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AI Career Bots in Schools: CICA Demands Answers Before Students Pay the Price

Australia's national peak body for career development says the Government's AI career coaching initiative for 1,000 secondary schools is not free, not impartial, not accountable, and not a substitute for qualified career development practitioners.

Writing in Future Campus this week, journalist Tim Winkler asked the questions the Government has so far failed to answer about its decision to deploy AI career coaching tools to up to 1,000 Australian secondary schools ("Govt Locks In AI Bots To Guide Secondary Student Career Choices", Future Campus, 27 April 2026).

The Career Industry Council of Australia (CICA) agrees with Winkler's framing: this announcement raises serious questions about quality, impartiality, accountability, and the data rights of young Australians. Notably, the announcement was made with no apparent engagement with Australia's career development profession, and no reference to the national standards that govern quality career guidance."

The tool is described as free. Policymakers should pause on that word. Nothing about deploying an AI system at scale is free. The 1,000 schools that sign on will not receive a gift; they will provide one.

Every interaction a student has with this tool, every question asked, every pathway explored, every piece of personal and aspirational data entered, becomes training data that improves a commercial product. The students in these schools are not the customers. They are the product. That is not a reason to reject the initiative outright, but it is a fact that must be disclosed clearly, governed carefully, and genuinely consented to before a single student logs on.

CICA welcomes any initiative that expands access to career guidance for young Australians. Access has long been inequitable, and well-designed tools can reach students in schools that have never had a qualified career practitioner. But access is not the same as quality, and free is not the same as without cost.

"The question being asked across schools, universities, and career services right now is whether these tools will genuinely help young people or simply fill a gap that governments have failed to fund properly," said David Carney, Executive Director of CICA. "We think it's both. And conflating the two is exactly the problem."

The Guiding Principles Test: Three Standards. No Evidence This Tool Meets Any of Them.

CICA's Guiding Principles for Career Development Services and Career Information Products, Australia's benchmark framework for quality career guidance, set out three standards against which any career service must be measured. This initiative fails to demonstrate that it meets any of them.

Client-centredness. Career development services must be designed around the individual's needs, not the service provider's. A tool deployed by a technology company on a platform with established commercial

interests in school-leaver decisions is, by definition, not client-centred. The interests of the student and the platform are not automatically aligned. Policymakers must ask, and publicly answer, who this tool is actually designed to serve.

Impartiality. The Guiding Principles make it clear that career information must be free from commercial bias and must present options honestly, including pathways that may not serve the provider's interests. As Winkler asks pointedly, will the bot be programmed to advance the Accord agenda, steering students towards university or TAFE regardless of fit? Will it learn to highlight institutional strengths while quietly ignoring QILT scores? An AI calibrated to drive enrolments is not career guidance. It is marketing. The Government must require independent auditing of the values and weightings embedded in this tool before it reaches students.

Accountability. The Guiding Principles require that career services be delivered by qualified practitioners with professional accountability and that clients have recourse when things go wrong. An AI system cannot be registered. It cannot be held professionally accountable. Critically, it cannot recognise when a student's answer about their career goals signals a mental health crisis and respond accordingly. Qualified career development practitioners do this as a matter of course. That is not a minor capability gap. It is a fundamental one.

A Resourcing Problem Dressed as Innovation

Career counselling in Australian schools is, in many cases, in a poor state, and that is a failure of government investment, not professional commitment. Career practitioners, where they exist, are often part-time, under-resourced, and competing with a hundred other teaching and pastoral demands. Many are delivering excellent guidance under considerable pressure and with inadequate support. The honest answer to why an AI tool is being deployed in schools is that human career guidance has been chronically underfunded for decades.

Deploying an AI tool in that environment does not fix the resourcing problem. It only papers it over. The 1,000 schools receiving a free AI career coach are likely to be the very schools that will never receive a qualified human practitioner unless governments make an explicit, funded commitment to both. Career development is a professional practice that requires professionally qualified, trained, and accountable professionals to help young Australians understand not only which jobs exist but also who they are, what they value, and which futures are realistically available to them. The Professional Standards for Australian Career Development Practitioners and the Guiding Principles exist precisely because this work is too important to be left to chance or to commerce.

"We are not opposed to AI tools in career services. Used well, they can extend the reach of qualified practitioners and help more students access timely, useful information," said Mr Carney. "What we will not accept is AI used as a substitute for proper investment in the profession. Young Australians making decisions that will shape the rest of their lives deserve better than a bot and a press release."

CICA's Call to Government

CICA is calling on the Federal Government to:

1. Ensure any AI career coaching tool deployed in Australian schools is co-designed with qualified career development practitioners and benchmarked against the CICA Guiding Principles for Career Development Services and Career Information Products.
2. Require independent evaluation for impartiality, accuracy, and student outcomes, not just reach and engagement metrics, before and during any rollout.
3. Establish a data governance framework that protects students' personal and aspirational data, requires explicit informed consent, and prohibits commercial use of student data for AI training.
4. Commit to building the qualified career development workforce in schools, not substituting technology for the human professional relationships that quality career guidance requires.
5. Brief CICA and the broader profession on the governance arrangements underpinning this initiative before it reaches students.

About CICA

The Career Industry Council of Australia (CICA) is the national peak body representing career development in Australia. CICA works collaboratively with governments, education, industry, and the community to advance the professional standards, quality, and impact of career development services for all Australians.

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