Submission cover sheet

Inquiry into E-PET-078-25 and PET-041-26: Make career guidance a right for every ACT Year 7–10 public school student

Submission number: 003

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Date authorised for publication: 13 October 2026

From: [redacted]
To: LA Committee - SP
Subject: Submission to the Standing Committee on Social Policy
Date: Tuesday, 22 September 2026 11:35:57 AM
Attachments: image.png
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Inquiry into E-PET-078-25 and PET-041-26: Make career guidance a right for every ACT Year 7–10 public school student

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This submission is made in a personal capacity. The views expressed are my own and should not be taken as representing my employer or any other organisation with which I am affiliated.

I am happy to appear before the Committee at a public hearing if requested.

Introduction

I support the intent of the petitions to improve access to qualified career guidance for ACT public school students in Years 7–10.

My perspective comes from working in career development, student pathways, tertiary access and transition programs, and from engaging with secondary schools and colleges across Canberra. I am also an active member of the ACT Careers Association. Through this work, I have seen both the value of strong career development practice and the considerable differences in what students can access from one school to another.

For me, the central question in this inquiry is not simply whether students receive information about careers. Young people receive career information from many sources. The more important question is whether every student has reasonable access to qualified, impartial and student-centred career development support at the point when they begin making decisions that can shape their future options. That distinction is particularly important in the ACT, where most schools have a distinct separation of resources between years 7-10 and years 11-12.

Career guidance should be developmental, not something that begins at the end of school

Career development should not begin when a student is about to leave school. Years 7–10 are a period in which young people increasingly encounter choices about subjects, senior secondary education, vocational pathways, university, employment and other opportunities. In the ACT, the transition from high school to college makes Year 10 an especially significant decision point. Students should have professionally developed opportunities well before that transition to explore their interests and strengths, understand different occupations and pathways, develop career management skills and have informed conversations about the choices available to them.

This is why I believe the inquiry should look beyond the provision of isolated career activities or information. Effective career development is an ongoing process. The Victorian approach provides a useful Australian comparison. Career education is structured across Years 7–12 and includes career action planning, career insights, work-based learning and career counselling. The significance of this model is not that the ACT should simply replicate Victoria, but that it

recognises career development as something requiring sustained attention throughout secondary education rather than a single intervention near the end of schooling.

The issue is not a lack of information

Students today have access to an enormous amount of information about university, vocational education, occupations, training and employment.

Schools are also approached by universities, training providers, employers, industry organisations and other groups offering valuable programs and information.

I work within this environment myself, so I think it is important to recognise the distinction between providing information about a pathway and providing professional career guidance.

An organisation can explain its courses, opportunities or industry extremely well. But its role is necessarily different from that of a qualified career development practitioner whose starting point is the individual student.

Students need someone who can help them make sense of competing information, explore alternatives they may not previously have considered, challenge assumptions, and understand how different pathways might connect with their interests, circumstances and aspirations.

That independent function becomes more important, not less important, as the number of pathways and sources of information available to young people increases.

What I have observed across schools

One of the clearest differences I have observed is between schools where career development has dedicated professional responsibility and schools where it is added to someone's existing workload.

Where there is a qualified practitioner with the time and responsibility to lead career development, engagement tends to be more deliberate. Relationships with external organisations are easier to establish and maintain, pathway activities are better coordinated, students know where to seek support, and career development can occur progressively rather than only when an immediate decision needs to be made.

Where responsibility is dispersed among staff who already hold other substantial duties, provision is understandably more variable. This is not a criticism of those staff. Many do excellent work for students. Rather, it reflects the difficulty of delivering a specialist service when responsibility, professional expertise and dedicated time are not consistently available.

In some circumstances, there may not be a clearly identifiable person responsible for career development at all. In those environments, students can become reliant on their own initiative, family knowledge or whichever external opportunities happen to reach their school.

That creates an equity issue.

A young person's access to informed career support should not depend primarily on the school they attend, whether a particular staff member has an interest in career development, or whether their family already knows how to navigate education and employment pathways.

Qualifications matter, but so does capacity

I support increasing access to professionally qualified career practitioners in ACT public schools. Career development involves more than familiarity with university courses or occupations. Practitioners draw upon career development theory, counselling and communication skills, education and training systems, labour market information, pathway knowledge and professional ethical standards.

At the same time, I do not think the answer should overlook the capability that already exists within ACT schools. There are teachers and other school staff who have developed considerable expertise and commitment to student pathways. Providing scholarships or funded professional learning for existing staff to obtain recognised career development qualifications could therefore form an important part of the response.

Qualification alone, however, will not solve the problem if the person performing the role has insufficient time to do it. Career development needs professional expertise, clear responsibility and dedicated capacity. Without those three elements, there is a risk that career guidance remains another responsibility competing with an already substantial workload.

A minimum entitlement rather than an identical model

I would encourage the Committee to focus on the student entitlement rather than prescribing a single staffing model for every school. Schools vary considerably in their size, cohort and local circumstances. The appropriate delivery model may therefore differ. What should not vary is the fundamental level of access available to the student.

Every ACT public secondary student should be able to expect:

- access to a suitably qualified career development practitioner;
- structured career development beginning before senior secondary transition;
- individual career conversations at meaningful decision points;
- impartial assistance in understanding university, vocational education, employment and other pathways;
- opportunities to engage with employers, tertiary providers and the broader community; and
- support that is accessible regardless of the student's school, family circumstances or intended destination.

This approach would establish a consistent floor for career development without requiring every school to deliver it in precisely the same way.

The ACT has an opportunity to strengthen what already exists

There is already considerable expertise across ACT schools, colleges, tertiary institutions, industry, professional associations and community organisations. The policy opportunity is therefore not to build an entirely new careers ecosystem. It is to ensure that every student has a qualified professional within that ecosystem who can help them navigate it.

The 2025 ACT Youth Assembly reached a similar conclusion from the perspective of young people themselves, recommending increased funding so ACT high schools can employ dedicated career advisers and identifying inconsistent access to career guidance as an equity issue.

National research cited in my original submission also indicates that 95% of Australian schools have at least one person responsible for career support. That reinforces the proposition that career development is already widely recognised as a distinct function within schooling. The question for the ACT is how to ensure that this function is appropriately qualified, adequately resourced and consistently accessible.

Recommendations

I recommend that the ACT Government:

1. **Establish a minimum entitlement to career development support for students in Years 7–10**, including access to a professionally qualified career development practitioner.
2. **Ensure career development begins before Year 10**, recognising that career learning and exploration should precede major subject and transition decisions.

3. **Provide dedicated resourcing for career development**, so responsibility for the function is accompanied by sufficient time and capacity.
4. **Create funded qualification pathways for existing school staff**, including scholarships or professional development support to obtain recognised career development qualifications.
5. **Develop minimum expectations for career development provision across ACT public schools**, while allowing flexibility in how individual schools meet those expectations.
6. **Strengthen coordination between schools and external pathway partners**, including tertiary institutions, vocational education providers, employers, industry and community organisations, while maintaining the independent role of the career practitioner.
7. **Support continuing professional development and connection with recognised career development professional bodies**, so practitioners remain informed about changing education, training and employment pathways.

Conclusion

The case for strengthening career guidance in ACT public schools is ultimately an equity argument. Young people will continue to receive information and advice from teachers, families, universities, training organisations, employers and many others. All of these groups can make valuable contributions. But they are not a substitute for an appropriately qualified professional whose job is to start with the young person rather than a particular destination.

The difference I have observed between schools demonstrates what happens when career development has professional expertise, ownership and time behind it. Students receive more coordinated support, schools can build stronger pathway relationships, and young people have someone who can help them interpret the increasingly complex range of choices available to them. The ACT's transition from high school to college makes getting this support right before the end of Year 10 particularly important.

I therefore support establishing an entitlement to qualified career development support for ACT public school students in Years 7–10. The objective should not be to tell young people which pathway to choose. It should be to ensure that every young person, irrespective of their school or background, has the professional support needed to understand their options and make an informed choice for themselves.

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