



## **Submission to the Universities Accord Panel in response to the Interim Report**

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## Introduction

The Smith Family<sup>1</sup> warmly welcomes the Interim Report of the Universities Accord Panel, and in particular its focus on equity, including for First Nations peoples and Australians from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

This short submission will focus on areas which we believe are particularly important for realising an equity agenda. It will draw on our work with young people experiencing disadvantage and their families, as well as our research with them over many years.

In summary, The Smith Family asks the Accord Panel to take into consideration:

- The link between the success of equity groups at the tertiary level and their engagement and advancement at school to inform the various solutions proposed in the Interim Report; and
- The particular challenges for young people experiencing disadvantage wishing to participate in, and succeed at, the tertiary level, specifically:
  - financial challenges;
  - those who have experienced the care system;
  - the complex nature of locational disadvantage;
  - the role of the pre-tertiary space and career support in enabling a more informed and seamless transition for students to post-school study and work;
  - the importance of sustained academic and personal support throughout students' tertiary journey; and
  - the important role of schools and community organisations in the 'eco-system' of support for equity cohorts.

The Smith Family strongly supports the re-establishment of a Tertiary Education Commission, to review, on an annual basis, and publicly report on whether progress is being made on agreed educational outcome targets, including for equity groups. The Commission could also have a role in sharing learnings across sectors and jurisdictions.

## Success of equity groups in higher education cannot be separated from their experience at the school level

The Smith Family strongly supports all measures outlined in the Interim Report related to equity cohorts. In particular, we welcome the emphasis upon prioritising support to them, including in the form of 'enabling courses, improved academic advice, and learning support, wrap-around support services (such as mental health services), scholarships or other equity-related services.' (Interim Report, p.29) Our experience is that students from low SES backgrounds are likely to need a mix of supports across their engagement in tertiary education. This support needs to be flexible; for example, the mode of delivery of support and its availability across young people's tertiary education experience, rather than limited for example to students' first year at university. To be effective such supports also need to be integrated and well-coordinated, so students can access the support they need in a more timely and effective way.

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<sup>1</sup> Further information on The Smith Family is in the Appendix.

We welcome references in the Interim Report to a range of other education related reform which is currently underway, including the *Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System* (The National School Reform Agreement), the Productivity Commission's *Inquiry into Australia's Early Childhood Education and Care* and the *National Skills Agreement*. There is an unprecedented opportunity in this range of policy reform to explicitly note the interconnections and direct relationships between the different educational stages.

We believe a **more explicit reference** in the Interim Report to the **link between the success of equity groups at the tertiary level and their engagement and advancement at school** would significantly inform the various solutions proposed. Analysis by the Grattan Institute (2016) as well as a recent Productivity Commission report (2022) highlights that **policy efforts aimed at increasing the successful participation of equity groups in higher education cannot be separated from policy efforts aimed at supporting these groups to participate more successfully in school education.**

Longitudinal analysis of The Smith Family's *Learning for Life* scholarship program data of thousands of children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds shows the clear link between school achievement in literacy and numeracy, Year 12 completion and post school engagement in further study and/or work<sup>2</sup>. Post-school goal setting and longer-term aspirations are also heavily influenced and have their origins when young people are at school.

Who 'shows up' at tertiary education and how they 'show up' is heavily influenced by experiences that happen throughout school. **We would urge that the final report more explicitly acknowledge this as this reality should heavily shape efforts aimed at significantly strengthening the participation of equity groups in tertiary education.** The same applies to high quality early learning and care, given children from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to participate in this and are more likely to start school behind in areas essential for their longer-term participation in education.

## **Particular areas for consideration regarding the challenges for young people experiencing disadvantage wishing to participate in, and succeed at, the tertiary level**

### **Financial challenges**

The Smith Family welcomes the multi-faceted ways in which the Interim Report seeks to address financial challenges for students experiencing disadvantage, not least as part of many of the 'Immediate Actions' (Interim Report, p.6-7).

We also encourage the Accord Panel to consider:

- **The quantum of financial support for equity cohorts.** The Smith Family supports the concept of a 'universal learning entitlement' as well as giving priority to ensuring that all students from equity cohorts are eligible for a funded place at university (Interim Report, p.43). Despite the value of scholarships already available at the undergraduate level, including those provided by The Smith Family, our experience working with young people experiencing disadvantage is that they are not, in isolation, sufficient to support significant numbers of young people to complete tertiary education.

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<sup>2</sup> The Smith Family (2018) *Attendance lifts achievement*, The Smith Family.

While scholarships assist students in financial need enough to stay at university, they can only do so much to overcome the effects of complex personal lives. Our experience confirms research led by Dr Nadine Zacharias (2016) that demonstrates that for optimal outcomes, scholarships need to be embedded in comprehensive support systems that support students to navigate systems, overcome personal barriers to participation and provide access to networks and career support opportunities. This research also finds that available scholarships are not well targeted, with only 3% of the eligible cohort receiving a scholarship. The rapid transition to online/hybrid study arising from the COVID-19 Pandemic, has placed additional financial pressure on students and families to have adequate devices as well as connectivity in order to be able to continue to participate in education in Australia.

The Smith Family therefore asks the Accord Panel to consider measures to ensure that the quantum of financial support for equity cohorts is sufficient to support their inclusion and success at the tertiary level, and for the duration of their tertiary studies.

- **Prioritising financial support for equity cohorts as part of any national broker system to support Work Integrated Learning (WIL).** The Smith Family supports the range of measures proposed in the Interim Report to ease the financial burden of students and minimise debt accumulation, particularly for low SES students and other equity cohorts. While WIL can provide financial pressures for all students, we know from our experience and research that this is particularly so for students experiencing disadvantage, notwithstanding students' acknowledgement of the value of such learning. The costs associated with higher education participation can be prohibitive for young people living in families experiencing poverty, and recent cost of living pressures, in particular in relation to housing, petrol and food, have exacerbated this.

Recent research (The Smith Family 2022) with young people who had been supported on The Smith Family's *Learning for Life* program and were in their first-year post-school recommended funding an expansion of high-quality career-related, remunerated work placements, cadetships and internship programs, which target young people experiencing disadvantage. The Smith Family therefore strongly supports 'improving WIL and placements by providing participating students with better incentives and financial support' (Interim Report, p.57, and **asks the Accord Panel to consider measures to ensure that priority is given to students experiencing disadvantage as part of any national WIL broker system, particularly in regard to financial support.**

- **Financial Literacy programs for first year students.** Based upon feedback from *Learning for Life* students studying at the tertiary level, The Smith Family suggests that many tertiary students, and particularly those from low SES backgrounds and/or those in receipt of scholarships, could benefit from financial literacy support in their first year. Such programs, including the *SaverPlus* program offered by The Smith Family and other community organisations, could form part of the wrap-around support programs and equity-related services mentioned in regarding the extension of the Higher Education Continuity Guarantee (HECG) (Interim Report, p.29).

## Increased focus on young people who have experienced the care system

The Smith Family welcomes the Interim Report's focus on 'more granular and practice-relevant data to inform policy and track progress', including 'to capture information more effectively on existing and emergent equity cohorts (such as improved data on disability, being the first in family to attend university, carers, care leavers, children from a single parent family, children of asylum seekers, etc) and cumulative disadvantage.' (Interim Report, p. 42).

The Smith Family understands that some universities are now collecting or exploring the possibility of collecting data on young people who have had experience of the care system, as part of their enrolment and support processes. We take this opportunity to reinforce the need for data mechanisms, including target-setting, that enable these students' participation, progress and success to be tracked.

## The complex nature of locational disadvantage

The Smith Family supports the immediate action to 'extend visible, local access to tertiary education, including those 'in locations with traditionally lower attainment rates.' (Interim Report, p.66). We welcome the development of the Regional Centre University model (RUCs) and particularly the idea of 'Tertiary Study Hubs' in outer-metropolitan/peri-urban areas, including given the considerable transport and relocation accommodation costs that many students currently bear, particularly amongst low SES cohorts. The Smith Family's experience supporting young women leaving care to participate in higher education, through the *Care to Achieve* scholarship pilot program<sup>3</sup> highlighted that some of these young women particularly struggled to find safe affordable accommodation within a manageable distance of their tertiary provider. Young women had to undertake multiple and frequent moves and some experienced homelessness or were at risk of homelessness. Each year of the program, as many as half of the participants moved, with some moving up to three times in a 12-month period. The Smith Family therefore takes this opportunity to emphasise the importance of the **'wraparound support'** (Interim Report, p.6) mentioned in regard to the creation of further Regional University Centres and similar centres in suburban/metropolitan locations. i.e. **the creation of centres of this kind alone will not be enough to address many issues associated with locational disadvantage.**

Another concern with such models, is the *potential* for these centres, and the students who engage with them, to be viewed as being 'inferior' in quality and experience to their main/headquarter campuses or limited in their choice of tertiary institution. The Smith Family therefore **urges the Accord Panel to consider measures that address the complex nature of locational disadvantage**, to ensure that students who connect with RUCs and future Tertiary Study Hubs are fully-integrated members of relevant tertiary institutions and that such places are also equipped with staff and other supports for students We also support any measures to provide maximum flexibility for students, subject to their meeting entry requirements, to study at the institution of their choice, regardless of their location.

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<sup>3</sup> Funded by the Queensland Government from 2017 to 2021

## Pathways to tertiary study

The Smith Family supports all measures outlined in the Interim Report to clarify and amplify pathways to, and between, the VET and the higher education sectors, including the creation of a National Skills Passport (Interim Report, p.55). We also urge the Accord Panel to consider the role of the **pre-tertiary space and career support in supporting a more informed and seamless transition for students to post-school study and work.**

Recent research (The Smith Family 2022) with young people who had been supported on The Smith Family's *Learning for Life* program and were in their first-year post-school, highlighted their desire for:

- More access to comprehensive careers advice at school, including in the middle years of high school, including support with subject selection for senior secondary and applying for post-school study.
- More personalised one-on-one advice regarding post-school pathways and the exploration of options to help them achieve their goals.
- A broader approach to careers advice, including information about labour markets, employment pathways, skills that will be in demand in the future and alternative pathways.
- Connecting young people to mentors and internships to help inform their career planning.
- Increased opportunities to study VET subjects at school and post-school, engage in work experience placements and be exposed to the world of work while at school.
- Strategies that support family members' access to up-to-date labour market, education and training information, and how they can support young people to develop their goals and plans to achieve them.

Such enhanced support was seen as essential for strengthening the post-school pathways of young people experiencing disadvantage, including increasing their participation in tertiary education. **This support needs to occur both prior to and during tertiary participation to help young people both in the post-school transition and the successful completion of tertiary education.**

The learnings from the *Care to Achieve* program also reinforce The Smith Family's broader experience working with young people experiencing disadvantage in the tertiary space, namely that many might benefit from support at an earlier age to develop their knowledge of tertiary study and career pathways, the skills and behaviours that assist when deciding on a course and how to access appropriate help to do so.

## Academic and personal support

The Smith Family strongly supports all proposals and measures outlined in the Interim Report designed to provide academic as well as personal support to students, particularly students from equity cohorts. We also take this opportunity to emphasise the **need for support of this kind to be maintained throughout students' tertiary studies.** Given that many young people experiencing disadvantage will be the first member of their family to participate in tertiary education, helping them access non-judgemental and easily accessible personal and practical support, both during their orientation and beyond is important. Some young people may require additional support to develop their literacy, numeracy, digital and study skills, as well as more subject specific support such as with essay writing. **While the first year of tertiary participation may be particularly important in terms of the provision of such**

**support, The Smith Family’s experience supporting young people in tertiary study is that the challenges and complexities many face, and the associated unpredictability of their lives, will require support to be available for some young people across their years in tertiary education.**

## **Equity Eco-System**

The Smith Family notes and agrees with the Interim Report’s statement that for visions to take flight as well as to endure, they need ‘to reflect the views of the wider community and achieve their buy-in’ (Interim Report, p.24).

In this context, **schools and community organisations have an important role to play in the ‘eco-system’ of support for equity cohorts.** The Smith Family, for example has long term relationships with families and students experiencing disadvantage and is a trusted source of advice and support in this regard. We would urge that the final report specifically acknowledges the role and contributions of schools and community organisations in the equity ecosystem. This acknowledgement is important as it will influence the implementation of strategies aimed at enhancing the participation of equity groups in tertiary education.

The Smith Family also strongly supports the **re-establishment of a Tertiary Education Commission.** Further to the proposal for such a Commission to operate ‘with a degree of independence from Government’ (Interim Report, p.111) we recommend that a **priority area** for a new Commission be the **review on an annual basis and public reporting on whether progress is being made on agreed educational outcome targets, including for equity groups.** This also includes contributing to the identification **of learnings from across jurisdictions, sectors and institutions and recommendations for ongoing continuous improvement.**

## **Conclusion**

The Smith Family applauds the strong focus of the Accord Panel’s Interim Report on increasing the successful participation in higher education of those groups who are currently under-represented. We would also welcome the opportunity to explore issues raised in this submission directly with the Review Panel.

## Appendix

### The Smith Family

The Smith Family is a national charity working in over 90 low SES communities across all states and territories. We have been supporting young people and families experiencing disadvantage for over 100 years. 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 FY22, over 190,000 children and young people, their parents/carers and community professionals participated in our programs. This includes around 60,000 children and young people who are on our long-term educational scholarship program, *Learning for Life*.

### The *Learning for Life* program

The *Learning for Life* scholarship program is based on the principles of intervening early, providing students with long-term support and supporting parents to be engaged in their children's learning. *Learning for Life* works with students in the context of their family, school, educational institutions and community. Young people can start on the program in primary school and participate through secondary school and tertiary education. Around 1,300 *Learning for Life* students are currently participating in tertiary education.

*Learning for Life* offers:

- A modest biannual payment to help cover core education-related expenses such as books, uniforms, digital technology and school excursions.
- Support from a *Learning for Life* Family Partnership Coordinator (a Smith Family team member) who works with the family to support their child's long-term participation in education. This extends to support to individual students at the tertiary level from a Tertiary Coordinator.
- Access to a range of programs to help ensure engagement in education. These include literacy and numeracy programs, learning clubs, mentoring, careers activities and digital and financial literacy programs.

Each *Learning for Life* student has a Unique Student Identifier, enabling The Smith Family to longitudinally track students' school attendance, achievement in literacy and numeracy, school completion, post-school engagement in employment, education and training, and tertiary completion.



## References

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