



CHANGING IT UP

Supporting young people  
to navigate life transitions

o r y  
g e n



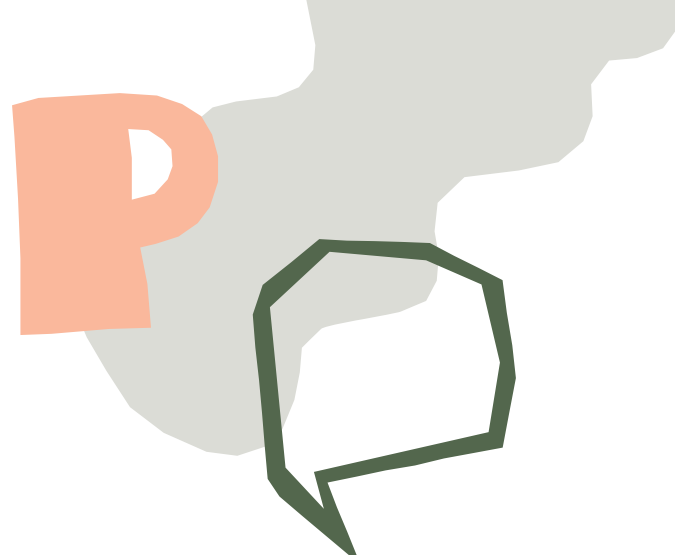
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The final report reflects Orygen’s analysis and independent conclusions. It may not necessarily reflect all the opinions or conclusions of key contributors.

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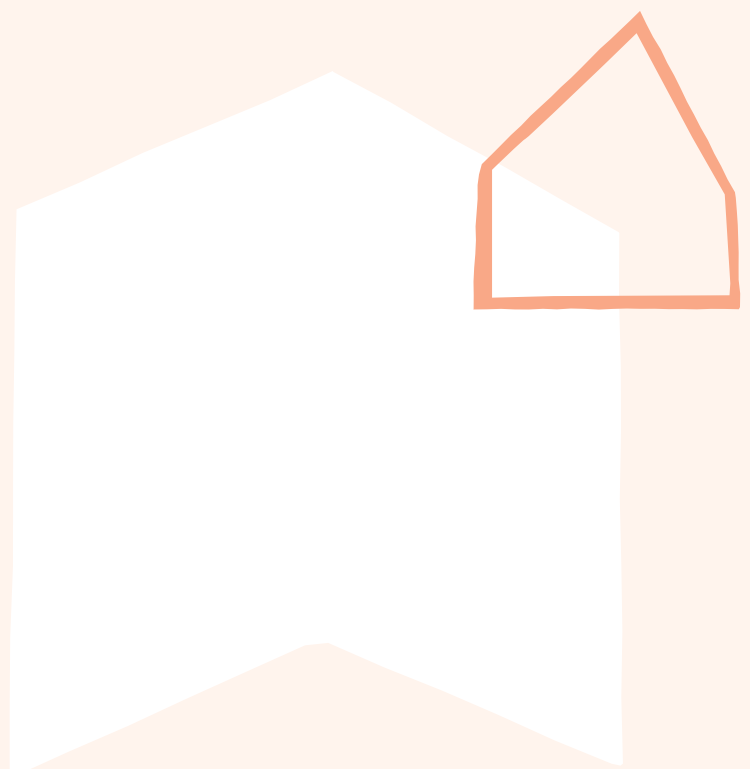
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## Glossary and term list

<b>CBT</b>	Cognitive Behavioural Therapy
<b>DSM-5</b>	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition
<b>IAR</b>	Initial Assessment and Referral
<b>IPS</b>	Individual Placement and Support
<b>NCVER</b>	National Centre for Vocational Education Research
<b>PHN</b>	Primary Health Network
<b>RTO</b>	Registered Training Organisation
<b>TAFE</b>	Technical and Further Education
<b>VTAC</b>	Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre



## Executive summary

Young people are required to navigate many changes throughout their lives. While these transitions can be expected, beneficial and rewarding, they can also represent challenging and difficult experiences that have far-reaching impacts. Transitions are often connected or overlap. For example, entry to post-secondary education potentially requires a move away from home, changes to support networks, and becoming financial independent. Young people have described a lack of understanding around the difficulties they can experience when having to cope with simultaneous changes throughout their lives.

While youth-related policies acknowledge that transitions require additional focus and support, there is little understanding about the frequency, impact and supports required for common transitions. As the timing and pressures associated with each transition can be impacted by global trends and events, young people are required to navigate unique and unprecedented challenges. There is a need to work with young people to understand the impacts of different transitions and to address their evolving support needs.

Typically, studies and reviews of youth transitions have focused on young people obtaining 'positive' outcomes, prominent markers to adulthood or singular transitions, such as vocational transitions. In compiling this report, young people spoke of the impacts of broader changes and transitions they had experienced, including changes in friendships and relationships. This policy report adopts a broad focus on the opportunities that are available to prevent or minimise distress for young people during times of change.

## Educational and vocational transitions

Vocational transitions between primary and secondary school, and secondary school to further education and/or employment. Young people with mental ill-health may need focused support during these key transition points, that may prevent or minimise lifelong vocational impacts.

## Social transitions

Young people may be required to navigate changes in family dynamics, relationships and friendships – often the most difficult transitions a young person can experience. Support to navigate these changes is often missed in mental health services and resources. Professional development for teachers and establishing programs in schools are an opportunity to prepare young people for these changes.

## Economic transitions

Economic transitions are often associated with vocational transitions such as, becoming financially independent, or moving out of home. Connecting young people with broad additional supports, such as financial counselling can support this transition.

## Solutions

### Improve transition data, research, guidelines and policy

- Develop clinical practice points to support young people navigating change.
- Identify the frequency and impact of transitions for young people.
- Address gaps in adjustment disorders research.
- Ensure government strategies includes a transition focus.

### Educational and vocational transitions and environments

- Support transitions in improvements to the National School Reform Agreement.
- Include transitions in guidelines for teacher professional development and social and emotional school programs.
- Develop and fund a post-secondary education transition support package.
- Develop mentally healthy workplaces with a focus on youth transitions.

### Online supports

- Support transitions on the Head to Health platform.
- Develop online navigation platforms for youth support.



## Introduction

Young people navigate a number of changes and common transitions during adolescence and young adulthood. These transitions can often occur at the same time across multiple life domains. While change can be expected, necessary and beneficial, it can also be a challenging time during which young people require additional support.

While youth transitions are often considered singularly, this report attempts a wide-ranging view of common transitions and recognises that change across domains is often interrelated. Additionally, youth transitions discourse is often focused on prominent markers on the way to 'adulthood' and successful outcomes, rather than the mental health supports someone might require when navigating a transition. While common transitions, such as school to work, are covered in this report, consultations with young people identified that many of the transitions that impact their mental health include more subtle shifts, such as changes that can occur in relationships. The current report takes a broad approach to understanding change and transition, and focuses on the mental health and wellbeing support that might be needed.

In compiling this report, transitions and their impacts were identified through a review of academic and grey literature, and consultations with academic experts, clinicians and young people. It is worth noting that while common transitions, such as school to work, are covered in the report, they are not universal to all young people – these experiences are not required or appropriate for all young people, the timing of transitions will vary and not all transitions are essential for 'successful' entry into adulthood.

While transitions are often emphasised for this age group, and are important for lifelong trajectories, transitions are rarely linear and many young people will continue to make social, vocational and economic transitions throughout their lives.

### What is a transition?

Transitions are passages, changes or shifts from one position, status, state or place to another. In the context of young people and a life course perspective, life transitions often refer to a discrete change in role or status, such as a transition from school to further study or moving out of home.<sup>(1)</sup> Theories of human development highlight that young people in their late adolescence to mid-twenties experience complex and multi-faceted transitions to an extent that is rarely seen in other stages of the lifespan.<sup>(2)</sup>

Transitions have been a feature of developmental theories and youth-related research and policy. The United Nations noted that navigating transitions into adulthood is critical and that transitions to new roles can influence the life course.<sup>(3, 4)</sup> Traditionally, the end of adolescence in the mid-20th century often involved transitions that were considered markers for entry into adulthood, such as buying a house, entering full-time work, becoming married and entering parenthood.<sup>(1, 5)</sup> However, the timing, sequencing and significance of these transitions have changed over time. While adolescence to adulthood was traditionally considered a brief transition period, some developmental theories indicate that broad social changes have resulted in delayed transitions to adulthood, forming a new life stage of emerging adulthood.<sup>(2)</sup> Now, when 21-year-old Australians are asked whether they are an adult, half (49 per cent) respond 'yes and no'.<sup>(6)</sup>

Transitions are shaped by society, cultures and historical time.<sup>(1)</sup> Social and economic changes impact the world and the choices that young people make. Globalisation, labour market changes, evolving social norms and rising housing costs have an impact on secure work, post-secondary education expectations, economic independence and family formation, resulting in young people adjusting their lives and transitions to the demands of the modern world.<sup>(1, 5, 7)</sup> While the markers have changed, transitions are still often used by many young Australians to assess entry into adulthood, who currently define adulthood as having full-time employment, being happy in a job, finding independence and autonomy from parents, becoming financially independent, and having responsibilities.<sup>(6)</sup>

The idea of transitions as markers to adulthood, or the concept of youth as a prolonged and

extended transition from adolescence to adulthood, has received some critique. It has been noted that transition frameworks assume linear and normative approaches, reinforcing a view that transitions are a progression towards maturity or completion.(8) It has been argued that changing social conditions have altered what it means to be young and to be an adult, creating a new adulthood that requires people to navigate emerging complexities.

The pathways that young people take in their lives are diverse and change depending on their priorities, preferences, circumstances and needs. For example, despite a focus on post-secondary education transitions for young people, less than half (42.2 per cent) of 20 to 24-year-olds in Australia were studying a Certificate III or above in 2021, with the proportion of young people engaged varying between gender, rurality, and states and territories.(9) For many young people, transitions such as moving away from home or entering a romantic relationship may occur at any point of their lifespan, if at all. Young people may move out of home to attend post-secondary education or employment and then return due to challenges, changes in personal preferences, or global social changes such as a financial crisis or pandemic. Some transitions, such as workforce transitions, can occur across the lifespan as people enter new careers, or engage or reengage with post-secondary education.

Instead of taking a developmental approach that examines transitions as an entry into adulthood, the current report is focused on the experience of a young person going through a period of change, its potential impact on mental health, and the supports that may prevent or reduce distress. Consultations with young people supported a broader approach to transitions, noting that less linear and tangible changes, such as transitions that occur within friendships and relationships, were often more impactful on their wellbeing.

### Why transitions can require support

Transitions are often not inherently positive or negative - they can be beneficial, challenging or both. While many transitions are common experiences and considered part of everyday life, even transitions perceived as positive can be difficult and entail some cost. For example, moving out of home can result in greater occupational attainment but financial hardship in the short term.(10) The impacts of these transitions are balanced against later gains or the value that individuals and society place on the transition.

### Stress about the future

There is anticipatory stress associated with transition and change. Two in five (42 per cent) young Australians (aged 16 to 21) surveyed by online youth mental health service ReachOut noted that stress about the future had a moderate impact on their wellbeing, and an additional 13 per cent identified that it had a major impact.(11) The same survey found that the most common causes of future stress were related to study and exam pressures (39 per cent), being able to afford the life they have planned (30 per cent), being able to survive financially (29.5 per cent), building a career in their chosen field (28 per cent) and their future physical and mental health (28 per cent).

### Significant change across domains

Transitions often represent major shifts across multiple life domains. Consultations with young people identified that many transitions and periods of change are deeply interconnected. For example, a romantic or family separation can lead to a change in housing, a transition to employment may be connected to a transition to economic independence, and transitions from secondary school to post-secondary education may be connected to moving away from their community. Additionally, these transitions are also occurring during a time of biological and developmental change, such as puberty and identity formation. Young people consulted for this report noted that the overlapping transitions can challenge some young people, impacting their routine and social support.

“You’re going through high school and then you get this pressure to work out who you want to be and what you want to do. I feel like young people are just experiencing all these transitions at once.” Young person

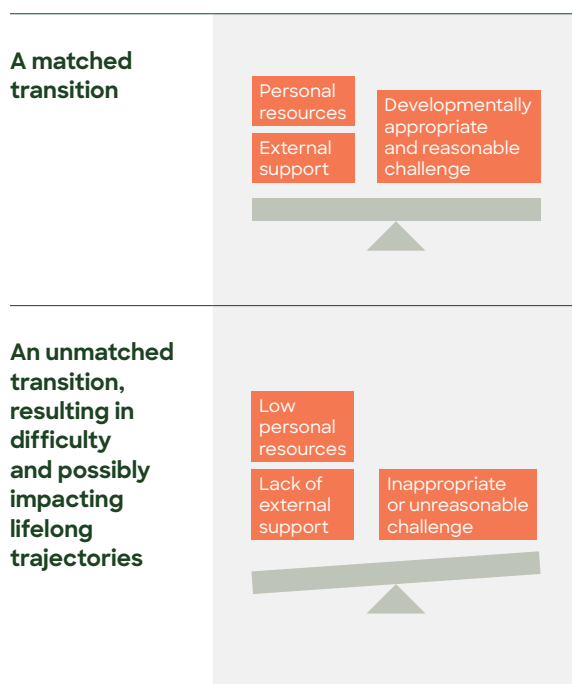


## The challenge can be mismatched to personal resources and support

Transitions can be made more successful with adequate consideration. Successful transitions occur when a reasonable challenge is met with appropriate personal resources and external support (figure 1).(2) Conversely, unsupported, inappropriate or unmatched transitions may result in distress or transition difficulty. Successful transitions can result in positive life trajectories, while transition difficulties potentially impair trajectories across the lifespan. For example, successful vocational transitions may influence future financial independence and career outcomes.

Many transitions require significant external support.(2) Transitions can be inherently challenging to navigate as they often involve shifts to social support, which can occur in transitions to living independently, leaving communities or changes in family structures and relationships. Young people experiencing mental ill-health, whose personal resources might be impacted, may be particularly at-risk of transition difficulties without increased support and adjustment. The Productivity Commission’s inquiry into mental health identified that mental ill-health may disrupt common transitions for young people, such as education to employment, resulting in long-term impacts to vocational, health and wellbeing outcomes.(12)

**Figure 1:** matched and unmatched transitions



Source: adapted from Wood et al.(2)

“I feel like there’s not a lot of support for people struggling with all these transitions, especially like secondary school. I feel like there’s not a lot of support and sometimes they can be left behind. There’s not a lot of support to actually bring them back.”  
Young person

## Young people are navigating an unprecedented landscape

While many of the transitions young people experience may seem similar to those undertaken by previous generations, many transitions have changed. Life course perspectives recognise that young people belong to a cohort of people born at the same historical time and experience the same social changes within a culture.(1) The COVID-19 pandemic is an example of an event that has vastly and uniquely transformed transitions experienced by young people, impacting employment and

educational settings and social relationships. Other long-term trends, such as precarious labour markets and an increased focus on post-secondary education, have led to our highest educated generation experiencing the greatest level of part-time, short-term or contract-based employment.(13) Young people navigating an insecure labour market have an eroded sense of personal control, impacting education, relationships and their health, as well as the timing they will move out of home or enter a committed relationship.(13) The current cohort of young people are required to navigate transitions without precedence, meaning that some of the support and wisdom of previous generations is less applicable to present circumstances.

From the increased expectation to obtain formal education, to the use of technology in social and committed relationships, young people may not be able to receive appropriate and applicable advice from their families and supports, or they may experience misunderstandings and disagreements. Young people consulted for this report felt that their transitions were often vastly different to the generations before them, with families and school staff not understanding their current pressures, realities and experiences. Young people noted that the pressure or lack of understanding they experienced added to the stress of the transition, strained relationships and made it difficult for them to seek help from their usual supports. This may partly explain why four in five young Australians (80.5 per cent) surveyed by Mission Australia report that they would seek support for important issues from a friend, which was listed twice as frequently as a GP, three times as frequently as a teacher and almost four times as frequently as a school counsellor.(14) There is an opportunity to promote a greater

understanding of current transitions and their unprecedented elements to young people's support networks. An additional opportunity exists in promoting informal peer support between young people in the same cohort, allowing young people to provide effective support to other young people sharing similar experiences.

“I feel like now you're at crossroads between choosing your educational pathways and choosing work. I feel like before there wasn't really that pressure. You know, you leave high school and get a job... Now you have to go to university or get an apprenticeship. That obviously has a strain on you financially.”  
Young person

### Young people are seeking help to cope with change

Many help-seeking young people require support to cope with change, and consultations with youth mental health clinicians have indicated that difficulties with transition and adjustment are common reasons for young people to seek help. While most (74 per cent) young people attend a headspace service for mental health or behavioural concerns, the second most frequent concerns are situational problems, which may include issues with relationships, conflict and bullying (12 per cent).<sup>(15)</sup> Of those that list their mental health as a presenting issue, 17.4 per cent list situational problems as a secondary issue. Many of these situational problems likely represent a form of transition and change. Young people consulted for this report identified that people might attend a youth mental health service without necessarily identifying the transition as their primary reason, instead experiencing symptoms of mental ill-health and identifying transitions as a cause with support from a clinician.

It is unclear which transitions are most frequent or have the greatest impact on young people. Uncertainty about transition frequency and impact makes it difficult to allocate resources to prevention initiatives that prevent or minimise the risk of distress, or intervention efforts, which aim to provide support and reduce the distress that is already occurring. The timing, frequency and impacts of particular transitions for young people will likely change across cohorts, alongside changes in policies, world events and social changes. There is a need for better data to identify whether some transitions are particularly frequent or impactful on the mental health of young people, allowing for targeted prevention, intervention and support.

Many youth and youth mental health organisations have created online resources for young people navigating different transitions. In 2017, the Australian Government Department of Health launched Head to Health, a digital mental health platform that connects Australians with existing online programs and resources from mental health organisations. While consultation with stakeholders noted that young people are often well-equipped to find the resources they need through online searches, expanding the online Head to Health platform to include a greater focus on coping with change and transition will provide an additional opportunity for young people to find these existing resources. Additionally, it provides an opportunity for young people to identify gaps in existing resources, provide additional content, and connect them to a broad range of supports that might be associated with their transition, such as vocational and financial services.

“They don't identify that it's the friendship change that makes them go to the psychologist. It's the anxiety or the depression symptoms, the sadness... I think it comes out in the conversation, but it may not be the initial reason they go to seek support, even though that is the problem.” Young person



### Develop clinical practice points to support young people navigating change

#### Policy solution

Develop clinical practice points to support young people with mental ill-health during times of change and transition.

#### Outcome

Clinicians can best identify risks, promote protective factors and support young people with mental ill-health during times of change.

### Identify the frequency and impact of transitions for young people

#### Policy solution

Fund the expansion of the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children to include items on both the frequency and mental health impact of common transitions. Items should allow for reporting on the mental health symptoms associated with different transitions.

#### Outcome

Youth mental health organisations and clinicians are provided with a clearer understanding of the transitions causing frequent or substantial impacts on youth mental health. Resources and interventions can then target frequent or impactful transitions.

### Support transitions on the Head to Health platform

#### Policy solution

Ensure the Head to Health platform links young people to external content focused on change and common transitions. This should:

- include social, vocational and financial support services and resources;
- include information for support networks, including friends, families, school counsellors, education staff and vocational supports; and
- fund youth mental health organisations to partner with young people to identify key transitions and existing content, and develop resources that address identified gaps.

#### Outcome

Young people experiencing change and their supports are provided with information, resources and pathways to care when needed.



“The current generation of young people are spending more time prioritising other things compared to their parents. And I think part of the reason why it can be difficult to communicate our differences in priorities is because our parents had very different upbringings. Compared to our parents, we have the ability to focus on things other than obtaining resources and having to work full-time immediately after high school. It’s actually really hard to communicate the differences in priorities to parents because they grew up with those expectations drilled into them, and now we’re in a lucky position where we have choices.” Young person

### Adjustment disorders

While it is not uncommon for transitions to cause some distress, marked distress or impairment in response to change or an event may indicate an adjustment disorder. Approximately one – two per cent of the general population have adjustment disorders.<sup>(16)</sup> Notably, this number does not include people with another diagnosis or an exacerbation of a pre-existing condition due to change. Adjustment disorders are associated with an increased risk of suicide and suicide-related behaviour, and are among the most common diagnoses in inpatient mental health settings.<sup>(17)</sup>

In the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5), an adjustment disorder diagnosis requires:

- emotional or behavioural symptoms to occur in response to a stressor within three months;
- clinically significant behaviours due to significant impairment and/or marked distress that is out of proportion to the severity or intensity of the stressor, taking cultural factors into account;
- the disturbance does not meet the criteria for another diagnosis or an exacerbation of a pre-existing condition;
- the symptoms do not represent normal bereavement; and
- once the stressor is terminated, the symptoms do not persist for an additional six months.<sup>(17)</sup>

Adjustment disorders are a common diagnosis for young people seeking help. In the general population, the prevalence of adjustment disorders are increased in high-risk groups, such as people recently unemployed or bereaved.(16) The DSM-5 includes specific developmental goals as a potential stressor, such as leaving home.(17)

The DSM-5 also notes that adjustment disorders are associated with an increased risk of suicide and suicide-related behaviour. In populations accessing hospital psychiatry services with adjustment disorders, younger ages are significantly associated with suicidality.(19) A systematic review of adjustment disorders in medical settings reported wide prevalence rates for people presenting for suicide-related behaviours, noting that it is often the most frequent diagnosis in this population.(20) The review noted that young people, particularly females, are at an increased risk.

Risk and protective factors may provide insight into supporting and preventing adjustment disorders. Neuroticism, introversion, maladaptive coping, harm-avoidance, low cooperativeness, low self-directedness, low self-transcendence and low social support may all place people at greater risk of adjustment disorder.(21) Conversely, positive mental health has been significantly associated with lower levels of adjustment disorder symptoms in young adults.(22)

There is debate about whether adjustment disorders pathologise and medicalise normal responses to stressful life events.(23) Additionally, there is little to support clinicians in demarcating the boundaries between sadness or adaptive behaviour and an adjustment disorder, which requires further research.(24) More research and consultation with mental health clinicians and young people is required to increase our understanding of the utility of the diagnosis.

Due to the differences between potential stressors, there are difficulties with designing and testing universal interventions for adjustment disorders.(23) Despite being a common diagnosis, adjustment disorders have been notably underexplored in clinical research,(23) leading to little understanding of prevention and effective support. A systematic review of studies investigating adjustment disorder treatment in adults between 1980 and 2016 found that all studies with positive impacts of psychological or pharmacological interventions were considered low or very low quality, and high-quality research is needed.(25) Psychological interventions were the most commonly studied, particularly interventions with cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) components, which are focused on

identifying and modifying negative thinking and cognitive distortions. Online mental health interventions are often identified as a promising approach for exploration.(26) More research is required, particularly for young people, to understand how to prevent and support adjustment disorders for people undertaking transitions.

### Address gaps in adjustment disorders research

#### Policy solution

Develop a National Health and Medical Research Council targeted call for research to address gaps in adjustment disorders research, focusing on prevention, risk and protective factors, screening and treatment of adjustment disorders in young people.

#### Outcome

Clinicians can identify and effectively support young people with an adjustment disorder and promote protective factors during times of change.



## Transitions

Young people experience a number of common transitions. Consulted young people identified and prioritised particular transitions for focus in this report. While the transitions covered in this report are not exhaustive, they are examples of significant changes across a number of life domains. Additionally, while the transitions typically covered by developmental and youth studies are focused on markers to adulthood, the current report is focused on times of change in which young people may require additional or targeted mental health support. Consultations with young people confirmed this broader approach to transitions, noting that nuanced transitions such as changes in their friendships had the greatest impact on their wellbeing.

### Policy context

Government policy and strategies recognise the significance of transitions for young people. Nationally, a recent scoping review of Australian federal, state and territory youth-related health policies found that they highlighted the importance of providing additional support at key transition points.<sup>(27)</sup> Excerpts from a selection of Australian youth-related policies have been provided below (Table 1). The National Action Plan for the Health of Children and Young People includes an action for supporting transitions, recognising higher help-seeking during times of change and a need for more robust prevention measures to prepare young people before a transition occurs.<sup>(28)</sup> Government inquiries have also examined specific youth transitions,

including the final reports of a federal inquiry of school to work transitions in 2012, a New South Wales parliamentary inquiry into transition support for students with additional or complex needs and their families in 2012, and a Victorian parliamentary inquiry into career advice activities in Victorian schools in 2018.<sup>(29-31)</sup> While many key documents and inquiries acknowledge developmental transitions and the impacts they can have across the lifespan, the focus is often limited to vocational transitions and vocational outcomes.

While current youth-focused strategies cover transitions, it is often limited to a focus on ‘successful’ transitions and ‘positive’ trajectories rather than the wellbeing supports needed to navigate change. The Productivity Commission’s inquiry into mental health noted a need to support the mental health of young people as they undertake common transitions due to a potential for long-term impacts across a range of life domains.<sup>(12)</sup> While the Productivity Commission has made recommendations to improve mental health and wellbeing considerations in settings such as schools and workplaces, there has been little focus on targeting support to particular transitions. Additionally, many current strategies do not include consideration for measurement or implementation. There is a need for future mental health and youth-focused strategies to focus on supporting wellbeing during transitions, and include funded activities, outcome measurements and an implementation plan.

**Table 1:** recognising transitions in Australian youth policy

Jurisdiction	Document (year)	Excerpt
National	Australia’s Youth Policy Framework (2021)	“Being a young person is a time of immense transition, from childhood to adulthood, from school to further study, training or employment. Each young person has their own goals and their own path to success. The Government’s role is to ensure every young person has the best opportunity to navigate these transitions, reach their goals and achieve success.” <sup>(32)</sup>
National	National Action Plan for the Health of Children and Young People 2020 – 2030 (2019)	“It is recognised that across the life course there are several key transition points which further influence outcomes in child and youth health. Therefore, we need to take into account the important transitions over the life course where support needs will be greater and where more help-seeking naturally occurs (e.g. becoming pregnant, entry into early learning, starting school, transition to high school).” <sup>(28)</sup>
New South Wales	The NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People 2016 – 2019 (2016)	“Supportive pathways at these critical [transition] times can set children and young people on a positive trajectory and enable them to reach their potential.” <sup>(33)</sup>

**Table 1:** recognising transitions in Australian youth policy

Jurisdiction	Document (year)	Excerpt
Northern Territory	Northern Territory Child and Adolescent Health and Wellbeing Strategic Plan 2018–2028 (2018)	<p>“Wellbeing is maintained when individuals have the psychological, social and physical resources they need to meet the range of changes and challenges they may face as they transition from childhood into adolescence and adulthood.”</p> <p>“Children and young people experience a number of key transitions in their journey from childhood to adulthood. ... These transitions can be destabilising and upsetting and can place vulnerable groups at further risk.”(34)</p>
Queensland	Queensland Youth Strategy (2017)	“... young people from diverse backgrounds identified many opportunities to support important transitions, such as from education to employment, to stable housing, and from dependence to independence, as well as to improve their overall wellbeing.”(35)
Tasmania	Tasmanian Child and Youth Wellbeing Framework (2018)	Focus area: “The young person is developing skills to be independent, resilient and transition successfully from school.”(37)
Victoria	Victorian Youth Strategy discussion paper (2021)	“New pressures and stressors can be introduced while young people are undergoing transition and change, such as achieving academic success, forming social relationships or establishing a work life and setting a course for the future.”(38)
Western Australia	WA Youth Health Policy 2018–2023 (2018)	“Optimal health in young people translates to ... more successful transition to full-time work.”(39)

**Ensure government strategies includes a transition focus**

**Policy solution**

Ensure that national, state and territory mental health and youth-focused strategies recognise that young people experiencing transitions require focused mental health support, as well as coordinated programs across education, employment and social services portfolios. Support for transitions should be included in outcome measurements, implementation plans and funded activity.

**Outcome**

Young people across Australia are supported, including during times of transition. Young people across Australia are supported, including during times of transition.



## Educational and vocational transitions

Vocational transitions are a key theme in youth-focused policies and research on youth transitions, likely due to their near universality and historical standing as milestones for moving through life stages. Consultations with young people identified high levels of anticipated stress associated with these transitions, particularly for the transition at the end of secondary education. Young people noted that part of this stress was related to the unknown – transitioning from their friends, routines and familiar environments – and feeling a pressure that their choices could impact the rest of their lives.

A systematic review of educational transition outcomes identified that young people with clinically relevant emotional or behavioural disorders risked negative transitional experiences and were at risk of more depressive symptoms, concerns and a worsening of symptoms than their peers.(40) Educational transitions were characterised by stress, depression, anxiety, emotional instability, negative feelings, substance use, low motivation and functioning difficulties. In the first months of a transition, students with emotional or behavioural disorders reported low levels of social participation and connection. However, friendships, peer acceptance and structured activities before the transition predicted social functioning after the transition. Additionally, parents were a significant support during these transition periods. Some studies identified positive feelings and increased wellbeing following the transition for some students, illustrating that young people experience transition and change differently.

Notably, youth mental health services offer a number of supports for people undertaking vocational transitions. The headspace Work and Study service provides support using webchat, video, email and phone to provide education and employment support for young people, which can include setting goals or transitioning into work and study.(41) headspace also provide a career mentoring service, connecting young people to mentors in industries they work, study or have interest in. More than 50 headspace centres also offer an Individual Placement and Support (IPS) program, which provides effective and cost-effective vocational support to young people with mental ill-health.(42) In addition to the support that youth mental health services provide, there is a need to identify whether education and employment settings can provide additional support for young people experiencing vocational transitions.

### Primary to secondary education

Transitions from primary to secondary school can represent a change in peer groups, and increased responsibility and independence. A study of 1,500 Australian students identified

that three-in-ten students (31.0 per cent) experienced a difficult or somewhat difficult transition to secondary school, which was associated with higher levels of depression and anxiety after their first year of secondary school. (43) Like most transitions, feelings can be mixed – while 31 per cent of Australian students felt joyful about their transition, one quarter reported fear and 13 per cent experienced contentment. (44) The New South Wales Government’s Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation identified a decline in student learning effort, valuing of school outcomes and their sense of school belonging between Year 6 and Year 7.(45) Relationships with peers and teachers and support for learning at school and home are positively associated with school belonging, which is associated with fewer academic, emotional and social difficulties.(45, 46)

A survey of Australian students identified that their main transition-related challenges were related to academic learning (49 per cent), managing a new school environment (26 per cent) and social reasons (21 per cent).(44) A study of students from the UK predominately identified concerns about changes to their relationships, as well as a new physical environment and routine.(47) Young people reported feelings of sadness, stress, anxiety, nervousness, loneliness and a loss of self-identity and key support people.

Young people have previously suggested a number of pre-transition strategies.(47) Suggested activities included having their primary school provide them with practical strategies for bullying, friendships and getting lost, and the option of attending some summer schooling at the new secondary school for students who feel they would benefit from seeing the space and getting to know other students. Students also noted a need for parents to be mindful about openly expressing their own worries and anxieties. Post-transition, students indicated that secondary schools and secondary school teachers needed to adjust their expectations and adopt more supportive approaches to rules and routine.

A number of mechanisms can support this transition, including state and territory education departments, who can provide services, frameworks and programs for transitioning students. The Victorian Government Department of Education and Training has provided guidance for primary to secondary transitions, including transition planning and activities, and information about transferring student data.(48) Additionally, it has provided tools and frameworks for groups of primary and secondary schools clusters to work collaboratively on a model for transitions. Queensland Department of Education provides professional development for teachers focused on supporting junior secondary students.(49)

The Beyond Blue ‘Be You’ platform offers advice to educators on supporting primary to secondary school transitions, including warning signs that may indicate that a student is having a difficult time.<sup>(50)</sup> ReachOut Australia provide resources and classroom activities for teachers supporting students through the transition.<sup>(51)</sup> Kids Helpline offer schools a free session on coping with change during the transition, recommended for Year 6 students.<sup>(52)</sup>

There are additional opportunities to improve the primary and secondary school transition that include:

- building relationships between senior primary school students and junior secondary school teachers and students before the transition;
- aligning curriculum and assessment practices across primary and secondary schools;
- transferring academic and wellbeing information across schools, particularly for those at risk;
- promoting predictors of secondary school adjustment, such as peer relationships in primary school, through teaching social skills and encouraging students to work collaboratively;
- developing peer support systems between Year 7 students and older students;
- encouraging collaborative work and transition camps in Year 7;
- taking whole-school approaches to address bullying;
- encouraging primary school teachers to provide realistic and positive expectations, and develop students’ independence; and
- keeping families informed with resources that support the transition.<sup>(45)</sup>

While mental health reform has focused on schools, there are further opportunities to support educational transitions. The Productivity Commission’s inquiry into mental health recommended updates to the National School Reform Agreement to include student wellbeing as an outcome.<sup>(12)</sup> The Productivity Commission also recommended developing guidelines for teacher education and professional development programs, which included social and emotional development and mental health, and national guidelines for the accreditation of social and emotional learning programs in schools. The Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System recommended that the Victorian Government fund evidence-based mental health initiatives in schools and develop a validated list of these initiatives.<sup>(53)</sup> This approach should be evaluated and considered by the Education Ministers Meeting for national implementation.

There is an opportunity to enhance the recommendations of the Productivity Commission with a specific focus on students undertaking education transitions. Additionally, social and emotional education should cover healthy and respectful relationships, including information about coping with social transitions. When setting priorities for policy reform in the National School Reform Agreement, the Education Ministers Meeting should also consider opportunities for developing strong referral pathways between educational settings and youth mental health services.

## Support mental health in schools

### Policy solution

In partnership with young people, design approaches to supporting mental health and educational transitions in improvements to:

- the National School Reform Agreement;
- teacher education and professional development guidelines; and
- social and emotional school program guidelines.

Additionally, the Education Ministers Meeting should identify opportunities and implement initiatives to increase referrals from schools to youth mental health services.

### Outcome

Young people experiencing transitions are supported across the education system.



## Pathways after secondary school

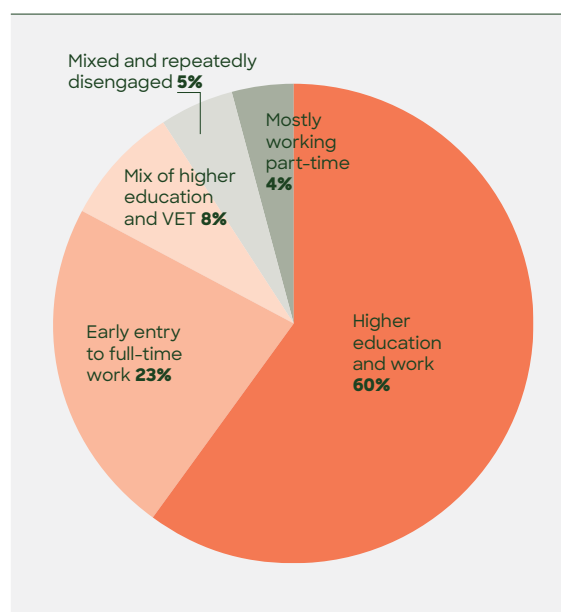
Young Australians have varied occupational and educational aspirations. In 2009, most 15-year-old Australians had plans to complete Year 12, with academic performance being the strongest predictor of plans.<sup>(54)</sup> Students whose parents expected them to go to university were 11 times more likely to report planning to go to university. A survey of young Australians found that many students begin to seriously consider what to do after secondary school in Year 10 (37 per cent), followed by Year 11 (25 per cent).<sup>(55)</sup> The Productivity Commission's inquiry into mental health recognised that the transition from secondary school can place additional stress on a young person's life as they adjust to increased autonomy, new routines, relocation and new financial responsibilities.<sup>(12)</sup>

Multiple post-secondary school transitions and pathways exist for young people, and the transition is not always linear. Despite the reality of young people taking a variety of pathways after secondary school, there is a discourse that promotes full-time work or post-secondary education as an ideal pathway after secondary school.<sup>(6)</sup> Following a cohort of over 3,000 16-year-olds between 2006 – 2016, the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) identified five school-to-work pathways undertaken by young Australians (figure 2).<sup>(56)</sup> While 60 per cent of young people engaged with higher education and work, this pathway contained the highest proportion of metropolitan students, the highest socioeconomic quartile, and the lowest proportion of young people with a First Nations background, married young people and parenting young people. On average, this pathway contained the fewest number of transition points over the 10 year period.

The 23 per cent of young people who transitioned from school to full-time work were most likely to have undertaken vocational studies while at school and most likely to be married, highlighting that young people's lives are characterised by broad and varied transitions outside of education and employment transitions. For young people with mixed and repeatedly interrupted pathways from school to work, employment outcomes were significantly lower than all other pathways, with over half (53.1 per cent) unemployed or not in the labour force by age 25. This pathway contained the highest number of transitions over the 10 year period and included the highest proportion of young people who experience vulnerability.

Young people in Australia have previously suggested changes to improve transitions from schooling, including the need for teaching approaches that are not solely focused on exams, diversifying final year assessments to be focused less on single scores and improving career education, including continued support once a student leaves an educational institution.<sup>(57)</sup>

**Figure 2:** pathways for young Australians after secondary school, 2006–2016



Source: adapted from NCVER<sup>(56)</sup>

## Post-secondary education

Many young people transition from secondary school to post-secondary education, which includes universities, Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutes and registered training organisations (RTOs). Notably, there is a paucity of information about transitions from secondary school to non-university post-secondary education settings. Therefore, the literature covered in this report predominately focuses on the university sector. While many issues and experiences are likely relevant to other students, more research is needed.

Despite being a common transition, entering post-secondary education can present significant issues for young people. In 2019, more than one in 10 domestic undergraduate students (13.23 per cent) left the higher education system in their first year and did not reengage with higher education the following year,<sup>(58)</sup> despite most Australians who do not complete their degree believing they would have been better off had they completed their studies.<sup>(59)</sup> Young people entering post-secondary education experience a number of issues unrelated to their coursework, with almost six out of 10 Australian undergraduate students (58.2 per cent) reporting that their financial situation is a source of worry and 14.6 per cent regularly going without food or necessities because of cost.<sup>(60)</sup> This experience is more prevalent for First Nations students, and students from regional or low socioeconomic areas. The combination of financial hardship, work and study is a mental health stressor, particularly for the middle socioeconomic bracket, who experience higher levels of financial distress than people in lower socioeconomic brackets.<sup>(61)</sup> The authors

hypothesise that this may be due to being ineligible for means-tested income support, despite still experiencing high financial hardship.

Young people experiencing mental ill-health or disability are at particular risk of difficult transitions to post-secondary education. A study of first-year university students in Australia suggested that students were more likely to successfully adapt to university if they had higher rates of optimism and lower levels of depression and anxiety.(62) There is an opportunity for post-secondary education providers to provide support by promoting knowledge about the psychological factors impacting transition experiences, increasing awareness of university psychological services, and focusing on developing optimism and self-efficacy in learning activities.(62) A number of programs exist that focus on transition supports for young people with a disability, which are effective at improving enrolment, self-determination, self-confidence, self-efficacy, autonomy, career exploration, social support and transitional skills.(63) Internationally, some post-secondary settings have developed more intensive pre-orientation programs for students with greater requirements, such as mental ill-health – allowing them to connect with peers and services before orientation to receive support while becoming familiar with campus and independence before the first term begins.

Some protective factors may exist to support transitions to post-secondary education. For first-year students in higher education, social connection and optimistic cognitive styles predict lower stress.(64) A scoping review identified that many students experience challenges during times of transition and that there is a need to promote resilience for this cohort.(65) Students with higher levels of resilience reported lower psychological distress and higher levels of social support and campus connectedness.(66) First-year undergraduate students in Australia have previously noted that self-reflection, goal setting and support from friends were important to the development of resilience.(67) The same study noted that students recognised that universities could nurture resilience through classroom experiences, such as challenging and active learning activities, as well as through study groups, clubs, sports, counselling services and mentoring programs. A meta-analysis of 25 randomised controlled trials identified that resilience interventions for higher education students are effective at improving resilience, reducing depressive symptoms and overcoming stress, particularly when interventions target social competency, involve synchronous communication, and include a mix of didactic and dialectic approaches.(68) Resilience interventions should go beyond the individual. In addition to promoting help-seeking and self-care, the wider environment should also

be addressed, such as increasing student autonomy and control over aspects of learning, facilitating social connections, preparing students for the workplace and providing supported exposure to challenges.(65)

Internationally, a number of resources exist to support the post-secondary education sector with transitions. In the US, The Jed Foundation's 'Set to Go' program prepares students, families and educators for the transition to post-secondary education.(69) Recognising the broad transitions that occur, the resources cover steps to take before applying to post-secondary education, changing relationships with friends and family, advice on communicating with roommates, transitioning to a new healthcare service and information about commonly available accommodations to support students. The UK University Mental Health Charter guides universities to support student mental health and includes a focus on supporting students during the transition.(70) The Charter includes information about supporting students from pre-application through to pre-entry, arrival, induction and the first year, as well as providing targeted interventions for students facing additional barriers. Similarly, Orygen has produced an Australian University Mental Health Framework to support the university sector in creating mentally healthy university settings, but it does not currently cover the support needed during the transitions to post-secondary education.(71) Orygen is also currently working with the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC) in analysing tertiary application data to identify mental health trends of young people, including whether mental health is impacting course selections and admissions. This is an approach that could be adopted by other Tertiary Admissions Centres nationally. There are opportunities to expand or supplement existing projects to include a focus on students undertaking transition, as well as expanding the focus to support all post-secondary education providers.

“If you think about high school from the perspective of a teenager, it's like the end of everything that they've known for their whole life. As soon as you finish Year 12, you get to decide if you want to keep studying. It's completely up to you. Every single thing that you've ever done is going to change, and all of your friends are going to change, and your whole life is going to change.”  
Young person



“It was the routine that was the hardest part for me. You have a strict routine throughout your whole primary school and high school years, and then having to choose your own timetable was wild to me. It took me at least six months to feel okay with this weird, flexible routine, and then at least a couple of years to get used to the routine of independent study.” Young person

### Develop and fund a Post-Secondary Education Transition Support package

#### Policy solution

Fund a Post-Secondary Education Transition Support package which would include:

- supplementing the Australian University Mental Health Framework with a companion document about supporting transitions, including to post-secondary settings beyond universities;
- funding Orygen to extend their work by examining and reporting on data from all tertiary admission centres to investigate mental health trends;
- funding a trial and developing guidelines for an intensive pre-entry transition support program for young people experiencing or at risk of mental ill-health during the transition; and
- funding a national youth mental health organisation to develop resources for students, families and educators that focus on post-secondary education transition, including information on changing relationships, maintaining healthy behaviours, and transitioning health and mental health care.

#### Outcome

Students are better supported to navigate the changes associated with post-secondary education.

Post-secondary education providers are better able to support the mental health of first-year students with whole-of-institute approaches.

### Employment transitions

Many young people engage in casual and part-time work while studying in secondary school. In 2016, 48 per cent of Australian students aged 16 to 17 were employed, with 14 per cent working ten or more hours per week.(72) Almost half (48 per cent) reported that it interfered with other areas of their life, such as social activities and study. While work stressors for secondary school students working part-time are associated with higher levels of depression and decreased self-esteem and self-efficacy, they may also be less likely to experience mental health decline when experiencing work stressors in adulthood.(73)

Events such as the global financial crisis have significantly changed entry to the workforce for young people, and it has been estimated that the transition from full-time study to full-time work now takes young Australians approximately 2.6 years.(74) In 2018, it was estimated that the lengthy transitions from full-time education to full-time employment for young people cost the Victorian economy \$60–100 million per year, with avoidable costs of \$30–50 million per year.(74) Cumulatively, this is estimated to cost approximately \$1.3 billion over the working lives of the 20 to 24-year-old cohort.

While obtaining employment is a positive experience for many young people,(73) there is evidence to suggest small declines in life satisfaction for young Australians entering employment.(75) This decline was mitigated when jobs had better psychosocial working conditions, such as lower job demands and complexity, high job control and security, and fair pay. Unfortunately, these mitigating factors do not reflect the experience of many young Australians, who have previously reported poor employment experiences, low job control, job insecurity, age-related discrimination, a lack of knowledge about employment rights, poor induction and supervision, and who perceived that it was common for young people to be paid under the national award rate.(76) They also reported feeling hopeless and depressed about being employed precariously and difficulties finding work flexible for their study requirements. There is a need to ensure that workplaces and employers support young workers by aiming to reduce stressors and increase the psychosocial quality of the work.(73)

Some young people may require additional support in transitioning to work. Young people have noted that transitioning from education to employment is particularly difficult for those not living at home, who experience the added burden of financial hardship while looking for employment.(76) A number of opportunities exist to support the mental health needs of young job seekers and workers, with a systematic review suggesting that both online and face-to-face



vocational supports are beneficial.(73) These supports may increase mental health literacy, reduce distress, improve quality of life, increase awareness of available support, increase help-seeking and help people deal with workplace stress or harassment.

Young people have previously reported feeling unprepared during the transition from education to employment.(76) Young people reported that schools could have better supported young people to write resumes and cover letters, provided interview techniques, emphasised work experience and employable skills, and promoted non-university pathways. They also suggested that vocational counselling could include more detailed information about what to seek in an employer, the skills and qualifications needed for different professions and pay conditions. Young people also reported unrealistic expectations for young people to have work experience or post-secondary education qualifications for entry-level jobs.

Young people have previously identified supports and facilitators for transitions into employment. Young Australians have recommended free university initiatives that support job seekers and employment skills, and have highlighted the importance of internships, volunteer work and placement opportunities. (76) When 54 young Australians (aged 18 to 26) were asked about transitions to meaningful work, they recommended:

- improving internship outcomes and providing financial support;
- increasing focus on life skills and learning through experience;
- ensuring diverse representation of minorities;
- increasing the focus of career counselling on individual support and current job markets, as well as increasing their mental health literacy;
- increasing their knowledge of all vocational pathways, as well as increasing understanding for parents and carers;
- providing education and penalties for employee mistreatment;
- building work readiness by embedding soft skill development into the curriculum, such as leadership, resilience and teamwork skills;
- supporting casual and part-time workers with secure work, ensuring rights are upheld and investigating ways to increase the security of casual work;
- mentoring and providing programs for young people to engage in different career options, from Year 7 to post-secondary education;

- investigating the current and future professional landscape, including predictions about future trends; and
- implementing policies to ensure that workplaces increase mental health awareness and support.(77)

While employment outcomes and work-readiness are beyond the scope of the current report, there is a need for focused attention and evaluation of youth-designed solutions for meaningful employment outcomes.

The Productivity Commission’s inquiry into mental health recommended a focus on developing mentally healthy workplaces, with actions to:

- amend national, state and territory government workplace health and safety arrangements to make psychological health and safety as important as physical health and safety;
- develop codes of practice to assist employers in meeting their duty of care in identifying, eliminating and managing risks to psychological health in the workplace;
- develop minimum standards and evaluate employee assistance programs; and
- monitor and collect data from employer-initiated interventions and advise employers of effective interventions.(12)

While the Productivity Commission acknowledges the unique challenges experienced by young people entering the workforce, these are not currently considered in the recommendations. There is an opportunity to adopt and augment these recommendations to include a focus on young people transitioning into employment.



“I started full-time work last year, it’s really tiring. I feel like it’s always going to be scary if you’ve worked casually and studied, and then you go from doing heaps of different things to doing one thing all the time.”  
Young person

### Develop mentally healthy workplaces with a focus on youth transitions

#### Policy solution

Mentally healthy workplace initiatives should focus on the benefits to young workers where they are supported in employment transitions and workforce re-entry. The following initiatives should be developed and communicated to new employees at the time of induction or commencement of employment:

- psychological safety in amended national, state and territory workplace health and safety arrangements;
- psychological health codes of practice for employers; and
- minimum standards for employee assistance programs.

#### Outcome

Young people receive a supported transition into mentally healthy workplaces.

### Social transitions

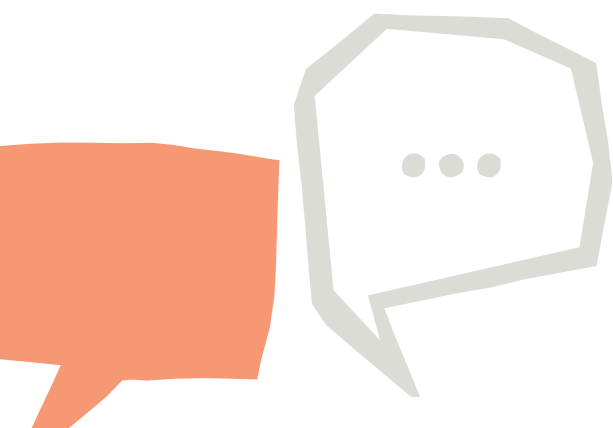
Social transitions do not commonly appear in youth transition literature, possibly because they are dynamic and do not always represent markers for adulthood. Consultations with young people highlighted that shifts in their social lives were the changes that had the greatest impact on their mental health. Given that some young people identify great difficulty in coping with change during these transitions, there is a need to explore how change in family structures, friendships and relationships may impact some young people and how distress can be prevented or reduced when change occurs.

#### Family

From adolescence to young adulthood, young people can experience a number of transitions within the family environment. Throughout this period, young people often gain more independence and autonomy, which may include changes to family roles and responsibilities. They may also experience changes to family structures, such as family separation, which may involve transitions in living arrangements and financial circumstances.

While common, family separation can be a difficult transition for young people. In 2012–13, 18 per cent of Australian adults had parents that were divorced or separated before they turned 18.<sup>(78)</sup> Adolescents going through a parental divorce or marital separation experience decreased academic performance and an increase in anxiety, depression, anger, and internalising and externalising disorders.<sup>(79)</sup> In a survey of 616 young Australians aged 10 to 24 years whose parents were separated or separating, over half (53.7 per cent) were upset most or all of the time when they first found out, with many also still feeling upset most or all of the time while their living arrangements were being considered (45.2 per cent) or after living arrangements were decided (40.5 per cent).<sup>(80)</sup> In the same study, young Australians expressed a lack of communication about the separation and decisions about living arrangements, schooling and housing. They expressed confusion about the arrangements and separation process, loss and grief, uncertainty about where to access support, concern about their mental health and the mental health of those around them, experiences of conflict, and a lack of agency in choices, such as their living situation.

Despite the potential difficulties, young Australians also noted some positives, such as having a new place to live and recognising that separation might be best for the family.<sup>(80)</sup> When they do require support, young people indicated a slight preference for face-to-face counselling, followed by online counselling and online peer support.



## Friendships

While friendships can be dynamic and fragile, they are highly valued by young people. Most young people value friendships above all else, with the Mission Australia Youth Survey finding that 81.9 per cent indicated that friendships had been extremely or very important to them in the past year – more important than family, their mental health, school, physical health, financial security, getting a job or their culture. (14) Young people consulted for this report noted that friendship transitions are some of the most challenging transitions. Friendships can provide stability as young people undertake transitions and can often provide support through shared challenges and experiences. Additionally, learning to maintain close friendships is an important life skill for other areas of life, with one study finding that the ability to form and maintain close friendships at ages 16 to 18 predicted romantic life satisfaction at ages 27 to 30. (81)

Approximately half of all friendships in childhood and adolescence are stable over time. (82) Studies of adolescent friendships have highlighted high levels of friendship flux in early adolescence, becoming more stable across the adolescent period. (83) Friendship stability is impacted by relational and contextual factors, and is associated with changes such as school-year and secondary school transitions. (82, 83) Friendship dissolutions can be complete dissolutions, but are more commonly downgrade dissolutions, in which friendships dissolve into less significant friendships. (84) Higher levels of loneliness have previously been reported during downgrade dissolutions, particularly for those who have not been able to form new close relationships. (84)

Early adolescents have previously indicated that dissolution is usually due to conflict or betrayal, and that friendships are most commonly ended through avoidance. (85) In the same study, young people reported responding to these transitions with sadness and positivity, with positivity, rumination and sadness felt over a longer period of time than anger, guilt, stress or loneliness. Young women were more likely to feel sadness, rumination, loneliness and stress, while young men were more likely to report positivity. Friendship dissolution is particularly impactful if the dissolution was led by the other young person. (85) Higher friend-related stress during early adolescence continues to impact young people beyond secondary school, and is associated with lower wellbeing, lower academic achievement and higher levels of risk-taking behaviour. (86) This was particularly impactful for young women, who are more likely to experience friend-related stress.

Young people experiencing mental ill-health are particularly at risk of friendship transitions.

A higher number of friendship dissolutions is associated with greater symptoms of depression, with some evidence indicating that it is the elevated depressive symptoms that leads to friendship dissolution. (87) This association is particularly important given the support that friends can provide for young people experiencing mental ill-health. Friendship transitions may be more prevalent or impactful for young people with anxiety, who report more interpersonal difficulties and negative feelings about interpersonal relationships. (88) Young people with mental ill-health may require targeted support in maintaining friendships.

Friendships transitions are common and can negatively impact a young person's mental health and wellbeing. However, there is little focused support on preventing friendship loss, ending friendships safely and compassionately, navigating dissolution and creating new friendships. Consultations with young people highlighted that friendship transitions often co-occur alongside other life changes, such as leaving secondary school or moving away from home. These transition points provide opportunities for targeted resources about keeping or safely dissolving friendships, which can be distributed through social and emotional wellbeing programs and online Head to Health resources.

“Leaving secondary education, you're used to seeing your friends every day. But when you leave school, it's harder. They've got work and I've got uni. It's harder to maintain those relationships sometimes.”  
Young person

## Committed relationships

Most young people hope to be in a relationship in their young adulthood. (89) If young people are involved in relationships, the likelihood of being in a relationship increases with age. In a longitudinal Australian study, one in seven 14 to 15-year-olds reported currently being in a relationship and approximately two-thirds of 16 to 17-year olds report having had at least one relationship. (90) In another Australian study, three quarters (75.6 per cent) of students in Years 10–12 reported having been in a relationship. (91)

A number of relationship types exist for young people. These have been categorised as:

- happily consolidated relationships (30.8 per cent), where a couple spends a lot of time together in committed, warm and supportive relationships with few negative interactions;
- happily independent relationships (18.9 per cent), who also have a committed and supportive relationship, but spend more time apart;

- exploratory relationships (17.9 per cent), which are shorter in duration, lower in support and commitment, and considered casual relationships;
- stuck relationships (23.0 per cent), which are low in warmth and intention to marry and high in negative interactions, but longer duration and more time together than exploratory relationships; and
- high-intensity relationships (9.3 per cent), which have high levels of support, warmth, intention to marry, as well as negative interactions and high levels of breaking up and getting back together.(92)

At any age, relationships can be dynamic. Young people have previously identified that the top reasons for relationships ending include romantic affiliation, such as losing interest, affection or excitement; intimacy, such as a lack of trust and communication; and autonomy, such as wanting more time for other aspects of life.(93) Relationship breakups can lead to help-seeking, with relationship concerns representing almost one in 10 calls (8.7 per cent) to Kids Helpline in 2013, representing the fifth most common reason for calls.(94) Compared to those at the beginning or in a relationship, people calling about a relationship breakup had higher levels of mental ill-health, self-harm and suicide risk.

Young people experiencing mental ill-health are more likely to engage in relationships, find breakups difficult and may experience altered relationship-related trajectories. Young people with mental ill-health are more likely to date than their peers.(95) A meta-analysis of developmental tasks for adolescents experiencing psychological symptoms identified that higher rates of romantic and sexual relationships predicted increased symptoms over time.(96) Young people with mental ill-health also experience greater difficulty during relationship breakups, with a longitudinal study of 144 adolescents finding that higher levels of depressive symptoms in adolescence predicted greater difficulty in recovering from a breakup in early adulthood.(97) Relationship and mental health trajectories may be impacted without focused support, as depressive symptoms in adolescence are associated with greater relationship conflict in mid-adolescence and young adulthood.(98, 99)

As with many transitions, relationship breakups can be associated with both distress and growth. A number of individual and relationship-based factors may determine whether young people perceive distress or growth. There is evidence to indicate that higher levels of emotional suppression predict lower levels of personal and interpersonal growth for young adults after a breakup, while cognitive appraisal, or subjectively assessing a situation, predicts higher

levels of intrapersonal growth.(100) Additionally, factors such as higher relationship satisfaction predict lower distress after a breakup. However, other research indicates that retrospective post-traumatic growth for young adults after a relationship breakdown is perceived, and actual growth may be unrelated to distress or relationship breakdown.(101) There is an opportunity for young people's supports to have an understanding of the factors that promote more positive perspectives and experiences.

Relationship education may support young people navigating relationships or experiencing distress following a breakup. Youth-focused relationship education has significant small-to-moderate effect sizes on conflict management and correcting idealised relationship beliefs, such as views that there is one person that they are meant to marry or that cohabitation increases the likelihood of a stable marriage.(102) Changing these views before a relationship breakdown may reduce distress. Young people have previously identified that they would like relationship education to cover communication, healthy and unhealthy relationship qualities and information about balancing individuality with togetherness.(89) Conversely, while some young people are interested in learning about maintaining relationships and transitions such as engagement, pregnancy and moving in together, young people are least interested in learning about relationship breakups. This may reflect that many young people, like people of all ages, do not anticipate relationship breakups. It may also indicate that young people may be less likely to engage with this information when it does not feel applicable to their lives. Although not particularly aligned with their perceived priorities, and although it does not require a primary focus, young people may benefit from relationship education that addresses relationship beliefs, difficulties and healthy coping behaviours. This should be included in social and emotional programs and professional development at school, as well as online resources on Head to Health that young people can access when and if they need them.



## Economic transitions

Many young people experience increasing financial autonomy from mid-adolescence into their mid-twenties. These years represent a part of the lifespan where young people are first permitted to enter the workforce casually or part-time, become eligible for particular income support payments or begin to forge a career path. In addition to employment transitions, economic transitions may be linked to changes in family structures, transitions to cohabiting relationships or educational transitions that require young people to relocate for post-secondary education.

## Financial independence

Economic independence is often connected to other transitions, such as moving out of home or entering the workforce. Young Australian's financial satisfaction can decrease during transitions such as leaving home,(103) possibly due to increased financial responsibilities. Young people have expressed concern about transitioning to financial independence, as future financial survival is a major source of stress for young Australians.(11)

In 2012, Australians aged 21 indicated that their weekly incomes ranged from \$0 to \$1,100.(6) Eighty per cent reported receiving income from wages, followed by support from parents (34 per cent) and Youth Allowance (24 per cent). Nearly 7 in 10 young people (69 per cent) reported having enough money for what they needed. Almost half (47 per cent) cited food as a major expense, followed by travel (40 per cent) and rent (37 per cent). While the spending has remained relatively stable for young Australia over the past three decades, young people are saving more and spending less on discretionary purchases such as alcohol, personal care, clothing and furniture.(104)

A study of 1,719 young adults aged 18 to 27 in the United States identified four financial trajectories across this life period, including:

- quickly independent (41 per cent), with steep declines in parental financial and housing support by their early twenties;
- consistently independent (23 per cent), who are largely financially independent across the period;
- gradually independent (23 per cent), with a steady decline in parental financial and housing support across this life stage; and
- consistently supported (13 per cent), receiving multiple kinds of support across this period of their life.(105)

Financial autonomy is often associated with vocational transitions and trajectories, such as delayed financial independence due to post-secondary study. Direct financial support from family is associated with greater occupational outcomes for young people,(106) which may partly be due to an association between

parental financial support and post-secondary study, as opposed to entering full-time employment.(107) However, compared to non-students, Australian university students are more likely to experience more financial hardship, are more likely to borrow money from their family, and are more likely to believe that they are not managing their money well.(108) When support is available, young people may experience short-term economic difficulties to benefit future vocational trajectories.

Young people from higher socioeconomic backgrounds experience later economic independence, more financial support and less financial distress. Four in five (80 per cent) surveyed Australians aged 21 from high-income families reported receiving financial support from their family compared to almost 1 in 5 young people (19 per cent) from low-income families. (6) Australian young adults who experience socioeconomic disadvantage are more likely to be financially independent and reside away from home.(107) The extended support received by young people from higher socioeconomic backgrounds is associated with lower levels of concern about poverty and financial worry.(105) Parents from higher socioeconomic backgrounds may also be more comfortable teaching their children about finances and feel more equipped to teach financial skills.(109)

There is some evidence to suggest that providing young people with opportunities to practice healthy financial behaviours while living at home will have a long-term benefit on their financial behaviour and financial wellbeing.(110) Financial skills should be promoted to all young people, and families should be provided with information about supporting young people to practice healthy financial behaviours. Given that this transition may be particularly linked with post-school vocational transitions, or as post-secondary education students may be less likely to be supported by full-time work, the end of secondary school presents an opportunity to provide targeted information about financially preparing to move out of home, developing a budget and information about the income supports they may be eligible for. As young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds experience more financial insecurity and less financial support, their needs should be uniquely considered in all approaches.

## Moving out of home or away from community

As with financial independence, moving out of home is often connected to other transition points, such as relocating for post-secondary education, or enabled by the financial independence associated with full-time or secure work. For Australians aged 18 to 34, the most frequently reported reason for leaving home were to be more independent (31 per cent), to study (20 per cent) or to live with a partner or get married (19 per cent).(78)

Moving out of home occurs at different points for young people. For example, young people may move out earlier if they experience poorer relationships with their parents.(111) The Australian Bureau of Statistics reported that 58 per cent of males and 47 per cent of females aged 18 to 24 years old were still living in their parental home in 2012–13.(78) Australians who move out of home between 18 and 25 years of age experience decreased housing satisfaction and increased financial hardship in the first few years, resulting in going without meals and asking friends and family for financial assistance.(10) Consulted young people noted additional difficulties for young people leaving their community as they moved out from home, resulting in significant shifts in their social supports and surroundings.

While often considered important to independence, moving away from home may be associated with poor health behaviours for some young people, as seen in studies of young people who relocate for study. Compared to students that have not relocated for study, Australian students relocating to attend universities are more likely to experience a reduction in healthy eating, sleep and exercise, and are more likely to experience increased alcohol consumption and smoking.(112) This may reflect the transition to greater independence and less assistance and supervision. Additionally, the same study found that the largest difference between these two groups were that relocating students reported higher levels of loneliness, stress and anxiety. This is despite reporting higher levels of connection to their university and all relocating students reporting new friendships, compared to 88 per cent of people who did not relocate.

Young people moving out of their community also experience a range of healthcare transitions that should be considered. Young Australians have previously reported that not having a Medicare card and not knowing which services to access are barriers to healthcare services.(113) Young people leaving their community may need to find new health services and clinicians, transfer medical records, and may be navigating the healthcare system independently for the first time. Head to Health and post-secondary orientation provide opportunities to increase young people’s knowledge about how to access and navigate the health system.

Opportunities exist to equip the primary care workforce to refer young people to a range of broad supports. The Initial Assessment and Referral (IAR) for mental healthcare guidance assists general practitioners and mental health clinicians to appropriately assess and refer people seeking mental health support.(114) The assessment process includes contextual domains, such as social and environmental

stressors, and the documentation notes that significant transitions should be considered in mental health assessments. Draft IAR guidance for adolescents identifies that these transitions might include family separation, educational or vocational disruption, a breakup or parental separation.(115) The guidance also notes that young people at all levels of care may require community, social, recreational and school supports, and that they may need support accessing additional services such as housing, legal and financial supports.

A number of Primary Health Networks (PHNs) have developed mental health navigation platforms for their region, some including resources and national and local services that focus on broad supports.(116–119) Many of these platforms provide tailored information to people seeking help, their supports and local services, as well as information about referrals required to access different services. Identifying best-practice approaches from the current platforms would support people to access broad supports, as well as supporting referral pathways between local services.

### Develop online youth support navigation platforms

#### Policy solution

Connect young people to broad supports and services they may need to support economic, vocational and social/relationship transitions by funding:

- a national youth organisation to develop national guidance and criteria for the types of services and supports to be included in a youth support navigation platform which responds to the nature of transitions they need assistance for; and
- a trial in three PHNs to each develop/enhance a regional online youth support navigation platform. The outcomes could then inform approaches in all PHNs.

#### Outcome

Young people and primary care services are provided with broad local and national supports and services.



## Policy solutions

### Develop clinical practice points to support young people navigating change

Policy solution	Evidence base and rationale	Outcome	Mechanism
Develop clinical practice points to support young people with mental ill-health during times of change and transition.	There is a need to systematically review and translate the available research on supporting young people with mental ill-health during transitions. This should include information on navigating a wide range of changes, as well as promoting appropriate protective factors and support. Practice points should be developed in partnership with clinicians, researchers and young people.	Clinicians can best identify risks, promote protective factors and support young people with mental ill-health during times of change.	Orygen.

### Identify the frequency and impact of transitions for young people

Policy solution	Evidence base and rationale	Outcome	Mechanism
Fund the expansion of the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children to include items on both the frequency and mental health impact of common transitions. Items should allow for reporting on the mental health symptoms associated with different transitions.	While many transitions are experienced by young people, it is unclear which transitions young people experience, when they encounter them and which have the greatest impact on their mental health. Understanding the frequency and impact of transitions allows for more effective resource allocation.	Youth mental health organisations and clinicians are provided with a clearer understanding of the transitions causing frequent or substantial impacts on youth mental health. Resources and interventions can then target frequent or impactful transitions.	Australian Institute of Family Studies.

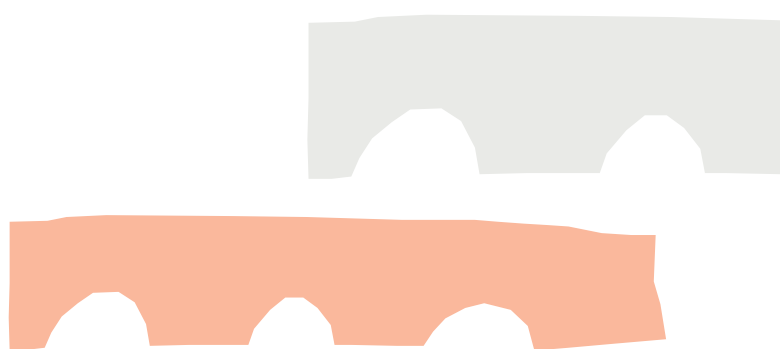


### Support transitions on the Head to Health platform

Policy solution	Evidence base and rationale	Outcome	Mechanism
<p>Ensure the Head to Health platform links young people to external content focused on change and common transitions. This should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>include social, vocational and financial support services and resources;</li> <li>include information for support networks, including friends, families, school counsellors, education staff and vocational supports; and</li> <li>fund youth mental health organisations to partner with young people to identify key transitions and existing content, and develop resources that address identified gaps.</li> </ul>	<p>A number of mental health and youth mental health organisations provide information and psychoeducation for common transition experiences. Collating these resources on the Head to Health platform would provide young people with access to appropriate information. It would also assist in identifying gaps in available resources and provide direction to the Australian Government Department of Health and youth mental health organisations on where new resources should be developed.</p>	<p>Young people experiencing change and their supports are provided with information, resources and pathways to care when needed.</p>	<p>Australian Government Department of Health.</p>

### Address gaps in adjustment disorders research

Policy solution	Evidence base and rationale	Outcome	Mechanism
<p>Develop a National Health and Medical Research Council targeted call for research to address gaps in adjustment disorders research, focusing on prevention, risk and protective factors, screening and treatment of adjustment disorders in young people.</p>	<p>Despite its prevalence in clinical settings, there is little high-quality research on adjustment disorders, particularly for young people.</p>	<p>Clinicians can identify and effectively support young people with an adjustment disorder and promote protective factors during times of change.</p>	<p>National Health and Medical Research Council.</p>



### Ensure government strategies includes a transition focus

Policy solution	Evidence base and rationale	Outcome	Mechanism
<p>Ensure that national, state and territory mental health and youth-focused strategies recognise that young people experiencing transitions require focused mental health support, as well as coordinated programs across education, employment and social services portfolios. Support for transitions should be included in outcome measurements, implementation plans and funded activity.</p>	<p>While many youth-focused policies highlight the prevalence and importance of transitions, they are largely focused on vocational outcomes or successful transitions. Additionally, many current strategies do not include an implementation plan or funding for adequate implementation. Future strategies should include implementation plans, outcome measurements and funding for development, stakeholder consultation and implementation.</p>	<p>Young people across Australia are supported, including during times of transition.</p>	<p>Australian Government Office for Youth, state and territory counterparts.</p>

### Support mental health in schools

Policy solution	Evidence base and rationale	Outcome	Mechanism
<p>In partnership with young people, design approaches to supporting mental health and educational transitions in improvements to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the National School Reform Agreement;</li> <li>• teacher education and professional development guidelines; and</li> <li>• social and emotional school program guidelines.</li> </ul> <p>Additionally, the Education Ministers Meeting should identify opportunities and implement initiatives to increase referrals from schools to youth mental health services.</p>	<p>The Productivity Commission’s inquiry into Mental Health recommended mental health considerations in the National School Reform Agreement, and guidelines for professional development and social and emotional school programs.(12) Through engagement with young people, educational psychologists and mental health professionals, these recommendations should be adopted and augmented to include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a specific focus on transitions;</li> <li>• supporting families and students to support other students; and</li> <li>• guidelines for social and emotional school programs that cover healthy and respectful relationships, including support for coping with social transitions.</li> </ul>	<p>Young people experiencing transitions are supported across the education system.</p>	<p>Education Ministers Meeting.</p>

**Develop and fund a Post-Secondary Education Transition Support package**

Policy solution	Evidence base and rationale	Outcome	Mechanism
<p>Fund a Post-Secondary Education Transition Support package which would include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• supplementing the Australian University Mental Health Framework with a companion document about supporting transitions, including to post-secondary settings beyond universities;</li> <li>• funding Orygen to extend their work by examining and reporting on data from all tertiary admission centres to investigate mental health trends;</li> <li>• funding a trial and developing guidelines for an intensive pre-entry transition support program for young people experiencing or at risk of mental ill-health during the transition; and</li> <li>• funding a national youth mental health organisation to develop resources for students, families and educators that focus on post-secondary education transition, including information on changing relationships, maintaining healthy behaviours, and transitioning health and mental health care.</li> </ul>	<p>Transitions to post-secondary education can be challenging for young people, impacting their mental health and future vocational trajectories. Expanding existing projects and implementing new initiatives bolsters transition supports for post-secondary students and settings.</p>	<p>Students are better supported to navigate the changes associated with post-secondary education.</p> <p>Post-secondary education providers are better able to support the mental health of first-year students with whole-of-institute approaches.</p>	<p>Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment.</p>

**Develop mentally healthy workplaces with a focus on youth transitions**

Policy solution	Evidence base and rationale	Outcome	Mechanism
<p>Mentally healthy workplace initiatives should focus on the benefits to young workers where they are supported in employment transitions and workforce re-entry. The following initiatives should include be developed and communicated to new employees at the time of induction or commencement of employment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• psychological safety in amended national, state and territory workplace health and safety arrangements;</li> <li>• psychological health codes of practice for employers; and</li> <li>• minimum standards for employee assistance programs</li> </ul>	<p>There is evidence to show that young people have a more positive experience transitioning into new work environments where workplaces have better psychosocial conditions. Recommendation 7 of the Productivity Commission’s inquiry into mental health focuses on developing mentally healthy workplaces.(12) These recommendations should be adopted and augmented with a dedicated focus on the impact of mental healthy workplaces on the experience of transition/ re-entry into work for young people.</p>	<p>Young people receive a supported transition into mentally healthy workplaces.</p>	<p>National, state and territory workplace health and safety regulators, for example Safe Work Australia.</p>



## Develop online youth support navigation platforms

Policy solution	Evidence base and rationale	Outcome	Mechanism
<p>Connect young people to broad supports and services they may need to support economic, vocational and social/relationship transitions by funding:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a national youth organisation to develop national guidance and criteria for the types of services and supports to be included in a youth support navigation platform which responds to the nature of transitions they need assistance for; and</li> <li>• a trial in three PHNs to each develop/enhance a regional online youth support navigation platform. The outcomes could then inform approaches in all PHNs.</li> </ul>	<p>While primary care services support people with broad needs and are expected to refer young people to broad support services, these referrals can be variable or missed.</p> <p>Many PHNs have developed online platforms to assist people and health professionals to navigate local and national mental health services. Some platforms include broad supports, such as financial counselling and housing support.</p> <p>National guidance should aim to enhance existing platforms and identify good practice. Ongoing funding should be provided to ensure that online platforms are regularly updated and aligned to the needs of the region.</p>	<p>Young people and primary care services are provided with broad local and national supports and services.</p>	<p>Australian Government Department of Health.</p>



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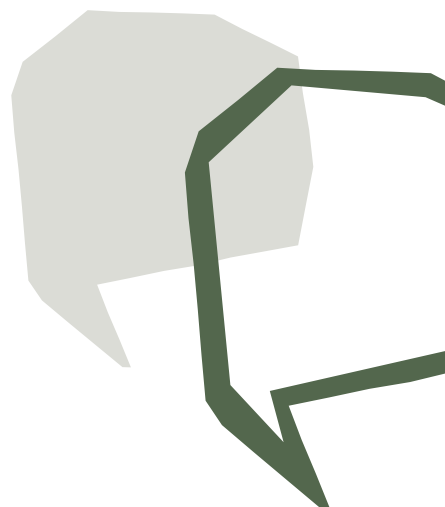
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**Orygen acknowledges** the Traditional Owners of the lands we are on and pays respect to their Elders past and present. Orygen recognises and respects their cultural heritage, beliefs and relationships to their Country, which continue to be important to First Nations people living today.



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