



# Pathways, Engagement and Transitions:

Young people's insights on  
navigating post-school pathways



# Introduction

The **Pathways, Engagement and Transitions (PET)** project is exploring the study and employment pathways of young people experiencing disadvantage as they navigate senior secondary education and their post-school transitions. By **hearing directly from young people** over time, it seeks to inform policies, programs and practice and support more young people to **complete Year 12** or equivalent and have **positive post-school pathways**.

Initially conducted over three years (2021-2023), the project annually surveyed thousands of students who were in Year 10 or Year 12 in 2020 and on The Smith Family's long-term *Learning for Life* educational scholarship program.<sup>1</sup> In addition, longitudinal interviews with over 60 young people each year provided deeper insights into their experiences during senior secondary school and their transitions into post-secondary education, employment and training.

This publication, the fourth in the PET series, builds on the findings of the previous three reports and focuses on the stories of **six young people who were in Year 12 in 2020** and participated in three longitudinal interviews. The rich, detailed perspectives they generously shared offer a unique understanding of their **diverse experiences**, revealing both their **strengths** and the **challenges** they faced.

The six young people share common experiences of **socioeconomic disadvantage** and left school at a time

when **COVID-19** disrupted many aspects of life, including work, study and training opportunities. Despite these shared challenges, their experiences and pathways are **diverse**, reflecting a wide range of **supports and barriers** encountered in pursuing their goals. While some enjoyed school, and had positive post-school employment and study experiences, others faced inconsistent and precarious employment conditions that could limit their future opportunities. Some pursued tertiary education or vocational training with mixed outcomes, while others struggled to find work aligned with their strengths. Several also spoke of mental health challenges that impacted their ability to engage fully in their chosen work and study pathways.

Together, these stories not only highlight the **resilience** and **determination** of these young people but also the **complex and varied** nature of their journeys, reflecting broader challenges and opportunities faced by young people across Australia.

The Smith Family acknowledges the generous contributions and insights provided by the six young people. These stories have been compiled from interview transcripts, however to respect their privacy, the names and photographs used throughout this report do not represent the individuals involved. Some minor details have been changed to ensure anonymity.



<sup>1</sup> All young people on *Learning for Life* live in a low-income family and most are recruited to the program when they are in primary school. More information on the program is available at <https://www.thsmithfamily.com.au/programs/learning-for-life>

The project included three repeated surveys in 2021, 2022 and 2023, along with in-depth interviews (up to one hour) with 60 young people each year. Survey and interview participants were broadly representative of young people on the *Learning for Life* program in terms of location (state/territory and metropolitan/regional locations), gender, Indigeneity, and health, mental health and disability experiences. The PET project has since expanded to survey the young people in Year 10 in 2020 for a further three years (2024-2026), along with a new cohort of young people in Year 10 in 2023.

# Evan



Evan joined the *Learning for Life* program in primary school and continued on the program for 12 years. Although his father is an Aboriginal man and Evan identifies as Indigenous, he has limited contact with his father and does not have extensive knowledge about his Aboriginal heritage.

Since completing Year 12 in 2020, Evan has primarily lived at home with his mother and two younger siblings in an outer suburb of a capital city. In 2022, Evan and his girlfriend moved into their own place, but they found the financial and practical demands of independent living too challenging. After six months, they both returned to their family homes, and as of mid-2023, Evan was still living with his family.

*...when we did move out, I didn't really have any money saved and my pay cheque was just going... And you always seem to need to do something... the household chores, washing, cleaning, trying to buy food...cooking dinner. It's a lot more than I thought it was going to be...Before...I was like 'I'll just move out. It'll be easy' but you don't know you have a good thing 'til it's gone.*

Evan enjoyed the social aspect of school as it allowed him to see his friends regularly and provided him with a consistent routine. Academically, he was an average student, meeting national curriculum standards in English and maths, however he found that he did not enjoy the theoretical aspects of his subjects.

## Vocational education and career guidance

In senior secondary school, Evan enrolled in a Vocational Education and Training (VET) Certificate II course, which he needed to graduate Year 12. He selected the VET subject that was 'most appealing' to him, even though he did not foresee it becoming a field of work or study he would pursue after leaving school.

At school, Evan received support from his teachers and an Indigenous Coordinator, who helped him develop essential skills for effective career development and post-school transitions, such as planning, prioritising and time management (National Careers Institute, 2022).

*There were lots of supportive teachers actually...I was struggling with just keeping myself organised and going to school...They helped me organise myself...They helped me just pull my head in a bit and get my priorities straight...Just talking about what I was going to do after school and helping me realise that I didn't know what I was gonna do. They tried to help me figure out stuff that I'd like to do.*

Despite receiving this support, Evan felt that his subject choices in senior secondary school were 'random' and not directly aligned with finding a career path after graduation, and that he did not make informed decisions about potential career options.

While at school, Evan initially considered attending university but hesitated to commit to a course of study because he was unsure about his future career goals. Although he was aware of apprenticeships, he, like many students completing Year 12, did not view VET and apprenticeship pathways as viable options for himself (Behavioural Insights Team, 2020; Gore et al., 2017).

Evan believes that having a network of ‘older kids’ who had finished school and were knowledgeable about career options would have been beneficial to him. He felt such a network could have provided valuable ideas and examples of what people do after school. He also thought participating in more industry-focussed career development activities, which would have illustrated the practical aspects of various jobs, would have been helpful.

*One thing that really might have helped is...doing some work experience...because a lot of jobs on paper, it's different than actually...what happens... Seeing what happened in the workplace might have helped me...find some sort of like connection with a career.*

## Peer group influence

During high school, peer groups play a crucial role in providing support and fostering self-belief. Peers actively engaged in school can positively influence school connectedness, academic achievement (Bradley, Ferguson & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2021) and Year 12 completion (Gemici et al., 2014).

In senior secondary school, Evan struggled with motivation and found it challenging to set goals, lacking a clear post-school pathway. As a result, he sometimes questioned the value of completing Year 12.

*While I was at school...I never really had any goals of my own...Every time, they'd try and get me to write my goals. It was hard because I just had no idea...I like having a goal and I just couldn't see where completing Year 12 was taking me, so I felt kind of lost and felt there was no point doing it.*

Although Evan believed that completing Year 12 would provide him with ‘more options’ in the future, the prospect of work life often felt distant and abstract. Despite this, his strong friendship group and personal conviction played an important role in helping stay focused on finishing Year 12.

*A lot of my friends...kept on telling me to make sure I finish school. All of us had the same goal to finish high school. And I also had my own personal mindset that I always wanted to finish Year 12, just cos it's something good to have.*

## Senior secondary school outcomes

Year 12 completion rates for young people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds remain lower than those of non-Indigenous young people. Among 20- to 24-year-olds, 68 percent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders complete Year 12, compared with 91 percent of non-Indigenous young people (AIHW, 2023).

Despite his struggles with motivation, Evan was determined to finish school ‘no matter what’, and he successfully completed his Year 12 school certificate at the end of 2020.

## Post-school engagement

Young people who hold part-time jobs while at school develop work-ready skills and experience that are highly valued by employers (Mann et al., 2020). After graduating Year 12, Evan began searching for work but faced difficulties as he had not held a part-time job during school. He initially struggled to find employment, with many places unwilling to hire him.

To improve his employment prospects, Evan completed a Responsible Service of Alcohol (RSA) certification and, in early 2021, secured part-time, casual work with an events company. His roster was irregular, with fluctuating hours and varying workplaces as he was assigned to different venues. To manage this situation, he relied heavily on friends, staying away from home to minimise travel time and costs.

*I started working through this company. I'd get work every now and then but it was very infrequent...I'd work for different events...I'd get sent to lots of different places and it'd never be stable work...It was often quite far from my house and my friends let me stay at theirs...They've just been real supportive.*

During this period, Evan faced financial challenges due to being underemployed<sup>2</sup> and ‘not having money.’ He continued looking for full-time work and sought opportunities that aligned with his career interests and aspirations.

## Apprenticeship pathway

The Australian Apprenticeships Incentives Program provides national funding to increase work-based training and development opportunities (Australian Government, 2021). In Australia, apprentices are predominantly employed either directly by trade-qualified employers or through group training organisations (GTOs).<sup>3</sup>

GTOs are responsible for employing and managing the legal obligations of apprentices. They match apprentices with host employers (Australian Government, 2021), mediate relationships between host employers and apprentices (Stanwick, Ackehurst & Frazer, 2021), and offer direct mentoring and support to apprentices (O'Dwyer & Korbelt, 2019; Stanwick et al., 2021). Host employers are responsible

<sup>2</sup> Underemployment refers to workers who work fewer than 35 hours but want and are available to work more hours than offered.

<sup>3</sup> Nationally, approximately 8 percent of apprentices are employed with a GTO (O'Dwyer & Korbelt, 2019).

for the daily work, training and supervision of the apprentices (Australian Government, 2021; O'Dwyer & Korbel, 2019).

Through a family friend, Evan learnt about an Indigenous GTO apprenticeship program in the building and construction industry. To qualify for the program, he completed a pre-apprenticeship course and general construction induction training (White Card)<sup>4</sup>. Pre-apprenticeship courses are designed to provide potential apprentices with a clear understanding of the trade and act as a screening and recruitment tool for employers (Misko & Wibrow, 2020; Stanwick et al., 2021).

Evan's pre-apprenticeship equipped him with the entry-level skills and experience expected in the industry and offered valuable insight into the job requirements, helping him make an informed decision about pursuing a trade-related career. In mid-2021, Evan began a full-time, three-year apprenticeship with the Indigenous GTO.

#### *Apprenticeship retention and completion*

Nationally, apprenticeship completion rates are of concern (Stanwick et al., 2021), with just over half of all apprentices and trainees completing their qualifications (NCVER, 2023). Negative employment experiences and poor-quality training impact on apprentices' motivation to continue with their training (Powers & Watt, 2021).

When Evan initially started his apprenticeship, he struggled with the early morning starts and the physical demands of the work. However, his overall experience was positive, and as his fitness improved, he came to appreciate the physical aspect of the job. Evan's GTO and host employer were consistently very supportive and approachable. The GTO ensured a strong relationship was maintained between Evan and his host employer, and Evan felt confident that the GTO would provide support if any challenges arose.

*The GTO always tries to look after me...They make sure that you and your boss get along well, and they ask you if there's any problems or if you want to be moved to a different trainer...My boss is really chill...We get along very well...I've had nothing really to worry about.*

Evan also gets significant satisfaction from the 'discipline' of full-time work and the sense of accomplishment from 'creating things...and turning an empty slab of space into someone's home.'

## Future plans

In Australia, employment outcomes for trade apprentices are strong. Ninety-six percent of trade apprentices are employed on completion of their training, with 84 percent of building and construction apprentices working in their apprenticeship occupation (NCVER, 2024). Additionally, over half of apprentices remain with the employer they had during their apprenticeship (Misko, Gu & Circelli, 2020).

Some apprentices pursue further training; 22 percent of those who complete a trade qualification continue with additional study (NCVER, 2024) and four percent undertake another apprenticeship (Misko et al., 2020).

While Evan enjoys his current work, he sometimes wonders if he might have pursued a different career had he received more guidance in school about what he 'really wanted to do.' Nonetheless, he is committed to completing his apprenticeship, driven by his dislike of 'leaving things half done'.

After finishing his training, Evan plans to remain in his apprenticeship trade initially. However, he hopes to broaden his skills and experience and in a few years is considering another apprenticeship within the construction industry that is less affected by 'weather conditions.' Evan is also mindful of the physical demands and injury risks associated with construction work and is contemplating potential supervisory roles in the future. Evan leverages his networks with other trades on his work sites to discuss career options and explore future possibilities.



4 A White Card is a mandatory requirement for anyone working in the construction industry in Australia, and provides proof that workers have completed general construction induction training.

# Samantha



Samantha joined The Smith Family's *Learning for Life* program in primary school and continued on the program for 12 years. She lives in a capital city with her parents and siblings and is the second oldest in a large family.

Samantha has physical and mental health conditions that she says 'sometimes' limit her ability to engage in activities typical for others her age.<sup>5</sup> She and several of her siblings receive disability support through the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).

*Mum has these workers that help my siblings and they've been really good for me as well...They help us a lot, actually. They help us with doctor's appointments and problems.*

## School experiences and disability support

Samantha liked the structure and learning environment provided by school. However, she experienced significant anxiety during her high school years, which sometimes led to her being sent home due to anxiety attacks caused by stress.

The *Disability Standards for Education 2005* describes the rights of students with disabilities and mandates that educational institutions provide equitable opportunities for these students, ensuring they receive the same educational benefits as their peers without disabilities (AIHW, 2024). Both state and federal governments in Australia have implemented policies and strategies to enhance access to and inclusion in mainstream education for children with disabilities (DSS, 2021; DSS, 2020).

In 2020, approximately one-in-five Australian students received additional educational funding for disability (ACARA, 2024b). Samantha received additional support in the classroom, which helped her to participate in regular classes within mainstream education.

*There was this one lady...she would always come into the classes that I was in and she would ask me questions about how I'm doing with my work, but then she would also help me with some of it too, which I really appreciated.*

<sup>5</sup> This information was provided by Samantha in the Pathways, Engagement and Transitions (PET) annual surveys (2021 to 2023). In the surveys, examples of physical conditions included cerebral palsy, brain injury, sight or hearing loss. Examples of mental health conditions included depression, anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorder.

## Combining mainstream schooling with an alternative school program

In senior secondary school, Samantha found many of her classes to be 'quite challenging' due to her 'learning issues.' During Year 12, she began attending an alternative school program a 'few days a week', where she received case management support and engaged in classes to develop work-ready skills.

*I'm really bad at counting money and doing maths...I was really worried that when it came to the point where I got a job and I was at the checkout, I couldn't do the money in my head, but the program really helped me with that... They helped me with resumé and cover letters to help me get jobs...They would help me with interviews...They'd help me prepare for that.*

In her mainstream school, Samantha continued to receive additional support from teachers, who would assist her with finishing work 'during recess or lunch.' Although Samantha acknowledged that she was 'really struggling' at this time, she never felt like she 'was failing' because she 'had the teachers helping.'

## Senior secondary school

Among 20- to 24-year-olds, two-thirds of people with disability complete Year 12 or its equivalent (AIHW, 2024) compared with nine-in-10 Australians without disability (ABS, 2023b).

Samantha was determined to finish Year 12 as she wanted to make her parents proud. She was also concerned about her employment prospects if she did not complete the Year 12 certificate.

*I wanted to finish Year 12 because I felt like if I didn't do that then I didn't really know what was going to happen because if you don't finish...then you might not be able to get a good job...I wanted to complete Year 12 to get a really good job and to have a good career.*

At the end of 2020, Samantha had not completed all the requirements for the Year 12 certificate. She needed to stay back for a couple of months in the alternative program to finish up her coursework and ultimately completed Year 12 during the school holidays.

## Post-school engagement

People with disability experience multiple barriers to employment (Devine et al., 2021). The NDIS provides personalised budgets to Australians with permanent disability, which can include funding for Disability Employment Services (DES). These services help people with disability to find and maintain employment in the mainstream labour market that aligns with their goals, preferences and abilities, (DSS, 2023; NDIS, 2021). DES offer various support models, including personalised training, on-the-job assessments, job customisation and support, and direct supervision (NDIS, 2021).

Despite this funding and support, just over half of all Australians aged 15 to 64 with disability are employed, compared to 82 percent of those without disability (ABS, 2024b). Among 15- to 24-year-old NDIS recipients, only 22 percent are in paid employment (NDIS, 2021) and people with disability are significantly more likely to be in part-time employment or underemployed, compared to those without disability (ABS, 2024b; AIHW, 2024).

When Samantha left school, she was focused on gaining employment, primarily to achieve independence. She applied for jobs at many places, and while she would have been content with any opportunity, her ideal role was a cashier or a similar role.

During her job search, Samantha was not registered with Centrelink and was uncertain about how government employment-related services worked.

*Centrelink is something that I'm going to be joining really soon. Probably toward the end the year...My mum...said it would be easier for me if I join Centrelink when I turned 19. So, I've been waiting...I don't even know why. That's just what she told me...I remember hearing about when you go on Centrelink, they make you look for 10 or so jobs a fortnight. <sup>6</sup>*

Towards the end of 2021, Samantha's mother helped her to apply for Centrelink, and Samantha subsequently registered with a Disability Employment Services provider. Her support worker assisted Samantha with job applications and transport to interviews.

<sup>6</sup> Disability Employment Scheme participants may have mutual obligation requirements or compulsory participation requirements, for example, regular meetings with a provider, looking for a particular number of jobs each week, or attending appointments, interviews and training (Job Access, 2018).

## Part-time, casual employment

In late 2021, Samantha's support worker helped her secure a part-time, casual job at a fast-food chain. Despite getting along with people, Samantha left just after a month due to dissatisfaction with both her colleagues and working conditions. The irregular and limited hours significantly affected her wages, contributing to her decision to leave.

*I couldn't handle it because I don't like being in small spaces. Also, because I didn't really get along with everyone there. And I was getting \$60 a week, which you can't live off that. So, I quit that job.*

In early 2022, Samantha received support to secure and maintain a part-time casual position with a supermarket chain. She typically worked five shifts a week, with each shift lasting between five to eight hours. Although she was satisfied with the work, Samantha would have welcomed more hours if they had been available.

*I really like chatting to the customers and also I like working in a fast-paced environment. I feel it's good for me because I have no time to get distracted and because I'm focused on what I have to do...I get at least like \$400, \$500 a week...If the opportunity for me to get more hours came up, I would definitely take that.*

By mid-2023, Samantha had been with the supermarket chain for over 18 months. She continued to work part-time on a casual basis, with irregular hours and varying shift lengths.

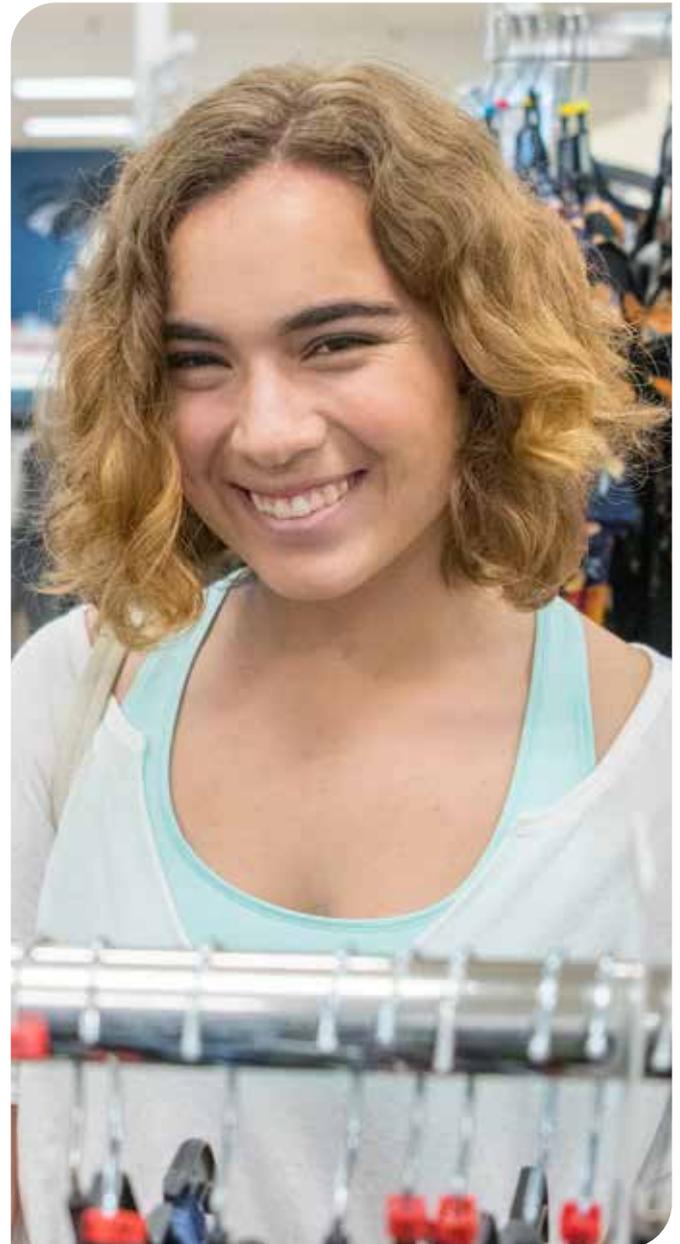
*I work three or four days a week. One shift, I'll have about eight hours and then another shift, I'll have two or three hours. It depends how busy they are.*

Through her employment and with support of her DES worker, Samantha developed and strengthened competencies and attitudes that supported both her job performance and her career exploration. She grew more confident over time, strengthened her help-seeking behaviour, and became more comfortable with asking for assistance.

*I used to struggle with asking for help, because I didn't want...people to think that I couldn't do it, so asking for help sometimes really terrified me. But now, I'm ok to ask... Because my...disability support worker... mentioned 'you don't have to be afraid to ask for help if you need it.' I took that advice and worked on it.*

## Future plans

Samantha believes that 'if you work hard for something, it will come true.' She is optimistic about her future and is making decisions that support her independence. Although she enjoys her job, in mid-2023 she began exploring a different career option. Having confidently cared for her younger siblings, she is interested in pursuing a career in childcare. Samantha's support worker has assisted her in applying online for a TAFE course, and she is preparing to start this new educational pathway.





Eliza joined The Smith Family's *Learning for Life* program as a primary student in 2010. In 2023, she was still on the program as a tertiary scholarship student. She lives with her mum in a large regional city. Eliza's parents separated when she was a young child and they are no longer in contact with her father.

## Early educational experiences

### Parental engagement

Parents are a key influence on their child's identity as a confident learner (Child Services Central, 2021). Parental engagement and encouragement of academic pursuits promotes school connectedness, engagement and academic achievement in children (Bradley, Ferguson & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2021). For students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, feeling connected to their school and feeling engaged in education can reduce the risks of poor educational outcomes linked to disadvantage (Tomaszewski, Xiang & Western, 2020).

Eliza's parents were highly engaged in her education, which helped her to become a confident learner and develop positive attitudes and behaviours towards school. When she was 'really young,' her father enrolled her in an after-school English and mathematics tutoring program, where she discovered that she is 'good at' these subjects. Eliza also remembers her father attending university when she was

still 'quite young and her family was together.' Parental role modelling of university aspirations encouraged Eliza to see university 'as a good...life pathway' and as such, she had 'always wanted to go to university and...never really considered doing anything else.'

### School mobility, peer group influence and subject choices

School mobility—when students relocate from one school to another for reasons other than scheduled transitions (like moving from primary to secondary school)—can negatively impact their engagement, academic achievement, and likelihood of completing Year 12 (Lu & Rickard, 2016; Gannon, Budgeon & Li, 2023). Peer groups also have a strong influence on school connectedness, academic achievement (Bradley et al., 2021) and Year 12 completion (Gemici et al., 2014).

Eliza 'went to a lot of schools,' including 'three different primary schools and two different high schools.' When reflecting on her school experience, Eliza was not particularly concerned about her school mobility. However, she had been troubled by the peer group in the first high school she attended, and thought this school was 'quite bad and a lot of students didn't focus on academics.'

Despite the challenges of school mobility and less academically inclined peers, Eliza was a diligent student.

Throughout school, she maintained very high attendance rates and exceeded national curriculum year level standards in English and mathematics, which are early signals of positive senior secondary and post-school outcomes (The Smith Family, 2018).

At the end of Year 9, Eliza successfully passed an entrance exam to an academically selective state government school. At this school, Eliza found ‘everyone pushed to get a good grade...and they were driven to achieve.’ She had a large circle of friends, all of whom intended to study at university.

Appropriate subject selection in senior secondary school is pivotal to influencing post-school employment, study and training pathways (Yu & Warren, 2018). In senior secondary school, Eliza studied business and marketing. The marketing component became her ‘favourite aspect of the business’ subject and this later informed her post-school study decisions.

## Career guidance

During high school, Eliza felt her school provided little support for exploring her career options. In senior secondary school, the advice she received from the careers counsellor was very general, focussing on providing ‘options’ rather than tailored guidance or targeted experiences. Although Eliza had contemplated several career paths, by Year 11 she had decided on becoming an accountant. With a clear plan to study at university and a defined career goal, Eliza felt the available guidance offered little additional value in exploring other potential options.

*Career guidance? Honestly, not much...We had a lot of alumni come in at my new school. They were still in the process of studying...but no one ever came after they had established their career. We had a school counsellor, but he...did not really give us any detail if we knew what we wanted to do. We went to a career expo...but it was pitched more towards people who were still deciding.*

At the end of 2020, Eliza completed Year 12, and attained a high ATAR (Australian Tertiary Achievement Rank).<sup>7</sup>

## Part-time employment during school

In Australia, almost half of all 16- and 17-year-old school students work part-time (Evans-Whipp, Swami & Prattley, 2021), an experience that can help young people to balance post-school study and employment pressures (Mann et al., 2020). Eliza began working part-time at age 15. However, like many young Australians during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kabátek, 2020; Littleton & Campbell, 2022), she lost her job in early 2020. She eventually found new employment at the end of the year in a part-time Christmas casual position that she held until mid-2023.

## University pathways and supports

To meet Australia’s future skills needs, the Australian Government has set a target for 55 percent of 25- to 34-year-olds to attain a university bachelor’s degree or higher by 2050 (Australian Government, 2024). To achieve this, the Government acknowledges the need to increase undergraduate degree completion among equity groups, such as students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, who have consistently been under-represented at universities (Australian Government, 2024).

In 2021, Eliza enrolled in a Bachelor of Business, majoring in accounting and marketing. Throughout her degree, Eliza continued to live at home with her mother. She received financial support through an annual scholarship from The Smith Family and a *Widening Participation* bursary from her university. Additionally, Eliza supplemented her income with Centrelink Youth Allowance benefits.

The scholarship and bursary made it ‘easier’ for Eliza ‘not to stress about money.’ She particularly appreciated the limited criteria and simple processes associated with The Smith Family’s scholarship program compared to the university bursary.

*The Smith Family has really helped with that progression from high school student to university student to career...With a lot of the university scholarships...you have to maintain a certain grade point average. But The Smith Family scholarship doesn’t have that. So, it’s not as much pressure.*

Young people who feel a strong sense of belonging at university tend to achieve better academic, mental health and overall wellbeing outcomes, compared to those with a poor sense of belonging. For university students, high quality, positive relationships with peers and educators are crucial to fostering this sense of belonging (Allen et al., 2024).

Eliza felt a strong sense of belonging at university. All of her high school friends also attended university, with many studying on the same campus, and one of her closest friends was enrolled in the same degree.

*My friends...They’re all going to university – even if they’re all going off to different universities and moving to different cities to study, it’s like ‘wow, we did a good job, guys’...One friend...we’re doing the same degree...the same courses.*

As Eliza advanced in her degree, her friendship and peer groups expanded beyond her high school friends. These new relationships further strengthened her sense of belonging and provided additional academic support.

<sup>7</sup> Australian Tertiary Admissions Rankings are used by universities to help select students into courses.

*All of my marketing courses have had a major group assignment in them. And it's been good, because every marketing course that I've done so far, I have got to know a lot of girls... We've been able to group up together. So, it's a lot more reliable working with them than with strangers.*

Early in her degree, Eliza proactively pursued opportunities that expanded her network of peers and career-related professionals. These experiences enhanced her understanding of potential work and study options and provided her with invaluable career connections. One of these opportunities was the The Smith Family's two-year *Cadetship to Career* summer holiday paid internship program.

*The best thing that happened last year was definitely The Smith Family's internship...It's given me a lot of insight into the industry and I met a lot of interesting people... We're in different stages of our lives so it's really interesting to hear their perspectives...their experiences...and compare it to what I'm doing and see what I want to do.*

Eliza also successfully applied to a two-year selective leadership program at her university, involving students from different year levels and degree majors.

*I started doing a leadership program and that's been really good...to see what...other students...are studying...because it's all different majors...who come together four times a trimester.*

Eliza believes these peer and adult networks strengthened her career-related skills and networks and were fundamental to her securing a part-time, casual position in a large accounting firm in the third year of her degree.

*The Smith Family's internship program helped me with getting my new position...It definitely helped me to be confident and it gave me experience in the corporate environment...The uni leadership program is more productive to building my career than the degree itself...At the leadership program events...it's not just uni students. There's a lot of professionals there...That's how I met my new boss.*

## Career management skills and attitudes

Strong career management skills, such as actively exploring jobs and engaging in intentional learning, enable students to discover and build their interests, skills, and self-confidence. These competencies lead to more informed career decisions and improved outcomes after leaving school (National Careers Institute, 2022).

Eliza exemplifies this principle through her career journey. From high school, she demonstrated a clear career ambition

and comprehensive understanding of the requirements to achieve her goals. During her undergraduate degree, Eliza focussed on developing a broad range of core work-related and career management skills that have supported her successful navigation of a professional career pathway.

Eliza acknowledges the significant value of her part-time employment, recognising how it honed essential skills such as effective communication and conflict management. These experiences not only reinforced her professional capabilities but also contributed to her overall career success so far.

*...working in retail for years now...in customer service and just experiencing and dealing with all sorts of different people. I've gotten really good at being communicative, but also listening and just adapting to how customers communicate.*

Success at university, particularly among students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, is influenced by self-agency and a desire for upward social mobility (Karimshah et al., 2013). Eliza has a very positive attitude and a strong understanding of how her self-concept supports her educational and professional goals. She also demonstrates a high degree of self-agency through her determination and personal commitment to her studies and chosen career path.

*My future? I'm optimistic...I'm also very stubborn. So, when I knew that I wanted to do accounting... when I made up my mind in Year 11...that that's what I wanted to do, I was sticking with that. I wasn't flip-flopping around. I'm not wasting time here.*

Effective career-related decision-making involves gathering accurate information and understanding the likelihood and value of various potential outcomes (National Careers Institute, 2022; Shergold et al., 2020). Eliza's strong decision-making skills and confidence were instrumental in her ability to identify and capitalise on the many opportunities and options that arose during her degree.

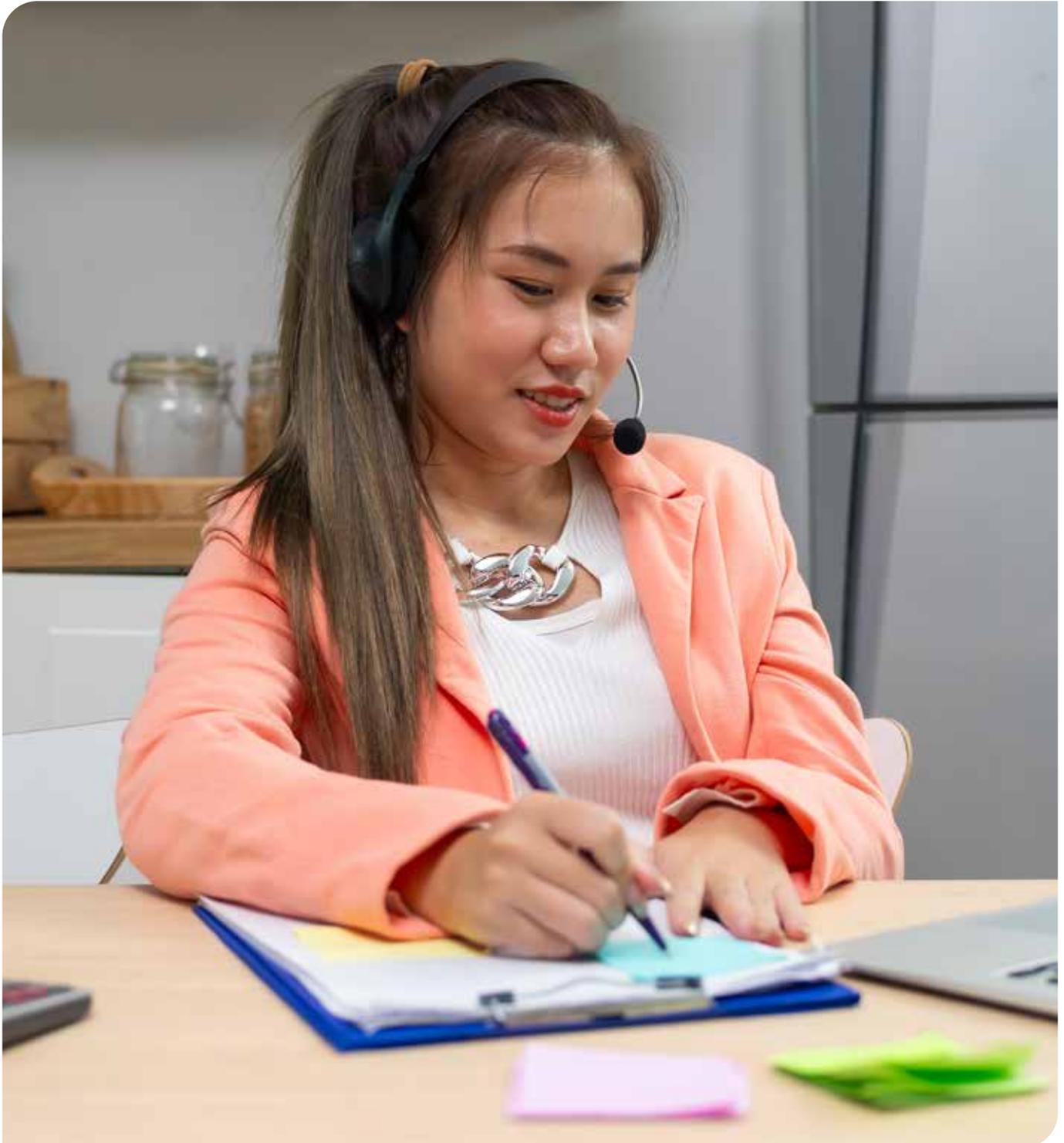
*If there's two really great options in front of me, I will do a mental pros and cons list and will be like 'what's better for me in the long run?'...If you don't put yourself out there, you're really out of the loop with what's going on and what opportunities are available. So, it's like I was only able to do X, Y, and Z because I was in the leadership program.*

## Future plans

Midway through the third year of her degree, Eliza had just resigned from her casual retail job and was 'really excited' about her role with an accounting firm. Her new employer offered Eliza the flexibility to determine her own hours and days of work so she could also manage the completion of her degree.

*They've literally given me...free reign...to just work whenever I want, that works with uni...I'm going to do two to three days a week and then when I'm on uni breaks, I'll do full-time.*

In the short-term, Eliza aims to complete her degree while gaining industry experience through her current work. Looking further ahead, she plans to remain with her current firm for the long term, expressing a commitment to working there for 'a really long time'. Her goal is to accumulate sufficient experience over the next decade to qualify for a more senior position within the company.



# Kari



Kari commenced on the *Learning for Life* program in high school, and remained on the program for six years. She is a young Aboriginal woman with strong connections to her Indigenous culture and heritage. Kari was born and raised in a regional town on her maternal family's traditional lands. In early 2021, she moved to the city where she now lives with her partner and his family.

From a very young age, Kari assumed adult responsibilities, providing significant care for her three younger siblings. When Kari was five years old, she and her siblings were placed into the out-of-home care system.

*My mum and dad, they weren't in the picture. I was the one that was raising my three other siblings. I was the one changing nappies and helping them get dressed. I was warming up the bottle.*

Kari maintained caring responsibilities after they entered kinship care and as a young adult continues to provide significant care and support to her siblings.

*I talk to my siblings every single day. I love them... We just FaceTime. They still call me every time they need help or something. I'm the first person they go to and I like that. I'll get on a train. I don't care. Those trains run all night. If my family needs me whenever, I want to be the first person they come to regardless. I want them to know that I'm always gonna be there.*

Like many children and young people who have out-of-home care experiences (Mendes & Chaffey, 2024; Miller & Alla, 2024), Kari has had poor mental health since she was a young child, which has significantly affected her school and post-school outcomes.

## School experiences

In Australia, children and young people who have been in the out-of-home care system tend to have poorer educational experiences and outcomes compared to their peers (Harvey et al., 2022; Lima, Maclean & O'Donnell, 2018). Many children in out-of-home care exhibit behavioural problems linked to underdeveloped self-regulation (McNamara, Montserrat & Wise, 2019). Unfortunately, these challenges often lead to school exclusion and an increased risk of early school leaving (ACWA, 2017).

Kari recalls being in 'all the gifted and talented' classes when she first started school and achieving 'immaculate' NAPLAN (National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy) results. However, as she progressed through primary school, her traumatic history began to manifest in behavioural issues. This led to repeated suspensions, and she was eventually 'kicked out of' mainstream schooling.

## Alternatives to mainstream schooling

Kari subsequently enrolled in and moved between various alternative school programs that provided specialised support for behavioural issues and mood disorders.

During her senior secondary years, she attended a program where she felt ‘really distracted’ by a classroom focused on self-direction, with low expectations for attendance and participation. Although she took advanced English and maths courses, she felt that ‘the work was really dumbed down’. Overall, Kari believed these experiences negatively impacted her school outcomes.

*There was no work pressure. They'd be like 'Do it at your own pace. Come to us if you need help, but we're not going to make you do it.' Going to school just became a hangout spot. That doesn't really sound that bad but, when you want to do your work, it becomes really tricky. I fell behind.*

## Systemic barriers

Kari understood that she had faced numerous systemic barriers throughout her schooling, which negatively impacted her educational outcomes. However, she believed that the most significant of these challenges was the lack of trauma-informed and culturally sensitive teaching practices.

*If you want to be a teacher, you need to be able to teach traumatised kids, gay kids and trans kids, Aboriginal kids. It's really upsetting to me... So much of my education could have been salvaged and I could have graduated with an ATAR<sup>8</sup> instead of an asterisk... With a little bit more attention and a little bit more patience from teachers and a little bit of a different approach, I would have been able to be a bloody amazing kid. And instead, I became a behavioural kid.*

## Senior secondary school outcomes

Research on the Year 12 completion and post-school outcomes of young people leaving out-of-home care is limited. Australian studies suggest that between 18 and 25 percent of all care leavers, and only eight percent of Aboriginal care leavers,<sup>9</sup> complete Year 12 (Lima et al., 2018; Muir & Hand, 2018). In comparison, 46 percent of all young people with similar socioeconomic characteristics, who have never had contact with the child protection system, complete Year 12 (Lima et al., 2018).

Kari considered leaving school numerous times, but her strong self-identity as a positive role model for her younger siblings kept her motivated. As a result, at the end of 2020, Kari became one of the few care leavers who graduate. She was the first in her family to complete Year 12 and one of two students from her year to earn their Year 12 certificate.

## Post-school transitions

In Australia, post-school transitions into work or further study can be challenging for all young people (Dietrich et al., 2021). Those who are or have been in out-of-home care are particularly vulnerable during these transitions (AIHW, 2022; CCYPV, 2020). Compared to their peers who have not been involved in the out-of-home care system, these young people have lower rates of participation in tertiary education (Harvey et al., 2022; Tomaszewski et al., 2018) and employment (Lima et al., 2018). Care leavers are more likely to rely on government benefits (AIHW, 2022), experience homelessness, live in public housing, be involved in the justice system (CCYPV, 2020) and to experience significantly poorer long-term mental health outcomes (Mendes & Chaffey, 2024). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander care leavers are at the greatest risk of poor outcomes across these areas (CCYPV, 2020).

Since finishing Year 12, Kari's post-school transition has been complex, non-linear, and impacted by many of the barriers faced by young people who have been in the out-of-home care system.

## Initial transition

After completing Year 12, Kari received help from a family member to enrol in a six-day introductory course at a regional university. The course focused on basic medical procedures which sparked her interest in the field. Following the course, Kari moved to the city to live with her boyfriend and his family.

Throughout 2021, Kari considered various occupations requiring different levels of tertiary education, all related to the short course she had completed, as they involved ‘having to do with the body.’

*Like I want to do body modification... I want to do forensics and figure out how people died. I want to even be doing behavioural analysis on the way that people function so I can figure out what's going on with me.*

However, Kari was not ready to commit to further study at this time, so she decided to look for work.

## Unemployment

In 2021, the youth labour market was significantly impacted by COVID-19 restrictions (e61 Institute, 2022a). The accompanying economic recession led to high rates of youth unemployment and underemployment (Walsh et al., 2022).

<sup>8</sup> Australian Tertiary Admissions Ranking – used by universities to help select students into courses.

<sup>9</sup> The study compared outcomes based on ‘Aboriginality.’ It did not distinguish between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.

In this challenging environment, and with no previous work experience, Kari found it difficult to secure employment.

*It's kind of hard to find work cos nobody's really hiring. Nobody's really going out and buying things. Nobody's really allowed outside, so you can't really do much. And I don't know if I'm the best candidate. I haven't done much.*

Kari spent most of 2021 searching for stable work that she could manage given her poor mental health, but was unsuccessful. She tried two jobs in the fast food sector, but found that each shift exacerbated her anxiety. Kari received some assistance from her job services provider, who helped her explore options and consider applying for disability support due to her mental health challenges. However, Kari had mixed feelings about applying for disability support and was hesitant to pursue it.

#### *Unpaid work experience*

In Australia, unpaid work experience is becoming increasingly prevalent. Nationally, approximately three-in-five young people aged 18 to 29 have participated in at least one episode of unpaid work (Oliver et al., 2016). In highly competitive labour markets, such as those experienced during the 2020 and 2021 COVID-19 pandemic, the perceived value of unpaid work increases as job seekers attempt to enhance their employability over candidates without work experience (McDonald, Stewart & Oliver, 2021).

Throughout most of 2021, Kari sought to improve her employability through unpaid work experience. She was eager to learn more about a specific apprenticeship and made considerable efforts to build strong relationships and expand her network with local employers. Kari firmly believed that unpaid work experience was crucial for her employment prospects.

*Nobody's going to want to hire me...if I just rock up and ask for an apprenticeship. They're not going to want me...I've worked at all of them in my local area...It shows I'm really interested and that I want to do it...They know that I'm really enjoying the work...So hopefully, they're going to want to hire me.*

In late 2021, Kari's unpaid work experience resulted in a workplace injury that posed a significant health risk. The poor workplace practices that contributed to her injury dissuaded Kari from pursuing the apprenticeship further.

### **Alternative university entrance pathways**

Since the 1990s, successive government policies have aimed to increase the participation of people from equity groups in higher education (Australian Universities Accord Review Panel, 2023). In response, universities have developed and expanded alternative admission pathways for undergraduate students (Jackson, Li & Carrol, 2023).

In late 2021, after her household caught COVID-19 and endured a month of isolation followed by weeks of recovery, Kari felt 'really bored' and spent time reflecting on her future. In an impulsive decision, she applied to and gained entry into an alternative university pathways program specifically for Indigenous young people.

Kari was aware of the significant study barriers she faced and recognised that her previous educational experiences had not fully prepared her for the demands of university coursework. Before starting the course in early 2022, she researched and implemented various learning and study strategies to effectively manage her coursework and assessments.

Kari was proud of successfully enrolling in university and described it as 'the most fun' she had ever had with learning. She chose subjects that aligned closely with her interests, provided a clear path to an undergraduate degree and subsequent career, and resonated with her desire to understand and heal her past experiences.

*I want to be working with criminals. I want to work with them after they've already been dealt with by the court and prison systems. I know that I want to work in crime and psychology and help people who were in my position and my mum's position. Figure out why the things that happened, happened. I can help kids that were like me.*

#### *Adult support networks and stable living arrangements*

Kari received substantial practical and emotional support for her studies from her partner, his mother and an Indigenous Coordinator at university. She felt optimistic about being in a 'strong and healthy relationship' and living in a stable, emotionally secure environment with a 'family that actually loves each other and communicates effectively.'

*My partner's mum is the one to push me. She's majorly supportive. She makes sure I take my medication. She takes me to uni, she drops me off at the station. She's my number one support other than my partner. She instantly accepted me and loves me for who I am, regardless of anything.*

#### *COVID-19 and study conditions*

Kari began university during a period when COVID-19 restrictions required significant modifications to an academic environment that was originally designed for face-to-face interactions. The shift to online classes heightened the need for independent learning skills (Eckley et al., 2023) and posed challenges, particularly for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds with limited access to the technology necessary for effective virtual engagement (Mupenzi, Mude & Baker, 2020).

Kari struggled with the online aspect of her classes, finding it difficult to fully engage in the lessons. She preferred face-to-face learning, and with three of her five classes being online,

she found it challenging to become ‘fully immersed’ in these virtual lessons.

For many women, family commitments and caregiving roles often take precedence over personal goals, particularly when those goals are challenging and require significant effort (Duncan & Carter, 2022). In addition to her difficulties with the online learning environment, Kari faced ongoing family issues and she and her partner were frequently responding to caregiving responsibilities for their siblings.

Young care leavers may experience increased emotional labour and burnout when studying subjects that evoke memories of their traumatic backgrounds (Harvey et al., 2022). During her course, Kari particularly struggled with course content related to ‘crime and how it affects families.’

*We started getting into foster care situations and Indigenous deaths in custody. I was in a constant surrounding of hearing about it over and over and over again. And I felt like it was hindering any chance I had to cope. It was like being punched in the face while going to class.*

### Deferring studies

Publicly available research on the outcomes of university pathway programs is limited. However, one regional Australian university reported program pass rates of around fifty percent (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2014).

Towards the end of the academic year, Kari felt overwhelmed by her circumstances. She chose to ‘drop out’ of her course and subsequently deferred her studies while dealing with ‘a lot of other issues.’

### Part-time and casual employment

After deferring her studies, Kari completed a barista course and obtained her Responsible Service of Alcohol (RSA) certification. With these qualifications, she secured part-time, casual employment in hospitality close to home. However, like many young Australians in casual employment, Kari faced underemployment (Campbell & Burgess, 2018). Her work hours and days frequently fluctuated, leading to financial insecurity and living ‘pay cheque to pay cheque.’ The irregular and inconsistent rostering made it challenging for her to seek a second job to supplement her income.

*I’m supposed to have 15 hours, but I regularly only get 10. There’s not really shift security. I don’t know if I’ll be working that week until that Monday. If they gave us two, three weeks’ notice in advance, that’d be cool because then I could just set my availability for other jobs.*

Kari’s employer was sympathetic to and supportive of her mental health issues, and Kari found that working helped distract her from her ongoing challenges. However, she experienced significant anxiety before each shift and found

that working in front-line customer service left her feeling ‘drained and overwhelmed.’

### Access to mental health services

For many children in out-of-home care, traumatic experiences hinder their development of social and emotional skills (Darwin et al., 2023; Muir & Hand, 2018) and significantly impact their mental health and long-term psychosocial outcomes (CCYPV, 2020; Mendes & Chaffey, 2024; Miller & Alla, 2024). Despite the critical need, mental health services for young people in and leaving the out-of-home care system are often poorly accessed, inadequately coordinated, and insufficiently funded (McLean, Hiscock & Goldfield, 2022; Muir & Hand, 2018; Productivity Commission, 2020).

Kari has accessed mental health services since entering kinship care. As a young teenager she struggled with addiction, and as a young adult, she was diagnosed with chronic and acute mental health conditions similar to those of her mother.

Despite extensive mental health care, Kari’s treatment has been characterised by discontinuity and fragmentation.

*...The most I’ve been without therapy since I was five, was like six or seven months. With CAMHS<sup>10</sup> and stuff like that they’ll do six months’ worth of therapy. And then from there they’ll refer you somewhere else or they’ll continue it. Or with Victim Services, it’s like you get a year of free therapy and then from there you have to find somewhere else. Or get it renewed. A lot of my time without therapy was just the end of the time allowed and it was just waiting for referrals. It’s never really been ‘Oh, I need to finish therapy.’ It’s more like, ‘I’m waiting for the next person to take me on.’*

After leaving school and moving to the city, Kari wanted to see a therapist but could not afford private mental health care. She attempted to access public mental health services but found herself ‘bouncing backwards and forwards between doctors’ and was turned away for being ‘a bit too intense.’

*Everyone was like, ‘This is way out of my league. You need to go private for this.’ But I couldn’t afford to go private. And I would just be sent to a bunch of different therapists. I was too complex.*

While at university, Kari was aware of the various student support services available but was reluctant to seek help from a team she believed might not be adequately equipped to address her significant mental health challenges.

In late 2022 and early 2023, Kari presented at hospital multiple times, seeking intensive specialist support. However, she was repeatedly refused admission. Eventually, after presenting again at an emergency department, Kari’s partner

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intervened by refusing to take her home, which led to her admission and access to specialist in-patient psychiatric care. By mid-2023, Kari had been released from hospital, receiving intensive, coordinated out-patient support, and had returned to her part-time, casual job.

## Future plans

Although daily life presents significant ongoing challenges for Kari, three years after completing Year 12 she continued to hold positive hopes and plans. In the near future, she hoped to be either working full-time or combining part-time work with part-time study. Kari had a strong desire to return to university, believing it would be beneficial for her mental health.

Kari maintained her aspiration to complete a degree and pursue a professional career, though she no longer felt she could work with criminals. Her longer-term plan included being enrolled at university, achieving greater financial security with '\$200 to \$300 in savings', and living independently with her partner.



# Peter



## Personal circumstances

Peter was on the *Learning for Life* program for 11 years, after joining in primary school. He grew up on a farm near a large regional town where he did not ‘really feel relaxed’ due to his complex family environment.

Peter has a developmental condition that he says ‘sometimes’ limits his ability to do things other people his age do.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, he and his family experienced a significant traumatic event during his teenage years, and six years later, he was still experiencing symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) without receiving any mental health treatment or support.

As a teenager, Peter had anticipated staying at home for an extended period because of his sense of responsibility towards his mother. However, after finishing school, he moved across the state to another large regional town to live with his older brother, who helped him explore and understand more about their family history.

*I thought I'd...look after my mother. I thought I'd be that child. Instead, I found that I wanted to leave...I was happy to leave. When I turned 18 my brother told me that he'd answer any questions I had about my family because a lot of things have been kept from me.*

Peter appreciated his brother’s practical and financial support, but he was determined to become independent and believed that moving to the city would enhance his employment prospects. By early 2023, he had saved enough for his share of a rental bond and was able to relocate to the city.

## School experiences

Students’ perceptions of being accepted, valued and supported by their peers and teachers are fundamental to their engagement in education and to fostering a positive sense of belonging at school (Allen et al., 2022; Halcrow & Cox, 2020). School engagement impacts educational outcomes and has a long-term effect on overall wellbeing and mental health (Halcrow & Cox, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> This information was provided by Peter in the Pathways, Engagement and Transitions (PET) annual surveys (2021 to 2023). In the surveys, examples of developmental conditions included autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, intellectual disability and learning disability.

Peter 'hated going to school.' He tried to be outgoing but found social interactions difficult. He 'didn't really have friends' and was 'bullied a lot' by both students and teachers. Despite seeing a 'few therapists' to try to help him 'talk about' his feelings, his school experiences contributed to a very low sense of self-worth.

At the beginning of Year 10, Peter changed schools and found that 'people were a lot better.' At his new school, one student reached out, leading to Peter making 'a few friends' and experiencing less social isolation than he had at his previous school.

*I didn't really know how to act around other people, so at my new school I was trying to just get adopted by a group of people. If I didn't meet that group, I...would have just sat around by myself most of the time...It was good that someone actually wanted to be around me.*

## Subject choices and Vocational Education and Training

During most of high school, Peter achieved the national curriculum year level standards in English but consistently struggled with maths. Overall, he preferred the practical and creative subjects where he could work with his hands.

Career aspirations significantly influence subject choices and can shape students' post-school pathways (Shergold et al., 2020). In Year 10, Peter completed a week of work experience in a restaurant, which he enjoyed. By senior secondary school, he 'was pretty determined to work in food' and aspired to be a chef. Believing his time at school would be better spent in a kitchen, he enrolled in a Vocational Education and Training (VET) Certificate II in Hospitality. While he enjoyed cooking and working in the kitchen, pressure from his family to take on cooking responsibilities at home eventually hindered his enjoyment of the course.

*It got annoying...My class would be used a lot to try and make me cook at home...I was being pushed to cook and all that, outside of what I needed to and my family was using the excuse that I wouldn't become a chef...It kind of just made it that 'I really don't want to do this.'*

### COVID-19

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the VET sector experienced significant declines in course enrolments and completions, particularly among young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds and other equity groups.<sup>12</sup> Lockdown restrictions and workplace closures prevented students from completing the mandatory work placement requirements of their courses (Trimboli, Lees & Zhang, 2023). In 2020,

these restrictions impeded Peter's ability to complete his Certificate II qualification.

*I needed a specific amount of services to be able to get my Cert II. And, you know? COVID. We weren't allowed to go out and all that, so I couldn't actually get my services...If COVID didn't happen...I would've graduated with my Cert II in Hospitality.*

## Career guidance

Peter felt that, compared to his peers, he received limited career guidance or support in identifying potential post-school pathways suited to his skills and interests. Although he received practical assistance with developing a resumé and preparing for job interviews, he believed this support was of little benefit to his subsequent employment outcomes.

*At school, they helped me with my resumé and feeling...as comfortable as I could be when talking to new people. They really...helped me a lot when it comes to looking for a job, but that didn't really help me find a job...There were definitely people who had more support.*

## Senior secondary school outcomes

Despite the challenges Peter faced, he was determined to finish school, motivated by his desire to be the first in his family to complete Year 12. His mother was clear about her expectation for him to graduate, which further fuelled his resolve. Although he felt he was 'never the smartest child' in his family, Peter successfully completed his secondary school certificate at the end of 2020, with hopes of finding employment.

## Post-school engagement

The COVID-19 pandemic led to a significant contraction of the youth labour market, with particular impacts on young people from regional areas and from low socioeconomic backgrounds (e61 Institute, 2022a). By early 2021, approximately one-in-six young Australians aged 15 to 19 were unemployed and a further one-in-five were underemployed (ABS, 2024a). When pandemic restrictions were eased and overall labour market conditions improved, many young Australians remained disengaged from employment and training, with young men being particularly affected (e61 Institute, 2023).

In the first 18 months after finishing school, Peter applied for multiple jobs each month but had little success or feedback on his applications. His lack of part-time work experience during school meant he missed out on developing work-ready skills that might have aided his job search (Mann et al., 2020).

<sup>12</sup> Including people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, those living in regional/remote areas, people with disabilities, and those who speak a language other than English (LOTE) at home.

Peter was particularly interested in working in a café kitchen, a field he was familiar with, but struggled to find any entry-level positions. The difficulty and lack of progress in his job search further diminished his already low sense of self-worth.

*When I left school, I was hoping to try and get work...I was putting in all the resumés I needed for Centrelink...the JobSeeker thing. And I was putting like twenty resumés in a month. No one answered me. I don't know. I guess I just wasn't the person they wanted. They found someone better or something.*

In mid-2021, Peter reached the interview stage for a position at a fast-food chain. It was his first formal interview, and he felt a significant lack of confidence and was extremely nervous. Despite his efforts, he was unsuccessful in securing the role.

*I just find it really difficult trying to sell myself. I've never been good at describing myself, so when people ask what I can bring...I kinda just don't know how to answer...It was my first actual proper interview and I was panicking a lot...I didn't know how...to answer anything and I didn't get the job... It was pretty hard for me for a while.*

## Social isolation and adult support networks

Having moved across state, Peter lost contact with the few friends he had made at school. Ongoing COVID-19 restrictions in 2021 limited his opportunities to build new social connections. For the first 18 months after leaving school, Peter felt isolated and lonely, spending much of his time at home with little social interaction.

His older brother was his primary source of financial and practical support. Through his brother's social network, Peter was offered a volunteering opportunity. This experience allowed him to gain practical skills, boost his self-esteem, and realise he was better at social interactions than he had previously believed.

In 2022, Peter reapplied for a job in the same fast-food chain where he had previously been unsuccessful and secured a part-time, casual position as a cleaner.

## Part-time and casual employment

Peter was 'grateful' to have a job and to be 'not just relying on Centrelink payments,' but his first employment experience worsened his already low sense of self-worth. He believed that cleaning work was 'the best' he could manage and felt he was of little value to the organisation compared to his peers.

*I know I'm not good at making the food, so I stick to cleaning, which lets all the people that are better than me do what they need to do...I'm just happy I can do the things I do.*

Despite the business being 'constantly short staffed', Peter was rarely offered full-time hours. His work days were frequently changed, and he was consistently scheduled only for closing shifts.

*I'm casual right now. My hours, they can fluctuate... around 14, 16 hours a week...normally four days a week. But this week, I had Tuesday and Thursday and I'm also working Sunday...I can start from 8:30 to any time after that...I always finish at 1am.*

Employment conditions characterised by underemployment and unpredictable hours can create psychological scarring, undermining confidence and negatively impacting employability and motivation to find work (Campbell & Burgess, 2018; e61 Institute, 2022b). For young people in particular, negative employment experiences can significantly increase the risk of long-term unemployment (Borland & Coelli, 2021; e61 Institute, 2022a) and may have scarring effects lasting up to a decade (Andrews et al., 2020; e61 Institute, 2022a; e61 Institute, 2022b). Job insecurity also negatively affects a range of broader life outcomes, including physical and mental health, self-esteem, and financial and housing security (Senate Select Committee on Job Security, 2022).

## Financial stress

During 2021 and 2022, it was common for young Australians aged 18 to 24 to experience financial difficulties, with a quarter frequently unable to meet their living costs (Walsh et al., 2022; Walsh et al., 2021). Since leaving school, Peter has been under significant and ongoing financial stress.

In the first 18 months after school, he was 'just trying to get by' and struggled to achieve his goal of living independently. While working at the fast-food chain, Peter remained reliant on his brother's financial support to afford basic necessities.

*I do want to move to the city eventually. But...I have to stay with my brother...I barely make enough to pay for basics. I'm lucky because...my rent at my brother's is decided by how much I get paid that week...If I paid a fixed rate for rent, I would not have enough money to buy food and all that.*

Despite his financial constraints, after 11 months in his job Peter had saved enough money to be able to pay his portion of the bond for a share house in the city. In 2023, he relocated, but this move required him to leave his job, making him once again reliant on Centrelink.

*I'm getting by on my Centrelink, but I do need more...Job Seeker is enough that I can pay my rent and have some money for food afterwards...I'm not starving...but I am broke a lot...I'm doing my best to just avoid debt...I just really want a job so that I don't have to worry about money anymore.*

## Future plans

Young people often struggle in their post-school transition when their career aspirations do not align with their understanding of the education and qualifications required for their preferred occupation (Mann et al., 2020).

Three years after leaving school, Peter still aspired to be a chef and believed that post-school study might improve his overall employability. However, he was uncertain about the specific qualifications needed and whether further study would ultimately be 'worth it'. His uncertainty was compounded by advice from family and friends who cautioned against a career in hospitality, citing its high stress levels and potential for being overwhelming.

By mid-2023, Peter had been unemployed for four months. Despite meeting with a 'really good' employment services provider every fortnight, he had reasonable concerns about facing another period of long-term unemployment. Peter was willing to take any job, but despite his recent employment history, he was having 'a lot of trouble' finding work. Financial insecurity remained a constant pressure, and he hoped that future employment would help alleviate his financial stress.

*I don't really have any jobs I know I could get. I'm just literally hoping for anything right now... It took me 18 months...and two interviews... to get my first job...It was not easy to find a job for me, and it still isn't...I'm probably going to be stressed in whichever job I get...I wouldn't want to be overwhelmed but to be honest, I'd rather be overwhelmed and have a job, you know?... Aspirations? I've spent so long trying to just be comfortable and not have to worry about money that I don't really know what else I want after that.*



# Matthew



Matthew joined The Smith Family's *Learning for Life* program in primary school and continued on the program for 13 years. He lives with his mother and two siblings in a small, highly disadvantaged rural town,<sup>13</sup> 30 km from the nearest regional centre.<sup>14</sup> His younger brother has a significant disability, requiring 24-hour care. Matthew's mother cares for his brother full-time, and Matthew and his sister also provide regular support. The family did not receive disability support services for Matthew's brother until 2022.

*I look after him a lot of the time...His condition is very unstable...I will check up on him every half an hour...It's getting a little easier cos we've recently got him a support worker to take him out every now and then. So, it's a little less stress on us.*

## School experiences

Matthew missed a lot of high school and struggled academically, consistently falling below the national curriculum year level standards for English and maths. He was not interested in, and felt he did not really learn from, compulsory subjects like history, geography, music, and art. In high school, he would have preferred practical subjects that taught skills relevant to everyday life, such as paying bills and dealing with taxes.

<sup>13</sup> As defined by the ABS (2023a).

<sup>14</sup> With a population of approximately 12,000 people (ABS, 2022).

<sup>15</sup> Matthew was uncertain of the level of qualification of these courses.

Matthew believed that practical subjects would have helped him explore potential career interests. He felt he received very little career guidance at school, and the guidance he did receive was not particularly useful.

*The school careers counsellor would give me options. I usually didn't take them because I wasn't interested in the sort of stuff she offered... She was useful to other people...but it didn't really help me out.*

## Vocational Education and Training

At the beginning of Year 10, Matthew left school to enrol in a Vocational Education and Training (VET) course at TAFE (Technical and Further Education) that he thought he might be interested in. However, after a year he lost interest in the course and returned to school to complete Years 11 and 12.

During senior secondary school, Matthew enrolled in two VET courses,<sup>15</sup> which he loved. He was much more engaged with the practical work and work placement structures of these classes compared to his theory-based classes. He particularly enjoyed an Information, Communications and Technology (ICT) hardware course, which involved 'taking things apart and putting them back together.'

Nationally in 2020, approximately two-thirds of male students in regional areas completed Year 12, compared with three-quarters of male students in major cities (ACARA, 2024a).

During senior secondary school, Matthew faced significant challenges that contributed to depression and anxiety. Despite his teachers being friendly and supportive, he found the workload overwhelming and struggled with motivation, feeling he lacked clear goals and did not really want to finish Year 12. Nevertheless, understanding that completing school would enhance his resumé and improve his job prospects, Matthew was encouraged by his mother and teachers to persist. By the end of 2020, he successfully graduated from Year 12.

## Post-school engagement

### COVID-19 and unemployment

During the COVID-19 pandemic, labour market entry was disrupted for many young people, particularly for those from low socioeconomic backgrounds and those living in regional areas (e61 Institute, 2022a). In early 2021, approximately one-in-six young Australians aged 15 to 19 were unemployed and a further one-in-five were underemployed (ABS, 2024a). As pandemic restrictions eased and labour market conditions improved, young men were more likely than young women and older workers to remain disengaged from employment and training (e61 Institute, 2023).

After completing Year 12, Matthew registered with an employment services provider and applied for the Youth Allowance government benefit. However, he faced several barriers to finding employment.

During school, Matthew had not developed a clear sense of his skills and interests or acquired career-building competencies to support his post-school transition. He had not engaged in part-time employment, missing opportunities to gain workplace entry-level skills and experience that could have facilitated his job search (Mann et al., 2020). His hometown had limited employment opportunities, exacerbated by COVID-19 pandemic lockdown restrictions and workplace closures. Matthew found it very difficult to secure any form of employment, noting that available jobs often required qualifications he did not possess.

Although he was 18, Matthew had not completed the mandatory 120 hours of supervised driving required for his probationary driver's licence. His mother, who was responsible for his brother's care, could not provide the necessary driving hours. This contributed to Matthew spending most of his first year out of high school unemployed and struggling to find work. These circumstances placed him at significant risk of long-term unemployment (Borland & Coelli, 2021; e61 Institute, 2022a).

## Adult support networks and Vocational Education and Training

Adult support networks who can provide diverse guidance and advice on career pathways—including education and industry professionals—are an important resource for young people and their post-school transitions. (Shergold et al., 2020). After leaving school, Matthew's only adult support networks were his immediate family and his employment services provider.

In mid-2021, he sought assistance from his employment services provider to find an ICT training course that would build on his VET qualifications from Year 12. However, Matthew was frustrated by the limited course options that did not align with his interests.

In the latter half of 2021, Matthew's family suggested exploring an individual support worker role, considering his experience providing care for his brother.

*I see myself as a patient, calm, easy-going person... that would do really well working with people...who are elderly or people with disabilities...My mum was part of the decision-making because she told me that it would probably be a good direction to go in, considering my traits.*

### Part-time study and employment

Matthew discussed the possibility of pursuing an individual support qualification with his employment services provider, who then funded his enrolment in a Certificate III in Individual Support during the second half of 2021.

*When I said I wanted to do some sort of thing working with other people...I wouldn't say my employment services provider offered advice, but they did offer different courses...then they paid for it and I got started.*

He found the course to be a significant challenge, requiring considerable effort due to the extensive theory, reading, and writing involved. Nevertheless, he felt well-supported by his training provider and, when needed, relied on his mother and grandparents for additional assistance with coursework and assessments.

*If I had any questions, I'd enquire about it and the teachers would assist me on which part to read for more information. They wouldn't give me the answers obviously, but they would sort of guide me to which sections to read to find the answers...Or I would ask my mum or grandparents...I did have the help I needed and am happy with the assistance I was given.*

While Matthew was studying, he secured a part-time, casual job stocking shelves at a local store, working approximately six hours a week. He enjoyed the work, believing it suited his capabilities. Although he would have preferred more hours, the store did not require him often, and after a few months, his employer ceased offering him any shifts without explanation.

Matthew successfully completed the coursework for his Certificate III in mid-2022. However, he faced significant challenges finding a placement to complete the mandatory 120 hours of workplace practice required for the qualification. Although by this time he had obtained a provisional driver's licence and could travel outside his hometown, it wasn't until the second half of 2022 that he secured a placement. Completing the required hours took him an additional three months. Despite critical staffing shortages in regional aged-care facilities (CEDA, 2023), which Matthew hoped would lead to a permanent position, he was not offered ongoing employment after finishing his placement.

In late 2022, Matthew's employment services provider identified a job opportunity with a local disability services provider. After a successful interview, Matthew was required to increase his car insurance<sup>16</sup> and complete several work-related certifications including First Aid, Hand Hygiene, and Food and Manual Handling certificates and a Working with Children Check.<sup>17</sup>

Eight months later, Matthew was still employed with this small family-run organisation and was enjoying many aspects of the work.

*I'm loving it. Couldn't be any better. I've got two really lovely bosses...I couldn't really ask for a better employer...very understanding...There's a colleague I talk to a lot...I really do feel good about helping other people. It gives me that little boost of dopamine.*

While he enjoyed his work, Matthew worked part-time, casual shifts averaging approximately 20 hours a week. In Australia, casual employment is characterised by unpredictable hours and variable earnings (Gilfillan, 2021). In the caring sector, part-time and casual employment is common; four-in-five disability support workers are employed on a part-time basis (Commonwealth of Australia, 2024). Over 50 percent of personal carers aged 15 to 24 are employed casually,<sup>18</sup> with short-hour, on-demand shifts, no leave entitlements, and limited job security (National Skills Commission, 2021). Long-term, insecure employment conditions can negatively affect life outcomes, including future employment prospects (Borland & Coelli, 2021; e61 Institute, 2022a), financial and housing security, and overall health and psychosocial wellbeing (Senate Select Committee on Job Security, 2022).

## Future plans

Matthew prefers not to think too far ahead, as he feels disheartened when his plans do not materialise. By mid-2023, he felt more accomplished and confident compared to his school years. In the short-term Matthew intended to stay in his current disability support role. However, he remained interested in ICT as a potential future career path, despite his reservations about further study due to the challenges he faced during the Certificate III course.



<sup>16</sup> From a third party to comprehensive policy.

<sup>17</sup> Matthew believed that these courses 'were free' so it is likely his employment services provider or employer paid for the certifications and the Working with Children Check.

<sup>18</sup> Compared with 19 percent of the total Australian workforce (National Skills Commission, 2021: 145).

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