

Embedding career development in the future of employment services

A position paper from the Career Industry Council of Australia on the Australian Government's reform of mainstream employment services

June 2026

CICA's position

The Australian Government's reform of mainstream employment services is a significant and welcome step. CICA supports the shift from a standardised model to three streams calibrated to a person's circumstances, the stronger emphasis on progress and sustainable outcomes, and the commitment to better assessment. These directions are consistent with established career development practice.

CICA's position is straightforward. Many of the reforms set out in the Discussion Paper are, in substance, career development functions, and they will deliver their intended outcomes only if qualified career development practice is embedded across the system. The career mapping and guidance tools proposed for the online stream, the Employment Goal Plan, the redesigned assessment and reassessment process, and the focus on frontline capability all rely on the discipline that connects a person's circumstances, skills and aspirations to realistic pathways and suitable work.

Australia already holds the professional infrastructure this reform requires. The Professional Standards for Australian Career Development Practitioners (5th ed., 2026), the Guiding Principles for Career Development Services and Career Information Products (3rd ed., 2026), the Register of Professional Career Development Practitioners, and the Australian Blueprint for Career Development together provide a recognised national benchmark for capability, ethics and quality. The opportunity now is to put these assets to work.

Why career development is central to the reform

The international evidence is consistent. The study of public employment services worldwide by WAPES, the ICCDPP and the University of Derby found that career guidance is most effective when it is referenced in policy, delivered by qualified staff, and resourced, and that the lack of qualified and trained career guidance staff is the single largest barrier to effective delivery. This points directly to the design choices Australia now faces.

Career development is a defined and resourceable service element. It spans assessment and self-knowledge, career and labour market information, career exploration and decision-making, career action planning through the Employment Goal Plan, the development of career management skills, and the brokering of pathways into education, training and work. Defined this way, it can be specified, staffed, measured and funded, rather than left to chance in frontline delivery.

Embedding it is an investment that lowers downstream cost. With 22.7 per cent of Workforce Australia Services participants achieving a sustainable outcome and around one in six re-entering within a year, better job suitability and reduced churn reduce the cost to government. International reviews of the economic benefits of career guidance reach the same conclusion, finding that the benefits justify public investment.

Why this matters to those who deliver the service and those who fund it

For the people who do the work

In the current system, frontline staff are too often positioned as administrators of obligations rather than skilled practitioners. They apply numerical scores that can produce referrals they know are wrong, and they manage compliance where they could be guiding people. Defining the role around career development restores its substance. It gives frontline staff a recognised skill set, the professional authority to exercise judgment, a credential through the Register of Professional Career Development Practitioners, and continuing professional development that builds a career of their own. The Select Committee identified the difficulty of attracting and retaining a suitably qualified workforce. Seen from the frontline, capability is not an overhead the reform must carry. It is what keeps experienced staff in the role and reduces the burnout that compliance-heavy servicing produces. An Employment Goal Plan developed well gives the working day meaning. Completed once and filed, it is one more form. The difference is professional capability and the room to use it.

For those who fund and steward the system

For those who fund and steward the system, the case is fiscal and about reducing delivery risk. The 2026-27 Budget has already committed substantial funding to functions that are, in substance, career development: \$205.5 million for online career-mapping and guidance tools, \$27.5 million for assessment and triaging, and \$52.6 million behind the early intensive services trial, with the Employment Goal Plan piloted alongside. The risk is investing in artificial-intelligence-assisted career tools and a new planning instrument without the professional standards and qualified staff that make them work, which is how earlier reforms have underdelivered. Embedding established career development practice is assurance on money already allocated.

It is also a cost story. With 22.7 per cent of Workforce Australia Services participants reaching a sustainable outcome and around one in six re-entering within a year, better job suitability reduces churn and the recurring cost it carries. Australia already owns the assets this requires. The Professional Standards, the Register, the Guiding Principles and the refreshed Australian Blueprint are national infrastructure that can be put to work now rather than built again. This is also the reform's own story. The Minister's foreword frames employment services around the dignity of work and the people furthest from the labour market, which is the cohort that qualified career development reaches and that the current system most often fails.

Where the system strains, and how career development changes the trajectory

The case is clearest when the reform is read against the points where the current system loses people. Each strain identified in the Discussion Paper is a point at which qualified career development practice changes the trajectory.

Where the system strains today	What the evidence shows	How qualified career development changes the trajectory
Entry and triage	Triaging relies heavily on numerical scoring, which the Discussion Paper links to inappropriate referrals and early disengagement.	A career-readiness assessment held as a guidance conversation improves the match between a person and their stream.
The online stream	Around one in nine people opt out to a provider, and around one in eight reach the maximum time before referral, which can damage confidence.	Brief career guidance, career mapping and proactive contact keep job-ready people moving rather than stalling.

Where the system strains today	What the evidence shows	How qualified career development changes the trajectory
Pathway planning	Mutual obligations are disconnected from the practical steps people need to take, and the Job Plan often becomes a compliance artefact.	A co-authored Employment Goal Plan, kept live, turns obligations into purposeful steps towards a goal.
Placement quality	Incentives reward rapid placement over suitability. Only 22.7 per cent reach a sustainable outcome and around one in six re-enter within a year.	Measuring and rewarding career readiness and suitable, sustainable outcomes reduces poor fit and churn.
Complex barriers	The share of the caseload in service for five years or more is well above where it sat a decade ago, made up largely of people with complex barriers.	Intensive, relational career development delivered by qualified case managers supports non-linear progress towards work.
Frontline workforce	International evidence finds the lack of qualified and trained career guidance staff is the single largest barrier to effective delivery.	Stream-based qualification standards, the Register, and a tiered workforce build the capability the system depends on.

Illustrative pathways

The following composite examples are illustrative. Each shows where a qualified career conversation changes the outcome at a point the evidence above describes.

A retrenched worker

After a business closure, an experienced worker is routed to online self-service on a job-readiness score. Without help to see how their skills transfer, applications go nowhere and confidence falls. Early access to a career development practitioner identifies transferable skills, recognises prior learning, and targets a realistic next role, so the next job comes sooner and fits better.

A young person

A school leaver with little work history is placed in a stream that assumes job-readiness, and generic job search produces rejections. A practitioner who builds career management skills, links them to apprenticeship and training pathways, and arranges work-like experience sets a foundation that the international longitudinal evidence connects to lower unemployment and higher earnings in adulthood.

Someone with complex barriers

A person with interconnected vocational and non-vocational barriers cycles through short placements that do not hold. Intensive servicing with a qualified case manager, wrap-around support, volunteering and staged work-like experience builds confidence and readiness over time, with progress recognised before a placement is reached.

Career development support belongs in all three streams

CICA supports three calibrated streams and recommends that career development support be present across all of them, scaled by intensity rather than concentrated in one. Stream placement should rest on a holistic assessment of both a person's distance from the labour market and their career readiness, not on numerical job-readiness scoring alone. Career readiness is what distinguishes those who can self-manage their job search online from those who need active coaching. The Discussion Paper's own data, where around one in nine people in online services opt out to a provider and around one in eight reach the maximum time before referral, suggests current placement does not always match need.

- Online and brief intervention services: high-quality self-help career and labour market information, career mapping and exploration tools, brief career guidance interventions, proactive contact, and job search support.
- Targeted provider services: active career coaching, employability support, development of the Employment Goal Plan, brokerage of skills and training aligned to local demand, identification of transferable skills, job matching, and post-placement support.
- Intensive services: intensive and relational career development, mentoring, work-like experience and volunteering, recognition of prior learning, coordinated wrap-around support, and staged pathways that build confidence and career management skills, including through social enterprises.

The activities least commonly offered internationally, such as the validation of prior learning and skills, are precisely those Australia should strengthen, particularly for retrenched workers and career changers who need help to identify how their existing skills transfer.

A capable, qualified workforce is the determining factor

Frontline capability is the single most important determinant of service quality. The reform's success therefore depends on who delivers it. CICA recommends stream-based qualification and capability standards drawing on the Professional Standards and the Register of Professional Career Development Practitioners, with professional registration considered as a condition of delivering funded career development services, and continuing professional development expected and resourced.

A tiered workforce makes this achievable at scale. Specialist career development practitioners lead complex servicing, assessment and Employment Goal Plan development. The broader frontline workforce, including Australian Public Service contact-centre staff in the online stream, can be equipped through accessible online professional learning to hold meaningful career conversations as part of everyday servicing. This mirrors the tiered model documented internationally and addresses the lack of career guidance training that the same evidence identifies as one of the two largest barriers to effective delivery. CICA is well placed to develop or accredit this professional learning, drawing on the Professional Standards, the Guiding Principles and the Australian Blueprint.

From a compliance focus to active, personalised servicing

The most consequential change the reform can make is to move the frontline from administering compliance to delivering active, personalised servicing. The Discussion Paper sets this direction itself, proposing a more contemporary regulatory approach that encourages active participant engagement rather than reactive compliance, alongside clearer expectations of frontline staff capability. That shift is a workforce investment before it is anything else. Personalised, relational servicing depends on staff with the skills to hold a guidance conversation, read a person's circumstances, and exercise judgment, which is the capability that career development qualifications define and that the Professional Standards and the Register make assurable.

Capability is the enabler, not the whole answer. Frontline staff cannot guide where the surrounding settings still require them to enforce. If payment models reward rapid placement and mutual obligations remain compliance-driven, the working day will continue to be shaped by activity rather than progress, whatever staff are trained to do. Active servicing therefore depends on aligning the capability of the workforce, the incentives that reward quality and progress, and mutual obligations connected to the steps in a person's Employment Goal Plan. The reform already proposes movement on each. Investing in the workforce is what allows the other two to take effect.

In practice, investing in the workforce means defining the capability required at each stream through the Professional Standards and the Register, resourcing the tiered model so that specialist practitioners lead complex servicing while accessible professional learning equips every frontline role to hold meaningful career conversations, and funding the continuing professional development that sustains quality over time. The evidence

is consistent that personalised, relational servicing delivered by qualified staff improves job suitability and reduces the churn the Discussion Paper identifies, which is the outcome that justifies the investment.

The Employment Goal Plan is a career action plan

The Employment Goal Plan is, in effect, a career action plan, and developing career action plans with clients is core career development practice. CICA strongly supports its introduction. To work, it must set a clear, realistic and individualised goal grounded in self-knowledge and labour market information, capture strengths and aspirations alongside barriers, link each agreed activity to a milestone, and connect mutual obligations explicitly to its steps. It should be written in plain language, genuinely co-authored, aligned to the Australian Blueprint, and portable so that information follows the person.

The risk is that the plan becomes a compliance artefact like the Job Plan it replaces. Two safeguards reduce that risk. Incentives and performance measures should recognise the quality of pathway planning and progress against the plan, not only final placement. And participants should experience the plan as their own. The OECD's survey of career guidance for adults found that while around four in ten adults had used career guidance in the previous five years, only about one in five considered it useful in achieving a concrete outcome such as finding a job or enrolling in training. The quality of guidance, not simply its availability, determines its impact, which reinforces that the plan must be developed by capable practitioners and kept live.

Assessment as guidance, and measuring what matters

Assessment should be a holistic guidance conversation that captures strengths, aspirations and career readiness, not only barriers and numerical scores. A relational, client-centred approach helps people feel comfortable to disclose the circumstances that affect their needs, and the validity of triaging depends on the capability of the assessor, for which the Professional Standards provide a ready national benchmark. Assessment should capture both barriers and assets, including self-knowledge, career management skills, work history and transferable skills, recognised prior learning, goals and aspirations, labour market awareness, and digital access and literacy.

On measurement, incentives and measures should reward suitable, sustainable employment and recognise genuine progress, not placement volume. The current tendency to reward rapid placement over suitability contributes to the poor job fit and churn the Discussion Paper identifies. Progress towards employment can be measured using established career development constructs, including career management skills aligned to the Australian Blueprint, career readiness, self-efficacy and confidence, clarified goals, skills attained, and completion of work-like experience. In intensive services, where progress is incremental and non-linear, measurement should give greater weight to intermediate progress over longer horizons while keeping suitable employment as the ultimate goal. A national evidence framework for career guidance outcomes, which Jobs and Skills Australia is well placed to support, would underpin consistent measurement across the system.

What gets measured shapes behaviour on both sides of the service. It defines what frontline staff are recognised and rewarded for, and it is the lever the government has identified for lifting quality. Measures that capture career readiness and progress therefore serve the people doing the work and those holding the system to account, provided they do not collapse back into placement-only metrics.

Digital tools, commissioning and stewardship

The career mapping and guidance tools proposed for the online stream, including any use of artificial intelligence, should meet quality and ethical standards consistent with CICA's Guiding Principles and retain human oversight. Tools that use artificial intelligence can narrow aspirations, embed bias, and rely on labour market data that may be out of date. They should be designed with professional input and with the people who will use them, evaluated for accuracy, bias and outcomes, kept transparent, and supported by a clear route to a practitioner. Digital tools

should complement practitioner support rather than replace it.

Commissioning should build in career development capability so that provider diversity and service quality advance together. CICA supports a stronger role for community-based organisations, First Nations organisations and social enterprises. Weighting provider capability, local connections and workforce qualifications, including registration through the Register of Professional Career Development Practitioners, ensures that a more diverse market does not come at the cost of quality. Proportionate requirements and capacity-building support would help smaller and specialist providers to enter and remain in the market.

Continuous improvement depends on consistent measurement, workforce development and genuine participant voice. Practitioner capability and professional development are the engine of improvement, through communities of practice, continuing professional development, and the dissemination of best practice through the professional body.

A reform that fits a lifelong career guidance framework

Employment services are one part of a person's lifelong career journey, which also includes school career education, tertiary education, and support for workers managing change. In March 2026 CICA published A National Framework for Lifelong Career Guidance in Australia, which argues that Australia has capable practitioners, credible professional standards, the Register of Professional Career Development Practitioners, and a refreshed Australian Blueprint, but lacks the national policy architecture to connect them. Aligning this reform with that framework, including professional workforce standards, a national evidence framework, and coordination across the Education, Skills and Training, and Employment and Workplace Relations portfolios, would strengthen coherence and reduce duplication.

Working with the department on the design

CICA's interest in this reform is the quality of career development practice across the system, not the delivery of funded services. As custodian of Australia's national professional infrastructure for career development, including the Professional Standards, the Guiding Principles, the Register and the Australian Blueprint, CICA can bring independent expertise to the design work now underway. The areas the government has prioritised for design, including the assessment and triaging tools, the Employment Goal Plan, frontline workforce capability, and the governance of online career mapping and guidance tools, each draw on career development practice. CICA would welcome the opportunity to advise on the design of the Employment Goal Plan, a stream-based capability framework for frontline staff, quality and ethical standards for career development services and digital tools, and the measurement of progress towards employment. These contributions draw on national assets that already exist, offered in support of a stronger system for participants, employers and the public.

Recommendations

CICA's central recommendation is that career development be treated as a defined service element across all three streams, and that it be delivered by appropriately qualified staff. In summary, CICA recommends that the Australian Government:

- 1** treat career development as a defined service element across all three streams, calibrated by intensity;
- 2** set stream-based qualification and capability standards for frontline staff, drawing on the Professional Standards and the Register of Professional Career Development Practitioners, and consider professional registration as a condition of delivering funded career development services;

- 3 build a tiered career development workforce, pairing specialist practitioners for complex servicing with accessible online professional learning that equips all frontline staff to hold meaningful career conversations, which CICA can develop or accredit;
- 4 invest in frontline workforce capability as the foundation for active, personalised servicing, rebalancing incentives and mutual obligations from a compliance focus towards engagement so that capability can be used;
- 5 design the Employment Goal Plan as a genuine, co-authored career action plan that is kept live and aligned to the Australian Blueprint for Career Development;
- 6 make assessment a holistic guidance conversation that captures strengths, aspirations and career readiness, not only barriers and numerical scores;
- 7 measure progress towards employment using career readiness and career management skills, and reward suitable, sustainable outcomes rather than placement volume;
- 8 ensure career mapping and digital tools, including any use of artificial intelligence, meet quality and ethical standards and retain human oversight;
- 9 build career development capability into commissioning so that provider diversity and service quality advance together; and
- 10 align the reform with CICA's proposed National Framework for Lifelong Career Guidance and a national evidence framework, coordinated across the Education, Skills and Training, and Employment and Workplace Relations portfolios.

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