

**A submission of
The Smith Family**
to the
Senate Employment, Workplace Relations
and Education Legislation Committee

on

**Australian Technical Colleges
(Flexibility in Achieving Australia's Skills Needs)
Bill 2005**

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everyone's family



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Preface

The Smith Family welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Legislation Committee's Inquiry into the provisions of the Australian Technical Colleges (Flexibility in Achieving Australia's Skills Needs) Bill 2005.

The Smith Family is a national, independent, social enterprise established in 1922. Our mission is *that, together with caring Australians, The Smith Family will unlock opportunities for disadvantaged families to participate more fully in society* and in the contemporary context we have a particular focus on children and education. The Smith Family is working to achieve its mission of unlocking opportunities in two ways – by increasing the participation in society of those who have previously been marginalised on the one hand, and through the engagement of those who have the capacity to give of time, talent and dollars, on the other. Pursuing our vision of *a more caring and cohesive Australian community*, The Smith Family researches different forms of disadvantage to propose preventive responses to them, and to promote social change.

Based on our research findings, our Submission reflects on the numerous local and national changes in the contemporary education and training environment, and provides a perspective on how the proposed Australian Technical Colleges (ATCs) can support these transformations. Particular attention is paid to the importance of legislation that is relevant to and inclusive of disadvantaged communities and families, which continue to face multiple and diverse barriers to education and training participation and achievement. This focus accords with The Smith Family's dual generational approach to education and community support, whereby we consider learners within the wider context of their families in order to strengthen social cohesion and interaction between the generations.

Terms of Reference

In responding to the Australian Technical Colleges Bill, The Smith Family's Submission reflects on a range of factors that our evidence has shown to contribute to achieving best possible outcomes for students in the VET and general education sectors. Particular emphasis is placed on opportunities to facilitate the fuller participation of disadvantaged groups in Australia's economic growth through the following longitudinal goals:

- **Short-term outcomes:**
 - (a) Ensuring adequate financial assistance
 - (b) Ensuring equitable educational opportunities
 - (c) Engaging with family and community members
- **Medium-term outcomes:**
 - (a) The importance of quality career guidance / support
- **Long-term outcomes:**
 - (a) The benefits of adopting a lifelong learning approach

These terms of reference have relevance to The Smith Family's agenda for societal change in enabling educational access, workforce participation and advancement among disadvantaged communities and families, thereby strengthening their capacity to contribute as active citizens.

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1. Executive Summary

The Smith Family (TSF) facilitates full participation for disadvantaged families in the education process and works with children, young people and their families to gain the knowledge, skills and confidence to exercise realistic life choices. The central objective of our flagship *Learning for Life* (LfL) suite of programs is to improve access to life opportunities that can impact positively on the self-esteem of students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds to ensure that current disadvantage does not translate into lifelong disadvantage. Our perspective on education is therefore not restricted to either compulsory schooling or particular levels of achievement. Instead, we use research to guide us in identifying how best to provide support and encouragement for students to develop the capacity for and an openness to lifelong learning that will help them make informed decisions about the paths they wish to follow. We also use research for the continuing development of our LfL suite of programs to assist them and their families in this process.

Our **short-term outcomes** are directed towards facilitating the participation of greater numbers of disadvantaged children and young people and their families in education and learning through the LfL suite of programs. With regard to VET initiatives such as the ATC proposal, our research has shown that the following factors are very important in ensuring equitable participation:

- **Ensuring adequate financial assistance:** Our research (The Smith Family, 2003) has shown that low-income households devote much less of their budgets to education than medium and high-SES groups, and the potential costs associated with attending an ATC (e.g. transport, field-trips) can still present significant financial challenges from the perspective of disadvantaged students. This is particularly so in light of a recent report by the Senate that found current student income support schemes to be inadequate (Senate, 2005).
- **Ensuring equitable educational opportunities for students:** The ATC Discussion Paper remarks that the Colleges will endeavour to attract 'capable and committed' students through a competitive, selective process (DEST, 2005:1). This suggests that candidates will need a certain level of proven ability as well as confidence that the trade qualifications offered by the Colleges represent the right path for them. Our research (The Smith Family, 2005; 2004; 2003; 2002a; 2001; 2000) has shown that children from low SES families have lower levels of literacy, numeracy and comprehension, are more likely to have difficulties with their studies, more likely to exhibit higher levels of problematic school behaviour (e.g. truancy) and more likely to leave school early. These findings therefore raise concerns as to whether low SES students will fit the 'capable and committed' benchmarks (as yet unspecified) of the ATC recruitment process.
- **Engaging with family / community members:** Who students confide in when making decisions about their education and career is an important factor influencing the quality of their outcome. Our research (The Smith Family, 2002b) has shown that just under 75% of students from disadvantaged backgrounds turn to their parents or wider family, as opposed to a career counselor (19%), a teacher (26%) or friends (27%). This focus is concomitant with The Smith Family's dual generational approach to education and community support, whereby we consider learners within the wider context of their families in order to strengthen the social cohesion and interaction between the generations. It therefore has implications for the ATC initiative, which has so far allotted no role to parent organisations in the planning phase or among the colleges' projected governing bodies.

Our **medium-term outcomes** are focusing on successful transitions from school to work. The Smith Family has been working closely with the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) in setting up a framework that will enable us to carry out longitudinal studies of our LfL kids. To date, this work has focused on students in junior and senior secondary school. It is providing an evidence base to further guide the development of LfL and the evaluation of our present suite of programs. Different aspects of this research are integrated into this submission. One of the key findings with relation to Australian Technical Colleges concerns:

- *The importance of quality career guidance and support:* 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 (The Smith Family, 2004; NCVER, 2000). Our research has also shown that at least a third of junior secondary school students themselves have difficulty in matching their educational paths to their preferred career (The Smith Family, 2005). These findings have important implications for the ATC initiative not only in terms of the type of student suited to its particular mix of academic and vocational education, but also with regard to its ability to assist graduates in making smoother transitions to work / further education.

The Smith Family's **long-term outcomes** speak to the importance of investing early in the developmental pathway to ensure the best outcomes for those who participate in VET. Hence, our long-term outcomes focus on more successful home to school transitions:

- *The benefits of adopting a lifelong learning approach:* Over the last few decades, the nature of work and the contribution of VET in preparing individuals for employment have changed considerably in line with the emergence of the knowledge economy. Within this context, the concept of lifelong learning has become increasingly important as a strategy through which the flexibility demanded by the labour market may be realised. 'Learning' is here construed in the broadest possible terms and relates to learning undertaken in both formal and informal education settings, including VET. The example of the 'Unlimited Potential' program, for which The Smith Family is a key alliance partner with Microsoft Australia, shows how this kind of lifelong learning orientation may be achieved through the kind of ICT skills education that the ATCs intend to provide.

The VET sector has always been of considerable importance to disadvantaged groups, who for over a decade have had approximately half the likelihood of participating in higher education as Australians from medium and higher socioeconomic status (SES). This phenomenon has remained relatively stable for over a decade, despite extensive equity initiatives across the higher education system as a whole (James, 2002). Compared with higher SES students, those from lower SES groups: (a) have a stronger belief that a TAFE course would be more useful to them than a university course; (b) are less confident that their parents want them to do a university course; and (c) exhibit a stronger interest in earning an income as soon as they leave school (James, 2002). Of the more than one in four Australians aged 15-19 years participating in the VET sector each year¹, disadvantaged students are therefore likely to constitute a significant proportion. This makes it essential to consider the particular needs of these groups in relation to new initiatives such as the ATCs.

¹ See Quarterly reports produced by the National Council for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), available online at www.ncver.edu.au

2. Rationale

Recognizing the impact of global, domestic and local labour market changes, The Smith Family has focused program initiatives to unlock opportunities for disadvantaged Australians to be able to develop skills to successfully participate in a 21st century knowledge economy. Having conducted and commissioned research and considered other studies, the provision and promotion of lifelong learning opportunities and preventive programs is the key strategy through which The Smith Family believes it can best contribute towards preventing those in disadvantage from living in continued circumstances of social exclusion.

The past few years have seen a concentration of attention around the problem of Australia's ageing population, sharply brought into focus in 2002 by the relevance of the Treasurer's Intergenerational Report (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002) and the more recent Productivity Commission's report on 'The Economic Implications of an Ageing Australia' (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2005). Both reports stress the need for greater participation in the workforce, and as better educated people generally have higher rates of participation,² it is in the interests of all to provide more educational opportunities for those who have been previously excluded. The Australian Technical Colleges have been introduced as a direct response to these issues, and are intended to offer more VET opportunities in regions suffering skills shortages with high youth unemployment rates and a significant industry base.³ However, it has been argued that responding to these skills shortages requires more than the provision of further youth apprenticeships and training – according to The House of Representatives, the issue is more about assisting all Australians to be financially independent and secure in their futures, which demands a longer-term policy perspective (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005).

Our own research and experience with disadvantaged groups suggests that this longer-term strategy for increased workforce participation and social inclusion can be facilitated through engaging individuals in lifelong learning. As this submission will show, ensuring that initiatives such as the ATCs are characterised by equitable opportunities and the full participation of students from all groups within society is critical to cultivating a community where learning is a tool for contemporary living, rather than a luxury. Extended flexibility in the areas of teaching methodologies, curricula, school to work transitions and civil society engagement in the education sector, could all potentially contribute to a more active and productive workforce. As an organisation facilitating financial and educational support to over 22,000 students through our flagship *Learning for Life* suite of programs, The Smith Family is thus fully committed to the progressive evaluation of teaching and learning strategies within our own operations, and as part of the bank of knowledge emanating from the public and private sectors.

² Australian Government Productivity Commission (2005), pXIX.

³ DEST (2005) *Australian Technical Colleges – A Discussion Paper*.

3. Introduction

As an organisation involved in the promotion of community capacity⁴ across the population, The Smith Family (TSF) operates on the basis of research that shows education, including Vocational Education and Training (VET), as critical in promoting an active and inclusive citizenry. Based on our research findings, our submission reflects on the numerous local and national changes in the contemporary education and training environment, and provides an insight into how initiatives such as the ATCs can best respond to these transformations. Particular attention is paid to our promotion of legislation that is relevant to and inclusive of disadvantaged communities, who continue to face multiple and diverse barriers to education and training participation and achievement. This focus is concomitant with The Smith Family's dual generational approach to education and community support, whereby we consider children and young people within the wider context of their families in order to strengthen the social cohesion and interaction between the generations. This perspective then reflects our mission that 'together with caring Australians, The Smith Family will unlock opportunities for disadvantaged families to participate more fully in society'.

While confirming the evident potential of targeted initiatives such as the ATCs in raising workforce participation and productivity rates, this submission also reflects the importance of developing a more holistic approach that encompasses and is informed by the experience of children and youth beyond their involvement in formal education / VET. 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. They are currently reflected in The Smith Family's Learning for Life suite of programs, which provide various forms of support to disadvantaged groups to progress through these transitions as smoothly as possible. Our strategic direction is particularly reflective of a significant body of research that shows that supporting children in the years before school (0-5 years) greatly increases their chances of better learning outcomes and more successful transitions from home to school and through other life transitions (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Shonkoff & Meisels, 2000; Keating & Hertzman, 1999). This has informed The Smith Family's involvement in early childhood intervention as a component of lifelong learning for a number of years, and our commitment to this developmental phase has been most recently expressed in our role as a facilitating partner in the Australian Government's Communities for Children initiative.⁵

The VET sector has always been of considerable importance to disadvantaged groups, who for over a decade have had approximately half the likelihood of participating in higher education as Australians from medium and higher socioeconomic status (SES). This phenomenon has remained relatively stable for over a decade, despite extensive equity initiatives across the higher education system as a whole (James, 2002). Compared with higher SES students, those from lower SES groups: (a) have a stronger belief that a TAFE course would be more useful to them than a university course; (b) are less confident that their parents want them to do a university course; and (c) exhibit a stronger interest in earning an income as soon as they leave school (James, 2002). Of the more than one in four Australians aged 15-19 years participating in the

⁴ Community capacity refers to the resources and assets in a community that enable it to positively address community problems and opportunities. Community capacity is a 'strength based' approach that seeks to focus on the assets rather than shortcomings of communities.

⁵ The Smith Family manages Communities for Children initiatives in five locations in New South Wales, Western Australia and Victoria providing support for an extra 12,000 babies and toddlers. For more information, see The Smith Family web site: www.smithfamily.com.au.

VET sector each year⁶, disadvantaged students are therefore likely to constitute a significant proportion. This makes it essential to consider the particular needs of these groups in relation to new initiatives such as the ATCs.

Connecting Education and Skills Shortages

Over the last few decades, Vocational Education and Training (VET) has played an increasingly strong role in the higher education sector by providing apprenticeships, traineeships and other courses primarily aimed at skilling people for the workplace. During 2003, 1.72 million students were enrolled in the public VET system across the country, and participation rates are likely to expand in the wake of increased funding and the ATC initiative. This year alone, the Australian Government will spend a record \$2.5 billion on vocational and technical education (DEST, 2005b).

At the same time, this steady growth has been offset by an increasing concern regarding a nationwide skills shortage and the implications of an ageing population (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002; Productivity Commission, 2005). It is estimated the current wave of skills shortages affects 42 occupations (16 Professional and 26 Trade), with the overarching transformation of Australian industry from a manufacturing to a service (or 'knowledge') economy held as primarily responsible.⁷ In response to these factors, the Federal Government's 2005 Budget sought to increase overall workforce participation by assisting those of working age on welfare support (notably single mothers and the disabled) back into employment. An extra 4,500 pre-vocational training places for people interested in a traditional trade and an additional 7,000 School Based New Apprenticeships for students were also announced with the intention of creating "an economy where every Australian who wants work can find it".⁸

However, the problem of skills shortages is not simply one of numbers, for more than one in six Australians are already 'underemployed' and in need of more work, with this sub-group increasing in size year by year (Wilkins, 2004).⁹ As has been pointed out by the Victorian government, the shortage is also driven (arguably more strongly) by a mismatch of skills between the capabilities of the current workforce and the complex and fluctuating demands of the new knowledge economy.¹⁰ This mismatch has been shown to operate at a number of levels and across a range of key transitions throughout an individual's progression from early childhood to adult participation in the workforce. For example, recent research by The Smith Family (2005) has found that students in Australia begin considering their career pathways from as early as Year 8, but with around one-third of students who nominate a desired occupation planning an education at too low a level to achieve this. Of this group, 70% still expect that they would get this job, suggesting a significant lack of realistic guidance, information and support in forming these goals.¹¹ This

⁶ See Quarterly reports produced by the National Council for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) available online at www.ncver.edu.au

⁷ See The National Skills Shortage List 2004 for details, available on the Employment and Workplace Relations web site, www.workplace.gov.au.

⁸ Budget Speech 2005-06, delivered on 10 May 2005 on the second reading of the Appropriation Bill (No.1) 2005-06 by the Honourable Peter Costello MP, Treasurer of the Commonwealth of Australia.

⁹ According to The International Definition of Time-Related Underemployment, 'underemployed' people are those who satisfy the following criteria: willing to work additional hours; available to work additional hours; and worked less than a threshold relating to working time.

¹⁰ *Government's Working Together – A New Approach to Workforce Skills for a More Prosperous Australia*. Report commissioned by the Premier of Victoria for the Council of Australian Governments, May 2005.

¹¹ Boys were also more likely than girls to have a mismatch between their planned education level and the skill level of their preferred job, reconfirming the need for gender specialisation within policy strategies relating to information provision. The Smith Family (2005) provides more details on this in relation to junior secondary school students, while a forthcoming complementary report analysing the experience of senior secondary school students will be published by The Smith Family / ACER later this year.

mismatch is then exacerbated when students leave school to find work, only to discover that employers do not value qualifications in the same way as the VET sector, demanding a higher grade of competencies, often in excess of the level appropriate to the job (NCVER, 2005; Karmel & Stanwick, 2002). The same sources also suggest that small businesses, which by some estimates constitute 40% of the Australian workforce, are indifferent to the VET system in particular and qualification outcomes in general (NCVER, 2005). Finally, there appears to be further misalignment between the type of skills job candidates possess, with many employers now seeking a range of generic skills in addition to more specific technical skills in order to respond to the increased level of workplace change (NCVER, 2005).

It is the recognition of these numerous and fluctuating pressures on job seekers that has sharpened understandings of the crucial role education – particularly VET – plays in equipping young Australians for their future working lives (Kennedy & Hedley, 2003; Dusseldorp Skills Forum 2005; Davis and Ewing, 2005). These studies have all concluded that increasing educational attainment across the population tends to increase labour force participation levels across all age groups, and this is particularly significant in light of Australia's comparatively low level of educational attainment in its working age population.¹² Initiatives in response to the skills shortage (such as the ATCs) have therefore tended to focus overwhelmingly on expanding levels of access and opportunity within the VET and wider education sectors.

The socioeconomic potential of VET

It is evident that the vocational education and training sector is a critical factor influencing successful school to work transitions and long term labour participation rates. The expectations attached to the ATC initiative alone are high, and range from providing 'a head start in [students'] working lives' through 'world class training and facilities' to sending 'a powerful signal to young Australians that trade skills offer a proven path to a rewarding career'. However, it would appear from international experiences that the scope of reform necessary for these goals to be achieved is considerably wider than simply creating additional places for apprenticeships through initiatives such as the ATCs. For example, it has been argued in the case of the UK that:

Throughout the 1990's, education and training policy became increasingly mired in the belief that simply boosting the outputs of the VET system by expanding the supply of educated and skilled employees, would be sufficient to transform national economic competitiveness and realise the vision of high skill, high value-added capitalism... It is now widely accepted amongst critical academic commentators in the field that this prevailing policy orthodoxy is both myopic and deeply flawed. (Payne 2000:359)

Ensuring positive employment outcomes is often beyond the VET system alone to tackle, particularly for disadvantaged groups who are usually less equipped in terms of skills and experience to overcome competition. Our research has shown that student motivation, self-esteem and level of participation in the learning process are all key factors influencing educational outcomes (The Smith Family, 2005, 2004, 2003, 2002b). It has also been suggested that students in VET programs are generally limited in their vision of where their training program may lead apart from an immediate anticipated job (NCVER, 2000). This underscores the importance of developing a broader lifelong perspective to education, training and employment whereby individuals are given appropriate guidance and support at key transition points in their lives – particularly disadvantaged students and their families, who may struggle to overcome negative experiences of learning in the past.

¹² Compared to its major competitors. 41% of people aged 24-65 in Australia have not completed Year 12 or an equivalent level of education, compared with 24% in New Zealand, 18% in Canada, 17% in the UK and 13% in the USA. Source: *Government's Working Together – A New Approach to Workforce Skills for a More Prosperous Australia*. Report commissioned by the Premier of Victoria for the Council of Australian Governments, May 2005.

4. Response to Terms of Reference

Short-term outcomes

Our short-term outcomes are directed towards facilitating the participation of greater numbers of disadvantaged children and young people and their families in education and learning through the LfL suite of programs. With regard to VET initiatives such as the ATCs, our research has shown that three factors in particular are very important in ensuring equitable participation: Providing adequate financial assistance; ensuring students from all SES backgrounds have equitable access to educational opportunities such as the ATCs; and engaging family and community members in the interests of sustainability. Analysis of the documentation released to the public regarding the ATCs suggests that at this stage there is still room to strengthen each of these three factors in order to maximize the short-term outcomes of its potential students.

Providing adequate financial assistance

The Smith Family has produced a number of reports over the years exploring the various financial, educational and technological barriers that disadvantaged students face in participating throughout the education system (The Smith Family, 2005; 2004; 2003; 2002b; 2002c; 2001). With regard to VET, external research has revealed similar trends. For example, the majority of students in one survey viewed the costs of VET courses at TAFE institutions as either 'very important' or 'important' when making the decision whether or not to enrol (DEST, 2004a). Study costs – including course fees, textbooks and material fees – are all 'up-front' costs that can amount to over \$600 on average for a full-time student (DEST, 2004a). This is before taking into account additional costs for transport to and from the campus. Our research (The Smith Family, 2003) has shown that low-income households devote much less of their budgets to education than medium and high-SES groups, which means that despite its popular image as the inexpensive alternative to university, VET can still present significant financial challenges from the perspective of disadvantaged students.

These financial barriers will continue to apply in the proposed ATCs, even those non-compulsory contributions that are levied by government schools for items such as course materials and field trips. Our research (The Smith Family, 2002a) has shown that many students are forced to miss out on school excursions and special events because of these costs, with parents feeling anxious about not being able to provide the uniform and 'extras' that other children can enjoy. Avoiding this kind of marginalization of low SES students from mainstream school communities has been a key objective of The Smith Family's *Learning for Life* suite of programs, based on evidence that shows students who are able to more fully participate in these additional-cost activities show signs of better adjustment and academic progress, with the improvement mainly due to increased self-esteem (The Smith Family, 2002b). That these non-compulsory contributions may continue to isolate some students in the ATCs is therefore a matter for concern.

This is further compounded by the possibility of non-government schools who successfully tender to run an ATC charging fees equivalent to those in place for regular students. For private schools such as Trinity Grammar School in NSW, which has submitted a tender to run an ATC, this is currently more than \$15,000 a year for senior students – far beyond the budgets of disadvantaged families.¹³ Depending on the mix of public and private schools that are successful in their bids, it is therefore unclear exactly how many of the 24 ATCs could immediately exclude low SES students in this way. Nowhere in the Bill or associated documentation is a critical or desired balance of government and non-government run ATCs expressed, and there is consequently a very real possibility that the needs of less-financially able students will be

¹³ Burke, K. (2005) 'Technical Colleges in limbo after student charges claim'. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, June 17 2005.

overlooked altogether. This represents a significant missed opportunity, for although the ATC has never been presented as an initiative specifically targeted at the disadvantaged, the 24 regions that have been specified for college locations (see Appendix A) include many that exhibit high or above average levels of relative disadvantage using the Australian Bureau of Statistics 'SEIFA' indicator.¹⁴ Moreover, it remains unclear why the Colleges would be located in areas of high youth unemployment if they were not intending to attract this demographic as participating students.

On a related note, although the ATC Bill makes provision for students to access government forms of income support payments (such as the Youth Allowance) while attending the ATCs, doubts remain as to the adequacy of such assistance. It has been argued in a recent Senate assessment that 'The current level of [student] income support does not come to close to providing students with a decent living wage to cover the cost of accommodation, food, bills and transport' and that 'various anomalies and inconsistencies with the eligibility criteria penalise students who are most in need of financial assistance' (Senate, 2005). These apparent loopholes in student financial support need attention to provide sufficient support not merely for ATC candidates, but for students within the education system as whole.

Ensuring equitable educational opportunities for students

As an organisation involved in the promotion of community capacity across the population, The Smith Family (TSF) operates on the basis of research that shows education as critical in promoting an active and inclusive citizenry. While most societies throughout history have recognised the importance of education, divisions of class or socioeconomic status, rather than ability, have in many instances skewed access and participation in educational and learning processes toward the more advantaged (Teese & Polesel, 2003). As a recent OECD report has shown, students with favourable background characteristics¹⁵ tend to receive better conditions of schooling in Australia, contributing to a high degree of variance and inequality in student performance and school quality (OECD, 2005). Although the concept and system of mass education has become a widely accepted norm, this lack of equity of opportunity within and around the education system continues to ensure that financial disadvantage and exclusion are often intergenerational phenomena among disadvantaged Australians. 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,¹⁶ students from disadvantaged backgrounds are continually identified as having disproportionately high rates of early school leaving.¹⁷ 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

¹⁴ SEIFA (Socio-Economic Indexes For Areas) is a tool developed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics using data derived from the 2001 Census of Population and Housing. It provides a range of measures to rank areas based on their relative social and economic well-being, where low values indicate areas of disadvantage, and high values indicate areas of advantage. Among the list of regions targeted for the Australian Technical Colleges, Sunshine (VIC) scored a value of 1, Northern Tasmania scored a value of 2 and Whyalla/Port Augusta (SA) scored a value of 3. A total of 7 further sites selected for the Colleges scored between 5 and 6, which indicates that a considerable number of the locations are areas of relative disadvantage. For more, see www.abs.gov.au.

¹⁵ 'Background characteristics' are understood in the context of the report as comprising parent's occupational status, immigrant status, gender and socioeconomic status. For more on this, see OECD (2005).

¹⁶ 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).

¹⁷ 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.

(OECD, 2005). In most cases, it is a combination of many factors. However, the issue remains that those 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 ATC Discussion Paper remarks that the Colleges will be suited above all to 'capable and committed' students (DEST, 2005a:1), suggesting that successful candidates for the limited places at each College will need a certain level of proven ability and confidence that the path they have chosen is right for them. In addition to the early school leavers discussed above, our research (The Smith Family, 2005; 2004; 2003; 2002a; 2001; 2000) has shown that children from low SES families have lower levels of literacy, numeracy and comprehension, are more likely to have difficulties with their studies, and more likely to exhibit higher levels of problematic school behaviour (e.g. truancy). These findings alone raise concerns as to whether low SES students will fail to fit the 'capable and committed' benchmarks (as yet unspecified) of the ATC recruitment process. Some may miss out altogether if the promotion of the ATCs is limited to targeted 'feeder schools' (the criteria for which remain unspecified). Research has shown that teachers at schools with higher levels of disadvantaged students often hold lower expectations of their students and may be less motivated in their teaching and career counselling as a consequence. This can impact detrimentally on students' perceptions of self-ability and self-worth, both of which have been shown by our research to be strongly influential in decisions regarding participation in Years 11, 12 and beyond (The Smith Family, 2005). It is therefore hoped that the ATCs will make particular effort to attract and engage with schools and students of all SES levels in their region to ensure equitable opportunity for this new education initiative.

Engaging family and community members

Our research has consistently shown a positive correlation between the level of family and community engagement in the educational process and the motivation of students to continue learning (The Smith Family, 2003, 2004, 2005). Establishing the value of learning among parents and communities, particularly among those where historically participation in education may be low or negative, is a critical part of creating a wider network of support for students outside of the school. The active engagement of interest groups such as employers, family members and civil society groups will ensure that the expectations and demands they hold with regard to education and training within their community will be more attuned to the outcomes of students. Given that curricula, skills and social values continue to evolve over time through national and international influences, ensuring the involvement of the wider community in the planning and/or management of local education opportunities will help the prosperity of the region as a whole. Having a greater degree of local autonomy in determining school policies, financial resources, curricula and instruction has also been associated with better school performance in many OECD countries (OECD, 2005).

The ATC initiative seeks to fulfil two important functions: firstly, to raise the profile and status of vocational pathways among schools and communities as genuine career options for students; and secondly, to respond to recognized skills shortages through establishing stronger employment links between local industry bases and their communities. Studies have shown that students, parents and career advisers have for some time shared the perception that VET is for the 'non-academically oriented' student, and that VET subjects are 'less intellectually demanding', and 'more likely taken for enjoyment and as a break from a more rigorous academic load' than for any other reason (Alloway et al, 2004; NCVER, 2000). Misconceptions such as these, exacerbated by poor community engagement and the continued promotion of university degrees as 'real' learning, have often jeopardised students' motivation and abilities to translate their VET experience into sustainable employment outcomes. Moreover, the lack of institutionalised bridges between vocational training, apprenticeship and tertiary education has further reduced the likelihood of students on either path fully understanding the flexibility or range of their options, and increased their chances of withdrawal or non-completion.

The political impact of the ATCs is therefore important in promoting an area of education that has until now been comparatively undervalued and not always considered as seriously as other opportunities. However, the overriding emphasis on responding to local industry needs and identified national skills shortages has left few platforms for students, their parent/guardians and the non-business oriented community to engage directly with the initiative. This is in spite of stated intentions that the Colleges will be '*very much part of their local community*' (DEST, 2005a:1). As Ryan (2001) observes, this tendency of VET to over-preference business interests and devalue the role of individual students and communities is quite common, but in many instances is harmful to student outcomes. Our research (The Smith Family, 2002b) has also shown that in making career and education-related decisions, around 75% of students from disadvantaged backgrounds turn to their parents or wider family, as opposed to a career counsellor (19%), a teacher (26%) or friends (27%). This suggests a relatively high degree of trust and support between parents and their children, and reflects The Smith Family's dual generational approach of providing information and support not just to students but to their parents as well.

The current strategy of recruiting students for the ATCs, which is suggested as being a mix of information evenings at schools in the middle of Year 10 and continuous promotion by teachers at potential 'feeder schools', could be strengthened in this respect. Documentation on the ATC initiative produced to date does not specify any significant role to individual parents or parent organizations in the planning phase or on the Colleges' Governing Bodies, which are to be chaired by a representative of local business or industry and be drawn from schools, universities, TAFEs and private enterprises. In light of the evidence cited above, it is recommended that more opportunities be provided to engage with the knowledge capacity of parents in the spirit of creating a stronger sense of community ownership and sustainability.

Medium Term Outcomes

The importance of quality career guidance and support

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 pathways through the school to work transition, with at least a third of students in Years 8 and 9 exhibiting difficulty in matching their educational paths to their preferred career (The Smith Family, 2005).¹⁸ Those from disadvantaged backgrounds in particular 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 (The Smith Family, 2004; NCVET, 2000). Moreover, the ability of disadvantaged groups to identify their training needs and be proactive in negotiating with training providers has been questioned (Kilpatrick, 2003).

Even without taking into account the Government's expectation that each of the ATCs will specialise in a particular trade from pre-determined industries, these findings point to the critical need for students to access quality, learner-centred guidance and support before enrolling and throughout their learning within the Colleges. While the ATC Bill does provide for 'a *qualified career advisor*', the evidence suggests that these kinds of advisory services – whether classroom or counsellor based – are often marginalised and/or misconceived within schools. For example, research by The Smith Family has shown that ability, gender and vocational orientation are strong influences on the formation of post-school plans among Year 9 students, but that the curricula and support provided to them in making choices is not responsive to these emphases (The Smith Family, 2004). More effort is needed to tailor the content and delivery of career information to student capacities and interests (as suggested in Appendix B).

This is particularly important in light of the Colleges' intention to provide graduates with a nationally recognized VET qualification (School-Based New Apprenticeship) *and* a Year 12 Certificate. These elements, which are not usually available to students within a single package or in this relatively balanced proportion, are included so that students achieve both 'a *strong foundation for a trade... [and] keep open the option of going on to university*'.¹⁹ This raises two associated questions: what kind of students would be suited to the Colleges, and what impact will this mix of academic and vocational education have on their transition from school to work / further study?

From a review of the official documentation on the Colleges, the messages expressed as to why students would choose ATCs as opposed to TAFE or the option of remaining in their present school for Years 11 and 12 are somewhat confusing and potentially contradictory. On the one hand, the Discussion Paper sets out a strong bias towards VET-oriented outcomes through asserting that the Colleges will attract 'capable and committed students who want to pursue a career in trades such as engineering, automotive, construction, electrical and commercial cookery' (DEST, 2005a:1). These five trades are non-negotiable, although the Discussion Paper concedes that 'there could be scope to offer additional trades in industries beyond those identified' conditional to their being 'identified areas of skills shortage' and 'important to the local industry base'. In other words, the Colleges' curricula will be very heavily driven (and therefore restricted) by industry-related priorities defined in the broader economy, rather than the potentially divergent and shifting needs of its students. This is reinforced by the 'expectation' that all

¹⁸ In response to this problem and the lack of appropriate career guidance/information available to many disadvantaged students, The Smith Family operates the 'eXLR8' mentoring program, designed to promote the successful school to work transition of financially disadvantaged students undertaking vocational education. The students receive a financial scholarship that covers course fees and some additional costs, and are matched with a mentor working in their field of interest. For more information, see www.smithfamily.com.au.

¹⁹ DEST (2005) *Australian Technical Colleges – A Discussion Paper*, p9.

students at the Colleges will commence a School-Based New Apprenticeship (SBNA) as ‘soon as possible, at the beginning of the academic year or even during the summer break preceding the start of Year 11’.²⁰ This is effectively encouraging students to commit themselves to a particular SBNA (and thereby, career trajectory) before their formal matriculation into the College and most likely before they have had the opportunity to assess the full range of options.

The reason why students are encouraged to undertake the SBNA’s so early is because these teaching components will typically stretch beyond the two years of schooling provided by the College – in most cases for another 12-24 months. Upon graduation therefore, students may be equipped with a Year 12 Certificate but will only possess half (or more likely less) of their anticipated VET qualification. From this point onwards, students are expected to complete the remainder of their trade training as full-time New Apprentices under a designated employer, with the Colleges required to provide ‘strong support’. This means that students who apply to an ATC are effectively committing themselves to a lot more (both financially and in terms of educational trajectory) than the two years of schooling provided by the Colleges. Those that choose to finish their training will also typically be required to remain in the local area because of the ATCs’ emphasis on linking its students to local employers. In this way, the apparent flexibility offered to students in combining both academic and vocational paths within the Colleges may actually work to eventually restrict rather than expand their options and potential outcomes upon graduation. It is perhaps for this reason that the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (2005) warned that:

The ATC option is not suited to students who are still deciding in which industry they will work in the future. It is for students who, with their parents, have made a clear decision to seek an employment outcome while continuing their school studies.

Nowhere in the formal documentation surrounding the ATC initiative is this critical component of candidature stated (at least with equivalent clarity), and this reinforces the absolute importance of potential students being able to access clear and accurate career guidance *before committing* as to whether the ATC is a suitable option for them. Granted, the Discussion Paper notes that ‘*it will be necessary to have strong, complementary career advice arrangements in ‘feeder schools’*’ (10), but does not make clear how these will be set up or monitored.

The feasibility of students changing their mind and being able to transfer between SBNAs and other course components is not mentioned in the ATC documentation, and appears to be a matter left to the discretion of each individual College. Research suggests that ensuring flexibility in this context - particularly with regard to the SBNAs – would significantly strengthen the retention of students who encounter difficulty in the Colleges, for traditional trade apprenticeships currently exhibit extremely high rates of withdrawal and non-completion across students from all backgrounds (DEST, 2004b). Reasons for this include factors such as wrong choice of course or subject, poor preparation, lack of readiness or commitment and poor pay conditions (McInnis *et al*, 2000). The role of the career advisor provided for within each College will become very important in supporting students who experience this kind of difficulty, and may prove a valuable tool in negotiating flexibility, particularly in light of the restrictions placed on the curricula mentioned earlier. The career advisor may also be crucial in assisting ATC graduates onto tertiary education pathways as the variation across states in the actual mix of academic and vocational subjects which can be undertaken at senior secondary level, and which can lead to eligible tertiary entry, could present unforeseen barriers.

²⁰ Quotation taken from the response to Question 6d in the FAQ section of the official ATC website, www.australiantechnicalcolleges.gov.au .

Long term outcomes

The benefits of adopting a lifelong learning approach

Educators need to recognise the constantly changing skill requirements of industry. What may be relevant to an enterprise's skill needs today may have no bearing on that same enterprise's skill needs in five years time. There is no point in providing learning opportunities to young people if the outcomes of these learning opportunities are not relevant to the workplace by the time the young person makes the transition from school to work.²¹

Over the last few decades, the nature of work and the contribution of VET in preparing individuals for employment have changed considerably in line with the emergence of the new knowledge economy. Within this context, the concept of lifelong learning²² has become increasingly important as a strategy through which the flexibility demanded by the labour market may be realised. 'Learning' is here construed in the broadest possible terms and relates to learning undertaken in both formal and informal education settings, including VET.

The key factor in defining a lifelong learner is not, however, the type of education or training in which they are involved, but the personal characteristics that lead to such involvement. Lifelong learners must have the motivation and capacity to learn, in any type of setting, with any type of teacher, or simply by themselves. These are different to the enterprise education, small business and employability skills that the ATC will provide, and that the Discussion Paper believes will be enough 'to succeed in a competitive business environment' (DEST, 2005a:9). Their development begins in early childhood (0-5 years), when individuals undergo significant transformations in their physical health and wellbeing, social knowledge and competence, emotional health, language and cognition, and communication. Research has shown that supporting children during this period greatly increases their chances of better learning outcomes and more successful life transitions later on (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Shonkoff & Meisels, 2000; Keating & Hertzman, 1999). This has informed The Smith Family's involvement in early childhood intervention as a component of lifelong learning for a number of years, and our commitment to this developmental phase has been most recently expressed in our role as a facilitating partner for the Australian Government's *Communities for Children* initiative.²³

An ATC presents an important opportunity to introduce (or further develop) an orientation to lifelong learning among its students at a critical point in their transition from school to work / further education. This is particularly so for disadvantaged students, whose parents / families are considerably less likely to have had the kind of early childhood support that research has now recognised as so critical to successful long-term outcomes (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Shonkoff & Meisels, 2000). The key values associated with lifelong learning (such as personal agency, self-confidence and information literacy²⁴) are also highly relevant to positive short-term outcomes in helping students manage the multitude of academic and vocational elements demanded during College attendance and post-graduation in completing their SBNA. Yet while the benefits of

²¹ Australian Industry Group Submission, quoted in Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2004.

²² From the perspective of The Smith Family, 'lifelong learning' refers to an orientation that encourages engagement with learning, and the development of characteristics that will make learning an integral part of the learner's life (Bryce & Withers, 2003, quoted in The Smith Family, 2004).

²³ Refer to footnote 5 for details of the *Communities for Children* program.

²⁴ Information literacy means that students must have the skills to explore information independently, know how to evaluate a source of information, how to collect, analyse and organise information from multiple sources and how to interrogate information. For more on the characteristics of lifelong learning, see The Smith Family, 2004.

lifelong learning are clear, understanding how to impart and inspire these values among students is not (The Smith Family, 2004). The benchmarks depend less on satisfying specific curriculum criteria (or achieving a particular employment outcome, as emphasised in the ATC goals), and more on helping students to develop a sense of responsibility, confidence and motivation towards their own learning. Conceptualising lifelong learning as more of a perspective than a particular educational system in this way allows for the cultivation of these qualities in a number of formal and informal environments, through a range of subjects and using a variety of teaching methodologies.

For example, The Smith Family's *Learning for Life* suite of programs has suggested that teaching information technology skills (as the ATCs intend to do) can prove a very successful platform to inspire this kind of self-direction and motivation for lifelong learning among students. Since February 2004, The Smith Family has operated as Microsoft's key alliance partner in Australia for the Microsoft Unlimited Potential (UP) program. UP is a global initiative designed to improve lifelong learning for disadvantaged young people and adults by providing technology skills training through Community Technology Learning Centres (CTLs).²⁵ A critical part of these centres is the cultivation of a relaxed and informal environment in which to learn. Lessons / training may be given either in a classroom-style setting, or as part of a self-paced learning program for those who feel more confident working alone. Participants are encouraged to explore their own personal interests or 'fields of fascination' and are given support by staff on using the range of ICT skills that may be relevant to these interests or their lives in general (see Case Study below). These can range from typing a letter to a friend, to creating Curriculum Vitae for a job application – the point is that ICT is largely incidental to the overriding aim of helping participants see themselves as learners with the motivation and self-direction to continue this learning in the future.

Unlimited Potential in Australia – Case Study

James is a very bright nine year old who attends a Smith Family UP Centre. His mother is a single mum who receives financial and non-financial support from The Smith Family's Learning for Life program. They live in a Housing Commission property close to an UP Centre. Mary, like many others, aspires to move out of the Housing Commission flat and own her own home.

James and Mary cannot afford to have a computer at home. Together they come to the weekly Computer Club at the CTL. James undertakes school-related tasks on the computer as a first priority. When these are completed, he develops other IT skills under the direction of a Smith Family Tutor. The group is aimed primarily at children but parents are encouraged to stay and experiment with the technology. Mary is learning at a slower pace that suits her and she is making exciting progress. She is a volunteer at a local community agency and believes that if she can develop her computer and office skills, she could get part time work. In addition, she knows that if her skills improve, she will be able to volunteer at the local Financial Community Co-op and qualify for a discounted home loan. Her dream of owning her own home may then become a reality.

For more information on the Unlimited Potential program, contact:

Roger Boot, Senior Project Manager (02) 9085 7142

²⁵ There are currently more than 120 CTLs operating in both rural and urban areas across Australia, each of which is 'a free or low cost, friendly place (in a community centre, school, library, housing facility or other convenient location) where people of all ages and abilities can come to learn about computers, use the internet, explore new careers, further their education, participate in community activities or develop technology skills'. Source: America Connects, www.americaconnects.org, viewed 5 March 2004.



Equipping learners with the capacity and motivation to look at employment not as an end in itself but as a means to fuller and more active participation in society is a key strategy behind the approach to lifelong learning driving the UP program. It is also a perspective that would considerably strengthen the long term outcomes of students who engage with the ATCs, which are at present focused above all on meeting the shorter-term needs of particular trades and industries. Prioritising lifelong learning more explicitly across the ATC framework will therefore help graduates move beyond filling isolated skills deficits to contributing more effectively within a flexible, confident and committed workforce.

5. Recommendations

The Smith Family is ultimately concerned with societal change. At a program implementation level, The Smith Family aims to increase the personal and collective resources of individuals, families and communities to help them develop skills and capacities they need to respond to challenges and more fully participate in society. Furthering opportunity for Australians to successfully access, and participate in, VET may be seen as an asset-building, as opposed to a deficit-bridging, response to the incidence of financial disadvantage and social exclusion in our community. Furthermore, successful participation in education is a vital foundation in enabling Australians to become lifelong learners, sufficiently equipped to adjust to changing circumstances across the life course.

The Australian Government has an important opportunity through these proposed Australian Technical Colleges to contribute to a vocational education and training system that puts the needs of students and their communities first. Equitable access and participation need to be driving factors in goals and targets established through the modernisation of existing policy, so that VET can be brought closer to its democratic potential in creating a society where learning is both valued and open to all socioeconomic groups. The Smith Family recognises that government initiatives such as the ATCs must be complemented and supported by the efforts of a larger society that involves individuals, families, communities, businesses, organisations and institutions. To this end, the following recommendations are for consideration in this context, recognising the desirability of all working usefully together towards mutually agreed outcomes.

The Smith Family recommends:

General recommendations:

- That all initiatives within the vocational education and training sector directly or indirectly facilitate more equitable access to VET as part of a lifelong learning pathway in which disadvantaged groups within society may fully participate.
- That continuous and systematic evaluation mechanisms regarding policy and program outcomes are integrated across all stakeholder levels within the ATC initiative (student, teacher, local business etc.) to further facilitate evidence-based strategies.
- That all initiatives within the VET sector recognise the importance of early childhood development in influencing subsequent educational outcomes and the transition from home to school, school to work and back from work to further education / different employment.
- That further research be conducted to explore the variable outcomes and participation of disadvantaged groups within the ATC initiative, and that particular efforts be made to understand and minimize the various financial, educational and technological barriers that may hinder their full participation.

Maximising short-term outcomes:

- That the Government take steps to provide adequate and accessible financial assistance for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who wish to enrol at an ATC, while rectifying anomalies that may currently exist within the student income support system.
- That the ATCs adopt a flexible and inclusive approach to the recruitment of students from all SES backgrounds, ensuring equitable application processes and opportunities that are reflective of the needs and socioeconomic characteristics of the region.
- That a broad range of community stakeholders from all SES levels, including family members and civil society groups be given formal opportunities to participate in the planning, management and evaluation of an ATC in their area, in order to maximise local relevance, ownership and responsibility for learning.

Maximising medium-term outcomes:

- That students and their parents/guardians are able to access appropriate information, guidance and support regarding the ATC initiative and the navigable pathways across the school to work transition as a whole, ensuring that the promotional aspects of the Colleges (e.g. feeder schools) make clear the type of commitment that is required by students who wish to participate.
- That clear and coherent bridges between the ATCs and alternative further education pathways (e.g. local universities, TAFEs) be created to allow graduates unwilling to pursue their SBNA to continue learning elsewhere.
- That further research be conducted around the factors influencing the relatively high rates of withdrawal and non-completion within the VET sector, particularly with regard to the type of traditional trade apprenticeships offered by the ATCs.
- That safety nets are installed at the College and community levels to offer appropriate financial or psychological support to those who do decide to leave an ATC early, and that opportunities for these individuals to enter alternative VET pathways or re-enter higher education are formalised within the administration and curricula of ATCs without stigmatisation.

Maximising long-term outcomes:

- That ATC policy and providers recognise the important role the VET sector plays in the promotion and facilitation of lifelong learning across the community, and that all teaching methodologies are consistent with the lifelong learning outcomes of developing capacity in self-direction and motivated engagement among learners.
- That a more learner-centred (as opposed to employer or industry-centred) approach be adopted within the ATC initiative to facilitate a more diverse and appropriate range of learning structures for students of mixed ability and background.

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Appendix A

Regions specified for Australian Technical Colleges

Australian Technical Colleges are to be located in the following regions. It is expected that there will be one College only per region.

NEW SOUTH WALES

The Hunter	Lismore / Ballina	The Illawarra	Dubbo
Queanbeyan	Gosford	Port Macquarie	Western Sydney

VICTORIA

Geelong	Sunshine	Warrnambool	Bairnsdale/Sale
Bendigo	Eastern Melbourne		

QUEENSLAND

Townsville	North Brisbane	Gladstone	Gold Coast
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SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Adelaide	Whyalla / Port Augusta
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TASMANIA

Northern Tasmania

NORTHERN TERRITORY

Darwin

Source: Australian Department of Education, Science & Training (2005) *Request for Proposal for the Establishment and Operation of 24 Australian Technical Colleges in 2006, 2007 and 2008*. Amended 7 April 2005.

Appendix B

Suggestions from students for improving the quality, quantity and accessibility of VET courses and providers

With respect to the quantity of information, the most frequent suggestions were that more information should be provided about:

- course structure, organisation and content (14%); and
- course completion rates and outcomes (primarily relating to jobs/careers) (6%).

With respect to the quality of information, the most frequent suggestions were to provide:

- simpler/clearer/less jargonistic information (7%);
- more consistent/comparable information about courses/providers and outcomes (4%); and
- more accurate and up-to-date information about courses/providers (4%).

With respect to improving the accessibility of information, the most frequent suggestions were to provide:

- more/better course/provider information on websites (provider and/or systemic) (20%);
- more advertising and promotion (newspapers, television, brochures, posters) (14%);
- more interactive use of ICT, particularly emailing of information to clients (4%); and
- more/better information provision by teaching staff (3%).

Almost one in ten (9%) suggested that a single and integrated source of information (mainly online and/or print-based, physical information centre) about all available VET courses and providers should be established. The strong emphasis on strategies to improve online information provision reflects the growing trend, noted earlier, for individuals to use the Internet as their preferred medium for information-searching in choice-making processes.

Source:

Anderson, D. (2003) 'Individual Learners: Choice and Lifelong Learning'. Paper presented at the Monash University/ACER Centre for the Economics of Education and Training Conference on 'Strategic Directions for VET'. 15 September 2003, Ascot House, Melbourne.