



*everyone's family*

# Review of Senior Secondary Pathways into Work, Further Education and Training

Education Council

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## Overview of The Smith Family

The Smith Family is a national charity founded in 1922 to improve the lives of disadvantaged children in Australia. Our vision is a better future for young Australians in need. Our mission is to create opportunities for them by providing long-term support for their participation in education. This mission is founded on the belief that every child deserves a chance to thrive and create a better future for themselves.

Our mission guides every element of our work, including program development and delivery, research, advocacy and fundraising. The Smith Family delivers programs in each state and territory in Australia, in over 90 communities, including many regional and rural communities.

In 2018-19, The Smith Family supported more than 200,000 disadvantaged children, young people, parents, carers and community professionals through its education-focused programs, including over 168,000 children and young people. We are supporting 50,000 financially disadvantaged children and young people nationally on our largest program, the *Learning for Life* educational scholarship. One in five students on the program is of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background.

*Learning for Life* has three integrated components:

- A modest biannual payment made to families to help them cover core education related expenses such as books, uniforms and excursions.
- A Program Coordinator (a staff member with The Smith Family) who works with the family and their school to support the young person's long-term participation in education.
- A range of short programs that help ensure the young person is engaged in education. Programs include literacy and numeracy, learning clubs, mentoring and career activities, as well as digital and financial literacy initiatives for parents.

Our programs aimed at helping young people build their career aspirations and post-school pathways, are outlined in this submission.

As part of our leadership and collaborative work in the sector, The Smith Family is a member of a number of organisations and represented on a number of advisory groups and boards.

## 1. Introduction

The Smith Family welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the important work of the Review of Senior Secondary Pathways into Work, Further Education and Training (the Review). Australia will need to better harness the potential of its young people if it is to deliver a new era of prosperity and remain globally competitive whilst maintaining our high standard of living. Improving the way students create pathways from high school into further education, training or study will help young people thrive in a volatile economic era, where it is increasingly difficult for them to find secure employment quickly at the completion of their studies. We are mindful of the size of the task that the Review has before them. Given the intensity and the pace of social and economic change, and the pressure on young people to adapt to constant disruption, ensuring they are able to create a positive individual pathway is a significant public policy challenge affecting different levels of government and Australia's broader social fabric.

We are pleased to see that the Review will have a particular focus on how to best support disadvantaged students. Approximately one in six young people live in poverty in Australia. They are more likely to struggle at school and achieve poorer educational outcomes, which affects their long-term employment prospects, health and social connectedness. These challenges are reflected in stubbornly high youth unemployment figures. The national youth unemployment rate is more than double the general rate of unemployment, at approximately 11.8 per cent.<sup>1</sup> Regional and remote areas however suffer far higher youth unemployment rates, such as Outback Queensland (25.7 per cent), Coffs Harbour in NSW (23.3 per cent), Bendigo in Victoria (18.3 per cent) and South-East Tasmania (17.8 per cent).<sup>2</sup> Improving the ability of disadvantaged students to find the most suitable pathway into further study, training or employment should be a priority for the Review in its policy recommendations.

The Smith Family's submission responds to several of the questions posed in the Discussion Paper. Complementing our focus on disadvantaged young people, throughout this submission we have also identified successful programs that put the relevant research into practice, and exemplify different ways to ensure these young people can create positive pathways after school. We have also included some case studies that are indicative of the young people with whom we work.

In short, we make the following points:

- Disadvantaged students have multiple and complex needs, and experience compounding disadvantage, in engaging in school and understanding post-school pathways.
- There are significant economic and social benefits to Australia for better supporting disadvantaged students to develop positive post-school pathways.

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<sup>1</sup> Brotherhood of St Laurence, '[Smashing the avocado debate: Australia's youth unemployment hotspots](#)', March 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Brotherhood of St Laurence, '[Smashing the avocado debate: Australia's youth unemployment hotspots](#)', March 2019.

- A set of academic and core non-cognitive skills are equally important for young people facing a changing world of work where they will have several careers through their professional lives.
- Career education must be modernised to reflect the future of work, and be more inclusive of a diversity of options. This requires an integrated approach at the school level.
- Vocational education and training, in particular, requires an overhaul, including from a perception perspective, so that young people and their families, as well as schools, fully understand the value of VET courses to future career prospects.
- Addressing digital disadvantage experienced by students is crucial for them to pursue positive post-school pathways.
- An increased emphasis on measuring broader life skills acquired through extracurricular and community activities requires equitable access for disadvantaged schools and families to such activities.

We examine these points further below.

## 2. Disadvantage and its impact on planning for post-school pathways

Disadvantaged students have to overcome a series of major barriers to be able to succeed at school and afterwards. They often experience a level of hardship and poverty unfamiliar to most of the community. In particular, certain groups of disadvantaged young people have multiple and complex needs, including those:<sup>3</sup>

- from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds,
- from lower socio-economic backgrounds,
- from regional, rural and remote areas,
- with disabilities,
- who are newly arrived migrants, and
- with mental health issues.

All the families in our *Learning for Life* scholarship program are financially disadvantaged, but we also see a challenging complexity of need within this cohort:

- Two in five students have a health or disability issue, and four in five students live in a family where at least one person has a health or disability issue,
- Three in four students live in a household in which the primary carer is not in paid employment,
- Over half live in a family in which the primary carer has not attained a Year 12 or equivalent qualification,
- Over half of students live in single parent families and a further one in 20 live with grandparents, or other carer or guardian, and

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<sup>3</sup> The Smith Family, *Young people's successful transition to work: What are the pre-conditions?*, September 2014, p 2.

- One in three families do not have reliable access to the internet at home.

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds often have additional learning needs, unconnected with their natural ability and potential. Many of these students experience multiple and compounding disadvantage. They often require extra assistance to remain engaged in their education and overcome significant personal barriers. They and their families have more limited economic, social and cultural capital to draw on. It is also much more difficult for these students to prepare for a post-school future because they often do not have access to the resources that their more advantaged peers do. This includes being able and confident to identify a positive individual pathway and work towards pursuing it, for instance by choosing appropriate electives in high school, or seeking advice from someone in a particular field of study or industry.

Students and families from disadvantaged backgrounds are often marginalised in their local areas. As a result, they can lack access to valuable social networks connecting young people to the world outside of the classroom. For instance, disadvantaged students can lack personal connections to work and the labour market. They may not have many people they can talk to about different professions, how to pursue employment in a particular field, or even the wide variety of possible careers available. This makes it much more difficult for these students to clearly articulate for themselves their desired post-school pathway, or know how to create it.

Further, financial hardship impacts on disadvantaged students' subject and course choices. Research shows that certain young people report being excluded in extra-curricular subjects and electives that attract additional fees at school.<sup>4</sup> In turn they start making their decisions based on what subjects have a lower cost or no cost at all, which may not align with their interests, aptitudes or aspirations. This increases the risk they disengage from school, even leaving school early with no clear pathway into further training, study or work.

A similar problem emerges with the capacity of disadvantaged students to participate in extra-curricular activities. In 2018, The Smith Family undertook research with Professor Peter Saunders from the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of NSW, in partnership with the NSW Department of Education and The NSW Advocate for Children and Young People. The research explored what poverty, material deprivation and social exclusion looks like from the perspective of young people in NSW.<sup>5</sup> The *Material deprivation and social exclusion among young Australians: a child focused approach* report, showed that the money available in their household heavily shapes disadvantaged students' capacity to participate in extracurricular activities like sport, music, drama and technology groups, and they regularly look for cheaper alternatives to stretch limited financial

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<sup>4</sup> Skattebol, J., Saunders, P., Redmond, G., Bedford, M., Cass, B., *Making a Difference: Building on Young People's Experiences of Economic Adversity*, Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales, August 2012, p 10.

<sup>5</sup> Saunders, P., Bedford, M., Brown, Judith, Naidoo, Y., Adamson, E., *Material Deprivation and Social Exclusion Among Young Australians: A child-focussed approach*, November 2018.

resources.<sup>6</sup> As schools increasingly look to measure a student's accomplishments based on a wider range of activities, this is much more likely to negatively impact disadvantaged students, as we will discuss later in this submission.

We commend the Review for focusing on improving the experiences of disadvantaged students. Improving the way we support and encourage disadvantage students to forge a positive future will help them not only unlock their own potential, but also make an incredible contribution to the community.

### 3. The economic and social benefits from supporting disadvantaged students

Ensuring that disadvantaged young people are confident and able to create a positive post-school future will not only help the individual students and their families. Australia stands to gain economically and socially in seeing disadvantaged students realise their potential.

Improving the educational outcomes for disadvantaged young people is of great benefit to the public purse. The cost to the community in lost earnings and tax receipts, and in health and welfare costs for each early school leaver, is conservatively estimated at \$1 million over their lifetime.<sup>7</sup> Improving post-school options reduces the magnitude of this cost at the same time as setting up young people for a better life.

Additionally, the skills of a nation's population strongly influence its Gross Domestic Product, economic growth, innovation capability and social development. As a result, even a modest improvement in the educational outcomes and pathways of young Australians would yield significant economic gains.<sup>8</sup> The impact would grow over time as higher skilled and career-ready school leavers become a larger proportion of the overall workforce. This in turn helps Australia to remain competitive and resilient in the face of volatile global economic conditions. It ensures the Australian population is better prepared for an era of continual change and disruption. Just as with each individual student, the nation itself will be able to forge its best future.

Young people with higher educational outcomes and positive post-school pathways are able to give back in other ways to those around them, such as engaging with local organisations and associations, or helping students who were in similar personal situations to them.<sup>9</sup> They can provide a community benefit by being able to improve the social capital of the area within which they live.

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<sup>6</sup> Saunders, P., Bedford, M., Brown, Judith, Naidoo, Y., Adamson, E., *Material Deprivation and Social Exclusion Among Young Australians: A child-focussed approach*, November 2018, p 4.

<sup>7</sup> Lamb, S., Jackson, J., Walstab, A. & Huo S., *Educational Opportunity in Australia 2015: Who succeeds and who misses out*, Mitchell Institute, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Australian Productivity Commission, *The Demand Driven University System: A Mixed Report Card*, Research Paper, June 2019, p 48.

<sup>9</sup> Lent, M., 'From social capital to social mobility', Future First, 30 April 2018.

We recommend that the Review explicitly acknowledge in its findings the broader economic and social benefits that better post-school pathways has to the country.

#### 4. Preparing for a changed journey through the world of work

The challenge of preparing young people to choose a positive pathway into work, further education or training has fundamentally changed from the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The era of singular, secure careers that start directly after the completion of secondary or tertiary education is over. Instead, young people must be prepared for a professional life comprised of multiple, non-linear careers, where a bundle of transferable skills enables their move between employment positions over the course of their professional lives, and in a labour market where service-centric roles offer the highest jobs growth.<sup>10</sup> For disadvantaged students, ensuring they have the requisite skillset, knowledge, attributes, and access to the right pathways is increasingly challenging.

To be confident and capable in creating a positive post-school pathway, young people require a diverse set of core skills, including the following.<sup>11</sup>

- critical thinking;
- creativity;
- problem solving;
- collaboration;
- motivation;
- self-efficacy;
- conscientiousness; and
- perseverance.

The Melbourne Declaration, currently under review, acknowledges the importance of these types of core skills, and The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) has codified General Capabilities in the Australian Curriculum. Young people can learn and develop these skills, including in school.<sup>12</sup> A pressing point for the Review is finding ways to ensure that the teaching of these core skills is consistent across the country and done to a sufficiently high standard. Equally important is ensuring that disadvantaged young people build these core skills as well as their peers. It is already well-documented that disadvantaged students require additional specialist support from the early years to ensure they have solid literacy and numeracy skills and do not fall behind academically. As mentioned earlier, disadvantaged students may lack the social and cultural capital to take advantage of different learning opportunities. They struggle for access to the opportunities to build core, non-cognitive skills in the classroom, or in other settings outside

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<sup>10</sup> Deloitte Access Economics, *The path to prosperity: Why the future of work is human*, June 2019, p 11.

<sup>11</sup> Lamb, S., Maire, Q., Doecke, E., *Key Skills for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: an evidence-based review*, report prepared for the NSW Department of Education, 2017, p 3.

<sup>12</sup> Lamb, S., Maire, Q., Doecke, E., *Key Skills for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: an evidence-based review*, report prepared for the NSW Department of Education, 2017, p 4.

school such as extracurricular activities, casual work or community engagement. This means when disadvantaged students arrive at key transition points to further training, study or work, they are more likely to be less prepared and skilled to make a successful transition than their peers.

The Review presents the Education Council with a significant opportunity to ensure that frameworks like the General Capabilities Framework are fully implemented across individual states and territories, and that every student has fair and equal opportunity to develop core skills and to prepare for a positive post-school pathway.

#### **Overcoming personal barriers to create a post-school future**

*When I was six years old, my mother, eight-year-old sister and I were forced to temporarily relocate to another city and live in a refuge. This was because my father was domestically violent. Subsequently I grew up in a single parent, welfare dependent household in regional Queensland, with five older siblings. My mother is also legally blind and reliant on the Disability Support Pension.*

*Throughout my educational journey, I was supported by The Smith Family in various ways, including its Learning for Life program when I was in primary school. In this program I was supported to keep up with my studies by having additional help to understand and complete homework tasks.*

*Growing up in an environment where there was constant financial stress, university was never a topic of discussion, especially as no one in my family had ever shown an interest in further study. However, I moved to Brisbane when I was 16 and studied a Diploma of Justice Administration at TAFE.*

*Over the past ten years or so, I have obtained several qualifications. I am also currently completing a Master of Public Policy and Management at the University of Melbourne.*

*Because of my educational achievements I have had the ability to live and work in Australia and abroad, working across government, politics and university teaching. This experience has shaped my interests and career goals where I have come to appreciate the importance of quality education, and the intergenerational disadvantages that people from low socioeconomic backgrounds face.*

*Peter, Learning for Life alumnus*



## 5. Modernising career education to reflect the future of work

A major opportunity for the Review is to recommend ways to improve the delivery of careers education across the country, so that students are confident and capable in determining a positive post-school future, and have the commensurate skillsets and knowledge to pursue it. This is a crucial point if Australia is to maximise the talents and potential of its young people and sustain its current level of prosperity.

By the term career education, The Smith Family takes the broad definition articulated in the National Careers Education Strategy, namely 'developing knowledge, skills and attitudes through a planned program of learning experiences in education and training settings which will assist all students to make informed decisions about their study and/or work options and enable effective participation in their working life'.<sup>13</sup>

Presently, career information available at schools is highly variable in extent and quality, fragmented and hard to contextualise. It makes it challenging for young people to obtain useful advice, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds who often require sustained assistance throughout school and afterwards.<sup>14</sup> If we want young Australians to be ready to navigate the labour market and able to build multiple, successful careers over their lifetime, it is crucial that they understand how to build for themselves a pathway into further training, study or work after high school. Research shows that not only do young people have low levels of careers knowledge generally, they often think they have sufficient information to make important career decisions. The volume of careers information available is extensive but dispersed across multiple sources and is hard to contextualise. This makes it challenging for young people to obtain relevant careers advice, and this is particularly the case for children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.<sup>15</sup>

Despite pockets of excellence in careers support for young Australians, the quality of support is inconsistent. Current approaches largely remain influenced by ideas developed for the industrial economy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, not the present labour market. The gap between current careers education practice and the economic reality risks jeopardising the futures of thousands of young people and in turn our future national prosperity.

It is important that careers education is integrated into the curriculum, and delivered in a high quality, consistent manner throughout the country. This means going beyond an investment in careers advisors alone. As important as careers advisors are, they form only one component of a leading careers education program. To suit the modern world of work schools must offer suitable, targeted careers education and activities from primary school and continuing through secondary

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<sup>13</sup> Australian Government, National Careers Education Strategy, February 2019, p 3.

<sup>14</sup> Behavioural Insights Team, *Moments of choice: Final report*, 2016, p 3.

<sup>15</sup> Behavioural Insights Team, *Moments of choice: Final report*, 2016, p 3-4.

school, and into the tertiary level. The supports offered at different educational stages need to be targeted to young people's stages of development.<sup>16</sup>

Careers education is most impactful when delivered in partnership with employers and industry. Evidence strongly suggests that students who take part in multiple work-related learning activities while in school are more likely to be in employment, training or further study in their 20s.<sup>17</sup> Leading practice on careers education and support includes activities such as careers insight talks, career fairs, mentoring, work 'taster' events, job shadowing and workplace visits.<sup>18</sup> In order to be impactful, engagement with the world of work needs to be authentic and insightful.<sup>19</sup> Schools can provide meaningful, authentic encounters with the world of work by engaging employers to convey their experiences directly to students.<sup>20</sup> Young people are also more likely to listen to an employer's insights into a particular industry or career and what steps must be undertaken to gain employment in that field. It is equally important that young people have numerous meaningful encounters, including hearing from a wide range of people from different personal backgrounds and professional sectors.<sup>21</sup>

Improved careers education can support the development of resilient individuals, able to both adapt to the evolving nature of work, and manage multiple careers in their lifetime, according to their circumstances and needs.<sup>22</sup> A better system for careers education and advice will deliver a positive long-term impact for young people. The Smith Family believes that a model evidence-based careers support program for young people would do the following:

- enhance young people's knowledge, skills and confidence regarding jobs, careers, what employers require and post-school planning,
- support young people to develop ambitious and realistic careers aspirations,
- encourage them to complete Year 12 by linking school to the world of work post-school,
- expose them to the contemporary world of work and build their network with employers and employees,
- engage them with diverse post-school training and education offerings, including vocational education and training, and
- empower parents to be engaged in the education, career planning and post-school choices of their children.

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<sup>16</sup> Hughes, D, Mann, A, Barnes, S, Baldauf, B. and McKeown, R, *Careers education: international literature review*, Education Endowment Fund, 2016, p 3.

<sup>17</sup> Education and Employers, *The case for employer engagement in state schools: Research Findings*, April 2019, p 4.

<sup>18</sup> Education and Employers, 'What is a meaningful encounter with the world of work?', September 2019, p 4.

<sup>19</sup> Education and Employers, *What is a meaningful encounter with the world of work?*, September 2019, p 2-3.

<sup>20</sup> Education and Employers, *What is a meaningful encounter with the world of work?*, September 2019, p 3.

<sup>21</sup> Education and Employers, *What is a meaningful encounter with the world of work?*, September 2019, p 3.

<sup>22</sup> Australian Government, *National Careers Education Strategy*, February 2019, p 7.

This is particularly important for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, given they are less likely to complete Year 12 and have much more limited access to employment and education-related networks. The Smith Family delivers evidence-informed initiatives tailored to young people's stages of development and needs. These are outlined below as examples of the types of additional support young people require to create post-school pathways for themselves. These are all delivered in partnership with disadvantaged schools and leverage The Smith Family's extensive relationships with many corporates, education and training institutes and individual volunteers.

### *Careers education in primary school*

There is a growing body of research about the importance of starting careers education activities in primary school. This is because children begin to form stereotypes (including based on gender) 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.<sup>23</sup> Once these limits are set, individuals will rarely consider broader alternatives. Helping primary school children to see the relationship between what they are learning and the possibilities it opens up for them in later life, helps motivate them to achieve and supports their ongoing engagement in education. Exposing primary school children to a wide range of people undertaking different jobs is particularly important for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, who may be exposed to fewer adults in employment.

The Smith Family has drawn on this latest evidence to pilot the Future Seekers Program. This program targets students in Years 4 to 6. 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.

### *Careers education in secondary school*

It is important that careers education is available to students throughout secondary school, not just as they approach school completion. The latest evidence demonstrates that there is a strong relationship between student participation in career development activities, including direct exposure to the world of work, and positive attitudes to schooling and post-school involvement in work and study. Young people who can recall four or more structured career activities across their school life, are five times less likely to be unemployed or disengaged from education or training in

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<sup>23</sup> NSW Education and Communities, *The case for career-related learning in primary schools: An introduction to primary school principals*, 2014.

early adulthood.<sup>24</sup> They can also expect to earn more, when they are in full time employment, than those who did not have the same exposure to careers at school.<sup>25</sup> Meaningful encounters with the world of work help ensure young people have positive attitudes to their education, and can connect their studies with a future after school.<sup>26</sup>

An example of a program introducing young people to the world of work whilst still at school is *Work Inspiration*, which The Smith Family has partnered with businesses to deliver since 2013. This program is delivered in schools to students from Years 9 to 12. It offers them a meaningful, practical opportunity to engage with the world of work, across different industries. Students spend time in various workplaces, interacting with employees, and learning more about the skillsets required for the particular industry, and the various roles within it. It helps highlights different pathways for young people within and beyond school. It helps young people in the transition between school, work and/or further study, and helps keep them attached to education and the labour force. Current employers involved in the program include Audi, SAP, Hilton Hotels, Southern Cross Austereo, Arup Engineering, Pfizer, Dominos and ANZ. Annually around 1,100 students from The Smith Family's partner schools participate in *Work Inspiration*.

Because many students in secondary school are not fully aware of the post-school opportunities available to them, timely high quality careers advice is crucial to support young people in developing realistic aspirations and the plans to realise them. The Smith Family's *iTrack* online mentoring program is an example of an initiative that provides students with support to understand a range of available post-school pathways. *iTrack* is delivered to Year 9 to 11 students, including many from regional communities. It is an online mentoring program that matches students with a supportive and trained adult, who provides practical advice and guidance about workplace, study and career opportunities. 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.

It is also important that young people at risk of leaving school early are supported to stay engaged with their schooling, and at the very least are supported to create viable post-school pathways. As demographic and economic changes occur, it is essential that all young people are able to participate in the world of work, and the completion of Year 12 or equivalent is a fundamental component of that. The Smith Family has designed The Career Coaching initiative, to identify those at risk of leaving school early. Specialist Careers Coaches provide individual career advice and guidance to support these students to stay at school and complete Year 12. To avoid early school

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<sup>24</sup> Mann, A, *It's who you meet: why employer contacts at school make a difference to the employment prospects of young adults*, UK: Education and Employers Research, June 2014, p 1, 11.

<sup>25</sup> Education and Employers, *The case for employer engagement in state schools: Research Findings*, April 2019, p 8.

<sup>26</sup> Education and Employers, *The case for employer engagement in state schools: Research Findings*, April 2019, p 7.

leavers becoming 'lost' in the system, we also use our existing relationships with these young people, to connect them with post-school services and employment opportunities, increasing the likelihood of them successfully bridging the school to post-school transition. For instance, as part of this program in New South Wales, young people have been placed into work, training and work placements through the program with organisations funded by the NSW State Government's Smart, Skilled and Hired program.

#### **Building community partnerships to help open doors for disadvantaged young people**

*I attended the Explore Uni camps through [The Smith Family] partnership with QUT and they were a great way to explore higher education opportunities. My talent is music and the program helped me to be able to study a TAFE Certificate 3 in Sound Production, a Certificate 4 in Music Theory, and a Diploma of Music Industry and Performance as well. I'm also a graded drummer through the Trinity College of London.*

*My goal is to make a difference through my music and let young people know that there are great people like the Learning for Life team out there.*

**Henry, Learning for Life alumnus<sup>27</sup>**

#### *Careers education and support post-school*

After secondary school, many young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, will still require assistance to establish their post-school future, even if they have completed a tertiary degree. The Smith Family's *Cadetship to Career* program is a joint initiative developed with the Business Council of Australia (BCA). This program offers professional cadetship opportunities for disadvantaged students who are currently part of The Smith Family's Tertiary Scholarship Scheme (TSS). A cadetship runs for typically two to four years (while they are in receipt of a tertiary scholarship). Throughout the year, cadets receive eight weeks of paid full-time employment per year, plus workforce-focused training and skills development and continuing financial support and practical assistance via the TSS. By participating in the program, cadets improve their job readiness, hone their own career aspirations, develop new professional networks, and potentially access graduate-level employment positions. It is a promising example of how not-for-profit organisations and business can collaborate and achieve shared outcomes which benefit young people and the broader community. The above initiatives exemplify the types of programs, and the types of partnerships needed to be embedded across the educational, training and employment systems.

Across all stages of young people's development, careers education cannot just be aimed at the individual student. It is best delivered via an integrated model incorporating individual and business support, parental/guardian involvement and partnerships with community organisations to support the diverse needs and aspirations of young people as they contemplate, and get ready,

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<sup>27</sup> Name has been changed to protect the individual's privacy.

for the post-school future.<sup>28</sup> In this way, we can help ensure that career education and support is geared for the current labour market and high-growth industries where the most jobs will be over the next decade.

#### **Gaining work experience and building career aspirations**

*I'm studying at university. I've been on the Cadetship to Career program through The Smith Family with the community engagement team at a major Australian company that exports globally. My role involves being across the company's partnerships.*

*I feel like the program gives me invaluable corporate experience – a foot in the door. They give me a wide breadth of what goes on in their workplace, in areas such as government relations, communications, heritage and agreements. I know it will be competitive when I graduate, so every bit of real-life experience counts. I have always been intrigued by constitutional law and human rights, and Indigenous rights are extremely important to me. I hope to work in these areas one day.*

*The Smith Family has helped me and my siblings since I was in primary school. Now I am on a tertiary scholarship with them. It is just nice to know that someone else cares – there are people out there that don't even know me but they help me to get ahead. I would like to pay it forward and sponsor a child once I get a job.*

**Lisa, Cadetship to Career participant<sup>29</sup>**

#### *Further ideas to help young people make better decisions for their post-school future*

The Discussion Paper lists several ideas about how to help young people make better decisions for their post-school futures:

- creating linkages between senior secondary subject choices, tertiary or other educational options and career outcomes,
- creating flexible model for Senior Secondary Certificates of Education (SSCE) allowing students to undertake micro-credentialing and work related learning, counting towards the SSCE, ATAR or end-of-school assessment, and
- building multiple review points into models of schooling, particularly leading into SSCE attainment to allow students to change or divert from particular pathways and specialisations.

The Smith Family thinks that these ideas have sufficient merit to pursue further. Regarding the idea of creating a flexible model for SSCE, we recommend that more research be undertaken to identify the potential benefit from micro-credentialing within schools, as this remains an emerging policy area. For instance, there would be many lessons to identify from the modularisation of qualifications in the vocational education and training sector that would inform whether micro-

<sup>28</sup> Youth Action, *Career Guidance: The missing link in school to work transitions*, Youth Action Policy Paper, July 2017, p 9.

<sup>29</sup> Name has been changed to protect the individual's privacy.

credentialing is suitable at the school level. This research could be complemented, or followed, by a pilot program offering micro-credentialing to a select cohort of young people in the first instance. Once a more substantive body of evidence is established, a more fulsome approach to micro-credentialing could be developed, if the evidence shows direct and significant benefits to young people.

Additionally, we recommend to the Review to think of the role brokers can play in helping schools provide better careers education. It is difficult for schools on their own to ensure their students have all of the skills and capabilities necessary to be ready for their post-school future. Schools in disadvantaged areas especially may require additional assistance to deliver careers education, given the range of student needs they may be addressing. The focus and expertise of school staff is understandably heavily weighted to the pedagogical and developing the range of partnerships required to deliver contemporary careers education, is a different skillset and time consuming. Brokers can play a crucial role in connecting disadvantaged schools to overcome this challenge.

The *Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools* argued that brokers ‘provide support in making connections, building networks, developing partnering skills, and providing tailored support as partners move through the various stages of partnership development’.<sup>30</sup> In regards to career education and support, brokers offer access to a bigger ecosystem of employers, industries and additional community partners. They also allow schools to focus on their core responsibilities as educators and mediate key relationships on behalf of the school. Brokers can identify the gaps preventing better post-school transitions in a local area, such as an overall lack of knowledge of different career pathways. They can work with schools to identify suitable local partners to assist schools in offering opportunities to connect their students with the world of work.<sup>31</sup> Industry partnerships, for instance, can deliver a multitude of different learning experiences like job shadowing, mentoring, careers expos and other exposure activities and practical training like mock job interviews or CV writing workshops.<sup>32</sup> Brokers can be extremely valuable in helping establish industry partnerships and other sustainable careers programs.

## 6. Improving the perception of different post-school pathways

Young people will continue to struggle to identify and pursue positive post-school pathway unless they have a more fully informed understanding of the variety of different options available to them, and the promise that each individual option potentially holds for their future. Too often, misperceptions, assumptions based on incomplete or outdated evidence, and personal bias can dissuade students away from suitable options. Parents, guardians and carers are hugely influential on the perceptions formed and decisions made by young people, even though these family

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<sup>30</sup> Australian Government, *Through Growth to Achievement: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools*, March 2018, p 46.

<sup>31</sup> Torii, K., *Connecting the worlds of learning and work: Prioritising school-industry partnerships in Australia's education system*, July 2018, p iv-v.

<sup>32</sup> Torii, K., *Connecting the worlds of learning and work: Prioritising school-industry partnerships in Australia's education system*, July 2018, p iv-v.



members may not have access to all the necessary information to best advise them. Even school staff may not have the latest information on post-school pathways and may not be providing the most accurate advice to students. As such, The Smith Family strongly supports the Review's endeavours to change the perceptions of different post-school pathways. We would note the following issues:

- in changing perceptions, we must broaden our understanding of what post-school pathways look like in a non-linear, multi-career world of work, and
- the perceptions regarding the value and prospects of pathways in the vocational education and training (VET) sector in particular requires improvement.

We discuss these two issues further below.

#### *Expanding our perception of post-school pathways*

In reframing the perception of young people and their families in order to better understand post-school pathways, we need to expand our collective understanding of what characterises an individual pathway. Presently, it's often assumed that a young person will either choose a university degree as their post-school pathway, or alternatively vocational education and training (VET). We also assume that once they start this course, they will study full-time until completing it in several years' time. The reality is that in a world of work that is non-linear, where people will have many careers over a professional life and undertake lifelong learning, post-school pathways can be equally versatile and fluid. Combining working with study will be increasingly necessary to young people's future employment prospects. It may be in the best interests of young people to undertake work either directly after high school, or sometime during their post-school training or study, rather than gradually progressing through a full-time tertiary course before seeking work experience. For instance, in recent years, universities have begun strengthening relationships with various employers in order to provide work-integrated learning for their students.<sup>33</sup> However, these alternatives are not fully acknowledged, nor adequately promoted or explained to young people generally.

The Review should ensure that in changing the perception of different post-school pathways, that similar emphasis is placed on expanding the definitions and assumptions of what comprises these pathways, and ensure that valuable information and advice is made available to all young people during school. Additionally, the Discussion Paper outlines specific ideas regarding how to change perceptions of post-school pathways. They include:

- commissioning research to better understand the individual and societal benefits of undertaking different pathways, including non-linear ones, and
- providing better quality, unbiased info to parents/carers, schools and students, considering how influential they are on a young person's choices.

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<sup>33</sup> Universities Australia, *Work-Integrated Learning in universities: final report*, 10 April 2019, p 4.



The Smith Family believes both these ideas have merit and are worth exploring in greater detail. As mentioned earlier in this submission, parents and carers have a profound impact on the choices of young people. Any recommendations about changing the perceptions of post-school pathways should actively include how to better engage this cohort of people, including how to overcome challenges of connecting and reaching them alongside students.

### *Improving the perceptions of VET*

The importance of recasting perceptions of post-school pathways is evidenced in the need to revitalise the reputation and promise of VET. VET is more relevant than ever to students considering their options after school. Approximately 1.2 million young people aged 15 to 24 years old are participating in VET courses nationally, including at TAFE, through private providers and in schools.<sup>34</sup> The sector currently provides training courses for nine out of 10 occupations predicted to have the greatest growth of new jobs to 2022.<sup>35</sup> Approximately 74.7% of VET graduates aged 20 to 24 years old were employed after training in 2018.<sup>36</sup> Of those who undertook training as part of an apprenticeship or traineeship, 79.8% were employed after training, with 91.2% of graduates in a trade occupation course employed after training.<sup>37</sup>

However, many young people and their parents, carers or guardians, and even potentially school staff have a limited or inaccurate understanding of VET. Students often do not understand the full suite of education and employment pathways on offer through VET, including the career outcomes these courses can deliver, nor how to access them. Post-school choices are heavily influenced by family, carers, friends, teachers, or referral agencies – each of whom often have misconceptions about the value of VET pathways often formed without any personal experience of VET.<sup>38</sup>

Negative assumptions of VET can particularly impact disadvantaged students, who are an important and large equity cohort for the VET sector. In 2018, about 32 per cent of all students undertaking VET courses, more than 1.3 million people, were from the two most disadvantaged Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) quintiles.<sup>39</sup> Yet disadvantaged students often find it difficult to enrol, engage in and complete VET courses.<sup>40</sup> The sector is complex, fragmented and difficult to navigate. This can mean students intending to pursue VET feel daunted by trying to

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<sup>34</sup> National Centre for Vocational Education Research, *Total VET students and courses 2018*, Table 11, p 16.

<sup>35</sup> Wyman, N., et al, *Perceptions are not reality: myths, realities & the critical role of vocational education & training in Australia*, Skilling Australia Foundation, 2017.

<sup>36</sup> Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching, *2018 Graduate Outcomes Survey – Longitudinal*, October 2018, Table 7, p 23.

<sup>37</sup> National Centre for Vocational Education Research, *VET Student Outcomes 2018, 2018*, p 11.

<sup>38</sup> See also Myconos, G., Dommers, E. & Clarke, K., *Viewed from the margins: navigating disadvantage and VET*, Brotherhood of St Laurence and University of Melbourne, August 2018, p 6.

<sup>39</sup> National Centre for Vocational Education Research, *Total VET students and courses 2018*, Table 11, p 17.

<sup>40</sup> Myconos, G., Dommers, E. & Clarke, K., *Viewed from the margins: navigating disadvantage and VET*, Brotherhood of St Laurence and University of Melbourne, August 2018, p 6.

select a suitable training provider, and enrolling in a course. This can add a layer of additional stress for disadvantaged students who often rely on marketing information from individual training providers without any additional support from school counsellors, or informed advice from families or industry experts.

This perception bias regarding VET extends to VET in Schools (VETiS). VETiS is an important component in preparing young people for post-school pathways. In 2017, approximately 237,700 school students aged 15 to 19 years old participated in VETiS courses.<sup>41</sup> About 90 per cent of Australian schools deliver or provide access to some form of vocational education.<sup>42</sup> The potential of VETiS to lead to further work, training or study is also poorly understood, and can at times be viewed as a second-rate option for low-performing students, rather than as a viable alternative pathway.<sup>43</sup> Disadvantaged students, who may already start school with a very limited understanding of learning opportunities at school and career options afterwards, are particularly affected by this misperception problem.

#### *Access to information*

The Review should consider ways to ensure that schools, and key tertiary partners like the VET sector, work better with students and their families to improve the quality, accessibility and dissemination of targeted and useful information on post-school pathways. Similarly, it is important that public information on all different courses and pathways is equally available to all students. This will ensure there is balance with the marketing campaigns delivered by well-resourced private tertiary education providers, which are able to market their courses extensively to students. As an example of leading practice, we commend the *My Future* website, managed by Education Services Australia, which provides quality information on post-school pathways to students and jobseekers. *My Future* ensures that information on various tertiary training courses is linked to relevant industry and career information. The website is designed to allow individuals to explore possible study or career options based on their personal preferences such learning aptitudes or desired skillsets. Importantly, it does not preference or promote one set of pathways over another. Despite its high utility, not all Australian students have access to this portal yet. This type of information portal is crucial in recasting perceptions, negative or otherwise, about post-school pathways, and we recommend the Review consider how best to promote such platforms across the country.

### **7. Addressing digital disadvantage for students is crucial when considering post-school pathways**

The importance of digital technology to preparing for senior secondary pathways is indisputable. Digital skills will be crucial to future jobs for young people. Many schools already have policies in

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<sup>41</sup> National Centre for Vocational Education Research, *Young People in Education and Training 2017*, 2018, p 1.

<sup>42</sup> Nguyen, N., 'The Impact of VET in Schools on Young People's Intentions and Achievements' National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 1 September 2010.

<sup>43</sup> Dempsey, M., *Impacts of the changing nature of the Vocational Education and Training (VET) system on educators within the VET system in Australia*, Edith Cowan University, p 21; Buchanan, J. et al, *Preparing for the best and worst of times: Future Frontiers Analytical Report*, already cited, p 42.

place regarding bring your own device for students. It is widely accepted that people can do simple and complex tasks from mobile devices, including research or even applying for jobs.

Digital technology is so deeply embedded in daily life, study and work that we risk forgetting that not everyone has equal or reliable access to it. The Smith Family's program delivery shows that disadvantaged students and families experience higher levels of digital deprivation than others. As mentioned earlier, on the *Learning for Life* scholarship three in ten of our students do not have reliable access to the internet at home. Our young people can also struggle to have access to quality digital devices that allow them to keep up with their studies and prepare for a post-school future.

In the *Material deprivation and social exclusion among young Australians: a child focused approach* research, young people agreed that a computer or other mobile device, as well as internet access at home, were essential for all young people to live a 'normal' life.<sup>44</sup> The lack of a computer was seen as potentially impacting on young people's attitudes to and experiences of schooling, as well as their overall wellbeing. Young people without the internet at home indicated they were unable to complete their homework and assignments.

As digital skills are integrated into everyday teaching and learning, students with low digital ability become further disadvantaged due to an inability to complete school tasks. The 2014 NAP ICT literacy data shows only two in four students from low SES backgrounds attained the national proficiency standard for digital ability.<sup>45</sup> Disadvantaged students at significant risk of digital exclusion may disengage from school, as well as being critically unprepared to pursue post-school study, training or work. Further, having a digital device is not simply about young people consuming content at school or elsewhere, it is increasingly about them creating their own content. Those that are adept at being digital creators will have a significant advantage in further training, work and study over those who are only digital consumers.

The Review should recommend that governments acknowledge the need to better support disadvantaged schools, families and students and consider how best to ensure that they have access to up-to-date technology and are supported to develop their skillsets. If disadvantaged students do not have sufficient digital proficiency, their ability to prepare their post-school future will be seriously undermined.

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<sup>44</sup> Saunders, P., Bedford, M., Brown, Judith, Naidoo, Y., Adamson, E., *Material Deprivation and Social Exclusion Among Young Australians: A child-focussed approach*, November 2018, p 76.

<sup>45</sup> ACARA, *National Assessment Program – ICT Literacy*, Years 6 &10, 2015.

### The education divide in our schools

*I have been sponsored by The Smith Family for nine years and while it has helped support me through my education a lot, there is still a major divide between me and the other students.*

*I was the only student in my class not to have a laptop during Years 10 and 11. It would take others 30 seconds to type up things from the board and then they would have to wait while I scribbled down in my notebook. I could take up to three minutes to take the same notes and would be really aware of the others watching me, waiting for me to finish. Instead of researching online, I had to carry textbooks and visit the library often. I was relying on print-outs and help from others. It really slowed me down and affected my education.*

*I have been very aware of the differences between me and the other students – because of what they have and I do not. I can see firsthand how I slipped behind because of this.*

**Luke, 19, Learning for Life sponsored student<sup>46</sup>**

## 8. Ensuring access to 'broader life skills' for disadvantaged students

As the Discussion Paper identifies, there is an ongoing discussion about how to identify and measure the holistic attributes of young people as they progress in their senior years of schooling, as opposed to simply relying on a quantitative assessment (such as an ATAR) to indicate their knowledge, skills and attributes. One idea put forward in the Discussion Paper is to balance the emphasis on academic skills with an equal emphasis on broader skills obtained through community engagement, work related learning, team-based sports, volunteering and activities undertaken outside the classroom.

The value of such activities outside of the classroom for young people's skills and personal development, is well documented. However, The Smith Family strongly recommends that any further exploration of this idea include how to ensure disadvantaged schools, students and families are provided with equitable access to opportunities to develop such 'broader life skills'. As mentioned earlier, disadvantaged students often do not have the social capital, family support, networks and resources to access extra-curricular and other community activities outside the classroom. If they do have such access, their ability to take advantage of opportunities relies heavily on their family's financial situation, location and access to transport. They can find this aspect of schooling closed off to them in a way it is not to their more advantaged peers.

If there was a shift to measure the performance and progression of students by taking account of extra-curricular and other community activities, but no similar investment in improving students' access to such opportunities, it would potentially close down certain pathways for disadvantaged

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<sup>46</sup> Name has been changed to protect the individual's privacy.

students. Measuring broader life skills must be accompanied with identifying how to provide equitable access for all students to the opportunities needed to develop such skills.

## 9. Conclusion

Australia stands to benefit significantly if we can improve the way young people are better informed, supported and skilled in creating pathways to education, work or training after high school. Youth unemployment rates remain stubbornly high, and young people continue to find it difficult to secure valued and meaningful work, despite being well qualified or credentialed for positions. This has a major flow on effect in their life and their ability to meet a minimum acceptable standard of living. Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are at even greater risk of detaching from a potentially rewarding and enriching post-school future. The Smith Family welcomes the sharp focus the Review brings to bear on these challenges, and looks forward to seeing the impact of its work in the coming year.