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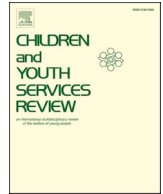
*“Going around the long route to get where I want to be”: Exploring the university experiences of care leaver students*

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## “Going around the long route to get where I want to be”: Exploring the university experiences of care leaver students

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### ABSTRACT

There is an evident, systemic lack of understanding regarding the university success of care leaver students. The few studies in this area indicate that care leavers tend to be highly independent, motivated, and determined to academically succeed, yet also more likely to face compound disadvantage that can impact their participation and completion. The current study sought to better understand the perceived support needs of care leaver university students, with the goal of improving support offerings for future cohorts of care leavers. Semi-structured interviews with seven female care leavers enrolled at an Australian university between 2018–2022 (at time of interview,  $M_{age} = 22$ , enrolled = 5, withdrawn = 2) explored university experiences, perceptions of available supports, enablers and barriers of course completion, as well as recommendations to support future care leaver cohorts. A reflexive thematic analysis revealed participants were required to navigate a university landscape that did not always account for their needs. They reported utilising new relationships and existing internal resources to overcome the unique challenges they encountered. The tension between feeling unable to self-disclose their care leaver status and yet longing to connect with other care leavers presented as a key finding. The findings demonstrated the various supports higher education institutions could introduce such as social opportunities with other care leavers to empower care leaver students in succeeding at university.

Within Australia, care leavers are defined as people who have spent time in statutory out-of-home care before the age of 18 years. There are several types of out-of-home care arrangements, ranging from temporary to permanent, and with known kin or trained carers (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2020). While a small minority of children are removed voluntarily, approximately 90 % of children are in out-of-home care as a result of protection orders issued as a last resort intervention by a statutory authority (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2023). Removal may have occurred as a result of neglect, abuse, death of family members, or inability of family members to care for them. There are approximately 45,000 children in care in Australia, with child protection orders growing each year (AIHW, 2023). Australian care leavers experience significant health, social, and educational difficulties, including homelessness, mental and physical health problems, inadequate social support systems, early parenthood, and poor educational outcomes both within care and when out of care

(Johnson et al., 2010; Thoresen & Liddiard, 2011). These challenges are linked to social stigmatisation and an absence of appropriate community supports (Harvey et al., 2017; Harvey et al., 2022; Jarczyszyn & Tilbury, 2012; Wilson et al., 2019).

Despite their recognised resilience and self-motivation, educational outcomes are often comparatively low for care leavers in Australia (Mendes et al., 2014). While more care leavers than ever are completing secondary school (McDowall, 2020), there has not been a corresponding increase in tertiary transitions. Only 1–3 % of care leavers go on to tertiary education after leaving secondary school, compared to the national average of 40 % (Wilson et al., 2019), and the number of care leavers who graduate from tertiary education is smaller still (Harvey et al., 2022). International and Australian research has demonstrated that many care leavers face significant social and financial barriers that impact their participation at university (Jackson & Cameron, 2012; McNamara et al., 2019). In addition to the transition to university life,

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care leaver students often experience further challenges such as alienation, difficulties balancing multiple responsibilities, and the absence of appropriate supports (Harvey et al., 2022; Jurczyszyn & Tilbury, 2012; Wilson et al., 2019). These compounding challenges are seen to affect their academic success (Okpych & Courtney, 2021). Missing out on equitable participation within higher education can further exclude care leavers from opportunities to improve their employment prospects and earning potential, opportunities that can in part help foster a more secure future (Lomax-Smith et al., 2011; Marks, 2007; Norton, 2012).

Research indicates that people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural backgrounds are disproportionately overrepresented in the Australian care leaver population (Harvey et al., 2022). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are approximately eight times more likely than non-Indigenous children to be engaged with child protection services (AIHW, 2023). As such, Australian care leaver research must also be sensitive to whether Indigenous care leavers are included at representative rates.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children experience additional difficulties in the Australian care system. While in out-of-home care, Indigenous children are at increased risk of poor academic achievement compared with other children in care (AIHW, 2023; Harvey et al., 2015). After transitioning out of care, Indigenous care leavers often continue to experience compounding challenges including additional administrative barriers and estrangement from culture and community (Mendes, 2018; Mendes et al., 2019). These outcomes are intrinsically linked to the history of Australia's colonisation, including acts of cultural dispossession, systematic separation of Indigenous people from Country, and the disruption of family structure and community supports through the forced removal of Indigenous children from their families in the Stolen Generations (Fernandez et al., 2015; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997). Despite the resilience and strength of Indigenous people and communities, the enduring socio-economic and structural impacts of colonisation, associated intergenerational trauma, and limited access to culturally appropriate services, continue to create barriers to wellbeing and produce conditions that lead to disproportionate needs amongst Indigenous families (Fernandez et al., 2015). Consequently, any focus on care leavers as a priority group within Australian higher education must also consider the specific needs of Indigenous care leavers if it is to contribute to the broader objective of decolonising the academy.

The need for university outreach services to target care leavers, alongside tailored services to support their transition into and through higher education has been highlighted (Harvey et al., 2015; Wilson et al., 2019). Building on the insights of international research on care leavers, recent Australian research has emerged in response to this identified inequality, mainly focusing on the higher education access and participation (Harvey et al., 2022). Nevertheless, there remains a gap in understanding the experience of care leavers at university, and subsequently what supports may be required to foster their experiences within higher education (Drok, 2020).

## 1. Challenges encountered beyond enrolment

Research indicates that care leavers who do continue into higher education face disproportionate challenges beyond enrolment (Harvey et al., 2017; Harvey et al., 2022; Okpych & Courtney, 2021). These challenges can include psychosocial stressors triggered by study experiences, lower academic readiness upon entry, less access to material, emotional, and financial support, differing social capital, being first-in-family, extra-curricular care or employment responsibilities, hesitance to disclose care-leaver status, and lack of shared experiences and connection to peers.

There is a currently a broader international movement to make education systems more equitable and welcoming for non-traditional students (Ainscow, 2020). Similar to international trends (Courtney et al., 2010; Courtney et al., 2011; Pecora et al., 2005), recent Australian

research has found the retention and completion rate of care leavers to be significantly below most other university students (Harvey et al., 2022). Many care leavers face challenges and psychosocial stressors from childhood trauma and care experiences that negatively impact their studies (Jurczyszyn & Tilbury, 2012; Mallon, 2007). International research has shown that long-term factors such as ongoing effects of school disruption, related low school achievement and academic readiness, and differences in social capital and informal networks can affect care leaver enrolment, university completion, and employment outcomes (Sebba et al., 2015; Stein, 2012). However, experts now argue that these findings should be interpreted with caution, stressing that an individual with out-of-home care experience does not have fixed, pre-determined higher education outcomes (Harvey et al., 2022). Rather, it is post-enrolment events that interfere with higher education success, acting as triggers of pre-existing, longer-term risk factors for care leavers (Harvey et al., 2017; Okpych & Courtney, 2021).

During their time at university, care leavers often report difficulties managing course placements, caring and parental responsibilities, and paid employment duties (Harvey et al., 2022; Jurczyszyn & Tilbury, 2012; Okpych & Courtney, 2021). Receiving insufficient financial support during higher education, international research has found that care leaver students are often required to take on additional work and become unable to dedicate as much time to study as their peers (Piel, 2018). This is supported by Australian research, demonstrating that care leavers are more likely to be managing caring responsibilities than other students (Harvey et al., 2022). Unstable accommodation and finances are also shown to negatively influence university enrolment and completion (McDowall, 2020; Mendes et al., 2014), with having to work to fund the dual cost of education and living being cited as a primary reason for Australian care leavers dropping out or taking a leave of absence from their studies (Jurczyszyn & Tilbury, 2012). In addition, feeling the need to become 'independent' adults, care leavers may not ask for the help they are entitled to due to perceived stigma and feelings of shame (Adley & Jupp Kina, 2017). Further qualitative research is needed to explore these perceptions (Colvin & Knight, 2021).

Social capital refers to an individual's social ties and networks that provide them with additional opportunities, resources, and support (Bourdieu, 1986). To navigate the changes and challenges encountered at university, tertiary students leverage their social capital by accessing useful information and social support through their relationships on and off campus (Mishra, 2020). As students often need support from those around them to manage the new challenges of university life (Schwartz et al., 2018), the disruptions to support networks that care leavers experience within the care system have been linked to challenges in educational success (Hiles et al., 2013; Stein, 2008). In addition, care leavers often have different social capital to their peers (Barn, 2010; Stein, 2008). While most young people in Australia stay in the parental home and receive continuous support into their early 20s (Australia Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2013; Wilkins et al., 2022), Australian care leaver students often live independently with limited supports while pursuing higher education (Jurczyszyn & Tilbury, 2012). This leads to an accelerated transition to independence (Mendes, 2009) where care leavers are required to be emotionally, financially, and materially self-reliant from a younger age (Harvey et al., 2022). Many carers have not attended university, thus care leaver students report not being able to rely on someone to guide them through the application process (Harvey et al., 2017). A lack of formal assistance and information when applying to university is one of the biggest challenges care leavers face (Harvey et al., 2017).

Australian research has found that care leaver students often feel alienated during their time at university due to narratives of the 'student experience' that tend to exclude the realities of care leavers (Harvey et al., 2017). In contrast, a sense of belonging to their university has been highlighted in facilitating continued enrolment and success of care-leaver students, particularly during times of crisis (Harvey et al., 2022). A fear of prejudice or lack of understanding from peers and staff can also

cause hesitancy for care leavers to share their personal experiences and disclose their care-leaver status (Harvey et al., 2017; Jackson & Cameron, 2014). Feeling unable to share their experiences and identity can lead to further feelings of alienation for care leaver students (Harvey et al., 2017).

## 2. Overlooked strengths of care leaver students

In having knowledge and social capital that is incongruent with academic expectations, non-traditional students may find that the resources and strengths that they do possess are undervalued and underutilised in the university environment (Daddow et al., 2012; Leese, 2010; Longden, 2004). In fact, care leavers are often treated with a deficit attitude in the form of pity from peers and staff, which is in contradiction to their demonstrable resilience and resourcefulness (Harvey et al., 2017). Harvey et al. (2017) found that care leavers in higher education typically hold qualities of persistence, resilience, and independence developed through life experience, that differ from other university students. In addition, once admitted to university, care leavers' academic performance was demonstrated to be relatively stronger than non-care leavers (Harvey et al., 2017). The inclusion of care leavers in classrooms can therefore also be a valuable contribution to institutions, staff, and the greater student body, through the recognition and celebration of their diverse experiences and capabilities (Chapin et al., 2023; Williams et al., 2005). Sensitive and supported disclosure of care leaver status could be facilitated through more general class discussions on students' university identities and pathways.

## 3. The role of universities in providing support

In recent years, several countries have made substantial progress in policy and action to address the gaps in care leavers' access to and success within higher education. For example, Raising Expectations is an Australian program which supports TAFE (i.e., vocational training) and university partners in providing scholarships, and financial, application process, personal, academic, peer, and mentoring supports (Raising Expectations: getting more care leavers to TAFE and uni, n.d.). The success of these initiatives has been linked to the explicit incorporation of care-leaver voices in research and implementation of change (Wilson et al., 2019), and have also focussed on changes to the care system to explicitly prepare care leavers for post-secondary education pathways, and for the cultivation of intrapersonal resources.

In Australia, research has demonstrated that meaningful high-level interventions and policy reform could be successful in supporting care leavers' participation in higher education (Harvey et al., 2017). This includes national and state and territory level recommendations such as extending care beyond 18 years of age, increasing post-school planning for young people with care experience, and recognising care leavers as a unique equity group (Harvey et al., 2017; Harvey et al., 2022; Mendes, 2019; Wilson et al., 2019). Experts have also called upon the care sector, which focuses on a young person's transition to self-sufficiency and independence, to shift toward developing *interdependence* for young people leaving care (Adley & Jupp Kina, 2014; Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2006). As opposed to having a goal of pure solitary self-sufficiency, *interdependence* focuses on connection and collaboration between young people, their families, friends, colleagues, and the broader community (Propp et al., 2003). This network of connections can act as a safety net of extended support that is often not available to young people leaving care (Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2006).

Other goals and initiatives focus specifically on what universities can do to improve educational outcomes for care leavers. Universities play a crucial role in Australian higher education equity, determining entry requirements, access, and support offerings (Naylor & James, 2016). Wilson et al. (2019) highlight the need for greater university outreach services to target care leavers, alongside tailored support services to ease their transition to higher education. Research has also outlined the

benefits of providing flexible pathways to enrolment (Jurczynszyn & Tilbury, 2012), financial support and accommodation (Jackson & Cameron, 2012), specialised mentorship programs (Jurczynszyn & Tilbury, 2012; Mallon, 2007; Martin & Jackson, 2002; Stadler, 2007), dedicated counselling services (Harvey et al., 2022), and facilitating the development of meaningful and trusting relationships between care leavers, peers and higher education staff (Cashmore & Paxman, 2006; Harvey et al., 2022; Jackson & Cameron, 2012).

Also recommended are wrap-around and embedded supports within universities, where relevant services are strongly linked to one another and support for care leavers is incorporated into broader and more sustainable practices (Harvey et al., 2017). These services are needed in order to offset any potential acculturation or outside-of-university barriers and challenges. There is also a need for universities to improve how data on care leaver students is captured and subsequently used to inform policy and program development (Wilson et al., 2019). Data systems are needed to flag care leaver status, along with other equity groupings, to trigger the provision of additional supports.

## 4. Rationale, Aims and research questions

There is a need for more qualitative research on the experiences and support needs of care leaver students (Colvin & Knight, 2021). The lack of institutional knowledge of care leaver experiences, needs, and strengths inhibits the provision of meaningful, targeted supports for care leavers in higher education (Harvey et al., 2017). Qualitative research allows for deep and nuanced exploration of individual experiences and the generation of novel insights (Willig, 2013). While it is understood that care leavers face a myriad of challenges when accessing higher education services in Australia (Jackson & Cameron, 2012; McNamara et al., 2019), limited research has explored the perceptions, attitudes, and experiences of care leavers post enrolment, especially in relation to support services. The research that does exist points to the presence of unique strengths (e.g. adaptability, resilience, independence) care leavers access to navigate compounding barriers and challenges they experience whilst engaged in higher education (Harvey et al., 2017; Harvey et al., 2022; Jurczynszyn & Tilbury, 2012; Wilson et al., 2019). However, this places undue burden on the care leaver population to manage unwarranted challenges that are not faced by most students, preventing equitable participation in tertiary education. Identifying ways to support and remove barriers for care leavers can relieve this burden and can be part of targeted strategies that broaden higher education participation and success.

The aim of the current study is to explore the experiences of Australian out-of-home care leavers studying at university. In doing so, the research seeks to identify ways in which tertiary institutions may support the equitable participation of their care leaver students. This study will endeavour to answer the following questions: How have care leavers experienced their tertiary studies? What types of social and educational supports do care leavers engage in? How do these supports assist in their educational experiences and success? What supports do care leavers perceive would further their educational experiences and unique strengths?

## 5. Methodology

The current research is rooted in a social constructionist epistemology, holding the assumption that perceptions of reality and knowledge are shaped by social interactions and power relations within society (Crotty, 1998), and these perceptions manifest in tangible outcomes; in this case student participation and course completion. With this understanding, researchers can better uncover marginalised voices and challenge dominant narratives. Using a critical emancipatory approach, the current research ultimately sought to identify and address structures that perpetuate inequalities and oppression that impact the wellbeing of care leaver students (Noel, 2016). The research has also



been informed by strengths-based approaches which intend to refocus research and policy on recognising assets and strengths within individuals and communities and identifying avenues for action through the systems they inhabit (Fenton et al., 2015; Thurber et al., 2020). Our focus is to develop recommendations for supports that harness the unique strengths of care leavers.

The current study adopted a general qualitative research design, considering reality to be socially constructed and research inquiry as unavoidably value laden (Denzin, 2008). A qualitative design therefore enables a nuanced examination of the care leavers’ experience within a university setting, capturing participants’ unique perspectives, strengths, and interpretations (Willig, 2013).

5.1. Researcher positioning

Reflexivity and the disclosure of researcher positionality are integral to qualitative research process and critical studies (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). By positioning themselves in the research, a researcher acknowledges that their own cultural, personal, and historical background shapes their interpretation and therefore findings are interpreted based on personal experience and background (Creswell & Poth, 2016). As outsiders to the participant group, the researchers must be cognisant of engaging in an ethical interpretation of participants’ experiences and acknowledge the responsibility of translating the benefit of the research directly to the related community.

5.2. Participants

Seven purposively selected participants met the inclusion criteria of current or former university students who self-identify as out-of-home care leavers and were enrolled at an Australian university between 2018 and 2022. All participants were female and aged between 19 to 27 years (M = 22). Five of the participants were still completing their studies and two were no longer enrolled. Further participant details are provided in Table 1 via descriptive vignettes.

5.3. Procedure

The research was approved by a University Human Research Ethics Committee. Initially, the university’s administration team generated a contact list of 69 potential participants who, when applying for a university course between 2018–2022, had a recognised Special Entry Access Scheme (SEAS) Category 4 special consideration due to having experienced out-of-home care. Of these students, 39 identified as being the first in their family to attend university. Seven students (10 %) did not accept their offers, 4 (6 %) accepted but had not yet enrolled, 7 (10 %) had enrolled but had not started, 4 (6 %) withdrew without an attempt, 13 (19 %) withdrew after attempting at least one unit, 1 (1.4 %) deferred, 26 (37 %) were currently enrolled and 7 (10 %) had graduated. Information about the research was shared with the identified care leavers via text and email notifications. Responding participants were provided with further information detailing the research and given the option to provide their contact details. Participants were called or emailed to co-ordinate an interview time.

Participants provided signed consent after discussing the study’s objectives, procedures, potential risks, participant rights, and benefits. Transcripts were de-identified to ensure confidentiality. The interviews ranged from 25 to 55 min and transcribed verbatim. Interviewers followed a schedule of open-ended questions (Willig, 2013) e.g. “What have been the biggest challenges, if any, of your student experience at this University? All participants were provided a \$100 GiftPay voucher via email.

5.4. Data analysis

The current study adopted Braun and Clarke’s (2021) Reflexive

Table 1  
Participant information.

Pseudonym	Descriptive Vignette
Kate	Kate is a 22-year-old woman who began a Bachelor of Paramedicine in 2019 directly after high school. Kate lived by herself for the first time shortly after beginning university, often working 15–20 h a week while studying full time to support herself. Unsure about the job security that she would be afforded through paramedicine, she withdrew from the course after her first year of study and followed a different career path.
Freya	Freya is a 21-year-old woman who was living in out-of-home care with her siblings for several years. Freya’s experiences with social workers as a teenager in out-of-home care drove her interest in her area study. She began a Bachelor of Youth Work in 2020 and is on track to graduate shortly.
Sara	Sara is a 21-year-old woman who began a Bachelor of Criminology in 2020. After receiving high marks in her first year of study, she successfully transferred into a double degree in her preferred area. Sara receives a lot of fulfilment from her engagement with university volunteering and now works for the university. She has been living with her grandparents during her studies and expects to graduate in 2024.
Caitlin	Caitlin is a 27-year-old woman who has lived out-of-home since she was in Year 10 at high school. She reports to have psychiatric conditions that can make it difficult to maintain her studies alongside external stressors. When she first became a university student, she transferred courses several times and eventually withdrew due to housing instability and a lack of support. She later moved interstate and completed a Bachelor’s degree in 2017 while living with a relative. Since then, Caitlin has partially completed a Bachelor of Youth Work and is now enrolled part-time at a different university in the greater Melbourne area.
April	April is a 19-year-old woman in her first year of a Bachelor of Business. Growing up regionally, she moved to the city for her studies and is currently living in rental accommodation with her cousins. April takes care to balance her studies with work in order to pay for rent and recreation commitments.
Leah	Leah is a 24-year-old woman who moved in and out of out-of-home care while growing up. She is in her final year of a Bachelor of Social Work, making her choice of study after her own positive and negative experiences within the care system. Leah has been working a night job throughout her degree in order to support herself and manage her responsibilities as a carer.
Jayne	Jayne is a 23-year-old woman who is in the final year of her Bachelor of Social Work. Jayne deferred her studies for a year after completing high school. Jayne is neurodivergent and chose her current university due to the support services offered, however a lack of appropriate and accessible supports made her first year of study particularly challenging.

Thematic Analysis (RTA). RTA allows the researcher to develop patterns of meaning across a dataset that addresses a research question. The six recursive phases were followed, and reflexive journaling was used by the first author to keep record of the analysis process and key decisions, enhancing ethical and methodological rigour (Smith, 1999). The themes identified by the first author were explored and discussed with the second and final authors.

6. Findings and interpretations

Thematic analysis led to the identification of three emergent themes regarding participants’ university experiences: 1) Belonging: Finding place and acceptance; 2) Being valued: Acts of investment; and 3) Security and stability: Challenges of self-reliance. Subthemes were identified within each of these primary themes, as illustrated in Fig. 1. The analysis demonstrated how these themes and subthemes were related to experienced or expected support that would bring out care leaver students’ strengths and in turn facilitate their success and enjoyment at university.

6.1. Belonging: Finding place and acceptance

While a sense of belonging is known to be a particularly fundamental

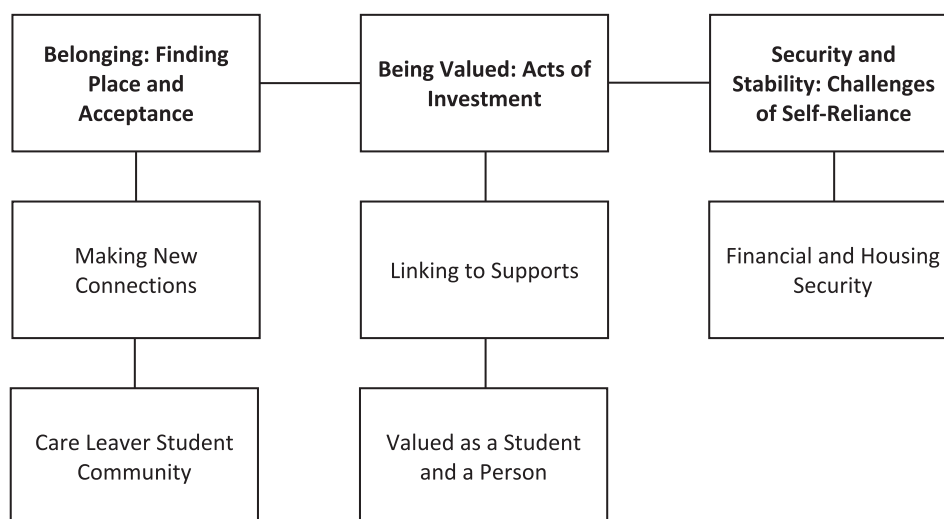


Fig. 1. Themes and subthemes of care-leaver students supports.

factor for care experienced students' engagement with their studies, it may also be more difficult for them to acquire (Harvey et al., 2022). Indeed, a central aspect of the current participants' university experiences was the importance of feeling accepted and included within the university setting alongside other students without care experience. The sense of belonging experienced by the participants varied, with some struggling to find place, "fitting in was something I really struggled with" (Jayne), and others feeling quickly accepted in the university environment, "I felt really like comfortable pretty quickly" (Kate). When participants felt accepted, it was often connected to an inclusive atmosphere in the classroom and campus; "everyone's so nice" (April). When asked about what made her university experience enjoyable, Freya spoke to the non-judgemental setting and the attitudes of the students around her that made her feel comfortable to be herself: "The students themselves. It's been, um, it was kind of like everyone had their own experiences, and that's what I like about it. And it's like, less room for judgment. Everyone can just be themselves". Overall, the current research found care leaver students may develop a feeling of belonging at university through different connections with students, staff, and other care leavers.

## 6.2. Making new connections

As care leaver students often live independently with limited supports (Jurczyszyn & Tilbury, 2012), creating new relationships at university may be especially important for this cohort. This was indicated by the current research, "I feel like meeting friends was probably the best thing that I was able to do" (Freya). Freya continues, describing how making friends at university in the first year of her studies made coming to class a fun and sociable experience throughout her degree:

There are people that I've met when my first during my first year and I'm still friends with them until now, and every time there's...a different class, you don't feel left out. You know everyone's like 'Oh come and sit here, come and sit here!' You know that that atmosphere is really good. Um very welcoming.

April also shared how her friendships were deeply tied with her university participation. "I've made like a couple friends at uni...it's like four people that I'm really close with, and we always see each other like whenever we go [to campus]."

The current care leaver participants seemed to validate their own belonging within the broader student cohort through their ties with other students. Kate explains:

It made me feel a lot more comfortable um as well to have like, I

guess people that were doing the same thing that I was doing helped. Okay, like that like-mindedness. And you know we all had that similar interest.

Similarly, Leah expresses a desire to meet more people who share her interests. "Get to know more like, like-minded people, especially like, it would have been good with like, things that are specific to your degree."

As friendships made in residential care settings do not typically last post-care, care leavers also sometimes find themselves having few friends on whom they can depend (Refaeli, 2017). Perhaps given the importance placed on building new connections, the participants often praised the various opportunities for connection that the university afforded:

I think just like I like how easy it was to like meet people. (Kate).

The university provided a lot of opportunities to kind of engage with everyone in the year level. (Jayne).

Doing stuff with the uni and, even though my classes were online, they were events that were like being held in person, that I was actually able to go and meet people and socialise...I actually feel um really beneficial compared to other students who haven't taken advantage of those opportunities. (Sara).

Again, when speaking to what support offerings would have benefitted her time at university, Leah suggests the university could have provided more events for students to get to know each other better:

I guess like, maybe more like, like, community things to get involved in. I know there's been a couple...to be more involved with the uni.

In addition to companionship and comfortability, some participants shared other ways their connections within the student cohort enhanced their time at university such as developing study skills, "I was able to get support and like planning things out really well, getting...like advice from other students". Leah discussed how connections and shared experiences with her classmates supported her in reflecting on her journey and learnings over her course:

We've [the course cohort] gone through the course together, mostly. It was really nice to kind of see how far we've come and see everyone else's different experiences and actually see the learning that we've had throughout these years. So yeah, it was really nice and wholesome.

In this way, through providing opportunities to connect, the university may facilitate care leaver students with building supportive relationships that enhance their university experience.

## 6.3. Care leaver student community

While the participants had made friendships and other beneficial connections at university, they expressed there would be something

special about having interactions with other students who also had out-of-home care experiences. Nevertheless, the participants did not know of any other care leavers students at their university.

While Leah acknowledged that “she met a lot of really good people through the course”, she later shares, “fitting in [at university] was something I really struggled with”. Similarly, Jayne felt different from the broader cohort due to challenges from her care experiences. She expected having connection with other care leaver students would create a network in which she could exchange stories and resources:

Being someone who’s from out-of-home care, like, I don’t know, anyone [other care leaver students]. Well, obviously, it’s not something that we’re openly disclosing to everyone, but I’d never really engaged with anyone who we talked about it with. And so I definitely felt like a sense of, I’m different to everyone else. And, you know, my struggles with university are probably because I’m different to everyone else, as I having peer group would have been so beneficial.

Similarly, [Harvey et al. \(2022\)](#) found that care leaver students tend to be isolated from one another and scattered throughout a university, making them unaware of each other and therefore unable to form a collective sense of community amongst themselves. Adley and Jupp Kina (2014) found that care leavers often feel a disparity between themselves and their non-care experienced peers. When describing what it would mean to have an established group of care leaver peers at university, the participants expected it would bring a feeling of comfort or accompaniment that would give them solace:

If there was like, a special group just made for people [care leaver students] to kind of connect and share their own experiences with each other. I think that would be helpful just to know that you know they not alone. And there are people, other people, that are also going through the exact same thing. (Freya).

It would be nice to be able to meet other people that have had that similar experience and hear about like, their life story. (Leah).

When discussing a potential for a care leaver peer group for future students, Kate excitedly shares:

I think part of me was like kind of ‘I can’t do this. It’s too hard’ kind of thing. Whereas, yeah, I think that would be amazing, like people that have had similar position, like situations or positions. They can talk to people that are then in that same position. Yeah, I think that would be unreal.

Speaking to what else could have supported her at university, Jayne highlights the importance of having community with other care leaver students: “the peer group would be the biggest thing. Like, definitely.”.

Some participants in the current research described how through such a peer group, care leaver students could mentor one another through their university journey:

They might feel alone and not be supported, and all the rest of that. But I feel like if there’s say another student that’s gone through the same thing, they can like, sort of be a mentor in a way. (Sara).

You could even, I don’t know, get out-of-home care people to, like, have like a group thing, where they connect or like, help each other. Or even, yeah, hear more voices from out-of-home care people. (Leah).

Consistent with past research, participants in the current study did not know of other students at university with out-of-home care experience and rarely shared their own care leaver identity with other students ([Harvey et al., 2017](#); [Jackson & Cameron, 2014](#)). This highlights the tension between competing positions within the participants accounts, of feeling unable to self-disclose and yet longing to connect with other care leavers:

Because it’s not something you come in and just talk about. (Freya).

I guess we didn’t really talk about that kind of stuff. (Kate).

It’s not something that we’re openly disclosing to everyone. (Jayne).

#### 6.4. Being Valued: Acts of investment

Care leavers rarely access the supports they are eligible for while enrolled at university ([Harvey et al., 2017](#)). The current study

demonstrates the acts of investment from the university that contribute to activation of supports for care leavers. Belonging to an institution that demonstrated authentic good will for care leaver students’ success was encouraging for Freya, who felt valued by the university, motivating her eventual enrolment:

[The application form] was something I was struggling with, with another uni. Um, it’s just that they were not willing to do some stuff... someone [from the current university] was on the phone while they’re walking you through, and it was just like quick and easy, and I was like, ‘Well, if that’s something that, you know, someone is looking after me then, like, it is how they are treating me now, then I’m sure they’ll treat me be better once I do enrol and um as a student they will treat me way better’.

It seems that through acts of investment, the university provides a mode of support through which a care leaver student feels their intrinsic importance to the institution and right to participation. This value was demonstrated in both how the university ensured participants had access to different supports, and in what qualities were deemed worthy of investment.

#### 6.5. Linking to supports

Participants in the current research used available supports to varying degrees. [Refaeli \(2017\)](#) found care leavers are sometimes unable to recognise potential avenues of support they could access. On a foundational level, the participants highlighted the connection between knowledge of supports and accessing supports:

I didn’t quite utilize that um, availability [assessment assistance] because I didn’t really quite know about it. (Sara).

I didn’t really seek to access anything like and I never really looked much into what support systems were available. (Kate).

I think it like comes down again to like I’m not, I feel like I don’t know the many supports that there are. (Leah).

During her first university experience, Caitlin describes not having the knowledge required to navigate university, not knowing where to begin looking for the support services she needed:

I just had no idea where to go for um help for anything...I transferred courses there about three times, and then eventually I just gave up. And I’m just like I can’t do this. I don’t have the support.

When Caitlin returned to a new university at a later date, she was aware she would likely have the same unmet needs for support she had at her first university. To compensate for this, she researched into offerings, faculty members, and services, and became well connected with a staff member who supported her in networking supports throughout the university:

I looked into scholarships. Um, I looked into accommodation in case my uncle couldn’t have me [live with him] um. I looked into um like uh after hours...I was looking into like my other study options like could I do part time if I needed to...And I looked up like whether there was like um uh a gym on campus just because I go to the gym all the time...just pretty much everything that would help me.

Here, Caitlin’s example highlights a great amount of learning and effort that was required in order to simply be equipped with the knowledge of different university services. Similarly, Leah recommended that universities could support care leaver students better by sharing information about financial supports on platforms students are frequently in contact with:

One of the things [the university] probably could do is like kind of advertise the options...Like on [the student portal] on the bulletin boards and stuff like that just so people are more aware of their options and what would make their, make it a bit easier.

Even when knowing support entitlements, asking for support can be difficult for care leavers due to perceived stigma, feelings of shame, and a desire to become an ‘independent’ adult ([Adley & Jupp Kina, 2017](#)). Jayne shared she found it difficult to ask for help, fearing she would be misunderstood and that her bid for support would be interpreted as a

failure:

I think what I really kind of took from my experiences and have grown up with is like, just pure, stubborn independence. And so that was part of the reason why I didn't end up going to the student, like writing help, even though it would have been super helpful to me. Because I just kind of felt like, oh, I can do this on my own. I don't need any help. And then it always just spirals and then I'm too like, almost like embarrassed to ask for help.

Jayne continues to share that although she felt her teacher could provide help to improve her learning, there was a gap to making the first step towards activating this support:

And there was nothing in place to kind of help me, like, kind of start the conversation with lecturers. And so I would just not say anything... Like, I was stopping and like, oh, they probably think I'm a shit student, or, like, I don't want to learn or whatever, when I was trying really hard, but it just wasn't working.

Living with an undiagnosed attention disorder, Jayne was also unable to access meaningful teaching and assessment adjustments due to associated costs with obtaining the official diagnosis required by the university: "Because I was never formally diagnosed, I couldn't actually access the Access Plan". She later emphasises the barrier this requirement presented in spite of her efforts to activate supports using the existing systems:

The first step of the Access Plan is to talk to your GP and I spoke to my GP and they were like 'Are you diagnosed with anything?' and I was like 'No'. So they shut it down. Okay. And that was it.

Indeed, the current participants highlighted different ways access to support could be scaffolded by the university institution. Acknowledging the additional work that was required for her to seek out and apply for financial supports, Freya suggests how a dedicated staff member at the university might assist other care leavers in future:

They should get somebody to actually um help them with their um supporting documents because I know that when you do have to apply for scholarships you are required to do that. So they have someone, maybe on the open days to kind of just, not like, put like, to put that information out would help that so much.

For the current participants, university staff often acted as gatekeepers and gateways to supports. One of Caitlin's greatest supports during her university experience was a faculty member who directly connected her with other helpful staff and services:

She would often um introduce me to other people or um like tutors that I would have in the future...she'd uh sort of keep me in the know of like any events that I could volunteer at...she'd help me meet other people from the Uni, what kind of supports they provide, and then it was just kind of like branched out from her.

Caitlin goes on to describe the networking potential of this kind of support:

And then from there, like um like it just kept branching out like from one person, um who's got like an abundance of knowledge to another one to another one like who's had the experience of working with people like me...I did find uh the staff at [the university] during my course and I found that it was extremely helpful.

Freya outlined how her school created time for the students to apply for university course and this was how she became connected with her financial scholarship at the university:

That was just through the, my high school when we were filling out our VTAC [course application]...that's when it was just a process throughout and then there was a list of scholarships that [the university] offered as well. So I just thought, yeah, why not just give it a shot.

This indicates the potential that connections between secondary schools and universities could afford care leaver students, ensuring institutional support is continued throughout this transition.

#### 6.6. Valued as a student and as a person

Rogers (2011) and Refaeli (2020) report that as care leavers may not

seek support when they need it, they benefit from having a caring person to check in on them. While the contact was still occurring within the university setting and often prompted by academic related concerns, participants spoke of highly valuing having a staff member simply "check in" (Freya). As such, when speaking to things that supported their success at university, the participants often spoke of the university staff who demonstrated care and offered emotional support to them:

...if you just something's bothering you, and you want to have a chat, the Wellbeing team I know are very helpful and welcoming. That's something I wish I had known from the start to I could take advantage of. (Sara).

There was one lecturer that I was pretty close with, because we used to like get along so well, and if I missed like a day he would email me and make sure that everything was all right, because he knew I was like out of home, so he would check on me in that department, and like, ask if there was anything he could do...it was good in that sense, because I felt supported just by him doing that. (April).

While the mentor services offered at the university provided academic support, Sara indicated that emotional support was absent: "[the mentors] help you like with your essays and stuff like that. There's nothing really for like personal experiences I guess. So I think that would be something different." Jayne also indicated a mentor would be most beneficial when offering both academic and emotional support: "Definitely more just to connect with on a social level. But if there was an element of like, 'Oh, hey, how are you going in your schoolwork?', that would definitely be helpful" (Jayne). For the current cohort, the care leaver participants were seeking more than just academic support during their time at university, wanting someone to demonstrate care for their personal wellbeing.

#### 6.7. Security and Stability: Challenges of Self-Reliance

Being unable to rely on family or future inherited wealth, care leavers often develop a drive for self-sufficiency in order to give themselves security (Harvey et al., 2022). Within the current research, Freya shared how being without adult family members to care for her had necessitated the development of her self-reliance, "I guess, to be... someone that um obviously that has no parents. And so you have to kind of just rely on yourself a lot".

She continues to reflect on the high expectations she places on herself, and the difficult reality of knowing that while support could be useful, it is not always available:

Yeah, so we [me and my siblings] kind of been by ourselves. Um, and time just to navigate into the world on our own as well, and the expectation that, you know, that you put on yourself, that you have to, you know, succeed. But sometimes you do need to the help to kind of get where you want to be. Um, and I think with the struggle thing is some, not everybody will get a case worker, and by the time that you're eighteen you're pretty much left out on your own to kind of fend yourself...There is, you know a lot of negative experiences as well with that.

While independence is often developed through necessity or in response to a perceived stigma of dependence (Adley & Jupp Kina, 2017), it can create challenges post-enrolment at university when care leaver students must respond to new challenges (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2021). Cotton et al. (2014) also found having a 'safety net', a trusted service or point of contact, to be an essential protective factor for care leaver students. The current research found that when the participants were given additional supports and security through the university, the precarity of their independence was relieved and they were able to invest their time and effort into their studies. Caitlin provides an example of this process:

I found that once I had the kind of foundation of support I was actually able to enjoy my subject, because if I didn't have that, I'd be worrying about um like being late on assignments, or being late to class or not having...You know the scholarship funds or stuff like that. If I



didn't have the foundational support, I wouldn't have been able to enjoy my subjects, and because I enjoyed my subjects, I was able to complete my degree sooner than I thought. (Caitlin).

Morton (2017) highlights how youth in foster care may experience their commitment to independence or self-reliance as a barrier to educational achievement, struggling without guidance regarding their university related pathway and decisions, but feeling unable to rely on others. When speaking to the exhaustive planning required to secure her study assistance payments without any guidance, Caitlin shares, "It would have been helpful to know, not have to work out those plans myself. But having someone tell me what I could do in a situation where I just feel like giving up". When speaking to the emotional, financial, and practical challenges she was required to navigate on her own, Caitlin summarises herself what it would mean to have a reliable source of support as a young person and university student:

But God, it's been such a journey! Um, I just think if I had, you know, that family kind of support from when I was like fourteen, fifteen, when it all started, like if I continue to have that support like I reckon I don't know, but I think I could have um avoided the whole mess of, you know, all these different courses like I could have had the stability um and support I needed I would need to get through um all the minor things. But it's it just seems like my life is just, you know, going around the long route um to get to where I want to be.

#### 6.8. Financial and housing security

The reflections and insights shared by the care leavers students in the current study also captured the great resources of time, energy, and consideration that were required to maintain their self-sufficiency, most notably the impact of work commitments and housing difficulties. As many non-traditional students are employed, live at a distance from campus, and have domestic responsibilities, the existence of flexible modes of study are important to the participation at university (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). In the current study, having university systems that afforded flexibility, supported the participants in managing their work commitments with their studies. The participants praised the university when flexibility in their class schedules, attendance, or assessments allowed them to work more or dedicate more time to their responsibilities:

I would say like, block mode [intensive, sequential, 4-week unit learning model] is pretty helpful. It provides a bit more time to still work. And, like, like responsibilities that I have. I think as well, the one good side of COVID as well was like, doing it online. That little bit of extra flexibility and not having to go in and like the time that it takes to go into uni. (Leah).

While most young people in Australia continue to live in the parental home into their early 20's (ABS, 2013; Wilkins et al., 2022), the current participants were mostly living alone or in shared rental accommodation during their studies which sometimes led to additional challenges to their participation at university. This housing was sometimes far from the university campus, which again required additional time in their schedule to attend class and additional finances to afford transport:

So that time I lived in [a rural town]. So that's about maybe two hours plus [from campus]. Or even three hours train ride. (Freya).

Obviously the distance was like really difficult for me. So it was quite expensive for me to like, no matter which way I went...but realistically, it was like, took me 2 h to get to uni kind of thing. That was kind of the only thing that from memory I can think that I really struggled with in terms of like surrounding uni. Was literally just getting there. (Kate).

Caitlin had lived in a variety of accommodations during her different times at university, with financial and housing security affecting her success in her studies. She shared that after transitioning out of care, she found herself in distracting and unsafe living environments. This required her to move multiple times during the university semester under circumstances that were out of her control:

I couldn't really get like the proper support I needed, and because I

was like constantly in and out of share houses and stuff like that, um, it was it was quite difficult to um hold on to a course for longer than one semester...Okay, I can either do this assignment or I can um focus on not being in the house, because you know, there are people in there that I don't know that are doing drugs, or there are people in there you know, smoking weed, and I've got asthma.

As she was unable to focus her attention on her studies, Caitlin chose to withdraw from her course and work full time in order to secure more appropriate and safe housing:

I didn't want that to be like my life for the rest of my life. So um it was, yeah, it just became really difficult to keep studying, and that's why, like I took a break and worked full time.

When Caitlin returned to tertiary education in 2020, she was again living in unstable share housing. From Caitlin's experiences, affordable and stable accommodation is demonstrated to relieve her financial pressures, affording her additional time and focus to contribute to her studies.

## 7. Discussion

The current research elaborates on the previously identified incongruence between accessed supports and those positioned as 'available' to care-leaver students (Adley & Jupp Kina, 2017; Glynn, 2020; Harvey et al., 2017), demonstrating that such offerings are in reality not always accessible. The care leaver participants encountered various barriers that prevented access to different social and educational supports at university. Often these barriers were related to social stigma (Harvey et al., 2017) that alienated care leavers in the university setting, made it difficult for them to access support services, and prevented the creation of a peer community. At other times, barriers to support were seen as an extension of experiences within the statutory care system, where the university acted as another institution that failed to recognise and meet the support needs of young people who were enduring disruptive transitions outside of their control. An accelerated independence and self-reliance was at times seen to interrupt pathways to support, requiring participants to overcome feelings of shame or failure in order to ask for help. The research demonstrates a dearth of truly accessible, meaningful university support offerings currently available for Australian care-leaver students. Where supports were used, their activation required the use of money, time, and other resources of which care leavers often have restricted access to (Harvey et al., 2022; Jureczyszyn & Tilbury, 2012; Okpych & Courtney, 2021). The current research reveals how accessing the supports that are currently offered through universities comes with an additional burden that can thereby reduce the significance of said support.

Through acts of adaptability and persistence, participants built new connections, gained institutional knowledge, and acquired financial resources that assisted them in overcoming the barriers they encountered at university. These findings emphasise how the skills that care leavers bring to university are often the same skills that enable them to overcome aforementioned barriers and contribute to their developing academic capabilities and successes at university. This insight adds nuance to previous research identifying the strengths of care leaver students (Harvey et al., 2017).

Finally, contrasting with the neoliberal model increasingly prevalent in the Australian higher education system, in which students are presumed solely responsible for their success (Connell, 2013; Rizivi & Lingard, 2009), the current research emphasises the importance of universities recognising care leavers as valuable members of the student community, and therefore investing into their wellbeing beyond academic performance. Care leavers were found to thrive when embraced by the university community (e.g. administration staff, peers, and teachers), afforded assistance, and integrated within the university system. This supports a growing body of literature seeking to change the discourse of care leaver journeys from an idealised transition to pure self-sufficiency and independence, to the development of connection

and interdependence (Adley & Jupp Kina, 2014; Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2006; Propp et al., 2003). In focusing on meritocracy and isolated self-sufficiency, Australian social systems and institutions are not doing their due diligence in advocating for the fair educational opportunity of care leavers.

### 7.1. Implications and applications

Universities should meet care leaver needs through facilitating community building on campus, having scaffolded supports, and creating a reliable safety net for care leaver students. Due to this strengthened call for the provision of 'wraparound supports' (e.g. Harvey et al., 2017), universities should link care leavers with reliable points of contact that they could come to for a variety of issues, including mentoring, emotional support, and connection. The institutional disclosure of care leaver status could trigger tailored, individualised support on a regular basis that is integrated within existing student services, connecting care leaver students with course and unit advisors, academic supports, and university housing and social services. Liaison officers should receive targeted education regarding common care leaver experiences, challenges, and strengths, enabling for more appropriate and effective one-to-one support of the care leaver students they encounter.

One of the key findings of care leaver experiences was the tension between feeling unable to self-disclose and yet longing to connect with other care leavers. Without forcing the disclosure of care leaver status, universities could continue to foster an inclusive community on campus through media, advertising, and student resources that are inclusive of care leaver identities and experiences (e.g. capture and share university pathways of de-identified care-leaver students). Alongside other university clubs and associations, universities may also facilitate social groups for care leaver students to meet, share resources, and exchange experiences.

### 7.2. Limitations and recommendations for future research

The current research focused on the university experiences of care leavers independently of their time within and transitioning out of the care system, without purposefully collecting the narratives or journeys of the participants from their care experience into university. As such, the research may have missed further ecological insight, connecting the personal contexts and histories of care leavers with their later university successes. In addition, while care leavers can often want to distance themselves from a care leaver label (Adley & Jupp Kina, 2017; Harvey et al., 2017), the study's recruitment method required all participants to self-identify at multiple points of their university experience. As such, the current group of research participants may have represented a homogenous subset of the broader care leaver population who sought connection with this identity.

The current study also did not include the voices of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students, who are known to experience disproportionate and compounding challenges at university (Mendes, 2018; Mendes et al., 2019). Further research is recommended to focus on the inclusion of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander care-leaver students to ensure the needs of these students are appropriately recognised and addressed.

## 8. Conclusion

The current research qualitatively explored the university experiences of care leaver students in an effort to better understand what institutional supports facilitate this population in succeeding at university. The research highlighted the diversity, strengths, and unwarranted challenges of care leaver students, who remain a largely invisible, overburdened, and under supported population. Within the breadth of participant experiences, the research highlighted a myriad of currently

missed opportunities through which care leaver students could be better supported by universities. The stigma that care leaver students face is in sharp contrast with their skills of adaptability, responsibility, and persistence through adversity, overcoming barriers to continue their university participation and make a successful life for themselves.

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### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

### Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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