



An evaluation of the Young Carer Bursary Program

Summary Report

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Government Department of Social Services**

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Introduction

This report summarises the findings and implications of the full report on the evaluation of the Young Carer Bursary Program (YCBP).

The Young Carer Bursary Program

Arising from a 2013 federal election commitment, and developed in 2014, the YCBP was designed to assist young carers aged 25 years and under to continue to study and to relieve the financial pressure for them to undertake part-time work in addition to their educational and caring responsibilities. The YCBP aims to achieve this by awarding a specified number of financial bursaries to young carers determined to be most in need.

Carers Australia is funded by the Department to administer the approximate total \$3.45 million YCBP grant pool (over three calendar years 2015-2017). Bursaries are awarded based on an annual selection process overseen by an Independent Assessment Panel.

Since 2015, 633 bursaries have been awarded at a total value of \$2,449,000. In 2017, 343 bursaries are expected to be awarded. Once these are awarded, the total number of bursaries awarded will be 976 at a total value of \$3,450,000.

Evaluation approach

The evaluation focused on assessing the effectiveness of the processes to administer the YCBP and the short to medium-term outcomes achieved by the program. The evaluation did not seek to assess the longer-term impacts of the YCBP.

To address the above, the evaluation sought to answer the following questions:

1. What is the need for the YCBP?
2. To what extent is the YCBP reaching the desired cohort of young carers?
3. How effective are the advertising, application and assessment processes in selecting the desired cohort of young carers?
4. How appropriate is the \$3,000 bursary (including amount and instalments) in assisting recipients?
5. To what extent did the young carer bursary:
 - a. Help recipients continue their education?
 - b. Help recipients continue their caring responsibilities?
 - c. Help recipients to be socially connected?
 - d. Reduce the pressure experienced by recipients to work part-time?
6. How cost-effective is the YCBP?

An extensive mix of qualitative and quantitative data collection methods were used to answer the above questions:

- Semi-structured interviews with Departmental Carer Policy Section staff Carers Australia staff and Independent Assessment Panel members
- Case study interviews with 12 bursary recipients and four support people¹

¹ Due to the diversity of the recipient population it was intended that 20 recipients would be interviewed, however despite significant efforts by the evaluation team in reaching out to 110 past and current recipients and providing an incentive payment for participating in the interviews, only 12 recipients followed through with the consent to be interviewed.

- Analysis of Carers Australia's bursary application data
- Analysis of the mid-year survey data for 2015 (round one) and 2016 (round two)
- Analysis of YCBP program administration and bursary costs.

Together both streams of research provide an in-depth evaluation of the YCBP by answering the research questions posed.

A detailed discussion of the limitations on the data collected and analysed through the above methods can be found in the full evaluation report.

Evaluation findings

The program's achievements

The evaluation shows that the YCBP assists young carers to achieve better life outcomes and in doing so is effective in creating savings to government over the span of recipients' lives.

Specifically, for such a modest investment, the evaluation found that the YCBP assists recipients to:

- stay in education
- continue in their caring role
- increase their social connections; and
- reduce the daily pressure/stress they experience.

The majority of bursary recipients from both rounds (through the case study interviews and mid-year survey results) reported – as a result of the bursary:

- Staying in education, completing their studies and achieving better results in their studies
- Being more connected to their friends and family as a result of having more time and being able to afford social activities
- Reducing the stress and pressure they experienced, especially regarding finances, because they had money to cover unexpected expenses, or to pay daily bills or because they didn't have to continue working part-time
- Feeling better able to care for their family member(s) as a result of using respite support or being able to pay for their own self-care.

The evaluation found that the above outcomes are starting to reveal potential long-term positive consequences for the program recipients. First, as a result of reducing the financial pressure and stress that the recipients faced, the bursary afforded them the ability to have more social time with friends, participate in hobbies or activities of interest and focus on things to help with their personal development. In essence, it seems the bursary enables these young carers to be young people. This includes doing all the social and personal things to develop as a teenager and into young adulthood.

Second, and related to the above, the bursary has been effective in enabling recipients to aspire to more for their futures. The majority of recipients interviewed reported the financial breathing space the bursary provided led them to more opportunities, like studying at university (n = 2) and contemplating pursuing a highly skilled or professional career (n = 8). They reported not contemplating these

opportunities – or thinking these opportunities were realistic for them – prior to receiving the bursary.

Third, the receipt of the bursary has a powerful effect on increasing the young carers sense of self-worth as a result of being recognised for their caring role. All recipients reported the lack of support for young carers, and the bursary was often the first recognition that the role they have is important and acknowledged.

A longer-term study may also reveal achievement of intended impacts in self-regard, employment and better life circumstances.

Most significantly the bursary seems to be the determinant of recipients remaining in, and completing their education, where in other circumstances they would have chosen to withdraw to work full-time in order to support their family. This has implications for the longer-term welfare costs and savings to government for this group of soon to be 976² young carers who were more likely to receive long-term unemployment benefits.³

The program is also effective in targeting young carers from around the country, of different ages, backgrounds and educational circumstances. The assessment process is also effective in determining, of these applicants, which are the most in need of the bursary, based on their caring responsibilities and the impact this has on their education.

Evaluation questions answered

1. What is the need for the YCBP?

While the specific characteristics of the national young carer population in Australia is an estimate and some characteristics (i.e. caring load, educational attainment and location) are unknown, the available ABS data coupled with the data obtained through the evaluation suggest that the YCBP is an important and much needed initiative that supports young carers by relieving financial pressure and helping them fulfil their caring responsibilities while remaining in education

2. To what extent is the YCBP reaching the desired cohort of young carers?

Reaching a broad group of young carers has improved with each round. Though there are concerns that the most vulnerable young carers – such as those in remote locations and those that do not have the internet – continue to miss out on opportunities like YCBP.

The characteristics of the recipients (as compared to those applicants who are unsuccessful) share the characteristics of the desired cohort i.e. they have a high caring load, come from low income households and are all engaged in education.

However, when compared to the estimated national young carer population, the female recipient population is slightly under-represented. While a proportional distribution of applications across States/Territories was not a target for the YCBP, it is interesting to note that young carers from the Young Carer Bursary recipient population are more likely to be from Victoria and less likely to be from New South Wales and Queensland.⁴

² At the time of conducting the evaluation the number of bursaries to be awarded in 2017 were not determined. Therefore, this figure includes the 2017 estimate.

³ Recent data suggests if nothing changes for young carers, 60 per cent of this cohort could be on income support in a decade time (Source: Australian Priority Investment Approach to Welfare – Carers available on the [DSS website](#))

⁴ See Table 2 page 32 of the Full Report.

3. How effective are the advertising, application and assessment processes in selecting the desired cohort of young carers?

The advertising, application and assessment process seem to be effective in targeting the desired cohort. However, young carers suggested the process could be improved by communicating more frequently with applicants during the assessment stage. Further, Carers Australia and the Independent Assessment Panel noted the challenges in distinguishing between applications in need and in “most” need, when the majority of applications received meet the eligibility criteria and the assessment weighting criteria.

4. How appropriate is the \$3,000 bursary in assisting recipients?

The bursary amount seems appropriate given recipients were able to achieve their educational and other related outcomes as a result of receiving the bursary. This seems to validate the decision to change the bursary amount from the \$4,000 to \$10,000 range in round one to a flat-rate of \$3,000 in subsequent rounds. There were mixed views about whether a lump sum or instalments were preferred. All young carers suggested that the timing of payments could be improved.

5. To what extent did the young carer bursary help recipients achieve educational, caring, financial and social connection outcomes?

All 12 young carers interviewed reported positive improvements in education, social connection and caring responsibilities as a result of reducing the need for part-time work and by reducing the pressure they felt. Of respondents to the mid-year survey (n = 139 in 2015 and n= 338 in 2016) 97 per cent in 2015 and 99 per cent in 2016, indicated an intention to continue their education throughout the year.

6. How cost effective is the YCBP?

The administration of the program is becoming more efficient over time with an 11 per cent reduction in Administration Costs to Bursary Costs between 2015 and 2016.

The administration costs per recipient reduced from nearly \$1,000 in 2015 to approximately \$500 in 2016. The average bursary costs per recipient in the same years were \$4,833 and \$3,000 respectively.

Underlying assumptions and opportunities for improvement

Overall, the data from the evaluation suggests that most of the seven assumptions underlying the YCBP’s program logic may be correct, specifically:

1. young carers – due to their caring responsibilities – are more likely to work part-time and as a result are less likely to remain engaged in education

The evaluation suggests this assumption may be partially correct in that young carers – due to their caring responsibilities – are less likely to remain engaged in education.

The evaluation did not find as strong a connection between working part-time and that being the reason young carers were likely to discontinue education. Rather, only a minority of recipients worked part-time. Further, the potential disengagement from education seemed to stem from the financial pressures of studying full-time and not having the capacity to work to meet these pressures.

2. young carers want and/or need to reduce the pressure to work part-time

As noted above, the minority of recipients work part-time. Those interviewed that worked part time expressed a desire to work less and study more. The driver for releasing the financial pressure seems to be the desire to continue in education and reduce the need to discontinue education completely to take on full-time work.

3. the purchaser-provider model is an effective model for administering the program

The evaluation suggests this assumption may be correct.

4. an open application process is the most effective way of reaching young carers most in need

The evaluation suggests this assumption may be correct.

The evaluation shows that the applicant pool reflects the national young carer population, and the recipient pool are those in highest need based on the weighting criteria. However it is unknown if those young carers most in need are being reached, in particular, young carers in remote and regional locations, young carers from disconnected or isolated communities, young carers who have already disengaged from education and young carers who do not have internet access.

5. the assessment weighting criteria is an effective tool for determining those most in need

While the evaluation does support this notion, it also revealed that the assessment weighting criteria also creates a large group of applications that are deemed to be eligible yet “medium” in level of need. This creates challenges for the assessors in determining who is ‘most in need’ when there are very few distinguishing features. To make this decision, assessors rely on the applicants’ stories to inform who is in most need, with the most harrowing stories being assessed as most in need. This can:

- increase the likelihood that assessments of need are subjective,
- increase the time in deciding the successful applicants,
- disadvantage applicants who are most in need but are unwilling or unable to articulate this in written form, and
- be emotionally taxing on assessors and applicants.

6. factors such as caring hours per week, household type (i.e. single parent or both parents), household income, length of time caring are the most important when assessing those in most need

The evaluation revealed first that care recipient need is the most important when assessing need. However, the treatment of need by the assessment weighting criteria in 2016 seemed to be skewed towards mental health conditions. This skew results from applicants being able to choose – in the application form – multiple mental health conditions while there is only one choice for other disabilities (i.e. physical). This increases the scoring for care recipient need in addition to placing young carers who care for family members with mental health conditions in the high category. There is no justification that mental health conditions should be weighted more than other types of need. It is noted that the weighting of this criteria was readjusted in 2017.

7. a bursary of \$3,000 will be effective in achieving the short-term program outcomes

The evaluation suggests this assumption may be correct.

The above findings suggest an opportunity to revise the assumptions underlying the program logic and where appropriate, the program design.

Implications

In the context of building on the early successes and strong foundations of the YCBP, this section discusses the implications of the findings outlined in the previous section. Specifically, this section considers what are the opportunities for improvement?

Reaching those most in need

To mitigate the risk that young carers most in need are not being reached, improvements could be made by:

- advertising directly to young carers through social media channels, in particular Facebook
- advertising to Indigenous young carers through the Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Service network and to young carers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds through refugee support services
- enhancing the online advertising process by displaying posters and other collateral in regional and remote primary and secondary schools; and
- setting aside a particular proportion of bursaries for younger young carers (i.e. those aged 15 and under) and those from remote and regional locations.

Enhancing the assessment process

To mitigate the challenge in distinguishing between those most in need from within the “medium” need category, improvements could be made by:

- more heavily weighting applicants of a younger age (i.e. 12-17 years) as they are at greater risk of disengaging from secondary schooling
- more heavily weighting applicants that work part-time; and
- including strengths-based questions in the application form that examine the young carer’s aspirations and plan for the future as well as what their achievements are.

To resolve the concerns raised by recipients, it is suggested that additional communication points are built into the shortlisting, pre-verification, during verification and post-verification stages to keep applicants informed as to the status of their application.

Improving the timing of payments

Recipients main piece of feedback was regarding the timing of payments. In particular payments were often received after the commencement of the study term and they were unable to pay for textbooks. To resolve the challenge, improvements could be made by:

- making the first payment then requiring this payment be repaid if the verification process is not successfully completed so that the first payment

can be made prior to the commencement of the study year (late January in most cases), or

- splitting the bursary payments into two payments rather than four to allow recipients to pay for full year study costs upfront, or
- speeding up the assessment and verification processes (by implementing assessment weighting criteria changes above or removing the need for the range of supporting documents) to enable payments to be made by late January.

Understanding the longer-term outcomes and impacts

The findings of this evaluation – especially the benefits created for young carers and government – as well as the challenges in accessing quality data set on the young carer and recipient populations highlight the importance of rigorous and robust data collection and research methods.

To this end, it is suggested that for future rounds, all applicant and recipient level data (including names on application forms and surveys) is held by Carers Australia so that longitudinal desktop research can be conducted on the changes to recipients over time.

It is also suggested that a qualitative longitudinal study of past recipients is undertaken to examine their circumstances post bursary.

More information

A detailed discussion of the evaluation findings and implications can be found in the full evaluation report.