

## In brief

The Smith Family has a strong legacy of supporting tertiary students from families experiencing disadvantage. With the current policy focus on boosting first-in-family equity students in tertiary education, insights into what works in supporting these students are of growing interest. Drawing on the experience of Smith Family students and team members, this paper reports on

- The challenges faced by tertiary students experiencing disadvantage
- Insights from The Smith Family on best practice supports for these students
- Recommendations for change

## First in family equity students: barriers and challenges

Tertiary students supported by The Smith Family experience the following barriers to accessing, remaining engaged in, and completing tertiary study:

- **Financial stress** resulting from: upfront payment for VET courses or uni course costs; long hours working is necessary to live but eats into study time, or requires students to drop units and extend their years of study; costs of laptop, internet and travel to uni/TAFE; losing income or employment to complete mandatory practical placements
- Students find the transition to tertiary study **overwhelming, stressful and lonely**; some feel they 'don't belong' at university
- Many have no family or friends who've studied at tertiary level, so have **few sources of advice or support** in navigating tertiary study
- **Little understanding** of university/TAFE processes, academic protocols, or "university language"
- **Little knowledge of supports** provided by their institution and lack of confidence to seek support
- The **complexity** involved in applying for some **scholarships** and sources of **financial support** can deter students from applying for funding.

## What works to support tertiary students experiencing disadvantage?

Data collected from tertiary students supported by The Smith Family identifies specific factors that build first-in-family students' belonging and confidence, which evidence indicates has a positive relationship with tertiary continuation and completion. They include:

- **Personalised support** from someone students have a trusting, enduring relationship with

- Support focused on **remediating financial, academic and career challenges** and motivating students to continue and complete their studies
- Providing students with information about available **financial supports** (government payments, scholarships, grants) and providing practical **support to access** this funding
- Directing students to **support services and targeted equity supports** within and outside of their uni/TAFE
- Access to **critical “insider” knowledge**: for example, the benefits of attending orientation, how HECS-HELP works, navigating Centrelink, changing courses, time management, or planning study pathways
- Providing **career development** advice and opportunities (internships, work experience, placements).

### What more could be done?

- More **financial assistance** for equity students to meet upfront costs and living expenses
- **Personalised support** targeted at the specific needs of first-in-family students
- **Programs to familiarise** first in family students with TAFE and university systems, processes and environments prior to enrolment.

### Other research

- Groves, O. and O’Shea, S. (2019) *Learning to ‘be’ a university student. First in family students negotiating membership of the university community.* Link to article [here](#)
- Jaremus et al (2022) *Aspirations, equity and higher education course choice: The path travelled.* Link to report [here](#)
- King et al (2019) *The experience of being First in Family at University: Pioneers in Higher Education.* Link to volume [here](#)
- McMahon et al (2026) *Towards a financially inclusive higher education system.* Link to report [here](#)

### The Smith Family is Australia’s largest educational charity

The Smith Family has been working to improve the lives of Australian children living in disadvantage for over 100 years. Over that time, The Smith Family has evolved to become a modern, dynamic, evidence-based organisation that helps children in need through long-term support for their education. Across Australia, we support almost 200,000 children and young people experiencing disadvantage through a range of educational programs.

Further information on The Smith Family, please visit [thesmithfamily.com.au](https://thesmithfamily.com.au)