



Submission to the Australian Tertiary Education Commission

A More Joined-Up Tertiary System: Discussion Paper

Response to the consultation, June 2026

About this submission

The Career Industry Council of Australia (CICA) is the national peak body for the career development profession in Australia, representing a council of state, territory and national member associations. CICA develops and maintains much of the profession's national quality infrastructure, including the Professional Standards for Australian Career Development Practitioners (5th edition, 2026), the Guiding Principles for Career Development Services and Career Information Products (3rd edition, 2026), and the Register of Professional Career Development Practitioners (RPCDP). CICA also contributes to national career development resources, including the Australian Blueprint for Career Development.

CICA welcomes the opportunity to respond to the discussion paper. The paper's framing of a non-linear "learner journey" (in which people enter, leave and re-enter the tertiary system across the life course) aligns closely with the career development sector's lifelong, person-centred perspective. Helping people understand and navigate that journey is precisely the work of career development practitioners.

Scope. CICA has responded to all twelve discussion questions. Its fullest responses concern the questions that fall within the career development sector's remit and expertise: how learners are informed and supported, parity of esteem, transitions, and the system as a whole (Q1, Q2, Q4, Q5, Q6, Q10, Q11 and Q12). The remaining questions, which concern the detailed design of tertiary funding mechanisms, sector pedagogy, qualification architecture and the viability of specific dual-sector models (Q3, Q7, Q8 and Q9), fall largely outside CICA's remit and are better addressed by funding bodies, providers and the two sectors directly; CICA has answered these briefly, offering a career development perspective where one is relevant and otherwise deferring to those parties. In keeping with the paper's invitation, the submission also provides direct feedback on the reform opportunities identified, highlights the gaps CICA considers most significant, and suggests additional opportunities; these are drawn together in the section Feedback on the reform opportunities.

A central message. A more joined-up tertiary system can only deliver its intended benefits if learners can see, understand and navigate the pathways it creates. That capability does not arise on its own. It depends on access to quality, impartial career guidance, delivered by a

capable workforce, grounded in career management skills, and supported by sector-neutral information. CICA's consistent position (set out in its March 2026 policy paper, A National Framework for Lifelong Career Guidance in Australia) is that Australia lacks the national policy architecture to provide this reliably. The Tertiary Roadmap is an opportunity to address that gap as it relates to tertiary pathways.

The international evidence base

The positions set out in this submission are consistent with a substantial and growing international evidence base on career guidance, developed by the OECD, the ILO and a coalition of international agencies. Three strands are particularly relevant to the discussion paper.

Career development is linked to better outcomes. The OECD's Career Readiness project analysed multiple national longitudinal datasets, including for Australia, and identified a set of teenage career development indicators (the ways in which young people explore, experience and think about their futures in work) that are consistently associated with better adult outcomes, including lower unemployment, higher earnings and greater job satisfaction. Drawing on PISA data, the OECD also finds that young people's career ambitions are commonly narrow, confused and distorted by social background, and that too few students engage in career development. These findings directly support the discussion paper's concern that learners are poorly informed at the point of decision, and underline the value of early, first-hand engagement with the world of work.

Investment in guidance delivers returns. Investing in Career Guidance, the joint statement issued in revised form in 2025 by Cedefop, the European Commission, the European Training Foundation, the ILO, the OECD, UNESCO and the World Bank, concludes that investment in career guidance provides positive economic, educational and social returns, while warning that access in too many countries remains insufficient, particularly for those in greatest need. That dual message of strong returns but uneven access mirrors the Australian situation the discussion paper describes.

Coherent national systems and lifelong access matter. The OECD's work on career guidance for adults in a changing world of work (2021), its review of career guidance for mid-career adults in Australia specifically (2022), and its analysis of career guidance and social inequality (2024), together with the ILO and ETF's guidance on developing national career development support systems (2021), all point in the same direction: effective provision depends on coordinated national architecture, professional standards, adequate funding and access across the life course. The Cedefop reference framework (2026) distils this accumulated learning into 18 evidence-based guidelines. CICA's recommendations adapt, rather than replicate, this international consensus to Australia's federal context.

Entering the tertiary system

Q1 *What actions will be most effective for ensuring that learners are better informed of the depth and range of course offerings and occupations when deciding on career options and tertiary education pathways?*

The most effective actions move beyond providing more information towards building learners' capacity to use it. International evidence, including the Cedefop reference framework that underpins much of CICA's policy work, identifies career management skills as the central concept for an effective system: the goal is to move individuals beyond information provision towards empowerment, so they can source, evaluate and act on information about learning and work themselves. Better course and occupation information is necessary but not sufficient; it must be paired with quality guidance.

The discussion paper's own evidence reinforces this. It notes that engagement with the two sectors is highly uneven: only around 8% of young people reported visiting a TAFE or private RTO to help plan their future, compared with 46% who visited a university. It also notes that key influencers, including teachers and career practitioners, tend to be more familiar with and to prefer higher education, reflecting their own experience and training. The paper also records that school guidance and career officers report lacking the resources and being ill-equipped to provide personalised, high-quality advice. These are not failings of individuals; they reflect an under-resourced and unevenly prepared career development workforce. The OECD's Career Readiness findings point to what works in response: guidance that is rich in first-hand encounters with the labour market, begins early, and helps learners explore and experience a genuine range of options.

CICA recommends the Roadmap prioritise the following:

1. **Invest in quality career guidance, not only information platforms.** The decision point is where mismatches originate. Resourcing impartial, qualified guidance at that point has leverage across the whole system.
2. **Equip those who advise learners to cover both sectors with equal fluency.** Professional standards, qualification expectations and continuing professional development for practitioners should require strong labour-market and VET-pathway literacy, directly addressing the documented higher-education skew in advice.
3. **Anchor career education in the Australian Blueprint for Career Development,** delivered by appropriately qualified practitioners, so that career learning is consistent and developmental rather than ad hoc.
4. **Move towards sector-neutral, whole-of-tertiary information.** The paper notes that digital course information is currently split across YourCareer, CourseSeeker, MicroCred Seeker and providers' own sites. Presenting occupations and pathways across both sectors in one place, organised around where a learner wants to get to rather than the sector that delivers it, would reduce the structural bias towards the better-understood pathway.
5. **Locate these actions within a national framework.** Information and guidance are most effective when governed coherently across portfolios rather than delivered through disconnected, sector-specific arrangements.

Q2 *What are the tangible actions that can be achieved through the Roadmap to support parity of esteem between the VET and higher education sectors?*

Parity of esteem is shaped substantially at the point where learners receive advice. The discussion paper documents that learners' aspirations are strongly influenced by parents, friends, teachers and career counsellors, and that this advice commonly positions university as the preferred pathway. It also notes that students who express interest in VET-related occupations more often cite direct exposure or personal experience as influencing their decision. Esteem, in other words, is built through informed advice and lived exposure, both of which are levers the Roadmap can act on. The OECD's analysis of PISA data reinforces the point: young people's career ambitions are often narrow and shaped by social background, which means that even-handed, well-informed guidance has a particular role in broadening horizons towards pathways learners might not otherwise consider, including in VET.

CICA is realistic that career practitioners are not the cause of low VET esteem; cultural and structural factors are substantial. They are, however, one of the most direct levers available. Tangible actions include:

1. **Strengthen the career development workforce so practitioners can advise across both sectors with equal authority**, supported by professional standards and CPD that build VET and labour-market knowledge.
2. **Support professional registration or equivalent recognition for practitioners in publicly funded settings**, so that learners receive consistent, impartial advice grounded in the full range of pathways.
3. **Increase learners' direct exposure to VET and the occupations it serves from a younger age**, given the paper's evidence that exposure drives interest and that very few young people currently engage with VET providers when planning their future.
4. **Frame career information around occupations and real labour-market outcomes rather than a qualifications hierarchy**. The paper documents strong employment and income outcomes for many VET graduates, apprentices and trainees; surfacing these at the decision point counters the perception of VET as a lesser pathway.
5. **Treat parity of esteem as a sustained, system-level task**, not a one-off communications campaign, consistent with the coordinated, cross-portfolio approach a national framework would provide.

Q3 *Noting fiscal constraints, how could existing funding settings and incentives be better aligned to support learner choice and labour-market outcomes across VET and higher education?*

The detailed design of tertiary funding settings falls outside CICA's remit, and CICA defers to funding bodies and the two sectors on the mechanics of fees, subsidies and loans. From a career development perspective, CICA offers one observation: the inconsistencies the discussion paper documents in fees, subsidies and the availability of student loans across VET and higher education can distort learner choice, steering learners towards the better-funded or better-understood pathway rather than the one best suited to their aspirations and to labour-market need. Greater consistency in funding arrangements across the two sectors would reduce these distortions and allow career guidance to support genuinely neutral choice between them. Career guidance cannot compensate for structural funding distortions;

aligning the settings so that they do not pre-empt informed choice would make guidance more effective.

Transitioning between VET and higher education

Q4 *What are examples of effective transitions, particularly for learners from underrepresented backgrounds? How can these be strengthened across the system?*

Effective transitions for underrepresented learners depend not only on the existence of a pathway but on whether learners can recognise and navigate it. The discussion paper notes that learners from low socio-economic, regional and First Nations backgrounds often have more limited cultural and social capital and fewer networks to help them navigate complex admissions and enrolment processes. Career development practitioners help build this navigational capability, which is frequently the difference between a pathway that exists on paper and one a learner can actually use. This is consistent with the international evidence: the OECD's work on career guidance and social inequality (2024) shows that well-designed guidance can help counter the way social background narrows aspiration, and the inter-agency Investing in Career Guidance statement stresses that access matters most precisely for those in greatest need.

CICA does not propose to re-list the structural examples already identified in the paper, such as the Flinders University and TAFE SA dual offers in skills-shortage areas, or the Regional and Suburban University Study Hubs that provide on-site advisers closer to where learners live. CICA would add the following observations about what makes such transitions effective and how to strengthen them:

- Guidance should reach underrepresented cohorts where they are, through trusted intermediaries, consistent with a principle of universal access across the lifespan.
- Exposure and role models matter. The paper notes that, for First Nations learners, exposure to others in an occupation can build aspiration; guidance that connects learners to relevant occupational exposure and role models strengthens transitions.
- Support must follow the learner across the transition. The paper records that learners who enter higher education with a year of credit may miss first-year supports such as academic-skills and systems orientation; transition and career support should not assume a standard entry point.
- Career management skills, grounded in the Australian Blueprint, give learners a durable capability to navigate non-linear journeys rather than relying on one-off advice at a single decision point.

Q5 *What support arrangements are currently available for VET and higher education learners to assist with moving between the sectors and to ensure they can succeed?*

Career development support exists across the tertiary system, but it is uneven, fragmented and largely organised within sectors rather than across them. Current arrangements include school-based career education and practitioners; institutional career services in higher education; the YourCareer information service and the Australian Blueprint; RPCDP-registered practitioners working across schools, tertiary settings and community services; and, as the paper notes, on-site advisers in Regional and Suburban University Study Hubs.

The honest position, however, is that there is no coherent, lifelong, cross-sector career development support system. CICA's broader analysis is that school career education is inconsistently delivered with no national framework; higher education career services operate institution by institution without national standards; and guidance for adults, mid-

career workers and those navigating transitions is largely absent from public policy settings. Cross-sector transition support specifically, helping a learner move from VET to higher education or the reverse, is among the weakest points, even though the paper shows large numbers of learners make these moves. Strengthening it means embedding career guidance as a consistent entitlement that follows the learner across sector boundaries, rather than resetting at each institutional or sectoral threshold. The OECD has made this case directly in an Australian context: its review of career guidance for mid-career adults in Australia (2022), and its broader work on guidance for adults in a changing world of work (2021), both identify the under-provision of guidance for working-age adults as a gap that limits mobility and re-engagement, precisely the movements the discussion paper seeks to support.

Q6 *What can VET and higher education providers do to better inform current and prospective learners of credit recognition arrangements and pathways?*

The discussion paper sets out the core problem clearly: most learners are unaware of what credit they may be entitled to or how to apply for it, and a majority of both higher education and VET providers surveyed agreed that more could be done to raise awareness. CICA's contribution is to stress that credit and pathway information must be treated as part of holistic career information and guidance, available when learners are weighing options rather than buried in an admissions process they reach only after they have already chosen.

Practical actions for providers include:

- Publishing transparent credit precedent lists and articulation arrangements, as the paper itself suggests, so learners can estimate their likely entitlement before they commit.
- Making credit and pathway information sector-neutral and discoverable through the national information ecosystem, not only on individual provider websites.
- Equipping career practitioners (in schools, in tertiary institutions and in community settings) with accessible, current credit and pathway information so they can advise learners proactively rather than reactively.
- Surfacing credit information at the career-decision stage, so that the prospect of recognised prior learning can inform pathway choice rather than being discovered after enrolment.

CICA supports the transparency objectives of the National Credit Recognition Framework being developed by ATEC, and emphasises that its value to learners will depend on the information it produces being usable by learners and their advisers, not only by institutions.

Drawing on the strengths of both sectors

Q7 *What does the VET sector do well that you would like to see adopted in higher education? What does the higher education sector do well that could be applied to VET?*

Detailed questions of sector pedagogy and curriculum design sit primarily with providers and the two sectors, and CICA defers to them. From a career development perspective, CICA offers one observation drawn from the discussion paper's own evidence. The VET sector's strength is its close connection to industry and its emphasis on work-based learning and direct experience of real occupational tasks, which builds the kind of first-hand labour-market knowledge that the OECD Career Readiness evidence links to better employment outcomes; higher education could draw on more of this experiential, industry-connected learning. Conversely, higher education's strength in developing transferable, generalist capabilities such as critical thinking supports career adaptability over the long term, and is something VET learners also benefit from. For career development purposes, learners in each sector are well served when they can access more of the other sector's strength.

Q8 *What are the challenges in developing and sustaining innovative qualifications, pathways and practices that span across the VET and higher education sectors? What does each sector need from government(s) to support their development and sustainability?*

The development and sustainability of cross-sector qualifications is primarily a matter for providers, the two sectors, and government funding and regulatory settings, and CICA defers to those parties on questions of qualification design, mapping and provider relationships. CICA offers one career development observation: as the discussion paper notes, learner understanding of dual sector and innovative qualification models is currently low, and the lack of parity of esteem between VET and higher education means learners may not perceive the benefits of these models. The sustainability of innovative offerings therefore depends not only on provider capacity but on qualified career guidance that makes these models visible to learners and helps them understand their value. Without that, even well-designed offerings will struggle to attract sufficient enrolments to be sustainable.

Q9 *In which geographical locations, fields of education, industries or occupations would dual sector models be best suited? What are examples of work underway?*

The identification of locations, fields and industries best suited to dual sector models is a judgment for providers, the two sectors and industry, and CICA defers to them. CICA notes only, from the discussion paper's evidence, that dual sector models appear most viable where both VET and higher education already provide pathways into the same occupation and strong cross-sector connections exist, such as nursing and early childhood education. CICA does not put forward specific locations or examples, which are better provided by the providers and sectors directly involved.

Overarching reform directions

Q10 *What does an ideal joined-up tertiary system look like?*

From a career development perspective, an ideal joined-up tertiary system is organised around the learner across the lifespan rather than around two sectors. Its defining features would be:

- **Career guidance as connective infrastructure:** every Australian able to access quality, impartial career guidance at any age and stage, so that connected pathways can actually be seen, understood and used.
- **A capable, qualified workforce** delivering that guidance, grounded in career management skills and the Australian Blueprint.
- **Sector-neutral information** that presents occupations and pathways across VET and higher education together.
- **Parity of esteem embedded structurally**, through informed advice, occupational exposure and outcomes-based information, not asserted rhetorically.
- **Coherent, cross-portfolio governance and an evidence base** so that guidance is coordinated and its impact is measured.

In short, a joined-up tertiary system requires joined-up career guidance. The two are inseparable: the connectedness of pathways is only as valuable as a learner's ability to navigate them. International benchmarks, including the Cedefop reference framework and the OECD's body of work, describe career guidance as a policy in its own right that simultaneously advances education, employment, social inclusion and economic outcomes. Australia can adapt this logic to its federal context.

Q11 *Which reform opportunities should be prioritised and why? Which ones are likely to have the highest impact? Are there any gaps that should be considered?*

Of the reform opportunities listed in the paper, CICA would prioritise those that strengthen how learners are informed and guided: in particular, building on digital resources and guidance centres to support whole-of-tertiary understanding, and resourcing the workforce that makes those resources usable. These are likely to have the highest impact because the paper's own evidence locates the origin of skills mismatches and parity-of-esteem problems at the decision point, where advice is currently uneven and skewed. Investment upstream, at the point of guidance, has leverage across the entire system.

The principal gap. The paper tends to treat career information as a system and information-platform challenge. The deeper gap is the absence of a national framework for lifelong career guidance: coherent governance, funding, workforce and evidence architecture for the guidance that helps learners use a joined-up system. International bodies are consistent on this point: the inter-agency Investing in Career Guidance statement and the ILO and ETF's guidance on developing national career development support systems both identify coordinated national architecture, not just better information, as the prerequisite for returns on investment. CICA recommends the Tertiary Roadmap explicitly connect to, or help catalyse, a National Lifelong Career Guidance Framework as it relates to tertiary pathways.

A second gap: scope across the life course. Career guidance is lifelong, but public provision concentrates on school-leavers. The paper rightly emphasises a non-linear learner

journey; the Roadmap should ensure that guidance for adult, mid-career and older learners is in scope, not only initial post-school decisions. These learners move between the sectors in large numbers and are currently under-served.

Q12 *What opportunities are there to improve Australia's data and information systems to better support learner pathways and outcome measurement across VET and higher education?*

CICA sees opportunities on two fronts: the information learners use, and the evidence the system uses to improve itself.

Learner-facing information. Consolidate and connect the currently fragmented digital career information landscape, which the paper identifies as split across YourCareer, CourseSeeker, MicroCred Seeker and provider sites, into sector-neutral, whole-of-tertiary information presenting occupations and pathways across both sectors. This should be supported by a national career guidance digital strategy, including guidelines for the ethical and quality use of AI and digital tools. CICA's Guiding Principles already address AI and digital tools in career practice and offer a starting point; any AI-enabled tools must preserve human oversight and the relational dimension of guidance, and guard against the kinds of bias the paper notes in relation to generative AI.

Outcome and evidence systems. CICA strongly supports the work, noted in the paper, to align core VET and higher education datasets so that learner pathways between the sectors can be understood. CICA would go further and recommend, consistent with its national policy position and through Jobs and Skills Australia, the development of a national career guidance data and evidence framework, comprising standard indicators, monitoring of funded services, and a research investment strategy, so that the contribution of career guidance to pathways and outcomes can be measured. At present there is no systematic framework for assessing the quality, reach and impact of career guidance, which makes it difficult to invest in it accountably.

Feedback on the reform opportunities

In keeping with the paper's invitation to provide feedback on the reform opportunities identified, to highlight significant gaps and to suggest additional opportunities, this section responds directly to the opportunities set out in section 6.2 that fall within the career development sector's remit, and consolidates the gaps and additions raised in the responses above.

Opportunities CICA supports

- **Building on digital resources and guidance centres to support whole-of-tertiary understanding.** CICA strongly supports this. As set out in response to Q1 and Q12, its value depends on resources being sector-neutral and, critically, on the qualified guidance that helps learners interpret and act on them. Information without guidance changes behaviour very little.
- **Addressing barriers to access and expanding support services and preparatory programs for underrepresented cohorts.** CICA supports this, and notes that career development support is one of the services that converts access into participation and completion, particularly for the cohorts the OECD identifies as most affected by social background.
- **Making credit recognition arrangements and reporting more consistent and transparent.** CICA supports this (see Q6) and emphasises that transparency must be learner-facing, through precedent lists and pathway information that learners and their advisers can actually use.
- **Supporting learners to transition from tertiary education into work, including through improved work experience and skills development.** CICA strongly supports this. The OECD Career Readiness evidence identifies first-hand encounters with the labour market as among the activities most consistently linked to better employment outcomes, and career development practitioners are central to designing and supporting them.

The remaining opportunities in section 6.2, concerning the development and scaling of dual sector models, embedding harmonisation in system architecture, and developing locally and industry-responsive offerings, sit primarily with providers and the two sectors. CICA supports their intent and notes only that learner understanding of dual sector and collaborative models is currently low, so qualified guidance has a role in making these offerings visible and valued.

Significant gaps

- The opportunities for entering the system are framed largely around information resources and access barriers, and underweight the workforce and guidance capability that make those resources usable. A well-built information platform delivers little if the people who help learners use it are under-prepared, as the paper's own evidence on career practitioners suggests.
- As set out in response to Q11, the deeper structural gap is the absence of a national framework for lifelong career guidance, providing the governance, funding, workforce and evidence architecture that the reform opportunities assume but do not establish.
- Also as noted at Q11, the opportunities concentrate on initial entry and transitions; guidance for adults, mid-career and older learners, who move between the sectors in large numbers, is under-represented.

Additional opportunities CICA suggests

- **Invest in the career development workforce**, including qualification standards and professional registration for practitioners in publicly funded school and tertiary settings, so the advice learners receive is consistent, impartial and capable of covering both sectors.
- **Establish a national career guidance evidence framework through Jobs and Skills Australia** (see Q12), so the contribution of guidance to pathways and outcomes can be measured and funded accountably.
- **Connect the Tertiary Roadmap to a national lifelong career guidance approach**, explicitly linking it to, or using it to help catalyse, a National Lifelong Career Guidance Framework as it relates to tertiary pathways.
- **Deliver information with guidance, not instead of it**, ensuring sector-neutral, whole-of-tertiary career information is paired with access to qualified practitioners rather than offered as a substitute for them.

In closing

CICA commends ATEC for placing the learner at the centre of this work. A joined-up tertiary system and lifelong career guidance are complementary reforms: the first creates the pathways, the second enables people to navigate them. CICA and its member associations would welcome the opportunity to contribute further to the development of the Tertiary Roadmap, and to bring the career development sector's professional standards, frameworks and practitioner expertise to bear on its implementation.

Evidence attributed to the discussion paper is drawn from the Australian Tertiary Education Commission's A More Joined-Up Tertiary System: Discussion Paper (2026) and the sources it cites. Full references for the works cited in this submission appear in the reference list that follows.

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