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**The Smith Family's submission to the
*Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People***

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Terms of reference

The Smith Family welcomes the opportunity to make this submission to the 'Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People'. **The submission will primarily focus on one of the key questions set out in Attachment B of the context paper:**

- How can we attract more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students into higher education?

It will also provide some brief comments with regards to one of the other questions raised by the discussion paper, namely:

- How can we ensure that more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students stay at university, complete their studies and graduate?

The submission will draw on The Smith Family's experience working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families across Australia, to identify key themes for supporting the goal of improved higher education outcomes for this group. This goal is in line with The Smith Family's Reconciliation Action Plan which was developed in 2010 and marked our public commitment to the reconciliation process. Our vision for reconciliation is a nation where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children fully benefit from the education and learning opportunities that Australia has to offer, and are truly valued as the first peoples of Australia through a deep respect and understanding by the broader Australian community.

Indigenous participation in higher education in Australia

As the Review's background paper highlights, the barriers to participation in higher education that Indigenous students face are multiple and well documented. They centre around "financial pressures and living away from home, health-related problems, racism and prejudice, and low levels of academic readiness and aspirations ... coupled with the high academic demands of study and insufficient academic support" (p. 5 Pechenkina and Anderson, 2011).

The Smith's Family's work with disadvantaged families, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, reinforces the impact and significance of the financial pressures relating to education. These pressures are experienced right across formal schooling and into the tertiary years. Low levels of academic readiness and aspirations reflect the need for focus **early in life** and throughout a young person's development, as neither are realised over the short term, nor through a one-off focus. Thus the major focus of this submission is what can be done in the **primary and secondary schooling years** that will over time contribute to attracting more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students into higher education.

Background on The Smith Family

The Smith Family is a national, independent children's charity committed to increasing the educational participation and achievement of disadvantaged Australian children and young people, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. The Smith Family provides holistic and long term support from pre-school through primary and secondary school and on to tertiary studies.

The Smith Family's approach reflects that there are multiple influences that impact on children and young people's wellbeing and educational participation and outcomes:



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- **Personal characteristics/attributes** – eg intelligence, social skills, health, self esteem, attitudes, intentions.
 - Children who exhibit greater social adjustment at age 11 are both more likely to stay on at school post-16 and more likely to have a higher education degree (Carneiro P et al, 2007). Students' Year 9 intentions for post-compulsory education are strongly associated with completion of Yr 12 and participation in higher education (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2010) .
- **Family** – eg the resources they have access to, parental aspirations and engagement in child's learning.
 - Parental involvement in a child's schooling is more predictive of child's academic success than family's socio economic status. (See for eg UK Department of Education and Skills, and Michigan Department of Education).
- **Peers** – eg aspirations, attitudes to education, risk taking behaviour.
 - There is a strong correlation between the performance of a child at school and the average SES of all the students at their school. Placing a lower performing student into a higher performing school creates a significant positive effect on that student's performance. (Nous Group, 2011)
- **Learning and care institutions, including school** – eg teacher quality, student mix, school ethos, expectations of students.
 - On average two students with average performance would diverge by more than 50 percentile points over a three year period depending on the teacher they are assigned (Cited in McKinsey and Co, 2007) .
- **Community** – eg economic and infrastructure resources available, role models, social capital and social cohesion and safety.
 - Children living in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods have lower social/emotional and learning outcomes than children living in more affluent neighbourhoods even when family income, parents' employment status, mother's education and other variables are controlled for (Edwards B, 2005) . *Strong social cohesion* in a community can lessen the strength of the effect of factors such as social disadvantage. (Vinson T, 2004)
- **Society** – eg norms and values relating to diversity, equity.
 - Countries of a similar socio-economic status and with similar values such as Canada, Finland, and Japan are more equitable than Australia on the OECD Program for International Assessment (PISA) scale (Nous Group, 2011).

These influences do not impact in the same way on all children and young people over their life course; nor do they act in isolation – challenges in one area can be offset by additional supports in another. These influences can place a child on a pathway or trajectory which is not fixed but can be influenced by the right support at the right time. Efforts aimed at enhancing the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people need to be cognisant of, and work in, these multiple areas of influence, in order to maximise the likelihood of positive outcomes.

The Smith Family's work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, families and communities

The Smith Family's work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and families takes a number of forms:

- Scholarship support.
- Programs that enhance the skills and capacities of young people and their family.



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- Comprehensive programmatic responses that target Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.
- School and community partnerships.

A. Scholarship support

Currently, 4,482 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people receive scholarship support through The Smith Family's *Learning for Life* program, which is 14% of the total number of young Australians the organisation is supporting in this way. The scholarship provides financial support to help pay for educational essentials such as uniforms, school shoes, books and excursions. It increases in value at different stages of schooling and continues, provided the student remains engaged with their education. An important part of the recruitment process for the scholarship is that The Smith Family enters into an agreement with the family that acknowledges the family's commitment to supporting their child's long term participation in education.

Well over half of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholarship holders are in primary school and around half have been on scholarship for three years or more, including a quarter who have been on scholarship for five years or more. These statistics reflect two key principles of our work which are of particular relevance to the Review, namely an **early intervention** and **long term approach**. The level of unmet demand for these scholarships, as well as our ongoing discussions with families, confirms the financial pressures which are impacting on the educational participation of young people across all age ranges.

B. Programs that enhance the skills and capacities of young people and their families

The Smith Family also supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families through facilitating their access to a range of programs that enhance their skills and capacities. These include literacy and numeracy programs, mentoring, learning clubs, careers activities and creative enrichment programs. All have the goal of supporting young people to remain engaged in learning and include a focus on increasing foundational skills such as numeracy and literacy, as well as enhancing aspirations and confidence, and expanding the networks and resources that young people can draw on. Expanding networks is particularly important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, as such networks can play a key role in increasing aspirations and in providing essential advice and practical support on education, career and employment options. These programs all have a focus on the personal characteristics or attributes of young people, but also focus to varying degrees on other key influences in a young person's life, namely family, peers, learning institutions, including schools, and the community.

C. Comprehensive responses targeting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people

The Smith Family also has a range of programs which have a particular focus on supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people's participation in education, with our most comprehensive being *Girls at the Centre* and *KIKASS*.

1. Girls at the centre

The *Girls at the Centre* program aims to keep young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander girls, in Years 7 to 9, engaged in their learning by:

- providing positive educational experiences and role models;
- improving their literacy and numeracy;
- supporting the development of life goals and life skills; and



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- establishing a positive pathway from school to further study and work.

The program is based in one Government middle-school in Alice Springs and supports around 50 girls per year. Research and The Smith Family's experience on the ground, highlights the importance of these 'middle years' for influencing aspirations and long-term education and employment outcomes, at a point years earlier than possible participation in tertiary education.

The key elements of this comprehensive initiative are:

- Girl Coaches – who encourage the girls to raise their aspirations, work hard and realise their potential. The Coaches work with the girls to develop an Individual Aspiration Plan and help them understand the steps needed to work towards that goal. The Coaches facilitate a *World of work, pathways to employment* initiative which includes arranging visits to work sites, TAFE and university and organising guest speakers and workshops on how to choose and apply for employment. There are two Girl Coaches so there is a 1:25 coach to student ratio.
- Girls Room - a safe and comfortable space at school for the girls to make healthy breakfasts and lunches, develop friendships and skills, and receive support. This is also a 'safe' place for the Girl Coaches to meet with parents and staff.
- Curriculum enhancement – this provides an opportunity for the girls to improve their motivation and confidence, and for success outside the classroom, through a range of sports and arts programs.
- Breakfast with a Mentor - a weekly opportunity for the girls to share breakfast and hear from an inspirational role model.
- Brokered program elements such as: a presentation skills workshop; *Core of Life: Making Good Choices about Mothering* which teaches about the realities of pregnancy and childbirth; *Families and Schools Together* which focuses on parenting skills, particularly relationship skills, and strengthening family and school networks.
- Experiential mentoring – this includes a visit to independent Girls' schools in Melbourne. The girls stay in pairs with host families, attend school, visit TAFE and university as well as have an opportunity to explore Melbourne. This is an important part of helping to build aspirations and relationships.

Central to the way *Girls at the Centre* has been implemented is the development of a range of partnerships across the school and wider community aimed at fostering community support and involvement. This is a key element for ensuring long term sustainability.

The core outcomes of the integrated model relate to literacy; school attendance, engagement, achievement and retention, life goals and life skills; and community engagement. The program is currently being externally evaluated, however some of the quantitative data suggesting the impact of the program includes:

- School attendance of *Girls at the Centre* participants is 20 percentage points higher than other Indigenous students at the school.
- All students graduating from the program in Year 9 in 2010 have continued on to year 10 in 2011.
- 25 families were actively engaged in *Girls at the Centre* in 2010.

Qualitative data from student, parent, teacher and principal interviews also suggests that the initiative is having a significant impact on family and peer relationships, student application to learning, and student confidence and aspirations.



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2. Keeping Indigenous Kids at Secondary School (KIKASS)

Keeping Indigenous Kids At Secondary School (KIKASS) is a school-community based program supporting Indigenous students to stay involved in school and transition successfully to further education or employment. It operates in Bairnsdale in the East Gippsland region of Victoria and is part of a range of initiatives The Smith Family is running in this area. These include the Parental and Community Engagement program (PaCE), learning clubs, community facilitation and a range of other programs targeted to Indigenous families and stakeholders.

KIKASS aims to provide comprehensive support to the students and their families and has three components:

- A financial scholarship - enabling students to take part in extra-curricular activities. This is additional financial support for students who are already receiving a *Learning for Life* scholarship from The Smith Family.
- Personalised support - focusing on education, goals and career aspirations.
- Personal development - activities aimed at building self-esteem, confidence, teamwork and leadership skills.

A central element of the way The Smith Family has worked in this region has been to undertake extensive community consultations and establish partnerships with 11 key organisations committed to the goals of:

- Increasing attendance and retention rates of Aboriginal students at secondary school.
- Parents and carers have the skills to foster a learning environment for their children.
- Increasing involvement of the broader community in supporting Indigenous children's education.

A recent evaluation highlighted that the majority of KIKASS students surveyed (77%) *agreed or strongly agreed* that participating in KIKASS has helped them become more aware of future career and study options. Only one of the 18 students surveyed did not know what their training, education and employment plans would be for the first 12 months after they finished high school. Quantitative data indicates that there have been some important improvements in educational outcomes for Indigenous students in this area in recent years:

- Enrolment of Indigenous students in the Senior Campus of Bairnsdale Secondary College (Year 11 and Year 12) has increased, from one to two students in previous years, to 17 students in 2011.
- The number of Indigenous students in Years 10 and 11 enrolling in Vocational Education and Training in Schools courses has increased from 22 students in 2009 to 40 in 2011.
- Attendance of Year 9 and 10 Indigenous students at Bairnsdale Secondary College has improved from 20% in 2001 to 80% in 2011.

The evaluation emphasised the need to focus on developing students' aspirations, career planning and goal setting (Wilkinson, L, 2011)

Both the *Girls at the Centre* and *KIKASS* programs have a focus on the multiple influences that impact on educational and other wellbeing outcomes of children and young people. These include personal characteristics or attributes, family, peers, learning institutions, including schools, and the community.

D. School and community partnerships



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Central to the initiatives identified above is the notion of school and community partnerships, which The Smith Family sees as critical to improving the educational outcomes for Aboriginal students in the primary and secondary years of schooling. This in turn is a foundation for improving their participation in higher education. The Smith Family would argue that while there has been some focus on school and community partnerships in Australia, this has to date, been a relatively under-developed area. Such partnerships reflect that learning and education are the responsibility of the **community as a whole** and not schools alone. These partnerships can, and should, include a facilitated role for businesses and other key community organisations and institutions. They can contribute to the enhancement of key outcomes such as keeping young people engaged in learning and assisting their smooth transition from school to work or further education. The size of the educational equity challenge facing Australia, the increasing complexity faced by schools with high numbers of Aboriginal and low SES students, and the clear need for schools to be able to leverage resources, skills and support from beyond the school system, demands a policy and programmatic environment that facilitates and promotes strong, long-term and genuine school-community partnerships.

Both *Girls at the Centre* and *KIKASS* aim to strengthen the school community partnership. In addition, a number of formal school-community partnership approaches are currently being piloted around Australia, such as the Extended School Hub pilot being run by the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. In The Smith Family's experience, including through the Victorian Extended School Hub pilot, in which we are playing a key leadership and facilitation role, there are a number of factors required if school-community partnerships are to achieve long term benefits for the students, schools, institutions and communities involved. These factors include:

- **Shared objectives** for the partnership.
- Stable **leadership** committed to achieving the shared objectives.
- Good **governance** structures, including for example Executive Steering Group arrangements which include school principals, senior staff from the Education department, and senior staff from key NGOs and other partners.
- Strategic partners from across a **range of sectors and agencies**, including those able to 'bring in' resources from outside the community. This could include educational institutions, business, local government, not-for-profit organisations, etc.
- A **suite of initiatives** that take into account the range of influences that impact on the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and low SES students.
- **Funding** arrangements which provide a degree of flexibility and are guaranteed for a significant period of time.
- Use of up-to-date **data** to inform planning.
- Commitment to **evaluation**, reflection and ongoing improvement, with this being built in to the initiative from the start.

The Smith Family would argue that it is not always necessary or indeed desirable for the education system to be identified as the 'facilitator' or 'driver' of such partnerships and that not for profit organisations can and do play a key role in facilitating the deep and long term school-community relationships which ultimately contribute to improving the wellbeing of children and young people. Having organisations such as not-for-profit organisations acting as the facilitator or 'lead agency' in such initiatives, reduces the burden of partnership development and management on school staff.



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Of particular relevance is the need for policy and programmatic environments, including funding, to be enhanced to more proactively support these types of partnerships. It is The Smith Family's view that schools should have the ability to internally resource partnership managers or engage non profit intermediaries to assist them to manage these types of partnerships. In addition to the factors identified above, The Smith Family would argue that school-community initiatives aimed at supporting enhanced educational outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people should include the following good practice principles:

- Make the school a **welcoming place** for Indigenous parents, teachers and community members
- Provide **comprehensive** support that meets the multiple needs of students, including support for their families.
- Have **high expectations** for Indigenous students and work with them to develop and realise high aspirations.
- Focus on **school achievement**, not just school attendance.
- Recognise the importance of educational opportunities for young **girls**. This includes acknowledging the additional caring and other responsibilities and community attitudes they may be dealing with.

In addition to the school – community partnerships mentioned above, The Smith Family is a facilitating partner for the Australian Government's national network of School Business Community Partnership Brokers. The program is designed to foster a strategic, whole of community approach to improving education and transition outcomes for all young people ([Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations \(DEEWR\) website](#)). The Smith Family delivers the program in six regions in Queensland, New South Wales and the Northern Territory. Staff broker partnerships with education and training providers, business and industry, parents and families, and community groups, including health, to provide key support and resources to young people, with the goal of improved levels of participation, engagement and attainment. During the period 1 July 2010 to 31 October 2011, a total of 186 partnerships have been brokered across the six regions in which The Smith Family is working, 42 of which had an Indigenous focus. The focus of much of the work of the Partnership Brokers in the Northern Territory has been on the **middle years** of schooling, given the critical importance of this time for young people remaining engaged in education and for goal setting and career planning.

The educational workforce

The educational workforce will be particularly important in supporting improved educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, firstly in the school environment and then within the tertiary environment. The Smith Family is particularly mindful of the challenges experienced by educational staff working in regional/rural/remote communities. The complex needs of many students in these areas include issues that go beyond educational need and relate to students' physical and mental health and wellbeing. Many of the students in remote schools are Indigenous and have English as a second or even third or fourth language. The lack of a range of support services means that students rely more heavily on the school to address a broad range of health and other needs. Students in remote communities require teachers with a specific range of skills to address their more complex needs and who are able to utilise pedagogies appropriate to them. Yet staff are difficult to attract and positions in remote schools can go unfilled for terms.



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In order to more effectively meet the needs of students in remote areas, The Smith Family proposes that the Commonwealth Government consider establishing a remote teaching service to ensure staff with the necessary skills that will meet students' needs are available. Such a service would have responsibility for identifying the incentives, service conditions and servicing models required to properly support remote students. The proposal to establish a remote teaching service would require significant investment and innovation but assist both the Commonwealth and COAG achieve the school participation outcomes they are committed to, particularly some of those under the *Closing the Gap* initiative.

There is also a clear need to support workforce development – not only in remote/regional/rural areas – so that educational leaders and staff working with Indigenous students use pedagogies that understand and embrace Indigenous knowledge and culture. There is a need for a much stronger focus on building an evidence base for what is effective in supporting better educational outcomes for Indigenous students and supporting school staff to understand and implement the evidence base. The Smith Family also supports the need for direct student data for Indigenous programs and that this be at both an individual and school level for monitoring purposes.

Educational pathways and the role of VET

Young people's experience of school education will clearly have an impact on the likelihood of them participating in higher education. The role VET pathways might play in promoting greater educational equity is also an important consideration for this Review. Analysis of VET data by socio-economic backgrounds shows that those from low SES are over-represented in VET and those from high SES are over-represented in the university sector. However further analysis across the range of VET options shows a more nuanced picture. Low SES students are over-represented in **lower level VET certificates**, but **under-represented in higher level VET diplomas** and advanced diplomas (Wheelahan, L. 2009). VET statistics for 2009 on Indigenous student completions show a similar picture:

- 5.4% of Indigenous VET students who completed their study in 2009 received a Diploma or higher, compared with 14.1% of non Indigenous VET students.
- Half of the Indigenous VET students who completed their study in 2009 received a Certificate I or II, compared with a quarter of non Indigenous VET students. (NCVER, 2010)

Wheelahan (2009) examined the current role VET articulation has in enhancing access to university for those from low SES. She noted "*...it seems that VET diplomas and advanced diplomas will not be an effective mechanism to redress socio-economic disadvantage for low SES students in higher education until the socio-economic profile of students enrolled in VET diplomas and advanced diplomas is more representative of the population.*"(p.9) Wheelahan also noted that for those students admitted to university on the basis of their prior VET studies, a negligible proportion were admitted to the Group Eight universities. "*...the Group of Eight admit 23 school leavers for every one prior VET student, while the other universities admit just over three school leavers for every one prior VET student.*" (p.9) Wheelahan concludes that "*while pathways are meant to act as an equity mechanism they are shaped by and replicate existing hierarchies within higher education in Australia. They do not provide access to the elite universities...Pathways do not act as a mechanism for low SES students to increase their representation in higher education because the socio-economic profile of VET articulators is similar to that of university groups and individual universities, with only a small number of exceptions.*" (p.12)



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Given the data on VET Indigenous students provided above, VET pathways as they currently operate, are also unlikely to be significantly contributing to higher education equity outcomes for Indigenous young people. This is an area which requires greater focus, including as Wheelahan has noted distinguishing between policy measures that “**deepen** participation in education by providing more opportunities and access for particular social groups already represented in education, and those that **widen** participation by including groups that are under-represented”. Given the size and geographical spread of the VET sector there is significant potential to enhance its contribution to educational outcomes for Indigenous young people but this requires taking a differentiated view, rather than focusing on VET participation at the aggregate level. It also requires examination of ways for enhancing pathways from VET into universities, including those in the Group 8.

Staying at university, completing studies and graduating

As indicated above in the discussion on scholarships, The Smith Family's experience is that there is a continued demand by some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people for financial support during the tertiary years and that this is an important part of them being able to undertake or stay engaged in their studies. The Smith Family's experience in providing tertiary mentoring support would also suggest that this can be an important strategy in supporting disadvantaged young people to remain engaged in tertiary studies. Such mentoring needs to reflect that both parties are adults and that different types of support may be required during the course of a student's time at university. The initial period of transitioning to tertiary study is likely to require particular types of support, while as the student approaches graduation, support and assistance with transition to employment could be more useful. One of the keys to such support is flexibility.

The multiple influences on a young person identified earlier in this submission may change over time as they mature, however for many they remain important influences. Family, peer or community support to participate in higher education (or lack of it) can be a critical factor in whether young Aboriginal people continue at university. Mentoring and other initiatives aimed to support their participation at university needs to be mindful of that.



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Conclusion

The Smith Family's experience working with thousands of disadvantaged children and young people, including many from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background, highlights that the critical first step in attracting more of them to participate in higher education is an **early intervention approach** and **long term support** across the **multiple influences** of a young person's life. We therefore recommend a stronger focus on supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people through their primary and secondary years of education, through initiatives which include the range of principles identified in a number of the successful initiatives identified above.

These principles include:

- A focus on the **multiple influences** on a young person, including family, peers and community.
- Strong **school and community** partnerships (which focus on the factors identified on page 6).
- Making the school a **welcoming place** for Indigenous parents, teachers and community members.
- Providing **comprehensive support** that meets the multiple needs of students, including support for their families.
- Having **high expectations** for Indigenous students and working with them to develop and realise high aspirations.
- Focusing on **school achievement**, not just school attendance.
- Recognising the importance of educational opportunities for young **girls**.

In addition to these principles, The Smith Family recommends:

- Consideration of the establishment of a **remote teaching service**.
- Supporting the educational workforce to use **pedagogies** that understand and embrace Indigenous knowledge and culture.
- Continuing **financial and mentoring support** through the tertiary years.
- A closer examination of the role **VET** can play in enhancing the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in universities, including the Group 8. This will require close examination of the multiple parts of the VET sector, with a key first step being addressing the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the lower levels of VET.



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