Response to National Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy Framing Paper

The Smith Family

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Adapted from original submission which was in a format designed by the Commonwealth Department of Education.

Introduction

The Smith Family provides this submission with a focus on young people in regional and rural communities. The REAG Framing Paper identifies raising the aspirations of these young people for tertiary education, and supporting informed career choices, as major challenges, and highlighted several barriers including:[1]

- misconceptions about the prospects of getting into university or successfully completing a university degree;
- a lack of exposure to role models from different tertiary backgrounds;
- a lack of exposure to universities in general;
- a focus in regional communities on short-term employment as opposed to considering different career pathways on offer in universities and vocational education and training (VET); and
- a lack of information on study and career options in the tertiary system generally.

The Smith Family agrees that young people in regional communities require better assistance to understand the full range of tertiary pathways available to them. This includes addressing misconceptions that a vocational qualification is less valuable compared to university and that VET largely focuses on traditional trades. Current data suggests VET graduates have higher employment rates than undergraduates, and earn wages comparable to, if not exceeding, their university educated peers.[2]

There are numerous examples of successful programs, delivered by charities and not-for-profits in the community sector that support the career aspirations of young people in regional and rural communities and assist them to develop and action plans that realise these aspirations. We would like to draw to the Advisory Group's attention programs that The Smith Family is delivering in regional communities, or can be appropriately scaled to do so, as examples of the type of initiatives that can support improved educational outcomes for young people from these areas.

We have also offered brief comment on how to best measure success at improving tertiary education attainment. Our comments are set out below.

1. iTrack

Our *iTrack* online mentoring program is one example of a practical initiative that actively seeks to combat each of the above barriers. The *iTrack* program is delivered to around 1,000 Year 9 to 11 students per year, including many from regional communities. This program matches students with a supportive adult, who provides practical advice and guidance about workplace, study and career opportunities. The mentoring relationship is developed online through weekly chat sessions for approximately an hour a week, for 18 weeks. The program helps students extend the networks of advice that they can draw on, at a key point in their lives. The conversations between the mentor and student encourage the student to do their own research into post-school–pathways and to begin formulating a plan for pursuing specific post-school opportunities. This also encourages better ownership of the discussions by the student as they identify the steps needed to implement their post-school plan.

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[1] REAG Framing Paper, p 8.

[2] Wyman, N., McCrindle, M., Whatmore, S., Gedge, J. & Edwards, T. (2017). *Perceptions are not reality: myths, realities & the critical role of vocational education & training in Australia*; Skilling Australia Foundation, Melbourne.

The Smith Family draws volunteer mentors from our corporate and community partners. Mentors are matched with students to ensure the conversations can be as valuable as possible. Mentors are also trained and supervised to ensure their support of students is high quality.

Because the program is online, students from regional areas can access a large and diverse pool of support from a range of locations, including metropolitan areas. This helps overcome the geographical distance and disconnect that so many young people experience in regional and rural communities.

For young people in regional communities, connecting with mentors with tertiary education and employment experience, and from different locations, helps them better understand the suite of opportunities available in universities and VET, and to more fully consider which options suit them best.

Annual evaluations of the program show that the program has a lasting impact on the young people who participate. Our latest assessment results, from 2017, show that:

- 89 per cent of students explored post school options once they finished the program;
- 85 per cent thought their mentor helped them feel more positive about their future job, career and study options;
- 83 per cent agreed that talking to their mentor has given them more ideas about possible plans for when they finish school; and
- 82 per cent agreed their mentor helped them understand more about how they can reach their career goals.

Students often refer their friends and peers to the program once they have completed it, another indication of the program's effectiveness.

Programs such as *iTrack* are cost-effective and adaptable to many regions, and work best when they are integrated into local school curricula, and when the families and carers of young people understand the relevancy and benefits of the program. The service infrastructure can be rolled out efficiently to support more students in regional areas if additional support and investment were available. This is just one example of how regional students can receive better quality career education and advice.

2. Career Mentoring Program (CMP)

The Smith Family offers the CMP for tertiary students entering their final year of higher education and receiving one of our tertiary scholarships. Students are matched with a mentor in their chosen career field who has first-hand experience of breaking into the industry and knowledge of how to navigate career pathways. Mentors are able to provide support, advice and potential networking opportunities over a twelve-month period.

CMP provides students with skills and knowledge to prepare for life after study. Students develop a career plan and a clear sense of actions required to achieve their goals, expand their professional networks, improve their industry insights, develop industry specific job searching skills, and develop their soft skills (including interpersonal skills and an understanding of workplace cultures, practices and behaviours).

The program is flexible and tailored to the individual student's needs. It can also connect students and mentors from different locations including regional communities, similar to *iTrack*. Students and mentors decide how often to meet, how to communicate (e.g. face-to-face, email, online chat and the like) and which particular items to discuss regarding career planning. They are required to meet for a minimum of twice a semester in person or online; and communicate at least one a month.

Delivering targeted careers education at this stage of the education journey offers one more effective intervention to assist disadvantaged young students to make suitable choices for their lives. This type of program will achieve an effective result when it is paired with other, earlier interventions during primary and secondary school.

3. Primary Careers Program

The Smith Family is currently implementing a pilot program targeting students in Years 4 to 6 which is informed by the latest research showing children begin to form stereotypes about occupations, careers and participation in post-school education from an early age for a range of reasons, including the unconscious influences of parents, friends and others they engage with.[3] Once these limits are set, individuals will rarely consider broader alternatives.

The purpose of the program is to support students to increase their understanding of the 'world of work' by introducing them to a wide variety of jobs and the skill sets needed now and in the future. It aims to broaden students' aspirations about their future and encourages them to remain engaged at school and prepares them for future careers.

The program:
- supports students to better understand their own interests and skills and helps them develop communication, critical thinking, collaboration and creativity skills;
- engages students with a range of people from the world of work, from a variety of industry and professions. This helps widen the students' views of the world of work and better understand the transferability of skills across industries and professions;
- helps students create and explore a 'job of the future'. This contributes to enhancing their motivation around the world of work; and
- facilitates students' interaction with peers, teachers, parents and community members around the world of work.

A key resource developed for the program is high quality digital content for students to engage with. This in turn increases the scalability of the program, including the ability to roll the program out in regional areas in an efficacious way.

Measuring success of the RRR Strategy

The Smith Family agrees with the Advisory Group that for a National Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy to be successful, suitable indicators of success must be identified and measured consistently over time. Ideally, measures of success will be developed that can both capture information on how individual local communities are trending, as well as highlight state and national trends.

We suggest the following measures be adopted at a minimum:
1. Year 12 completion rates;
2. Completion rates of VET; and
3. Completion rates of higher education.

Data collected on these measures should also capture key demographic information such as Indigeneity, age, gender, socio-economic status, location, and disability.

The Advisory Group should consider ways it could also collect and analyse information relating to the regional students' experience of the tertiary education system. Valuable information would include what supported people's course completion, as well as challenges and barriers they have faced in undertaking their study. Given the challenge in accumulating such data, the Advisory Group could consider efficient methods of collecting representative samples from this cohort, such as through annual

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[3] NSW Education and Communities (2014), *The case for career-related learning in primary schools: An introduction to primary school principals.*

surveys with select students from regional communities done in collaboration with the Department of Education and Training and local organisations.

We would be happy to discuss our submission further with the Advisory Group at its convenience.

Summary

The Smith Family agrees with the Advisory Group that raising aspirations and supporting informed career choices is crucial if the educational outcomes for students from regional, rural and remote communities is to be improved. The Smith Family has identified three programs helping students consider their post-school pathways into further training, study or work that can be effectively delivered to regional and rural communities. These programs can enhance careers support in such communities. They are just an example of the myriad of programs delivered across the country by the community and charity sector.

These programs are:
1. *iTrack* – an online mentoring program for students in Years 9 to 11;
2. *Career Mentoring Program* – sophisticated, year-long mentoring provided to tertiary students in their final year of study; and
3. *Primary Careers* – a program delivering tailored careers information to students in Years 4 to 6, using the latest research about early intervention.

Finally, in measuring the success of any RRR Education Strategy, the Advisory Group should consider measures to evaluate local, state national trends consistently over time. Recommended measures include (1) Year 12 completion rates; (2) Completion rates of VET; and (3) Completion rates of higher education, and regular capturing of important information regarding regional students' experience of the tertiary education system.