

Submission to the Victorian Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into Student Pathways to In-Demand Industries

Submitted by: Career Industry Council of Australia (CICA)

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About the Career Industry Council of Australia (CICA)

The Career Industry Council of Australia (CICA) serves as the national peak body for the career industry, representing professional career development practitioners throughout all states and territories.

CICA is dedicated to advancing quality career development by establishing and promoting professional standards, practitioner qualifications, benchmarking and ethical practices. CICA advocates for the integration of career development into education, employment, and workforce planning policies. We promote lifelong access to career services as a public good, recognising that informed career decisions benefit not just individuals but also industries, communities, and the Australian economy.

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Victorian Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into how students can be better supported with advice and pathways into in-demand industries, including through TAFE and other vocational education and training (VET) routes.

Our submission highlights the role of professional career services in empowering all students to make informed, confident decisions about their futures.

1. Supporting Student Transitions into Further Education and In-Demand Industries

In-demand industries such as healthcare, construction, aged care, early childhood education, cybersecurity, clean energy, and advanced manufacturing provide growing and sustainable employment opportunities for young people. However, students cannot pursue what they do not know exists. Ensuring all students are aware of these opportunities—and understand the various ways they can access them requires a coordinated and well-resourced career development system.

The OECD (2025) confirms that students who engage in various career development activities during school, such as workplace visits, career talks, and job shadowing, report significantly higher confidence in their career plans and achieve more successful transitions into work or further study. These experiences help students connect their school learning to real-world opportunities and develop the skills necessary to navigate their futures.

Despite these benefits, many students in Victoria remain unaware of vocational pathways that align with labour market needs. The *Victorian Chamber Career Services Policy Paper* (2023) found that information about TAFE, apprenticeships, traineeships, and industry-endorsed micro-credentials is not consistently provided in schools. This leads to missed opportunities, particularly in sectors that offer meaningful careers yet are too often regarded as “lesser” options compared to university.

A career development system that supports young people in exploring and pursuing both higher education and vocational education pathways is essential. Career practitioners must be equipped to present vocational options, such as TAFE certificates, pre-apprenticeship programs, and dual VET/VCE pathways, as viable, respected, and aligned with long-term success.

Disadvantaged students, including those from low-income backgrounds, culturally diverse families, or who are the first in their family to complete senior secondary school, gain significant benefits from sustained and personalised career guidance. OECD (2024) research indicates that these students are more likely to raise their aspirations and take meaningful action when supported by structured, high-quality career programs.

Finally, while employer engagement is critical to helping students understand and access in-demand industries, practical barriers persist. The Victorian Chamber (2023) reports that only 19% of employers currently offer work experience placements, despite 98% recognising their importance. CICA supports the establishment of a Local Careers Development Fund to enable scalable partnerships between schools, TAFEs, employers, and community organisations, particularly in regional and priority growth areas.

Victorian Employment Growth and Career Development Imperatives

According to Jobs and Skills Australia (2024), Victoria is projected to add 628,000 new jobs between May 2024 and May 2034, representing a 16.9% increase. This growth will elevate Victoria's share of national employment to 26.7%. To meet this demand, students must be equipped with knowledge of growth industries and clear, supported pathways to enter them. Career development should be integrated as a core component of workforce development, rather than as a supplementary activity at the end of schooling.

2. Strengthening Senior Secondary Pathways

The introduction of the VCE Vocational Major and the expanded senior secondary offering in Victoria is a welcome step towards recognising diverse post-school pathways. However, structural reform alone is insufficient. To ensure these reforms have a lasting impact, they must be supported by accessible, comprehensive, and expert career development services.

Students require practical and timely support to comprehend the implications of their subject choices and how their strengths and interests align with available opportunities. Career practitioners play a crucial role in helping students map these connections and make informed decisions regarding VET and higher education.

In many cases, students from regional and low socioeconomic status (SES) schools are unable to access subjects that align with their intended career pathways due to staffing shortages, timetable limitations, or inadequate infrastructure. For example, a student in a regional school may wish to pursue a Certificate III in Individual Support (Ageing). Still, their school might not offer the program or a suitable alternative.

Without career guidance that enables students to explore various options, such as TAFE partnerships, distance learning, or school-based apprenticeships, these students are more likely to disengage or choose pathways that do not align with their goals. Career development also aids in acquiring employability skills, which employers increasingly value over technical knowledge. Skills such as teamwork, resilience, communication, and digital literacy must be integrated across the curriculum and highlighted through career education and experiential learning.

The OECD (2024) recommends embedding equity principles into all aspects of career development, including prioritising access to programs in under-resourced schools and ensuring system-level accountability for career guidance delivery. This means ensuring subject availability and career services are not a postcode lottery but a consistent right for all students in Victoria.

3. Elevating Career Development Practice in Schools

Despite decades of national and international research affirming its critical importance, career development in Victorian schools remains under-recognised, under-resourced, and delivered inconsistently. Too often,

career education is treated as an add-on to the curriculum or as a logistical task assigned to unqualified staff who lack formal training in career development.

To provide meaningful, equitable, and future-focused career support, career development must be recognised as a specialised profession, one that requires dedicated qualifications, appropriate status within the school structure, and remuneration that reflects its strategic importance to student success.

Professional career development practitioners possess specialised knowledge in career development theory, labour market information, ethical practice, and communication skills. CICA-endorsed qualifications, such as the Graduate Certificate in Career Development or equivalent postgraduate studies, are designed to ensure that practitioners are not merely coordinating events or administering work experience placements but actively engaging students in career conversations, facilitating decision-making, and guiding pathway planning that aligns with both their aspirations and real-world opportunities.

These professionals provide:

- Individual and group career conversations based on career development frameworks
- Expertise in mapping curriculum learning to employment pathways
- Accurate, up-to-date labour market information
- Structured programs that support transitions into further education, including VET, TAFE, and apprenticeships
- Advocacy for students facing barriers to engagement or aspiration

Despite this complexity and importance, many career practitioner roles are categorised as administrative or ancillary, leading to inadequate remuneration, limited influence within school leadership structures, and reduced retention of skilled professionals. This not only devalues the profession but also undermines the quality and reach of career services delivered to students.

CICA strongly recommends that schools and systems recognise career development roles as middle-to-senior level professional positions, with salaries, professional autonomy, and responsibilities comparable to other specialised staff, such as curriculum leaders, wellbeing coordinators, or learning support specialists.

Further, career development practitioners must be included in whole-school planning and leadership decision-making, particularly in relation to subject selection, vocational programs, transitions, and partnerships with TAFE and industry.

Implementing a mandated student-to-practitioner ratio of 1:450 will not only guarantee access but also validate the allocation of properly compensated, full-time positions. This strategy aligns with international best practices and bolsters the delivery of consistent, high-quality services across all school environments, irrespective of location or student demographics.

A professionalised workforce of qualified career practitioners, recognised and remunerated as core members of the education team, is essential to ensuring that every student in Victoria receives the personalised guidance they need to pursue in-demand industry pathways, whether through TAFE, apprenticeships, university, or direct entry to employment.

4. Addressing Equity Gaps: Regional Students, Girls in Non-Traditional Pathways, and Underrepresented Groups

Career development serves as a vital tool for enhancing equity in education and training. For students in regional and rural Victoria, barriers include limited access to industry, fewer subject options, and inadequate contact with qualified career practitioners. They may also encounter transport difficulties and digital exclusion, which further restrict access to work-based learning or online career resources. While digital tools

can broaden reach, these need to be supported by local career hubs, coordinated school-employer partnerships, and in-person guidance tailored to the region's economic context.

The Victorian Chamber Career Services Policy Paper (2023) highlights the role of TAFEs, LLENs, schools, and employers in delivering regionally relevant, high-impact programs. Career development efforts should align with place-based employment strategies, including local industry profiles, economic development plans, and community engagement initiatives.

Persistent gender stereotyping continues to deter girls from pursuing careers in trades, engineering, manufacturing, ICT, and other male-dominated sectors. This issue begins early, with research showing that gendered beliefs about 'suitable' jobs are formed during primary school. Countering this trend requires sustained intervention, including the use of inclusive language, female role models, confidence-building programs, and access to hands-on experiences.

To support this early intervention, the Career Industry Council of Australia, in collaboration with the National Careers Institute, has developed the Little Ripples suite of career education resources. These materials are designed for parents, caregivers, and educators of primary school-aged children to help expand career aspirations and challenge conventional gender stereotypes in the workplace. Through storybooks, lesson plans, activity sheets, and parent engagement tools, Little Ripples fosters inclusive, age-appropriate career exploration, nurturing early confidence in children's diverse capabilities. These free resources are accessible at www.yourcareer.gov.au/littleripples.

Students from refugee and migrant backgrounds, students with disabilities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and students with complex learning needs often encounter intersecting challenges in accessing education and employment pathways. OECD (2024) research shows that culturally responsive, personalised, and sustained career development makes a measurable difference in outcomes for these groups. Programs that engage families, respect cultural perspectives, and connect students to mentors and support networks can significantly boost engagement, aspiration, and participation in vocational pathways.

Innovative Global Practices to Inform Victoria's Approach

Drawing from international best practices, there are several innovative solutions that can further bolster Victoria's efforts to support student pathways into in-demand industries:

AI-Driven Career Platforms

The Netherlands has introduced AI-powered tools that offer tailored career guidance based on a student's strengths and the labour market. Victoria could develop a statewide AI-enhanced career platform that integrates local industry data to provide personalised insights, simulate pathways, and connect students with relevant courses and job-shadowing opportunities.

Career Guidance Frameworks with Accountability

The UK's Gatsby Benchmarks provide a national framework for measuring the performance of school career services. Adapting this model to the Victorian context could ensure greater consistency and accountability in the delivery of career guidance, supported by strong school-industry links and tracking of student destinations.

Expanding Digital Equity and Virtual Mentoring

Finland's national virtual career service ensures that rural students have access to mentoring, career advice, and industry engagement. Victoria could establish regionally coordinated virtual career hubs that offer

services like live industry Q&As, tele-mentoring, and virtual work placements, thus reducing geographic barriers.

Promoting Gender-Inclusive Career Development

Early career education programs in Australia and overseas have proven effective in challenging gendered career norms. Increasing Victoria's investment in initiatives like CICA's *Little Ripples* and enhancing school-based mentoring for girls in trades and STEM can foster confidence, dismantle stereotypes, and create equitable access to high-wage, high-growth roles.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Career development is not a luxury; it is an essential component of an inclusive, future focused education system. Without structured career support, students risk making decisions based on guesswork, pressure, or misinformation. With it, they gain the clarity, confidence, and skills to pursue fulfilling careers in sectors that need them most.

To better support students with guidance and pathways into in-demand industries, including through TAFE and other vocational education options, the Career Industry Council of Australia recommends the following six actions:

1. Embed a statewide Career Development Strategy aligned with education, skills, and employment reform agendas.

Victoria should adopt a whole of government approach that positions career development as a critical enabler of education and workforce outcomes. This strategy should articulate a clear vision, define system wide goals, embed accountability mechanisms, and ensure alignment across education, training, economic development, and youth transitions. The strategy must prioritise equity and inclusion, leverage industry and community partnerships, and explicitly acknowledge the role of career development practitioners in supporting student engagement and transitions into further education and work.

2. Establish a Local Careers Development Fund to support scalable, place-based partnerships.

To address regional disparities and ensure relevance to local labour market needs, the Victorian Government should establish a dedicated fund to support local career development initiatives. This fund would enable partnerships among schools, TAFEs, employers, LLENs, and community organisations to co-design and deliver programs tailored to in-demand industries. It would facilitate work-based learning career immersion experiences and outreach to underrepresented groups, particularly in rural and disadvantaged communities.

3. Mandate access to qualified career development practitioners in all secondary schools, with a benchmark ratio of one practitioner per 450 students.

Every student deserves access to high-quality, individualised career support from a qualified practitioner. To achieve this, Victoria should introduce a policy requiring all secondary schools to employ or have access to a career development practitioner who holds a CICA-endorsed qualification. A benchmark of one practitioner for every 450 students, consistent with international best practices, would ensure practitioners are not overstretched and can provide tailored guidance, program delivery, and stakeholder engagement. Career practitioner roles should be formally recognised as professional positions, with appropriate remuneration and inclusion in school leadership structures.

4. Introduce compulsory, developmentally appropriate career education from Year 7 onwards.

Career education should not be left until the final years of schooling. Instead, it ought to be integrated from Year 7 and increase in complexity and depth throughout each stage of schooling. Age-appropriate content should enable students to explore their interests, develop self-awareness, understand career pathways, and build career management skills. By incorporating career education into the curriculum and school culture, students are better prepared to make informed subject selections, access relevant opportunities, and comprehend the connection between learning and the world of work.

5. Ring-fence funding for career development to ensure consistent and high-quality program delivery.

Sustainable and dedicated funding is crucial for providing consistent, high-impact career services throughout the state. Career development should not rely on fragmented or ad hoc funding mechanisms. Ring-fenced funding enables schools to hire qualified staff, implement ongoing programs, acquire resources, and facilitate system-wide coordination and evaluation. Investing in this area translates to better education retention, stronger transitions, improved workforce alignment, and long-term social and economic inclusion.

6. Prioritise equity through targeted initiatives that address geographic, gender, cultural, and digital barriers.

Targeted strategies are crucial for supporting students who encounter additional barriers to accessing career development. These initiatives should incorporate programs to assist regional and rural students, as well as programs to encourage girls to pursue trades and STEM careers. Furthermore, culturally responsive services need to be offered for First Nations, refugee, and migrant students, while inclusive approaches must be adopted for students with disabilities. It is also crucial to address digital access to ensure all students, irrespective of their location or socioeconomic background, can benefit from online resources and virtual engagement. Family engagement should be a fundamental aspect of these initiatives, facilitating career conversations at home and within community contexts.

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