



# Submission on the South Australian Skills Plan Concept

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December 2022

## Introduction

As South Australia's Commissioner for Children and Young People, my mandate under the *Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016* is to advocate at a systemic level for the rights, interests and wellbeing of all children and young people in South Australia.

I am pleased to provide this input into the SA Skills Plan on behalf of South Australia's young people in addition to that provided via an online consultation workshop on 23 November 2022.

Since commencing in this role, I have spoken with thousands of children and young people on a wide range of issues that are important to them. Repeatedly children and young people have discussed with me the pressures and challenges in going from education to work.

Much of our society and schooling system focuses on preparing children and young people for their futures. From a young age, children are asked: "What do you want to be when you grow up?" At their core, these questions are about the decisions young people have to make in order to achieve their work goals. For many young people, even those who know their path, this can be daunting.

Particularly when coupled with the dominant narratives of our time relating to uncertainty and concerns that artificial intelligence, machine learning and robotics are changing the way we do things. Young people constantly hear that the workforce is being increasingly disrupted by technological, economic, and societal changes with the effects being seen in retail, hospitality, and transport. We tell young people that "the jobs of the future don't exist yet" while at the same time acknowledging that some jobs that exist now likely won't. In the midst of this uncertainty young people are required to prepare for these changes, in school and by building their skills.

Whilst young people increasingly have diverse opportunities and options to pursue, after school this could include whether to continue with further education or move directly into work. Furthermore, few careers and jobs result from isolated decisions and we know there are many possible avenues to reach a goal. We know that fewer young people are taking a linear journey from education and training into work, and the time it takes to get from school to work is increasing. However, many young people tell me this is contrary to the pressure they feel at school when subject selection from year 10 is portrayed as a major life decision and one they are increasingly concerned about. This decision is also being made at a time when most young people are still exploring their own interests and skills.

Despite a growth in the variety of jobs available, many young people are still not aware of the options available or what this means for them. On a personal level this can affect engagement and aspiration and young people feel inadequately prepared for the job market. They feel the current education system is letting them down. They want more information to be made available to them about careers and work, and the pathways available to get to the jobs they want.

Many people support children and young people to transition from school, this includes parents, guardians, and educators, and to a limited extent employers. However, this is

becoming more difficult as many of these traditional supports don't have the knowledge of what opportunities exist and which ones have some level of future proofing.

My conversations, with those involved in preparing young people for work, highlight concern that preparing young people for life after school continues to operate largely in isolation and in a self-interested way. What is needed is a system approach that builds collaboration and shared responsibility for developing adaptable future workforces to achieve the productivity and innovation gains central to competitiveness in an increasingly globalised world.

Feedback from young people involves disrupting the traditional "Pathways" mentality in favour of better approaches that are more flexible and allow young people to properly explore. Linear transitions are becoming less reflective of the actual journey from education to work, increasingly career paths that have existed for the much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century will be replaced by more flexible requirements which will see young people today make as many as 17 changes in employers across 5 different careers.<sup>1</sup>

However much of our traditional approach to careers education is based on the premise of preparing children and young people for 'pathways'. These have been a clear feature of the journey from education to work over the last several decades.

A more favourable approach would incorporate *Ecosystems thinking* which recognises the shared interest that multiple stakeholders have in children and young people's schooling outcomes and how each entity can better improve this journey and take greater responsibility for the outcomes that it produces.

The development of future work skills should be at the core of preparing our young people for their future and educators, government, employers, and community all have a role. How prepared young people are impacts every part of our State, from workforce participation and competitiveness to standards of living and wealth inequality.

We must all share the interest in supporting the next generation of innovators, entrepreneurs and community and business leaders. This requires a system that works for everyone, including young people, educators, and industry. It is essential that the perspectives of young people must be included in designing creative solutions that engage young people, schools, education, higher education, industry, and civil society in being future work ready. When we do this, we will attract and build on new opportunities and drive future growth and prosperity for young South Australians and the entire State.

A Skills Plan must address the needs of children and young people, educators, and careers advisors, as well as on employers across different industries working together to provide information and opportunities.

My conversations with children and young people have led to a focus on identifying barriers, challenges and how to better support and inspire children and young people. The findings from my project informed my report [Off To Work We Go: Preparing South Australian school students for their work futures](#) and the companion reports [Spotlight on Parent/Carer Careers Advice](#) and [Spotlight on Work Experience](#),

In addition, in collaboration with the Australian Migrant Resource Centre I have held two summits with young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds on the specific issues they face with education, training and employment. The reports on these summits and Tapping into our Talents, [Leading for our Future Youth Symposium](#), highlight the specific barriers and challenges experienced when finding post school pathways and employment.

I urge you to consider all these reports in relation to the Skills Plan and the summarised commentary included below.

### **Information provision and awareness raising**

The knowledge of which jobs are available is important to the aspirations that children and young people develop for themselves.<sup>ii</sup> This impacts young people's perceptions of what is possible, and how they apply their interests and skills in their own learning.

If young people can see what options are available to them, they are more likely to find something that matches their interests, to be able to apply this to their education and learn the skills required by industry.

Raising awareness of the options available should be focused on both students and their parents. Parents are keen to be better informed about career choices and pathways, while young people report turning to their parents for career advice ahead of both peers and career advisors.

Clarity about what is offered, training pathways, the costs and timelines involved, geographical access and other relevant practicalities must be provided to young people to enable them to make informed choices. Early and ongoing career discussion and access to up to date, accurate online information is essential. Information should provide insights into the reality of likely work environments in addition to information about the training itself.

### **Accessing information**

Children and young people want to be able to find and access information easily, but also be able to explore this in detail both online and offline. Many young people talk about having the ability to talk through things with an adult. Whether that was a career advisor if they are exploring their interests, or an industry professional if they wanted to hear more about a job or field.

There are a number of websites available to young people that allow them to explore jobs and careers broadly as well as find how this fits with their interests. However, many of these sites seriously lack an engaging user experience and a connection to their audience. There is a limited ability to access personalised results, or when narrowing down interests, forcing the user to make binary choices that are not reflective of the real world and possible contrasts.

Poor linkages and other design issues also mean that rather than being able to 'click through' and 'explore' a job and how it relates to an interest, information is dispersed. Often

this includes things such as the study, skills or experience that typical work in that field requires, job security, course information and where jobs are located.

Not all children and young people have the same experience of career guidance in school. While some schools have career nights, guest speakers or careers advisors who have the time to assist them, there is a significant variance between schools and the information children and young people can receive. Research conducted by my office through a call out to 70 schools in South Australia found that schools often held the opinion that careers guidance was getting in the way of academic priorities such as ATAR that were expected to be promoted.

Children and young people however have said that accessing careers information is important in helping them to make informed choices. And that there are ways education could improve how it helps prepare them for the jobs that they are interested in.

### **Strengthening the narrative**

I strongly support the promotion of VET as a valued and skilled pathway. In recent years the obsession with ATAR scores has led to students who complete VET studies feeling that their efforts and achievements are undervalued. I welcome the proposal to reposition VET within secondary schools to combat the current focus on university education as the pathway of choice, which results in inappropriate career choices, skills gaps, and high university drop-out rates.

The presentation of vocational pathways as a credible option requires early and continual discussion of careers for children and young people throughout their education. We know that children and young people's career aspirations are shaped early by the reality they experience in the world around them. The proposal that stakeholders should be involved in improving outcomes is essential. Meaningful, targeted and ongoing consultation and engagement with trainees, apprentices and potential learners will ensure that the systems and offerings are appropriate to their needs as well as those of employers. This must take account of changing needs over time and the diverse social geography of South Australia.

### **Inclusive Access**

Inclusive access is vital to the success of any skills program providing for South Australians. In addition to meeting the diverse physical and neurological needs of young people, this must include consideration of cost and the barriers faced by young people from poorer backgrounds. Additional support must be provided to those who need it, including consideration for free training, free transport, and digital access for those who cannot afford the technology or internet connection they require to complete their training.

Young people in regional South Australia have repeatedly raised concerns about their lack of access to training opportunities, with even those in Adelaide's outer suburbs being faced by prohibitive travel costs and journey times.

Migrant and refugee young people experience a range of barriers to training which must be addressed, including language and communication, cost and cultural "clash".



## Work readiness

Young people do not feel that they are learning skills in school that are relevant to their future. Young people are aware of the importance of learning the skills required for life and for the workforce. While some children and young people feel prepared with the right skills for their lives and future jobs many do not.

Recognition of the need for supplementary human skills development alongside more specific training is essential and is something young people are eager to gain. They need to be better equipped with the soft and enterprise skills they will need to be work ready. This may include financial literacy, critical thinking, communication skills or problem-solving experience.

Work experience and volunteer work can offer valuable ways to provide insight into the reality of work and the softer skills required. Formal contact with the world of work can also help demystify and debunk commonly held misconceptions about particular industries, including gender stereotypes.

Businesses are often reluctant to offer young people work experience or the chance for them to build their skills on the job. Building trust with industry and business is important to ensure young people are adequately prepared for the current and future demands of industry and for employers to have confidence in the training and preparedness of young people to meet future challenges.

In a survey I undertook of small business throughout metropolitan Adelaide to investigate perceptions of the work readiness of young people. The survey sample was weighted for industries and sectors that commonly employ young people, including those with VET qualifications and those undertaking apprenticeships.

The survey found that a vast majority of the businesses do consider employing young people, however just over half felt that young people were “ready” or “sometimes ready” for work. This was rarely attributed to technical skills such as those developed in vocational training, but rather it was most often discussed in terms of soft skills. Although limited in its generalisability the survey reinforced the importance of preparing young people for the world of work with a range of additional skills. These include things such as financial literacy, communication, and confidence in tackling problems.

For young people that are pursuing more direct transitions to work, ensuring that these core soft and enterprise skills are being better covered is essential to preparing them. This is necessary to ensure they are able to thrive in the workplace and adapt to the shifting demands of the workforce and different workplaces.

## Future thinking

Planning for the future skills needs of South Australia and South Australians will be a vital part of any Skills Plan. The voices of children and young people should be engaged in a meaningful way as part of any future thinking as they provide a useful insight into the interests of future generations.

Every year I survey thousands of 8–12-year-olds by asking them to complete and return postcards asking about their interests and concerns. Based on input from the postcards I have produced a short report on [The Job Aspirations of 8-12 Year Old's](#), which provides a helpful insight into the job aspirations of students who will be entering the skills environment very soon, which you may find useful. Research shows that many of the interests' children have at a relatively early age are aligned with their choices at high school and beyond.<sup>iii</sup>

An excellent example of long-term strategic decision-making can be found in the Welsh Well-Being of Future Generations Act 2015. It ensures policy makers and service designers fully consider the impact of their decisions on future generations by balancing short-term needs with long term goals. For example, the Welsh Future Generations Commissioner has undertaken research that has identified how investment in green jobs and skills could contribute to the country's economic recovery.<sup>iv</sup>

If you would like to talk about any of the matters raised in this submission, please get in touch. I look forward to hearing the outcome of this consultation early next year.

Yours sincerely



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<sup>i</sup> Foundation for Young Australians & AlphaBeta, The new work smarts: thriving in the new work order, FYA new work order report series, Foundation for Young Australians, 2017. Accessed on March 14 2019: <http://www.fya.org.au/report/the-new-work-smarts/>.

<sup>ii</sup> K. Torii (2018). Connecting the worlds of learning and work: Prioritising school-industry partnerships in Australia's education system, Mitchell Institute, Melbourne.

<sup>iii</sup> Gore, J. Holmes, K., Smith, M. et al. Socioeconomic status and the career aspirations of Australian school students: Testing enduring assumptions. Aust. Educ. Res. 2015. 42: 155

<sup>iv</sup> Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, Skills. Available at [https://www.futuregenerations.wales/priority\\_areas/skills-2/](https://www.futuregenerations.wales/priority_areas/skills-2/).