



Centre for Behavioural and System Change

Launchpad:

A fresh approach to  
broadening access to post-school  
opportunities for disadvantaged  
young Australians



3 April 2025

## About System 2



We are an applied research not-for-profit, created in 2022 by BIT (Behavioural Insights Team) Australia and UK innovation charity Nesta.

Our mission is to enable young Australians experiencing disadvantage to thrive.

We bring together behavioural science, systems thinking, and insights from deep collaboration with those with lived experience, to co-design, test, and scale practical solutions.

### Acknowledgment of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we operate, the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, and pay our respects to Elders past and present. We recognise their ongoing connection to this land, waters, and community, and honour their rich cultural heritage.

### Centre for Behavioural and System Change

We established the Centre for Behavioural and System Change to undertake research that supports our mission. The Centre is an Approved Research Institute with Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR) status. It is overseen by our **Research Committee** (below), chaired by Dr Robyn Mildon.



**Dr. Robyn Mildon**

CEO of Centre for Evidence and Implementation



**Dr. Jenny Donovan**

CEO of the Australian Education Research Organisation



**Jesse King**

Head of Policy and Programs at the Aurora Education Foundation



**Prof. Nicholas Biddle**

Head of the School of Politics and International Relations, ANU



**Prof. Amanda Third**

Co-Director, Young & Resilient Research Centre, WSU



**Dr. Alex Gyani**

Managing Director of the Behavioural Insights Team's Asia Pacific team



**Prof. Robert Slonim**

Honorary Professor, UTS School of Business

Report prepared by:



**Hannah Bellier**

Research Lead - Youth Employment and Education



**John Craven**

Chief Executive Officer

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### Suggested citation for this report

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## System 2 Launchpad

'Launchpad' is the name we give to our exploratory research projects. Projects were initially undertaken in three priority research areas, each led by a dedicated System 2 Research Lead specialist. This report is one of three summarising the project findings.

To select our three research priority areas, we began with a review of 60 Australian youth surveys published from 2020–2024. Our Youth Advisory Board, in collaboration with our Research Committee, used this review to identify the three most important issues affecting young Australians experiencing disadvantage:

- **Youth mental health**, and in particular the challenges associated with accessing high quality mental health services. *This topic was identified as the top priority issue and is the topic of a separate report available on our website.*
- **Fair access to post-school career opportunities**, with linked concerns about employment, cost of living, and debt. The preferred focus was on the role of career education and support prior to leaving school in driving access to career opportunities. *This topic was identified as the second priority issue, and is the focus of this report.*
- **Early years**, and in particular early childhood education and care. *This topic was not a priority identified in youth surveys, but was identified by the Youth Advisory Board as the third priority issue. It is also the topic of a separate report.*

Each project shared several goals including:

- Understanding the extent to which systems are working as intended
- Identifying areas ripe for policy reform
- Posing important research questions
- Understanding where System 2's unique approach can have the most impact.

While activities to achieve these goals varied between projects, they typically involved building a system map informed by a rapid evidence review and consultations with experts and other stakeholders in the system — including those with lived experience.

## Youth Advisory Board

Our research is guided by our Youth Advisory Board (YAB), comprising 12 young people, with three main objectives:

- Amplify the perspectives of young people on the big issues they identify,
- Support the decision making of our Research Committee,
- Participate directly in our research projects, where their lived experience is valued.



Is



Jazmin



Dominic



Cooper



Tahlia



Ruby



Jasmine



Sophie



Kushagra



Julia



Carly



Chase

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# Introduction to Accessing Careers & Opportunities

Research in Australia highlights the urgent need to improve the availability, accessibility, and relevance of career guidance and work-based learning experiences. Despite an overall upward trend in investment in career education in Australia, significant challenges persist. Findings suggest that issues such as inconsistent quality, limited research on the implementation of school-based career education, and disparities in funding contribute to inequitable access to quality support. These systemic barriers make it difficult to identify and share best practice, ultimately affecting career readiness, particularly for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. This highlights a gap between available support and the diverse needs of young Australians.<sup>1</sup>

## Executive summary

Ensuring equitable access to high-quality careers education and opportunities is essential for young people's long-term career success and economic participation.<sup>2 3</sup> By providing clear career pathways, young people can be empowered to make informed choices, build meaningful futures, and contribute to society. Key transition points – including during school careers – play a crucial role in shaping their trajectories. At these moments, access to accurate career information, mentorship, and real-world experience can make a transformative difference.

This report details System 2's findings from an exploratory research project looking into **careers education and opportunities for Australians aged 16–24**. The project comprised a series of research activities including a rapid evidence review, consultations with experts and young people, and interviews with young people. The purpose of this program of work was to:

- Develop a comprehensive understanding of the post-school pathways landscape using detailed **system and journey maps**, identifying systemic barriers and opportunities for high-impact intervention areas.
- Develop **proposals for impactful projects** that System 2 could pursue to enhance career access and support equitable outcomes.

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<sup>1</sup>Dockery, A. M., Bawa, S., Coffey, J., & Li, I. W. (2022). Secondary students' access to careers information: The role of socio-economic background. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 49(5), 1001-1023.

<sup>2</sup>Sharapova, N., Zholdasbekova, S., Arzymbetova, S., Zaimoglu, O., & Bozshatayeva, G. (2023). Efficacy of school-based career guidance interventions: A review of recent research. *Journal of Education and E-Learning Research*, 10(2), 215-222.

<sup>3</sup>Career Industry Council of Australia. (2007). *The public benefits of career development services: A position paper*.



## The careers education system is broken

The careers and post-school pathways ecosystem in Australia consists of multiple interdependent systems, including education and schools, tertiary and vocational pathways, financial and social support structures, and informal influences. Numerous policy efforts and initiatives aim to enhance career readiness and equitable access, including formal in-school provision and external organisations.<sup>4</sup> However, outcomes remain uneven, disproportionately disadvantaging low-socio-economic status (SES) students, Indigenous youth, students from rural and remote areas, and students from migrant backgrounds.<sup>5</sup>

Career education in Australia is fragmented, and under-resourced, often falling short of meeting young peoples' needs, with no national framework ensuring consistent quality across different schools and states.<sup>6</sup> As shown in our system and journey maps, young people, especially those from low-socio-economic, Indigenous, or rural backgrounds, are routinely denied the guidance, resources, and networks they need to make informed decisions about their post-school pathways. While some schools have sufficient resources and excel, many public schools remain funded below the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS), offering minimal career exposure and little industry engagement.<sup>7</sup> Without clear benchmarks or evaluation frameworks, schools have no accountability mechanism to improve, measure, or even know what to aim for when it comes to their career guidance provision, ultimately widening existing equity gaps and restricting young people's post-school opportunities.

### Summary of barriers identified in this research

- **There is no clear guidance on what high-quality career education looks like,** and no nationally mandated framework ensuring this quality is consistently met across Australian schools. Career education provision varies widely by state, school sector, and socio-economic context.<sup>8</sup> Public schools, particularly those in low-SES and regional areas, often lack dedicated career advisors, structured work-integrated learning, and industry engagement opportunities.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, many higher-resourced private schools provide richer career guidance, alumni networks, and exposure to diverse pathways, reinforcing opportunity gaps.<sup>10</sup> The absence of clear national benchmarking and evaluation frameworks further exacerbates these disparities; if there are no external benchmarks indicating what schools *should* be delivering, less well-resourced schools may struggle to prioritise or plan career education effectively.

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<sup>4</sup>Delahunty, J. (2022) *You going to uni? Exploring how people from regional, rural and remote areas navigate into and through higher education*. University of Wollongong 2020 Equity Fellowship Report: National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education

<sup>5</sup> Groves O, Austin K, O'Shea S, Lamanna J. 'One student might get one opportunity and then the next student won't get anything like that': Inequities in Australian career education and recommendations for a fairer future. *Aust Educ Res*. 2023;50(2):519-536.

<sup>6</sup> Groves O, Austin K, O'Shea S, Lamanna J. 'One student might get one opportunity and then the next student won't get anything like that': Inequities in Australian career education and recommendations for a fairer future. *Aust Educ Res*. 2023;50(2):519-536.

<sup>7</sup> Australian Education Union (2025). *Public school funding falls behind*.

<sup>8</sup> Groves O, Austin K, O'Shea S, Lamanna J. 'One student might get one opportunity and then the next student won't get anything like that': Inequities in Australian career education and recommendations for a fairer future. *Aust Educ Res*. 2023;50(2):519-536.

<sup>9</sup> Dockery, A. M., Bawa, S., Coffey, J., & Li, I. W. (2022). Secondary students' access to careers information: The role of socio-economic background. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 49(5), 1001-1023.

<sup>10</sup> Groves O, Austin K, O'Shea S, Lamanna J. 'One student might get one opportunity and then the next student won't get anything like that': Inequities in Australian career education and recommendations for a fairer future. *Aust Educ Res*. 2023;50(2):519-536.



- **Disparities in school funding and policy developments directly impact students' career readiness and post-school opportunities.** The majority of public schools remain funded below the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS), limiting funds for “non-curriculum” post-school preparation (i.e. dedicated career education and resources).<sup>11</sup> In contrast, private schools, many of which already have higher baseline resources, often exceed SRS funding levels.<sup>12</sup> Although policies like Better Fairer Schools aim to address funding gaps, they lack explicit focus on career education, and outcomes are not expected for another decade.<sup>13</sup> International comparisons, such as Finland’s targeted equity funding model, highlight how redistributive policies could help mitigate these disadvantages.<sup>14</sup> Providing clearer guidance on how to improve the equity loadings of Australia’s SRS funding model to reduce the shortfall for disadvantaged students would help direct resources toward equity-focused practices where they are needed most, thereby maximising overall impact.
- **Beyond formal education systems, young people’s career aspirations and decisions are heavily shaped by their social environment,** including family, peers, and digital media.<sup>15</sup> Students from professional, high-income backgrounds often have greater access to positive role models in more elite industries and professions, networking opportunities, and informal career knowledge, while those from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to have limited exposure to a range of career options.<sup>16</sup> Social capital disparities contribute to self-limiting aspirations in low-SES and rural communities, where young people may feel that they don’t belong in elite universities or certain professions.<sup>17</sup> The rise of online career influencers and digital platforms has the potential to democratise career information but also risks exacerbating misinformation and reinforcing narrow career aspirations.
- **Exposure to industry through school partnerships or external programs support more informed decision-making on pathway options, but the provision and reach of these is also uneven.** Employer-school engagement remains limited in many public or remote schools, reducing students’ exposure to real-world career experiences and industry networks.<sup>18</sup> Without greater funding, coordination, and accountability for school partnerships with broader industry and organisation, these programs alone are unlikely to bridge existing equity gaps.

## Systemic reforms to address barriers

This research identifies a series of system-level reforms to address the barriers identified to young people realising their full potential.

### 1. Nationally consistent career education standards

<sup>11</sup> Beazley, J., & Cassidy, C. (2023, July 16). *Private school funding increased twice as much as public schools' in decade after Gonski, data shows*. The Guardian.

<sup>12</sup> ACARA. (2022). *School income*.

<sup>13</sup> Greenwell, T. and Bonnor, C. (2022). *Waiting for Gonski; How Australia failed its schools*. Sydney: UNSW Press.

<sup>14</sup> Kettunen, J. (2024). Finnish Lower Secondary Career Education Through a Systems Lens. *Nordic Journal of Transitions Careers and Guidance*, 5(1), 73–85.

<sup>15</sup> Roberts, S.; Lyall, B.; Trott, V.; Foeken, E.; Smith, J.; Robards, B.; Genat, A.; Graf, D.; Jones, C.; Marple, P.; et al. *Young Australians Navigating the 'Careers Information Ecology'*. *Youth 2023*, 3, 300–320.

<sup>16</sup> Productivity Commission. (2024). *Fairly equal? Economic mobility in Australia*. Commonwealth of Australia.

<sup>17</sup> Delahunty, J. (2022) *You going to uni? Exploring how people from regional, rural and remote areas navigate into and through higher education*. University of Wollongong 2020 Equity Fellowship Report: National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education

<sup>18</sup> Australian Business and Community Network. (2023). *ABCN Annual Impact Report 2023*.

- Establish clear, mandatory guidelines so that every student, regardless of their background, can receive quality career counselling and exposure.
  - Supplement these guidelines with detailed implementation support (including culturally and place-based responsive practice) to ensure schools are aware of what quality looks like in specific contexts.
  - Finally, incentivise or mandate consistent reporting mechanisms to ensure transparency in provision.
- 2. Review and improve the mechanisms and implementation of the Schooling Resource Standard to ensure fully equitable funding for Australian schools**
- Review the SRS funding model to ensure public schools are being allocated full funding.
  - Revise equity loadings to explicitly include additional funding for career guidance and mentoring in schools serving disadvantaged youth.
  - By increasing and recalibrating equity loadings to fund dedicated career advisors, structured work placements, and mentorship programs, schools would be better positioned to address increased needs and opportunity gaps for young people facing disadvantage, and help all young Australians explore meaningful post-school pathways.
- 3. Enhanced Support Beyond School**
- Expand financial and academic support after young people leave school.
  - This includes offering further support navigating the ATAR system and adjustment factors, providing more on-the-ground support for pathway navigation, further education and training applications and transition, and helping to improve self-efficacy among marginalised students.
  - This should also be applied to financial support including standardising student loans across tertiary education, expanding and facilitating scholarship application processes.
- 4. Robust Employer-School Partnerships**
- Invest in more structured work-integrated learning and industry engagement in under-served regions – an essential step to connecting youth with tangible career experiences.

Taken together, these reforms aim to **break cycles of disadvantage** by embedding equity-driven practices into the broader education system. However, a number of specific questions about how to implement these reforms still stand.





Systemic reforms go hand-in-hand with system-level projects to further explore and address the critical unknowns that influence how changes might be operationalised effectively.

1. **Data Gaps:** Where are career education gaps most acute, and where is career education being implemented with high impact? What does good quality career education look like, and how do we tailor these solutions to local contexts (e.g., remote Indigenous schools)?
2. **Funding Design:** How can we optimise the school funding system to improve the quality of careers support available to young people facing disadvantage?
3. **Cultural Responsiveness:** How do we measure and evaluate high-impact support? How can we ensure mandatory benchmarks are culturally adapted for a wide variety of underserved communities rather than a “one-size-fits-all” approach?
4. **Maintaining Accountability:** Once new standards and resources are introduced, how do we continuously evaluate progress and ensure reforms remain a priority amidst other school demands?

## Addressing the unknowns: Next steps

Addressing inequities in career education and post-school pathways requires coordinated, evidence-based action. The proposed projects provide a strategic roadmap for embedding equity-driven practices into education systems.

### Project 1 : Mapping national career education gaps for data-driven reform

While our research has identified that gaps exist. It is not clear where these specific gaps are. This project focuses on building comprehensive data on career education gaps nationwide to enable targeted reforms. This will help us support the sector to plug specific gaps.

### Project 2: Building futures through a national framework for career education equity

This project involves introducing and trialling a national accountability system for career education provision, drawing on current benchmarking tools and proven international models, to standardise career education quality for all.

### Project 3: Unlocking opportunity by analysing SRS funding for equitable career education

This project focuses on evaluating how the Schooling Resource Standards funding model currently leads to shortfalls in provision of equitable and meaningful career guidance for disadvantaged youth, identifying opportunities to implement more impactful equity loadings to close the gap.



# 1. Background

## 1.1 Rationale

Access to high-quality career development opportunities is a key determinant of long-term social and economic mobility.<sup>19</sup> However, young people's career trajectories are shaped by a complex interplay of individual, family, school, and systemic factors, with socio-economic background often playing a decisive role. Research indicates that students from disadvantaged backgrounds (including low socio-economic background, regional and remote students, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students) face barriers such as limited access to career guidance, weaker professional networks, financial constraints, and lower exposure to diverse career pathways.<sup>20</sup>

A fragmented system of career support leaves many young people confused and underprepared for the transition beyond school. Disparities in funding, policy implementation, and access to quality guidance result in misaligned expectations and suboptimal educational and employment outcomes. Addressing these challenges is critical for creating equitable post-school pathways.

## 1.2 Aims

This report details a program of exploratory research on the experiences of young people aged 16–24 living in Australia in navigating opportunities and pathways after secondary education, including access to employment. The purpose of the project was to:

- Develop a comprehensive understanding of the post-school pathways landscape using detailed system and journey maps, identifying systemic barriers and opportunities for high-impact intervention areas.
- Identify potential reforms that would improve outcomes for young Australians experiencing disadvantage.
- Identify research questions that still remain when reforms are implemented or would help effective implementation of proposed reforms.
- Develop ideas for impactful research projects that help address these questions and where System 2's unique approach makes it well positioned to deliver.

Specifically, this paper aims to answer the following research questions:

- What factors affect young people's pathways and opportunities post-school?
- How can System 2 leverage these factors to address inequalities in pathways and opportunities for young people facing disadvantage?

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<sup>19</sup> Rice, S., Hooley, T., & Crebbin, S. (2022). Approaches to quality assurance in school-based career development: Policymaker perspectives from Australia. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 50(1), 110–127.

<sup>20</sup> Groves, O., Austin, K., O'Shea, S., & Lamanna, J. (2021). "One student might get one opportunity and then the next student won't get anything like that": Inequities in Australian career education and recommendations for a fairer future. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 50(2), 519–536.



## 1.3 Methodology

This project employed a mixed-methods approach combining a rapid evidence review, consultations with stakeholders and the System 2 Youth Advisory Board, and interviews with young people.

### Rapid evidence review

A comprehensive review was conducted of academic literature, grey literature, policy documents, and desktop review of available quantitative and qualitative data sources to gain a broad understanding of:

- The context of post-secondary education and career pathways in Australia including systemic trends and existing interventions;
- Challenges that young people face in accessing meaningful career opportunities.

### Consultations with Stakeholders

Consultations were conducted with twelve experts across leading organisations, academia and community service providers. A list of organisations consulted is in the Appendix.

The aim of these interviews was to gain expert insights into the current support provision landscape, existing support mechanisms, policy challenges, and gaps in service provision that impact young people's career trajectories. The consultations also aimed to refine the project's research questions and validate emerging findings.

### Systems and journey mapping

A series of visuals were developed in order to illustrate the birds-eye view of the factors affecting post-school pathways and decisions, sources of career support and advice for young people, and the primary pathways available to young people after secondary education, including transitions to higher education, vocational training, employment, and disengagement from education and work. The mapping process identified key barriers, enablers, and critical decision points along these pathways. Findings from the desk research and interviews with young people were used to annotate and validate the journey map.

### Consultations with young people

- **Interviews with young people**

Semi-structured virtual interviews were conducted with eighteen young people from throughout Australia to capture their lived experiences, aspirations, and challenges in navigating post-school transitions. Participants were recruited through youth service community organisations and the System 2 Youth Advisory Board to ensure a diverse range of perspectives. The aim of these interviews was to provide firsthand insights into the real-world challenges young people encounter and identify key areas for targeted intervention. A breakdown of the interview sample is provided in the Appendix.

- **Consultation with the System 2 Youth Advisory Board (YAB)**

To ensure youth perspectives were embedded in the research, the YAB was consulted to gather high-level feedback, highlight overlooked barriers, and contribute to shaping feasible and acceptable project ideas. Insights from the consultation were collated and used to refine the scope and direction of the project,



including feeding into the qualitative research objectives, and experiences of high and low-value career guidance.

## 2. System and journey maps

At the core of this project is the need to address persistent inequities and systemic challenges in the post-school transition, particularly for disadvantaged youth. Many face a fragmented system of career guidance and support, leading to confusion, misaligned expectations, and ultimately, suboptimal educational and employment outcomes.<sup>21 22</sup> The system and journey mapping process highlights how this complexity creates barriers during transition from school. For the purposes of this project, the mapping process was split into three distinct maps:

1. [The Career Support and Advice Ecosystem](#)
2. [Educational and Career Journey Map](#)
3. [Factors Influencing Post-School Pathways and Outcomes](#).

Mapping the post-school system in this detailed manner serves several key purposes.

- It provides a clear visual and conceptual framework that **elucidates the complex network of influences, decisions, and supports** that shape young people's transitions beyond secondary school.
- By breaking down the journey into distinct stages and identifying the various inputs – from formal career education and institutional factors to family, social capital, and broader policy contexts – these maps enable us to **pinpoint gaps, disparities, and opportunities for intervention**.

The system and journey maps were developed initially using the insights from the rapid evidence review and consultations. The journey maps were then verified, refined, and annotated using insights from the qualitative interviews with young people, mapping out the breadth and variety of experiences from school to post-school pathways, identifying common barriers. These maps then helped us to identify commonalities and opportunities for change.

### *Summary of challenges identified from the System Mapping process*

- **Fragmentation of career guidance:** Students receive disparate and inconsistent career advice from various sources, leading to decision-making based on incomplete or non-contextualised information.
- **Inequitable access to support:** There is a significant disparity in the quality and breadth of support available, particularly between public and private schools, as well as among students from different socio-economic backgrounds.

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<sup>21</sup> Rice, S., Hooley, T., & Crebbin, S. (2021). Approaches to quality assurance in school-based career development: policymaker perspectives from Australia. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 50(1), 110–127.

<sup>22</sup>University of Queensland. (2023). *Drivers of underrepresentation in Australian higher education*.

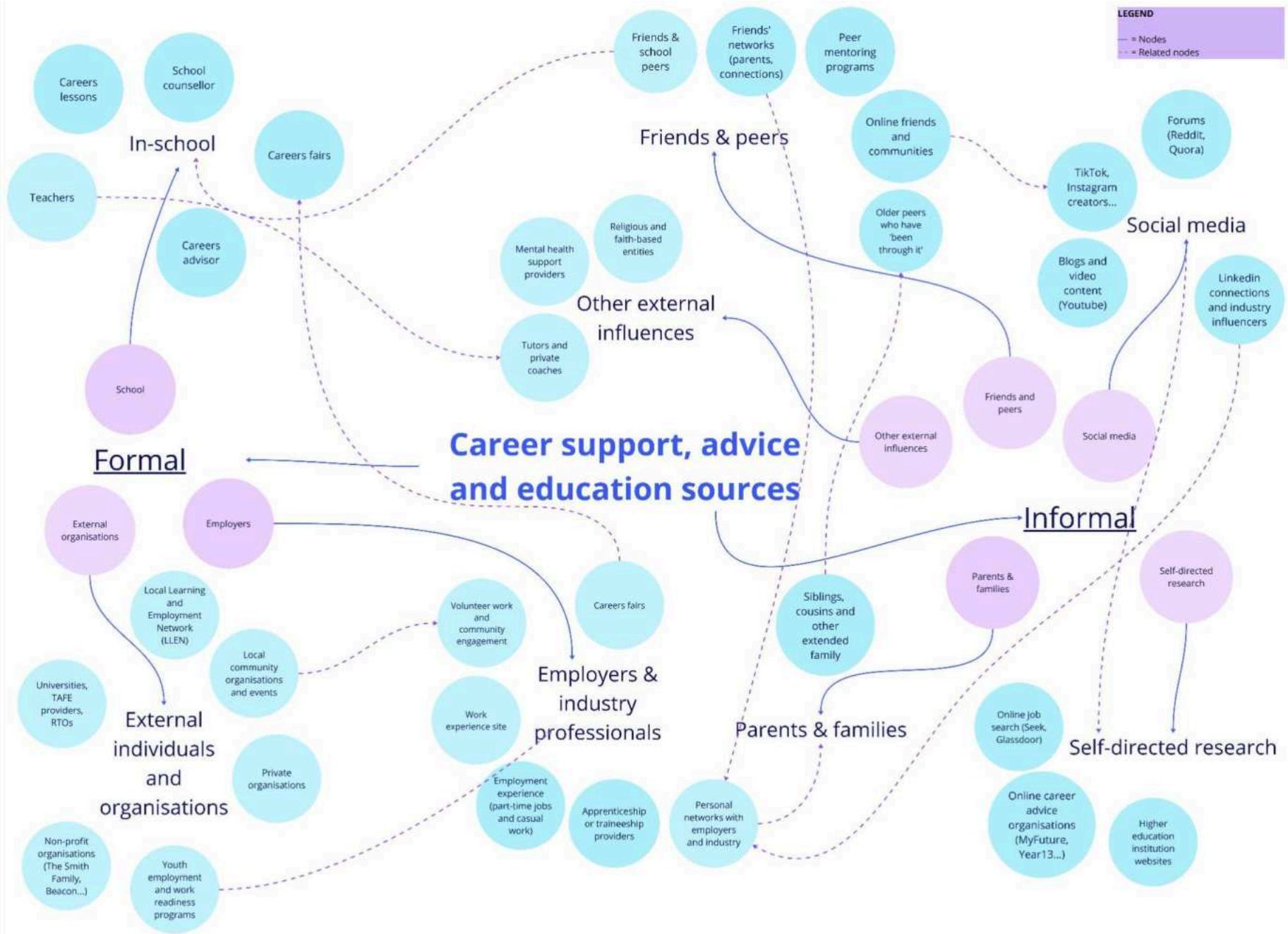


- **Lack of cohesive policy implementation:** Current policies and educational practices often fail to integrate the multiple factors influencing post-school outcomes, resulting in gaps where interventions are needed the most.
- **Insufficient preparation for real-world challenges:** The transition from school to further education or employment is riddled with uncertainties, such as understanding financial aid, navigating application processes, and acquiring soft skills for the workplace.

## 2.1 The Career Support and Advice Ecosystem

Access a higher resolution map [here](#)





The first map details the ecosystem of career support available to students, highlighting both formal and informal channels. Key insights include:

- **Multiple sources of guidance:** A range of formal and informal supports help students navigate post-school options.
- **Access disparities:** Variations in the quality and breadth of support are influenced by factors such as school type, rurality, socio-economic background, and local networks.
- **Self-directed research:** Individual initiative plays a significant role in seeking out career information, often necessitated by gaps in structured guidance.

This multifaceted support landscape reveals both the opportunities available to students and the challenges they face in accessing consistent and relevant career information.

## 2.2 Educational and Career Journey Mapping

Access a higher resolution map [here](#)



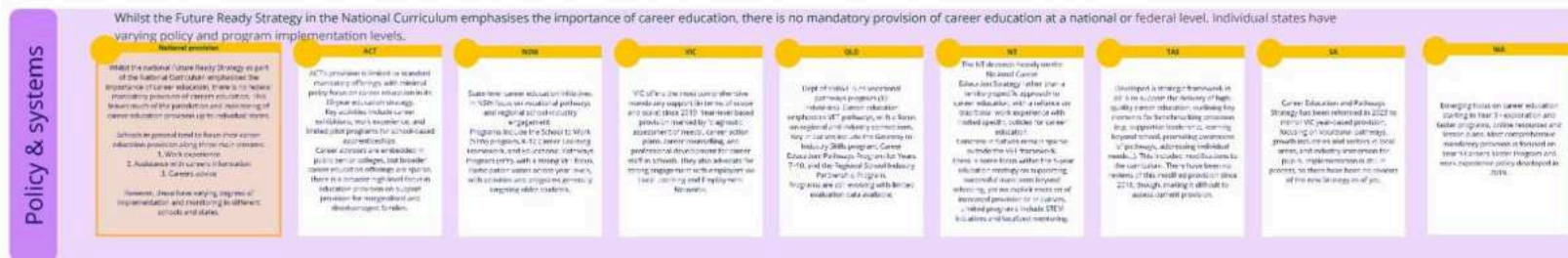
# Post-school pathways journey and policy roadmap

## In-school pathways: journey, policies and considerations



**Research insights**

Formal career education	Formal career education	Work experience and career exposure	Industry exposure	Formal career education	Formal career education	Barriers
<p>The majority of parents and school teachers support a mandatory career education program for all students.</p> <p>"The public school tends to be a really strict, so the selection of classes that were available were very limited... the school in general probably didn't have as much exposure to support students in doing career stuff."</p>	<p>Students receive very little advice regarding formal careers in the early to mid high school years, leading them to consider their research. At the school, there is a lack of coordinated and personalised career provision for students.</p> <p>"I don't have any parents (mostly in early high school) who were necessarily doing research to what it was like here at high school."</p>	<p>Work experience is a useful way to gain industry exposure and experience of an occupation. However, for many students, this work experience was not a 50% or 60% work experience. Students felt that it was not a real work experience, which is why they are willing to participate in work experience.</p> <p>"A lot of people don't go to work experience because they don't know that it is, I was going to say that and not knowing, I don't think they were that into it either."</p>	<p>"I'm not really regarding industry options to gain work experience, but I'm going to do that at school and then, I'm not really regarding industry options to gain work experience."</p> <p>"I don't see a requirement that you should sign up to it and then that's not necessarily on the school grounds, which is not the career office, but that's not the case. You have to go to the school and then they can offer you that."</p>	<p>Students who are in certain of the path... (text partially obscured)</p> <p>"The education office is a bit of a... (text partially obscured)"</p>	<p>The value of a pathway is not really being... (text partially obscured)</p> <p>"I've not worked out of my school system, I was the one who focused on it, the most and was actually thinking about it, I'm going to go and then on the way and then the group in the group in the school, they were really really into it with me."</p>	<p>The barriers to and constraints of... (text partially obscured)</p> <p>"I would like to see more... (text partially obscured)"</p>
<p>Informal sources of support</p> <p>"The majority of parents beyond the school setting... (text partially obscured)"</p> <p>"It shouldn't have been... (text partially obscured)"</p>	<p>Informal sources of support</p> <p>"I was there, made to be a... (text partially obscured)"</p>	<p>Informal sources of support</p> <p>"I completed... (text partially obscured)"</p>	<p>Informal sources of support</p> <p>"I don't see... (text partially obscured)"</p>	<p>Informal sources of support</p> <p>"The... (text partially obscured)"</p>	<p>Informal sources of support</p> <p>"Students have to... (text partially obscured)"</p>	<p>Informal sources of support</p> <p>"I don't... (text partially obscured)"</p>





# Post-school pathways journey and policy roadmap

## Beyond school: key pathways

### University pathway

Research and course selection	Verify entry requirements & apply	ATAR results released	Financial aid scholarships	Transition to university
<p><b>Process:</b> Dependent on individual and school circumstances, most students will rely on independent research. Help from their careers counsellor or teachers, and social networks.</p> <p><b>Considerations:</b> Degree options (e.g. Bachelor programs, specialisations, double degrees), University Regulatory Standards, campus location, teaching quality, financial support resources.</p>	<p><b>Process:</b> Students need to verify the specific entry requirements for their desired courses, including their ATAR results and other subject-specific requirements. For example external tests, e.g. IELTS for international students, or interviews.</p> <p><b>System:</b> Applications are submitted on university websites and through the Tertiary Admissions Centre (TAC) for each state.</p>	<p><b>Process:</b> Students consider their ATAR, typically via email or an online portal. Universities make offers based on the student's ATAR and other criteria. Offers are issued in rounds. Offers made for students who need or require entry requirements, second round for students who may not have received first preference but qualify for entry.</p> <p><b>Preference adjustments:</b> After receiving their ATAR, students have a chance to change their preferences based on their final results.</p>	<p><b>Process:</b> Students can apply for financial aid. For domestic students, tuition fees are offset via through HECS-HELP (via MYGov) and support via the Student Support Index (SSSI) (via MyGov) and support via the Student Support Index (SSSI) (via MyGov) and support via the Student Support Index (SSSI) (via MyGov).</p>	<p><b>Process:</b> Students accept their offer and enrol in their chosen university, including attending units for their first semester. This is managed by each university's student portal.</p> <p>Students then begin their studies, after participating in orientation or induction weeks.</p>
<p><b>Key inputs:</b> Students feel they have to rely on self-directed research of post-school pathways.</p>	<p><b>Key inputs:</b> Students face challenges in understanding subject prerequisites, entry requirements, and additional admission tests for different degrees.</p>	<p><b>Key inputs:</b> The stigma around TAFE performance or students who achieve high scores, to encourage students.</p>	<p><b>Key inputs:</b> Students rely on the knowledge and expertise of teachers staff and external support bodies.</p>	<p><b>Key inputs:</b> Students have to rely on informal support or self-directed research to navigate the variables.</p>
<p><b>Barriers &amp; pain points:</b> 70% of university offers have to be made within the first 10 days of the year, which leaves little time for students to make informed decisions. Many students do not have the resources to do so.</p>	<p><b>Barriers &amp; pain points:</b> Confusion about subject prerequisites and entry requirements for different degrees and subjects. Lack of understanding of additional requirements (e.g. IELTS, entrance tests, applications fees) and a lack of information on degree options.</p>	<p><b>Barriers &amp; pain points:</b> Confusion about the ATAR score and what it means for their university choice. Lack of understanding of the ATAR system and how it works. Lack of information on degree options.</p>	<p><b>Barriers &amp; pain points:</b> Limited knowledge of financial aid options and how to apply. Limited understanding of the support available to students.</p>	<p><b>Barriers &amp; pain points:</b> Student anxiety or uncertainty about their future. Lack of information on the support available to students. Limited understanding of the support available to students.</p>
<p>We had so much to do at school, we didn't have time to think about what we want to do next.</p>		<p>After I got my ATAR, I TAFE where I couldn't go to university so I changed my preference from TAFE to uni.</p>	<p>The only financial support, like bursaries, that every student can get.</p>	<p>Have not prepared for the transition period between school and uni and finding it hard to adjust to uni life.</p>

**NSW** In NSW, 38.7% of school leavers in 2023 pursued a university bachelors degree.

**VIC** In VIC, 52.3% of school leavers in 2023 pursued a university bachelors degree.

**QLD** In QLD, 38.9% of school leavers in 2024 pursued a university bachelors degree.

### Vocational training pathway

Research and course selection	Verify entry requirements & apply	Financial aid & costs	Transition to training
<p><b>Process:</b> Students rely on independent research to explore their options. Help from their careers counsellor or teachers, and social networks.</p> <p><b>Considerations:</b> Degree options (e.g. Bachelor programs, specialisations, double degrees), University Regulatory Standards, campus location, teaching quality, financial support resources.</p>	<p><b>Process:</b> Students need to verify the specific entry requirements for their desired courses, including their ATAR results and other subject-specific requirements. For example external tests, e.g. IELTS for international students, or interviews.</p> <p><b>System:</b> Applications are submitted on university websites and through the Tertiary Admissions Centre (TAC) for each state.</p>	<p><b>Process:</b> Students consider their ATAR, typically via email or an online portal. Universities make offers based on the student's ATAR and other criteria. Offers are issued in rounds. Offers made for students who need or require entry requirements, second round for students who may not have received first preference but qualify for entry.</p> <p><b>Preference adjustments:</b> After receiving their ATAR, students have a chance to change their preferences based on their final results.</p>	<p><b>Process:</b> Students can apply for financial aid. For domestic students, tuition fees are offset via through HECS-HELP (via MYGov) and support via the Student Support Index (SSSI) (via MyGov) and support via the Student Support Index (SSSI) (via MyGov).</p>
<p><b>Key inputs:</b> Career advice differs between schools. Government or private providers have a stronger emphasis on VET training, but there is a lot of confusion about options.</p>	<p><b>Key inputs:</b> Students face confusion about the requirements for vocational courses, apprenticeships, and internships. Limited information is provided in school.</p>	<p><b>Key inputs:</b> Students struggle to navigate and access financial aid options, including VET Student Loans, bursaries, and scholarships.</p>	<p><b>Key inputs:</b> The structure of VET courses can be inaccessible for students.</p>
<p><b>Barriers &amp; pain points:</b> Lack of information on the support available to students. Limited understanding of the support available to students.</p>	<p><b>Barriers &amp; pain points:</b> Lack of understanding of the support available to students. Limited understanding of the support available to students.</p>	<p><b>Barriers &amp; pain points:</b> Limited knowledge of financial aid options and how to apply. Limited understanding of the support available to students.</p>	<p><b>Barriers &amp; pain points:</b> Limited knowledge of financial aid options and how to apply. Limited understanding of the support available to students.</p>
<p>There wasn't much education on what VET actually is, I thought it was just trade courses.</p>		<p>I couldn't get my own laptop, I spent about \$2 or \$3 a week and having to bring money with me was stressful to get to uni.</p>	<p>I enrolled in TAFE but it ended up not actually being it, it was going to be an apprenticeship, but I didn't know that.</p>

**NSW** In NSW, 8.3% of school leavers in 2022 pursued a VET course. Another 13.8% pursued an apprenticeship, and 6% pursued a traineeship.

**VIC** In VIC, 20% of school leavers in 2023 pursued vocational training. 10% pursued a certificate or diploma, while 10% went to university.

**QLD** In QLD, 6.5% of school leavers in 2024 pursued a VET course. Another 8.3% pursued an apprenticeship, and 2.6% pursued a traineeship.

### Entry to labour market

Career exploration and preparation	Finishing school, employment planning	Search and application	Interviews and assessments	Securing employment and onboarding	Sustaining employment and progression
<p>At high school, students are encouraged to think about career paths and industries they want to work in.</p> <p><b>Career Education Programs:</b> Some schools provide formal career education, including career advisors, work experience, and career planning.</p> <p><b>School-Based VET:</b> Students in VET programs might have placements as part of their qualification.</p>	<p><b>Job-Securing Skills:</b> Some students may receive guidance on how to write resumes, practice interviews, or search for jobs. This is often signposting.</p> <p><b>Job Market Awareness:</b> Students begin researching industries, companies, and roles that interest them.</p> <p><b>Networking:</b> Some students may have access to formal networks, through being in community connections.</p>	<p><b>Job Platforms:</b> Using online job boards such as Seek, Indeed, LinkedIn, and industry-specific platforms to search for job opportunities.</p> <p><b>Networking:</b> Leveraging personal and professional networks to find job leads, connecting with peers, mentors, or industry professionals.</p> <p><b>Applications:</b> Submitting resumes and cover letters, following up on interviews.</p>	<p><b>Interviews:</b> Graduates and school leavers are often assessed on their communication, teamwork, and problem-solving skills during interviews.</p> <p><b>Assessments:</b> Some interviews require specific skills assessments or practical tests (e.g. coding tests for IT roles or practical exercises for trades).</p>	<p><b>Training:</b> Graduates or school leavers often receive onboarding to help them understand the company's systems, processes, and expectations.</p> <p><b>Workplace Culture:</b> Adjusting to workplace norms, such as communication styles, dress codes, and professional behavior. It is a key aspect of the transition.</p>	<p><b>Upskilling and Development:</b> Employees may pursue further training to improve their skills and advance their careers.</p> <p><b>Networking and Mentorship:</b> Developing professional relationships within the company and industry.</p> <p><b>Progression and Career Pathways:</b> Young people look to move into higher-level or more specialised positions.</p>
<p><b>Key inputs:</b> Students often receive career advice from school, but there is a lot of confusion about options.</p>	<p><b>Key inputs:</b> Career advice differs between schools. Government or private providers have a stronger emphasis on VET training, but there is a lot of confusion about options.</p>	<p><b>Key inputs:</b> Students struggle to navigate and access financial aid options, including VET Student Loans, bursaries, and scholarships.</p>	<p><b>Key inputs:</b> The structure of VET courses can be inaccessible for students.</p>	<p><b>Key inputs:</b> Students have to rely on informal support or self-directed research to navigate the variables.</p>	<p><b>Key inputs:</b> Students have to rely on informal support or self-directed research to navigate the variables.</p>
<p><b>Barriers &amp; pain points:</b> Limited knowledge of financial aid options and how to apply. Limited understanding of the support available to students.</p>	<p><b>Barriers &amp; pain points:</b> Limited knowledge of financial aid options and how to apply. Limited understanding of the support available to students.</p>	<p><b>Barriers &amp; pain points:</b> Limited knowledge of financial aid options and how to apply. Limited understanding of the support available to students.</p>	<p><b>Barriers &amp; pain points:</b> Limited knowledge of financial aid options and how to apply. Limited understanding of the support available to students.</p>	<p><b>Barriers &amp; pain points:</b> Limited knowledge of financial aid options and how to apply. Limited understanding of the support available to students.</p>	<p><b>Barriers &amp; pain points:</b> Limited knowledge of financial aid options and how to apply. Limited understanding of the support available to students.</p>
<p>I had so much to do at school, we didn't have time to think about what we want to do next.</p>		<p>After I got my ATAR, I TAFE where I couldn't go to university so I changed my preference from TAFE to uni.</p>	<p>The only financial support, like bursaries, that every student can get.</p>	<p>Have not prepared for the transition period between school and uni and finding it hard to adjust to uni life.</p>	<p>Have not prepared for the transition period between school and uni and finding it hard to adjust to uni life.</p>

**NSW** In NSW in 2022, 24.9% of school leavers went straight into paid employment (10% full-time work, 14.9% part-time work).

**VIC** In VIC in 2023, 22.6% of school leavers went straight into paid employment.

**QLD** In QLD in 2024, 31.6% of school leavers went straight into paid employment (10.5% full-time work, 21.1% part-time work).

The second map outlines the chronological journey that students experience as they progress through secondary school and make critical decisions regarding their future. Key touchpoints include:

- **Early exposure:** Introduction to career options through electives and career lessons.
- **Critical transition points:** Decision-making during Years 10 to 12, where students choose to continue with schooling, enrol in vocational training (VET or SBAT), or enter full-time employment.
- **Informed decision-making:** Considerations around subject choices, financial factors, and preparation for further education or training, with notable variations in outcomes by state.

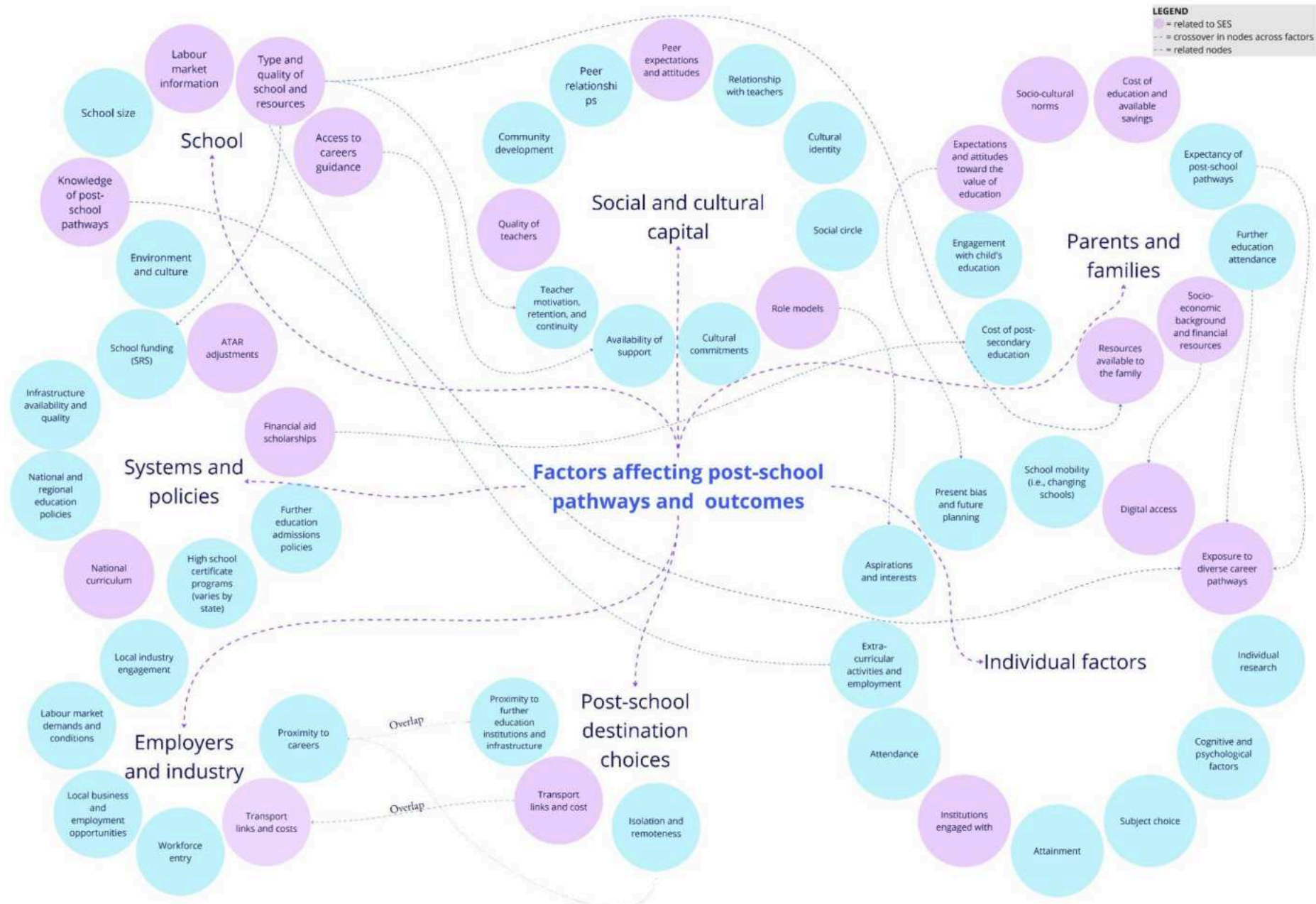
This journey map emphasises that the transition to post-school life is not a singular event but a progressive series of steps influenced by formal career education and the timing of key interventions.

## 2.3 Factors Influencing Post-School Outcomes

Access a higher resolution map [here](#)



**LEGEND**  
 ● = related to SES  
 - - - = crossover in nodes across factors  
 - - - = related nodes



The third map provides a systems-level perspective on the various factors that affect post-school pathways. It illustrates that the decisions made during the transition are not only determined by immediate educational contexts but also by broader systemic influences. Key factors include:

- **Institutional and school factors:** School size, resource availability, quality of teacher support, and the extent of formal career guidance.
- **Family and social capital:** Socio-cultural background, parental expectations, and community networks that shape students' aspirations and access to information.
- **Individual and psychological factors:** Personal attributes such as subject choice, future planning, independent research abilities, and cognitive factors that influence decision-making.
- **Policy and system-level influences:** National and regional education policies, financial aid availability, and labour market information that form the framework within which post-school decisions are made.

This mapping process highlights how systemic influences can feed into individual-level experiences and exacerbate inequalities, shaping students' post-school trajectories and identifying areas for effective intervention. A key observation arising from this map is that formal sources of support tend to operate in silos far more than informal ones, leading to fragmented delivery. Students in under-resourced contexts may end up missing out on crucial connections, which are afforded to more advantaged young people through higher quality 'interim' sources of support, with better-connected networks. These factors were further explored in the rapid evidence review and qualitative research, discussed in turn below.



### 3. Rapid evidence review

This section provides an overview of the rapid evidence review findings. A combination of open source data sets, academic and grey literature were reviewed to explore the different inequalities and influencing factors identified in the system-mapping process, and identify gaps in current research.

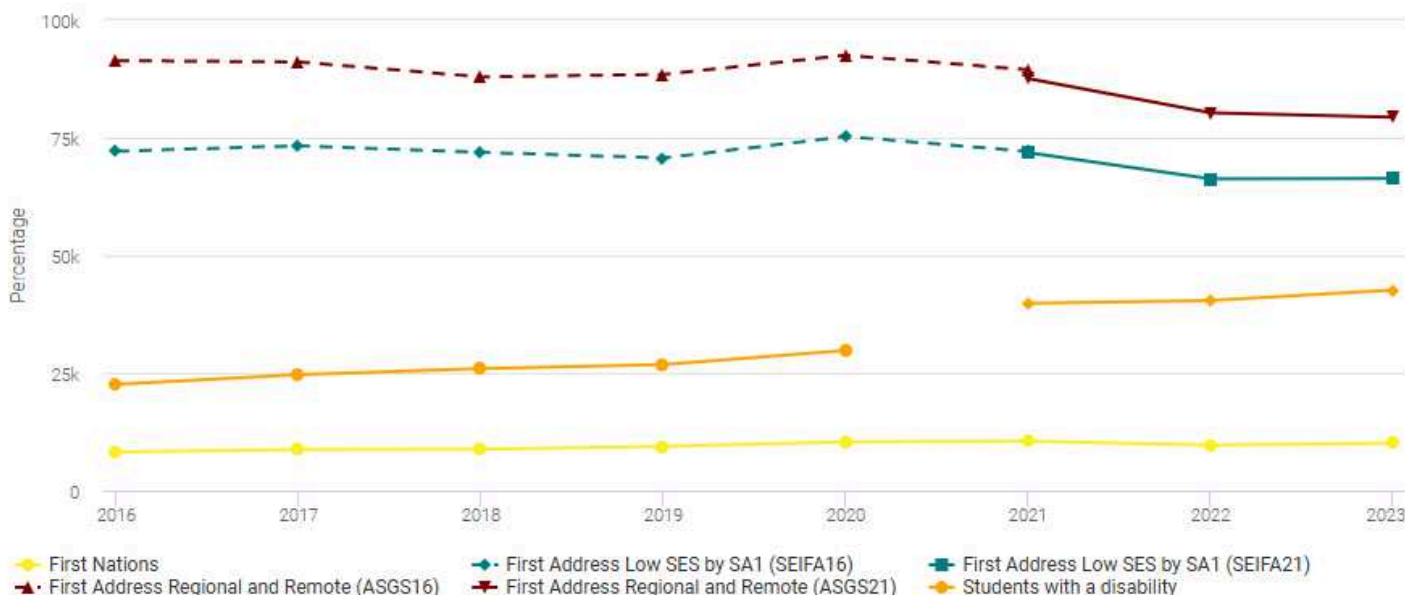
#### 3.1 Inequalities are evident in the post-school pathways that young people pursue

Post-school pathways remain heavily influenced by socio-economic background. For example, in 2020, only 50% of 24 year-olds from the lowest socio-economic status quartiles (SES) were fully engaged in either education, training or work, compared to over 82% for those from the highest SES backgrounds.<sup>23</sup> This gap in engagement represents a significant disparity of opportunity between the most and least advantaged.

This discrepancy is also evident in the types of higher education young people are pursuing. Low-SES students are far more likely to pursue vocational education (VET) or enter the workforce directly, while their higher-SES peers commonly attend university.<sup>24</sup>

Figure 1 provides an overview of total higher education enrolments students for different equity groups since 2017, demonstrating how inequalities have persisted over time.<sup>25 26</sup>

**Figure 1: All commencing onshore domestic students by equity group, 2017 - 2023**



Source: Australian Government Department of Education (2023). Key Findings from the 2023 Higher Education Student Statistics.

<sup>23</sup>Lamb, S., Huo, S., Walstab, A., Wade, A., Maire, Q., Doecke, E., Jackson, J., & Endekov, Z. (2020). *Educational opportunity in Australia 2020 Who succeeds and who misses out.*

<sup>24</sup>Clarke, M. (2025). *Key findings from the 2023 Higher Education Student Statistics* - Department of Education, Australian Government. Department of Education.

<sup>25</sup>Clarke, M. (2025). *Key findings from the 2023 Higher Education Student Statistics* - Department of Education, Australian Government. Department of Education.

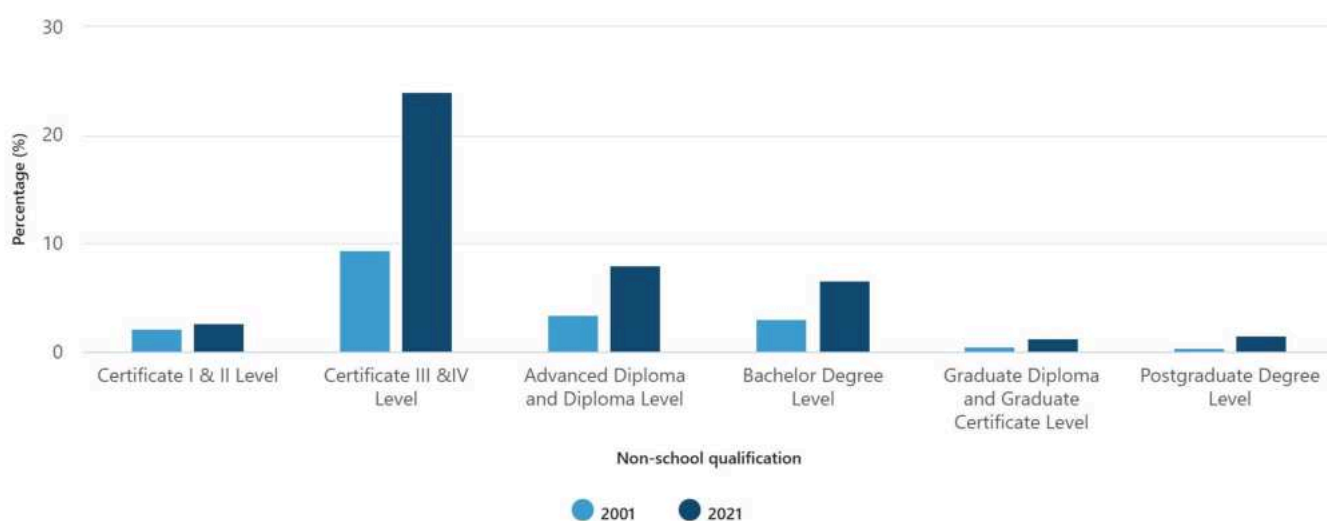
<sup>26</sup>Lamb, S., Huo, S., Walstab, A., Wade, A., Maire, Q., Doecke, E., Jackson, J., & Endekov, Z. (2020). *Educational opportunity in Australia 2020 Who succeeds and who misses out.*

Geographic and cultural factors compound these gaps. **Young people in major cities are twice as likely to hold a university degree as those from rural areas**, reflecting stark regional differences.<sup>27</sup>

**Indigenous Australians also remain particularly underrepresented in higher education.**<sup>28</sup>

While there has been progress over the past two decades (for instance, more young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are pursuing vocational studies and apprenticeships now than in the early 2000s), their university participation has increased at a much slower rate, as demonstrated in [Figure 2](#) below.<sup>29</sup>

**Figure 2: Level of highest non-school qualification completed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander aged 20 years and over, 2001 and 2021**



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2024). *Education Statistics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples 2021*.

**Inequity challenges also persist in the fields of study that young people are choosing.**

This is particularly evident in high-wage and STEM industries, where **women and Indigenous students remain underrepresented**, despite targeted initiatives like the National STEM School Education Strategy and the Women in STEM Decadal Plan.<sup>30 31 32</sup> This starts at a young age: boys are much more likely to choose STEM-related electives in school, contributing to ongoing gender segregation in further education.<sup>33</sup> This in turn has knock-on effects for wage equity and career progression later in life.

While academic achievement is one driver behind this gap in further education access, there are many other factors that feed into this, including exposure to, and provision of, information regarding options available to young people as they leave school. In fact, given

<sup>27</sup> Larsen, S. (2022). *Does background determine student achievement?* Australian Education Research Organisation.

<sup>28</sup> Delahunty, J. (2022). *“You going to uni?” Exploring how people from regional, rural and remote areas navigate into and through higher education* Equity Fellowship Report National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education.

<sup>29</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2024). *Education Statistics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples*.

<sup>30</sup> Australian Institute of Family Studies (2018). *Longitudinal Study of Australian Children: Annual statistical report 2018*.

<sup>31</sup> Australian Government Department of Education (2015). *National STEM School Education Strategy 2016–2026*.

<sup>32</sup> Australian Academy of Science (2019). *Women in STEM Decadal Plan*.

<sup>33</sup> Australian Institute of Family Studies (2018). *Longitudinal Study of Australian Children: Annual statistical report 2018*.

the same ATAR, lower-SES students enrol at a higher rate at university and once there, generally slightly outperform their non-disadvantaged peers.<sup>34</sup> However, they face a much higher dropout rate in universities (at 26% for low SES backgrounds, in comparison to 18% for higher SES backgrounds).<sup>35</sup> This suggests that there are high potential, but under-served young people who could be attending or completing university, but missing out due to feeling they don't belong, not even enrolling in the first place due to insufficient or low-quality guidance and support given to them during their school pathways.

**This report seeks to explore the factors that drive this gap, other than the role that differences in academic qualifications between low and high SES groups may have.**

These patterns suggest that, although overall participation in further education has risen, structural barriers continue to limit access to higher education and lucrative career paths for disadvantaged groups. The following section explores what these barriers may be.

## 3.2 Barriers to further education for disadvantaged youth

The research identifies multiple, overlapping barriers that contribute to unequal further education participation, higher dropout rates, and reduced completion among disadvantaged young people. **Five broad categories of barriers are prominent: financial, geographic, social/cultural, individual (aspirational), and institutional/policy challenges.** These factors can often compound; for example, a student in a remote area may face both financial strain and limited role models for university. Each category is outlined below and how it limits post-school opportunities:

### a. Financial barriers

**Financial constraints are one of the most significant hurdles preventing young people from disadvantaged backgrounds from accessing higher education.** While Australia's income-contingent student loan system reduces immediate tuition costs, the prospect of accumulating debt can deter lower-SES students from enrolling.<sup>36</sup> Research shows that students from low-income, regional, and mature-age backgrounds tend to be more debt-averse, making them more likely to opt out of further education or choosing cheaper vocational options.<sup>37</sup> Lacking family financial safety nets, these students worry about repayment obligations and long-term financial insecurity.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, inconsistent funding availability for vocational education can confuse the market, making young people less likely to research opportunities for training in their area. For instance, government loans for VET courses are capped below the tuition of some programs, meaning disadvantaged students in vocational tracks may still need to pay substantial fees out-of-pocket.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Manny, A., Yin, Z. et. al. (2021). *Data analysis: Student disadvantage and success at university*. University Admissions Centre (UAC).

<sup>35</sup> Lamb, S., Huo, S., Walstab, A., Wade, A., Maire, Q., Doecke, E., Jackson, J., & Endekov, Z. (2020). *Educational opportunity in Australia 2020 Who succeeds and who misses out*.

<sup>36</sup> Institute for Social Science Research (2023). *Drivers of underrepresentation in Australian higher education*. University of Queensland.

<sup>37</sup> National Union of Students. (2013). *Do tuition fees underpinned with income-contingent loans diminish access and gender income equality?* [Submission No. 4].

<sup>38</sup> Manny, A., Yin, Z. et. al. (2021). *Data analysis: Student disadvantage and success at university*. University Admissions Centre (UAC).

<sup>39</sup> Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (2019). *Strengthening Skills: Expert Review of Australia's Vocational Education and Training System*.



In addition to tuition concerns, the ancillary costs of higher education pose major barriers. Relocation and living expenses can be prohibitive for students from rural and remote areas who must move to cities for university; accommodation costs in metropolitan areas like Sydney or Melbourne can far exceed what low-income students can afford.<sup>40</sup> Commuting or technology costs also add financial strain. There are also high opportunity costs to pursuing higher education: low-SES students are more likely to prioritise immediate employment over further education to support their families financially.<sup>41</sup> This immediate income need can trap disadvantaged youth in low-paying jobs and foreclose the longer-term benefits of higher qualifications.<sup>42 43</sup>

In summary, while Australia's loan schemes attempt to neutralise costs, financial barriers – from debt aversion to living expenses and foregone earnings – continue to sharply curtail higher education participation for less advantaged students.

## **b. Geographic barriers**

**Young people in regional, rural, and remote areas experience lower university participation rates compared to their metropolitan peers.** A key issue is the centralisation of universities in major cities; many students in regional and remote areas must relocate to attend university due to limited access to nearby institutions, introducing additional financial, social, and emotional challenges.<sup>44</sup> Schools in regional and remote areas also tend to have fewer resources for career and university preparation; they often employ fewer dedicated career advisors, have limited access to university outreach programs, and have weaker links with higher education institutions.<sup>45</sup> This means rural students may be less informed about available pathways (such as scholarships, bridging programs, or part-time study options).

## **c. Social and cultural barriers**

**Social and cultural factors also contribute to lower higher education uptake among disadvantaged groups.** One of these factors is limited access to role models and networks. Research indicates that having a close role model with a university education significantly increases a young person's likelihood of seeing higher education as attainable.<sup>46</sup> Yet, low-SES and Indigenous students may lack family members or community figures who have attended university, which can dampen their aspirations and confidence pursuing that pathway.<sup>47</sup>

A related barrier is a sense of belonging (or lack thereof) in academic institutions. Disadvantaged students who do enter university often feel cultural alienation on campus. As discussed, disadvantaged young people tend to be in the minority cohort of university entrants, which can be intimidating and "unwelcoming" to those from low-SES or Indigenous communities. Indigenous students in particular report experiences of cultural

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<sup>40</sup> Institute for Social Science Research (2023). *Drivers of underrepresentation in Australian higher education*. University of Queensland.

<sup>41</sup> Institute for Social Science Research (2023). *Drivers of underrepresentation in Australian higher education*. University of Queensland.

<sup>42</sup> National Union of Students. (2013). *Do tuition fees underpinned with income-contingent loans diminish access and gender income equality?* [Submission No. 4].

<sup>43</sup> Tomaszewski, W., Xiang, N., & Kubler, M. (2024). *Socio-economic status, school performance, and university participation: evidence from linked administrative and survey data from Australia*. Higher Education.

<sup>44</sup> Halsey, J. (2018). *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*.

<sup>45</sup> Gore, J., Holmes, K., Smith, M., Southgate, E., & Albright, J. (2015). Socioeconomic status and the career aspirations of Australian school students: Testing enduring assumptions. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 42(2), 155–177.

<sup>46</sup> Institute for Social Science Research (2023). *Drivers of underrepresentation in Australian higher education*. University of Queensland.

<sup>47</sup> The Smith Family. (2016). *Improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged young Australians*.





dislocation and a lack of culturally responsive support services, contributing to lower retention.<sup>48</sup> These social barriers can be cyclical and self-reinforcing: if universities lack diversity, incoming students from minority or low-SES backgrounds see few people “like them” succeeding, which undermines their confidence and willingness to persist.<sup>49</sup>

Additionally, lower expectations and encouragement in earlier schooling play a role. Evidence suggests that teachers and advisors (often unintentionally) set lower academic expectations for students in disadvantaged or rural schools, leading those students to self-limit their ambitions.<sup>50</sup>

#### **d. Individual aspiration and information barriers**

On an individual level, disadvantaged young people face **barriers in the form of limited information, guidance, and confidence to navigate complex post-school options.** Information and know-how when it comes to navigating the post-school pathways system is not evenly distributed across backgrounds. Aspirations are often shaped early: if further education has never been discussed at home or school in a positive light, a student will be less likely to set expectations for themselves to pursue it.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, disadvantaged youth are more likely to be juggling adult responsibilities or stressors (such as part-time work, caregiving, or financial stress) that can divert focus from long-term education planning.<sup>52</sup> Mental health challenges, sometimes exacerbated by socio-economic stress, can also reduce a young person’s capacity to plan and aspire for further study.<sup>53</sup> It’s important to note that lack of aspiration is a *symptom* of structural barriers (financial, social, etc.), rather than a root cause; young people are prone to “lowering” their aspirations because they (correctly) perceive the hurdles ahead of them.

#### **e. Institutional and policy barriers**

**Institutional practice and broader policy context can perpetuate inequality in access to higher education.** University admissions processes are one such hurdle. The ATAR (Australian Tertiary Admission Rank) remains the dominant criterion for university entry. This reliance on a single score disadvantages students from underfunded schools who may have fewer opportunities to maximise their ATAR (e.g. limited subject choices or tutoring) despite having equal ability.<sup>54</sup> While many universities have introduced adjustment factors or alternative entry pathways to widen access, these measures vary by institution and often target those already near admission thresholds.<sup>55</sup> Evidence suggests low-SES students with the same ATAR as high-SES students are actually *more likely* to succeed in university, calling into question whether admission cut-offs fairly recognise potential.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>Lamb, S., Huo, S., Walstab, A., Wade, A., Maire, Q., Doecke, E., Jackson, J., & Endekov, Z. (2020). *Educational opportunity in Australia 2020 Who succeeds and who misses out*.

<sup>49</sup>Frawley, J., Larkin, S., & Smith, J. A. (Eds.). (2017). *Indigenous pathways, transitions and participation in higher education: From policy to practice*. Springer.

<sup>50</sup>Harwood, V., McMahon, S., O’Shea, S., Gawaian Bodkin-Andrews, & Priestly, A. (2015). Recognising aspiration: the AIME program’s effectiveness in inspiring Indigenous young people’s participation in schooling and opportunities for further education and employment. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 42(2), 217–236.

<sup>51</sup>Bathmaker, A. M., Ingram, N., & Waller, R. (2013). Higher education, social class and the mobilisation of capitals: recognising and playing the game. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 34(5–6), 723–743.

<sup>52</sup>Baxter, J. (2017). *The career aspirations of young adolescent boys and girls*.

<sup>53</sup>Tomaszewski, W., Perales, F., Xiang, N., & Kubler, M. (2019). Beyond Graduation: Socio-economic Background and Post-university Outcomes of Australian Graduates. *Research in Higher Education*.

<sup>54</sup>Perry, L. B. (2024). Tensions undermining equitable school funding: insights from Australia. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 57(1), 56–73.

<sup>55</sup>Jackson, D., Li, I., & Carroll, D. (2023). Student access to higher education through alternative pathways and differences by equity group and discipline. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 45(6), 593–625.

<sup>56</sup>Manny, A., Yin, Z., Tam, H., Lipka, R., Dickins, P., & Sciberras, G. (2021). *Data analysis: Student disadvantage and success at university*.



Additionally, inflexible course structures disproportionately hinder those who cannot engage in full-time study. Few universities offer truly flexible scheduling (e.g. evening classes, part-time progression options, or intensive semesters) that accommodate students who need to work significant hours. Indeed, research suggests that institutions that do provide flexible or part-time pathways generally achieve higher retention among disadvantaged cohorts.<sup>57</sup> In summary, without systemic adjustments in admissions, funding, and course delivery, universities risk inadvertently maintaining exclusionary practices. Policy reforms (discussed in the next section) are beginning to address some of these issues, but implementation and impact remain challenging.

### 3.3 Systemic issues impacting post-school pathways

#### a. Spotlight: Australia's School Funding model

**Overview:** Australia's school funding is governed by a needs-based model introduced after the 2011 Gonski Review of Funding for Schooling. This model established the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) – a benchmark for the total public funding a school needs, consisting of a base amount per student plus six loadings for disadvantaged students (such as low SES, Indigenous, remote, disability, English language needs).<sup>58</sup> Under current arrangements, the federal government provides at least 20% of the SRS for public (government) schools and 80% for non-government (private) schools. States are meant to cover the remaining share (around 80% for public schools), but in practice many have not reached their full commitments, creating gaps in resources.<sup>59</sup> For instance, a review of the SRS funding model in New South Wales found that public schools faced a per-student funding gap of approximately \$1,523 in 2023, while private schools received overfunding of \$785 per student.<sup>60</sup>

**Aim:** The Gonski reforms sought to direct funding “according to need” across sectors.<sup>61</sup> In 2013, bilateral “Better Schools” agreements (also known as the National Education Reform Agreement) were struck with states to boost funding for disadvantaged schools. However, changes in government led to some agreements being undone or modified, delaying full implementation of needs-based funding. Key pillars included improving teaching quality, school leadership, and data-driven practices to better support disadvantaged students.

**Impact:** Originally set to conclude in 2023, the Gonski reforms were extended through 2024 to attempt to reach its targets. As of early 2025, the final outcomes are unclear, but interim evaluations suggest the reforms fell short of goals, with little evidence of significant improvement in academic attainment or closing gaps by SES and region.<sup>62</sup> Implementation proved difficult, varying by jurisdiction, and many schools reported that additional support did not fully materialise at the classroom level. The extension implies recognition that systemic change is slow; however, without bold adjustments, simply prolonging the agreement may not yield different results.

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<sup>57</sup> Norton, A. & Cherastidham, I. (2019). *Risks and rewards: when is vocational education a good alternative to higher education?* Grattan Institute.

<sup>58</sup> Australian Department of Education (2024). *Schooling Resource Standard*.

<sup>59</sup> Rorris, A. (2022). NSW: Public Funding, Schools, and the School Resourcing Standard.

<sup>60</sup> Rorris, A. (2022). NSW: Public Funding, Schools, and the School Resourcing Standard.

<sup>61</sup> Beazley, J., & Cassidy, C. (2023, July 16). Private school funding increased twice as much as public schools' in decade after Gonski, data shows. *The Guardian*.

<sup>62</sup> Perry, L. B. (2024). Tensions undermining equitable school funding: insights from Australia. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 1-18.



**Further reforms: A second wave (“Gonski 2.0” or the 2018 National School Reform Agreement)** set fixed Commonwealth shares (20% public, 80% private) and extended timelines for states to reach 100% of SRS in public schools. Despite record total funding, most public schools remain below the SRS target due to states not fully meeting their share, while most private schools meet or exceed it.<sup>63</sup> In 2023, over 98% of public schools were funded below the SRS, whereas over 98% of private schools were above it.<sup>64</sup> This imbalance has persisted even as overall funding rose. Notably, from 2012 to 2021 (the decade after Gonski), government funding per student increased by 34% for independent schools and 31% for Catholic schools, but only 17% for public schools.<sup>65</sup> In other words, private school funding grew about twice as fast as public school funding, widening the resource gap. Such disparities have led critics to argue Australia’s SRS funding system “promotes unequal resourcing” by design.<sup>66</sup>

The current per-pupil amounts allocated using the SRS model may not adequately account for the extra support required by disadvantaged students, especially when it comes to providing adequate career support (particularly as young people facing disadvantage tend to lack robust family networks or industry connections that their more advantaged peers benefit from). Whilst the equity loadings take socio-educational disadvantage into account, this does not take into account additional needs for post-school planning support.<sup>67</sup> Therefore, SRS equity loadings are not fit for purpose to adequately prepare disadvantaged young people to transition to further education or employment after high school. A more robust and transparent model of SRS equity loadings needs to be established, setting out how equity loadings are determined, distributed, and spent, in order to assess how to improve the funding model and hold systems accountable when and where shortfalls arise.

To address the shortfall, a new intergovernmental accord – **the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement** – was announced for 2025 onward. This commits the Commonwealth to modestly increase its share of public school funding from 20% to 25% of the SRS in all states (and up to 40% for the Northern Territory, which has its own unique educational disadvantage).<sup>68</sup> <sup>69</sup> In exchange, states must ensure their funding rises to cover the rest.

*For example, South Australia recently struck a deal for the Commonwealth to reach 25% of SRS by 2034 (an extra 5% worth ~\$1 billion over 10 years) while the state will maintain 75%, finally achieving 100% funding for every public school.<sup>70</sup>*

These new agreements aim to put all public schools on a path to full funding of the SRS by the mid-2030s, ending the underfunding of government schools. If fully implemented, this

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<sup>63</sup>ACARA funding data shows urgent need for public school funding | Australian Education Union (AEU) Victorian Branch. (2025). Aeuvic.asn.au.

<https://www.aeuvic.asn.au/acara-funding-data-shows-urgent-need-public-school-funding#:~:text=%E2%80%9CMore%20than%2098,all%20Australian%20governments%20in%202012>

<sup>64</sup>ACARA funding data shows urgent need for public school funding | Australian Education Union (AEU) Victorian Branch. (2025). Aeuvic.asn.au.

<https://www.aeuvic.asn.au/acara-funding-data-shows-urgent-need-public-school-funding#:~:text=%E2%80%9CMore%20than%2098,all%20Australian%20governments%20in%202012>

<sup>65</sup>Beazley, J., & Cassidy, C. (2023, July 16). Private school funding increased twice as much as public schools’ in decade after Gonski, data shows. *The Guardian*.

\* *It is worth noting that this study controls for level of education, but not for selectivity of university, which may explain part of the initial disparity.*

<sup>66</sup> Committee for Economic Development of Australia (CEDA) (2018). *How unequal? Insights on Inequality*.

<sup>67</sup> Australian Government Department of Education (2025). *Schooling Resource Standard*.

<sup>68</sup> Clarke, M. (2024). *Schooling Resource Standard* - Department of Education, Australian Government.

<sup>69</sup> Australian Government (Hon. Anthony Albanese MP & Hon. Jason Clare MP). *All Australian public schools now on a path to full and fair funding*.

<sup>70</sup> Prime Minister of Australia (2025). *Putting all South Australian public schools on a path to full and fair funding*. (2025, January 24).



agreement could significantly boost resources for public schools serving disadvantaged communities. However, observers note potential implementation challenges, including the need for cooperation from states and non-government sectors, and concerns that without parallel investment in teacher workforce and infrastructure, simply injecting funds may not automatically improve outcomes.

In addition, this additional funding is tied to specific support provisions (such as mental health reforms, evidence-based teaching practice, and teacher recruitment and retention strategies).<sup>71</sup> Therefore, it is unlikely that schools will be able to funnel these resources into career education programs.

The ambition of Better Fairer Schools signals a policy recognition that equitable funding is foundational for closing achievement gaps. However, the agreement only promises a “review” of the equity loadings calculation, without specifying what this might look like or what the aims of such a review would be.<sup>72</sup>

Moreover, scholars note that the agreement’s definition of equity goals are vague and difficult to pin down.<sup>73</sup> The Agreement advocates for “equitable learning opportunities to support [students] to maximise their learning”, and measures this equity as an upward trend on NAPLAN scores.<sup>74</sup> However, this does not take into account trends for students’ post-school pathways; in fact, it has been critiqued that the BFSA does not take Year 12 completion rates into account as an equity goal.<sup>75</sup> Critics also note this timeline still leaves schools under-resourced for another decade.<sup>76</sup>

A comprehensive funding review for this new Agreement could help identify high-impact opportunities for review, to disseminate best practice (see proposed project).

**In short, Australia’s school funding model faces two overlapping problems:**

1. The Schooling Resource Standard is not being met by federal and state contributions, leaving many of Australia’s most vulnerable schools (and their students) under-resourced to provide adequate support.
2. The funding model’s equity loadings are not fit for purpose as they do not take into account the resources schools need to provide adequate support for post-school pathways, particularly taking into account the additional support needed to level the playing field with more advantaged students.

### **Case study comparison on funding equity: Australia vs. Finland’s Approach**

**Overview:** Australia’s approach contrasts with countries like Finland, which is renowned for educational equity. Finland’s school system emphasises universal high-quality public education and targets extra resources to disadvantage without a large private sector diverting funding. Equity is embedded in the design of Finland’s education system.<sup>77</sup> All education is free, and funding and legislative power over education spending is largely decentralised to municipalities. The national government provides about 25% of school

<sup>71</sup> Australian Government (Hon. Anthony Albanese MP & Hon. Jason Clare MP). *All Australian public schools now on a path to full and fair funding*.

<sup>72</sup> Australian Government (2024). *Better and Fairer Schools Agreement 2025-2034*.

<sup>73</sup> Sahlberg, P. and Cobbold, T. (2025). *Why the new plan for fairer schools will fail*.

<sup>74</sup> Australian Government (2024). *Better and Fairer Schools Agreement 2025-2034*.

<sup>75</sup> Sahlberg, P. and Cobbold, T. (2025). *Why the new plan for fairer schools will fail*.

<sup>76</sup> Greenwell, T. and Bonnor, C. (2022). *Waiting for Gonski; How Australia failed its schools*. Sydney: UNSW Press.

<sup>77</sup> European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Public Policy and Management Institute (PPMI), Bakelants, H., Verelst, S., Vandevooort, H., & Nicaise, I. (2020). *The governance of equity funding schemes for disadvantaged schools : lessons from national case studies : analytical report*.



funding on average, with allocations that deliberately vary based on the socio-demographic profile of each municipality.<sup>78</sup> Poorer or higher-need communities receive larger grants, ensuring a baseline of resource adequacy. Municipalities then subsidise the majority of education (about 75%), based on their own local levies and taxes, and have autonomy over the expenditure of this funding. Local authorities can then add their own equity measures: for instance, the City of Helsinki uses a “positive discrimination” index to direct extra funds to schools in disadvantaged areas.<sup>79</sup> This means schools serving low-income or high-migrant populations get additional teachers, support staff, and materials. Moreover, schools themselves have full autonomy to determine how their funding is spent; the model is that of high educational autonomy to let schools determine their needs based on their student makeup.<sup>80</sup>

**Impact:** The results are seen in Finland’s uniformly well-resourced schools and narrow achievement gaps. Importantly, Finnish schools intervene early. Nearly 30% of students receive targeted learning support at some point, in the form of extra help as soon as they start to fall behind.<sup>81</sup> This intensive remediation model (enabled by funding and small class sizes) helps prevent small gaps from widening.

This also means that Finnish schools have higher capacity in terms of resources to meet minimum standards of career education: students in grades 7-9 (ages 13-16) are required to complete 76 hours of compulsory career education, which is treated the same in the national curriculum as core subjects such as mathematics or history, emphasising a whole school approach to career education.<sup>82</sup> Career advisors are also compulsory, salaried staff members in schools, and are held in high esteem for their qualification levels and expertise.<sup>83</sup>

**Comparison:** Australia’s funding inequalities often mean the students who need the most support attend schools with the fewest resources, making it harder to provide high-impact support, especially when resources are already stretched due being under-resourced; schools are forced to de-prioritise ‘non-essential’ provision which is not considered part of the core curriculum (including career guidance). In contrast, Finnish schools see career guidance and support as equally important (and therefore, in need of equal resourcing) to core subject delivery. Finland also minimises social segregation between schools: almost all Finnish children attend their local public school, which eliminates the steep socio-economic stratification seen in Australia’s split public/private system.<sup>84</sup> There is also little difference in terms of quality between Finnish schools, whereas Australian schools vary widely in facilities and teacher shortages depending on their affluence and school type.<sup>85</sup> Overall, Finland’s model prioritises equity

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<sup>78</sup> European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Public Policy and Management Institute (PPMI), Bakelants, H., Verelst, S., Vandevooort, H., & Nicaise, I. (2020). *The governance of equity funding schemes for disadvantaged schools : lessons from national case studies : analytical report*.

<sup>79</sup> European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Public Policy and Management Institute (PPMI), Bakelants, H., Verelst, S., Vandevooort, H., & Nicaise, I. (2020). *The governance of equity funding schemes for disadvantaged schools : lessons from national case studies : analytical report*.

<sup>80</sup> Ukkola, A. and Väättäin, H. (eds.) Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (2021). *Equality and participation in education: An overview of national evaluations*.

<sup>81</sup> Committee for Economic Development of Australia (CEDA) (2018). *How unequal? Insights on Inequality*.

<sup>82</sup> OECD (n.d.). *Finland: Access to Guidance Counsellors and One-Stop Guidance Centres*.

<sup>83</sup> OECD (n.d.). *Finland: Access to Guidance Counsellors and One-Stop Guidance Centres*.

<sup>84</sup> Sahlberg, P. (2022). *The Australian school system has a serious design flaw*.

<sup>85</sup> European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Public Policy and Management Institute (PPMI), Bakelants, H., Verelst, S., Vandevooort, H., & Nicaise, I. (2020). *The governance of equity funding schemes for disadvantaged schools : lessons from national case studies : analytical report*.



by funding needs and ensuring every school can meet its students' requirements; a stark contrast to Australia, where equitable funding is still an unmet goal rather than a reality.

## b. Other relevant policy developments

### **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives: Closing the Gap**

**Context:** In response to social justice campaigns, the **Closing the Gap policy** was introduced to reduce systemic inequalities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. The original 2008 strategy faced criticism for top-down design and limited success. In 2020, a new National Agreement on Closing the Gap was established.

**Aim:** The 2020 Closing the Gap policy puts emphasis on genuine partnership with Indigenous communities in policy design and service delivery, setting nineteen specific targets across areas like early childhood, school attendance, and Year 12 attainment.

**Impact:** Despite these efforts, a 2024 progress report found that only five targets were on track, with others stagnating or worsening, particularly in tertiary education, though Indigenous Year 12 completion rates improved modestly. This therefore teaches us a key policy lesson that co-design and community involvement, while crucial, must be backed by sustained investment and accountability to translate into better results on the ground.

In response to skills shortages and youth unemployment, the Australian Government launched an initiative to provide **free TAFE (vocational college) places in targeted industries**. The program significantly increased VET enrolment for underrepresented groups; about 60% of fee-free TAFE participants are women (addressing gender gaps in trades and training), and over 30,000 Indigenous students have enrolled.<sup>86</sup> This initiative addresses cost barriers in vocational education, offering an alternative pathway to university for disadvantaged students. Early outcomes are promising, although the challenge remains in ensuring these courses lead to quality employment outcomes and match to local industry demand. This policy represents a shift toward valuing vocational and skills pathways on par with university; a crucial rebalancing for those who learn better by doing or face barriers to attending university.

Overall, recent policy developments show incremental progress, with growing acknowledgment of systemic issues and new policies like Better Fairer Schools and Fee-Free TAFE are attempts to address these. However, the effectiveness of these initiatives will hinge on robust implementation. Internationally, evidence suggests comprehensive approaches can be effective, for instance, tying funding reforms to accountability, integrating academic and vocational strategies, and maintaining political commitment beyond election cycles. As Australia enters a new election cycle, sustaining these policies and monitoring their impact on disadvantaged youth will be critical, with mid-course corrections based on evidence of what works.

<sup>86</sup> Australian Government (2023). *Fee-free TAFE*.



## 3.4 Careers guidance - sources

A critical factor influencing post-school pathways is the availability and quality of career guidance that young people receive. Career guidance comes from multiple sources – formal career education in schools, external organisations and community networks, and informal support systems (family, peers, media). The consistency and quality of guidance vary widely, contributing to inequities in how prepared students feel to make decisions about further study or work. Below we examine each source and recent developments, including how Australia’s approach compares internationally and emerging best practices for improvement.

### a. Formal career education

Formal career education is not uniformly provided in schools across Australia. The national curriculum offers guidance, but does not mandate a comprehensive career education program in every school. The National Career Education Strategy (2019) was introduced to encourage integrating career development into the K-12 curriculum, supported by the Australian Blueprint for Career Development framework. This Blueprint outlines eleven career management competencies for students to develop across different stages of schooling.<sup>87</sup> However, the Blueprint is implemented inconsistently across states, and is not embedded in broader education and employment policies, so has limited concrete impact.<sup>88</sup> Without a mandatory requirement or strong incentives, many schools and states have only partially adopted these guidelines.<sup>89</sup> Crucially, there is very little data tracking actual implementation of career education provision within individual schools and states, making it difficult to identify gaps in practice and suggest avenues for improvement.

The national Future Ready Strategy<sup>90</sup> also details components of the K12 Career Ready Framework, in order to prepare Australian students for the workforce. This includes:

- **Developing work-related skills and career management:** Equipping students with essential skills and career planning abilities (such as teaching them to prepare and write a resume, key interview skills, and tips on how to find careers that suit their interests and job searching in their chosen fields).<sup>91</sup>
- **Fostering school-employer partnerships:** Encouraging collaboration between schools and industry to provide real-world career insights. This target is not elaborated upon in the strategy, posing a gap in implementation.<sup>92</sup>
- **Supporting educators and families:** Enhancing teacher capabilities and involving parents in career conversations to support student guidance. While it is important that teachers are able to provide advice and insights, this risks an overreliance on teachers as sole providers of careers support, despite a lack of specialised training and a lack of provision of tailored and well-informed advice to plan their post-school pathways. Teachers might view career education as a lower priority in

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<sup>87</sup> YourCareer (2023). *Australian Blueprint for Career Development*.

<sup>88</sup> Rice, S., Hooley, T., & Crebbin, S. (2021). Approaches to quality assurance in school-based career development: policymaker perspectives from Australia. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 50(1), 110–127.

<sup>89</sup>Rice, S., Hooley, T., & Crebbin, S. (2021). Approaches to quality assurance in school-based career development: policymaker perspectives from Australia. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 50(1), 110–127.

<sup>90</sup> Department of Education and Training. (2019). *Future ready: A student focused national career education strategy*. Australian Government.

<sup>91</sup>Department of Education and Training. (2019). *Future ready: A student focused national career education strategy*. Australian Government.

<sup>92</sup>Department of Education and Training. (2019). *Future ready: A student focused national career education strategy*. Australian Government.



relation to the demands of teaching, which risks leaving them unprepared to adequately advise their students.<sup>93</sup>

In practice, provision of career education is largely left to state policies and individual school priorities.

### ***State-level policies***

Whilst the national Future Ready Strategy highlights the importance and value of career education as part of the National Curriculum, **state-by-state approaches to school-based career education vary considerably**. The majority of states and schools focus on a threefold approach to career education:

1. Industry exposure through work experience; usually in Year 9 or 10, although rarely mandatory, often limited to one week, and very rarely repeated.
2. Provision of information on post-school pathways; provided to various extents depending on availability and local market (for instance, there has been a policy push towards vocational pathways in the NT, meaning schools might put more emphasis on VET pathway information).
3. Assistance with basic careers skills or practice; most schools provide careers lessons which aim to teach students how to write a resume, apply for jobs, interview skills, or networking advice.

The frequency and depth of these activities differ widely, and students are often left with a minimal, 'one-size-fits-all' approach.<sup>94</sup> <sup>95</sup> [Figure 3](#) below provides an overview of different scales of state-based career education provision. Based on our rapid desktop review of the limited data and information available, the states and territories could be put into three broad groups based on their scale of career education provision, with Victoria being the most comprehensive. This analysis is not comprehensive or exhaustive, limited by the quality and range of data currently available. For example, there is little information about career education policy, programs or projects on some states' departmental webpages.

**Figure 3: Overview of career education models across Australian states and territories**

State / territory	Career education model <sup>96</sup>
Victoria <sup>97</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Structured year-level model with some industry engagement and career 'action plans' to map out pathways</li> <li>● Place more equal education and culture on both university and vocational training options</li> </ul>

<sup>93</sup>Department of Education and Training. (2019). *Future ready: A student focused national career education strategy*. Australian Government.

<sup>94</sup> OECD. (2019). *PISA 2018 Results (Volume II): Where All Students Can Succeed*. OECD Publishing, Paris.

<sup>95</sup>Musset, P. and L. Mytna Kurekova (2018), "Working it out: Career Guidance and Employer Engagement", OECD Education Working Papers, No. 175, OECD Publishing, Paris.

<sup>96</sup>Groves, O., Austin, K., O'Shea, S., & Lamanna, J. (2023). 'One student might get one opportunity and then the next student won't get anything like that': Inequities in Australian career education and recommendations for a fairer future. *Australian educational researcher*, 50(2), 519–536.

<sup>97</sup> Victoria Department of Education (2021). *Career education in the curriculum*.





Queensland <sup>98</sup> and New South Wales <sup>99</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Multifaceted, with some focus on vocational training and industry, but inconsistent implementation</li> <li>● Some regional industry engagement but less state-run policies and initiatives</li> </ul>
Western Australia, <sup>100</sup> South Australia <sup>101</sup> , Tasmania <sup>102</sup> , Northern Territories, <sup>103</sup> Australian Central Territory <sup>104</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● More traditional models of career education focused on writing CVs and cover letters, encouragement to complete work shadowing</li> <li>● Limited information is available online about the structure and provision of more in-depth programs and policies.</li> <li>● A reform is underway in SA to mirror the Victoria year-based model focusing on growth sectors</li> </ul>

One challenge is the **lack of systematic quality assurance for career programs**. Since career education isn't a required part of schooling, there is also no consistent national assessment of how schools perform in this area. Instead, benchmarking is done on a voluntary-basis. The Career Industry Council of Australia (CICA) has developed a framework for best-practice career development and offers a voluntary benchmarking tool for schools.<sup>105</sup> However, as this is voluntary, uptake is sporadic; schools self-select to use CICA's standards, and there is no obligation to publish results. Thus, there is little visibility into how many schools use (or meet) these benchmarks or whether students nationally are receiving an adequate baseline of career support.

### CICA Benchmarking: Overview<sup>106</sup>

The CICA framework provides a set of national standards for best practice in career development across Australian schools. These standards focus on ensuring that career education programs are aligned with quality standards, tailored to diverse student needs, and integrated within the broader educational experience.

The framework emphasises:

1. **Comprehensive Career Education:** Ensuring students receive a well-rounded education in career development that includes labour market insights, employability skills, and individual career planning.
2. **Personalised Guidance:** Encouraging programs to tailor support based on students' individual strengths, interests, and goals.

<sup>98</sup> Department of Education. (2024). *Career education*. Queensland Government.

<sup>99</sup> NSW Education Standards. (2019). *Work Education 7–10 Syllabus (2019)*

<sup>100</sup> Department of Education. (2025). *Career learning lessons*. Government of Western Australia.

<sup>101</sup> Department for Education. (2023). *Career Education and Pathways Strategy – supporting school students on their pathway to lifelong success*. Government of South Australia.

<sup>102</sup> Department of Education. (2023, October 10). *Career education – Years 9–12*. Tasmanian Government.

<sup>103</sup> Department of Education. (2022). *Career education guidelines: Curriculum, assessment, reporting and certification: Early childhood to year 12 policy statement*. Northern Territory Government.

<sup>104</sup> Department of Education. (2024). *Careers and vocational pathways*. Australian Capital Territory Government.

<sup>105</sup> Career Industry Council of Australia (2014). *School Career Development Service Benchmarking Resource*.

<sup>106</sup> Career Industry Council of Australia (2014). *School Career Development Service Benchmarking Resource*.

3. **Evaluation and Improvement:** Schools are encouraged to regularly assess and improve their career programs, ensuring they stay relevant to students and the labour market.

**International comparisons highlight that Australia’s decentralised approach could be improved.** In some countries, career education is more firmly embedded in the school system. For example, the United Kingdom introduced the Gatsby Benchmarks in 2014 as a national standard for career guidance in schools. The Spotlight below provides an overview of The Gatsby benchmarking principles, which were adopted into England’s Ofsted inspection criteria and effectively made mandatory for schools. As a result, by 2022, over 80% of English secondary schools were meeting most Gatsby Benchmarks, leading to improved student engagement in career planning and smoother school-to-work transitions.<sup>107</sup>

Similarly, countries such as Germany and Switzerland integrate career exploration within strong apprenticeship and workplace learning systems, ensuring that by the end of secondary school, virtually all students have had substantial industry exposure and guidance.

The OECD finds that across member countries, students who have more career guidance activities in school – such as speaking to advisors, visiting workplaces, or participating in job shadowing – have better employment outcomes later on.<sup>108</sup> Yet, OECD data also show many students miss out on these experiences. On average, only 50% of 15-year-olds in OECD countries report having spoken to a school career advisor, and just 4 in 10 have visited a workplace by that age.<sup>109</sup>

Australia mirrors this international trend: many young people leave school having received relatively little formal career guidance, especially if they attend schools in disadvantaged communities.

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<sup>107</sup> The Careers & Enterprise Company. (2024). *Careers education 2022/23: Now & next*.

<sup>108</sup> Covacevich, C. (2021, October 27). *Preparing youth for work: What really works in career guidance?* OECD Education and Skills Today.

<sup>109</sup> Covacevich, C. (2021, October 27). *Preparing youth for work: What really works in career guidance?* OECD Education and Skills Today.



### **Spotlight: The Gatsby Benchmarks (UK)**

The Gatsby Benchmarks provide a structured framework for high-quality career guidance, implemented across the United Kingdom (UK) to ensure all students receive consistent and effective career education. Developed in 2014 by the Gatsby Foundation, the benchmarks have since been formally integrated into UK education policy and school inspection criteria.

#### **The Eight Gatsby Benchmarks**

The Gatsby Benchmarks define best practice in career education as including:

1. A stable careers programme: Every school must have a structured and regularly reviewed careers strategy.
2. Learning from career and labour market information: Students and parents should access up-to-date career and job market data.
3. Addressing student needs: Career advice should be inclusive and tailored to individual aspirations.
4. Linking curriculum learning to careers: Subjects should integrate real-world career applications.
5. Encounters with employers: Regular student engagement with employers to develop workplace understanding.
6. Experiences of workplaces: Structured work placements to provide real industry experience.
7. Encounters with further and higher education: Exposure to a range of post-school pathways, including university and apprenticeships.
8. Personal guidance: At least one face-to-face careers interview before leaving school.

The Gatsby Benchmarks were incorporated into the 2017 UK Careers Strategy, requiring all state-funded secondary schools in England to adopt them by 2020.

In England, the framework is fully mandatory, supported by the Careers & Enterprise Company (CEC), which funds and coordinates employer-school partnerships.

Implementation is backed by:

- Careers Hubs – Regional networks linking schools, employers, and advisers.
- Enterprise Advisers – Industry professionals guiding schools on employer engagement.
- Ofsted Inspections – Career guidance provision is assessed in school evaluations.

**Impact and challenges:** Over 80% of English schools now meet or exceed the Gatsby Benchmarks (CEC, 2023). This has led to improved student engagement in career planning and higher employment success post-school, although challenges persist in accounting for regional disparities in employer participation and funding limitations in disadvantaged areas. Overall, though, impact has been positive: meeting all Gatsby Benchmarks reduces the likelihood of a school's students becoming NEET (not in

education, employment or training) at age 16 by 8%.<sup>110</sup>

**Lessons for Australia:** The UK’s standardised career education model offers insights for Australia, where career guidance is fragmented by state. Key takeaways include:

- Introducing national career education benchmarks to ensure equity.
- Embedding career education into school accountability frameworks.
- Expanding employer engagement initiatives to bridge the gap between education and work.

A structured, evidence-based career framework like Gatsby could enhance career readiness and improve post-school transitions for Australian students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In light of these insights, emerging practices for improving formal career education in Australia include:

1. Making career development an explicit, mandatory part of the curriculum from early secondary years, on equal footing with core curriculum provision;
2. Ensuring every student gets multiple interactions with careers advisors and industry by graduation;
3. Adopting a national benchmarking system (akin to Gatsby or CICA standards) to guarantee a minimum level of service, and making results across benchmarks publicly available.

The establishment of the National Careers Institute (in 2019) and resources like the MyFuture careers portal are steps forward, but without formalised requirements and accountability, their reach can be limited. While comprehensive data on uptake of the MyFutures service is hard to locate, a survey of the sources young Australians get careers information from found that 37% of respondents used an online career site or tool, after talking to family, peers, career practitioners, word of mouth and other digital tools (online quizzes).<sup>111</sup> A stronger national framework – potentially making career education an assessable aspect of school performance – could help “democratise” access to guidance.<sup>112</sup>

International examples suggest that when done systematically, career education opens students’ eyes to a wider range of pathways and can particularly benefit those who don’t get such guidance at home.<sup>113</sup> Indeed, the OECD’s Career Readiness project identified key activities (career talks, work trials, part-time work, mentoring, etc.) that correlate with significantly lower chances of unemployment for youths.<sup>114</sup> Embedding these activities for all students, not just the proactive or privileged, is viewed as a best practice approach.

<sup>110</sup> Careers Enterprise Company (2021). *The benefits of Gatsby Benchmark achievement for post-16 destinations*.

<sup>111</sup> Roberts, S. (2024). *myfuture: Thinking in a Joined-Up Way: The Importance of the 'Careers Information Ecology'*.

<sup>112</sup> Rice, S., Hooley, T., & Crebbin, S. (2022). Approaches to quality assurance in school-based career development: Policymaker perspectives from Australia. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 50(1), 110–127.

<sup>113</sup> Covacevich, C. (2021, October 27). *Preparing youth for work: What really works in career guidance?* OECD Education and Skills Today.

<sup>114</sup> Covacevich, C. (2021, October 27). *Preparing youth for work: What really works in career guidance?* OECD Education and Skills Today.

Australia's challenge and opportunity in the coming years will be to elevate school-based career guidance from what could be considered a patchy afterthought to a core component of education for every child.

## **b. Informal guidance**

Not all career guidance is delivered through formal means; **a great deal of influence comes from the informal guidance young people receive through their immediate social environment.** This is especially true for young people who receive limited career guidance through formal means, as they plug the gaps with what is accessible to them. Parents, extended family, friends, and even social media all shape how youth form their aspirations and make decisions about the future. These informal sources can be double-edged: they can provide strong positive encouragement, or they can reinforce limiting beliefs and information gaps.

### **Parents and families**

Parents and family members are often the most influential sources of career advice and support. In many cases, parents' expectations and knowledge about education pathways drive the trajectory of their children.<sup>115</sup> Youth from high-SES families tend to benefit from more proactive and informed parental guidance – for example, parents from professional backgrounds may discuss university from an early age, help arrange work experience through their networks, or pay for tutoring and career counselling.<sup>116</sup> By contrast, non-university educated parents may have limited knowledge of current career pathways or university application processes, especially if they never navigated those pathways themselves. This can inadvertently narrow a child's options.

Furthermore, disadvantaged parents struggling with financial stress might be more likely to favour short-term stability for their children (encouraging them to earn income sooner) over long-term educational investment.<sup>117</sup> It's important to note that we recognise parents want the best for their children; the differences lie in what they perceive as viable and how able they are to support those goals. Strengthening parental awareness is one way to improve this informal guidance. Some programs now actively involve parents in career events or provide resources for parents to learn about university admissions, scholarships, and new industries, so they can better guide their children.<sup>118</sup>

### **Friends and Peer Networks**

Peers play a crucial role in shaping career perceptions, ambitions, and decision-making processes. Teenagers often calibrate their aspirations based on what their friends are doing or aiming for.<sup>119</sup> Career discussions among friends normalise certain pathways, influencing whether university, TAFE, or direct employment feels like the "expected" route. These shared experiences between networks—such as co-applying for jobs, apprenticeships, or university courses—can therefore provide motivation, practical support

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<sup>115</sup> Billett, S., Choy, S., & Hodge, S. (2020). Enhancing the standing of vocational education and the occupations it serves: Australia. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 72(2), 270–296.

<sup>116</sup> Groves, O., Austin, K., O'Shea, S. et al. (2023) 'One student might get one opportunity and then the next student won't get anything like that': Inequities in Australian career education and recommendations for a fairer future. *Aust. Educ. Res.* 50, 519–536 (2023).

<sup>117</sup> Institute for Social Science Research. (2023). *Drivers of underrepresentation in Australian higher education*. The University of Queensland.

<sup>118</sup> The Smith Family. (2016). *Improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged young Australians*.

<sup>119</sup> Hunt, J., Atherton, K., Collerton, E., & Wilkinson, N. (2021). *Effective Careers Interventions for Disadvantaged Young People a Report by the Behavioural Insights Team* (November 2021).



and a sense of community.<sup>120</sup> Moreover, peer networks can also play a determining role in later earnings; a UK study by BIT found that students from lower SES backgrounds who spend time with friends from more advantaged backgrounds earn up to £5,100 more per year later in life (\$10,200 AUD).<sup>121</sup>

However, peer influence can also backfire, with some students limiting aspirations to career paths they see within their immediate social circles. Students in private and selective schools tend to have peers with higher educational aspirations, reinforcing a positive feedback loop of ambition and achievement.<sup>122</sup> Conversely, students in low-resource schools may be exposed to more vocational or precarious job pathways, shaping their career expectations accordingly.<sup>123</sup> <sup>124</sup> Harnessing peer influence positively can involve alumni networks where recent graduates from the same school return to talk about their university or TAFE experiences, thereby expanding the peer reference group beyond one's immediate friends.<sup>125</sup>

### **Social media and online communities**

Social media and digital career influencers have emerged as significant new sources of career-related information. Platforms such as LinkedIn, TikTok, and YouTube provide career advice, professional networking opportunities, and insights into different job roles.

However, while algorithm-driven content can expose students to emerging industries and new opportunities, it can also reinforce career stereotypes and existing socio-economic divides, as well as perpetuate misinformation and bias.<sup>126</sup> <sup>127</sup> Not all “career influencers” have credible advice, and algorithms might silo content in a way that students only see a narrow band of careers (often those that are trendy or high-status).<sup>128</sup> They also risk over-emphasising entrepreneurial success stories, where influencers highlight exceptional career trajectories rather than practical, realistic career pathways.<sup>129</sup>

While social media can be a powerful tool for career exploration, its impact depends on a young person's ability to critically evaluate the information they encounter. Schools and career educators can play a role in promoting digital literacy, ensuring that students learn to assess the credibility of online career advice and engage with diverse, reliable career resources.

### **Self-directed research**

Today's youth have an unprecedented amount of information at their fingertips. This presents an increasingly common form of informal career support, where young people seek out information independently to explore potential career paths in order to plug the

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<sup>120</sup>Roberts, S., Lyall, B., Trott, V., Foeken, E., Smith, J., Robards, B., Genat, A., Graf, D., Jones, C., Marple, P., Waite, C., & Wright, B. (2023). Young Australians Navigating the 'Careers Information Ecology'. *Youth*, 3(1), 300–320.

<sup>121</sup> Makinson, L., Silva, A., Wessel, M. et. al. (2025). *Social capital in the United Kingdom: evidence from six billion friendships*.

<sup>122</sup> Makinson, L., Silva, A., Wessel, M. et. al. (2025). *Social capital in the United Kingdom: evidence from six billion friendships*.

<sup>123</sup> Gemici, S., Bednarz, A., Karmel, T., & Lim, P. (2014). *The factors affecting the educational and occupational aspirations of young Australians*. National Centre for Vocational Education Research.

<sup>124</sup> TASO. (2023). *The value of higher education: Rapid evidence review and initial data analysis*. State of Life London.

<sup>125</sup> Hunt, J., Atherton, K., Collerton, E., & Wilkinson, N. (2021). *Effective Careers Interventions for Disadvantaged Young People a Report by the Behavioural Insights Team* (November 2021).

<sup>126</sup> Billett, S., Choy, S., & Hodge, S. (2020). Enhancing the standing of vocational education and the occupations it serves: Australia. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 72(2), 270–296.

<sup>127</sup> Roberts, S., Lyall, B., Trott, V., Foeken, E., Smith, J., Robards, B., Genat, A., Graf, D., Jones, C., Marple, P., Waite, C., & Wright, B. (2023). Young Australians navigating the 'careers information ecology'. *Youth*, 3(1), 300–320.

<sup>128</sup> Roberts, S., Lyall, B., Trott, V., Foeken, E., Smith, J., Robards, B., Genat, A., Graf, D., Jones, C., Marple, P., Waite, C., & Wright, B. (2023). Young Australians navigating the 'careers information ecology'. *Youth*, 3(1), 300–320.

<sup>129</sup> Roberts, S., Lyall, B., Trott, V., Foeken, E., Smith, J., Robards, B., Genat, A., Graf, D., Jones, C., Marple, P., Waite, C., & Wright, B. (2023). Young Australians navigating the 'careers information ecology'. *Youth*, 3(1), 300–320.



gaps of inadequate formal support.<sup>130</sup> Websites such as MyFuture and JobOutlook provide structured insights, while platforms like Reddit and Quora offer first-hand accounts from professionals in various industries.

However, the effectiveness of self-directed research depends heavily on digital literacy skills and access to reliable information. While some students are adept at navigating job boards, professional networking sites, and educational resources, others may struggle to filter misleading or overly generic career advice. There is also a risk of cognitive overload, where the vast quantity of resources can lead to confusion rather than clarity in career decision-making.<sup>131</sup>

### 3.5 Summary

**The rapid evidence review highlights significant and persistent inequities in young people’s access to career education, post-school pathways, and employment opportunities in Australia.** While policies and initiatives have sought to improve career guidance and reduce barriers to higher education and vocational training, gaps remain—particularly for young people from low socio-economic backgrounds, regional and remote areas, and Indigenous communities. These disparities create unequal access to informed decision-making, structured career support, and meaningful employment pathways, ultimately limiting social mobility.

[Figure 4](#) on page 40 summarises the barriers identified in the literature review using the COM-B framework. This categorises barriers into Capability, Opportunity, and Motivation. This framework organises how barriers manifest both at the individual and system-level, and how they intersect, in order to shine light on the behavioural aspect of systemic problems. This helps us target nuanced projects that address mindsets and behaviours within the systemic context.

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<sup>130</sup> Roberts, S., Lyall, B., Trott, V., Foeken, E., Smith, J., Robards, B., Genat, A., Graf, D., Jones, C., Marple, P., Waite, C., & Wright, B. (2023). Young Australians navigating the 'careers information ecology'. *Youth*, 3(1), 300–320.

<sup>131</sup> Hunt, J., Atherton, K., Collerton, E., & Wilkinson, N. (2021). *Effective Careers Interventions for Disadvantaged Young People a Report by the Behavioural Insights Team (November 2021)*.



Figure 4: Barriers to equitable outcomes: a behavioural approach

# Barriers to equitable outcomes: a behavioural approach

## Competing Priorities or Low Perceived Value of Career Guidance

When resources are stretched in underfunded schools, career education is deprioritised. Students may similarly assume that 'there's no point' planning pathways if they see few local job prospects.

## Psychological and Cultural Deterrents

Some young people feeling they 'don't belong' in higher education or particular career fields due to their background, leading to reduced aspiration. Family or peer norms can reinforce these beliefs. Internalised low expectations or fear of failure can deter students from seeking new opportunities—lack of self-efficacy is a powerful demotivator.



## Insufficient Knowledge and Skills in Schools

Students and teachers lack knowledge or training to navigate and deliver quality career guidance (e.g. teachers have little formal career development training; students don't know how to research job markets or apply for scholarships).

## Limited Cognitive Resources for Navigating Complex Options

Young people experience overload or confusion when trying to sift through myriad vocational/tertiary pathways without clear structure or support.

## Resource Constraints (Funding and Infrastructure)

Underfunded schools, particularly in low-SES or regional areas, are unable to hire career advisors, host industry engagement events, or provide structured work experience.

## Fragmented or Inconsistent Policy and Benchmarking

No national requirement or unified framework for career education means some schools excel while others offer minimal support. Without consistent accountability (e.g. benchmarking frameworks like Gatsby Benchmarks in the UK), schools have little external pressure or structural opportunity to prioritise high-quality career guidance.



## 4. Qualitative Research findings

In order to supplement the findings from the desk research, we conducted semi-structured interviews with eighteen young people from across Australia to investigate their experiences of navigating post-school pathways, their journey from school to what came next, and any challenges and support they experienced in the process.

The qualitative interviews provided rich insights into the factors influencing young people's career decision-making, access to opportunities, and the barriers they encounter in navigating their post-school pathways. Across the interviews, several recurring themes emerged, highlighting the role of formal career education, the impact of financial and geographic barriers, the importance of industry exposure, and the role of informal support networks. This section presents a thematic analysis of these findings.

### 4.1 Barriers to career access

Many participants described significant barriers that limited their ability to explore and pursue career opportunities. These barriers were often multi-faceted, with financial, geographic, and systemic challenges intersecting to create compounding disadvantages, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds,

#### a. Inadequate career guidance in schools

Several participants expressed frustration with the lack of structured and effective career guidance provided in schools. While some schools offered career advice sessions, many young people found that these sessions were too generic and did not cater to individual needs. One participant described their career guidance as "boring" and irrelevant, stating that it focused too much on university entry and did not provide useful information about vocational pathways.

*"At the time, it just felt really boring; it was one of those lessons that you dreaded and wanted to go by fast. [...] Looking back, I don't think it was that useful; everything useful I've learned about interviews etc. I kind of learned it on my own."* - Participant 0201  
(Government school, Aged 21, NSW.)

In contrast, participants who attended private schools or religious schools noted that they had access to a range of opportunities, including in-depth career coaching, networking events, and internship opportunities, highlighting the disparity in career education between different school systems.

*"The careers fair is very over the top - people fly in from all over the world across every single industry you could think of [...]. They hand-feed you the networks and contact information you need."* Participant 0801 (Private school, aged 17, SA).

## b. Financial barriers and the cost of further education

A recurring theme across the interviews was the **financial constraints that affected young people's ability to engage with further education and training**. Several participants reported delaying or reconsidering their post-school plans due to associated costs. In particular, students without access to financial support from their families faced heightened uncertainty about their ability to afford tuition fees, living expenses, and study-related costs.

One participant described enrolling in a TAFE course but struggling with the financial burden of completing it, leading them to withdraw before finishing. Another participant highlighted how financial uncertainty meant they had to work full-time after high school instead of pursuing further study, even though they had originally planned to attend university. These examples illustrate how financial barriers do not just affect career choices but can also disrupt pathways after young people have already begun their studies.

*"I only started uni when I was 23 because I was a permanent resident. and you're not eligible for HECS if you're not a citizen. So, I couldn't afford to pay upfront fees. So, I spent about five or six years just working and saving money until I was eventually able to afford to go to uni" - Participant 0302 (Government school, aged 24, VIC).*

## c. Regional and remote disadvantages

For participants from regional and remote areas, **geographic isolation was a key factor limiting their access to career-related experiences**. The lack of nearby industries, career fairs, and work experience opportunities meant that many young people in these areas had limited exposure to different career options before finishing school.

One participant explained that most of their peers did not undertake work experience or industry placements simply because there were few options available in their local area. Another participant noted that their school struggled to connect students with employers or industry representatives, which meant that career education was largely theoretical rather than practical. This lack of real-world exposure contributed to uncertainty about post-school options, particularly for students who were the first in their family to consider university or vocational training.

## 4.2 The role of industry exposure in career decision-making

Industry exposure played a crucial role in shaping young people's career aspirations and confidence in pursuing their chosen pathways. Participants who had access to industry placements, vocational training, or employer-led programs reported feeling more prepared for the workforce and more confident in their career decisions.

### a. Vocational training and hands-on learning

For many participants, **exposure to industry through vocational training was one of the most valuable aspects of their career development**. Some described completing TAFE

courses or short industry-specific certifications, which provided them with direct skills and an understanding of what working in a particular field would be like.

One participant shared that they completed online modules to obtain a certification in a trade-related field, which helped them secure a job straight after high school. Another participant who undertook a vocational placement described how the hands-on nature of the experience helped them clarify their career interests and build connections within the industry.

However, several participants noted that information about these opportunities was not always readily available. One interviewee mentioned that they only discovered TAFE pathways through a friend, as their school primarily promoted university entry, highlighting that vocational pathways are overlooked within the broader career guidance framework.

## **b. Formal work experience as an underutilised tool for career exploration**

Despite strong evidence that hands-on exposure to workplaces significantly enhances career confidence and decision-making, many participants reported **limited access to structured work placements during their schooling**. When opportunities were available, they were often unstructured, with little support from school to find meaningful placement, meaning they ended up in sites that were disconnected from their career interests.

Several interviewees noted that their only exposure to work experience came through informal part-time jobs, which provided valuable workplace skills but did not necessarily align with their long-term career aspirations. Others mentioned that their schools offered one-off or optional work experience programs that did not cater to all students, particularly those interested in non-traditional or emerging career paths. This lack of structured industry engagement left many young people feeling uncertain about their options, with some only discovering potential career pathways after leaving school.

Additionally, barriers such as geographic location, socio-economic status, and school resources further limited access to work experience. Students from regional and remote areas, in particular, highlighted the difficulty of securing placements due to the absence of local opportunities and limited school support for arranging external placements. In contrast, young people in well-resourced schools had access to formalised internship programs and career partnerships with industry, demonstrating a significant gap in equity of access.

Some interviewees who had completed meaningful work experience placements described them as transformative, giving them a sense of direction and practical insight into their chosen field, as well as key contacts for later networking and support opportunities. However, these experiences were often arranged independently rather than facilitated through school systems.

The qualitative findings suggest that a more structured, universally accessible approach to work-integrated learning is needed. Programs that embed meaningful work placements into the education system—rather than treating them as optional extras—could help bridge the gap between education and employment.



*“Immersion theory experience would have been great when you get smaller versions of work experience throughout the year, like one day to go to different careers and see if I want to do that.” – Participant 1001 (Aged 16, Government school [State unspecified]).*

### **c. Informal work experience and self-initiated learning**

In cases where formal career education was lacking, many participants sought out **industry exposure independently**. Several young people described taking up casual jobs or volunteering in fields they were interested in as a way to gain practical experience.

One participant explained that they deliberately sought out part-time work in different industries to explore potential career paths, as they felt their school did not provide enough structured career guidance. Another participant mentioned joining industry-specific online communities to learn more about potential career options and network with professionals. These findings highlight the role of self-initiative in career exploration, particularly for students who do not have access to strong school-based career support.

## **4.3 The importance of informal support networks**

Beyond formal education systems, many participants relied on **informal networks—family, friends, mentors, and community groups—for career guidance and support**. These networks often played a pivotal role in helping young people navigate career decisions, particularly when formal career education was insufficient.

### **a. The role of family and social connections**

For some participants, **family members provided critical career advice and support**. Those with parents or relatives in professional fields often had greater exposure to different career options and clearer guidance on navigating pathways into those fields. One participant noted that their parent’s career connections helped them secure an internship, which gave them a significant advantage in entering the industry.

*“Most of my advice came from my dad who worked in a uni and my friends. Reaching out to people who had gone to uni was helpful. I wouldn’t want to go to social media to get information, it’s not really reliable. I would rather get information from people in person.”*  
– Participant 1401 (Aged 19, Rural school, NSW)

However, participants from lower-income backgrounds or first-generation university students often lacked access to such support. One interviewee described feeling isolated in their career decision-making because their parents were unfamiliar with university application processes or professional career pathways. This lack of career-related social capital meant that these young people had to rely more heavily on school or self-directed research to navigate their options.

*"I mainly talked to my friends about [pathways and careers], not my parents. They would just say study hard and go to uni but they didn't understand the processes behind it."*  
Participant 0302 (Government school, aged 24, VIC).

## **b. Community mentors and support programs**

Several participants highlighted the **importance of mentors and community-based career programs in filling the gaps left by formal education**. Some had access to programs run by non-profit organisations that provided career coaching, industry exposure, and networking opportunities. One participant credited a community mentoring program with helping them secure a scholarship, which enabled them to pursue further education despite financial barriers.

*"[Organisation] does this in summer or in the school holidays - they do little camps for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. So it's fully subsidised. You could go to the uni and they kind of explore different avenues... tell you what scholarships are available, what uni life is your workload as you ... they pay for your flight and everything and then you stay at the colleges that they have on campus."* - Participant 1601 (QLD).

Others mentioned the impact of **informal mentors, such as teachers, sports coaches, or employers, who took an interest in their career development and provided guidance**. These findings suggest that structured mentoring and community-based career programs can play a crucial role in supporting young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

## **4.4 Navigating transitions**

Many participants described their transition from school to further education or employment as a period of uncertainty and adjustment. **The clarity and confidence with which they navigated this transition often depended on the level of guidance and exposure they had received during school.**

One participant who had undertaken a structured career preparation program reported feeling well-prepared for university, while another who had received little career education described struggling to make informed decisions about their future. Similarly, participants who had access to vocational training or industry placements generally found it easier to transition into work, whereas those who lacked exposure to career options often faced delays in their post-school pathways.

*"If they had followed up on things as we moved on in school - 11 and 12 and post school, that would have been more useful (...). The closer we were to going through that process the school 'let go' more and more, you were left to fend for yourself"* Participant 0201 (Government school, Aged 21, NSW.)

## 5. Summary and implications

### 5.1 Summary of key findings

A thematic review of the data highlights key trends that emerge across different areas. These trends point to underlying inefficiencies, persistent challenges, and potential areas for improvement for understanding what factors affect young people's pathways and opportunities post-school. Understanding these overarching patterns is crucial for developing targeted and sustainable solutions.

Higher-SES students continue to benefit from more structured career pathways, accessing university-focused career counselling, networking opportunities, and well-resourced school programs. Meanwhile, their disadvantaged peers engage more frequently with vocational options, though these resources are dwindling. This shift disadvantages students who may benefit from vocational education but lack the exposure and guidance to explore these options fully. **The disparity in access between government and independent schools further widens this gap, reinforcing the cycle of educational and career inequality.**

**Personalised, one-on-one career support is particularly critical for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, as strong relationships with advisors can significantly impact engagement and trust.** However, in many underfunded schools, career services are stretched thin, leading to inconsistent access. Some students receive comprehensive career support, while others – particularly those who are more likely to be seeking information on vocational pathways – find themselves with limited resources and little structured guidance.

To address these issues, **a balanced approach to career guidance is needed**; one that provides equitable access to diverse pathways and acknowledges the role of informal networks while ensuring all students have access to accurate, up-to-date, and comprehensive career information. Without such reforms, the divide in career outcomes between advantaged and disadvantaged groups will continue to grow, limiting opportunities for many young Australians.

Both the qualitative and desk research findings emphasise the **importance of work experience and industry exposure as critical factors in shaping career confidence and decision-making.** The desk review highlights the value of structured vocational placements, apprenticeships, and school-industry partnerships, while interviewees frequently cited hands-on experience as the most effective way to develop skills and develop concrete career aspirations. This alignment further underscores the need for expanded access to industry engagement initiatives, particularly for students in disadvantaged circumstances.

Additionally, both strands of research emphasise the **importance of early and proactive interventions**, including work-integrated learning, mentoring programs, and community-driven career support initiatives. The desk research highlights successful models of holistic career guidance, such as multi-touchpoint mentoring programs and industry-school partnerships, that align with interviewees' descriptions of the types of support that made a meaningful difference in their career decision-making.

These findings suggest that **addressing career access inequities requires a multi-faceted approach that strengthens and tailors formal career education to individual needs and**



aspirations, expands industry exposure opportunities, and enhances support systems for disadvantaged youth.

## 5.2 Systemic causes identified

Beyond the immediate findings, a deeper analysis reveals systemic root causes that contribute to these issues. These underlying factors perpetuate challenges and hinder long-term progress. Identifying these root causes is essential for implementing meaningful, lasting solutions rather than addressing symptoms alone.

### **a. Inconsistent and under-researched career education and support**

Career education in Australia remains fragmented, underfunded, and unevenly implemented across states and schools. Without standardised career education, students from disadvantaged backgrounds face greater uncertainty and are less prepared to navigate post-school transitions. However, gaps in comprehensive data mean it's difficult to identify what high-quality looks like, where it is being provided, and how to disseminate this best practice.

This systemic gap directly informs Project 1: Mapping National Career Education Gaps, which seeks to create a comprehensive national picture of career education disparities. By identifying where and why these gaps persist, this project will provide the evidence base for policy interventions that ensure career education reaches all students equitably.

### **b. Structural funding inequities and gaps in resource priorities**

Australia's school funding model systematically under-resources public schools, which educate the vast majority of disadvantaged students. While the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) was designed to fund schools according to student need, most public schools remain funded below this benchmark, while the majority of private schools exceed it. This imbalance justifies Project 3, which aims to identify how funding structures can be improved to support equitable career education. Understanding how funding disparities affect career outcomes will allow policymakers to design more effective equity loadings, funding mechanisms and incentives.

### **c. Limited benchmarking and accountability in career education**

There is no national mechanism to track or evaluate the effectiveness of career education programs in schools, meaning that quality varies widely, with no clear minimum standard. Without strong evaluation frameworks, schools lack incentives to improve career guidance delivery, and students in under-resourced schools are left behind.

This challenge underpins Project 2, which will promote the adoption of national benchmarking tools to track and enhance career education quality. By introducing standardised evaluation measures and supporting schools to engage in continuous improvement, this project will help ensure every young person, regardless of background, receives the career guidance they need to make informed choices.

The systemic causes identified in the rapid evidence review underscore the need for targeted, data-driven reforms. The three proposed projects directly address these systemic barriers, aiming to build a more equitable career education system that



empowers all young people to access meaningful post-school opportunities. The next section of the report will explore potential strategies and interventions to bridge these gaps and create more equitable career pathways for young Australians.

## 6. Proposed projects

### 6.1 Project ideation: targeting high-impact opportunities

The process for identifying opportunities for intervention was informed by the evidence review, stakeholder consultations, system mapping and qualitative insights to build a comprehensive understanding of the structural, informational and behavioural barriers that limit career and opportunity access, particularly for disadvantaged students. Through this analysis, we identified gaps in existing provision and areas where System 2 could have the greatest impact. These gaps were grouped according to seven broad themes which were identified as areas for potential intervention:

1. Careers education and advice
2. Social and cultural capital
3. Parents and families
4. Individual factors (aspirations and motivations)
5. Post-school pathways and decision-making
6. Employers and industry exposure
7. Funding systems and policies.

From these themes, we developed a longlist of project areas that could address these challenges, targeting key opportunities for intervention using evidence-based insights, barriers, and enablers for each theme. Each potential project was then evaluated using a structured ranking framework assessing alignment with government priorities, potential for System 2 impact, practical feasibility, strength of supporting evidence, and innovativeness of the idea. Projects that scored strongly across each of these categories were prioritised, ensuring that interventions could be piloted and scaled efficiently with minimal dependencies or uncertainties.

Firstly, we considered research avenues most closely aligned to System 2's unique approach:

- **Systems-thinking:** Prioritising projects that address 'upstream' system leverage points, rather than tackling 'downstream' barriers in isolation. A key factor underpinning the structural barriers identified in this report appears to be that the provision of career education is inconsistent, and there are no strong benchmarks or policies requiring schools to provide high-quality support. We present one priority project that focuses on the supply-side of the system (funding) and two priority projects that focus on the demand-side of the system (provision of career education and benchmarking of career education).
- **Behavioural science:** Prioritising projects that involve one or both of the following:
  - 1) Mapping the different actors or entities within the system and the behaviours emerging from the interaction between their goals, abilities, and environmental





settings;

2) Using insights from behavioural science about how to shift external settings and internal motives and capacities to encourage behaviour change.

- **Deep collaboration:** Prioritising projects that incorporate research methodologies that amplify the voices of young people with relevant lived experience.

In pursuing our research, we recognise the need to collaborate with a diverse group of stakeholders and engage key decision makers early to ensure support. As an independent charity and research institute, System 2 brings a unique perspective to persistent challenges. We have prioritised projects where decision makers are most likely to be supportive of independent research and to meaningfully engage. This approach will allow us to efficiently move forward with impact-driven initiatives while embracing collaboration where appropriate.

The final shortlist of projects was selected and refined with the input of System 2's Research Committee based on feasibility, potential for system-level impact, and ability to fill identified gaps in career and opportunity access for disadvantaged youth.

We identified the following potential projects that meet these criteria. Each of the three projects directly addresses specific systemic gaps identified through this report's analysis:

- **Project 1: Mapping national career education gaps**

This project responds directly to the fragmented, inequitable career education identified across Australian states and territories. By systematically mapping existing career education provision, the project will illuminate gaps and highlight effective practices. Comprehensive national data will serve as the critical evidence base required to drive targeted reforms, ensuring resources reach the most disadvantaged students and schools.

- **Project 2: Strengthening benchmarking and evaluation**

The lack of standardised benchmarking and evaluation perpetuates inconsistency and poor accountability in career education. Leveraging successful international benchmarking approaches (such as the UK's Gatsby Benchmarks), this project will implement a national accountability and evaluation framework. This ensures every school consistently delivers high-quality, measurable, and continuously improved career guidance, reducing inequities and promoting fairer outcomes for disadvantaged youth.

- **Project 3: Reviewing school funding to prioritise career support**

The report clearly demonstrates how current funding arrangements systematically disadvantage public schools. This project will rigorously analyse existing funding mechanisms and their impacts on career education provision. By identifying optimal funding models such as revised equity loadings, it will enable policy adjustments ensuring equitable, consistent support for disadvantaged schools, supporting improved student outcomes and stronger social mobility.

Further details of each project are provided from page 51.



Beyond these three project ideas, we also identified some promising avenues for research that fall outside the criteria we have outlined above. Four examples are shown below, with a spotlight on the first idea shown in the box underneath.

- 1: Co-designing a career education curriculum with industry input;
- 2: Ensuring wider uptake of mandatory work experience among school students;
- 3: Providing informal support for parents and carers navigating post-school pathways with their children;
- 4: Visualising 'future self' for better pathway guidance

### **Spotlight - Co-designing a career education curriculum with industry input**

This project aims to transform career education by developing a curriculum that is co-designed with students, teachers, career advisors, and industry experts. The goal is to ensure career guidance is relevant, practical, and reflective of real-world pathways and local industries while incorporating diverse perspectives. The focus would be on what individual teachers can learn from industry and implement in the classroom to make career education a more casual, everyday conversation and topic that young people are exposed to on a regular basis, and not in ad-hoc career provision.

To strengthen the evidence base and design process, the project would include an exploratory research phase using a large-scale survey to assess the current state of career guidance, verifying qualitative insights from existing research.

#### **Proposed project activities:**

1. Exploratory research: understanding the current state of career guidance
2. Co-design workshops with students, teachers and career advisors, industry professionals, academics and behavioural scientists.
3. Using insights from co-design, draft a career curriculum to pilot and test in Australian schools.
4. Implement and trial the product, including evaluating how it meets Australian benchmarks for career education (such as the CICA framework).

This project is well-aligned with System 2's commitment to deep collaboration, systems thinking and behavioural science. However, it targets the behaviour of actors within the system (schools and teachers implementing career education) rather than the system in which the actors operate (where career education is under-funded and deprioritised). Other projects also scored higher on feasibility and innovativeness of ideas.



## 6.2 Project 1: Mapping national career education gaps for data-driven reform

This project acts as an extension of the current stream of work, proposing a comprehensive, nationwide audit of school career education to identify where services are lacking and for whom. By mapping disparities across states, regions, and student groups, it aims to create a data-driven foundation for reforms. The intention of the project is to plug the current evidence gap; currently, no comprehensive picture exists of how well Australian schools prepare students for careers, making it difficult to target improvements and identify best practice for evaluation and dissemination.

### *Approach*

The project proposes a nationwide quantitative study to map and evaluate career education across all jurisdictions. By auditing schools and surveying students, it will reveal disparities in career support and highlight best practices. This will feed into building an ongoing evidence base that policymakers and educators can use to drive improvements. This solution directly addresses the problem by generating the missing data needed to pinpoint gaps and monitor progress over time. Ultimately, it would help identify best practice, and inform future reforms and projects so that every student – regardless of state, school type or background – can access quality career guidance.

The implementation of this project would consist of:

- Activity 1: State-by-State Career Education Audit

A structured audit of schools in each state/territory to map current career support provision. This would identify disparities between different regions, school sectors (government, Catholic, independent), and communities (e.g. comparing low-SES vs high-SES schools, metro vs rural).

- Activity 2: National Student Survey

A large-scale survey of students and recent school leavers (ages 16–22) capturing their experiences with career guidance, work exposure (like work experience or VET courses), and transitions after school. This survey ensures lived experience and student voices are central to the analysis.

- Activity 3: Annual Reporting & Continuous Improvement

Based on the audit and survey data, develop an annual Career Education “Report Card” for each state. This report would track key indicators (access to counsellors, career lessons, work-based learning opportunities, etc.) and outcomes (student career readiness, post-school pathways). Transparent reporting creates accountability and a feedback loop: schools and governments can see where they lag and implement continuous improvement programs.

- Activity 4: Policy Recommendations & Framework

Using the evidence gathered, formulate policy recommendations to increase equity and quality in career education. This could include recommending minimum service standards, resource allocations, or support programs for under-served areas.



- Activity 5: Publication and dissemination of findings

Findings will be synthesised and published on the System 2 website. A framework for regular audits should be institutionalised so that career education quality is monitored on an ongoing basis rather than via one-off studies.

### ***Rationale***

**There is limited understanding of how career education is implemented across Australia, what is working well, and where major gaps lie.** Unlike academic achievement (which is tracked nationally via metrics like NAPLAN or ATAR), no unified data exists on the availability or quality of career guidance in schools. This absence of data means many crucial questions remain unanswered; for instance, which student groups are missing out on guidance, or how school career programs correlate with post-school employment/education outcomes. A national review also noted these gaps, as well as inconsistencies between states, and recommended better use of big datasets and linking student records to later outcomes to enable longitudinal analysis.<sup>132</sup> In short, systematic data on career education is missing, and filling this gap is crucial to identify inequities and drive improvements.

By shining a light on hidden issues and turning anecdotal concerns into hard data, a national audit can provide the impetus and blueprint for targeted reforms. For instance, if the audit finds students in remote or lower-SES schools receive only minimal career guidance, this evidence can justify directing resources or programs to those areas.

Over time, establishing a robust evidence base would allow Australia to practice evidence-based policymaking in career education. Rather than relying on piecemeal studies and non-standardised reports, decision-makers would have reliable data to guide interventions and policy reforms. Trends could be tracked annually: for example, improvements in a state that introduced new career initiatives, or persisting gaps that need attention. This is grounded in the idea that a strong system lens is needed. Career guidance involves multiple systems (schools, vocational training, employers) and without data connecting them, students can fall through the cracks. By mapping the system, we can better ensure all students get the support they need for successful transitions.

### ***Why a Behavioural & Systems Approach is Critical***

BIT and System 2's combined behavioural and systems expertise is critical to the success of this initiative. The project takes a systemic view, looking at the entire education system rather than isolated programs. It recognises that career guidance is influenced by policies at federal, state, and school levels, and by how different parts of the system (school curriculum, counselling services, work experience programs, etc.) interact. Only a comprehensive mapping captures these interactions and variations. Applying a systems lens ensures recommendations will address structural issues (like funding models or policy mandates) that individual schools alone cannot fix.

At the same time, incorporating behavioural insights will enhance the intervention's effectiveness. Simply collecting data isn't enough: it must spur action. By publishing results in an accessible "report card" format, the project uses transparency to nudge stakeholders toward improvement. Schools and education authorities, seeing their performance relative to others, may feel social and reputational pressure to improve their

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<sup>132</sup> Shergold, P., Calma, T., Russo, S., Walton, P., Westacott, J., Zoellner, D., & O'Reilly, P. (2020). Looking to the future: Report of the review of senior secondary pathways into work, further education and training. Education Council.



career programs. This leverages a behavioural principle: people are motivated to act when they have feedback and information about the behaviour of peers or reference groups (social comparison). Indeed, the idea of a public dashboard on career education is akin to how publishing test scores has driven schools to address academic performance gaps.<sup>133</sup> Additionally, the project could use behavioural strategies to encourage participation in the audits and surveys – for example, framing the data collection as a positive opportunity to showcase good work or sending personalised invitations emphasising how each school's input will contribute to a national effort. Such techniques would improve response rates and honesty in reporting.

Furthermore, a behavioural approach is key when interpreting the data to drive change. The project can identify not just structural gaps but also behavioural barriers (e.g. if surveys reveal that students didn't seek career help due to lack of awareness or confidence, interventions can address those psychological factors). Ultimately, combining these approaches means the project doesn't just produce a report for the shelf, it creates a living feedback system that influences the behavior of schools, principals, teachers, and policymakers in an ongoing cycle of improvement.

## 6.3 Project 2: Building fair futures through a national framework for career education equity

This project aims to improve the consistency and quality of career guidance in schools by promoting the widespread use of a national evaluation framework. This means encouraging all schools to adopt benchmarks such as the Career Industry Council of Australia (CICA)'s national guidelines (or similar standards) for career education and regularly benchmarking their programs against these standards. The project will assess current uptake of such frameworks, identify barriers, and recommend policies, including potential behavioural “nudges” and reporting mechanisms, to integrate benchmarking into school practice. By doing so, it seeks to create accountability for career education outcomes and ensure every student receives a minimum standard of guidance, no matter their background or the school's resources.

### *Approach*

This project would look to increase uptake of national benchmarking and evaluation framework for career guidance across all schools, using the CICA framework or an analogous set of standards. This involves two major thrusts: (1) Assess and boost the uptake of the CICA framework, first understanding how widely (or not) it's currently used and what obstacles schools face with it, and (2) Implementing measures to increase universal and transparent reporting. The project would recommend policy levers such as integrating career guidance criteria into existing school review processes (like school accreditation or improvement plans) and potentially linking it with incentives (as described in the previous project). In essence, it aims to transport career guidance from being informal and unmeasured to being a part of the school accountability system, thereby strengthening evaluation and driving better practice through visibility and comparison.

Implementation would involve:

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<sup>133</sup> Ladd, H. F. (1999). The Dallas school accountability and incentive program: An evaluation of its impacts on student outcomes. *Economics of Education Review*, 18(1), 1–16.



- Activity 1: Identify barriers and needs:

Through a school practitioner survey, interviews or focus groups with school leaders and career practitioners, identify behavioural barriers to implementing benchmarking and reporting tools. Possible barriers might include lack of awareness, lack of time/expertise to conduct self-assessments, or deprioritisation. The project will gather these insights to inform the design of interventions (for example, if time is an issue, perhaps a simplified tool or additional support is needed).

- Activity 2: Behavioural intervention to increase uptake:

Design a BI-informed strategy to encourage schools to adopt the career benchmarks. Potential designs include reverting to default reporting mechanisms; leveraging social norms messaging (e.g. headteachers who have implemented benchmarking emailing others to encourage uptake); for schools that haven't engaged, send them a gentle comparison showing, say, "X% of similar schools have implemented a career development audit", alongside an easy how-to guide (reducing friction); tapping into competitive and reputational motives, recognising schools that do benchmark via awards or public acknowledgement. The project may pilot such nudges in a few regions to test their effectiveness in increasing framework adoption.

- Activity 3: Integration into school reporting:

Work with education authorities to develop an Annual Career Education Review for schools. This would involve specifying a set of indicators derived from the CICA framework (e.g. availability of trained counsellors, number of career activities per year, student career competency outcomes from surveys). The intervention would likely recommend adding these indicators to existing public platforms like the MySchool website or state school report tables, thereby making them visible. Schools would then be expected to report on these annually. This transparency is key: it not only informs students and parents, but also motivates schools to improve if they see they are lagging behind peers.

- Activity 4: Policy recommendations for mandating benchmarking:

Finally, the project will formulate recommendations for policymakers on how to formally strengthen the mandate. This could range from soft mandates (e.g. include in school improvement guidelines) to harder mandates (e.g. require all schools to complete a self-evaluation against the CICA standards annually, possibly tied to funding or compliance checks). The recommendations will likely suggest a phased approach; starting with encouragement and incentives, moving toward requirements once support systems are in place. It will also suggest capacity-building measures and incentives, such as targeted funding or tools to help schools meet benchmarks, ensuring that the push for evaluation is paired with help to actually improve (and not just a punitive measure).

- Activity 5: Publication and dissemination of findings:

Findings will be synthesised and published on the System 2 website.

### ***Rationale***

Currently, use of the CICA National Career Benchmark Toolkit (and earlier National Career Development Blueprint) is voluntary and sporadic, and uptake is difficult to gauge. Some schools have excellent, comprehensive career programs, while others offer very little, and there is no compulsory requirement or consistent measure for reporting or evaluating these differences. Policymakers and parents alike have no transparent way to know if a



school is meeting national frameworks in preparing students for post-school pathways. In other words, improvement in this area is largely left to individual school initiative. This lack of reporting means that ineffective practices can persist unchallenged, and successful approaches aren't systematically identified or replicated. The problem is exacerbated by fragmentation across states: each jurisdiction has its own approach, and without federal coordination or mandates, adoption of frameworks like CICA's has been patchy. The bottom line is that Australia lacks a unified benchmarking and reporting system for career education, resulting in uneven student access and no clear accountability for schools' performance in this domain.

The rationale for using a benchmarking framework is strongly supported by international evidence, particularly from the United Kingdom. The UK's Gatsby Benchmarks have become an exemplar of how clear standards plus evaluation can raise the quality of career education. When schools know what best practice looks like and measure themselves against it, student benefits can also follow.

A systemic push (through policy or behavioural intervention) can overcome this inertia. Moreover, a national approach to benchmarking would create common language and goals. For example, if every school strived to meet the CICA standards, professional development and resources could be aligned to those standards, and successful programs from one school could be more easily shared and replicated in others. Consistency doesn't mean uniformity in practice, but it means every school can start aiming for equitable student outcomes (such as "By Year 10, every student will have had at least one week of work experience" or "Every school has a trained career advisor").

From a policy perspective, research indicates that Australian schools respond to what is valued by the system<sup>134</sup>: if career guidance quality became visible in reporting, it would no longer be so easily ignored. Indeed, behavioural evidence suggests that providing feedback and comparative data can spur improvement.<sup>135</sup> For instance, giving principals data on how their school's career activities compared to the national average could nudge underperforming schools to take action. Additionally, an annual benchmarking cycle encourages continuous improvement: schools can set goals (e.g. "next year we will improve from 4/10 to 8/10 on the benchmark scale by adding X and Y services") and track progress. CICA's own materials suggest that when schools engage in self-assessment, it helps "stimulate thinking" about improvements.<sup>136</sup>

Strengthening evaluation will also generate data and insights to guide resource allocation and support. If all schools report on certain benchmark indicators, education authorities can identify trends, for example if schools in remote areas consistently struggle with employer engagement (one of the benchmarks) due to fewer local businesses. Identifying these insights could lead to targeted programs like funding virtual engagement or mobility programs for those students. Conversely, if the data shows a particular state has exemplary outcomes, others can learn from its approach (creating a healthy competition and learning environment nationally). In essence, widespread benchmarking not only holds schools accountable but informs higher-level decision-making by highlighting systemic strengths and weaknesses.

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<sup>134</sup> Department of Education and Training. (2018). *Through growth to achievement: Report of the review to achieve educational excellence in Australian schools*. Australian Government.

<sup>135</sup> Hallsworth, M. (2023). *A manifesto for applying behavioural science*. Behavioural Insights Team.

<sup>136</sup> Career Industry Council of Australia (CICA). (2014.)



### *A behavioural & systems approach*

Implementing national benchmarking for career guidance is as much about changing mindsets and habits as it is about changing policy – hence the need for a combined behavioural and systems approach. On the systems side, the impetus for change is integrating career education metrics into the broader educational accountability system. This is a structural shift: it might involve updates to Department of Education guidelines, adding new reporting requirements, and ensuring all parts of the system (schools, districts, inspectorates) embrace the importance of career development. The project’s systemic approach ensures alignment – for example, aligning the CICA framework with the national curriculum or with funding formulas, so that everything points schools in the same direction.

Success also depends on people’s buy-in and actions. Schools might formally report on benchmarks but not genuinely improve unless the culture and attitudes shift to value career education. Here, behavioural strategies (nudges, incentives, social norms) play a role in motivating voluntary compliance and enthusiasm rather than mere compliance. Recognising and celebrating improvements (like a government publication praising schools that made significant progress on career benchmarks) leverages social proof and positive reinforcement. A behavioural approach also helps address pushback or resistance. For example, the communication around it can utilise the framing effect, emphasising that benchmarking is a tool for self-improvement, not a punitive ranking. By using careful messaging, the behavioural approach increases genuine engagement.

## **6.4 Project 3: Unlocking opportunity by reviewing targeted equity funding loadings under the SRS funding model.**

This project proposes a comprehensive funding analysis and equity loading mapping to facilitate evaluation of how the SRS equity loadings can be improved to allocate more weighting to schools that need it most, thereby increasing the proportion of funding that can flow into career education. This project will examine the variance in SRS payments per pupil and whether the current equity loadings sufficiently cover the enhanced guidance and mentoring disadvantaged students need (especially those lacking personal networks or family support). By mapping gaps in per-student funding and comparing them with existing equity loadings, we can determine how well the SRS accounts for critical career education needs. Ultimately, the initiative aims to recommend adjustments to SRS equity loadings so that additional career counselling and work-based learning opportunities are explicitly factored in, giving under-resourced schools the funding capacity to close persistent opportunity gaps.

### *Approach*

This project will map and analyse the existing funding landscape to pinpoint high-impact flows and incentives that are already effective or could be scaled. The solution includes:

- Activity 1: Systematic data collection

This includes a funding stream analysis and equity mapping, gathering detailed data on current SRS allocations across schools, including how equity loadings are allocated and spent. This would then help identify the specific gap in funding “non-essential curriculum”





elements, including career practitioners, career lessons, work placement programs, or career guidance resources.

- Activity 2: Stakeholder consultations

Conduct interviews and/or roundtable discussions with principals, teachers, education policymakers, and student representatives, to explore which career-related initiatives are most impactful but most underfunded, as well as practical constraints to implementation (such as lack of dedicated staff, time constraints, or industry partnerships).

- Activity 3: Equity loadings audit and review

Propose adjustments, comparing current formula for equity loadings with actual additional needs of disadvantaged students, and develop recommendations to factor in career education provision and career readiness within the SRS loadings. By spotlighting high-yield investments, the project ensures limited funds are used where they make the biggest difference.

- Activity 4: Publication and dissemination of findings:

Findings and recommendations will be synthesised and published on the System 2 website.

### ***Rationale***

Career guidance in Australian schools is highly inconsistent: many students, particularly in lower-SES or rural areas, receive minimal or no professional advice about future pathways. Research underscores that schools with limited funding often struggle to invest in dedicated career practitioners or comprehensive programs, while better-resourced institutions can afford specialised staff and enriched career initiatives.<sup>137</sup> A national review likewise concluded that career advice is “inadequate” overall, citing insufficient teacher expertise in non-university pathways.<sup>138</sup> These inequities stem in part from insufficient equity funding models to account for the additional need of disadvantaged pupils. Current career advice has been deemed “inadequate, linked to insufficient funding allocations and weak incentives to meet adequate provision with already-stretched resources.”<sup>139</sup> Hence, mapping and reviewing existing funding allocations is the logical first step to rectifying blind spots. To address this, we need a detailed understanding of how funding is being allocated and spent in order to truly drive improvement, so that schools can consistently deliver high-quality career guidance.

### ***A Behavioural & systems approach***

Career education funding doesn't exist in a vacuum. It involves multiple agencies, policymakers, and school practices. A systems approach ensures each piece is mapped, revealing how they interact or conflict. Without this perspective, well-intended reforms may fail to address underlying structural barriers (e.g. incomplete data sharing or rigid state policies).

Moreover, merely having funds or incentives doesn't guarantee their uptake. Behavioural insights help us see why principals might not pursue certain programs (e.g. lack of

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<sup>137</sup> Shergold, P., Calma, T., Russo, S., Walton, P., Westacott, J., Zoellner, D., & O'Reilly, P. (2020). *Looking to the future: Report of the review of senior secondary pathways into work, further education and training*. Education Council.

<sup>138</sup> Shergold, P., Calma, T., Russo, S., Walton, P., Westacott, J., Zoellner, D., & O'Reilly, P. (2020). *Looking to the future: Report of the review of senior secondary pathways into work, further education and training*. Education Council.

<sup>139</sup> Shergold, P., Calma, T., Russo, S., Walton, P., Westacott, J., Zoellner, D., & O'Reilly, P. (2020). *Looking to the future: Report of the review of senior secondary pathways into work, further education and training*. Education Council.



awareness, insufficient resources, or lack of incentive). By understanding these factors, we can design more user-friendly incentives, reduce administrative friction, and nudge schools to utilise available resources effectively.



## 7. Conclusion

This report has highlighted that significant inequities continue to constrain educational and career opportunities for disadvantaged Australian youth. These span from individual challenges to school-level factors, through to systemic and structural barriers that hinder equitable outcomes.

**At the individual level**, young people suffer from a lack of awareness of the options and support available to them as they navigate post-school pathways. They are also prone to struggling with self-confidence to choose certain pathways depending on their social environment. Without the guidance and support of their family and/or peers, they might turn to online resources, but these may not always be reliable or accessible to them. Finally, the cost of pursuing some pathways can be prohibitive. Young people might struggle to cover the financial burden of relocation, tuition, and living expenses, which further deters them from study and work opportunities, crowding out some groups from certain spaces and opportunities.

Most **schools** lack a comprehensive or unified approach to career education guidance due to a combination of absence of expertise, time and resource constraints, as well as a lack of a clear 'North Star' for what high quality provision might look like, especially when resources are already stretched. Public schools, especially in areas of low socio-economic advantage or rural areas, remain underfunded, meaning the insufficient resources they receive are likely channelled towards 'core' curriculum components and leaving additional support on pathway selection (which is more important for schools serving Australia's most vulnerable young people) de-prioritised. For schools in rural and underserved areas, barriers are compounded by general access to infrastructure, limiting opportunities for industry engagement and partnerships and attention to specialised needs.

Finally, these barriers are reinforced by **a broken system that entrenches inequality**. The current funding model is broken and underserving Australia's most vulnerable young people; the majority of public schools remain funded below the SRS, therefore leaving no resource to spare for essential career support programs to help young people overcome the barriers they face at the individual level. Meanwhile, private schools often exceed the SRS, reinforcing steep opportunity gaps between different groups. Without a clear and unified national standard for career support written into policy, or reporting mechanisms to ensure quality is consistently met, schools face little impetus to improve on their current provision. Finally, this fragmentation of policy and practice has led to piecemeal reforms that don't scale to address deep-rooted inequities.

Without targeted systemic reforms, entrenched funding disparities, fragmented career guidance, and limited accountability will persist, limiting social mobility and perpetuating cycles of disadvantage.

**Three key systemic challenges** emerged from this research: fragmented career education without national standards, deep-seated funding inequities exacerbating socio-economic disparities, the absence of rigorous, nationally representative research and data, and a lack of robust benchmarking and accountability frameworks to ensure quality and effectiveness in career guidance.

Addressing these challenges requires a combination of policy advocacy and comprehensive, evidence-based system-level interventions. **This report has outlined a**



**series of proposed policy reforms that System 2 calls for** in order to level the playing field between Australia's most and least advantaged communities:

1. Nationally consistent career education standards, including clear, detailed implementation guidelines, and incentivised or mandated reported mechanisms.
2. Review and improve the mechanisms and implementation of the Schooling Resource Standard to ensure fully equitable funding for Australian schools.
3. Provide enhanced support beyond school to address individually experienced challenges and barriers, including easier access to financial and academic aid during transitions to post-school pathways.
4. Invest in structured and robust work-integrated learning and industry engagement in under-served schools and areas.

In addition to these policy reforms, the **proposed projects** outlined in this report – mapping national career education gaps, enhancing benchmarking and evaluation systems, and reviewing school funding mechanisms – provide practical, strategic solutions aimed at closing equity gaps. Implementing these projects would create a fairer, more effective career education system, enabling all young Australians, regardless of background, to access the resources, support, and opportunities needed to build fulfilling futures and contribute meaningfully to society.

Ultimately, advancing equity in career education and opportunities is not only a matter of social justice but also an essential investment in Australia's future economic prosperity and social cohesion. Implementing these systemic projects represents a critical opportunity to deliver equitable, quality career education to all young Australians, ensuring that pathways to meaningful employment and social mobility are genuinely accessible, regardless of background.



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# Appendix

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## Interview Sample

Demographic	Type	Number
Age	16-18	4
	19-21	8
	22-24	6
	Unspecified	0
State	NSW	4
	VIC	6
	SA	2
	NT	0
	QLD	4
	WA	1
	ACT	0
	Unspecified	1
Type of school attended	Government	6
	Private	2
	Mix	5
	Unspecified	5
Post-school pathway	University	6
	Employment	0
	Vocational training (incl. Apprenticeship or traineeship)	1
	NEET	1
	Mixed pathway	8
	Unspecified	2
<b>Total</b>		<b>18</b>



 [www.system2.org.au](http://www.system2.org.au)

 [info@system2.org.au](mailto:info@system2.org.au)

 [system2\\_amplify](https://www.instagram.com/system2_amplify)

ABN 45 664 500 494