavers to be lower than that of other students. Further modelling would be required to understand the interplay of compound disadvantage, prior educational attainment, housing and stability, and other potential causes of this lower success, but specific institutional support could include facilitation of peer networks and more flexible structures to support caring and parenting duties. Moreover, an emphasis on the positive attributes and expertise developed by many individuals during care experiences – including independence and the ability to navigate complexity – could provide the basis for increasing success and attainment in higher education.

5) **Similarly, that universities develop strategies to raise completion rates of care leaver students.** We found relatively low completion rates, likely reflecting the well-documented challenges that care leavers face at different points over their educational journey. Our interviews revealed particular difficulties in managing course placements, caring and parental responsibilities, and paid employment duties. These themes have also been cited as barriers to completion in other countries (Okpych & Courtney, 2018) and could be addressed through targeted financial support and flexibility. Universities could continue to pursue and expand opportunities to enhance professional experience through placements and professional projects, while considering and mitigating the immediate impact of lost income during such placements. Given many care leaver students are studying in precarious financial circumstances, often working long hours to support themselves, conventional approaches to student placement can become a barrier to participation and success.

6) **That universities provide dedicated counselling and information to care leaver students considering withdrawal, particularly around options to take a Leave of Absence or move to part-time status.** Our students followed bifurcated paths and after five years of enrolment had typically either completed or withdrawn, suggesting a gap in awareness of alternatives.

7) **That further research be commissioned and conducted into the graduate outcomes of care leavers, including transitions to employment and postgraduate education.** Research from England suggests relatively high transitions to postgraduate study (Harrison, Baker & Stevenson, 2020), consistent with the experiences of our interviewees. Such trends may reflect the reality of limited employment opportunities following graduation, an attraction to the institutional context of the university, or a range of other factors.

8) **That Universities Australia and other peak bodies promote a specific focus on out-of-home care within institutional Indigenous strategies.** Our findings were consistent with previous research, which has confirmed an over-representation of Indigenous young people in care, limited cultural and transitional support for those Indigenous people, and relatively low transitions to higher education. Among other imperatives, universities, governments, and other stakeholders have an obligation to increase the proportion of Indigenous care leavers transitioning to higher education.

Introduction

We begin this report with a brief background to the current study. Australian research into care-experienced university students has lagged behind several other countries, primarily because of the absence of qualitative and longitudinal data, and an associated gap in tertiary education policy. We outline the ongoing under-representation of care leavers in higher education; the international evidence around retention, completion, and graduate outcomes of care leavers; and the intersection of education and broader policies around out-of-home care, particularly the extension of state support beyond the age of 18.

In the second section we reveal findings from our analysis of longitudinal data across two Australian universities. The data confirm the potential to increase care leaver enrolments with targeted, collaborative efforts. We also examine the geo-demographic profile and course choices of the care leaver cohort, along with success, retention, and completion rates.

The final section of this report addresses findings from our interviews with care leaver students and graduates. Interviews focussed on the challenges and strengths of our interviewees within a university context, including the management of course placements, caring, parenting, and multiple time demands, financial instability, effects of the pandemic, and the adaptation of their goal orientation and often accelerated independence, which in some cases enabled effective study and timely course completion. In these discussions we focus particularly on the under-researched issues of retention, completion, and graduate outcomes.

Background

The journey of care leavers within higher education is now well-documented internationally, and we have previously written at length on the participation and experiences of Australian care leavers in particular (Harvey et al., 2015; Harvey et al., 2017). Access to higher education remains a challenge for the 46,000 or so Australians (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare – AIHW, 2021) in out-of-home care, including foster, kinship, and residential care. In the United States (US), fewer than one in ten foster youth complete 2-year or 4-year degrees by early adulthood (Okpych & Courtney, 2018), while in England, the higher education participation rate for care-experienced students is around 12 per cent (Harrison, 2017). Similarly, a recent Australian review found a higher education participation rate of less than 9 per cent for foster care children (Tomaszewski et al., 2018). In each case, these access rates are far below those of the broader population.

While Australian research to date has focussed on challenges of access and participation and, to a lesser extent, the experiences of enrolled care-experienced students (Michell, Jackson & Tonkin, 2015; Harvey et al., 2017), no studies have yet been able to interrogate longitudinal data to explore success, retention, and outcome patterns. This gap is problematic, as our previous research (Harvey, Burnheim & Brett, 2016) highlighted the need for a life cycle approach to student equity, confirming that some groups face challenges at different points along the spectrum. Indigenous students, for example, record particularly low retention rates relative to other students, while students with a disability and those from refugee backgrounds typically experience poorer graduate outcomes than others. Further, recent international research suggests that care-experienced students often record lower completions and employment outcomes than other students (Harrison et al., 2020; Okypch & Courtney, 2018).

There are multiple reasons posited for relatively poor university completions, including both legacy issues of being in care and post-enrolment factors. Prominent authors such as Stein and Sebba have highlighted long-term issues, including the ongoing effects of school disruption, related low school achievement, and paucity of social capital/informal networks held by many care leavers, which can affect enrolment, completion, and employability outcomes (Sebba et al., 2015; Stein, 2012). Unstable accommodation, finances, and mental and physical health issues are also prominent factors influencing post-care transitions, including university enrolment and completion (McDowall, 2020; Mendes, Michell & Wilson, 2014). Harrison et al. (2020, p.1) also noted that, in the United Kingdom (UK), care-experienced graduates ‘are crucially over-represented in groups that are disadvantaged in the graduate labour market — e.g., by ethnicity, disability or educational history’.

Interestingly, one analysis of the Midwest Study in the US found that background characteristics were less related to likely college completion than more recent, post-enrolment factors. The study highlighted the importance of post-enrolment events, such as parenthood or needing to work longer hours, to likely completion of a degree (Okpych & Courtney, 2018). Our own previous qualitative research in Australia stressed the importance of both long-term, background factors and more transient influences on university persistence (Harvey, Andrewartha, et al., 2017). Indeed, the two were often connected, with interviewees noting that longer term factors – e.g., financial and housing instability, trauma – were often triggered by particular post-enrolment events. Our research also revealed that care leavers undertake a substantial journey of education, self-awareness, and identity across the course of their degree, similar to other university students but in many cases more pronounced. Being care-experienced is not a fixed state or identity.

Relatedly, our previous research has also highlighted the strengths that many care leavers bring to their studies, and their positive influence on the learning and university experience of other students. In previous research, including interviews with 35 care leavers, we noted that

the students often have ‘reserves of determination and persistence that enable them to overcome severe educational barriers and challenges’, and uncommon levels of independence (Harvey, Campbell, Andrewartha, Wilson & Goodwin-Burns, 2017, p.6). Further, such students are aware of the benefits that their own diverse perspectives and experiences can bring to other students, and to university staff, within and beyond the classroom. Our interviews for this project confirmed similar patterns of determination and, in many cases, an accelerated independence aligned with a future-focussed approach to study.

Notwithstanding an emerging body of qualitative research on factors affecting university success, persistence and completion, quantitative research in Australia has remained limited. Despite ongoing policy advocacy (Harvey et al., 2015), the Australian Government still does not require the identification or reporting of care leaver students in higher education, and existing research has typically been limited to individual institutions. Equally, there is no Australian equivalent of the English Quality Mark for universities, now overseen by the National Network for the Education of Care Leavers (NNECL). The Quality Mark is an independently assessed recognition of institutional commitment towards care-experienced students and has played a key role in raising the profile and support levels of care leavers in higher education since originally introduced by the Buttle Trust (NNECL, 2021). Some state-based tertiary admissions centres (TACs) do now collect data on the care leaver status of university applicants, and some state governments collect similar data on Technical and Further Education (TAFE) enrolments within vocational education and training (VET). However, such data have not been published and are primarily focussed on recording access and participation.

The absence of longitudinal data is particularly problematic given the significant recent institutional and policy changes in related areas. The Victorian Government, for example, introduced Lookout schools in 2017, based on the English Virtual Schools model for looked-after children (National Association of Virtual School Heads, 2021). Most recently, the program has been expanded with the addition of dedicated careers advisers in each region, partly with the aim of increasing knowledge of post-secondary pathways among those students in care. In addition, the Victorian Government has funded and supported the *Raising Expectations* program. Originally a collaboration between the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, La Trobe University, and Federation University Australia, *Raising Expectations* is specifically focussed on raising the education aspirations of young people in care and has contributed to the substantial participation growth within both institutions (Drok, 2020).

In addition, the Victorian Government is one of several jurisdictions to offer extended care and support, through to 21 years of age, for those in out-of-home care (Mendes, 2021a). This offer of accommodation and broader state support is likely to make a significant difference not only to the welfare and financial circumstances of young people in care, but to their postsecondary education and longer-term planning (Courtney, Dworsky, Brown, Cary, Love, & Vorhies, 2011; Munro et al., 2012). Extension of care has been driven largely by the *HomeStretch* campaign (Mendes, 2021a), in which a national not-for-profit organisation, Anglicare, joined with care-experienced young people to advocate the importance of extending support beyond the age of 18 years.

The benefits of extending care could be better documented and understood if relevant higher education data were collected, and it is notable that a connected approach in California has resulted in large numbers of foster care students transitioning to higher education while formally supported beyond the age of 18 (Okpych & Courtney, 2018). In the absence of government reporting, multi-institutional collaboration such as that documented in this report can still provide meaningful, if imperfect, evidence. The analysis in this paper should be seen as a necessary next step towards a more comprehensive, systematic cross-institutional focus on effective data collection and analysis, rather than a substitute for it.

Better understanding of care leaver university enrolments and completions is therefore necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of broader out-of-home care policy reforms, in addition to specific higher education strategies. Moreover, establishing care leavers as a priority group within Australian higher education is germane to the broader objective of decolonising the academy and prioritising Indigenous students. Over one third of Australian children in out-of-home care are Indigenous (Mendes et al., 2020). Despite this extraordinary statistic, itself related to a history of dispossession, the stolen generations, and associated intergenerational trauma, recent research confirms an ongoing lack of funding and cultural support for Indigenous young people in out-of-home care (McDowall, 2016), and a particular lack of funding for Aboriginal Controlled Community Organisations (ACCOs) (Mendes et al., 2020).

In 2017, the peak professional and advocacy body for the higher education sector, Universities Australia, developed an Indigenous Strategy (Universities Australia, 2017). The Indigenous Strategy was designed to: 'improve enrolments and performance in students, academics/researchers and staff; increase the engagement of non-Indigenous people with Indigenous knowledge, culture and educational approaches; and improve the university environment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.' One way of strengthening this approach would be to advocate a specific sectoral agenda around care leavers, including through recording, monitoring, outreach, recruitment, support, and employment initiatives. As has been widely documented, such a policy approach for care-experienced students has been adopted in England with positive results. An Australian agenda could improve the transitions of all young people in care, but particularly Indigenous young people who remain over-represented in care and under-represented among both higher education enrolments and completions.

Quantitative analysis

In the following section we analyse a range of data on care leaver students, collected across two Australian universities between 2016 and 2020. The analysis included two primary objectives: to examine the achievement and outcomes of care leaver students across the universities; and, relatedly, to compare and contrast care leaver achievement and outcomes with other equity groups and non-care leavers over the same period. Our analysis follows the student life cycle, beginning with enrolments, equity group membership status, and information about course choice, status, and campus of enrolment. We then consider success, retention, and completion rates. Unfortunately, we do not currently have sufficient data to examine graduate outcomes, but such work is planned for future years, consistent with recent English analysis (Harrison et al., 2020). Broader implications of the findings are discussed at the end of the section.

Data & Definitions

We use data gathered from student enrolment records from Federation University Australia and La Trobe University from 2016 through to the end of 2020.

In the first instance, we filtered the raw data to fashion a sample that includes the following:

- Only domestic students.
- Higher education coursework students (no research students or non-award study).

The Achievement & Outcomes section of the analysis further filters the sample to only include bachelor level study.

A major part of the analysis is to compare and contrast care leaver outcomes with other marginalised student groups. For this we use five of the equity groups defined among the conventional *A Fair Chance for All* (AFCFA) equity groups that form the basis for the Australian Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE) reporting on equity in Australian higher education. Unfortunately, we were not able to obtain data for another of the major equity groups, women studying in non-traditional areas, so we have excluded this group from the analysis. The remaining AFCFA equity groups include:

- People from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds.
- People from regional and remote areas.
- People with disability.
- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people.
- People from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB).

For equity categories that rely on a student's address for identification (e.g., low SES or regional and remote), we use the student's postcode to assign their equity information. The Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) Statistical Areas Level 1 (SA1) categorisation provides a more disaggregated and accurate measure of SES or regionality, but our data were not sufficiently detailed to derive this measure. It should be noted also, specifically with respect to measuring SES using area-based indices provided by the ABS, that they can potentially misclassify individual level SES.

Access & participation

Care leaver access and participation has continued to grow at the two participating universities since identifying and supporting students from care leaver backgrounds has become an equity priority, although it dipped slightly in 2020 (Table 1). The combination of care leavers being retained over multiple years and more continuing students coming forward and identifying as care leavers, has contributed to participation nearly doubling

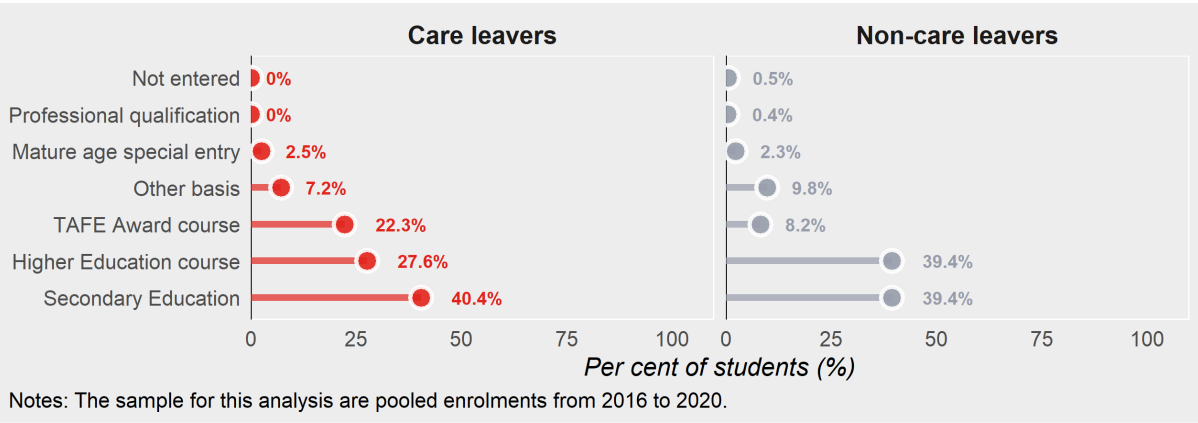
between 2016 and 2020. By 2020, around 200 care leavers were enrolled across the two institutions. Growth in care leaver participation has outpaced overall enrolment growth at the participating universities. Albeit from a low base, the care leaver participation rate (care leavers as a percentage of all enrolments) has doubled between 2016 and 2020, from 0.28 per cent to 0.55 per cent. Unfortunately, we did not have access to the time series data of Equivalent Full-Time Student Load (EFTSL) or Part-Time/Full-Time status of students, so we were unable to track this over time.

Table 1. Access and participation for care leavers, 2016-2020

Year	Commencing	Continuing	Total
2016	52	48	100
2017	91	76	167
2018	95	94	189
2019	72	124	196
2020	80	113	193

Our analysis found that around one in five (22.3 per cent, Figure 1) care leavers were admitted to university on the basis of a VET or TAFE award – more than double the proportion of non-care leavers (8.2 per cent). This is a particular interesting finding of this research, indicating possibly that many care leavers either enter VET/TAFE with an ambition to move further into higher education, and/or that they develop that ambition while at VET/TAFE, at a higher rate than others. When considering recruitment of care leavers to further education, this should prompt us to probe deeper into whether VET/TAFE is indeed where a care leaving prospective student wants to go, or if it is where they have been encouraged to go based on expectations of themselves and others.

Care leavers were just as likely as non-care leavers to enrol on the basis of their secondary education results, possibly because of the two universities' strong focus on secondary schools and young people in care, aligned with the broader *Raising Expectations* program. A lower share of care leavers were enrolled on the basis of previous higher education study than non-care leavers (27.6 per cent vs 39.4 per cent).



Notes: The sample for this analysis are pooled enrolments from 2016 to 2020.

Figure 1. Basis of admission shares by care leaver status

Care leavers and cumulative disadvantage

Care leavers are much more likely than students overall to be members of other identified equity groups. As Table 2 shows, a quarter (26 per cent) of care leavers were from low SES areas compared to a fifth (21 per cent) of overall enrolments. Around six per cent (5.7 per cent) of care leavers were Indigenous, compared with one per cent (1.2 per cent) of overall enrolments. Care leavers were more than twice as likely as other students to disclose

disability (23.4 per cent compared to 10.6 per cent). Care leavers were also more likely to be from regional or remote areas (47 per cent compared to 39.8 per cent), and NESB groups (15.4 per cent compared to 7 per cent), than students overall. The definition of NESB can be limiting, in that it only includes students who have arrived less than ten years prior to enrolment. We conducted a further analysis by student country of birth and found that 83 per cent of non-care leavers were born in Australia, compared to 68.5 per cent of care leavers.

Table 2. Multiple equity group membership matrix of participation rates

Group	Care leavers (%)	Disability (%)	Indigenous (%)	Low SES (%)	NESB (%)	Regional & remote (%)
Care leavers	-	23.4	5.7	26.0	15.4	47.0
Disability	1.1	-	2.4	19.9	3.2	42.4
Indigenous	2.3	20.2	-	34.0	0.2	62.1
Low SES	0.6	10.0	2.0	-	7.1	57.1
NESB	1.1	4.8	0.4	21.7	-	17.1
Regional & remote	0.6	11.4	1.9	30.5	3.0	-
Overall	0.5	10.6	1.2	21.2	7.0	39.8

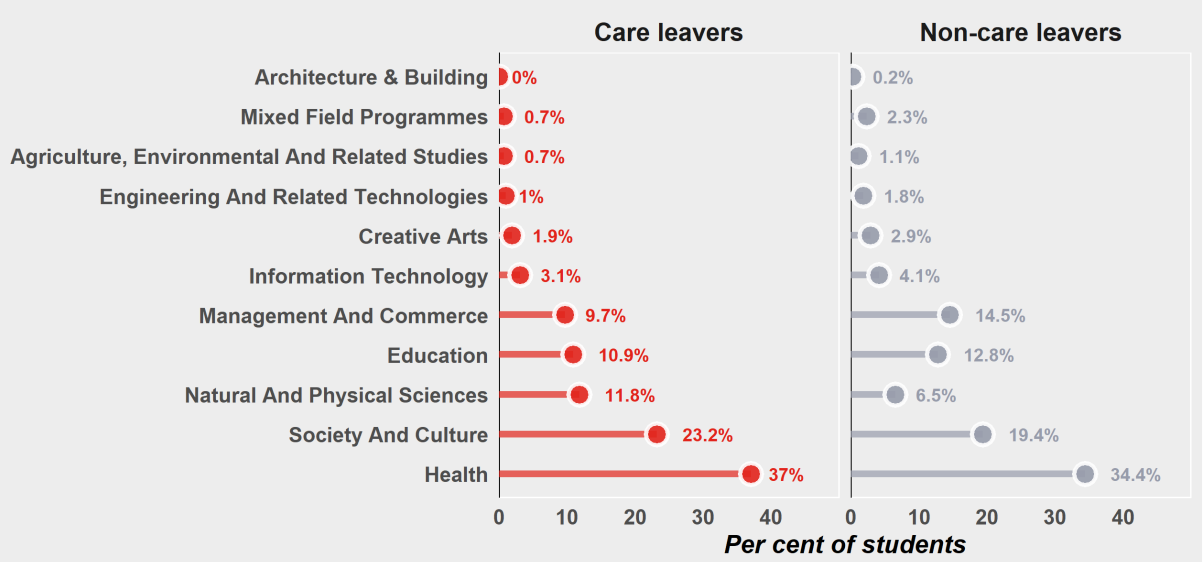
Women make up the majority of students at the two institutions we drew our data from. However, women make up an even greater proportion of care leavers than non-care leavers. While just over two-thirds (65.6 per cent) of non-care leavers at the two institutions were women, nearly three-quarters (73.8 per cent) of care leavers were women.

Our analysis of the age distribution of care leavers takes the age of a student at the first year of enrolment that was captured in our sample years. Care leavers were more likely than non-care leavers to be under the age of 20 (38.8 per cent vs 30.2 per cent), and interestingly, were also more likely than non-care leavers to be 30 years or older (28.7 per cent vs 23.1 per cent).

We built on this age distribution analysis by splitting the data further by gender, revealing an intriguing distinction between female and male care leavers. Male care leavers were more likely to be younger than female care leavers. Some 43.7 per cent of male care leavers were aged under 20, compared to 37.2 per cent of women care leavers. Conversely, women care leavers were more likely than male care leavers to be 30 or over (30.5 per cent vs 24.4 per cent).

Care leavers and course characteristics

Over a third of care leavers were enrolled in health courses, similar to enrolment levels for non-care leavers (Figure 2). Care leavers were more likely to be enrolled in courses that fall within the society & culture field of education (23.2 per cent compared to 19.4 per cent) and within the natural and physical science courses (11.8 per cent compared to 6.5 per cent).

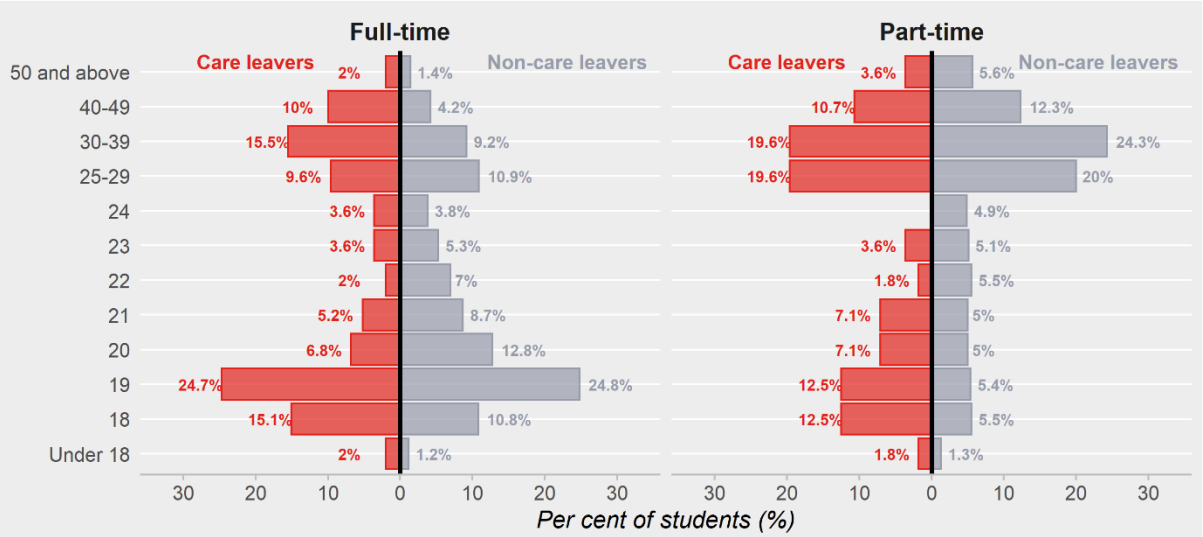


Notes: The sample for this analysis are pooled enrolments from 2016 to 2020.

Figure 2. Broad field of education enrolment shares by care leaver status

Almost all care leavers were engaged in 'on campus' study, with just seven per cent enrolled in online study. In contrast, ten per cent of non-care leavers were enrolled in online coursework. Also, care leavers were more likely than non-care leaver students to be based at a regional campus.

We found that, compared to other students, care leavers were more likely to be enrolled in full time study (77 per cent compared to 68.5 per cent). We investigated further the relatively high share of care leavers in full-time study by breaking down study load by age (Figure 3). For both care leavers and non-care leavers, most full-time students were below 25 years of age, whereas the majority of part-time students were over 25 years of age. As the care leaver student population has higher shares of students below 20 years of age compared to non-care leavers, this may explain in part of why care leavers are more likely to be enrolled full-time. However, interestingly, a larger share of care leavers aged 30 and over were studying full-time, compared to non-care leavers in the same age bracket (27.5 per cent vs 14.8 per cent).



Notes: The sample for this analysis are pooled enrolments from 2016 to 2020.

Figure 3. Age distribution by study load and care leaver status

Care leavers and success

The success rate takes successfully completed units in an enrolment year, as a percentage of all units attempted. Across all the enrolment years in our data the success rate for care leavers has been below that of other students (Table 3).

Table 3. Success rates of care leavers and overall enrolments

Year	Care leavers (%)	Overall (%)
2016	78.1	84.1
2017	67.0	83.2
2018	77.7	83.9
2019	76.3	85.4
2020	77.3	86.4

Figure 4 compares care leaver success rates to success rates for identified equity groups. Between 2016 and 2020, care leaver success rates were similar to those of students with disability or who identified as Indigenous. In contrast, care leavers had much lower success rates compared to low SES students, NESB students, or students from regional and remote areas. Year on year fluctuations, particularly in 2017, may be related to the relatively small sample size of the care leaver cohort in individual years.

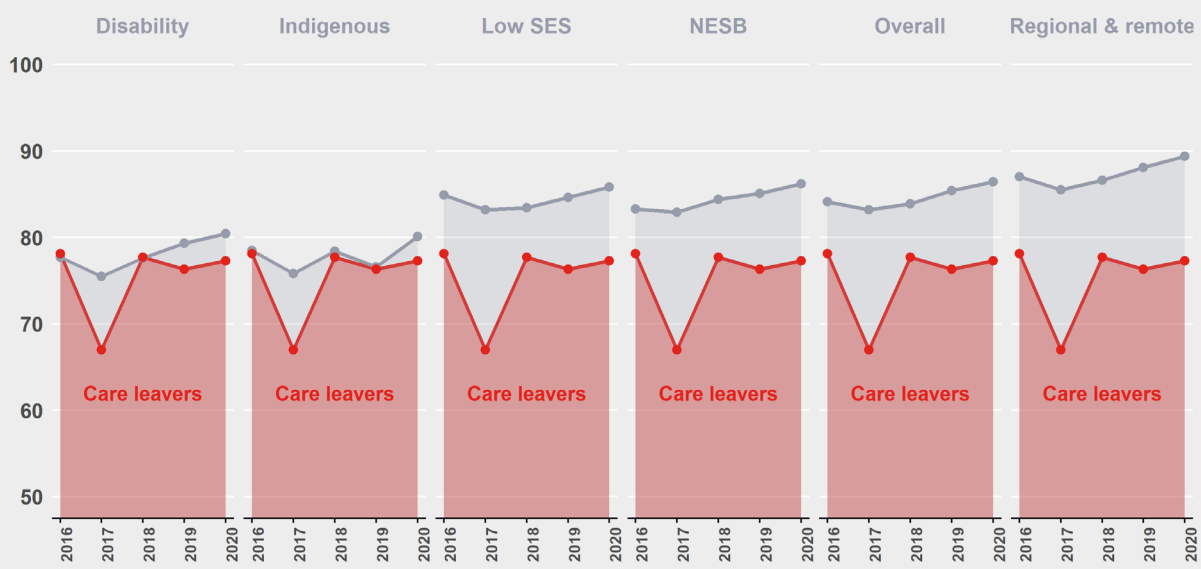


Figure 4. Success rates over time for care leavers and comparison equity groups

Care leavers and institutional retention

The measure of institutional retention includes students who have left the participating universities. However, it does not account for students who transferred to complete a degree at another university. As with previous measures, the retention rate for care leavers is relatively volatile, higher than comparison groups in some years, and slightly lower in others (Table 4 and Figure 5).

Table 4. Retention rates of care leavers and overall enrolments

Year	Care leavers (%)	Overall (%)
2016	92.7	85.0
2017	84.4	84.3
2018	86.1	82.6
2019	83.2	83.4
2020	85.5	85.6

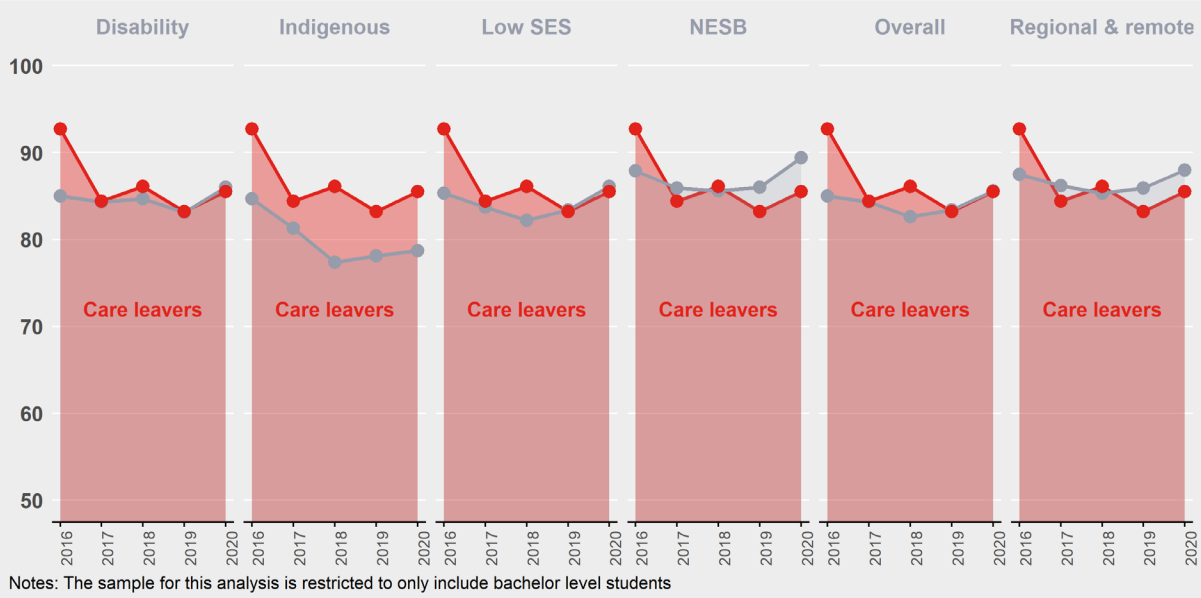


Figure 5. Institutional retention rate over time for care leavers and comparison equity groups

Care leavers and institutional course completion

The measure of completion also only includes course completion at the participating universities and cannot capture students who transfer and complete their degree elsewhere. We included care leavers who commenced in 2016 and 2017. This allows us to calculate five-year and four-year completion rates for care leavers in bachelor level study.

Figure 6 shows that just over half of care leavers had withdrawn from their course five years after commencement, compared to a third of non-care leavers. The outcomes were similar four years out from commencement, although a larger proportion of students were still enrolled. Interestingly, the gap between completions for care leavers and non-care leavers was smaller than the withdrawal rate would suggest. While a significant minority of non-care leavers were still enrolled if they had not completed, this was less likely to be the case for care leavers. As shown earlier, care leavers are more likely to study full-time, and tend either to complete or withdraw after five years.

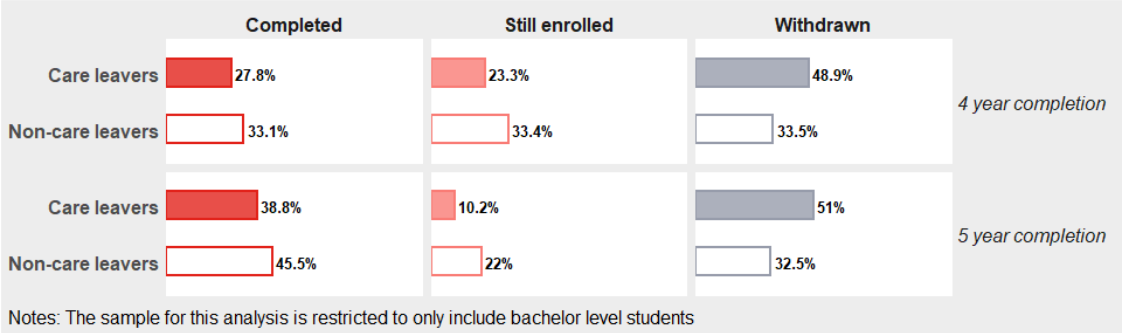


Figure 6. Four, and five-year completion by care leaver status

Discussion of quantitative analysis

The data reveal important new information about care-experienced students in Australian higher education. The upward trend in enrolments over time reflects the success of recruitment and identification strategies within and across the two institutions, aligned with the broader *Raising Expectations* program. Analysis of equity group membership reveals that care leavers are more likely to be from one or more equity groups than other students, including over-representation within the non-English speaking background, disability, and Indigenous cohorts. These patterns are consistent with previous research and broader trends across out-of-home care, with care leavers highly represented among Indigenous people, new migrants, and people with a declared disability, particularly involving trauma and mental health.

Course choices reflected broad and diverse interests. While health, humanities and social science courses were popular choices, care leavers were enrolled across a wide range of fields of study, underlining the value of comprehensive careers advice within and beyond the out-of-home care system. Interestingly, care leavers were more likely than other students to be enrolled at regional campuses, and in a full-time capacity. It would be helpful to interrogate the proclivity to full-time study in particular, and the extent to which that status explains care leaver tendencies either to complete or withdraw from their course after five years of study. There may, for example, be gaps in knowledge about leave of absence and/or transitions to part-time study that are hindering long-term retention and completion rates.

In examining success, retention, and completion rates, we found the performance of care leavers significantly below that of most other students, and at similar levels to Indigenous students and those with disability. Again, further research would be required to confirm the causes of these gaps, but their existence suggests a need for institutions to strengthen their support for continuing care leaver students beyond a focus on broadening access and participation rates. In the next section, we reveal the views of care leaver students and graduates, which provide further insight into the likely causes of success and retention gaps, but also into the way that care leavers are successfully managing compound, and in many cases extreme, disadvantage.

Interview analysis

To learn more about the experiences of recent care leaver university students completing university and entering the workforce, we interviewed seven recent graduates. To recruit the seven interview participants, we emailed all recent care leaver graduates of one university included in the study. Seven care leaver graduates replied, and all seven participated in interviews.

The interviews were conducted in September 2021 via Zoom. Interviewees were asked a range of questions about their geo-demographics, their pathway to university, their study experiences, their extra-curricular study experiences, and their experiences of seeking and obtaining employment post-graduation. Given the COVID-19 pandemic of the past 18 months, participants were also asked specific questions about how the pandemic had affected their study and employment experiences.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed, then sent to interviewees for verifying. Once verified, the transcripts were analysed for major themes. An interpretative phenomenological approach was applied (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). In the below analysis, we present findings from the major identified themes.

Geo-demographic profile of interviewees

Six of the seven interviewees were female, with one graduate identifying as gender non-binary and/or queer. Most were of an Anglo-Australian background, with one graduate identifying as Indigenous. At the time of interviewing, interviewees ranged in age from their early 20s to their early 40s. All had commenced their degree prior to the age of 30, with three of the graduates having commenced their degree prior to attaining 21 years. Four of the graduates were admitted to the university on the basis of having completed some TAFE. Two were admitted on the basis of having completed their higher school certificate, both in unconventional ways (i.e., not in a mainstream school setting). Only one interviewee had completed secondary school in the standard manner and been admitted directly to university.

All seven interviewees completed their undergraduate degrees between 2017 and 2020. Six of the graduates had completed within the standard (full-time) timeframe, i.e., 2-4 years depending on course length and prior achievement. One graduate had dipped in and out of study while raising her child and took almost twenty years to complete her undergraduate degree, having acquired a disability in the meantime. Two other interviewees were raising at least one child while completing their undergraduate degree. One interviewee was pregnant during her final year and gave birth to her first child upon completion.

The interviewees graduated from a variety of courses, most of which were vocationally oriented. Two had completed masters-level social work degrees; another two had completed teaching degrees. One interviewee had undertaken a Bachelor of Nursing degree and another a Bachelor of Business degree. The final student had completed an arts degree. Three of the seven interviewees had studied at a regional campus, while the other four were enrolled at a metropolitan campus. All seven were engaged in ‘on campus’ study.

Compared to the geo-demographics of the care leavers enrolled at the two institutions between 2016 and 2020, the interviewees shared both typical and atypical traits. The interviewees were typical in the sense that we know the cohort of care leaver students were more likely to be female, and to identify as Indigenous, than the average undergraduate student at the two institutions. Interviewees were also more likely to have been admitted on

the basis of prior participation in TAFE, to have engaged in 'on campus' study, and to have been enrolled full-time. The group was also relatively typical in terms of the range of courses in which they had been enrolled, and their split between metropolitan and regional campuses.

However, some characteristics of the interviewees were atypical in comparison to the wider care leaver and non-care leaver cohort. For instance, participants were young when they commenced their degrees (100 per cent of interviewees were aged under 30 years at the time of commencement, compared to 71 per cent of the care leaver cohort and 77 per cent of students overall); all were born in Australia (100 per cent of interviewees, compared to 69 per cent of the care leaver cohort and 83 per cent of students overall). The group was also atypical in that 86 per cent completed their degrees within four years of commencement, whereas the comparison rates for the care leaver and non-care leaver cohorts at the two institutions are much lower (28 per cent for care leavers and 33 per cent for non-care leavers).

Thus, the seven interviewees were reasonably representative of the care leaver cohort at the two institutions, except for the fact that they were all born in Australia and completed their degree, for the most part, in the minimum timeframe. Three of the seven interviewees have also gone onto enrol in higher level courses (Masters & PhDs), and the others stated an intention to undertake further study. Three interviewees were also caring for children while completing their undergraduate degrees. As a group, therefore, the interviewees are exceptional in certain ways, and it is important to bear this in mind when considering the remainder of the interview findings.

The interviewees were also a very high-achieving group. As high achievers, they were not representative of the overall care leaver cohort, whose retention and completion rates are lower than average. However, our interviewees shared many of the same challenges and their experiences provide important lessons for institutions, governments, and other stakeholders on how to engender and support a culture of success.

Motivating factors – the search for material security, a sense of moral duty or purpose, and a sense of belonging

All of the interviewees were incredibly motivated to achieve highly, and this affected their decision to enrol in university, their choice of course, and the resilience and determination with which they pursued their course and subsequent professional employment and/or higher-level study. Their high levels of motivation stemmed from a variety of positive and negative influences. Most were aware of the statistics surrounding people who grew up in care and were determined to minimise common risks such as homelessness, unemployment, incarceration, and/or having their own children taken into care. Most had also been required to be very independent from an early age — emotionally, financially, materially, and otherwise. This journey meant they were often more independent than the average university student, but they were also determined not to endlessly endure the financial and housing instability they had experienced as children. Most had no reliable family to fall back on, and no inherited wealth expected in the future; they each considered that they were the only people who could give themselves the security that many had never experienced but all craved. They had therefore taken it upon themselves to ensure that happened. For some, this prioritisation of self-reliance did not come immediately. At least two interviewees had been previously living with partners who they eventually came to see as abusive. Later, having freed themselves from situations of domestic violence, they

became incredibly determined to ensure their own self-sufficiency, regardless of whether they were partnered or unpartnered.

> *I was determined not to be the Aboriginal person who lowered the stats. I was going to be part of that 3 per cent that was going to achieve what I needed to achieve. And I wasn't going to have society tell me that all this research and all this other stuff is saying that being an out-of-home care child and being an Aboriginal child means I can't achieve it. So, I think that made me butt my head against the system and just really knuckle down and do it.*
>
> Diane, Bachelor of Human Services and Master of Social Work graduate

> *Yeah, everyone that I've come across of a similar background has had just this mindset of, go hard, go fast, because you don't know when it's going to end kind of thing. Yeah, it's almost like you're always running from something but you're not quite sure what, if that makes sense. It's just a fear of failure or fear of living up to the expectations society has of you I think, for the most part.*
>
> Eliza, Bachelor of Teaching (Outreach and Community Education) graduate

Importantly, all interviewees had secure housing throughout their time at university and this no doubt impacted their ability to complete their degrees in the minimum timeframe. Having a secure living situation is not the norm for care leavers, and all interviewees had previously experienced bouts of housing insecurity since transitioning from care. However, perhaps as part of their drive to ensure their own self-sufficiency, all interviewees had first ensured their own housing security, insofar as possible, prior to enrolling at university. Only one lived on campus, one was living in a mortgaged property (which limited her access to scholarships), and one was living with extended family. The others were all living in rented properties with partners, children and/or friends. The drive to have a place of their own, that they could call home, seemed to be particularly strong amongst this group of graduates, many of whom were busy buying, building and/or paying off properties at the time of interview.

The interviewees were not purely motivated by a search for security and a desire to be on the right side of the statistics for care leavers, however. And none were purely motivated by financial security or money. Rather, most also expressed a desire to give something back to the community to which they belonged. They wanted to do some good in the world, through their professional employment, at the same time as acting as a role model for younger siblings, their own children, other care leavers, young people currently in the care system, and/or young people in general. For the two graduates of social work, part of their motivation was to change or improve the child protection system that they had been through. For the two teaching graduates, part of their motivation was to change and influence the lives of the young people they worked with and their families. Having been through the care system themselves, during which time all were exposed to both positive and negative people and experiences, all were determined to ensure a better life for themselves than the life they had heretofore experienced, but all were simultaneously determined not give back to their community, to not lose sight of their own humanity.

I've slowly come to realise that despite everything I went through I never lost my humanity. And that's a big thing because a lot of people do. And a lot of people never find it either. But I've realised that despite everything it never got drummed out of me. And it would have been so much easier to have just stopped caring. Like to go off and get just any job. I could have easily gone and got a job that paid the bills, paid the mortgage, just did whatever. But I didn't.

Cara, Bachelor of Arts (Honours) and Master of International Relations graduate

I went to the Head of Campus when I kept hearing about the campus's 'great connections with industry'. I said, 'I'm a student here. I've never been connected to industry. All I see is you having these VIP events that students aren't invited to.' So, I actually set up a dinner where we invited industry alumni who had gone off and done wonderful things to have dinner with current students. We sat them all down in a room together in tables, and we had a guest speaker. And we did that every year until COVID took it away last year. So, it was things like that where I just decided that no one else is going to make the change, I have to be part of the change. And I think that's the attitude that people need or should try and go into it with, because one thing that my childhood taught me is that nothing comes to you. You've got to go and fight for it.

Grace, Bachelor of Business graduate and current Master of Management student

Along with material security and a sense of moral duty or purpose, a third motivating factor for enrolling in and completing their degrees that emerged during the interviews was the search for a sense of belonging. All interviewees had had experiences of both belonging and alienation in their lives, and all were keen to pursue a positive sense of belonging not just in their personal lives, but in their professional lives as well.

For some, a sense of belonging at university took time to develop, as they became acculturated to the academic environment. This was especially true for those who transitioned to university from TAFE, often going straight into the second year of a course where friendship groups may have already been formed and unfamiliar academic skills such as referencing mastered. For others, a sense of belonging at university took time to develop because they had to wait for the other students – who were the same age but far less independent – to 'catch up' and become more self-reliant. For the Indigenous graduate, a sense of belonging at university was mostly found within the haven of the Indigenous students' unit. For one young graduate, a sense of belonging was found while studying at a small, regional campus, where they soon found work as a peer learning adviser and later became actively involved in a range of extra-curricular, campus-based activities.

Regardless of where or how a sense of belonging was found, the need to belong was a common theme for all interviewees. Whenever interviewees were struggling with their courses, or with other aspects of their lives, having a support network (in the form of friends, colleagues, or Indigenous allies) to help motivate them to stay enrolled at university was deemed critical. For all their determination to ensure financial security in their lives, to become a role model, give back to the community and defy statistics, it seems likely that the care leaver graduates we spoke to would have found it more challenging to complete their courses had this critical sense of belonging at/with/to the university been absent. Given the variety of experiences of the interviewees, it did not seem to matter where or how that sense of belonging was found, only that it was found, and that it endured.

I think I got really lucky at my campus. I found my space and, because it was a smaller campus, people knew people. Even the town is small, so people know people. If they could take that and apply it at larger campuses, I think less people would get lost and less people would … It's so easy I think at these bigger campuses for anyone, regardless of background, who is struggling a little bit, just to switch off and say, "No", and pull out of uni. Like it's so easy to do that.

Grace, Bachelor of Business graduate and current Master of Management student

I had such a fantastic time at uni. I felt like I belonged and that is such a Massive thing. Especially when you come from a place where you feel like you don't belong anywhere. In care. So yeah, I really loved it.

Pamela, Bachelor of Nursing graduate

Undoubtedly, a sense of belonging at university is critical to the success of all students. However, for students with an out-of-home care background, a sense of belonging is potentially even more vital because those students are perhaps less likely to have this in their personal lives (due to the lack of family support), while at the same time being more likely to face hardships that might cause them to withdraw from study (such as periods of homelessness, for example).

It is also possible that a sense of belonging at university may be more difficult for students with an out-of-home care background to acquire, given they are more likely than the average student to be facing intersectional discrimination, and to have had disrupted educational experiences in the past. Of those we spoke with, most had eventually let others in their course know about their out-of-home care background. At times, this led to a greater sense of belonging within their peer-group; at others, it became a source of further alienation – or some complicated mix of the two (see quote below). None of the interviewees had the experience of connecting with other care leavers throughout their time at university, and then being able to draw on that connection and the commonality of their experience/s as a basis for belonging at university.

In my second year of university, we went to the Whitsundays for one of our university trips. We were out sea kayaking for two weeks, so we got to know each other quite well. And one person brought up the question, they're like, "Actually, come to think of it, Mae, I've never known anything about you from your family side, that sort of thing." And then I was, I wouldn't say I'm ashamed of my past, but because I haven't grown up in the same way everybody else has, I had to explain that to a couple of people in my group, and then obviously the whole group sort of started to know, because we were out there for two weeks, and they're like, "Oh, we would never have guessed because you're so motivated to do so many things and you're so bright and bubbly." And a lot of people started to be grateful for the little things that they would have taken for granted prior. So, once I explained that I'd rented for years and had to fend for myself they were like, "Oh, I'm glad that I have parents to back me up when I need." They just hadn't really thought about that.

Mae, Bachelor of Outdoor Education graduate and current Master of Teaching student

Whereas care leavers tend to be isolated and scattered throughout the university – unaware of who each other are and therefore unable to form a sense of community amongst themselves – Indigenous students, many of whom are care leavers also, tend to be banded or bonded together, yet still isolated from the mainstream elements of the university. The

Indigenous care leaver interviewee spoke of how important the Indigenous studies unit was to her sense of belonging, in the context of what is still essentially a very colonial institution.

> *I suppose I found that studying wasn't very cultural, it just didn't take the cultural lens into account at all. It was like, you're in the Indigenous unit, that's it, that's your cultural lens. But I don't feel like it was brought in much in any of the subjects or anything. The university definitely needs to decolonise in terms of, the Aboriginal aspect needs to filter right through. I felt that everyone needed to do that first and second year of Aboriginal studies. I think it teaches you a lot. And I don't think that it should only be certain areas that do that.*
>
> Diane, Bachelor of Human Services and Master of Social Work graduate

Employability – course selection, placements, volunteer experience and paid employment

At the time of interviewing, five of the seven interviewees were employed within their chosen professions, another was gainfully employed but not in her chosen profession, and the last was currently studying full-time in a higher-level degree. The high employment rate of the interviewees can be attributed to a number of factors, including: the predominantly vocationally oriented degrees the interviewees had completed; their long employment histories (commencing age 15 onwards for many of them, including through their university studies); and finally, their aforementioned motivation levels (for financial security, giving back to the community, and establishing a sense of professional belonging).

The majority of interviewees had completed vocationally oriented degrees. This doubtless impacted their high employment levels at the time of interviewing, particularly given that we were mid-pandemic. Two interviewees were graduates of social work degrees (both are now employed as social workers); two were teaching graduates (one is now employed as a teacher and the other is employed in another field due to the COVID-19 pandemic); the nursing graduate is working as a nurse (administering COVID vaccinations); the business graduate is working within human resources (HR); and the arts graduate is enrolled in a Masters-level course. Five of the interviewees completed placements as part of their courses, which greatly assisted in their transition to employment in their chosen profession. These professions have been deemed "essential" as part of the response to the pandemic. Out of the five, only one was not currently working in her chosen field, the outdoor education graduate. This was due to outdoor education "field trips" being temporarily on hold. By contrast, the business graduate was working in the HR area of a business contracted to do laundry for hospitals etcetera, so her work had been in more demand than ever since the commencement of the pandemic.

We know from the quantitative analysis that there is a tendency for care leavers to enrol in vocationally oriented courses such as teaching, nursing and social work. This trend is likely because these are the professions they have most often encountered in their early lives, and they also align with their desire to provide a sense of service or giving back to the community. Courses such as teaching and social work also provide opportunities for personal growth and development, which can be transformative for care leavers.

> *I've done a lot of work on understanding trauma, complex trauma, which is something I didn't know I had until the third year of my degree when I did a class on it and I was like, these case studies sound an awful lot like me. That's how I got introduced to even having a traumatised background. I think I just thought that I have done well, and my brother has not. He's never had a job. He probably*

never will I think … Personal development is the single greatest thing that university has given me.

Eliza, Bachelor of Teaching (Outreach and Community Education) graduate

The fact that vocationally oriented courses often lead to clear career pathways upon completion, while also incorporating hands-on practical experience in the field can strengthen graduates' chances of securing satisfactory employment soon after completion, even in the midst of a global pandemic. These courses align well with interviewees' desire to be getting on with their lives, in terms of ensuring their financial futures. However, one interviewee found themselves limiting their choice of course based on the perceived likelihood that this would lead to secure employment. This is possibly a reflection not only of being from a disadvantaged or marginalised background and seeing university primarily as a way to "get ahead" (materially), but also part of a broader cultural trend that emphasises and supports the utilitarian aspects of university education (e.g., career prospects) over the less immediately tangible ones (such as personal growth, for example). A degree like teaching or social work simultaneously encompasses these multiple benefits while also working to ensure the personal growth and development of oneself and others. However, there are many other degrees that combine these elements, even if some may require more effort in finding employment at the end. Care leavers, and members of other marginalised groups, would ideally not be limited by inadequate exposure to, and/or awareness of, a full range of degrees and their benefits.

I knew I didn't want to do an Arts degree. Sorry, I would've loved to do an Arts degree, but I was really terrified about employability at the end of the degree. And at the (small) campus I was studying at, within the Arts degree, they offered only two majors – English and history. Two things I would've loved to study. But I'm just not going to get a job at the other end of it. Nursing and accounting and business – they were the only other courses they offered when I first started – and I wanted to study locally so I thought, business, there are some options for jobs at the other end of that. Alright, I'll go with that. And it ended up being a great choice. I thrived and really sort of found my groove.

Grace, Bachelor of Business graduate and current Master of Management student

The fact that most interviewees elected to enrol in vocationally oriented courses that incorporate hands-on practical experience in the form of placements likely contributed to their employability post-graduation. However, this enhanced employability came at a cost. Those who could survive on Centrelink payments while studying without the need to engage in paid employment, did so. Yet at least five of the interviewees were required to engage in paid employment while undertaking their degrees in order to support themselves. Three were working full-time or more while also studying full-time – a near impossible task requiring exceptional dedication and flexibility. Those employed within very flexible workplaces were able to take leave or adjust their schedule to facilitate placements. Others struggled with the loss of paid employment – either temporarily or permanently – as a result of doing their professional placement. While beneficial, employability bursaries were deemed inadequate to compensate for the lost income.

Even for those who did not need to engage in paid employment while undertaking a placement, the requirements of the course together with the demands of the placement sometimes proved too much, leading to burnout. In particular, those who were studying in fields where they encountered as part of their placement (e.g., as trainee social workers) others with trauma backgrounds sometimes experienced additional emotional labour which contributed to the burnout.

In third-year I did placement advocating for clients or parents of children with intellectual disabilities that are entwined with the child protection system. It's strange – I went into social work to study family violence and all my studying led me to child protection, which is one area that I really didn't want to go into. But I stayed, and that was the placement that really burnt me out. I really enjoyed the placement, I got a really good idea of the court system, and I still work with lawyers that I met back when I did that third-year placement. But I was really burnt out. And it took me a while to come back from that.

Diane, Bachelor of Human Services and Master of Social Work graduate

There's this emotional burden that comes with lived experience work. Sometimes I'll be writing a piece, and I get really triggered by something. And that happens to me to this day. And that's the kind of unseen work that goes on with lived experience, with being lived experience. Yeah.

Sybil, Bachelor of Human Services and Master of Social Work graduate

In addition to potentially finding placements more challenging financially and/or emotionally than most, it is likely that care leaver students find it more difficult than the average student to participate in other (unpaid) activities that may enhance employability. This is because they are more likely to be already engaged in paid employment, at the same time as having responsibility for caring for family members. While three interviewees were parents while studying, a number of interviewees were also caring for (aged, frail or mentally unwell) parents, younger siblings and/or the children of other family members. This meant the demands on their limited time were great. Although a minority of interviewees did still find time to engage in extra-curricular activities, others considered that their unpaid labour of caring for others should be used in lieu of more accepted forms of volunteerism.

Also, most interviewees had worked continuously since their mid-teens, and some articulated they did not consider the drive to "enhance employability" was relevant to them. They saw it as more relevant to younger students who had never had a job and who were still living at home. Some interviewees did indicate, however, that it would be worthwhile developing techniques for including all of their paid and volunteer experiences on their curriculum vitae (CV) in a way that might appeal to prospective employers. One interviewee was keen to potentially find ways of including their out-of-home care experience on their CV, in order to highlight the skills and qualities this experience instilled in them that might be considered valuable by employers.

The employability modules involve large amounts of volunteer time, which I do. But it's not just that. The modules are not aimed at someone with a disability at all. They're extremely complex and difficult to understand quite frankly. I struggle to understand how they work, so I don't engage in them. In the end, a coordinator just added my volunteer work, and I received an email saying, "You've completed the emerging leaders course" … People doing this course have got to be like 20 or 21 year-olds who are living at home, There's no way that … I mean, how is it relevant to me? I've worked since I was 14 years old."

Cara, Bachelor of Arts (Honours) and Master of International Relations graduate

Discussion

Several important findings emerged from our interviews, many of which provide context for our earlier data analysis. While the data confirmed that care leavers are frequently also members of the six identified equity groups in Australian higher education, our interviews revealed membership of other 'invisible' groups, which we have addressed in previous research. In particular, many of our interviewees were parents and/or carers themselves. Student carers and parents both typically hold strengths of independence, empathy, and experience, but such strengths are often unrecognised and may also create challenges for students when faced with inflexible or inadequate timetabling, facilities, and curriculum (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2020; Andrewartha, Knight, Simpson, & Beattie, forthcoming).

Similarly, many of our interviewees had been working in paid employment since an early age, consistent with a culture of accelerated independence. Most were also working to support themselves during their studies but received little recognition of the value of their work. Following Yosso's analysis of cultural capitals (Yosso, 2005), we have previously noted the difference in student capitals and experiences that are valued by Australian universities, including the difference between work-integrated learning and work. While work-integrated learning and formal volunteering are often recognised on transcripts and for admissions and prior learning purposes, institutions are less likely to recognise caring duties, paid employment, and community service, which are themselves more likely to be undertaken by care leavers and other marginalised students (Harvey & Mallman, 2019).

Moreover, the experiences of our interviewees highlighted the problematic expectations of placement. In many courses, unpaid placements (e.g., in schools, hospitals, health settings) of relatively long duration are required for the purposes of course completion and accreditation. For care leavers and others who are supporting themselves with paid employment through their studies, placements often require leave to be taken from their employment. Obtaining such leave requires both an accumulated store of leave available and a flexible work manager, often in addition to a capacity to manage caring and/or parenting roles simultaneously. Most of our interviewees were creatively able to find work-around solutions to this challenge but there are clearly many care leavers and other students for whom placements are a serious impediment to completion, and most institutions provide little or inadequate financial support for such employability activities (Harvey, Andrewartha, Edwards, Clarke & Reyes, 2017).

For the Indigenous graduate we interviewed, a lack of cultural content and context was also perceived as a challenge to engagement and success. Similar to Indigenous care leaver respondents from our previous research (Harvey, Andrewartha, et al., 2017), our interview with the Indigenous graduate revealed that support from the university's dedicated Indigenous Office was strong, and important to promoting both a sense of belonging and academic achievement. However, Indigenous content within the curriculum was perceived to be limited, and there was little sense of a broader decolonised university. Addressing teaching and learning practices as well as broader issues of campus climate are important to the success of Indigenous care leavers, and of Indigenous students more broadly. It is also worth noting that many care leaver students were undertaking courses (e.g., Social Work) in which content could be triggering, highlighting the importance of institutional teaching and learning approaches.

Many of our interviewees entered university via pathways that were alternatives to the Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank (ATAR). Consistent with the broader data, we found that most interviewees did not transition to university directly from secondary school but rather entered subsequently via pathways such as TAFE qualifications. Along with the aforementioned strengths possessed by many care leavers, the admissions data suggests a need for: contextual admissions, in which care leaver strengths and achievements can be valued; diverse pathways, including TAFE articulations and enabling programs; and

inclusion of the vocational education sector in development of higher education awareness and pathways for care leavers. In Victoria, some of these issues are being addressed through the *Raising Expectations* program, which has specifically expanded its operations and outreach to include partner TAFE institutions.

Several interviewees also mentioned the absence of a peer group on campus, including of other care leaver students. One of the advantages of better identification of care leavers is the potential to create informal, supportive peer networks on campus. Our previous research confirmed that the views and experiences of care leavers often strengthen the learning of other students (Harvey, Andrewartha, et al., 2017). However, a sense of difference is also common, with many undergraduate students unable to relate to the broader life experiences of care leavers. Facilitating more peer group opportunities, both within and beyond individual institutions, would be helpful to student success and satisfaction.

Finally, our respondents revealed a high proclivity to undertake postgraduate study. While we were unable to track post-graduation outcomes in our data analysis, this remains an important area of research to understand both employment and postgraduate outcomes. Research from England suggests high rates of postgraduate study among care leavers (Harrison et al., 2020), consistent with our interviewees' experiences. In previous research we have found postgraduate study often linked to difficulties in obtaining employment after graduation, particularly among new migrant graduates who may hold relatively few informal networks and/or face unconscious bias in the workplace (Harvey, Szalkowicz & Luckman, 2020). Care leaver graduates may face similar challenges but may also be encouraged to continue study because of an attraction to the university environment, as hypothesised by Harrison et al. (2020) in the English context. Many professional courses also now require postgraduate study, which is another potential driver for the care leaver cohort. Analysis of post-graduation outcomes therefore remains an important element of potential further research.

Conclusion

Collectively, our mixed methods research confirmed the need for universities to prioritise care leaver students across the life cycle. As national data confirms, people from foster care backgrounds remain severely underrepresented in higher education, and those from kinship and residential care are likely to face similar underrepresentation. Many are also members of the six identified equity groups in Australian higher education, and of other 'invisible' equity groups. Care leavers highlight both the intersectional and compound nature of equity, revealing the limitations of the current equity framework which focusses on monitoring high level, individual groups (Harvey, Burnheim & Brett, 2016). Nevertheless, the experiences of our two universities reveals that a substantial increase in enrolments is possible, through a focus on dedicated outreach to schools, carers, and stakeholders; collaboration with community service organisations; broad and inclusive careers education; and diverse, contextualised admission pathways.

Once enrolled, we found that care leaver students faced numerous challenges, including time, accommodation, and financial pressures. Many of these pressures were exacerbated by inflexible course and placement requirements, and limited institutional support to balance paid employment and study responsibilities. Many care leavers are also parents and/or carers, and these roles create further challenges which are often unrecognised by universities. Lack of a peer group, and educational disruptions caused by illness, trauma, family commitments and other experiences, were also highlighted as barriers to completion. Data revealed relatively low success and retention rates, and a tendency for students to withdraw rather than take a leave of absence or move to part-time status. Notwithstanding these difficulties, our research again confirmed that the strengths of care leavers, including their resilience, empathy, and life experience, were helpful in overcoming often extreme disadvantage, and in supporting the learning of other students.

While we were unable to track the post-graduation outcomes of care leaver students, our interviews found high levels of postgraduate study, consistent with findings from England. Understanding the motivations for postgraduate study is an agenda for further research, along with a better understanding of barriers to, and facilitators of, graduate employment. Our interviews confirmed a tendency for care leavers to have been working in paid employment from an early age, and to hold a strong work ethic and self-reliance. These qualities should position care leaver graduates to succeed in the workplace, but further research is required to understand employment outcomes, particularly in fields cognate to the degrees studied.

In summary, some universities have made progress since we first identified the invisibility and precarity of care leavers in Australian higher education (Harvey et al., 2015). Further work is required, however, to increase university access, preferably aligned with the identification of care leavers through nationally collected and monitored data, and a nationally consistent extension of care to the age of 21 at least. The formal establishment of care leavers as a priority group in higher education remains critical, particularly considering the over-representation of Indigenous young people in out-of-home care. As governments across Australia consider significant reforms to their resourcing of post-care support and transition, the need to demonstrate the possibilities and successes of care leavers in higher education is particularly critical. Our latest research also confirms that while improvements to access and participation are clearly possible, raising care leaver success, retention, and completion rates will require further efforts within teaching, learning, and student support. A life cycle approach is needed to improve the university outcomes of this important yet invisible group.

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