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To The House Standing Committee on Education and Training,

**A Submission by The Smith Family¹ in response to
the 'Inquiry into combining school and work: Supporting successful youth transitions'**

The Smith Family welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission for the 'Inquiry into combining school and work: Supporting successful youth transitions'.

Research has shown that there exist various points or phases along the continuum of individual development that are highly influential with regard to educational and economic outcomes, including workforce participation. These include transitions from home to school, from primary to secondary schooling, from secondary to tertiary education, school to work, and work back to further education / different employment. The Smith Family's agenda for societal change is focusing on all of these transitions,² and we commend the Government's commitment to supporting successful transitions for young people.

The Smith Family recognises the Committee's overarching objective to identify and examine some possible flexible approaches to completing high school which promote a healthy balance of work and study, to enable successful transitions from high school to further education or workforce. This submission is mostly concerned with two of the Inquiry's five Terms of Reference:

- The potential impact (combining work and study) on educational attainment (including the prospects for post-compulsory qualifications and workforce productivity); and
- Support that may be required to assist young people to stay engaged in their learning, especially where work and study intersects with income support.

Based on our own experiences providing opportunities for disadvantaged young people and their families to build their capacities to participate socially and economically, we would like to raise the following points for consideration:

- Australian students combining work and study;
- Achievement in school and future attainment;
- The importance of quality career guidance and support;
- The Smith Family's relationship with Senior students - The role of mentoring;
- The Smith Family's recommendations to support successful youth transitions.

¹ See Appendix I.

² The Smith Family's agenda for societal change has led us to develop a range of population goals that reflect our commitment to children, their families and communities. It therefore describes a broader goal to which the work of The Smith Family is contributing, but cannot achieve alone. The five population outcomes decided upon by The Smith Family, reflect our vision, mission, strategy and suite of programs as a social enterprise: all children are ready for school (0-5); all children meet minimum literacy and numeracy standards (6-12); all young people stay engaged in education and learning (12-16); all young people make a smooth transition from school to work or further education (16-24); and, all parents and carers have the skills and qualifications to lead active and productive lives (strong families).

Australian students combining work and study

The Australian Bureau of Statistics data indicates that over half of Australia's high school students' work part-time while studying full-time.³ Many factors influence workforce participation in teenagers and there is a general consensus that a part-time or casual job can have positive effects on a young person's self esteem, self efficacy, prospects for future employment and further education.⁴

In cases where work and study intersects with income support, young people may be forced to work longer hours, taking valuable time away from their studies. Findings from the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth showed that working one to five hours per week during Year 9 makes no difference to the likelihood of completing Year 12, however participation in employment beyond the level of five hours per week is associated with an increased likelihood of dropping out before the end of Year 12.⁵

Achievement in school and future attainment

In May, 2008, 70 per cent of teenagers were in full time education at school or elsewhere.⁶ A further 16.6 per cent of teenagers were in full-time work. The remaining 13.3 per cent of 15 to 19 year-olds were not fully engaged in full-time work or full-time education, and instead were either unemployed or working part-time, or were not in the labour force.

Achievement in school is one of the strong predictors of student outcomes and future life chances. Drawing on the ABS Education and Work survey, the Foundation for Young Australian's report *How young people are faring* (2008) presents figures on the education and labour market status of school leavers in the year after leaving, showing the relative impact of leaving school early compared with completing Year 12. School completers have an advantage over early leavers in terms of both entering further education (six in every ten compared with around one-third of early leavers) and when it comes to the labour market, where they are more likely to secure employment, especially full-time work. While one in five Year 12 completers are neither in study nor full-time work, more than twice as many early leavers are in this more tenuous situation of not studying and being either unemployed, in part-time work or not in the labour force.⁷

The completion of secondary schooling to the end of Year 12 is a case in point here, for while research from many different sectors has confirmed the multiple benefits of this level of attainment in accessing employment and moving beyond the limitations of intergenerational disadvantage,⁸ students from disadvantaged backgrounds are continually identified as having disproportionately high rates of early school leaving.⁹

In 2006, only 58% of young people from low SES backgrounds attained Yr 12 or equivalent. This may be the result of personal factors such as a lack of self-esteem, confidence, motivation or ability, or it could be a consequence of the significant variance in quality of teaching and resources identified by the OECD within the Australian education environment.¹⁰ In most cases, it is a combination of many factors. However, those

³ ABS (2005) *Australian Social Trends: Education and Work*. Cat 4102.0. ABS: Canberra

⁴ Singh, K., Chang, M. & Dika, S. (2007) Effects of Part-Time Work on School Achievement During High School, in *Journal of Educational Research*, Sep/Oct2007, Vol. 101 Issue 1.

⁵ Vickers, M., Lamb, S. & Hinkley, J. (2003) *Student Workers in Highschool and Beyond: The Effects of Part-Time Employment on Participation in education, training and work*. LSAY Research Report 30. ACER: Victoria.

⁶ Lamb S. & Mason K. (2008) *How Young People are Faring: An update about the learning and work situation of young Australians*. Foundation for Young Australians: Melbourne.

⁷ Lamb S. & Mason K. (2008) *How Young People are Faring: An update about the learning and work situation of young Australians*. Foundation for Young Australians: Melbourne.

⁸ Entry requirements for many jobs now increasingly demand high levels of educational attainment meaning that 'twelve years of schooling are now considered a basic requirement for an educated population' (Bagnall, 2001). Those who leave early are more likely to be unemployed, obtain low skilled work, earn less money and have a higher probability of not being in the labour force compared to those who complete Year 12 (Fullarton, 2001).

⁹ Early school leavers are defined here as those students who are unable for whatever reason to complete schooling to the end of Year 12 or its equivalent. For details on the statistical representation of disadvantaged students within this group, see The Smith Family, 2002a.

¹⁰ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2005). *School Factors Related to Quality and Equity – Results from PISA 2000*. OECD: Paris.

students for whom upper secondary school completion would arguably be most beneficial in helping them overcome a cycle of disadvantage are, for various reasons, slipping through the net.

The importance of quality career guidance and support

The decisions made by young people preparing for or undertaking the transition from school can have long term implications – for the young people themselves, their family and their community, as well as for industry and governments in terms of health, welfare and national productivity. Research conducted by The Smith Family in conjunction with the Australian Council for Educational Research from 2003-2007¹¹ indicated that students and young people are more likely to stay engaged in education and reach better participation levels if they have the opportunities to plan and pursue learning around their chosen areas of interest, as well as their skills sets at a given point in time.

The research also showed that at least a third of junior secondary school students themselves have difficulty in matching their educational paths to their preferred career.¹² These findings have important implications for the Inquiry into combining school and work, not only in terms of the type of supports that students need in making decisions about tertiary pathways, but also with regard to assisting students to make connections between what they are learning, the skills being developed in their part-time or casual work activities and their intended career pathways.

The Smith Family's relationship with young people

The evidence has shown that in a 21st century knowledge society, wellbeing depends more than ever on the **relationships** individuals form with others. For disadvantaged young people and their families, the opportunities to build these relationships are few by virtue of their social and economic isolation. The key to closing the gaps between these groups and the wider society and creating a more caring and cohesive community is therefore connecting different people in different ways. As the Australian knowledge society grows ever more complex, the benefit of receiving tailored guidance and support from an experienced mentor has become an indispensable tool for thousands of young people looking to succeed in this challenging and competitive environment.

The following case study of the *iTrack* online youth mentoring program, introduced by The Smith Family in 2003, is an excellent example of connecting different people in different ways to support successful youth transitions. Research has shown that financially disadvantaged students have far fewer resources to draw upon in helping them to make post-school plans than their more advantaged peers. This makes it difficult for them to plan effectively for their school to work / further education transition, and limits their understanding of which jobs they might be suited to or want to aim for.¹³

¹¹ The Smith Family worked with the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) in the production of five studies that provided more in depth evidence on advantaging factors in the formulation of post-school plans and successful school to work transitions: *Post-School Plans: aspirations, expectations and implementation* (2004), *What do students know about work? Senior secondary school students' perceptions of the world of work* (2005) *What do students think of work? Are they on the right page? Junior secondary school students' perceptions of the world of work* (2005), *On track? Students choosing a career* (2006), and *Australian young people: their stories, their families and post-school plans* (2007). All papers are available on The Smith Family website www.thesmithfamily.com.au

¹² The Smith Family (2005). *What do students think of work? Are they on the right page?* The Smith Family / Australian Council for Educational Research: Sydney.

¹³ The Smith Family (2004). *Post-School Plans – Aspirations, Expectations and Implementation*. The Smith Family / Australian Council for Educational Research: Sydney.

Connecting students with professionals – iTrack

The Smith Family recognised the need to disadvantaged students with adults already established in the working world, and through the *iTrack* program moved to tackle the geographical barriers between them through facilitating mentoring relationships over the Internet. With the rise of internet sites such as YouTube, Facebook and MySpace, not to mention blogs, chat rooms or SMS as a means of communication, *iTrack* was especially innovative in shifting the traditional face-to-face context of mentoring online, providing a less intimidating and more effective platform for learning.

Over the course of approximately two terms (or 19 weeks), students enrolled in *iTrack* participate in regular online sessions with their mentors at specific times within their school day under the supervision of a school facilitator. Through The Smith Family's *IGNITE!* website chat rooms and IBM's *MentorPlace* site, students have the chance to chat electronically with mentors about the subjects they are studying and their plans for the future, while mentors provide them with information, direction and assistance in developing the communication and organisation skills they need to make successful school to work / further study transitions.

In the most recent (2008) evaluation over 90% of students and mentors reported that the program was successful. Mentors rated support from The Smith Family as highly valuable and students were significantly more confident in their post-school plans for work or further study.

Following successful evaluations each year, *iTrack* is continuing to expand, and currently involves hundreds of students in many hard to reach locations in NSW, QLD, WA and VIC. The Smith Family is also in the process of developing an Indigenous version of *iTrack*, which will further the exciting progress we have made in creating a more caring and cohesive Australia.

The Smith Family's recommendations to support successful youth transitions

The substantial costs to the individual of non-participation are mirrored by costs to the economy. In today's global knowledge society, the increased frequency with which individuals now move between multiple forms and sectors of employment throughout their careers has placed new demands on young people as they seek to enter the workforce. There is now an ongoing necessity to acquire, upgrade and market an individual's various skills in order to respond to the changing needs of employers and social contexts outside work such as the home and family. Resilience, adaptation and flexibility are critical in this respect, as are the motivation and capacity to absorb an increasingly diverse range of information.

Research has shown that no one type of pathway – whether apprenticeship, school-based vocational or general education – holds the keys to consistently successful transitional outcomes. Secondary school students looking to progress their learning are today faced with a multitude of options and pathways that present a considerable challenge to negotiate. A large proportion of students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, experience difficulty in navigating these paths, and do not appear to interpret

and apply information provided on career pathways to their best advantage, or, at least with comparably positive outcomes as more advantaged students.^{14 15}

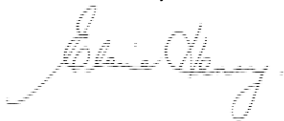
The effectiveness with which Australia facilitates and supports successful school to work/further study transitions for its young people is a prerequisite for increasing our productivity levels in a 21st knowledge society.¹⁶ The 'Inquiry into combining school and work: Supporting successful youth transitions' in particular provides an important opportunity to enhance the support available to young people when they are at greatest risk of disengagement from education.

The Smith Family commends the Australian Government's commitment to successful youth transitions and supports a system that:

- continues to prioritise and enhance the health and wellbeing of Australian children and their families, recognising the importance of the early support and intervention in breaking the cycle of intergenerational disadvantage;
- activates resources and opportunities for one-on-one guidance and mentoring relationships at the community level, recognising the positive influence of this on the educational outcomes of students.

We also urge that continuous and systematic evaluation mechanisms regarding policy and program outcomes be applied in relation to the impact of this strategy on young people, their families, and the wider community.

Yours sincerely



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¹⁴ The Smith Family (2004). *Post-School Plans – Aspirations, Expectations and Implementation*. The Smith Family / Australian Council for Educational Research: Sydney.

¹⁵ National Centre for Vocational Education Research (2000). *How people choose vocational education and training programs*. NCVER, Australian National Training Authority (ANTA): Adelaide.

¹⁶ Lamb S. & Mason K. (2008) *How Young People are Faring: An update about the learning and work situation of young Australians*. Foundation for Young Australians: Melbourne

APPENDIX I

The Smith Family

The Smith Family is a national, independent social enterprise that provides opportunities for disadvantaged Australian families and communities to create a better future through education. The purpose of The Smith Family's *Learning for Life* suite of inter-connecting programs is twofold: on the one hand, it works to increase the **participation** in society of disadvantaged children and their families through the provision of educational opportunities across the life course (increasing *human* capital); while on the other, it works to increase the **engagement** of those with the time, talent or dollars to support them (increasing *social* capital).

All of the programs within our *Learning for Life* suite are built around facilitating these relationships between disadvantaged children and those in their wider community with the capacity to assist them. Such sound connections are crucial, not only to ensure that disadvantaged children are ready and able to progress through key transition points in their lives where they are most vulnerable (e.g. moving from home to school, from school to work), but also to build capacity in the wider community to be receptive to and supportive of their participation.

Through these relationships, which are built around sponsorship, tutoring, coaching or mentoring by adults or even their peers, disadvantaged children and young people are able to develop their academic, socio-emotional and vocational skills to achieve their full potential. This includes support for essential comprehension, emotional, digital and financial literacies to ensure that students are fully equipped to participate in the 21st century knowledge society.