



The Smith Family

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The Smith Family

Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper

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INTRODUCTION

The Smith Family welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Australian Universities Accord. We particularly welcome the Review's focus on enhancing access and opportunity to higher education for students from backgrounds who are currently under-represented, including First Nations Australians, those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, people with a disability and regional and rural Australians. We also welcome the Review's dual focus on Australia's needs now and into the future, including a 30 year horizon. We would welcome the opportunity to explore issues raised in this submission directly with the Review Panel.

We also take this opportunity to recognise that there is much to be proud of and to retain in the Australian higher education system. Australia is unique globally in having made a substantial (>\$1.5bn) and long-term investment in equitable participation of students who belong to nationally recognised equity groups, especially students from low SES backgrounds. We also note important reforms dating back to the early 1990s and most recently, those arising from the Bradley Review in 2008, that have not only transformed Australia's higher education system, but provided significantly greater access for all, including those living with disadvantage of various kinds. As both Minister Clare and the Accord Panel have indicated, there is still important work to do in this regard, and The Smith Family is eager to continue to contribute to this.

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.
- 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.

This submission draws on our work with young people experiencing disadvantage and their families, as well as our research with them over many years, particularly through the *Learning for Life* program. It aims in particular to identify some of the challenges that these young people face in accessing and succeeding in tertiary education, as a contribution to helping the Review identify the types of policy and programmatic support that may be needed to increase the successful participation in tertiary education of young people experiencing disadvantage.

THE COMPOUNDING NATURE OF POVERTY AND ITS IMPACT ON YOUNG AUSTRALIANS' PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

To access higher education, students need to jump five hurdles: availability, accessibility, achievement and aspiration (Anderson & Vervoorn, 1983) and affordability. Research and data over many years demonstrate clearly that notwithstanding significant investment and effort over many years, our education system continues to privilege those from more advantaged backgrounds. While the focus of the review panel's considerations is clearly on the higher education system, how it considers factors that will enable higher rates of participation of disadvantaged students needs to consider the education system as a whole, commencing in early childhood.

Data on students and families participating in The Smith Family's *Learning for Life* program highlights the range of factors that can compound for those living in poverty. The experience of poverty impacts young people's experience of education, and life more broadly, as they move through school. This in turn significantly impacts their knowledge and understanding of higher education, and their ability to access and successfully participate in it. How poverty impacts on young people is explored below.

Young people's experience of 'missing out'

Research in 2018 led by Professor Peter Saunders of the University of NSW, sought to understand the extent to which young people experiencing disadvantage miss out on the 'essentials of life', as defined by young people themselves. Young people identified 18 items as essential for all young people with items falling into two broad categories: material deprivation (a lack of 'things') and social exclusion (a lack of 'doing' activities).

Forty percent of high school students supported on *Learning for Life* missed out on three or more of these essential items, compared to less than 20 percent of young people at NSW Government high schools (The Smith Family 2018). More than one in 10 of the students supported on *Learning for Life* missed out on seven or more of the items. In particular, young people on *Learning for Life* were likely to miss out on having internet access at home, going on school excursions or trips, having money to pay for classes or activities outside of school, having money to spend or save each week and an annual holiday away with family, a number of which are explicitly related to their experience of and ability to participate in education.

The research showed the impact of having less access to what young people saw as the 'essentials of life'. There was a clear inverse relationship between the degree of deprivation young people experienced and their positivity about the future, enjoyment of and satisfaction with school. Young people who were deprived of at least three essential items had lower levels of wellbeing and more negative attitudes to schooling than those who were not experiencing significant deprivation.

Research also shows that some young people experiencing disadvantage make 'adult' decisions for their parent/carers, knowing the financial pressures they are under. For example, they may choose cheaper elective subjects in high school which are not mapped to their future career plans, in order to limit the financial impost on their family.

Young people's repeated experiences of being left out and missing out on things other young people do at school, can deeply affect their sense of self and engagement with education (Skattebol, 2012). This can contribute to them leaving school early and not being in a position to participate in higher education, with likely detrimental long-term effects, given the relationship between educational attainment and life-time earnings, health, wellbeing and social inclusion.

Young people's achievement through school

The patterns of which groups of young Australians do not participate in and complete tertiary education, are reflective of and heavily influenced by achievement as they move through school. Across a range of key educational outcome measures – the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) (in the first year of school), NAPLAN (in Years 3, 5 7 and 9), and school completion rates, young people experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage achieve significantly below their more advantaged peers. This is not a new phenomenon, with a recent Productivity Commission report (2022) which reviewed the National Schools Reform Agreement concluding:

- There have been persistent and significant gaps in (school) education outcomes over the last decade for some groups of students, particularly those from low SES and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.
- Gaps in outcomes for students from low SES, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and remote students emerge early and tend to widen over time.

Analysis by the Grattan Institute (2016) is particularly disturbing: “For students with the same level of initial achievement in Year 3 (a proxy for similar capability), less progress is made by disadvantaged students, at disadvantaged schools, and in disadvantaged areas. This strongly suggests that equally capable students are failing to reach their potential. This holds for disadvantaged students at all ability levels in Year 3, especially bright students from poor backgrounds in disadvantaged schools” (p 25).

This data 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. 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. Thus the work of the Australian Universities Accord must also be explicitly connected to other major policy reviews underway focussing on early learning and care and schools education.¹

Compounding factors for some young people and the need for more nuanced data collection

All students on the *Learning for Life* program live in low income families and one in five are from Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds. One in three of the students and a similar proportion of their parent/carers have a health or disability issue. Around half of the students live in regional communities. Over half of students' parents/carers have not completed Year 12 or equivalent and three quarters of parent/carers are not in the labour force or are unemployed. More than half of the students live in single parent families and a further six percent live in grandparent-headed families or other care relationships. A quarter of students are from non-English speaking backgrounds and a third live in a household with six or more people.

From the perspective of current higher education equity groups, young people supported on *Learning for Life* 'fit' into a number of equity groups, but as work by Tomaszewski et al (2020) has shown, approaches to equity which take a single lens, for example, low socioeconomic background, hide significant access and completion challenges for young people such as those The Smith Family

¹ These include the Productivity Commission's review into Early Learning and Care and work underway to inform a new National Schools Reform Agreement.

supports. Analysis by Tomaszewski et al (2020) shows the much lower rates of higher education completion for each additional disadvantage factor people experience.

This analysis is reinforced by recently released data on the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people aged 20 to 24 years who have attained Year 12 or equivalent, broken down into SES quintiles. The rate for the most disadvantaged young people was 52.1 percent compared to 84.3 percent for those from the least disadvantaged young people (Closing the Gap dashboard, Productivity Commission).

These data reinforce both the additional and personalised support that some groups of young people are likely to need if they are to be able to successfully access and participate in higher education and the need for more sophisticated data collection and analysis which provides more granular understanding of who is or isn't participating and succeeding in higher education.

In addition, The Smith Family notes that there is currently no visibility nationally of the extent to which young people who have experienced the care system are participating in, and completing higher education. As the Productivity Commission's 2022 Review of the National Schools Reform Agreement noted: "Children and young people living in out-of-home care face significant disruptions to their education and are considerably less likely than their peers to attend school and engage with education — by Year 9, children in out-of-home care were four times more likely to be below the national minimum standard in reading, and six times more likely to be below the national minimum standard in numeracy, relative to the general population" (p 112). The Commission recommended that parties to the next Agreement should consider students living in out-of-home care as a priority equity cohort.

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. However, there is no central national collection of data on this group of young people nor systematic policy efforts focussed on supporting their increased participation in higher education. The Smith Family believes this should be addressed.

THE CHALLENGES YOUNG PEOPLE EXPERIENCING DISADVANTAGE FACE PARTICIPATING IN AND SUCCEEDING AT HIGHER EDUCATION

Financial challenges

Young people experiencing disadvantage face a range of challenges in participating in higher education and therefore may need a range of supports both to access and successfully complete higher education. The most obvious is financial and this plays out in a range of ways. 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. For young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who need to relocate to study, the financial impost is particularly harsh.

This is a huge expense, and often a barrier for students, or something that makes their study journey far more difficult that is, if they have to work extensive hours to get enough funds to cover rent. We see a lot of students from regional areas taking a gap year before starting tertiary study. Sometimes they need time to prepare for the move, but often it's purely a financial decision in that they can't afford to cover the costs of moving and so are prohibited from starting study straight away.

The Smith Family, Tertiary Coordinator

The Smith Family's experience supporting young women leaving care to participate in higher education, through the *Care to Achieve* scholarship pilot program² 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.

Financial disadvantage influences the courses young people take if they do choose to pursue tertiary education. Factors such as the size of the up-front or potentially deferred fees, course length and associated costs such as textbooks, technology, necessary uniforms and associated equipment, all impact on the decisions made by young people who have limited financial resources.

Financial disadvantage also makes the need to undertake employment alongside of study particularly acute. While most young people participating in higher education are likely to be engaged in employment, it is a non-negotiable for young people experiencing disadvantage and many will need to work a significant and consistent number of hours to be able to survive. The hours worked by young people supported by The Smith Family to undertake tertiary education are often beyond what is generally considered compatible with tertiary study. For some young people we support, the financial pressure to work has resulted in them deferring their study, at least for a period of time.

The need to undertake employment puts additional stress on young people experiencing disadvantage and means their ability to participate in core course placements is problematic. The employment imperative also means that many young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are unable to participate in additional opportunities available through tertiary education providers which might strengthen their longer-term employability.

Financial scholarships and income support provisions are therefore an important contributor to supporting increased participation of young people experiencing disadvantage as young people supported by The Smith Family explain:

I have so far used my scholarship money on a reliable laptop that will not break down on me which is useful for my studies and completing assignments. I have also used the scholarship money on printing which has been useful for lectures and readings for each week. I have also had to buy expensive textbooks which some were up to \$300 which I would have missed out on without the help of the scholarship money....

I'm just following up on the scholarship payment 'cause I have been waiting for it as I am negative in my account...I haven't had money to eat and to get train tickets from work. I might have to defer uni because I am struggling to get my licence and I need to get it to drive to uni and so I need money to pay for transportation and so I need to work...I just don't really have a safety net to fall back on and I don't like to borrow money.

Despite the value of such scholarship funds, The Smith Family's 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. 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 supportive opportunities. This research also finds that available scholarships are not well targeted, with only 3% of the eligible cohort receiving a scholarship.

² Funded by the Queensland Government from 2017 to 2021.

Universities and other higher education institutions can be trusted and valued partners of very disadvantaged schools and of the non-government agencies who already have trusted relationships with those schools and directly with disadvantaged students and their families, thus enabling cultural change in favour of post-school education. This work, done well makes a measurable difference and needs to be sustainably funded. The Smith Family believes there is an opportunity for universities to seek partnerships to target scholarships and wraparound support to students who might not otherwise be able to overcome the barrier of affordability.

Paid internships

The Smith Family's experience highlights the importance of paid internships for young people undertaking tertiary study, not only from a financial perspective, but so they can gain skills in a workplace directly related to their area of study and develop professional networks which are important to establishing and developing their careers. Programs such as The Smith Family's *Cadetship to Career* program, which links tertiary students supported by The Smith Family with employers for paid, flexible, multi-year cadetship opportunities, can play an important role in both supporting students to participate and complete higher education, as well as increasing the likelihood of employment post-completion of study. The program, originally launched in partnership with the Business Council of Australia enables students who need to be earning to explore and experience professional learning in their chosen field of study see [Cadetship to Career | The Smith Family and Business Council of Australia](#).

Accessing up-to-date information and careers support

In addition to financial challenges, young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and other equity groups, have information and careers support needs that need to be met if they are to access and successfully participate in higher education.

Research by The Smith Family and others shows that family members are the main source of careers advice and support for young people experiencing disadvantage. As noted above, most parent/carers of *Learning for Life* students are not in employment and have not participated in tertiary education. This means their access to up-to-date information regarding career pathways and the role of tertiary education is often limited or inaccurate. Schools supporting large numbers of young people experiencing disadvantage can also struggle, despite their best efforts, to provide high quality, up-to-date careers support and this can directly impact on young people's knowledge of tertiary pathways and the likelihood of them pursuing such study. As part of helping young people experiencing disadvantage to consider participation in higher education, they may also need support to weigh up the short and longer-term costs and benefits of such participation.

Recent research (The Smith Family 2022) with young people who had been supported on *Learning for Life* 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.

Personal and practical support

A range of Australian and international data indicates that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds may have lower levels of self-efficacy than their more advantaged peers, with The Smith Family's 2022 research noted above indicating that young people wanted "more support to develop self-confidence and other life skills, including how to seek help, seize opportunities and learn from their mistakes" (p.4).

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.

Accessing the range of supports needed, including health and disability support

The education system is part of the broader human services system, with barriers to access often sitting outside the education system itself. If Australia is to address inequities in educational achievement, attention also needs to be paid to how the current service system either supports people to realise their potential or holds them where they are.

As indicated above, many of the young people on *Learning for Life* have health, including mental health, and disability issues, which can impact on their participation in higher education. Many of them also have housing support and income support needs. As a consequence, they are likely to engage with a range of Commonwealth and state/territory Government and non-government agencies, often simultaneously.

Despite the good intentions of those who work in them, the systems set up to 'serve' these young Australians, tend to be complex for them to access. They are often ineffective in supporting positive change and inadvertently rob people of a sense of agency and empowerment. The Smith Family contends that while aspects of Australia's human services system work well, the system needs to be redesigned, so it is better able to address the needs of those Australians experiencing complex and sustained disadvantage. Such a redesign, that would support young people to access the range of supports they need in a coordinated, non-judgemental and easily accessible way, is an important component of increasing the successful participation of young people experiencing disadvantage in higher education.

Complex pathways and the VET and higher education interface

While change is a reality for many young people pursuing tertiary education, young people experiencing disadvantage are likely to have more complex pathways through tertiary study than their more advantaged peers for a range of reasons. How the system supports them through this complexity will influence the likelihood of them completing a qualification or not.

The policy and regulatory gap between VET and higher education continues to be a major barrier for inclusion for disadvantaged students. Learning Creates Australia (2020) reports that 'Australia has the fourth most segregated education system in the world'. Disadvantaged students are an important equity cohort for pathways to both the Higher Education and VET sectors, relying heavily on varied entry options and ease of pathway changes. Ensuring their successful participation both increases the nation's skill base and ensures that latent talent can be realised. However as noted elsewhere in this submission, these young people often require additional assistance to ensure that their talent, sometimes masked due to situations of disadvantage and hardship, can be recognised and nurtured.

It is incumbent on the Higher Education and VET systems to provide this necessary, additional support and reduce the complexity of moving through systems.

The Smith Family's experience with the *Care to Achieve* program supporting young women leaving out-of-home care, highlights the complexities of pathways, including between university and TAFE providers, that some young people experience. Sixty percent of the more than 100 young women who participated in the program deferred at least one semester, and eight left the program (and study) only to ask to be reinstated at a point in the future (which they were). Thirty young women began at least two different courses during their time on the program, five of whom attempted four different courses. Of these five young women all completed a qualification and three continued on studying to a second qualification. Of the 43 young women who completed a qualification across the five years of the program, 16 left one or more courses prior to completion, suggesting that leaving a course should be viewed not as a 'failure' but as a learning experience.

The experience of Lisa, a participant on the *Care to Achieve* program gives a sense of the complex pathways young people may take and some of the reasons for them:

Lisa left three courses before completing her first qualification. Beginning at university in a Bachelor degree, she left towards the end of her first year due to the two to three hours of travel time to and from uni each day, and deciding that the area of study was not right for her. The following year she began a Diploma at TAFE but found the work on placements was physically too hard for her. In the second semester of that same year, Lisa began another Diploma in a different field but discontinued this when she experienced significant difficulties with the staff at her TAFE, including their inability to secure her a placement which was a mandatory requirement to complete her course. After taking a semester off, she undertook a Certificate III in a different field again, which she completed by the end of that year. Lisa subsequently enrolled in a Diploma in a related field, which she continues to study. Lisa reflected that it took some time to find a study pathway that was 'a little bit stressful' but not unmanageably so, as the previous courses she had attempted had been. Her time away from study allowed her to reassess her options and recommencing study at the Certificate III and successfully completing this qualification encouraged her to continue on to the Diploma.

The learnings from the *Care to Achieve* program 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.

Learner centred options

In recent years, there has been a slow but steady growth in competency based education in education systems. In the United States in 2020, 128 institutions had adopted over 1000 undergraduate and graduate competency-based education programs (American Institutes of Research, 2021). We are also encouraged to see an increase in higher education institutions in Australia enabling competency based learning for some courses. We encourage evaluation of these early changes to assess their potential to support outcomes for students with complex challenges.

The Smith Family believes that a choice of competency based learning and recognition of achievements beyond academic achievement through micro or stackable credentials could provide viable pre and in higher education pathways for young people who experience multiple barriers to participation. This learner centred approach, outlined by the Business Council of Australia in 2018, embedded in a universal learning system where schools, VET and Higher Education are all components of one system funded through a single, sector neutral funding model. Such a system would allow an individual student to produce a record of their skills and knowledge development as opposed to needing to undertake a prescribed course in order to achieve any form of qualification.

Students who, due to a range of life circumstance need to pause or discontinue their education could have their learning to date acknowledged and recorded with a view to adding to these credentials at a time when life circumstances are more conducive to continuing. We understand that learner focussed options such as these made it possible for students to undertake study over a longer time-frame for lower fees and provided recognised qualifications at various stages.

Conclusion

Young people experiencing disadvantage have more limited access to the financial resources, services, opportunities and networks of support and advice, that encourage higher levels of achievement and success, right across all levels of education, including higher education. This can limit young people's life opportunities and in turn impact the economic and social contribution that they can make to the Australian community.

The Smith Family welcomes the strong policy focus of Minister Clare and the Review panel on increasing the successful participation in higher education of those groups who are currently under-represented. There are both short-term and longer-term approaches that can support this policy intent. The Smith Family would welcome the opportunity to explore the issues and opportunities raised in this submission with the Review panel.

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