

POLICY PAPER

A National Framework for Lifelong Career Guidance in Australia

The Case for Action: Why Australia Cannot Afford to Wait

Prepared by
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Executive Summary

Australia does not have a national policy framework for lifelong career guidance. This is not a minor administrative gap. It represents a structural failure to support Australians at every stage of their working and learning lives, and it places Australia increasingly out of step with the sustained policy investment being made by comparable nations.

Globally, the case for systemic career guidance investment has never been stronger or better evidenced. The European Union's 2026 reference framework for lifelong guidance, developed by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) with the support of the European Commission and contributions from the European Training Foundation and the International Labour Organization, provides 18 evidence-based guidelines spanning career management skills, access, quality assurance, governance, workforce professionalism, and digital systems. It draws on the work of the inter-agency Working Group on Career Guidance and reflects decades of accumulated policy learning across 27 member states, representing the most comprehensive international benchmark currently available.

Australia has capable career development practitioners, internationally respected professional standards, a growing Register of Professional Career Development Practitioners, and a refreshed Australian Blueprint for Career Development. What is missing is the national policy architecture that would give these assets purpose, coherence, funding, and cross-sectoral reach.

This paper makes the case for that architecture. It examines the evidence base for lifelong career guidance, identifies the specific gaps in Australia’s current approach, draws on the Cedefop framework and other international comparators, and presents a set of practical recommendations for national policymakers.

Core Recommendation

The Australian Government, in collaboration with state and territory governments and the career development sector, should develop and adopt a **National Lifelong Career Guidance Framework**. This framework should establish shared goals, cross-portfolio governance structures, funding commitments, quality standards, and a research and evaluation agenda. It should be grounded in Australia’s existing assets and benchmarked against international best practice.

1. The Problem: A Nation Without a Framework

1.1 What Lifelong Career Guidance Is

Lifelong career guidance refers to the full range of activities and services that help individuals, at any age and stage of life, to understand their own capacities and interests, to access reliable information about learning and work opportunities, to develop the skills needed to navigate complex career decisions, and to manage the transitions that characterise modern working lives. It is not confined to school-based career education, nor to job-placement services for the unemployed. It encompasses everything from career learning in primary school to support for mid-career workers managing technological disruption, to guidance for older adults considering re-engagement with the workforce.

The Cedefop framework defines lifelong guidance as enabling individuals ‘at any age and at any stage of life to identify their capacities, competences and interests, to make educational, training and occupational decisions and to manage their individual life paths in learning, work and other settings.’ This is, at its core, a citizenship service, one that affects productivity, equity, individual wellbeing, and social cohesion.

1.2 The Current State in Australia

Australia currently provides career-related services through a patchwork of disconnected arrangements. School-based career education is inconsistently delivered across states and territories, with no national curriculum framework, no consistent resourcing model, and significant variation in the qualifications of those delivering it. Employment services delivered through federal contracting arrangements are primarily focused on job placement rather than sustained career development. Higher education career services operate institution by institution, with no national standards or quality framework. Career guidance for workers, for those managing transitions in mid-career, and for older adults is largely absent from public policy settings.

There is no national coordinating body or forum with a mandate to align these elements. There is no shared definition of what career guidance services should achieve. There is no evidence framework for measuring outcomes. There is no national funding model that treats career guidance as a policy investment with measurable returns.

What exists instead is a series of siloed arrangements, each addressing a particular population in a particular context, with little coherence between them and no overarching vision of what Australians should be able to access across their lifetimes.

1.3 The Cost of Inaction

The absence of a national framework is not a neutral position. It has real costs, for individuals, for the labour market, and for the public purse.

At the individual level, Australians who lack access to quality career guidance are more likely to make poorly informed education and training choices, less likely to successfully navigate labour market transitions, and more vulnerable to long-term unemployment and underemployment. The evidence consistently shows that effective career guidance reduces time on income support, improves education completion rates, and supports more productive skills matching.

The scale of the problem is measurable. In its 2025 Occupation Shortage List, Jobs and Skills Australia assessed 273 of the 916 occupations examined, around 30 per cent, as being in national shortage (Jobs and Skills Australia, 2025b). At the same time, young people are disengaging from work and study: in May 2024, 8.5 per cent of people aged 15 to 24, around 288,000, were not in employment, education or training, up from 7.7 per cent a year earlier (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2025). The coexistence of widespread shortages with this level of disengagement points to a matching problem that better career guidance is well placed to address.

Why those shortages persist reinforces the point. Jobs and Skills Australia found that the most common driver, affecting health, teaching and construction trades roles, is a shortage of qualified applicants, while a further group of shortages, including many engineering and management roles, reflects a suitability gap in which qualified applicants are available but are seen to lack employability skills and work experience (Jobs and Skills Australia, 2025b). Both patterns turn on whether people are supported to choose suitable training pathways and to develop the capabilities that make qualifications count.

At the systemic level, Australia's current approach contributes to the skills mismatches and labour market inefficiencies that constrain productivity and economic growth. The OECD's review of career guidance in Australia and comparable nations has repeatedly identified the absence of a coherent national framework as a structural weakness. As careers become longer, more non-linear, and more subject to technological disruption, the capacity to navigate them becomes increasingly important, and increasingly unequally distributed.

The difficulty begins early. The OECD's review of career guidance in Australia found that, while a higher share of Australian teenagers take part in career development activities than the OECD average, the availability of those activities varies between schools, across activity types, and in quality (OECD, 2023). Internationally, the OECD reports that by the age of 15, 39 per cent of students were unclear about their career expectations, roughly double the share of less than a decade earlier, and that one in three said school had not taught them things that would be useful in a job (OECD, 2025).

The consequences of inaction also fall most heavily on those least able to absorb them: young people without access to good school-based career education, adults in regions with limited service infrastructure, workers in industries undergoing rapid structural change, and the older Australians who are being asked to remain in the workforce longer but are given little support to do so productively. The same OECD review found that being not in employment, education or training in Australia is more common among young people with lower educational attainment, disability, and among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth (OECD, 2023).

2. The International Context: What Others Are Doing

2.1 The Cedefop Reference Framework

In 2026, Cedefop published a comprehensive reference framework for lifelong guidance across the European Union, building on policy investment that dates to Council resolutions in 2004 and 2008. The framework comprises 18 guidelines organised into three categories: nine transversal guidelines that apply across all sectors and contexts, seven sectoral guidelines addressing specific populations (school students,

VET learners, higher education students, adult learners, workers, the unemployed, and older adults), and two social inclusion guidelines addressing young people at risk and vulnerable groups.

The framework is significant not only for its comprehensiveness but for what it reflects: twenty years of sustained investment in career guidance policy across EU member states, supported by evidence-gathering, peer review, and shared governance. It represents the collective judgment of 27 governments, major international agencies, and the career development research community about what good lifelong guidance systems look like and what they require.

The nine transversal guidelines of the framework address: career management skills; access to guidance; quality assurance; evidence-based systems and policy development; governance and strategic leadership; career information; workforce professionalism; funding; and information and communications technology. These are not aspirational concepts. Each guideline includes a rationale grounded in evidence, a set of good practice indicators, and a curated bibliography of resources for policymakers. Together they constitute a practical policy toolkit.

Australia can learn from this framework without replicating it wholesale. Australia's federal structure, labour market conditions, and service delivery traditions differ from those of EU member states. But the underlying logic of the framework, that effective career guidance requires coherent governance, adequate and sustained funding, professional workforce standards, evidence-based practice, and universal access, applies here as directly as it does in Europe.

2.2 Other International Comparators

The Cedefop framework does not stand alone. Canada's Pan-Canadian Competency Framework for Career Development Professionals, developed by the Canadian Career Development Foundation with funding from the Government of Canada's Sectoral Initiatives Program, provides a comparable model for practitioner competencies and professional recognition. The United Kingdom's Career Development Institute publishes a Career Development Framework setting out the career development skills and learning outcomes that underpin career education for both young people and adults, and which is referenced in the Department for Education's statutory careers guidance. Scotland's Career Management Skills Framework, developed by Skills Development Scotland and aligned with the Curriculum for Excellence, demonstrates how career learning can be embedded systematically from early schooling.

Beyond Europe, the OECD's substantial body of work on career guidance, including its 2004 Career Guidance and Public Policy review, its 2021 report on career guidance for adults, and its 2024 analysis of career guidance and social inequality, consistently identifies the same set of policy levers: national strategy, cross-portfolio coordination, adequate funding, professional standards, and evaluation frameworks.

New Zealand has established a national careers system led by its Tertiary Education Commission, set out in its 2023 National Careers System Strategy, which created a cross-agency leadership function for the system. Ireland operated a National Centre for Guidance in Education as an agency of its Department of Education for over two decades, before its functions were reorganised in 2022. Singapore has embedded career guidance within its SkillsFuture national movement, led by SkillsFuture Singapore and Workforce Singapore. The common thread across these examples is political commitment expressed in institutional architecture, not merely in service delivery.

2.3 Where Australia Fits

Measured against any of these international benchmarks, Australia’s current position is poor. We have capable practitioners and credible professional standards, but no national policy framework to give them coherence or resource them adequately. We have research expertise in career development, but no national evidence framework to connect that expertise to policy decisions. We have existing services across multiple sectors, but no governance architecture to coordinate them or fill the gaps between them.

The Cedefop framework notes that even in Europe, ‘significant progress is still greatly needed’ and that ‘the uneven development of lifelong guidance systems makes it difficult to meet current policy and societal aims.’ If sustained, resourced, coordinated European systems still have significant ground to cover, the implications for an Australia that has not yet begun the coordinated phase of that journey are clear.

3. The Case for a National Framework

3.1 Career Guidance as Economic Policy

The economic case for public investment in career guidance is well established. The Cedefop framework summarises the relevant evidence under four headings: education and training outcomes (improved participation, completion, and progression); labour market outcomes (improved employability, earnings, job retention, and reduced unemployment duration); social inclusion outcomes (reduced long-term unemployment, improved social equity, and active ageing); and broader economic development outcomes (better skills matching, reduced skills shortages, and support for digital and green economic transitions).

Australia’s own productivity agenda depends on better skills matching and more efficient use of the workforce. The Jobs and Skills Australia analytical work, the National Skills Agreement, and successive intergenerational reports all identify workforce participation and skills development as central economic challenges. Career guidance is a direct enabler of progress on all of these. It is, in the terminology of the Cedefop framework, ‘a policy in its own right’ that simultaneously supports progress in education, employment, social inclusion, and economic development.

The structural direction of the labour market makes the point concrete. Jobs and Skills Australia projects that total employment will grow by close to two million people over the decade to May 2035, a 13.3 per cent increase that would take the workforce to 16.6 million (Jobs and Skills Australia, 2025a). More than nine in ten of those additional jobs are projected to be in occupations that typically require a post-secondary qualification, and more than half of the growth is in occupations requiring a bachelor degree or higher (Jobs and Skills Australia, 2025a). In a labour market where almost every new job demands a deliberate education or training choice, the capacity to make those choices well is not incidental to productivity. It is a precondition for it. Yet the same period shows persistent shortages alongside spare capacity, with national labour underutilisation sitting above 10 per cent (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2026). Guidance that helps people identify transferable skills, evaluate training options, and align their decisions with where demand is growing is a direct response to that inefficiency.

An investment in career guidance infrastructure is not a soft social expenditure. It is a productivity investment with demonstrable returns. The OECD and the inter-agency Working Group on Career Guidance (comprising Cedefop, the European Commission, the European Training Foundation, the ILO,

the OECD, the World Bank, and UNESCO) have all argued for sustained public investment on precisely these grounds.

3.2 Career Guidance as Social Policy

The case for career guidance as equity and inclusion policy is equally strong. Access to good career guidance is currently highly unequal in Australia. Young people in well-resourced schools with specialist career practitioners have access to a fundamentally different quality of support than those in under-resourced schools where career guidance is delivered incidentally by non-specialist staff. Adults in major cities have access to a different range of services than those in regional and remote areas. Workers in well-unionised industries with active professional development cultures have access to different career support than those in precarious employment or the gig economy.

These inequalities compound existing disadvantage. The Cedefop framework identifies, as a core operational principle, that ‘ease and equity of access’ means that ‘all individuals have access to the same level of services according to their needs and circumstances.’ In Australia, we are far from this standard. A national framework that established universal entitlements, minimum service standards, and targeted investment in underserved populations would be a meaningful contribution to reducing inequality of opportunity.

3.3 Career Guidance for a Changing World of Work

The labour market disruption driven by automation, artificial intelligence, and the green economy transition is well documented and accelerating. The World Economic Forum, Jobs and Skills Australia, and the OECD all project substantial occupational change in the coming decade, with many current roles transformed or eliminated and significant demand for new skills and capabilities.

In this context, the capacity to navigate labour market transitions, to identify transferable skills, to access retraining, and to make informed decisions about career reinvestment, is not a luxury. It is increasingly a survival skill for workers and a prerequisite for labour market functioning. The Cedefop framework makes this point directly: ‘to ride the waves of change, it is more important than ever to acquire, as early as possible, the skills and competences required to successfully manage labour market complexity and uncertainty, the changing nature of work and non-linear employment patterns.’

Australia’s workforce adjustment services and employment programs are not currently designed to deliver this kind of sustained career development support. A national framework would provide the basis for redesigning these services to address the transition challenge that is already underway.

4. What a National Framework Should Include

Drawing on the Cedefop reference framework and other international evidence, and building on Australia’s existing assets, a National Lifelong Career Guidance Framework should address the following elements.

4.1 Career Management Skills

Career management skills (CMS) are the competences that enable individuals to manage their own learning and career development: self-knowledge, decision-making, understanding of the labour market, ability to

source and evaluate career information, and resilience in managing transitions. The Cedefop framework identifies CMS as a central concept for the entire lifelong guidance system, arguing that effective guidance moves individuals ‘beyond information provision towards empowerment.’

Australia has the Australian Blueprint for Career Development, a framework for CMS development from early childhood through adulthood, which was refreshed in 2022. The national policy challenge is to give this framework genuine policy weight: embedding it in school curricula, in training packages, in employment services, and in workplace learning programs, and ensuring that practitioners across all these settings are equipped to develop CMS with their clients.

4.2 Universal Access

A national framework should establish a principle of universal access to career guidance services across the lifespan. This does not mean identical services for everyone, but it does mean that no Australian should be unable to access meaningful career guidance because of where they live, their employment status, their age, their level of prior education, or their membership of a disadvantaged group.

Universal access requires multi-channel service delivery (in-person, online, telephone, and outreach), attention to digital inclusion, services delivered through multiple sectors (education, employment, community), and targeted investment in underserved populations. The Cedefop framework’s good practice indicators on access provide a detailed blueprint for what this looks like in practice.

4.3 Quality Assurance

Australia’s career development sector has made significant progress on quality and professional standards through CICA’s Professional Standards for Australian Career Development Practitioners, the Guiding Principles for Career Development Services and Career Information Products, and the Register of Professional Career Development Practitioners. These are genuine achievements. The national policy challenge is to embed these standards in funding and accountability frameworks so that publicly funded career guidance services are required to meet agreed quality standards.

This means quality standards referenced in funding agreements for employment services, school career programs, higher education career services, and community-based guidance programs. It means professional registration or equivalent recognition as a condition of providing funded services. It means monitoring and evaluation systems that measure quality and outcomes, not merely activity.

4.4 Governance and Strategic Leadership

The most fundamental structural gap in Australia’s current arrangements is the absence of cross-portfolio governance. Career guidance is relevant to the portfolios of Education, Skills and Training, Employment and Workplace Relations, Social Services, Health, Industry, and others. At present, each of these portfolios makes its own arrangements, with no mechanism for coordination, shared strategy, or coherent investment.

A national framework requires a governance architecture: a cross-ministerial mechanism at the Commonwealth level, with complementary arrangements at the state and territory level, that has a mandate to develop and implement a national strategy. The Cedefop framework is clear that this kind of coordinating structure is not optional. It is a prerequisite for any coherent, sustained national system.

Australia should also consider the establishment of a National Career Development Institute or equivalent body, with a mandate for research, professional standards, data collection, and policy development. This would parallel the UK Career Development Institute, Ireland's former National Centre for Guidance in Education, and Cedefop's own coordinating function in the European context.

4.5 Workforce Professionalism

Career guidance cannot be delivered well by an unprepared workforce. The Cedefop framework's guideline on professionalism in lifelong guidance addresses initial education and training for career practitioners, continuing professional development, competence frameworks, practitioner registration, and ethical standards. Australia's career development workforce is unevenly qualified, particularly in the school sector where teachers are often asked to deliver career education without specialist preparation.

A national framework should set minimum qualification standards for career practitioners in publicly funded settings, support pathways to professional registration, fund continuing professional development, and establish an expectation that career guidance in all sectors is delivered by, or under the supervision of, appropriately qualified practitioners.

4.6 Evidence and Evaluation

Australia currently lacks a systematic framework for collecting evidence about the quality, reach, and impact of career guidance services. This makes it impossible to assess what is working, to identify gaps, or to make evidence-based investment decisions. The Cedefop framework's guideline on evidence-based systems and policy development sets out what a sound evidence framework looks like: regular data collection on inputs, outputs, and outcomes; monitoring and evaluation embedded in quality assurance systems; research partnerships with universities; and indicator development that allows comparison over time and across service types.

Jobs and Skills Australia is well positioned to support the development of such a framework. A national career guidance evidence strategy, analogous to the approach taken in other social policy domains, would provide the foundation for genuinely accountable public investment.

4.7 Funding

The Cedefop framework is unequivocal that sustainable, adequate funding is not a background condition for a good career guidance system. It is a design requirement. Guideline 8 addresses funding specifically, arguing that publicly funded career guidance services require stable, earmarked budgets, accountability frameworks that connect funding to quality and outcomes, and a mixture of public and (where appropriate) private and employer investment.

Australia's current career guidance funding is fragmented, inadequately documented, and largely invisible in public accounts. There is no estimate of total public expenditure on career guidance services, no assessment of whether that expenditure is adequate, and no framework for evaluating its return on investment. A national framework should include a funding strategy, with realistic estimates of what adequate investment looks like and a model for how it should be structured across Commonwealth, state and territory, and other funding sources.

4.8 Digital and Technology

The Cedefop framework’s guideline on ICT in lifelong guidance addresses both the opportunities and the risks of technology in career service delivery. Digital tools can substantially extend access, particularly in regional and remote areas. Artificial intelligence creates new possibilities for personalised career information and assessment. But digital services require digital literacy, privacy safeguards, quality standards, and human oversight to be genuinely effective.

Australia’s career guidance system needs a digital strategy: not merely the digitisation of existing services but a considered approach to how digital tools can extend access, improve quality, and support practitioners, while maintaining the relational and human dimensions of effective guidance. CICA’s Guiding Principles for Career Development Services address the use of AI and digital tools in career practice and provide a starting point for national policy development in this area.

5. Recommendations

The following recommendations are addressed primarily to the Australian Government, with recognition that effective implementation will require active partnership with state and territory governments, the career development sector, employers, and education and training providers.

Policy Area	Recommended Action
National Framework	Develop and adopt a National Lifelong Career Guidance Framework through a cross-ministerial process, establishing shared goals, governance, funding, and quality standards across the lifespan.
Governance Body	Establish a cross-portfolio Ministerial Council or equivalent mechanism to coordinate national career guidance strategy, supported by a dedicated national research and policy body.
School Career Education	Mandate quality career education in all Australian schools, aligned with the Australian Blueprint for Career Development, delivered by appropriately qualified practitioners, and resourced at the national level through the schools funding agreement.
Workforce Standards	Require professional registration or equivalent qualification recognition for career practitioners in all publicly funded settings, with a funded pathway for existing practitioners to meet standards.
Universal Access	Commission a national audit of career guidance service reach and equity, and develop a strategy for achieving universal access, with targeted investment in regional and remote areas and underserved populations.
Evidence Framework	Through Jobs and Skills Australia, develop a national career guidance data and evidence framework, including standard indicators, monitoring requirements for funded services, and a research investment strategy.

Policy Area	Recommended Action
Funding Review	Conduct a comprehensive review of public expenditure on career guidance across Commonwealth and state and territory governments, with a view to establishing an adequate, coordinated, and accountable funding model.
Digital Strategy	Develop a national career guidance digital strategy, building on existing digital infrastructure and incorporating guidelines for the ethical and quality use of AI and digital tools in career practice.

6. Conclusion

The evidence for public investment in lifelong career guidance is substantial, international, and growing. The countries and regions that have made this investment are better positioned to support their citizens through the labour market disruptions ahead, to achieve more efficient skills matching, and to reduce the social costs of inequality of opportunity.

Australia has capable people, credible professional standards, and an emerging evidence base. What is missing is the national policy architecture to put these assets to work at scale. The Cedefop framework, and the two decades of European policy learning it represents, provides a rigorous and practical blueprint for what that architecture should look like. Adapting it to Australian conditions is not a complex policy task. The framework is designed to be used in exactly this way, as a resource for countries to review their systems, identify gaps, and develop strategies for improvement.

The question for Australian policymakers is not whether to act, but how quickly. The disruption facing Australian workers and the inequality characterising current career guidance access are not issues that will diminish with time. The international community has provided a detailed map of the destination. Australia now needs to commit to the journey.

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