On 17 November 2016, the Assistant Minister for Vocational Education and Skills, the Hon Karen Andrews MP, hosted a national roundtable in Darwin, Northern Territory, focused on career education in schools. The roundtable brought together 37 representatives from the Commonwealth, state and territory governments, Catholic and independent education sectors, and peak industry, parent and career bodies to discuss the importance of career education in preparing young people for life beyond school.

The roundtable sought to identify a way forward in the development of a National Career Education Strategy with feedback indicating stakeholders support the development of a contemporary strategy reflective of the current context.

Overarching key messages from the roundtable are as follows:

- There was consensus that career education is relevant to all students, regardless of whether they intend to pursue a VET, higher education, or employment pathway - or some combination of these.
- However, participants did express concerns about the quality of provision and outcomes of current career education programs and the need for the strategy to reach into primary school, rather than focussing solely on secondary students.
- Industry articulated a view that existing career education programs are not adequately equipping students with the knowledge and skills they need to successfully transition into further education, training or employment and there is a need for accessible up-to-date information available to students.
- Further comments were made that while there are sufficient resources available, the challenge lies in harnessing these so that young people are able to access them in an effective manner.
- There was strong participant support for the strategy to include a focus on 21st century skills to prepare young people for the jobs of today and the future and to allow them to transition between jobs and careers.
- Participants also strongly expressed the need for greater school and employer collaboration with a need for connections between industry and career advisers but that bringing these stakeholders together required leadership.
- It was also noted that challenges exist regarding the flow of labour market information into schools, with a key difficulty being the resourcing demands that career advisers experience.
- Participants recognised that parents are often the biggest influencers for students when making early career or pathway decisions and that it is important that they are well-informed with up-to-date information in order to provide the best possible guidance to their children.
- Opportunities relating to the use of technology as a means to supplement existing career education were also raised.
Discussion ranged across a number of topics, including school-employer collaboration, parent engagement, multiple pathways, 21st century skills, career advice and information, schools capacity to deliver and technology. A synopsis of the discussion is provided below.

**School-employer collaboration**

It was noted that partnerships with industry and work placements are vital if students are to experience quality career education. However, for some industries, work experience can be problematic for a range of reasons, including workplace safety concerns. Employers are also very busy and schools can struggle to find work placements, particularly for Year 10 students.

For school-business partnerships to be effective and long-lasting there was discussion that ‘champions’ were required – both from the school and employer. Much of the success is down to how much value is placed on harnessing and maintaining the relationship.

Industry members also commented that it is not feasible to provide work placements to all students, but that technology can go some way to filling this gap.

A model suggested as a basis to improve career education was the ‘Three Cs’:

- Clarity - about who is responsible for career education
- Connection - between industry and career advisors
- Coordination - leadership is needed to bring all of this together.

**Parent engagement**

Roundtable participants recognised that parents are often the single biggest influence in terms of their children’s career advice. However, there was also awareness that advice from parents may not reflect contemporary industry developments. Parents will also often prioritise higher education pathways, rather than vocational education and training, in spite of often superior job outcomes for those undertaking VET pathways.

Participants agreed that the career education strategy should have a strong focus on parent engagement.

**Multiple pathways**

Participants recognised that university is often perceived as the pinnacle of success and that vocational education and training (VET) is sometimes perceived as a lesser option. Given this perception, young people are more often directed into university pathways than otherwise could be expected. Questions were raised around how we improve the value of VET as an option in this context.

Participants also noted that career advice needs to provide young people with information that there are a range of pathways and that the option to undertake dual pathways - work and study - is gaining traction and provides students with real life work experience.
21st century skills
There was significant discussion about 21st century skills with widespread consensus that the nature of work is changing and that developing 21st century skills is vital. However, it was noted that the focus should not solely be on 21st century skills to the exclusion of ‘content’. It is not a binary choice and they are equally important. Key points around 21st century skills included:

- embedding 21st century skills in the curriculum- the question is how do we make this explicit to students and how do we make sure that students identify them when they are learning them?
- distinct skills compared with employability skills, which are in fact foundation skills and the terms should not be used interchangeably.

With regard to the measurement and assessment of 21st century skills (otherwise known as general capabilities in the Australian Curriculum), there was discussion that measurement was important for it to gain importance within the curriculum. Counter-views were raised with other participants noting that against any measurement or assessment of such skills can narrow the scope of the capability.

It was also noted that if effort is put into the measurement of 21st century skills the results must be transferable between schools. Socially disadvantaged students tend to be transient so they need to be able to take the outcomes with them.

Career advice and information
In relation to career advice and information, there was agreement that information needs to be a national unbiased source available to young people. Any information source should be freely available and without barriers to using it such as having to log-in as this was seen as detract from its effectiveness.

Industry stakeholders commented that a lot of career information does not discuss what jobs actually require and whether students will be suitable for that type of career. It was noted that such information needs to go into education systems earlier and the strategy should reach into primary schools.

There was broad agreement that students need a career adviser as well as information available for them to access that is informed by industry. It was noted that students need to be linked to careers that have jobs available after they finish and there needs to be adequate labour market information so young people are aware of the skills gaps and where these are located.

Schools capacity to deliver
Participants agreed that schools are managing a number of competing demands and that career education is under resourced.

Often driving a career education agenda in schools is left up to individual principals and if they do not personally value it, students will not have access to effective career education and advice.

It was also noted that career advisers are often very under resourced in terms of timetable constraints. Given this it can very difficult to keep abreast of all of the available labour market information while also maintaining links with industry and meeting other teaching and school obligations.

Participants also discussed that a career adviser should be the last resort for students to seek advice from and that career education needed to start much earlier. Further, it was noted that career education should be embedded and should start in primary school as students disengage much earlier than in secondary school.
Technology
Participants discussed the use of technology in delivering career education. It was widely agreed that technology could be a viable option in providing students ‘tasters’ of work placements and in delivering career education. However, it was noted that technology need not be complex in order to be effective and that simple technology e.g. short film clips would be more effective. This is particularly the case as schools are often not at the cutting edge of information technology.