



*everyone's family*

# Submission to the evaluation of the Higher Education Participation & Partnerships Program

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Wendy Field  
Head of Policy & Programs  
Level 9, 117 Clarence Street  
GPO Box 10500  
Sydney NSW 2001

Telephone 02 9085 7192  
Facsimile 02 9085 7299  
[wendy.field@thesmithfamily.com.au](mailto:wendy.field@thesmithfamily.com.au)

## The Smith Family

The Smith Family's mission is to create opportunities for young Australians in need by providing long-term support for their participation in education. The goal is to enable them to participate economically and socially in the Australian community. We are Australia's largest education-oriented charity and deliver programs in 94 communities across all states and territories.

In the 2014-2015 financial year we supported around 125,000 disadvantaged children and young people, their parents/careers and community professionals. This included over 31,000 students in secondary school, over 1,200 students engaged in tertiary education and over 14,500 children, young people and their parents/careers who are from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.

While we partner with many schools across Australia – including having formal partnerships with 500 and supporting students in 4,000 – our programs are in addition to what schools can provide. Most of our programs take place outside school hours. We also partner with universities, including formal partnerships with 24 Universities, with whom we work to provide programs and supports for students, from school through to tertiary, to support their engagement in education and post-school studies.

All of our programs are evidence based and we collect outcomes data on our programs, including longitudinal data that enables us to track students' progress over time.

The Smith Family's largest and most comprehensive program our *Learning for Life* scholarship program. Students can begin on the *Learning for Life* program in the first year of school and continue through to the completion of tertiary education. The program is comprised of three integrated components that provide financial, relational and programmatic support.

Students' long-term participation on the program offers a significant opportunity to track educational outcomes and better understand what is and isn't effective in this area. The three long –term measures of effectiveness for the program are:

- Improve school attendance over time to 90%
- Increase the operation of students who advance to year 12, and
- Increase the proportion of students engaged in employment and further education after they leave the program.

In addition, shorter term outcomes such as reading ability, confidence and knowledge of post-school pathways are also measured.

The above background on The Smith Family is the context for our comments here.

## Introduction

The Smith family welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Review of the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP).

Since 2010 the HEPPP has played an important role in increasing the number of low socio-background students participating in university. It continues to play an important role in improving students' literacy and numeracy development, school engagement, motivation, confidence, knowledge of careers and post-school pathways all of which support the long term outcomes of school completion and transition to tertiary education.

This review is an opportunity to examine the importance of early intervention in supporting increases in the participation of students from low socio-economic backgrounds in higher education, as well as to consider the value of continuing targeted and specific support for students throughout their university studies.

In this submission we will focus our commentary on the following questions 1, 2a and 3 from the public submission invitation.

## Academic preparedness, achievement, attitudes & aspiration

1. *What effect has the HEPPP had on low SES school and/or VET student's*
  - a) *Attitudes towards and aspirations to attend higher education?*
  - b) *Academic preparedness to attend higher education?*
2. *To what extent has the HEPP impacted:*
  - a) *Academic achievement at school (particularly mathematics and science) and/or the rate of retention to year 12.*

Efforts aimed at improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged children and young people in ways which are both sustainable and scalable, need to take account of the range of complex and interconnected factors that influence these outcomes. There is no simple, short-term response. Early intervention and balanced long-term support are key.

### ***Factors influencing the development of children & young people***

A range of educational indicators highlight the significant challenges facing Australia regarding educational performance. These indicators cross all stages of children and young people's lives, including in the early years, school and post-school areas.

A number of factors influence the development of children and young people, including:

- **Personal characteristics** – such as social skills, intelligence and attitudes.
- **Family** – such as a parent's engagement in their child's learning, parental aspirations and expectations, parent-child reading, value placed on learning, creating a cognitively stimulating environment, and parent-child relationships.
- **Peers** – including their attitudes to education, their aspirations and risk-taking behaviour.

- The **institutions** children and young people attend and engage with – including early learning and care settings, school, as well as health and community services.
- The **community** in which they live – the social and economic resources available there, the presence of role models and the level of community cohesion and safety (Bronfenbrenner 1994).

There are links between these factors which also influence young people's development. For example, the relations between home and school, the extent of a family's community networks and how well education and health institutions work together to support children's development.

The values and customs of a society can also influence young people's development. Whether a nation values strong educational outcomes for all young people, as well as the broader economic and social environment, are important.

These factors help shape a child's likely pathway or trajectory through life. Social and family background help to create the conditions for opportunities – or the lack of them – that influence progression through school (OECD 2016).

Young people's pathways, however, are not predetermined or immutable. Challenges in one area, for example at school, can be offset by additional support in another, for example the family or community, and vice versa. A young person's trajectory can be positively influenced, by providing the support that is needed at the time it is required.

### ***Intervene early, and then maintain support***

Two key principles for positively influencing the outcomes achieved by disadvantaged children and young people are early intervention and long-term support. Together these support the early intervention and university student support policy focus of HEPPP.

### **Early intervention**

The early years of life play a key role in laying the foundations for children's future learning and lifetime outcomes (McLachlan et al. 2013). Effective learning involves ideas and concepts that build on each other. If children do not acquire crucial skills and knowledge, and develop positive attitudes to learning early on, it can become increasingly difficult for them to learn as they get older (Bailey 2014). School-entry maths skills, for example, are predictive of later maths learning and achievement (Carmichael et al 2013; Duncan et al. 2007).

Early intervention goes beyond just providing support in the early years. It also involves addressing issues and gaps soon after they are identified, for example, by providing additional support for children to understand the links between education decisions, pathways and careers.

The Smith Family believes that HEPPP plays an important role in supporting sustained interventions that build educationally disadvantaged students' understanding of careers and higher education pathways, in time to influence their engagement in learning and post-school decision making.

HEPPP also plays an important role in supporting school students' academic achievement through the provision of programs, activities and opportunities that build skills and extend and enrich learning, including in the areas of science and mathematics. Universities possess highly relevant tools and resources that they leverage to support students' academic achievement.

## **A whole of sector effort**

The Smith Family believes that this work is not the responsibility one part of the higher education sector alone, and that all universities are stakeholders in, and can and do play an important role, in improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged young Australians.

Given the geographic distribution of low socio economic communities The Smith Family believes all universities have a significant contribution to make in relation to the early intervention work required to improve school completion and participation in higher education for low socio-economic background young people.

As noted below, effective cross sectoral collaboration and partnerships are also key.

## **Balanced long-term support**

While early intervention is important in improving disadvantaged children's educational outcomes, if early support is not followed up by later investment, its effect is diminished as children grow (Cunha & Heckman 2007).

Research by Nobel Economist James Heckman and his colleague Flavio Cunha (2007), shows that efforts aimed at improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged young people are most cost effective when they involve balanced long-term support across a young person's life.

Investment distributed over the first two decades of a child's life, produces more adult skills than the same level of investment focused on one part of a young person's life, for example the early years or adolescence. A sustained and early intervention approach is also far more cost effective than one-off or short term programs for young people, or remedial efforts aimed at preparing adults for the workforce. (Cunha & Heckman 2007).

## **Supporting low-socio economic students at university**

Research clearly shows that students from low socio-economic backgrounds can require additional support to transition to and complete their higher education. Completion rates for low socio-economic students accessing higher education, as well as groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students those from rural and regional areas underscores the importance of maintaining investment in this area.

Financial support is an important component in enabling low socio-economic background student success at university and scholarships, offered in addition to adequate income support, are effective in reducing students stress, boosting morale and allow students to dedicate more time to their studies (in lieu of paid work) (Zacharias et al. 2016).

However, effective transition programs and support services are also needed. A number of low socio-economic background students require support adjusting to tertiary study and despite meeting academic requirements, with research showing that these students can feel less well prepared and more stressed and concerned than their peers, whilst being less likely to seek out support (Baik et al. 2015). They are also more likely to be struggling financially, work more hours, with less family/other support. (Devlin et al 2011) (Bexley et al 2013). Many low socio-economic background students are not aware of, or do not know they are eligible for support from universities (Green 2012).

HEPPP plays an important role in supporting cohort specific programs and activities that seek to address these factors.

## The value of cross sectoral partnerships

The Smith Family believes that a continued focus on cross-sectoral partnerships within HEPPP will support strong outcomes from the Commonwealth's investment in this Program.

The evidence based programs and activities enabled to date by HEPPP provide important opportunities for students. Universities, however, cannot achieve strong outcomes in isolation. Effective implementation can be best achieved through effective partnerships with schools, Governments, VET providers, and community organisations. The Smith Family believes that the scope of the HEPPP should continue to encompass partnerships, to provide a driver for universities to continue work in this way.

Given the size of Australia's educational challenge, approaches that go beyond individual student, family and school factors are required to improve the educational outcomes of young Australians, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

There is an increasing realisation of the need for shared responsibility and collaborative cross-sectoral and cross-institutional efforts aimed at addressing educational disadvantage.

Collaboration – the sharing of effort, knowledge and resources in the pursuit of shared goals – has been identified as playing a central role in the achievement of student learning outcomes (Bentley & Cazaly 2015). The Smith Family's place-based facilitation work, including through Communities for Children and School Community Hubs, demonstrates the value of stakeholders working together to support improved student outcomes in disadvantaged communities.

The uncertainty in the policy environment and relatively short-term HEPPP funding cycle has created much uncertainty for universities. This has flowed through to partners, including community organisations and schools. Good partnerships and strong outcomes for students are supported by predictable funding and sustained partnerships.

## Parental attitudes & influence

3. *To what extent have parents and low SES communities changed their attitudes and behavior as a result of HEPPP activity, particularly in terms of parents attitudes towards and support for their child attending university?*

Continued focus through HEPPP on programs and activities that influence parents understanding of the role they can play in supporting their child's learning, academic achievement and post-school study intentions will make a substantial contribution to the goal of improving low socio-economic students' academic preparation for and participation in university.

Research clearly demonstrates the importance of parents in influencing the educational outcomes young people achieve. Students whose parents have higher levels of education and better jobs benefit from accessing a wider range of resources that make it easier for them to succeed in school. These resources take a variety of forms – **financial** (for example computers, books, private tutoring), **cultural** (for example a larger vocabulary,) and **social** (for example role models and networks) (OECD 2016).

While access to, or lack of, resources can influence educational outcomes, research highlights the critical role of parental engagement in their children's learning. This is especially true for children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

### ***Parental engagement***

A recent review by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) (Fox & Olsen 2014) identifies the aspects of parental engagement that matter most.

These include:

- **Parents' aspirations and expectations** of their children's achievement and participation in further education. These have consistently been identified as the strongest and most influential aspect of parent engagement.
- **Parent-child reading** is particularly important for children in the early years and primary school, for developing skills, confidence and enjoyment of reading and learning.
- **Parents' conversations** with their children can have a strong influence on children's cognitive skills, the value they place on learning and their enjoyment of it.
- Creating a cognitively **stimulating environment** for children. This includes having books and other learning resources in the home, visiting libraries and museums, participating in community events, fostering learning around children's interests and talking about movies and television programs.
- Positive and trusting **parent-teacher relationships** and opportunities for regular communication.

Parental engagement contributes to a range of short and long-term outcomes for children. It primarily influences children's orientation to learning, including their motivation, engagement, confidence and beliefs about learning (Fox & Olsen 2014).

Parents influence children's beliefs about the importance of education and the extent to which children believe they can influence their academic progress through hard work. Parents also influence children's confidence in their academic ability, the likelihood that they'll seek help if they need it and the acquisition of a range of skills for learning. These include early reading and mathematical skills, problem solving, being an independent learner and linking learning at school to the everyday (Fox & Olsen 2014).

Parental engagement has been shown to have a consistent impact on children's learning outcomes. This is not just in the early years of a child's life. Analysis of data from the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) highlights the importance of parents and peers on the educational and occupational aspirations of adolescents.

LSAY data shows that parents are an important influence on whether young people complete Year 12, second only to academic achievement at age 15. The data also shows that the most important influencers on whether young people intend to go to university immediately after leaving school, are the perceived expectations of their parents and peers (Gemici et al. 2014).

Students, who at age 15 believe their parents expect them to go to university, are around 11 times more likely to report that they plan to attend university, when compared with students whose parents do not expect them to go to university. Students whose friends plan to attend university are nearly four times more likely to plan to do so, than those whose friends do not envisage going to university (Gemici et al. 2014).

## ***Parental engagement and disadvantaged families***

Despite wanting to be actively engaged in their child's learning, many parents from disadvantaged backgrounds need support to achieve this. They may:

- Lack confidence or be uncertain about how to support their child's learning.
- Have a poor educational history or experience with schools.
- Have limited English language skills.
- Come from a country where the educational system does not encourage parental engagement.

Importantly, parental engagement in children's learning is a bigger predictor of how children do in school than a family's socioeconomic status. Students with engaged parents, no matter what their income or background, are more likely to do well at school, graduate from school and go on to higher education (Fox & Olsen 2014).

Analysis of LSAY data shows that parental and peer influences almost entirely mediate the effects of gender, Indigeneity, socioeconomic status, location, family structure and immigration background, on young people's educational and occupational aspirations (Gemici et al. 2014).

Both the ARACY review and analysis of LSAY data highlight the clear value of efforts aimed at enhancing the engagement of parents in their child's learning, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Parental engagement in learning is a tool that can help close the gap in achievement between children of different socioeconomic backgrounds (Fox & Olsen 2014). Any policy intervention that successfully leverages the influence of parents and peers may provide a substantial pay-off in terms of raising aspirations (Gemici et al. 2014).

## **Conclusion**

Australia's educational performance must be improved if individuals and the nation as a whole are to participate in the 21<sup>st</sup> century world.

Since 2010 HEPPP has played a central role in supporting improved university participation rates for low socio-economic background young people. The early intervention outreach work that has supported this outcome needs to be sustained to continue to see improvements in this area.

Support for low socio-economic background young people at university is also crucial, as it enables students, once admitted, to make the most of their potential. Low socio-economic background students at university need a mix of adequate financial support and wraparound supports to enable their success. The evidence regarding the value of investment a balanced long-term intervention supports this approach.

Given the significance of parents in influencing the educational outcomes of children and young people, including at university, parents as well as students should be engaged in evidence based programs and activities. Effective partnerships underpin the efficacy of the HEPPP, and continued investment in these is warranted.

The higher education sector are stakeholders in, and possess relevant resources and skills to support, improved educational outcomes for disadvantaged and low socio-economic background young Australians and should continue to play an important role in supporting these outcomes.



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