

Career Development and the National Skills Agreement Outcomes Framework

A discussion paper on the Balanced Scorecard Baseline Report

Career Industry Council of Australia

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1. Purpose

Jobs and Skills Australia released the first National Skills Agreement (NSA) Outcomes Framework Balanced Scorecard in August 2026. It establishes a baseline across nine outcomes and 42 listed measures, with agreed targets against ten of them. It is a substantial piece of work and the first nationally consistent view of system performance under the agreement.

This paper reads that baseline from a career development perspective. It makes one argument. The Balanced Scorecard treats career guidance as an input to the VET system, arriving from somewhere else and improving the quality of enrolments. On that basis it names career guidance as a driver of five of the nine outcomes and then provides no way of seeing it, funding it or holding anyone accountable for it. The measures the NSA is furthest from meeting cannot be reached by an input. They can only be reached by a function built into the system.

The Career Industry Council of Australia is the national peak body for the career development profession, representing ten state, territory and national member associations. This paper is offered as a contribution to the policy conversation among governments, Jobs and Skills Australia, VET sector partners and industry, ahead of the next annual review of the Outcomes Framework.

2. What the baseline shows

Every one of the ten target measures sits below its agreed minimum target for 2028. Six of the nine measures with reported data are moving in the wrong direction or not moving at all.

Measure	2024 or 2025 result	Minimum target 2028	Gap	Direction
Employer satisfaction, nationally recognised training (5.1, 7.1, 8.1)	76.1% (2025)	80.5%	4.4ppt	Down 2.4ppt from 2023
Student satisfaction with training (6.1, 8.2)	84.6% (2025)	87.7%	3.1ppt	Down 0.8ppt from 2024
Subject load pass rate (6.3)	80.7% (2024)	82.7%	2ppt	No change
Improved numerical skills (6.7)	50.2% (2025)	50.6%	0.4ppt	Up 1.3ppt
Improved writing skills (6.8)	51.2% (2025)	52.3%	1.1ppt	Up 0.7ppt
Developed problem-solving skills (6.9)	78.4% (2025)	79.6%	1.2ppt	Up 0.1ppt
Participation rate in VET (7.5)	10.8% (2024)	13.4% (stretch)	2.6ppt	Down 0.4ppt
Employed or in further study after training (7.7)	80.9% (2025)	85.5%	4.6ppt	Down 0.9ppt
Improved employment circumstances after training (8.3)	58.5% (2025)	66.1%	7.6ppt	Down 1.5ppt

Source: Jobs and Skills Australia (2026), Targets table, pp. 8 and 9. The tenth target relates to the Outcome 9 Stewardship Model Delivery survey, for which results are not yet available.

The measures with the largest gaps have something in common. Employer satisfaction, student satisfaction, employment circumstances after training, and employment or further study after training are all judgements about whether the training turned out to be worth doing. They are measures of fit between a person's decision and the outcome that followed it. Participation is a measure of whether people decided to enter at all.

The measures that are holding up are largely supply-side and volume-based. Completions aligned to occupations in national shortage rose about 26% between 2020 and 2024. Completions linked to NSA national priorities rose about 45% over the same period. Enrolments in priority-linked courses reached 964,839 in 2024.

The share of occupations with a VET pathway in national shortage fell from 33% in 2023 to 27% in 2025.

The system is producing more training in the right areas. Users are becoming less satisfied with it and less likely to report a labour market benefit from it.

3. Career guidance is named as an input, and inputs are not governed

The Balanced Scorecard's "What is Driving the Results" sections name career guidance, career navigation, career information or informed career choice as enabling conditions in five of the nine outcomes, including all four population outcomes:

- **Outcome 1 (Productivity):** productivity improvements depend on "students making informed choices and clear career evidence-based decisions", and on "clear career pathways (including work-integrated learning)" that broaden participation in productivity-critical qualifications (p. 14).
- **Outcome 2 (Labour Supply):** "Targeted career navigation and local job matching are also needed to guide learners into occupations with sustained demand" (p. 20).
- **Outcome 3 (Wellbeing and Inclusion):** "gaps in accessibility, career guidance, and tailored interventions for priority groups constrain completion rates and long-term wellbeing" (p. 26). For women, "entrenched gender norms and limited targeted career guidance continue to influence career choices" (p. 26).
- **Outcome 4 (Resilience):** "Gaps in mental health supports, career guidance, and workplace flexibility limit progress for these priority groups" (p. 30).
- **Outcome 6 (Student Needs):** "limited access to effective careers information constrain satisfaction, subject load pass rates, and completions" (p. 43).

None of the 42 measures captures the availability, quality, reach or effect of career development support. There is no measure of whether a learner received career advice before enrolling, no measure of career management skills alongside the measures for numeracy, writing and problem-solving, and no measure of career development capability alongside the VET workforce measures.

That combination is what an input framing looks like. Career guidance is understood as something that happens before a person reaches the training system, improving the quality of the enrolments the system receives and then stopping at the door. On that understanding it belongs to schools, or to employment services, or to a body outside the training system. It appears in the explanation of results and disappears from the accountability architecture.

Three consequences follow. A factor identified as a driver of five outcomes cannot be tracked, so no share of movement in the targets can be attributed to it. It cannot attract investment through an outcomes-based agreement, because outcomes agreements fund what they measure. And it has no place in stewardship, so no one is answerable for whether it is present.

3.1 The input model has lost its supplier

An input has to come from somewhere. Until 2025, the national supplier was the National Careers Institute, which produced career information, refreshed the Australian Blueprint for Career Development and supported school leavers and women returning to work. Funding for the NCI was discontinued in March 2025 (CICA, 2025).

This changes the argument. If career guidance is something the VET system receives from elsewhere, the reasonable question is who now produces it. Nationally, there is no body with that mandate, no budget line, and no clear custodian for the Blueprint. The enabling condition the Balanced Scorecard names five times has no owner.

That leaves two options. Career development is embedded in the systems that depend on it, or it is not reliably available at all.

4. Why an input cannot reach the failing measures

An input model places career guidance at a single point: before enrolment. The measures the NSA is furthest from meeting sit at three points, and only one of them is before enrolment.

4.1 Entry: participation (7.5)

VET participation has sat near 11% of the working-age population since 2019 and was 10.8% in 2024, against a stretch target of 13.4%. The Balanced Scorecard notes that "the trajectory needs to change" to reach the target (p. 51).

The report identifies the constraint honestly. Public understanding of VET is limited and it is often viewed less favourably than higher education, a finding it draws from the 2024 parliamentary inquiry into the perceptions and status of VET (p. 20). It also lists geographic isolation, travel time, cost of living and limited access to support services as barriers, particularly for priority groups (p. 50).

Perception, awareness and the ability to see a pathway are the working material of career development practice. Additional training places, faster qualification development and expanded fee-free delivery do not reach a person who has not considered VET as an option, does not know what the qualification leads to, or cannot connect it to a job they can picture themselves doing. Closing a 2.6 percentage point participation gap requires reaching people who are not currently in the system.

This is the one measure an input model could in principle address, and it is the one where the input has just been withdrawn.

4.2 During: completion, retention and informed choice (3.2, 6.2, 6.4, 6.5)

National completion is 49% for qualifications commencing in 2020, with First Nations learners at 35.4% and learners with disability at 40.9%. The framework's own commentary is careful about this measure: many students meet their objectives without completing, and non-completion "often reflects personal choice, rather than system failure" (p. 44).

That caveat identifies the real question. The system cannot currently distinguish intentional early exit from avoidable attrition. The report says as much in its key considerations for Outcome 3: attention is needed to ensure "that partial completion is beneficial where it supports real transitions, and that avoidable non-completion is reduced in priority qualifications and cohorts" (p. 27).

Making that distinction requires something that happens during training, not before it. It depends on whether the learner's goal was established and recorded at entry, and whether progress against that goal was reviewed while they were enrolled. Two measures already in the framework depend on the same thing. **Achieved main reason for training (6.2)** fell slightly to 82.1% in 2025, and sits at 74.0% for students with disability, and it only means something if the main reason was well formed at the outset. **Main reason for leaving study (6.4)** counts "training was not as expected" among its training-related reasons, which is an expectation problem recorded as a retention statistic.

The report notes that part completers themselves identified better support as the main thing that would have encouraged completion (p. 26, citing the 2025 Student Outcomes Survey).

4.3 Exit: employment circumstances and further study (7.7, 8.3, 4.1, 4.2)

Improved employment circumstances after training has the largest gap of any target measure, at 7.6 percentage points, and is falling. Employed or in further study after training is 4.6 percentage points below target and also falling. Improved skills for job (7.4) fell 3 percentage points nationally to 49.6% in 2025.

These measures record what happened in the period after training ended. Guidance delivered before enrolment cannot move them. They are structurally out of reach of an input model, and they are the measures with the largest gaps in the framework.

They are also the period in which most VET learners have no access to career development support at all. School students may have a careers adviser. University students have an institutional careers service. Jobseekers in employment services receive placement assistance. A VET graduate who is in neither school nor employment services has nothing at the point where the outcome is measured.

Progression data reinforces this. Nationally, 29% of 2020-21 graduates enrolled in any further VET, 17% moved to a higher AQF level, and 8% progressed to higher education. The report treats progression as evidence of VET's role in lifelong learning. It is also evidence of how many graduates do not progress, in a system where progression pathways are neither well mapped for the learner nor actively brokered.

The strongest resilience result is income support exit, which rose from 39% to 48% nationally. For people with disability it is 23%. That 25 percentage point gap is not a training quality gap. It reflects transition support, employer engagement and job design.

4.4 Employer confidence (5.1, 7.1, 8.1, 7.6)

Employer satisfaction with nationally recognised training is the weakest signal in the report: 76.1% in 2025, the lowest in a decade, down from above the stretch target in 2015, and 4.4 percentage points below the minimum target. Satisfaction with unaccredited training sits at 86.2% and is stable, which suggests the problem is specific rather than a general souring on training.

The report attributes dissatisfaction primarily to training being of poor quality or low standard, or to relevant skills not being taught (p. 35, footnote 17). It also raises the connected finding from the Survey of Employers who have Recently Advertised: only 56% of qualified applicants for skill level 2 to 4 occupations were found suitable by employers in 2025, up from 50% in 2024 but still meaning that close to half of formally qualified applicants are judged unsuitable (p. 49). The report's own gloss is that this "may indicate a lack of confidence in the skills delivered by relevant qualifications".

The gap between qualified and suitable is where career management skills sit. Application quality, interview capability, understanding of the occupation and the workplace, and the ability to articulate transferable capability are not technical competencies and are not systematically taught. The report's key considerations for Outcome 5 come close to this argument without naming it, calling for graduates who are "not only technically capable on entry, but equipped to learn, adapt and grow in work over time" (p. 37).

4.5 Equity (3.2, 3.3, 3.4, 6.1, 6.2, 7.4, 7.7, 8.3)

The equity pattern in the baseline is consistent and, for learners with disability, severe:

Measure	National	People with disability	Gap
Student satisfaction (6.1)	84.6%	79.5%	5.1ppt
Achieved main reason for training (6.2)	82.1%	74.0%	8.1ppt
Improved skills for job (7.4)	49.6%	39.0%	10.6ppt
Employed or in further study (7.7)	80.9%	69.5%	11.4ppt

Measure	National	People with disability	Gap
Improved employment circumstances (8.3)	58.5%	40.9%	17.6ppt
Income support exit rate (4.1)	48%	23%	25ppt

The gaps widen as the measures move from experience of training towards outcomes in the labour market. Satisfaction differs by 5 points. Employment circumstances differ by 17.6 points. Income support exit differs by 25 points. Whatever is happening to learners with disability is happening mostly at the transition, not during delivery.

First Nations results show a different and instructive pattern. First Nations learners exceed the national average and in several cases the stretch target on foundation and transferable skills measures: numeracy 56.2%, writing 57.8%, problem-solving 82.1%, student satisfaction 87%, participation 16.1%. They sit well below on completion (35.4%) and on employed or in further study (73.9%). Strong engagement and skill gain are not converting to transition outcomes at the same rate.

Both patterns point to the same intervention point. The OECD's 2024 work on career guidance and social inequality argues that guidance has its largest relative effect for learners who have the least access to informal career information through family and social networks (OECD, 2024). That is the group the NSA equity measures are describing.

4.6 Productivity and skills use (1.1 to 1.4, 2.4)

The productivity case is the least direct and should be argued carefully. Economy-wide productivity growth was 1.1% in 2025 with a five-year moving average of -0.3%, and productivity in VET-critical sectors was -0.3%. The report is explicit that these results are shaped by factors well beyond the training system, including regulatory settings, industry concentration and innovation levels, and it cites the Productivity Commission's 2025 finding that many advanced economies show similar construction productivity trends.

The narrow, defensible claim is the one the report itself makes in its Outcome 1 key considerations: improving productivity "will depend less on overall training volume and more on whether training consistently builds skills that are current, valued and used in workplaces" (p. 16).

The report also notes persistent shortages in technician and trades occupations where a training gap is the primary driver, alongside a separate group where retention is the primary driver, including aged and disabled carers, hairdressers, cooks and several construction trades. Retention-driven shortages are partly a career development matter. People leave occupations they entered without a clear picture of the work, or without a visible progression pathway once they are in it.

5. The NSA already has a model for embedding

The agreement does not treat everything as either a delivery activity or an external condition. It has an established category for capabilities that cut across the whole system, and a set of mechanisms that follow from being placed in it.

Gender equality and Closing the Gap are designated cross-cutting national priorities. Improving completions and foundation skills are designated cross-cutting policy initiatives. Each of these has a national strategy or policy commitment, actions carried in the National Skills Plan and jurisdictional action plans, governance arrangements, and in most cases measures within the Outcomes Framework. Foundation skills has the National Foundation Skills Strategy 2025 to 2035, a measure (6.6), a training package, and a national referral approach. Closing the Gap has a policy partnership, an interim partnership committee and a dedicated centre being established.

The foundation skills work is the closest precedent. The "no wrong door" assessment and referral approach accepts that an adult presenting anywhere in the system needs help working out what to do next, and builds that help into the design rather than assuming it happened beforehand. That is an embedded navigation function under a different name. Applying the same logic to career decisions produces the model this paper is describing.

Career development meets the same tests the existing cross-cutting entries meet. It affects multiple outcomes rather than one. It cannot be delivered by any single part of the system acting alone. Its absence falls hardest on priority cohorts. And the Balanced Scorecard already identifies it as a driver of results. The difference is that the four existing cross-cutting entries have strategies, governance and measures, and career development has none.

6. What embedding would involve

Embedding is not a single new program. It is the presence of career development at four layers of a system that already exists, using mechanisms already scheduled under the agreement.

6.1 Learner-facing: entry, progression and exit

Career development support at the three points the failing measures occupy. At entry, a career conversation that establishes and records the learner's goal, which is what makes "achieved main reason for training" meaningful and what distinguishes an intentional early exit from an avoidable one. During training, a progression review. At exit, transition support for graduates who are in neither school nor employment services.

This should be proportionate rather than universal. The points of highest leverage are entry into priority and shortage-linked qualifications, the cohorts with the largest completion and transition gaps, and the exit point where the two largest target gaps are measured.

6.2 Qualification design: career management skills

The framework already measures self-reported improvement in numeracy, writing and problem-solving. Career management skills are the fourth transferable capability, defined nationally through the Australian Blueprint for Career Development. Embedding them means treating them the way foundation skills are treated: present in training products through the revised Training Package Organising Framework and qualification reform, and measured through a comparable Student Outcomes Survey item.

This is also the most direct available response to the gap between qualified and suitable applicants in measure 7.6.

6.3 Workforce and provider practice

The framework measures VET workforce capability but not the capability of those advising learners into and out of VET. CICA's Professional Standards and the Register of Professional Career Development Practitioners exist and are in use. Recognising them in funding agreements and quality expectations for publicly funded career guidance, in the way the 2025 Standards for RTOs recognise trainer and assessor requirements, is a matter of policy alignment rather than new infrastructure. Career development capability also belongs in the work flowing from the VET Workforce Blueprint and the National TAFE Network.

6.4 System architecture: measurement, data and stewardship

Three components. A measure in the Outcomes Framework, which the annual review provides for. Career guidance data in the VET National Data Asset and the VET data streamlining work, so that the relationship between guidance and the outcomes already collected can be tested rather than asserted. And representation in stewardship arrangements, since Outcome 9 concerns governance of the system and career development currently has no place in it.

A single Student Outcomes Survey question on whether a student received career information or advice before enrolling, and from whom, would allow the framework to test this paper's argument against the measures it already collects: main reason achieved, reason for leaving, satisfaction and completion. It is the cheapest available way to establish or disprove the connection.

6.5 Timing

The Balanced Scorecard's milestones include an annual review and update of the Outcomes Framework in 2026, 2027 and 2028, second jurisdictional action plans in 2026, VET data streamlining implementation plans finalised in mid-2026, and the Independent Review of the NSA Stewardship Model completing in June 2026. The First Nations VET Policy Partnership and the Indigenous Centre of Vocational Excellence are being established through 2026. Each is a point at which embedding could begin during the life of the agreement rather than after it.

7. The nature of the claim

Three qualifications matter to how this argument is read.

The case rests on the Balanced Scorecard's own logic. The framework identifies career guidance as an enabling condition of five outcomes and then provides no means of observing it. That is a coherence question within the framework before it is a question about investment in any particular service, and the first steps towards resolving it are inexpensive.

The claim about causation is a modest one. Career development will not close a 7.6 percentage point gap on employment circumstances by itself. It is one condition among several, alongside job design, employer engagement, wage settings, delivery quality and labour market demand, and the scorecard is right to give those factors substantial weight.

The connection is strongest where the framework is weakest. Employer satisfaction, participation, and post-training outcomes are the three areas the report identifies as needing the direction of travel to change before 2028. All three sit at the boundary between the training system and the labour market, which is where career development operates.

8. What the evidence does and does not establish

Four limitations should be stated plainly.

The Australian evidence linking career development services to VET completion, satisfaction and transition outcomes is thin. The stronger evidence is international, drawn from systems with different funding, governance and schooling arrangements. The OECD and Cedefop syntheses are credible and consistent in their findings, but they are not Australian data. That absence is itself the argument for the measurement and data proposals in Section 6, not a reason to defer them.

The baseline carries limitations that the report states clearly. Completion rates lag by four years and currently describe learners who commenced in 2020. VET National Data Asset outcomes data is from 2020-21. Employer satisfaction estimates are subject to sampling and non-response bias with overlapping confidence intervals, which means some year-to-year movement may not be statistically meaningful. The scorecard is a point-in-time assessment using data current to 6 March 2026.

Several of the associations described here could be explained other ways. Learners with disability may report weaker transition outcomes because of labour market discrimination rather than absent guidance. First Nations completion is shaped by delivery models, remoteness, cultural safety and community context as much as by

access to career advice. Career development is unlikely to be the largest single factor in any of these results and is not presented here as though it is.

There are also two boundary questions this paper does not resolve. The first is cost and scope: embedding at every point for every learner is not proposed, and the proportionate version needs to be worked through with jurisdictions and providers. The second is the division of responsibility for post-training transition between the training system and employment services, which is being considered separately through employment services reform. Neither question is a reason to leave career development out of the framework, but both will need answers.

Finally, there is no current national estimate of public expenditure on career guidance across Commonwealth, state and territory portfolios. Any proposal to invest differently will meet the reasonable question of how much is spent now, and that question cannot presently be answered by anyone.

9. Conclusion

The first Balanced Scorecard does what a baseline should do. It is candid about where the system is weak, careful about what the data can support, and clear that several targets will not be met on the current trajectory.

The measures furthest from target are those that record whether people entered training at all, whether it matched what they wanted from it, and whether it led anywhere afterwards. Volume, alignment to shortage occupations and delivery in national priority areas are all moving in the right direction. Satisfaction, participation and post-training outcomes are not.

Career guidance appears in the framework as an input that arrives from outside and improves the enrolments the system receives. Two things follow from that framing. It cannot affect what happens during or after training, which is where the largest gaps sit. And since the withdrawal of national funding for the National Careers Institute, there is no longer a national supplier of the input.

The NSA has a category for capabilities that cut across the system, and a set of mechanisms that follow from being placed in it. Career development meets the same tests as the four capabilities already in that category. Recognising it there, and building it into measurement, qualification design, workforce expectations and stewardship, would cost little at the outset and would allow its contribution to be demonstrated rather than asserted.

CICA welcomes discussion of these proposals with governments, Jobs and Skills Australia, and VET sector and industry partners.

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