

# Approaches to quality assurance in school-based career development: policymaker perspectives from Australia

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## Abstract

In this article we explore Australian policymaker perspectives on the quality assurance of career development (CD) programmes in schools. We found that Australian policymakers are concerned about the quality of CD provision in schools and have a wide range of approaches that they deploy to ensure and assure quality at the school level. Quality assurance within the country is focused on the qualifications and professionalism of the people delivering career development programmes rather than on systemic or organisational quality. We also found that the range of quality assurance tools that are deployed by such policymakers varies across the different Australian jurisdictions and is influenced by geography, the size of the jurisdiction and the level of priority given to career guidance.

**Keywords:** Career guidance; quality assurance; education systems; secondary schools; school guidance; educational quality

## Introduction

Young people are negotiating a complex and shifting employment landscape (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2019; Committee for Economic Development of Australia [CEDA], 2015; Foundation for Young Australians, 2018). In Australia, young people have experienced higher unemployment and underemployment than any other age group in the population with this trend worsening due to structural changes in the Australian labour market that have led to decreased opportunities for entry-level positions (Down et al., 2018; The Smith Family, 2014). A recent paper by a range of key international organisations argues that “as the working world becomes increasingly complex, career guidance is becoming ever more important to individuals, employers and to society” (Inter-Agency Working Group on Work-based Learning [WBL] 2020, p. 3), suggesting that career guidance, or “career development” as it is usually described within Australia, may offer at least some of the answers to the social and economic problems that we have just described. While the evidence on the design of career development systems points to the need for lifelong guidance provision, the delivery of career development programmes within schools has been identified as a key component of quality career development provision (Hooley et al., 2015; OECD, 2004; Inter-Agency Working Group on WBL, 2020).

The Oxford dictionary defines quality as “the standard of something as measured against other things of a similar kind; the degree of excellence of something”. Hooley and Rice (2018) described quality assurance in career development as “a range of techniques that can be used to ensure consistency in the way that activities are approached and that can potentially also be used to ensure fidelity of practice to policy” (p. 473). However, quality and quality assurance are not uncontested

terms in career development. The inherently political nature of definitions of quality has been highlighted as a policy danger in career development (Plant, 2004 ), with Hooley and Rice (2018) noting that “quality systems are not neutral, but rather a tool that lends power to particular groups, and privileges certain sorts of practice and certain kinds of outcomes above others” (p. 473).

Bearing in mind these constraints and debates, research has found that quality school-based career development programmes support students to make better educational and labour market choices, increase their engagement with and achievement in the education system, and improve their labour market outcomes (Hooley et al., 2014; Hughes et al., 2016; Kashefpakdel & Percy, 2017). However, while the evidence provides some strong clues about how career development programmes should be delivered in schools, this research evidence is not articulated in a way that provides clarity about how to operationalise its lessons for schools, policymakers concerned with schools, and those who operate in the middle tier between schools and policy (advisors, inspectors and resource developers).

Translating evidence, good practice and the aims of policy into something that can be operationalised, observed and improved is the role that is played by quality assurance systems. Those with a stake in the way in which career development is delivered in schools need to be able to influence how practice operates. However, quality assuring career development can be difficult as the activity is rarely demarcated and distinct. As Hooley and Rice (2018) have argued, career development “is an activity that is at once embedded within wider educational programs and ... works across boundaries” (p. 475). In making career decisions, young people have been found to draw on a range of sources of information and advice that extend beyond the school boundaries (Sweet et al., 2014). Even within schools themselves, information and advice may come from diverse sources such as subject teachers (e.g. the science teacher), peers, or school leadership staff, not just careers staff. Many of these staff may not identify the career conversations that they have with students as part of the career development programme. Furthermore, career education is rarely assessed in the same way as other subjects, which makes judging the success of programmes more difficult. So, while policymakers might monitor the mathematics grades that students achieve in order to make judgements about the quality of mathematics programs in a system, it is less clear how the quality of career guidance programmes should be judged and monitored.

Countries and education systems invest significant resources in school career development provision, and the quality of that provision influences both young people’s transitions into work and further education, and their career management capabilities beyond school. Understanding how systems seek to ensure quality in the provision of career guidance supports researchers and policymakers to understand what is feasible, what is likely to be effective, and the resources required, and highlights for policymakers any unexplored mechanisms for system improvement. In this study we sought to explore the quality systems that exist within Australian government schools from the perspective of educational policymakers. We asked how Australian jurisdictions have worked to establish quality systems for career development and explore the nature of these quality systems.

### The Australian context

In Australia, careers provision has a long history in schools (Patton, 2019), and school career development (CD) programs have been found to be relatively well-resourced by world standards (Sweet et al., 2014). Nonetheless there is no clear national entitlement for school students to access or receive career development and while state jurisdictions support career development provision in a variety of ways, it may or may not be compulsory. Evidence suggests that while Australian

education systems have invested significant resources in CD provision, that provision is often highly variable (Commonwealth Department of Employment and Training [DET]/Price Waterhouse Coopers [PWC], 2017; Rice et al., 2016; Sweet et al., 2014). Concerns have routinely been raised about the quality, relevance and recency of the CD information provided to students in schools (Commonwealth DET/PWC, 2017), and access to CD has been shown to vary hugely both between schools and between groups of students within them (Sweet et al., 2014). The highly stratified nature of Australian school education (Perry, 2018) also potentially exacerbates variations in provision, as those students who find transitions most challenging tend to be pooled in schools with relatively few resources, and little local capacity to generate additional resources.

Australia is a federation of six states and two territories, and has three tiers of government: Federal, state and local. The Federal (national) government is responsible for national affairs, holds responsibility for employment and trade, and receives the great majority of tax revenue (subsequently dispersed in part to the states and territories). The Federal government provides national leadership in some policy areas, including through national statements on the purposes of schooling (which have at times noted the importance of careers education, see Patton, 2019). The provision of school education, however, is largely the responsibility of state and territory governments (jurisdictions): there are eight departments of education that hold responsibility for career education in schools. These governance arrangements have meant that there are diverse initiatives and patterns of provision in each jurisdiction, with no consistent or coordinated approach at a national level (Patton, 2019). In addition, within each of these eight jurisdictions there is a government school sector and a non-government one (comprising Catholic and independent schools); government schools educate just over two-thirds of students, with the non-government sector educating the remaining third (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2017). Government departments of education are responsible for government schools only and cannot mandate or advise schools in the non-government sector.

The provision of face-to-face career education and career counselling in Australia has been overwhelmingly focused on schools (Commonwealth DET/PWC, 2017). Post-school provision has been shown to be a patchwork, and heavily reliant on online information and provision within post-secondary institutions and public employment services (Commonwealth DET/PWC, 2017). Universities mostly provide some career services for their students as do some further education colleges, but this is not mandated. There is currently no single face-to-face national career service to cater for those past school age and the entitlement to access services varies considerably with age, educational and employment status, jurisdictional location and a range of other factors. The Federal government plays a role in the provision of careers information: there are several national career-focused websites, including the *MyFuture* website<sup>1</sup> (focused on identifying suitable careers), the *Jobs Outlook* website (focused on job market information for various careers) and the *Course Finder* website, but there is limited information about the use or usefulness of any of these resources by the wider population. The Federal government also released *Future Ready: A Student-focused National Career Education Strategy* in February, 2019, that outlined broad directions for career development in Australia. As part of this strategy the National Careers Institute (NCI) was founded in July, 2019, by the Federal government; this will, among other activities, build a unified national digital platform for careers information, but there appear to be no plans for the national provision of face-to-face career services through the NCI.

The heavy reliance on internet-based delivery of careers information and tools for those who have finished school is problematic for many reasons. First, research demonstrates that access to and competence with digital technologies and the internet varies across social groups. Young people

from low-income backgrounds, those with disability, those living in rural and remote areas, and those from Indigenous communities have been found to be less likely to have access to and the skills and confidence in using technology than their more advantaged peers (Lamb et al., 2020; Thomas et al., 2019). Second, the nature of the current Australian websites is that they are largely focused on delivery of careers information, with some additional tools to identify, for example, domains of career interest. Watts (2013, p. 253) observed that,

*While information is essential for effective career decision-making, it is not sufficient. As noted by the OECD, 'public investment in information is of little value if its potential users are not able to access the information, to understand it and relate it to their personal needs, and to act upon it'. (2004, p. 91).*

Careers counselling tailored to the individual allows these linkages to be made.

Australian young people are therefore highly dependent on the quality of school career development provision to build their career management skills and knowledge, and transform careers information into viable and satisfying career trajectories and decisions. This is particularly the case for those young people most at risk of adverse employment outcomes – the economically disadvantaged, those with disability, the Indigenous, and those in rural and remote settings. Maximising the quality of provision through understanding what is being done to ensure quality, the likely effectiveness, and what further might be done, is essential.

### Conceptualising quality assurance in career development

Much CD research is rooted in psychology and focuses on individuals. Such research provides an important foundation for practice but may not address organisational and systemic factors crucial to effective delivery and provides researchers with little in the way of conceptual frameworks for examining these factors. However, there have also been broader discussions and debates among researchers and CD practitioners about what constitutes quality in CD and to a much lesser degree, how it might be assured. This work is briefly summarised here.

Several authors have underlined the political nature of quality and quality assurance: if quality is about fitness for purpose, then the question of “Whose purpose or purposes?” arises. There is a long tradition in CD research that notes the potential for CD to fulfil a reproductive function (e.g. Roberts, 1977), with students channelled towards courses and roles that align with their current socioeconomic status. Watts (2015/1996) has described this tradition as adopting a “conservative” ideology and has argued that such a perspective “masks inequalities in society by making them seem matters of individual choice, thereby reconciling people to their roles” (p. 173). If the purpose of CD is framed primarily in terms of the purely pragmatic needs of businesses for appropriate labour, then this will affect the ways in which quality is conceptualised, what counts as quality practice, and how this is measured and monitored. There is a real danger that what is deemed quality in such circumstances will be efficient (in directing labour towards gaps in the market) but will pay little attention to raising student aspirations, or to opening up individuals’ freedoms and pathways.

There are also other important traditions within both the practice of career development and the analysis of its function. Watts (2015/1996) has argued that different approaches to career development variously place emphasis on social outcomes or individual outcomes and are either orientated towards change or the status quo. He used this insight to construct a matrix which recognised that in addition to the conservative ideology (focused on social outcomes and the status quo), career development can also be liberal (individual outcomes and the status quo), progressive (individual outcomes and change) or radical (social outcomes and change). This highlights the range

of different ideological underpinnings that can inform the practice of career guidance. Onto these varying ideological perspectives, a wide range of different policy concerns have been loaded (OECD, 2004; Watts, 2008) which have been designed to inform the delivery of career development within school systems. For example, in periods of high youth unemployment, career development has been found to be addressed towards minimising and managing such unemployment (e.g. Ajufo, 2013), whilst in periods of economic boom, the focus has been shown to move towards increasing human capital, for example by incentivising engagement with higher education or science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) (Schmidt et al., 2012). Such differences of ideology and immediate objective clearly make a difference to how “quality career development” is defined and what kind of metrics might be used to measure whether such quality has been achieved.

With regard to the measurement and assurance of quality, Plant (2004) has described a broad range of standards and guidelines developed by policymakers to raise or assure quality. He underlines the political nature of such standards and highlights the impact that various forms of quality assurance and measurement can have on the way in which practice operates and the outcomes that it fosters. Given the way that quality assurance systems shape practice, Plant has raised important questions about who owns the standards, how they are used for monitoring and embedded into existing power-relations within the educational system, and whose priorities or purposes they advance.

Defining and assuring quality in CD thus raises theoretical, ethical and pragmatic challenges that have not yet been fully addressed in the research literature. Recent years have seen the development of important quality standards and guidelines for career development providers in both Australia and elsewhere. The Gatsby Benchmarks (2014) are widely used in Britain, while the Career Industry Council of Australia (CICA) concurrently developed and published its School Career Development Benchmarking Resource for Australian schools (2014). However, while these benchmarks are designed to allow schools to evaluate the quality of their own provision, they are a resource to support quality provision, and are not designed to analyse the mechanisms and approaches being used by systems to ensure that quality is achieved. Recently, Hooley and Rice (2018) proposed a new theoretical framework for analysing systemic approaches to assuring quality in CD. The framework identifies six domains in which quality may vary and can be assured, and proposes four broad systemic approaches to quality assurance in CD. It was chosen for this study because it was designed as a flexible framework that can be used to analyse and evaluate approaches to quality assurance in career development used by policymakers across national or state systems of education.

The six domains identified are Policy, Organisation, Process, People, Outputs and Outcomes, and Users. In the *Policy* domain, the focus question policymakers need to consider is, “Are the policy frameworks conducive to quality CD provision?” – do they align with research about best practice in CD, are they well-designed in terms of supporting schools? In the *Organisation* domain, the focus is, “Is the organisation capable of delivering quality CD?”. In the *Process* domain, the key question is, “Is this particular process capable of delivering quality CD?” The key focus for the *People* domain is, “Are the people involved suitably qualified and skilled?” Aspects such as who is able to act as a CD counsellor, and what resources are provided for their professional learning are considered. The *Output and Outcomes* domain focuses on the question, “What effects does the CD have after it has happened?”. The measurement of outputs and outcomes can be subjective as it requires those seeking to quality assure provision to construct a counterfactual of what would have happened if the CD had not taken place and theorise impacts and effects that seem likely. This can lead to the monitoring of things like confidence in decision-making, knowledge about the labour market and, over the longer term, educational or employment outcomes. However, the use of such outputs and

outcomes to quality assure CD can be problematic as they may be driven by factors that are unrelated to the CD itself. Finally, the *User* domain focuses on the question, “Do the users believe that the CD they have received is of a good quality?”, and seeks to measure levels of client satisfaction.

Hooley and Rice (2018) further proposed that quality assurance approaches vary in the degree to which movement towards higher quality is driven centrally or at the local level, and in the degree of provider professional autonomy embedded in the approach. Quality assurance approaches in which the change driver is systemic, and the degree of local provider autonomy is low may be classed as Regulatory approaches. An example of a regulatory action would be the requirement that all career development staff hold formal counselling qualifications. Approaches in which the change driver is local, and the degree of local provider autonomy is also low may be classed as Advisory. An example of an advisory approach would be the development and distribution of rubrics describing how provision should be organised by schools and what increasing levels of quality look like. An Organic approach is one in which local providers and professionals have responsibility for quality assurance and where they have a high degree of professional autonomy to decide how such processes work. Such approaches might include mentoring or local professional networks for the sharing of expertise. Finally, systems may use Competitive approaches. With competitive approaches, change is driven by system actions to set up and encourage a market of providers, but local providers are given autonomy as to how they compete within this market for clients (the so called, “black box approach”) (Considine et al., 2018). Examples of competitive approaches to quality include the establishment of systems of league tables publishing student outcomes, or requirements for schools to publish student transition and destination data online in school reports. It should be stressed that education systems will usually use a combination of approaches to ensure and drive improvements in the quality of provision, rather than a single approach.

This framework has already been used to conduct an empirical study of quality systems in six countries (Hooley, 2019). The study found that the framework provided a robust way of describing the various ways in which different countries managed quality in career development. It also added some further elements to understanding about the way in which the model operates in practice. These included the fact that the different domains were inter-related and so quality assurance approaches were fungible or interchangeable as action on any one domain could impact on the other domains. It also noted that quality systems were rarely the result of central design as they tended to emerge over time with substantial regional and sectoral differences and were often strongly influenced by wider quality assurance processes that existed within the educational or employment system. Finally, it also highlighted the gap that frequently existed between the framework and the reality of implementing quality assurance systems into multiple institutions and the practice of thousands of career development practitioners.

The current project draws on the existing literature on quality in career development and particularly the Hooley and Rice (2018) framework and the further exploration of this framework by Hooley (2019) as the basis for a detailed study of Australian policymakers’ approaches to quality assurance. The research questions for the study were as follows:

- How do Australian education systems define quality in CD provision?
- What measures do they use to monitor the quality of CD provision?
- What mechanisms do systems use to lift and assure CD quality?
- How might these approaches be classified?

## Methods

In this project we sought to determine how education systems in Australia are working to ensure quality in their delivery of CD to school students. The nature of the research questions required a qualitative approach, with data collected through a combination of semi-structured interviews with policymakers, and document collation and analysis. Directed content analysis is primarily used to expand or validate a concept or theory (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) and was thus appropriate for investigating quality assurance of CD, guided by findings from studies conducted in other countries. Existing research provides predictions about the themes under investigation which leads to an initial coding scheme; any text that does not fit within the scheme is analysed to determine whether it represents a new category, or theme, and is then allocated a new code (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Operationally, rules regarding the material to be included in the analysis, the unit of measurement, and the coding procedure (i.e. how the information will be classified) are clearly detailed. Additionally, categories should be mutually exclusive and comprehensive (Mayring, 2000). Six domains relating to the quality assurance systems were identified based on previous research: policy, organisation, process, people, output and outcomes, and users (Hooley & Rice, 2018). These formed the basis for the initial coding of statements made by participants in response to the interview questions.

## Participants

Participants were middle-to-senior level education department policymakers with knowledge of their system's career development practices and policy in Australian jurisdictions: Federal/state/territory departments of education and industry representatives. A participant was sought from each of the eight Australian educational jurisdictions (Queensland, New South Wales, Northern Territory, South Australia, Western Australia, Tasmania, Australian Capital Territory and Victoria), together with a representative of a career practitioner professional organisation and a major current national provider of online career education resources, Education Services Australia (ESA).<sup>2</sup> Australian education departments are relatively small (ranging from the Northern Territory with 34,500 students and 152 schools to New South Wales with 798,000 students and 2,254 schools). For this reason, there is usually only one staff member in each department's central office with responsibility for career development provision, and in some of the smaller jurisdictions, this staff member may have additional responsibilities in related areas such as youth transitions or vocational education in schools. These staff have in-depth knowledge of career provision in their state and the ways in which their departments are seeking to ensure quality, as they have carriage of any initiatives. The great majority have come from secondary school teaching positions, although not all have worked as career development practitioners.

### *Australian system characteristics:*

The eight education systems in Australia vary considerably in their profiles. Table 1 outlines the characteristics of these systems and whether information about the system was gathered through interview and document/website analysis, or through document/website analysis only.

**Table 1. Australian state government education jurisdictions.**

Jurisdiction	Approximate government school student population	Approximate physical size	Data collected	Attended findings seminar
A	805,000	800,000 km <sup>2</sup>	Interview and website/documents	Yes
B	560,000	1,800,000 km <sup>2</sup>	Interview and website/documents	No

C	309,000	2,520,000 km <sup>2</sup>	Interview and website/documents	Yes
D	175,000	980,000 km <sup>2</sup>	Website/public documents	No
E	645,000	227,000 km <sup>2</sup>	Interview and website/documents	Yes
F	78,000	2,300 km <sup>2</sup>	Interview and website/documents	Yes
G	62,000	68,000 km <sup>2</sup>	Website/public documents	Yes
H	34,000	1,400,000 km <sup>2</sup>	Website/public documents	Yes

### Approach

An initial face-to-face seminar was conducted with policymakers from each Australian state and territory department of education and with national career guidance professional bodies to discuss issues of quality in career development provision, and to introduce the theoretical framework. This seminar was used to shape the research project and engage participants in it. Following development of the project and the research instruments, jurisdictions were directly approached via telephone; where interest in participation was expressed, this was followed by an email including a Plain Language Statement and consent form. Where jurisdictions chose to take part in the study, they were followed up by telephone to confirm mutually suitable dates and times for interviews and a consent form was signed prior to the interview. Five jurisdictions agreed to participate in the study; three were unable, as was the professional association. Interview data was supplemented with relevant publicly-available documents from jurisdiction websites. Where jurisdictions were unable to participate, relevant website documents alone were used to identify quality assurance strategies used in career development for these jurisdictions. Interviews took approximately one hour and were audio-recorded and transcribed. Where participants had relevant policy documents, these were forwarded by email to the researchers following the interview.

Findings from the project were presented for feedback at a second invitational seminar, to which participants and policymakers from both participating and non-participating jurisdictions were invited. Seven of the eight jurisdictions attended the seminar, either face-to-face or through a web link.

### Measures

An interview schedule of 18 questions was developed. Interviews were semi-structured in nature and questions were mostly open-ended. These questions sought to explore:

- General approaches to quality and the existence of any quality frameworks (e.g. “Does your jurisdiction have a framework for quality in career guidance? If so, can you provide some information about it?”)
- Mechanisms to support quality in each of the six domains of policy, organisation, processes, people, outputs and users, and ways in which these were monitored (e.g. “Who is allowed to provide career guidance? What qualifications and training are required?”)
- The degree to which mechanisms and activities to support quality in CD were required, recommended, driven at the local level, or encouraged through market forces (e.g. “What elements of your quality assurance approach are mandatory? What sanctions exist if they are not complied with?”). These questions mapped onto the four identified approaches in the theoretical framework: Regulatory, Advisory, Organic and Competitive.



## Ethics

Ethics approval for the project was sought and gained from the Human Ethics Committee of the university leading the study. One of the participating jurisdictions also requested that approval be sought from its own Ethics Committee and this was subsequently sought and granted. Given the small sample size, data from the project is largely presented in aggregate, to reduce the likelihood that someone with extensive knowledge of the field would be able to identify an individual jurisdiction from the findings.

## Data analysis

Interview data and documents were analysed thematically based on Hooley and Rice's (2018) theoretical framework of quality assurance mechanisms for career development. A mapping of actions and mechanisms against the six domains was initially carried out, together with an analysis of the frequency with which given mechanisms were used across jurisdictions. A mapping of the data against the four approaches to CD quality assurance was also conducted.

## Results

Our findings describe the strategies and processes that Australian jurisdictions use to assure quality. It should be noted that the research was not focused on measuring the efficacy or impact of the approaches that were taken or making judgements about the quality of programs offered by jurisdictions. It should also be noted that jurisdictions are responsible for government schools only, so mechanisms described do not apply to non-government schools. However, resources are sometimes shared between sectors; non-government school staff, for example, often use frameworks and materials developed by government systems, or may attend workshops or networks offered and run by government education systems.

We found that a wide range of actions are taken to ensure quality in each of the six domains and those identified are outlined as follows.

## Policy

Quality assurance practices pertaining to career development policies included independent reviews and evaluations, internal reviews, and parliamentary reviews of career development provision. One jurisdiction had a career development steering committee as part of the quality assurance process. Two systems had formal policies focused on career development, but most did not. One noted that they "would like a policy in career education" (Jurisdiction 1) or "would like to implement the Australian Curriculum Work Studies<sup>3</sup> as compulsory" (Jurisdiction 4). One jurisdiction stated that they were "doing some work at a policy and vision level in relation to quality career guidance- [we] don't have it but [are] really exploring it" (Jurisdiction 5). Policies that did exist were state-based and only applied to government schools.

Formal review or evaluation of school-level career development provision was generally not mandatory; however, in every jurisdiction resources were provided to schools to support the translation of policy into practice. Resources provided included CD consultancy services, CD curricula, websites, online portfolio planners, discussion resources for use with young people and parents, and templates and action plans.

## Organisation

A range of strategies was used by jurisdictions to promote quality at the organisation [school] level in their systems. Voluntary reporting using Career Industry Council of Australia (CICA) benchmarks (CICA, 2014) or the eight Gatsby benchmarks (Gatsby Charitable Foundation, 2014) was also used by three jurisdictions to quality assure the schools and their ability to provide career development. One

jurisdiction promoted the National School Improvement Tool (Australian Council for Educational Research [ACER], 2018), a more general quality improvement tool, highlighted its applicability to CD, and required schools to evaluate themselves against the tool. One jurisdiction commented that they “had a reportable process in the past but it was a tick box and had no clout” (Jurisdiction 1) whilst others generally “provide guidance and a website with information and resources”, and one reported “looking at having something a little bit tighter going forward” (Jurisdiction 4).

### Processes

In general, process was mainly regarded as the responsibility of the school, with comments such as, “There is no quality assurance of what happens in schools” (Jurisdiction 1) and, “Schools are NOT told what they must do; information is fed back around what is important and why, and [they are given] opportunities to strengthen and grow the program” (Jurisdiction 3). Two jurisdictions provided dedicated funding streams and schools were required to spend the funding on CD, but how this was done was up to the schools. Two jurisdictions required schools to report to policymakers on the number and type of careers activities offered to students, and this was fed back to schools as part of a reflective/evaluative process rather than a punitive one. Jurisdictions reported limited knowledge and monitoring of processes in schools and observation in schools by Department staff was not used as a strategy. While jurisdictions provided resources such as career plan templates, requirements about matters such as time spent on CD, provision at various year levels, and the content covered at year levels were limited to one jurisdiction, as was monitoring of this (Jurisdiction 5). A sentiment echoed by a number of jurisdictions was that the “school location/context/need determines the nature/flavour of the career guidance (i.e. local solutions)” so jurisdictional requirements in the process domain tended to be limited in order to permit this flexibility.

### People

Overall, this domain was the most developed, with four jurisdictions reporting that career development practitioners in schools were required to hold appropriate professional qualifications and membership of one of the professional bodies: “To provide career guidance, you have to be qualified, but career education is the responsibility of every teacher” (Jurisdiction 4). In Australia, the qualifications required to work as a career development professional would typically be a graduate certificate or Master’s in career development to be recognised as a professional career development practitioner, and a Certificate IV in career development (a lower-level, pre-bachelor qualification) to be recognised as an associate career development practitioner (CICA, 2019). It should be noted that many, but not all, CD practitioners in Australian schools are also trained teachers, and so hold initial teacher training qualifications. Further, CD practitioners were required to adhere to professional and ethical standards such as those of the Career Industry Council of Australia (CICA, 2019) and the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL, n.d.). While not directly monitored by systems, professional learning (PL) is required by CICA member organisations for members to maintain their registration, and this can be audited by CICA member associations, so there are flow-on effects from registration requirements to professional learning requirements for CD practitioners in schools.

Three jurisdictions reported providing scholarships or courses for staff interested in career guidance but lacking in qualifications, and also provided support for qualified CD practitioners in the form of funds and/or paid release time from school to attend professional learning and conferences. One jurisdiction ran an induction course for new careers advisors.

There was some uncertainty expressed by jurisdictions as to compliance with qualifications requirements at a school level. While jurisdictions’ expectations around the qualifications required

for career counselling were clear, where a school does not have a qualified CD staff member or such a person leaves, provision is likely to continue using whoever is willing to take on the role, and this is particularly likely to be the case in remote and rural schools, which struggle to identify appropriately qualified staff in many delivery areas, not just careers (Weldon, 2016). One jurisdiction commented, “Professional standards are strict, but the question is around whether they are implemented or enforced” (Jurisdiction 1).

Jurisdictions also expressed uncertainty as to the currency of the knowledge and skills of their career development staff; for example, whether CD staff are up-to-date on changes in the labour market. However, the quality of staff was seen as important. Participants noted that quality in the people domain is also enhanced organically at the local level, through communities of practice that are established by career development practitioners. The career practitioners “have a pretty strong network and work closely with each other but [are] not directed by us” (Jurisdiction 4).

### Outputs/outcomes

Jurisdictions largely identified the Australian Blueprint for Career Development (ABCD) (MCEETYA, 2010) and the Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2020a) as the frameworks referenced when quality assuring career guidance outputs and outcomes. These frameworks essentially define the learning outcomes that should be associated with a CD programme and consequently lend themselves to measurement through assessment of learning. The most common approach to quality assuring outputs and outcomes (used by four jurisdictions) was to monitor the percentage of students who had completed a student career plan, a logbook or a portfolio during their senior secondary years. At the system level this kind of approach is really monitoring compliance with process rather than outcomes as such, but at the school level it opens up the possibility of attending to outcomes more closely.

One jurisdiction had both an online student pathway plan, and a logbook in which students documented the development of their industry-related skills, and asked schools to ensure that students can “articulate a post-school plan”. One jurisdiction reported that Year 10 (16-year-old) students were required to complete a senior education and training plan that maps out students’ goals and intended learning, and that is reviewed periodically as the student moves through senior secondary school. In some jurisdictions, schools were required to report the proportion of students completing the MyFuture online career plan, while others had built customised online planning documents students were required to complete, and schools monitored proportions.

Three jurisdictions also conducted large-scale post-school student destination tracking for school completers; these were usually outsourced to research organisations but fewer systems monitored outcomes for early leavers. One jurisdiction was implementing a transition tool that would feed information back and feed forward. Two jurisdictions noted that, “Nothing was measured at a system level but [we] imagine it is measured at school level but [we have] no data/evidence of what that looks like” (Jurisdiction 4) and, “We would like to think there are or have been better transition and pathways for students and increased confidence in career decisions but [we] have no way of measuring at the moment but [we’re] working on it” (Jurisdiction 5).

### Users

Three jurisdictions had well-developed school leaver surveys that measured student satisfaction across a number of school-related areas, including career guidance. However, the emphasis placed on careers in these surveys varied considerably, with some only containing a small number of questions on careers. Feedback was also sought by schools individually and systems collectively following careers events such as expos. One jurisdiction had implemented a corporate survey of

students, parents, and teachers and in another, a parliamentary enquiry into career development provision had actively sought student input. The school leaver surveys were generally seen as valuable: “Schools can use this to reflect, evaluate and plan” (Jurisdiction 4). A number of jurisdictions utilised MyFuture data analytics which provided them with insights into the level and intensity of usage of the site, how this was distributed across their jurisdiction, and what occupational profiles and other content, users are looking at. In one jurisdiction additional tagging has been done to enable them to match usage data with school records.

#### Summary of Australian approaches

Overall, the data suggested that Australian systems’ approaches to supporting and assuring quality in CD focused most strongly on the provision of resources to implement policies and support quality at the local level (combining actions in the Policy and Process domains) and through actions focused on ensuring that CD is delivered through well-qualified staff who are up to date with recent developments in the field (the People domain). All systems examined in this study had a range of mechanisms and resources to support quality provision in this way. There were fewer mechanisms that focused on the Organisation, Outputs and Outcomes, or User domains.

The quality assurance strategies documented through the research suggest that systems largely adopted organic and advisory mechanisms, with far less emphasis on using regulatory or competitive mechanisms as a means to support and lift quality. These types of approaches allow for considerable local autonomy and thus the capacity to adapt provision to meet local needs; however, they are weaker in ensuring that systems meet a basic level of quality across provision sites. Some regulatory strategies were used, mostly in the People domain, and these had to do with who is allowed to provide career guidance, and what training they must undertake to maintain that status. It was clear from interviews that competitive elements did not feature in policymakers’ thinking, even though some competitive mechanisms do exist for schools more broadly and may serve to influence the quality of CD provision. For example, school transition outcomes for all Australian schools are publicly available through the MySchool website, a Federal government initiative specifically designed to raise educational quality more generally by allowing parents to compare outcomes between schools. As noted, several educational jurisdictions also require secondary schools to publish student transition outcomes in their annual online school report, which also facilitates comparisons of these outcomes between schools. However, none of the policymakers viewed these data as being useful for driving student or parental perceptions about the quality of the CD provision that they were receiving and encouraging competitive behaviour amongst schools in their delivery of CD.

Figure 1 summarises the frequency of use of the various mechanisms for quality assurance across Australia. Universal Approaches were used by five or more jurisdictions, Common Approaches were used by three to four jurisdictions, Evident Approaches were used by two jurisdictions and Infrequent Approaches were used by only one jurisdiction in each instance.

**Figure 1. Summary of the frequency of approaches used in quality assuring careers guidance programs across Australian education jurisdictions.**

<b>Infrequent</b>	Awards for quality Formal steering committees Surveys of all users (including parents)	
<b>Evident</b>	Designated funding streams Evaluations/reviews Monitoring delivery Use of MyFuture data	Provision requirements Student destinations in school reports Reporting requirements to Head Office/region
<b>Common</b>	Monitoring student outcomes Post-school tracking School leaver surveys	Scholarships for qualifications upgrading for CD practitioners Monitoring the proportion of students creating artefacts (e.g., portfolios)
<b>Universal</b>	Providing resources to support Linking to national resources (e.g. ABCD) for provision & outcomes Guidelines/requirements for CD staff qualifications	Professional learning for staff Use of professional and ethical standards for CD staff Professional learning requirements for staff to maintain registration Quality assurance applies to government schools only

There were additional patterns evident within the data related to the number of students in the system, and the geographical dispersion of students in the system. Three systems with larger numbers of students reported or listed on their websites the use of large-scale student destination tracking systems (through student surveys pre- and/or post-school completion), and these were not evident in any of the systems with small numbers of students. In addition, geographical dispersion appeared to influence how systems sought to ensure quality: systems with highly-dispersed students reported that such dispersion made it harder to keep track of what was happening in schools, while the smallest, most geographically condensed system reported that it was able to keep its “finger on the pulse” of what was happening in its schools through largely informal mechanisms.

## Discussion

In this project we sought to determine how Australian education systems define quality in CD provision, the mechanisms and processes that they use to ensure and lift quality, and the degree to which such quality assurance approaches are regulatory, advisory, organic or competitive. The findings demonstrate that Australian policymakers recognise the importance of quality assuring CD provision and that there is a range of strategies across the country to operationalise quality assurance. Also there is considerable diversity in how quality is understood and how quality assurance is undertaken, with the only thing that really looks like a national system of quality being a common understanding that CD requires professional qualifications and some level of agreement on what those qualifications should be.

In this section we will look at some of the features that shape the different approaches that Australian jurisdictions take to quality and quality assurance of CD. But, first we will set the findings of the Australian study into context, by looking at the approaches that can be found elsewhere in the world, but which are not evident in Australia.

### The road not taken

This study uses a similar methodology to that adopted by Hooley (2019) in his study of the quality assurance of CD across six countries (including Australia). Hooley’s (2019) study is useful as it provides us with insights into what characterises other career guidance systems, that was not evident in any of the Australian jurisdictions. The notable absences that existed were within the domains of policy, organisation and users.

Within the policy domain, other countries have committed to a regular review of CD policy (South Korea); the publication of an annual review of CD (Scotland, the Netherlands); establishing research and evaluation agencies or departments to monitor and support the implementation of career guidance policy (Scotland, South Korea); and monitoring policy implementation against key indicators (England, Scotland, the Netherlands). The absence of these approaches in Australia highlights the relatively low priority that CD is given within Australian policymaking. In most jurisdictions the area was not viewed as a clear policy area in its own right and so consequently lacked the accountability and reporting mechanisms associated with formal policies.

In the organisational domain, other countries have reported the use of formal inspection of career guidance provision by an external inspectorate (England, Scotland) or including career guidance in wider inspections and quality assurance processes (England, the Netherlands). For the most part, Australian jurisdictions no longer use formal inspections or have established inspectorates, so the capacity to implement these types of measures is limited. Victoria and Queensland still conduct reviews of schools on a four-yearly basis, but these are general reviews with no specific focus on career development provision.

While the gathering of user feedback through surveys was common within the Australian jurisdictions, other mechanisms for user involvement were not in evidence. Notably there was limited evidence of proactive research on user needs (which was found in Germany, Scotland and South Korea in Hooley's [2019] study); of requiring user input as part of the qualification and accreditation process of careers professionals (the Netherlands); or the involvement of student representative bodies in the steering of career guidance policies, systems and practices (the Netherlands). The absence of user voices in shaping career development services has been remarked upon internationally, particularly in a strand of studies from the Nordic countries (Haug, 2016; Plant & Haug, 2018; Vilhjálmsson et al., 2011). Such concerns bring us back to some of the critiques of quality systems raised by Plant (2004, 2012) about who defines quality and in whose interests quality processes are constructed.

#### What drives and shapes engagement with quality?

Engagement with quality and the types of mechanisms used to drive and support it are shaped by numerous factors. One such factor is the size of the system. A pattern we noted was that size matters, in terms of the number of students within the system, the related funding, and the consequent potential economies of scale available to the system. Jurisdictions with large numbers of students had sufficient capacity to use mechanisms such as post-school student pathway tracking systems and large-scale student satisfaction surveys, which may require substantial upfront funds for development, but relatively low per capita costs for each additional student once the data collection tools are developed. Some smaller jurisdictions indicated that they were interested in such mechanisms, but simply did not have capacity for development and implementation. Larger systems also had more sophisticated data environments that permitted easier integration of additional monitoring mechanisms, as well as greater resources to develop and deploy such mechanisms.

Geographical dispersion of students also appeared to influence the types of quality assurance practices in place. Australia is a large country and some jurisdictions have schools that are very dispersed. One jurisdiction, for example, has 309,000 students spread over 2,520,000 km<sup>2</sup> (a land mass 10 times larger than the UK). Policymakers working in more dispersed systems reported that it was difficult to visit schools for discussions or review, and understand how well policy is being implemented. Schools in the largest and least densely populated jurisdictions have been found to



face staffing challenges in many subject areas (Weldon, 2016), so that while the systems that lead these schools might mandate minimum qualifications for CD staff, many schools can struggle to meet them, and systems are likely to turn a blind eye. Geographically condensed systems were more easily able to use more informal mechanisms to monitor the quality of provision.

Another factor that potentially shapes career development quality assurance is the level of policy priority accorded to CD provision. CD has been offered within some (if not all) Australian secondary schools for many years (Patton, 2019), but CD provision has been found to be often under-resourced; CD practitioners have been found to be mostly part-time and have other responsibilities, and CD school-level budgets have been shown to be low (CICA, 2015). There have been numerous calls in recent years from Australian politicians, business leaders and policymakers to raise the quality of school CD provision (NCI, 2019; Polesel et al., 2015; Victorian Department of Education, 2018) and a general agreement that quality CD provision is increasingly important, but this is not always matched by commitments to provision of more extensive and coordinated resourcing at the school level.

Because the provision of education is a responsibility of state governments rather than the national government, each Australian jurisdiction also has its own traditions of career development, its own broader policy frameworks and objectives, and its own senior secondary qualifications, each with distinct emphases. This shapes the approaches seen as appropriate by each jurisdiction; incidentally it also increases the resource burden on each system and can constrain the capacity to share resources.

Finally, the relatively small numbers of students in each jurisdiction and the extent of resourcing means that each state or territory Department of Education usually only has one or at most two policymakers with responsibility for oversight of career development provision across the state; this person or persons may also combine this responsibility with responsibilities for other aspects of provision, such as reduction of school dropout. This means that the implementation of mechanisms to monitor and lift quality may be dependent to some degree on the energy of the individual policymaker, their background (for example, whether CD always been focus of theirs, or whether it has been added on to their main area of interest) and the degree of commitment they bring to CD provision. Staff turnover can also be an issue where policy is largely the responsibility of one or two staff; institutional knowledge and memory are quickly lost if someone moves on. The lack of a clear national perspective and consistent interest in CD at the Federal level over the years may also contribute to this issue; it remains to be seen whether the establishment of the National Careers Institute might go some way to providing a strong Federal focus and direction.

Our study also points to areas for additional exploration. While our study maps current mechanisms used by Australian jurisdictions to assure CD quality, the impact of various approaches and quality mechanisms on youth transition outcomes is still unclear, and needs to be the subject of further empirical research. It is also yet to be determined how these approaches at the policy level play out in schools, how school providers interpret and respond to system-level quality measures, and what additional measures they may take of their own initiative.

## Conclusion

Our study shows that Australian policymakers are concerned about the quality of CD provision in schools and that they have a wide range of techniques and approaches that they deploy to ensure and assure quality at the school level. However, the range of quality assurance tools that are deployed by such policymakers varies across the different Australian jurisdictions. In some, usually the larger, more urban and more populous jurisdictions, there is a quality assurance system that is

comparable with what can be found elsewhere in the world. In others, generally the smaller, more rural and less populous jurisdictions, quality assurance of CD is more difficult. Despite these differences, the quality assurance of CD across Australia has some similarities which are framed by the generally low priority that CD is given as a policy area. For the most part, the quality assurance of CD in Australia is advisory and lacks clear processes for implementation and ensuring compliance. It is also focused strongly on the people domain and ensuring the qualifications of individual practitioners rather than on systemic or organisational quality.

This study should not be read as a commentary on the quality of provision of CD within Australia. The policymakers who we spoke to in this research reported an array of good practice as well as concerns about schools and areas where practice is less good. It would be interesting to conduct further research to map this patchiness and understand further what factors contribute to quality across the system. What our findings do demonstrate is that although Australian policymakers are committed to ensuring quality in CD, they often lack the tools that they need to deliver on this. It also demonstrates that at present, and in the recent past, the Federal government has been largely absent from this area. Looking forwards there are important decisions to be made about whether CD should become a higher priority for policymakers in the country and whether the Federal government should take a greater leadership role.

Career development provision has been shown to provide major economic benefits to societies (Hooley & Dodd, 2015) and has been demonstrated to impact positively on individuals' building of career and labour market knowledge and career management skills (Hooley, 2014; Whiston et al., 2017). Ensuring the quality of its provision is therefore a central research and policy concern. This study adds to our knowledge of how quality is currently being assured, what mechanisms are available, and some of the constraints faced by policymakers in different contexts. In doing so, it highlights options available to policymakers and ways of improving provision for the benefit of individuals and societies.

#### [Disclosure statement](#)

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Data not available due to privacy/ethical restrictions

Due to the nature of this research and the involvement of a small sample, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

#### [Additional information](#)

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## Notes

1 MyFuture is a national career website established and maintained by the Federally-funded Education Services Australia (ESA). It provides users with information on career pathways, occupations and courses, and allows them to undertake surveys and quizzes to identify appropriate career options for themselves. School students are usually provided with a school login that allows ESA to develop aggregated data about school and jurisdiction use of the site.

2 ESA is a national not-for-profit company owned by the Australian state, territory and Federal government education ministers. It is responsible for the national MyFuture careers website.

3 The Australian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (ACARA, 2020b) publishes a national curriculum that is used in the great majority of government and Catholic schools, and in some independent schools. The Work Studies strand is optional and is focused on development of students' career and entrepreneurial knowledge and skills during Years 9 and 10 (i.e. with students aged 15 and 16). The work studies curriculum can be accessed at <https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/work-studies/>.

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