



Legislative Assembly for the
Australian Capital Territory

Standing Committee on Social Policy

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

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Submitter: Louise Hara

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Submission to the ACT Legislative Assembly

Standing Committee on Social Policy

Inquiry into E-PET 078-25 and PET 041-26

My name is Louise Hara and I welcome the opportunity to provide a submission based on my experience working in both the ACT school system and the apprenticeship sector.

I have worked as a Careers and Work Experience Coordinator in an ACT public high school and currently work as a Careers and Mentoring Specialist supporting apprentices and trainees. Having worked on both sides of the transition from school into employment, I have seen firsthand the difference that quality career development services can make to a young person's future.

When I worked in a public high school, I found that careers education and work experience were often viewed as additional responsibilities rather than essential services. Career development was expected to compete with many other priorities, and significant advocacy was required to ensure students were given opportunities to explore careers, undertake work experience, and learn about pathways beyond school.

The biggest challenge was not a lack of interest from students. It was a lack of dedicated time and resources. Careers and work experience programs cannot be effectively delivered when they are assigned to a teacher who has limited administrative time to manage employer engagement, student interviews, work placement coordination, risk assessments, career planning and parent communication.

When I was able to dedicate time to building a structured careers and work experience program, participation increased by approximately 400 per cent. The reason was simple. I had the time to meet individually with students, understand their interests and strengths, build relationships with employers, and connect young people with real opportunities. The growth of the program was driven by relationships and engagement, not administration.

This experience demonstrated to me that access to a dedicated career practitioner has a direct impact on student participation and engagement. Students are far more likely to explore opportunities when they have access to someone who can spend time understanding their goals and helping them navigate their options.

In my current role supporting apprentices and trainees, I regularly work with young people who would have benefited from earlier exposure to vocational education and training pathways while they were still in school. Many of these young people are highly capable, practical learners who

struggled to see the relevance of remaining in a traditional academic pathway. Others were disengaged because they were unaware of the wide range of career opportunities available through apprenticeships, traineeships and vocational education.

Australia continues to experience workforce shortages across a range of industries, particularly in construction, trades, infrastructure and other vocational sectors. In my current role, I regularly engage with employers who are actively seeking apprentices and trainees but are struggling to attract and retain suitable candidates. At the same time, I have worked with many young people who are looking for a practical career pathway but have not been exposed to these opportunities early enough in their education.

I believe schools have an important role to play in addressing this challenge. High school students represent a significant untapped workforce pipeline. For many young people, particularly those who are practical learners, early exposure to vocational pathways can improve engagement with education while creating a direct connection to future employment. With appropriate guidance and support, students can begin exploring apprenticeships, traineeships and industry pathways well before leaving school.

Professionally qualified career practitioners are uniquely positioned to facilitate these connections. Through employer engagement, work experience programs, industry visits and pathway planning, career practitioners can help students understand the opportunities available to them and make informed decisions about their future. This benefits not only the individual student but also employers and industries experiencing ongoing skills shortages.

I have seen firsthand how students who may be disengaging from traditional classroom learning can thrive when given access to workplace experiences and vocational pathways. Many of these students go on to become successful apprentices and skilled workers. Investing in career development services is therefore not only an investment in young people, but also an investment in the future workforce.

Not every student is suited to a university pathway, and not every student thrives in traditional senior secondary education. I believe schools play a critical role in helping young people understand that there are multiple pathways to success. The construction industry, in particular, is experiencing significant workforce shortages, yet there are many young people who would thrive in these careers if they were exposed to them earlier.

I believe every high school should have the resources and staffing required to actively promote vocational pathways, work experience, school-based apprenticeships and traineeships, and industry engagement opportunities. Career education should not begin in the final years of schooling. Career awareness, career exploration and workplace engagement should occur throughout the middle years of schooling so students can make informed choices about their future.

I also believe more support should be provided to help students access industry-entry qualifications and enabling courses. Programs such as White Card training, asbestos awareness training and other introductory workplace certifications should be more accessible and affordable for students interested in entering trades and construction-related industries. These qualifications often represent the first practical step into employment, yet financial barriers can prevent participation.

Through my current work, I see that obtaining employment is often only the beginning of the journey. Young people frequently face barriers including transport, obtaining a driver's licence, financial pressures, workplace communication challenges, confidence issues and adjusting to workplace expectations. These are common reasons why apprenticeships and traineeships can become at risk.

For this reason, I believe career development should not be viewed as ending when a student leaves school. Strong transition support is essential. Young people entering employment, apprenticeships or traineeships benefit greatly from ongoing mentoring during the first 12 months of their transition. This support helps them navigate challenges, build resilience and remain engaged in training and employment.

Based on my experience, I strongly support the petition's recommendations that professionally qualified career practitioners be employed in all ACT public schools and that these positions be adequately resourced. Career development is a specialised profession requiring knowledge of labour market trends, education pathways, vocational training systems, employer engagement and career development practice. It should not be treated as an add-on responsibility.

I also support the recommendation that schools be funded to employ career practitioners at meaningful staffing ratios. The ability to build relationships with students, families, employers and industry partners takes time. Without adequate resourcing, career services become reactive rather than proactive, limiting the support available to young people when they need it most.

Career guidance has the potential to improve student engagement, support workforce participation, strengthen links between education and industry, and help young people successfully transition into adulthood. Every student deserves access to professional career support, regardless of the school they attend or the pathway they choose.

At a time when Australia is facing significant skills shortages across critical industries, ensuring all young people have access to qualified career practitioners is both an educational priority and a workforce development opportunity.

My experience has shown that when career practitioners are properly resourced and given the opportunity to build genuine relationships with students and employers, the outcomes can be transformative. Career guidance should not be viewed as a discretionary service or an

administrative function. It is an essential investment in young people, their futures, and the workforce Australia needs.

Recommendations

1. Ensure every ACT public school with Years 7-10 employs a professionally qualified career practitioner.
2. Resource schools at a minimum ratio of one full-time equivalent career practitioner for every 450 students.
3. Increase access to vocational pathway programs, work experience, and industry engagement opportunities from Years 7-10.
4. Provide funding for students to access entry-level industry qualifications such as White Cards and other workplace readiness training.
5. Establish transition mentoring support for young people entering apprenticeships, traineeships, or employment during their first 12 months after leaving school.
6. Recognise career development as a specialist profession requiring dedicated staffing, qualifications, and funding.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry.

Kind regards,

Louise Hara

Careers and Mentoring Specialist

Former Careers and Work Experience Coordinator