

Submission to the Skills for Victoria's Growing Economy review

June 2020

Submission: Skills for Victoria's growing economy

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (the Centre) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the *Skills for Victoria's Growing Economy* review.

The Centre is the peak body for child and family services in Victoria. For over 100 years we have advocated for the rights of children and young people to be heard, to be safe, to access education and to remain connected to family, community, and culture. We represent over 150 community service organisations and individuals throughout Victoria working across the continuum of child and family services, from prevention and early intervention to the provision of care services. Many of our member organisations work closely with children and young people experiencing disadvantage, including young people in care services and care leavers.

Our interest in this review

As the Victorian peak body, the Centre advocates with and for children and young people in care to make sure they have the best available support and opportunities. One of our flagship projects, Raising Expectations, focuses specifically on supporting pathways into higher education for young people leaving care.

The Raising Expectations program is a collaboration between the Centre, Federation University Australia, La Trobe University and Swinburne University of Technology. This program is designed to increase awareness of care leavers as an equity group in their own right and to make sure they are supported to be able to access and complete post-secondary education.

Concerningly, the number of children and young people in care has doubled in the last decade. Currently, over 10,312 young people are in care arrangements: foster, kinship, permanent and residential care.¹ This does not include the growing number of children and young people without a statutory care order who are often in the care of their grandparents in an informal care arrangement.

Studies show that educational aspirations and expectations for young people in care are low, with few going onto university.² Raising Expectations is working to change this situation. Accessing post-secondary education and training can transform the life trajectory of young people with a care background and can break the cycle of disadvantage, poverty, and homelessness.³

It is important that the specific needs of students with a care background are understood, particularly students on a statutory order who must exit formal care on or before their 18th birthday. For most students this coincides with Year 12. There has been a recent shift in policy in Victoria to extend care and support for all young people turning 18 between 16 March and 31 December in 2020 to June 2021. This is in addition to 250 extended care placements to 21, over five years, offered through Home Stretch.

Young people with a care background can experience significant inequality and disadvantage. Studies show that up to 50 per cent of young people aged 16-18 years leaving state care in Victoria become homeless.⁴ Young people leaving care services are likely to intersect with the groups

¹ Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) 2018, Children in care, CFCA Resource Sheet, AIFS, Melbourne.

² Harvey, A, Campbell, P, Andrewartha, L, Wilson, J, & Goodwin-Burns, P 2017, *Recruiting and supporting care leavers in Australian higher education*, Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research, La Trobe University, Melbourne.

³ Council to Homeless Persons 2014, Young people leaving care need a safety net, viewed 25 June 2020, <<http://chp.org.au/young-people-leaving-care-need-a-safety-net/>>.

⁴ Ibid.

identified in this review; specifically, Victorians living in poverty and young people vulnerable to joblessness.⁵

The impact of COVID-19 on the employment prospects for young people has been stark. Prior to COVID-19, young people aged 15-24 years were already facing a challenging job market and high unemployment. In December 2019, the Australian youth unemployment rate was 11.5 per cent, more than double the general population.⁶ Recent figures show young people are bearing the brunt of the economic contraction and are disproportionately affected by the current crisis, representing 35 per cent of Australians who lost work in April.⁷

Given these trends, it is critical that young people with a care background are provided with targeted and accessible supports to increase participation in vocational and higher education and improve their employment prospects, life outcomes and opportunities.

Our submission highlights the need for ongoing support from schools, TAFEs and government to improve access to and completion of vocational education and training for young people in care and care leavers. It is structured around the following themes:

1. **Cost:** affordable study to increase access and completion.
2. **Decision-making:** supporting young people and giving them a voice.
3. **Accessibility:** equitable and affordable digital access.
4. **Additional support:** access to coordinated and tailored support for care leaver students.

Cost: affordable study to increase access and completion

Many care leavers depend on one or more part-time jobs to be able to pay rent, buy food and necessities and pay for transport to pursue their study. Research shows that barriers for care leavers to pursue higher education include lack of suitable and secure housing, financial insecurity, and disability and mental health issues which could take priority or even hinder their ability to think about starting education or training.⁸ Messaging around the availability and accessibility of financial supports for care leaver students must be clear and 'normalised'.⁹

Beyond course fees, books and materials, enrolment fees, equipment/technology, other student fees and transport are additional financial barriers. Associated study costs can make post-secondary study even further out of reach for many young people in care and care leavers. Making sure that prospective students are aware of all costs and financial support available to them is important to allow students to plan and alleviate any last-minute stress. For example, through the Centre's work with carers, we are aware of instances where students planning to enrol are only made aware of student fees at the time of enrolment. Finding out so late means they may not have the resources to pay these fees, placing undue stress on them. Waiving student fees for care leaver students would remove this barrier.

The Raising Expectations program and its partner universities offer a range of scholarships, bursaries and grants to improve access to post-secondary education and to support students to continue their study. Feedback from students has shown this to be critical to supporting access and completion of their studies. A recent report by Deloitte Access Economics on Return on Investment of the Raising

⁵ Skills for Victoria Independent Review 2020, Skills for Victoria's growing economy: issues paper, Skills for Victoria Independent Review, Melbourne, p. 20.

⁶ Atkins, M, Callis, Z, Flatau, P & Kaleveld, L 2020, *COVID-19 and youth unemployment*, Centre for Social Impact, Sydney.

⁷ Atkins et al. 2020.

⁸ Muir, S, Purtell, J, Hand, K & Carroll, M 2019, *Beyond 18: the longitudinal study on leaving care - wave 3 research report: outcomes for young people leaving care in Victoria*, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

⁹ Harvey et al. 2017.

Expectations program shows that for every dollar invested, an estimated minimum of \$1.80 is derived in social and economic benefit.¹⁰

In other countries, such as the United Kingdom, all care leavers are provided with a £2000 higher education bursary to support post-secondary study when they leave care.¹¹ Such support is not offered in Australia. Providing more bursaries would be a simple and effective method of supporting care leavers to build skills and knowledge and contribute to Victoria's economy.

Awareness of care leavers and their needs in relation to studying is limited across the vocational and higher education sector. There is an absence of system-wide embedded supports, financial and otherwise, for care leaver students, yet care leavers are one of the community's most marginalised and disadvantaged groups. Support for care leavers could be provided in the same way that existing supports are provided for groups such as refugees, people with a disability and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. An opportunity exists to increase and quarantine funding from the Community Support Fund (CSF) to improve equitable access and the kind of support needed by care leavers to succeed in post-secondary study. Swinburne University of Technology is utilising its CSF in this way, providing much needed assistance with financial barriers facing care leavers.

Many care leavers pursue study and careers in the 'caring and helping' professions such as nursing, social work, youth work and social justice. This often includes a period of clinical or work placement in the final year. This can be financially challenging as students are unable to continue any part-time work for that period and are unlikely to have family support to assist them. Care leaver students at La Trobe University are offered \$500 bursaries to support their studies. We would like to see more systemised support for care leavers on placements. One student described the difference this made for them:

The care leaver bursary assisted me in my studies as it came at a critical time in my degree. I was attending a full-time placement of over 3 months and was unable to resume my normal paid work as I can during a normal semester. The care leaver bursary definitely assisted me in dealing with rent for 1/3 of the time I was on my placement, relieving a lot of pressure off me so that I could focus my energies into my placement.¹²

The Issues Paper highlights expected workforce shortages in Victoria by 2025, particularly in relation to doctors, enrolled nurses and registered nurses.¹³ At Federation University Australia, which supports nearly 240 vocational and tertiary care leaver students, nursing is the most commonly studied course by care leavers. The review provides an opportunity to assess how care leaver students can be financially supported to successfully complete their training and go on to contribute to workforces in high demand.

¹⁰ Deloitte Access Economics, 2020, Return on investment analysis of the Raising Expectations program, Deloitte Access Economics, Melbourne.

¹¹ Become 2018, All about the money: Financial entitlements for care leavers, viewed 26 June 2020, <https://www.becomecharity.org.uk/media/1411/factsheet1_financial_entitlements_english.pdf>.

¹² Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) 2018, Raising Expectations final evaluation report, ACER, Melbourne, p. 19.

¹³ Skills for Victoria Independent Review 2020, p. 20.

Increasing awareness of the Skills First Youth Access Initiative

Care leaver students have access to existing initiatives designed to ease the financial burden of post-secondary study, including:

- Free TAFE for Priority Courses, which provide increased access for Victorians to pursue vocational education and training in over 40 courses. Raising awareness of these courses is supported by system-wide promotion through government, TAFEs and more broadly. Free TAFE provides an opportunity for many Victorians who might not otherwise have engaged in further study.
- The [Skills First Youth Access Initiative](#), which supports eligible young people who are, or have been, subject to a Child Protection Order or Youth Justice Order and are between the ages of 16 and 24 years. The initiative offers access to over 800 government funded courses from VCAL/VCE through to Diploma/Advanced Diploma. Eligible students pay no tuition fees and can undertake more than one course, provided they have enrolled in the second course before they turn 24 years of age. Raising Expectations, together with the Higher Education and Skills branch of the Department of Education and Training (DET), widely promotes the Youth Access Initiative which has seen over 300 enrolments since 2017.

We have found that despite extensive promotion of the Youth Access Initiative that TAFE enrolment staff are not always aware of this initiative and on occasion have been reluctant to assist Community Service Organisation (CSO) education support workers, who are supporting a care leaver to enrol. Supporting the enrolment of prospective care leaver students' needs to be done in a sensitive way as many young people with a care background experience stigma and do not wish to identify their care background. Having to negotiate with TAFE staff to secure the student's enrolment could be a deterrent to pursuing further study.

Government-sponsored system-wide promotion, awareness and communication of the Skills First Youth Access Initiative to TAFEs, via the Victorian Skills Gateway website, and to secondary schools, similar to the promotion of Free TAFE, would increase awareness of the initiative and uptake by young care leavers.

Young people in informal kinship care arrangements, often with grandparents, are not subject to a statutory order and are not eligible for the Youth Access Initiative. Consideration could be given to opening up the initiative to this growing group of young people who are often ineligible for a range of supports received by carers and families in other types of care arrangements.

Extending the eligibility age to 28 years for the Youth Access Initiative would support more young people with a care background to access post-secondary education. Young people transitioning from care can experience extended periods of uncertainty and instability as they seek stable housing, employment, address mental health issues and find their place in the community. Achieving life stability is important for care leavers as an enabler of education.¹⁴ It may take some time – often years – by which time, if they become aware of the Skills First Youth Access Initiative, they are too old to access the initiative. We are aware of young people who have experienced this and consequently have not pursued study.

¹⁴ Muir et al. 2019.

Decision-making: supporting young people and giving them a voice

Appropriate support by careers and transitions staff

Research by the Career Industry Council of Australia (CICA) in 2017 identifies parents as the key influencers in a child's career planning with career practitioners second.¹⁵ More than half of the students in the CICA study identified their career teachers/advisors in the top two people they are most comfortable to approach about career advice.¹⁶ Career development activities include:

1. Interview with a career advisor
2. Work experience
3. Vocational Education and Training in schools
4. Hosting or visiting career expos
5. Attending University/TAFE/RTO open days.

However, there is limited research into whether career advice activities are currently meeting the needs of school leavers who have been in care. A 2015 study by the CREATE Foundation found that young people in care wanted greater assistance in planning for their future careers and wanted teachers/advisors to allow them to make their own choices.¹⁷ In its 2018 report, CREATE Foundation found that only 65 per cent of young people in care had talked to someone about their future. This indicates a third of young people in care are missing out on planning for their future, making it difficult for them to plot a course of post-secondary education or training that is purposeful and meets their needs.

There are multiple challenges for career advisers helping young students in and leaving care services to transition from secondary school to post-secondary education and training or to the workforce. One study, which compared adolescents in care with adolescents not in care (matched for age, gender and school achievement) on career-related aspirations (occupational aspirations, educational aspirations, life barriers) and career action behaviours (career exploration, career planning) found that:

The out-of-home care adolescents reported lower occupational aspirations, less career planning, more career barriers, lower educational aspirations for themselves, lower parental aspirations, and more school engagement. Further, career exploration was lower for out-of-home care children who had higher aspirations, lower self-efficacy, parents who communicated higher aspirations, and low aspiring friends.¹⁸

These findings highlight the need for advisers to build on the existing strengths and capabilities of students in or leaving care services and to encourage high aspirations, including the possibility of going to university either through a TAFE pathway or directly. Focusing on strengths through favourite activities, particularly for harder-to-engage young people, is vital to build confidence and to help them identify career and study options. Building relationships over time between career staff and students is important to foster student confidence in pursuing achievable options.¹⁹ Support

¹⁵ Career Industry Council of Australian and McCrindle 2017, As key influencers, school career practitioners need more time to assist students make well-informed decisions, Media Release, viewed 31 May 2020, <<https://cica.org.au/wp-content/uploads/CICA-Media-Release-21-June-2017.pdf>>.

¹⁶ Career Industry Council of Australian and McCrindle 2017.

¹⁷ CREATE Foundation 2015, *What's important to YOUTH? Youth policy framework consultation for the Office for Youth*, CREATE Foundation, Melbourne.

¹⁸ Creed, P, Tilbury, C, Buys, N & Crawford, M 2011, 'The career aspirations and action behaviours of Australian adolescents in out-of-home-care', *Children and Youth Services Review*, vol. 33, no. 9, pp. 1720–1729.

¹⁹ Outcomes Practice Evidence Network 2020, Event reflection: Gray Poehnell – Canadian careers expert, viewed 31 May 2020, <<https://www.outcomes.org.au/blog/event-reflection-gray-poehnell-canadian-careers-expert/>>.

should also include improving student, carer and family knowledge about the application processes for post-secondary education and training options while still in care as this has been shown to be a barrier to applying to post-secondary study.²⁰

For career practitioners to be effective in their support of young people in care services, they need to be aware of the programs, services and supports available to these young people. The Centre's work with carers, teachers and with leaving/post care professionals in the child and family services sector indicates that this is not always the case. The Centre noted this in its submission to the Victorian Parliament's Economic, Education, Jobs and Skills Committee's 2018 *Inquiry into career advice activities in Victorian schools*, and the need for a central resource for career practitioners to support young people with a care background. A key strategy identified by the Centre in its submission is to make sure career advisers are fully informed about the impact of trauma on a young person's development. Research shows that trauma undermines children's ability to learn, form relationships, and function appropriately in the classroom.²¹ It can lead to:

- Delays in all domains of development
- Higher drop-out rates
- Lower academic achievement (reduced ability to organise, problem-solve and process information)
- Higher suspension and expulsion rates
- Higher rates of referral for special education
- Emotional responses or symptoms that can negatively impact concentration and memory.²²

Given these and other impacts of trauma on student engagement, self-confidence, educational aspirations and outcomes, it is important for career advisers to be able to tailor career support and information to the needs of students in care services.

Career activities need to consider that not all students are in stable, safe environments where basic needs are being met and educational aspirations are encouraged and normalised. They should also be aware of the often-accelerated transition to independence and the associated uncertainty around secure housing, financial and other supports which affect the ability of care leavers to continue with education and enhance their prospects.²³

Recently, policy changes in Victoria have been implemented to improve and extend the support offered to young people preparing to transition from care services to the age of 21.

Supporting students who have disengaged from school to engage in vocational education

Students with a care background can experience disrupted learning through multiple placements. Without timely, appropriate, and empathetic learning support, they can struggle at school, increasing the probability of school disengagement. Through Raising Expectations, we are aware of instances where students aged 16 years and over have disengaged from school but have shown interest in a focused area of vocational study. When young people have been supported to transition to a TAFE course in the area of their choosing, they have re-engaged in learning. However, it is important that they are properly supported to make sure they continue and complete their studies.

²⁰ Harvey et al. 2017.

²¹ Krasnoff, B n.d., *A practitioner's guide to educating traumatized children*, Education Northwest, Portland.

²² NASP School Safety and Crisis Response Committee 2015, *Supporting students experiencing childhood trauma: Tips for parents and educators*, National Association of School Psychologists, Bethesda, MD.

²³ CREATE Foundation 2015.

We need to make sure young people in residential care are connected to career and transition support. Studies show that positive supports and encouragement help young people enter and stay in education and foster self-belief.²⁴

Examples of students who disengaged from mainstream school but were subsequently able to engage in a TAFE course with the appropriate support are given below.

Students disengaged from mainstream school engaging in vocational education

- 1. A 17-year-old female student** who experienced significant disruption and disengagement from education since primary school enrolled in a Certificate III in Hairdressing at Kangan TAFE.

What difference this made: The student was able to re-engage with learning in a supportive environment, and even with difficulties has been able to return to study the following year to complete her course.

What else would assist her in her study: Ongoing intensive support to monitor interest/motivation and reduce risk of non-completion.

- 2. A 16-year-old female student** who disengaged from mainstream school for 12 months enrolled in a Certificate II in Animal Studies at Melbourne Polytechnic.

What difference this made: It has built her confidence and sense of achievement. She is working towards goals in an area of interest to her. It is a real opportunity for her.

What else would assist her in her study: Extra support, a study group in the library and studying online subjects initially.

Accessibility: equitable and affordable digital access

The rapid move to online remote learning by school, TAFE and university students during COVID-19 has highlighted the significant numbers of students who do not have their own device, internet access or sufficient data to access online learning. It is unlikely in the foreseeable future that learning will revert to a predominantly face to face environment. With schools, TAFEs and universities adapting to online learning, blended learning may become more prevalent.

By 2025, DET aims to halve the proportion of students leaving education during Years 9 to 12.²⁵ One of the ways it aims to achieve this is through equity funding which supports schools with students who face more barriers to success than their peers. Schools receive additional funding for disadvantaged students to enable them to invest in more resources and expertise.

During COVID-19, DET supported the transition of its students to remote learning by:

- Loaning 48,000 laptops and tablets; 29,000 to primary school students and 12,500 to secondary school students with more than 1,800 to special school students
- Providing 26,000 internet dongles and 5,000 SIM cards.

²⁴ Muir et al. 2019.

²⁵ Department of Education and Training 2019, Target: breaking the link, viewed 31 May 2020, <<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/educationstate/Pages/targetbreakinglink.aspx>>.

Priority was given to senior secondary students, students in bushfire-affected areas, and families who cannot afford an internet connection at home.²⁶

In April 2020, the Centre surveyed practitioners (Better Futures Providers) who work with young people 16 years and over who are in care or have left care. Findings highlighted that even with the extensive roll out of devices and associated technical support from the DET and State Schools Relief, there were sometimes delays of 3-4 weeks in reaching students. The survey found that:

- Some students in care had difficulty in transitioning to an online learning environment and continuing with their courses
- Agencies reported young people in care not always having the necessary equipment to access their studies found it hard to stay motivated when not in a class environment or being physically required to be at school/TAFE
- Some needed laptops, dongles, internet access and office furniture
- Better Futures providers purchased devices, data packs and dongles to avoid any further delay for students, as the DET-funded support was slow to arrive.²⁷

Providers also noted that the equity gap is now more pronounced for struggling families without the financial ability to purchase the technology needed for their children and young people to access remote learning.

Equitable and affordable access to digital technology is a key consideration now and into the future as vocational and higher education continues online indefinitely.

Additional support: access to coordinated and tailored support for care leaver students

Accessible on-campus support

Research shows that support on campus for enrolled care leaver students is important, particularly at times of stress. Students identified counselling and mentoring, more accessible information and services, academic skills and careers guidance and financial planning supports as the most helpful.²⁸

Feedback from care leaver support roles at the three Raising Expectations partner universities and workers engaged with the Centre has identified the importance of having a 'go to' person at university who understands the kinds of challenges care leaver students face. Building trusted relationships is often the key to support being accepted and for the student not to have to re-tell their story. For example, the Care Leaver Coordinator, who is a qualified social worker, at Federation University Australia provides direct support to students, including:

- Navigating the vocational and tertiary education systems and processes
- Hosting drop-in sessions to let students know the supports and services available
- Advocating for extensions to assignment due dates
- Referring to external services, including support to access leaving care brokerage and engaging with case workers
- Assisting with scholarship applications including writing referral letters

²⁶ Minister for Education, Extra devices and internet delivered for remote learning, 23 April 2020, <<https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/extra-devices-and-internet-delivered-for-remote-learning/>>.

²⁷ Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare 2020, Snapshot of practice in leaving care, extending care and post care services during COVID 19, Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, Melbourne.

²⁸ Harvey et al. 2017.

- Support and advocacy for care leaver students to access university-based support services including Student Support Services, Student Advisory Service, Financial Support Services, Literacy and Numeracy support.

In addition to the above, feedback from CSO education support workers identified the importance of helping care leavers to:

- Understand expectations of teachers, lecturers, and tutors
- Understand and learn how to use the TAFE's online student system to find information related to the unit they are studying and lodge assignments
- Have access to support services from the outset
- Provide one-on-one time with a support person as needed, including for the case manager/worker to participate in orientation with the student
- Access industry and/or peer mentors
- Find an apprenticeship following completion of a Certificate.

Care leaver students at the Raising Expectations partner universities are identified through the enrolment process and linked into available supports and services. At La Trobe University and Swinburne University of Technology, care leaver students are offered a \$500 bursary.

As the examples above identify, support needs to be pro-active and coordinated. It might need to be more intensive at initial enrolment, reducing over time as students become more familiar with the learning environment and build their confidence and skills. Expanding the CSF through dedicated funding for care leaver students would increase the take up of financial and support services by care leaver students.

Increasing engagement through outreach programs

It is important to engage early with all young people, including those not in mainstream school, and start conversations about post-secondary education to increase their awareness of what's available, spark interest in post-school learning and build aspiration.

Raising Expectations employs outreach strategies to improve the knowledge, skills and awareness of workforces that intersect with young people in care, including carers and their families. We increase the awareness of young people in care services at school through a range of communication media, LOOKOUT Education Support Centres and Designated Teachers.

Our three partner universities offer outreach activities directly into schools to demystify higher education and build aspiration. For example, the School Partnerships Program (SPP) at La Trobe University engages with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds who have experienced disadvantage at partner schools. SPP staff are highly skilled in working with young people in care. SPP worked with flexible learning schools, The Pavilion School and Berry Street School (Shepparton), to provide a range of activities to foster awareness and engagement with higher education. Expanding outreach of these kind of programs increases awareness and opportunities for a broader range of students including those in flexible learning schools.

Conclusion

While care leavers often experience significant personal, academic and financial challenges in pursuing and completing post-secondary education, participation and achievement rates at Raising Expectations' partner universities is increasing through the provision of a range of targeted activities and supports.

Increasing awareness of care leavers and implementing system-wide support in post-secondary education would be a step towards addressing a system that currently does not provide equitable access to the most disadvantaged.

The Victorian government has implemented policy reforms to support children in and leaving care. It has funded a successful initiative in Raising Expectations to link care leavers with higher education and vocational pathways. We need to make sure that other policy and funding decisions at the Commonwealth and state levels – such as the recent increase in costs to undertake a social work degree – do not undo this good work. We need to continue to work together to improve access to and completion of post-secondary education for young people in care and care leavers.

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