

Submission to the Victorian Government's Inquiry into student pathways to in-demand industries

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CONTENTS

1	Introduction	3
2	Prioritise foundational skills, digital inclusion and digital literacy	4
2.1	Foundational skills are critical to successful post-school transitions	4
2.2	Digital capability	4
2.3	Recommendations	5
3	Improve school based career education	6
3.1	The Smith Family's career activities and programs	6
3.2	Students experiencing disadvantage may not receive career education	6
3.3	Reducing career misalignment and raising the status of VET	7
3.4	What's needed to improve school-based career education?	8
3.5	Recommendations	8
4	Support pathways to, and completion of, VET and university study	9
4.1	Barriers to post-school skills attainment for disadvantaged young people	9
4.2	What support benefits low-SES tertiary students?	10
4.3	Recommendations	10
5	Provide accessible information on in-demand occupations	11
5.1	Recommendations	11
6	References	12

1 Introduction

The Smith Family welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the The Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into student pathways to in-demand industries.¹

The Smith Family is a national charity working in over 90 low socio-economic status (SES) communities across all states and territories. Our belief is that education is one of the most powerful change agents and our purpose is to overcome educational inequality caused by poverty.

In FY23-24, around 200,000 children and young people, their parents/carers and community professionals participated in our evidence-based programs (with nearly 40,000 of all student participants in Victoria). These programs enhance the literacy, numeracy, digital and career management skills of young Australians experiencing disadvantage.

Nationally, over 70,000 children and young people living in a low-income family are on our long-term educational scholarship program *Learning for Life*. This includes 14,898 *Learning for Life* scholarship students from 7,268 families and 116 schools across Victoria.

In addition to our scholarships and programmatic work with young people, The Smith Family is also undertaking large scale longitudinal research with young people on the *Learning for Life* program, including through their post-school pathways. This has allowed us to hear the voice of students as they navigate life through and beyond school and better understand what influences the direction they choose to take after school.

The Smith Family welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry as career education and positive post-school transitions to study and employment are key advocacy priorities for the organisation. Our programmatic, practice and research work underpins this submission and enables us to provide insights on what helps create successful pathways for young people experiencing disadvantage.²

The Smith Family advocates for priorities in relation to better supporting students facing disadvantage to pursue pathways into in-demand industries. The **focus of this submission** is on the support and information that **students from disadvantaged backgrounds** need in relation to **career guidance and pathways to employment in-demand industries**, including support in completing **VET or higher education**. This requires resourcing schools, tertiary organisations and other bodies to provide support. This submission focuses on the following policy priorities:

- Prioritise foundational skills, digital inclusion and digital literacy
- Improve school-based career education
- Support pathways to VET and university study
- Provide accessible information on in-demand occupations

¹ We understand in-demand industries to be those cited in the Terms of Reference, namely: health care, social assistance, construction, technology, clean energy, and education, among others.

² The Smith Family's advocacy activities in this space include the recent Reimagining Careers Support forum (April 2025) attended by over 120 key stakeholders in the career education field, with a presentation by Linda Rozenberg, Manager - Career Education, Victoria Department of Education. In addition, The Smith Family's longitudinal Pathways, Engagement and Transitions study is a critical source of evidence informing our advocacy work which we draw on in this submission. This is a longitudinal survey data of Australian students experiencing disadvantage which tracks the senior school and post-school pathways of *Learning for Life* students from 2021 onwards. The sixth wave of this research will be conducted in 2026.

2 Prioritise foundational skills, digital inclusion and digital literacy

- Low levels of **literacy, numeracy and digital skills** reduce students' potential to pursue the post-school study and training required for employment in in-demand industries.
- Students **require devices and digital skills** to study and to leverage digital innovation in workplaces; however, young people experiencing disadvantage are less likely to have access to devices, data, or digital skills and literacies.

2.1 Foundational skills are critical to successful post-school transitions

Recent reviews and inquiries have focused on the need to improve the foundational skills of Australians (numeracy, literacy and digital skills). The Productivity Commission (2023) warns that school leavers with low levels of foundational skills risk being marginalised and excluded from job markets. Foundational skills are essential for continuing successfully to tertiary education, to obtain the skills required to gain employment in in-demand sectors. For example, a recent study of foundational skills by NCVET found that VET students with higher reading and numeracy levels are more likely to complete their course and report improved employment outcomes (Hughes et al, 2025).

The Smith Family's Pathways, Engagement and Transitions longitudinal survey of students experiencing disadvantage finds that **school attendance and Year 9 English and Maths grades** are associated with the likelihood that young people become, and remain, engaged in work and/or study in the years after leaving school (The Smith Family, 2025). This underscores the need for the education system to provide students experiencing disadvantage with a solid grounding in foundational skills as early as possible, along with resources to meet literacy and numeracy benchmarks, and resourcing and strategies to improve attendance levels.

2.2 Digital capability

The Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) provides a detailed measure of digital inclusion, finding that almost 24 per cent of Australians remain either 'excluded' or 'highly excluded'. The ADII analysis finds **lower levels of digital inclusion for disadvantaged cohorts** including those in the lowest income quintile and those who did not complete secondary school: cohorts reflective of the families that The Smith Family supports (Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance, 2025; Thomas et al, 2023).

Digital literacy/capability is one of the core foundational skills, with digital skills in high demand among employers (AI Group Centre for Education and Training, 2024; Hays, 2025). While several of the in-demand industries of interest to this Inquiry require advanced digital skills (technology, education), others (health care, clean energy etc) will become increasingly reliant on digital skills as technology innovations evolve.

The Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance (2025) reports research finding that 87 per cent of jobs require some level of digital skills, with digital skills recognised as the fastest growing emerging skills requirement by employers. However, in tandem with measures of digital exclusion, Jobs and Skills Australia (2024) identifies a current digital capacity gap alongside the trend of increasing digitisation. NAPLAN reporting shows that only 46% of Year 10 students attained the ICT proficiency standard, with **students in lower socio-economic groups even less likely to be experienced users of ICT devices** (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023).

The Smith Family works with partners to improve digital inclusion and the digital literacy of young people experiencing disadvantage through a range of programs. These include (among others): Donate Your Data (with Optus); a partnership with WorkVentures to provide refurbished laptops and digital support to students in need; and a digital skills hub containing information on digital skills for parents and students. Our organisation believes that students experiencing disadvantage should share in the benefits of Artificial Intelligence (AI) to improve foundational numeracy and literacy skills, and for that reason we are working with key partners on AI Digital Assistants and AI Tutors for students. The Smith Family is a key member of the Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance (ADIA).

ADIA (2025:23) advocates for the implementation of a common language and national benchmark to describe the digital skills needed in work, learning and life - a tool that would enable people (and employers and trainers) to identify digital skill levels and the actions needed to advance. This framework should take account of the generalist entry-level skills needed by the most digitally excluded cohorts, and ensure continued relevance as new technologies like AI emerge.

2.3 Recommendations

- That schools in areas of disadvantage are provided with sufficient funding and resources to equip students with the literacy, numeracy and digital skills needed for tertiary training and employment.
- That foundation skills are more deliberately integrated into VET qualifications, and in particular, those leading to employment in in-demand sectors.
- Increase resourcing of **schools-based delivery of devices and digital skills programs** for students experiencing disadvantage, along with digital skills incorporated within **career readiness programs**. Skills-building programs might be supported by leading tech industry employers.
- Digital skills to be incorporated within student learning as core career readiness skills.
- Provide low-SES families with the digital access at home (devices and home internet) that young people need to succeed in their education.

The Smith Family supports the recommendations advocated by ADIA:

- Develop a national strategy for digital inclusion, which would include: establishment of a cross-portfolio accountability for digital inclusion; and investment in coordination of digital inclusion initiatives across the public, private and not for profit sectors and collaborations across sectors.
- Define a national benchmark to describe the digital skills needed for work, education and in life. This will enable workplaces to communicate skill levels required and enable education and training organisations to prepare students with necessary digital skills, including in AI.

3 Improve school based career education

- While Victoria provides secondary school students with robust and comprehensive career education, research finds that Australian students experiencing disadvantage are less likely than their more advantaged peers to have exposure to career education at school.
- Exposure to school-based career education leads to higher skills, better job matching, and a lower incidence of occupational skills shortage in in-demand industries.
- Effective career education profiles a wide range of career options and skills pathways (including occupations and industries experiencing skills shortages).
- Undertaking VET while in school provides young people with exposure to in-demand industries.

3.1 The Smith Family's career activities and programs

A key advocacy and delivery priority for The Smith Family centres on increasing the provision of career education to students experiencing disadvantage. The Smith Family provides opportunities for *Learning for Life* students, and other students in low-SES schools, to participate in evidence-based career education programs and activities. This includes delivery of the Commonwealth Department of Education-funded Growing Careers Project in 59 schools across all jurisdictions, which has delivered over 94,000 student participations in career activities and programs between 2021 and 2025. The Smith Family targets career education to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students and their families through our programs including Girls at The Centre, the Indigenous Youth Leadership Program, and our work with Koorie families in Victoria through the Indigenous Advancement Strategy funded-program.

The Smith Family's evidence-based and place-based career programs and activities provide students with **exposure to in-demand industries**. Students visit a wide range of employers in cities, outer metro and regional areas through our two-day Work Inspiration excursions, Industry Engagement Days, and career expo activities. Work Inspiration programs run in outer metro and regional areas typically involve visits to local employers in many of the in-demand industries that are the focus of this inquiry.

Students also participate in in-school career activities such as career talks and speed mentoring. Employers are chosen from in-demand industries, with significant student exposure to employers in health care, social assistance, technology and construction in particular. Tertiary experience days provide students with opportunities to visit universities and TAFEs. Feedback from operations staff of a low level of awareness among parents of VET post-school pathways, or of TAFE as an alternative to university, has led to The Smith Family running TAFE experience days attended by both students and their parents. These visits profile career pathways to in-demand occupations in construction trades, healthcare, social assistance and other sectors.

3.2 Students experiencing disadvantage may not receive career education

The Smith Family **commends** the Victorian Department of Education's student pathways policy and highly effective in-school career education framework, as well as the work of the Jobs and Skills Councils in providing career advice and support for young people. Victoria's universal and sequenced system, including Morrisby assessments, career action plans and counselling, along with work-based learning via LLENs, is comprehensive in scale and has positive outcomes for students. In addition, the success of the VCE Vocational Major (VM) indicates the appetite for VET study pathways among Victorian students and the recent funding for Jobs, Skills and Pathways Coordinators should provide for greater VCE VM completions. The work of LLENs in exposing students to local workplaces and job pathways, and Headstart SBATs, provide further opportunities for students to experience VET-pathway skills and occupations, including in in-demand industries. The Smith Family has a strong interest in ensuring that high school students are exposed to VET pathways (both VET in schools, and VET tertiary pathways) as a high proportion of *Learning for Life* students pursue post-school VET pathways (The Smith Family, 2022).

Victoria's policy focus on career education aligns with research indicating that **Return on Investment in school-based career education** includes higher skills and a lower incidence of occupational skills shortage. As Hooley et al (2023) note:

Effective career guidance is associated with a range of economic and social benefits. ... career guidance helps people to engage with the labour market, align their skills with employer demand and be more productive in their workplace. Ultimately higher employment, better skills alignment, increased productivity and improved employee engagement pay off at the national level for government, in terms of a well-functioning economy and improved tax returns.

Despite these compelling arguments for investment in school-based career education, a wealth of evidence from recent research and government reviews highlights the **inadequacy of career education provided to students, and particularly students experiencing disadvantage**. Reports of the Australian Universities Accord (Australian Government, 2024) and the Education Council (2020) conclude that access to high-quality careers information and guidance is not uniform across Australian schools. Many studies indicate that Australian young people experiencing disadvantage are less likely to receive career education and support when compared to their more advantaged peers (Austin et al, 2022; Jaremus et al, 2023; OECD, 2025). There is significant variation in the extent to which state and territory governments resource career education in schools, and variation within jurisdictions, in terms of the resources available to individual schools. While Victoria's school-based career education is the most comprehensive of all the jurisdictions, we hear anecdotal evidence from our operations staff working in schools that there is variability in the scope of delivery across Victorian schools in areas of disadvantage.

3.3 Reducing career misalignment and raising the status of VET

Given inequitable access to career education, it is perhaps unsurprising that OECD analysis of PISA 2022 survey data finds that Australian students aged 15-16 who experience disadvantage are **more likely** than advantaged peers to have **misaligned career expectations**, and are more likely to aspire to a limited, narrow range of potential career options. Effective matching of the skills demanded by industry and those of school leavers is critical. Teenage career aspirations are often misaligned with the forecast or in-demand jobs available in the economy and students may not have back-up plans, leading to future disappointment for many young people and **exacerbating skills shortages** in the economy. Tackling such misinformed early impressions requires lots of **exposure to diverse career options** through career education initiatives.

Effective career education provides students with the full range of options, including exposure to careers in in-demand sectors. Persistent skills shortages are particularly apparent in care and trade and technician occupations, highlighting the important role for vocational education and training in boosting productivity (AI Group Centre for Education and Training, 2024). However, career education in Australian schools commonly privileges ATAR-university pathways (Bennett et al, 2022). As noted by the Jobs and Skills Commissioner and the Minister for Skills and Training, there is a need to build **parity of esteem** between university and VET pathway options, particularly among students and parents who may have no knowledge of VET pathway options or who assume that university pathways are the superior option. It is important for schools to recognise and shine a light on diverse career pathways, including VET pathways.

The Smith Family's Pathways, Engagement and Research study found that young people in senior high school wanted more opportunities to study VET subjects at school and postschool, engage in work experience placements and be exposed to the world of work while at school (The Smith Family, 2022). They wanted to try different career options while at school. Many of the interviewees in the first report of the project had completed one or more VET qualifications while in secondary school or immediately after leaving school. Many took VET subjects out of interest, to try out a field, or as a pathway into jobs or further study. For some, VET courses acted as a career 'taster', which helped solidify their choice of career pathway or led them to refine their decision and pursue a different study or career pathway. These findings highlight unmet demand among Australian students for VET study pathways and work experience opportunities.

The South Australian Department of Education has been actively trialling a number of initiatives to build interest in VET pathways to in-demand industries, including Flexible Industry Programs where students study with TAFE SA while undertaking SACE, and graduate with a Certificate II/III in one of 26 growth industries; along with Stackable VET short courses delivered in-school.

In line with the research evidence, The Smith Family recognises the value of “**starting early**” with regard to exposing students to a wide range of career options. We do this by delivering career activities and programs to students in primary schools that profile a broad sweep of occupations. Another example of a primary school career education program aimed to encourage interest in in-demand sectors is the South Australian Trades in Primary Schools Program in 50 primary schools, providing exposure to VET occupations.

3.4 What’s needed to improve school-based career education?

Insights from The Smith Family’s recent Reimagining Careers Support forum, and its longitudinal research with students experiencing disadvantage, highlight a need for career education that: profiles a wide range of career options and skills pathways; provides personalised, one-to-one support; includes employer encounters; provides for careers teams in high schools, rather than a single, (often part-time) careers advisor, and has a focus on occupations and industries experiencing skills shortages and labour market demand (The Smith Family, 2022). These elements of robust career information enable students to broaden their career aspirations and align their skills and training pathways to their career aspirations.

Other recommendations from Reimagining Career Support participants included:

- Equip teachers to provide sound career advice on both VET and university pathways and VET occupations, by, for example, building career education into the curriculum, or providing teachers with industry exposure, to build knowledge of VET and in-demand sectors.
- There was a strong view among participants of the need to value - and expose students to - diverse post-school pathways, rather than privileging university pathways. While universities have well-resourced outreach functions, there is a need for school staff to educate students about the opportunities that VET pathways may provide. Other means of building VET aspirations among young people include resourcing incursions by VET outreach officers in Year 10, prior to subject selection, and promoting VET in school courses as “career tasters”.
- Support for schools to find employers to take on SBAT students is also required to enable students to gain work experience in in-demand sectors.

School-industry engagement is crucial for students, to expose them to a broad range of career options, and for schools, to gain insights from business about careers, skill requirements and employment contexts. Participants stressed the need to “bring industry into schools”. However, schools often lack the resources to engage deeply with industry partnerships and many employers do not have the coordinating functions required to build relationships with schools. While in Victoria, LLENs may provide this function, stakeholders advocated a need for funding to support collaboration between industry, schools and tertiary and community organisations to provide students with place-based, co-designed career education tailored to localised job opportunities.

3.5 Recommendations

- Review and seek solutions to remedy the lack of consistency in the breadth and availability of career education to government schools.
- Ensure that career education provides exposure to a wide range of VET career pathways and that students have opportunities to engage in VET courses while at school – particularly those leading to employment in in-demand occupations.

4 Support pathways to, and completion of, VET and university study

- Skills acquisition through tertiary study drives employment in in-demand occupations.
- Young people experiencing disadvantage face considerable challenges applying for and completing tertiary education and require specialised support through the tertiary education journey.
- Early school leavers are more likely to become disengaged in the three years following their departure from school and require specialised support to engage in post-school training.

The Smith Family welcomes increased Federal and State government funding for Free TAFE and Skills First, each of which waive TAFE tuition fees for courses in in-demand sectors. In addition, we support the increase in funding allocated to Apprenticeships Victoria for the Apprenticeship Support Officer program, delivery of the Priority Apprenticeship Model, and the reform of the apprenticeships system in line with the recommendations of the final report of the Apprenticeship Taskforce in the 2025-26 budget. These measures have the potential to boost the engagement and retention of young people in apprenticeships in in-demand sectors.

4.1 Barriers to post-school skills attainment for disadvantaged young people

The Smith Family's longitudinal research finds that a barrier experienced by some young people was **difficulty applying for university and post-school VET courses**. These young people were the first in their family to apply for tertiary study and had no sources of support to help them navigate the application process. They found the application process overwhelming and in some cases this led them to abandon the process and their decision to apply to study. These young people (and others in the study) were reluctant to seek help and lacked the confidence to ask for help, or did not want to seem reliant on others for advice (The Smith Family, 2022). Low levels of self-efficacy are common among first in family students. As such, **early, proactive support** from school staff, or tertiary institution outreach staff should be provided. Ideally, this support would be offered in Year 12, in advance of students completing school or attempting to apply to university through VTAC.

In addition to difficulties applying for tertiary study, Australian research indicates that low-SES students are **less likely to complete their studies** in comparison to the general student population (Jaremus et al, 2022; Tomaszewski et al, 2022). The Smith Family's research found challenging compounding circumstances for young people and their families. Some young people withdrew from courses due to **insufficient academic support** or **financial constraints** due to the cost of living, the cost of study, or because study options such as Certificate courses required significant hours of unpaid work placements. Students commonly left courses because they had problems juggling study and work commitments. **Mental health concerns** were a common reason for leaving post-secondary study before completing a course (The Smith Family, 2022; 2023; 2024).

Other **barriers to completion** of post-school study and training among low-SES students include: difficulty balancing paid work with study; feeling that they do not belong at university; and being away from home and social isolation. A lack of accommodation and housing affordability are also frequently cited by low-SES students as a reason for discontinuing study (Bennett et al, 2024). Low-SES university students also face an array of challenges arising from their lack of access to knowledge about specific careers, specific courses, or the university system (Groves and O'Shea, 2019).

The Smith Family notes that factors impacting VET completion rates will be considered as part of the inquiry. Research indicates that **VET students** – who may be building technical skills aligned to in-demand sectors – face the same barriers to completion as well as distinct challenges to retention. They include language and literacy hurdles, the need for stronger foundation skills, and the need to travel great distances to access training for regional and rural students (Bruniges et al, 2023).

4.2 What support benefits low-SES tertiary students?

Research indicates that these challenges are mediated where low-SES students have access to support that: provides learning support for subjects that students find difficult; helps them to change university courses or move between VET and university study; provides information about, and access to, away-from-home accommodation and financial support/scholarships in lieu of working (to alleviate juggling study and work); and provides access to support for mental health or personal issues, or family/care needs (Cox and Naylor, 2018; Zacharias and Ryan, 2021).

“Wraparound”, personalised supports are recommended, including: **early identification** and support of students who are struggling with course requirements; free or low-cost **literacy and numeracy courses** and additional classroom supports for VET learners; access to **specialist support staff** and mentors; and **holistic services for more vulnerable learners** who may be dealing with housing insecurity, childcare commitments or justice issues. For **VET students**, student-centred career guidance and foundational courses are recommended; as is simplification of scholarship information and other financial supports (Lamb et al, 2018).

In line with these recommendations, The Smith Family provides personalised guidance (“Tertiary Support”) for *Learning for Life* scholarship recipients transitioning to their first year of university or of Cert IV or above VET study. Students are supported with: help and advice applying for tertiary education courses; information about financial assistance and academic help; and support in other aspects of tertiary study that they require help with.

Consistent with national statistics,³ the Smith Family’s research indicates that students who **leave school without completing Year 12** are less likely than students who complete Year 12 to go on to study or training, post-school. Leaving aside those early school leavers who directly enter apprenticeships or traineeships, low proportions engage in post-school study or training and instead tend to work in precarious jobs or become disengaged over the long term. As such, this priority cohort requires personalised support to explore pathways to in-demand jobs (The Smith Family, 2024; 2025:3).

4.3 Recommendations

- That students experiencing disadvantage are given support to apply for post-school study.
- Students should also be given greater exposure of what to expect from tertiary study while at school and provided with tailored support to help them develop the practical, foundation and academic skills needed, along with broader support for pathways planning, financial support, work, study, accommodation or mental health challenges.
- Supports might include The Smith Family’s personalised tertiary support program, “student success coaches”; university and TAFE/RTO support services; peer mentoring by students who are further ahead in their studies; and early intervention programs to welcome commencing students.
- Supports for early school leavers should be prioritised, whether in the form of nationally-available, personalised career support, or support to complete Year 12 through alternative means.

³ Jobs and Skills Australia (2024) The current and future state of the labour market – what does it mean for young people? Webinar presentation by Cliff Bingham, Labour Market and Migration Branch, Jobs and Skills Australia, 3 December 2024

5 Provide accessible information on in-demand occupations

- Current sources of information about in-demand industries and occupations are technical in nature and are not easily interpreted or understood by young people, their parents, or teachers.
- There is a need for accessible, easily understood information for young people that is tailored to their user characteristics.

Stakeholders at The Smith Family's Reimagining Careers Support forum advocated a need to provide students with job forecasting information, to help shape their decision-making about career options in current and future in-demand occupations. Similarly, the Pathways, Engagement and Transitions reports have recommended a need for students and family members to be provided with access to up to date labour market information.

A survey of labour market information sources and websites administered by federal and state departments indicates **a lack of easily accessible information about in-demand occupations** that is designed for access by young people. The currently available web resources and websites provide information that is technical, weighty and seemingly pitched at labour market analysts. The content in these resources refers to outdated occupational titles that align with ANZSCO/OSCA conventions (an example would be "General Clerks"); meaning that young people would lack understanding of the occupations profiled. These web resources take the form of data-heavy dashboards, long and detailed data tables, or 90 minute webinars on specific occupations.

Some federally-administered resources (yourcareer.com.au or myfuture.edu.au) require users to select an occupation (from a long list of ANZSCO codes) to access a rating of "Future demand" or "Future growth" for the occupation of interest – yet these indicators do not provide insights into whether the occupation is currently "in-demand" with a high rate of unfilled vacancies and thus strong employment prospects. Of the state-administered web resources, the Skills SA webpage ([My Training | Jobs in high demand](#)) is perhaps the most accessible to young people as it shows occupations, future growth and certification needed to do the job. However, more generally there is a need for information on in-demand occupations and industries that **reflects the user experience of young** people, for example quick reads, graphics, heatmaps or short videos on in-demand occupations.

5.1 Recommendations

- That Victoria leads the way in testing and developing accessible web content aligned with young peoples' user characteristics that enables them to identify in-demand occupations and sectors easily.

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