



*everyone's family*

26 November 2010

Sue Beitz, Head of Secretariat  
Skills Australia Secretariat  
GPO Box 9880  
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Dear Ms Beitz

**Re: Creating a future direction for Australian vocational education and training (VET)**

It is my pleasure to provide a response to Skills Australia's consultation on the future direction of the vocational education and training (VET) sector in Australia. The consultation's focus on the quality of VET, participation and outcomes is of particular relevance to The Smith Family's (TSF) mission to utilise education to unlock opportunities for disadvantaged children and their families to participate more fully in Australian society.

TSF has been working with disadvantaged Australian families for nearly 90 years. This experience has deepened our understanding of the complex and pervasive nature of disadvantage and the considerable challenges faced by disadvantaged people. In 2009/10, TSF continued its longstanding support of student success in tertiary education and transitions to work, including:

- Providing scholarships to 1,600 tertiary students to support VET and university studies;
- Matching 394 tertiary students with career mentors; and,
- Providing Partnership Broker services in six service regions across Queensland, New South Wales, and Northern Territory<sup>1</sup>.

As noted in the consultation discussion paper and previous reports<sup>2</sup>, structural changes in the global economy are reshaping the Australian labour market – creating increasing demand for highly skilled workers within a more dynamic labour market characterised by accelerating changes in technology and jobs. The VET sector is well-positioned to simultaneously respond to evolving labour market needs and strengthen participation by disadvantaged Australians. In the attached submission, we have outlined specific measures to support these reforms such as more flexible course structures, clarifying training and career pathways, and strengthening workplace experience, mentoring support and performance indicators.

The majority of the recommendations in our submission can be linked to one of two overarching issues relating to the sector's ability to expand and its relevance: engaging disadvantaged Australians, and balancing short and long-term skills needs.

---

<sup>1</sup> Part of the National Partnership on Youth Attainment and Transitions, funded by DEEWR

<sup>2</sup> Martin, Bill. (2009). *Skill acquisition and use across the life course: Current trends, future prospects*. National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER).

### *Engaging disadvantaged Australians*

Skills Australia has estimated that VET enrolments need to increase by 3 per cent annually for the next 15 years in order to meet the skills targets from the Council of Australian Governments<sup>3</sup>. Increasing participation amongst low socioeconomic status students and disadvantaged Australians is the most obvious way to directly support this goal.

TSF works in 95 disadvantaged communities across Australia, partnering with a range of corporate, community and educational institutions to break the cycle of disadvantage. Through this experience, TSF has gained a strong understanding of the significant challenges faced by disadvantaged people (e.g., teen mothers, single parents, remote communities) and experience designing education programs that are sensitive to these challenges. We are therefore well-positioned to advise and support reforms that seek to strengthen engagement with disadvantaged groups.

### *Balancing short and long-term skills needs*

Short-term outcomes such as successful transitions to work and skill utilisation are important and should be one of the key drivers of curriculum and training pathways. However, within the context of fast-paced technological and labour force changes, long-term outcomes also need to be considered. Reforms balancing short and long-term interests of both industry and students will best ensure a relevant sustainable sector that supports economic growth and participation.

Over the last 10 years, TSF's experience designing and implementing education programs has achieved this balance in the primary and secondary settings. Examples include the identification and development of literacies (e.g., comprehension, digital literacy, intercultural literacy) that research has identified as essential to participating fully in society and succeeding in our increasingly global world and dynamic workforce. We are now actively exploring ways to integrate these essential literacies into educational programming in the tertiary setting. For example, we are currently developing a pilot financial and emotional literacy program for tertiary students in partnership with AXA AsiaPacific. As structural reforms to the VET sector consider what essential skills are required to succeed in today's, and tomorrow's, working world, I encourage you to tap into our experience and expertise in this area.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the discussion paper and support this important initiative. If you have any questions about TSF's submission or would like to discuss any aspect in further detail I encourage you to contact Wendy Field, Executive Director of Participation at [Wendy.Field@thesmithfamily.com.au](mailto:Wendy.Field@thesmithfamily.com.au) or 02 9085 7192.

Yours Sincerely



Elaine Henry  
Chief Executive Officer

---

<sup>3</sup> Increasing the proportion of people with qualifications at Certificate III level or higher and doubling the number of higher qualification completions by 2020.