Submission:

ATEC Statement of Strategic Priorities 2027–28 Consultation Paper

October 2026

Introduction

The Smith Family thanks the Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC) for the opportunity to respond to the consultation on the *Statement of Strategic Priorities 2027–28*. We support the ambition for a high-quality, equitable and sustainable tertiary education system. Our submission focuses on two areas where our evidence and experience can add value: strengthening support for successful transitions and recognising the multidimensional nature of disadvantage.

The Smith Family is Australia's largest education charity. We support almost 72,000 students from low-income families through our *Learning for Life* program, around 700 of whom are tertiary students receiving scholarships and personalised support through our longstanding Tertiary Learning for Life program, established in 1996. An additional 400 tertiary students are provided with navigational support through The Smith Family's "Tertiary Together" program, currently being trialled. Over 800 of the tertiary students supported by The Smith Family are enrolled in Bachelor degrees across 40 Australian universities. Alongside these programs of support, The Smith Family has tracked the pathways and destinations of students experiencing disadvantage through our longitudinal Pathways, Engagement and Transitions (PET) study, which follows young people through senior secondary school and into work, training and further education. This study provides direct insight into how pathways develop over time and the factors that help or hinder successful transitions.

1. Do the draft outcomes meaningfully reflect progress towards the National Tertiary Education Objective and ATEC's legislated goals?

The draft outcomes are consistent with ATEC's legislated goals, but they are expressed at a level that makes it difficult to judge progress. The final Statement and performance framework should make the equity outcome more meaningful in two respects.

First, **define equitable success as sustained progress through tertiary education, not simply access or completion within a standard timeframe.** The proposed outcome that students should finish in minimum time and with minimum debt is understandable, but it risks treating a linear pathway as the norm. Students experiencing disadvantage may reduce their study load, pause study, change courses or providers, combine study with work or caring responsibilities, or re-engage after disruption. These pathways should not be interpreted as failure where students continue to make meaningful progress towards a qualification.

For example, students on our Tertiary scholarship are supported for up to eight semesters, or four years. Among those who commence a bachelor degree, around 40% complete a qualification within four years, with a further one-third still enrolled after that time.

ATEC should therefore assess equitable success through a balanced set of measures covering access, persistence, credit accumulation or qualification progress, retention, transfer, re-engagement and completion. Measures should also examine whether students progress into further study or employment, while recognising that graduate outcomes are addressed separately under the proposed outcome on graduate capability and national benefit and would also be affected by the broader health of the labour market.

Second, apply a **multidimensional and intersectional understanding of disadvantage**. Low income can intersect with disability, caring responsibilities, regional or remote location, digital exclusion, First Nations status, cultural and linguistic background and limited family experience of tertiary education. These factors can compound at transition points and affect the type and intensity of support a student needs. ATEC should

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also explicitly recognise first-in-family or first-generation students within its equity framing. While this group overlaps with existing equity categories, being unfamiliar with tertiary systems can create distinct challenges in navigating admissions, financial assistance, course requirements, and institutional support.

2. Do the draft priorities appropriately reflect where ATEC should focus in 2027 and 2028?

The proposed priorities identify relevant areas for action, but their breadth creates a risk they become a description of desirable system features rather than a basis for prioritisation. We recommend sharpening five priorities around the points at which students experiencing disadvantage are most likely to encounter barriers.

Equity: make participation, progression, and completion the focus. The equity priority should extend beyond increasing access. It should require providers to identify the practical and institutional barriers affecting their students and to set out how these will be addressed. Relevant barriers include complex admissions and enrolment processes, uncertainty about financial support, digital exclusion, transport and housing costs, inflexible timetables, unpaid placements and fragmented support pathways.

The need for this focus is illustrated by PET findings, which show that high aspirations do not guarantee successful transitions. Across two recent cohorts, 97–99% of Year 11 students intended to complete Year 12, yet 14–18% did not do so. [2] High aspirations are important, but they do not by themselves remove the barriers between aspiration, participation, and sustained engagement.

A joined-up tertiary system: support movement into, through, and between pathways. The proposed priority appropriately focusses on links between VET and higher education. It should also encompass the learner's pathway from school into tertiary education, movement between courses and providers, and re-entry after disruption. Clear information, effective credit recognition and timely navigation support are essential if students are to transfer or re-engage without unnecessary loss of time, credit, or confidence.

Collaboration: recognise community organisations as delivery and evidence partners**.** The priority should refer explicitly to partnerships with community organisations, alongside providers, industry and governments. Community organisations can contribute trusted relationships with students and families, evidence about barriers that may not be visible in institutional data, and continuity across the school-to-tertiary transition. Mission-based compacts should encourage providers to identify where such partnerships would improve outreach, navigation, retention, or re-engagement.

Student experience and safety: make navigation, belonging, and timely support visible. PET identifies personalised career guidance and strong adult networks beyond family and school as important to young people's opportunities, motivation and direction.[3] These supports are particularly important at transition points. Providers should be expected not only to offer wellbeing, disability, financial and career services, but also to ensure that first-in-family and other equity students know these services exist, can access them easily, and receive support early enough to prevent avoidable disengagement.

Prioritise retention and completion. Consider introducing incentives or obligations for universities to provide intensive academic, financial and wellbeing support for first-in-family/first generation CSP-funded students in their first and subsequent years of study.

3. Are the proposed priorities practical and useful for mission-based compacts?

The priorities are broad enough to reflect different provider missions and contexts. That flexibility is useful, but it should not come at the expense of accountability. Mission-based compacts should translate the Statement into a limited number of provider-specific commitments that identify the equity problem being addressed, the action to be taken, and the evidence that will show whether conditions are improving.

Through mission-based compacts, ATEC should ask providers to:

- identify the transition points and equity barriers that materially affect access, progression, retention, and completion relevant to their student cohort and context;
- select a small number of evidence-informed actions proportionate to those barriers, with clear responsibilities and time frames;
- demonstrate how outreach will reach low-ICSEA schools and communities in outer metropolitan, regional and rural areas, where relevant to the provider's mission and location;
- set out how it will work with students, schools, VET providers, community organisations and employers to support navigation, transfer, and re-engagement; and

This approach would preserve provider flexibility while giving ATEC a clearer basis for assessing whether compacts are contributing to equitable student outcomes. It would also shift the emphasis from the existence of strategies or services to whether they are reaching the students who need them and reducing the barriers the provider has identified.

Recommendations

- **Strengthen the outcomes** by defining equitable success as sustained progress into, through and beyond tertiary education.
- **Reflect the realities of disadvantage** by using a multidimensional and intersectional framing across the Statement, mission-based compacts and performance framework.
- **Make transitions a shared responsibility** by requiring providers to identify material barriers, support transfer and re-engagement, work with schools, VET, community organisations and employers, and report disaggregated pathway outcomes.

The Smith Family would welcome the opportunity to contribute further evidence on post-school transitions and the experiences of students from low-income families.

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Sources

[1] The Smith Family, *Pathways, Engagement and Transitions: How young people experiencing disadvantage navigate the first three years after leaving school*, Report 5, 2025.

[2] The Smith Family, *Senior Secondary Transitions in a Changing Context: Insights from the Pathways, Engagement and Transitions Study*, Report 6, 2026.

[3] The Smith Family, *Pathways, Engagement and Transitions: How young people experiencing disadvantage navigate the first three years after leaving school*, Report 5, 2025.