



Spotlight on Parent/Carer Careers Advice

'According to young people the knowledge and experience that their parents and carers have of work, not only helps inform them about their options, but comes from a trustworthy source that can help them to demystify and navigate an experience that is unknown and new to them.'

Helen Connolly, Commissioner for Children and Young People

My role as Commissioner for Children and Young People is to promote and advocate for the rights, development and well-being of all children and young people in South Australia. I am committed to advocating for children and young people's involvement in decision-making that affects them, with particular consideration given to the needs of vulnerable and at-risk children and young people across the state.

My key objective of my role is to position children and young people's interests, development, and wellbeing front and centre in public policy and community life, and to advocate for laws, policies, systems and practices to change in their favour.

Since commencing in the role, I have spoken with thousands of children and young people on a wide range of issues that are important

to them. Across South Australia, in regional towns and in metropolitan centres, children and young people have told me about the pressures and challenges they face leaving school and transitioning to work. This not only includes the core issue they face of high youth unemployment, but also those relating to making the transition from school to work and how they are supported to explore and achieve individual short term employment opportunities and/or long term career aspirations.

“ Parents and carers consistently told me they feel under prepared to provide the kind of career advice their children need. They observe the levels of stress young people face when having to decide on subject choices without knowing what the future world of work is all about. They want one-stop access to easy to understand, independent, accurate, up-to-date information on subject choices, pathways and careers. This should include information specific to growth industries and opportunities in South Australia.’

Not only have I heard that many young people are worried about life after school, I have also heard that many parents and carers don't feel well equipped to support their children adequately through this stage.’

These conversations have prompted me to look more closely at the role parents play in guiding their children to transition from education to work and what kinds of support they would like to see provided.

A key focus of this work has been on identifying barriers and challenges that currently exist, and on developing solutions that will enable better outcomes for young people and their parents and carers. Solutions proposed will ideally help young people navigate their choice of subjects in their senior years, as well as provide access to reliable, relevant and up to date information about future work prospects and careers likely to become available in the future.

By exploring the range of career advice currently available, including what kind of information young people and their parents and carers want to be able to source, we can identify gaps and help to create closer alignment between what knowledge and skills young people will require to meet the needs of future job and career opportunities created by industry and government.



Report Context

‘When parents and carers are known to be a major source of trustworthy support for young people transitioning from education to work providing them with what they need is crucial to their capacity to fulfil this critical role.’

This spotlight report aims to bring the insights of parents and carers in relation to the transition their children make from education to work to the attention of other parents and carers, as well as to those in leadership positions within South Australia’s education and business sectors.

It identifies a number of ways in which parents and carers themselves would like to be better supported to help prepare their children for the world beyond school, including the challenges they face finding reliable, current and easily accessible information about current and future employment opportunities and career pathways.

Young people have told me that their parents and carers are immensely important in guiding them toward their career choices. They see them as their primary supporters around decisions they must make which will impact on their future employment and career opportunities and aspirations.

They believe the knowledge and experience their parents and carers bring, not only helps inform them about career options, but

has greater value because it comes from a trustworthy source; one that helps them to demystify and navigate the world of work, an experience of which is fundamentally unknown and new to them.

However, not all parents and carers have had any direct experience in the career areas in which their children may be interested. Their own knowledge is often limited to the fields in which they themselves have worked, or to those of friends and family they know who may have worked in other fields. It can also reveal a personal bias around particular fields, both positive and negative which can also extend into other fields they may feel confident or not to comment upon.

Sometimes this commentary is limited to whether or not they possess certain skills, or can find current and/or relevant information on the career in which their child has expressed some interest.

Given the diversity of South Australian family units that exist across our communities and the rapid pace at which the world of work is changing, I felt it was important to gain a better understanding of what was happening in relation to parental careers advice being provided, including whether parents and carers knew how their children viewed the advice they gave.

Project Methodology

To examine the issue in more detail I engaged Adelaide-based research agency McGregor Tan, to explore how parents contribute to career advice. This research was conducted through a survey of 400 South Australian parents of 14 – 20 year olds. There were also several focus groups undertaken in metropolitan Adelaide and regional South Australia.

I wanted to hear firsthand what role parents believe they can or do play in shaping their child's work and career choices following completion of their formal schooling and whether this included undertaking further studies, or seeking to enter the workforce immediately – either on a temporary basis in a casual job, or over a long term career basis or combination of both.

I also wanted to know how much parents and carers know about post-school options and pathways, and how equipped they feel to provide accurate careers information to their child.

The research findings indicate that there a number of gaps and limitations in the advice parents feel confident to provide to their children. Currently the majority of parents rely on a combination of their own knowledge from their direct experience and those of their networks and friends. They generally combine this with ad hoc internet searches for information around careers their children may have expressed interest in but in the main rely on schools to deliver the most careers guidance to their children.

In fact, when asked what they believed were the major influences on their children when making decisions about their future careers, most parents said that they actually did not know.

The 'loud and clear' message was that most parents surveyed believed their role was not to pressure their children in any particular direction but rather to support them in making decisions when asked. This included ensuring the expressed the view that whatever their choices were, that it made them happy.

Parents and carers surveyed also took a broad approach to the kind of help they provided their children. For some it was important to consider their wellbeing and future lifestyle, while others were more interested to give their child a more general sense of direction without being too insistent on one approach over another. For others, career advice mostly involved encouraging their child to focus on what they loved doing as a way to guide their choices.

There was an emphasis on a belief that each child manages the issue of choosing a career for themselves, that they do this very differently, and that a no one size fits all approach can possibly apply. Parents felt that some children (even from the same family) were very focused on working out what they wanted to do early, while others were 'all over the place' and had little or 'no idea'.

Parents were, however, acutely aware that the decisions made in relation to subject selection and post schooling directions carry significant consequences, even if they ultimately wanted their children to have an opportunity to try things out and explore options while still at school.

An equally strong finding was that parents and carers observed that career issues were not usually uppermost in their child's mind until they reached the transition point between Years 9 and 10. It was at this time, when students are required to make decisions about what subject/s to drop from Year 10 onwards that their child's career focus usually sharpened quite dramatically.

'The trouble is that when they are as young as 15 or 16, they often do not know what they want to do. My daughter has spoken about being a builder or then an architect. The truth is they really do not know, and there's little point pressuring them to try and decide. The decision to drop subjects at Year 10 is really the earliest period when they need to start focusing on what they want to do, but only in general terms. It's a very hard time for them and for us as parents.'

Challenges and Issues for Schools and Educators

Many parents and carers surveyed reported that they feel confused over the relative value of one option their child might pursue over another - ie commencing studies at a university, TAFE or VET provider, starting an apprenticeship or a business, or taking a gap year.

Many parents and carers expressed concern in relation to the pressure being placed on their child to achieve a 'good ATAR' even though university might not be part of their career aspiration.

'My son is determined to embark on a creative career in photography, but there aren't any suitable courses at his school to create any kind of pathway for him. His teacher is insisting that he focus on getting a good ATAR score by concentrating on the subjects he's good at, and not to worry about his future career at this stage. All the focus is on ATAR.'

Parents reported too, that they felt schools were placing strong emphasis on students to achieve a high ATAR, and that this included pressuring their children into taking subjects that gave them the highest ATAR results, even if they weren't necessarily subjects their child was interested in studying. Neither did some of these subjects provide a background in the career they had expressed that they wished to pursue. Some parents felt this pressure was for the benefit of the school and for the school's overall result; not that of their child.

'You do wonder if the teachers push students in a direction to achieve the best ATAR results for the school's benefit rather than their own. It's all a bit cynical. My son was told he would get a 98 score, which would enable him to apply for a place on a law course, without giving any consideration about whether he should do law.'

Despite issues with the stress that ATAR is known to cause many young people, most parents favoured encouraging their child to remain in school to complete Year 12, and to obtain the best ATAR score that they could. They believed this would give their child the greatest flexibility of choice when it came time to deciding on a career.

There was also widespread endorsement of the benefits of securing an apprenticeship, especially one that could be commenced while their child was still at school. Several parents were happy for their child to leave school for a meaningful alternative such as VET or TAFE, or an apprenticeship, or an early employment opportunity that may arise. This was particularly so amongst parents representing regional areas where unemployment is traditionally much higher.

In regional areas concern about future job prospects resulted in a number of parents seeing little point in their child either completing their schooling or working for a positive ATAR score. They could not see any benefit in their child aiming to undertake post-school studies given the lack of opportunities available to them, and felt that they would perhaps be better off taking whatever job opportunity they could find as soon as possible.

Parents of children living with disability said it was especially difficult to find pathways and career options for their child. One avenue they felt would be helpful would be organising volunteer opportunities to help their child understand what type of work or career they might enjoy doing or be best suited to.

Many parents felt there was limited knowledge available to them on what career options exist for young people. This, coupled with limited chances in school for young people to explore future careers was having a knock on effect of providing young people

fewer opportunities to evaluate their future direction prior to arriving at the time when they must make decisions about subjects that will impact their post-school options.

'Hardly get any info about at careers / uni at school academic scholarship Trade school helps you, tell you about jobs, both – uni TAFE, jobs trades, pathways.'

Most parents were not in favour of young people setting up their own business. There were, however, a small number of parents who saw that developing an online business while still at school could be a valuable enterprise for their child.

The majority of parents and carers surveyed wanted to be better equipped to help their child with career choices. However they that felt finding this information can be a complex task. They felt there was an underlying assumption that information about careers was freely accessible and available to all parents. Most parents, however, have not had recent experience weighing up post school options, and that the impact of a generation gap can also create a few 'blind spots'.

One example relates to the popularity of young people pursuing a university education when the majority of the current generation South Australian parents with school-leaver aged children are not university educated themselves.

Many said they were quite confused by the whole process and that they were relying upon the rules and protocols associated with career guidance and decision-making to be provided by their child's school.

Parents expressed concern that the subject choices made by their child were often done without full awareness of what limitations they might accidentally be creating for themselves down the line: particularly those young people who did not have any strong idea of what they wanted to 'do' over the longer term.

Many felt they were making decisions in the absence of any real information about future jobs, growth industries, or the kinds of skill sets that would most likely be required

or sought after when it came time for their child to join the workforce. They felt this kind of information should be freely available and easy to access.

Of the 400 parents and carers surveyed more than a third felt they didn't have enough information to guide their child around career choices and post school options. In addition, three quarters of all parents indicated they wanted to be better informed about career choices or post school directions available to their child and where this information could be sourced.

'As parents it is vital we have the information to help our children make the best choices on regards to their future. Helping them in all aspects. We need as much information as possible.'

Approximately three quarters of parents and carers surveyed also expressed the view that there are gaps in the information parents receive about careers and pathways. Most often parents turned to internet searches and careers events as their main source of information. Many parents felt that school career counsellors were either unavailable to their child, or were generally the least helpful source of information to them.

Parents described having to navigate complex web searches to find relevant information hosted across multiple websites. This information would often be biased, out of date, or aimed purely at marketing a particular university of training course.

Most parents and carers felt they did not possess the research skills or time required to collate and process careers information, and that ultimately their child was losing out on essential support and advice because of this.

'Also your own personal experience comes into it. I had no idea when I was in Year 12 what I wanted to do – no clear vision - let alone in Year 9 or Year 10. I tried my best to help my daughter with her decision-making, but I had no more idea than she did [about] what specific direction to go.'

Parents expressed concern about the objectivity some schools show when it comes to providing advice about further studies or career options to students, believing that schools actively protect their academic reputation as reflected in ATAR results. There was a perception that borderline students who might benefit from some encouragement, extra academic support or further assistance, were discouraged from continuing with their secondary studies because their results may impact on the overall ATAR the school could achieve.

'The world we grew up in is not the same as the world our kids are growing up in. It's very difficult to guide your child today if you don't know how the system works and what the opportunities are. It took me a while to understand the whole thing about ATAR.'



A Way Forward

There is a clear desire amongst parents and carers for an independent source of career information to be made available. The majority of parents and carers supported the idea of an independent career pathways website being established specific to South Australia. In fact, approximately three quarters of parents surveyed stated that 'having access to an independent career pathways website was either extremely or very important'.

Resources made available via a centralised careers website, would allow parents to be better informed so that they can assist their child to make the transition from education to work more easily, upskilling them with the information they need to fulfil their role as trustworthy career advisors.

Without a centralised source of information parents and carers are likely to have limited knowledge of jobs of the future. They will continue to be dependent on sources of information and experiences most familiar to them and yet known to be biased and out of step with government, industry and business directions and trends.

This is particularly relevant for young people who do not necessarily know what they want to do but who are required to make choices around subjects based on careers or jobs of the future. Any solution developed must endeavour to make subject selection for those going into Year 10 who do not know what career they wish to pursue a much less stressful time for them and their families.

Parents and carers play a critical role in guiding young people toward their career choices. They are considered a primary source of support along the transition from education to work journey. Young people value the advice they receive from their parents and see them as their number one

trusted source. Many parents are not aware of this and so consistently underestimate how much their advice is valued and sought after by their children.

A number of practical suggestions around ways to improve young people's transition from education to work were made by parents and carers surveyed. They include:

- provision of an independent, authoritative and unbiased website that provides objective, reliable information to improve general awareness of employment options and what is ahead for young people after completing school – aimed at young people and their parents and carers;
- provision of much more data highlighting the correlation between courses at university, TAFE and VET providers and actual career options and opportunities, including specifying the success ratio for graduating students in securing jobs in their chosen fields and where the jobs of the future are likely to be;
- applying more attention to the improvement of work experience programs operated between schools and local businesses to ensure that in practice they are a proven worthwhile experience for students who participate;
- presenting open days and career expo events that focus on inviting parents and students to find out more about career and study pathways together – a number of parents were surprised to learn that they could attend these events with their child;

- encouraging schools to attend career expos or to join with neighbouring schools to invite representatives from universities, TAFE and other VET providers to convey information to groups of students about options available to them;
- ensuring that representatives from local businesses and industry sent to career expos are capable of informing students about early career pathways and opportunities that are open to them including work experience opportunities;
- providing greater clarity about post-school options and the multiple pathways to achieving desired outcomes;
- promoting volunteer work as a way of gaining experience in a particular field or industry, as well as an understanding of different pathways that can be taken.

The most commonly cited recommendation made by parents and carers was development and maintenance of an independent, authoritative and unbiased careers advice website, aimed at parents and carers and their children, to better support the transition from education to work. Such a website could include information on workforce trends, future job prospects and career pathways in South Australia and beyond, as well as provide industry insights and data on youth employment opportunities more broadly.

Please note: This spotlight report is designed to be read in conjunction with the *Off To Work We Go* report and the *Spotlight on Work Experience* report available for download from ccyp@sa.gov.au/resources