



WHAT IF?

What if A plus B no longer equals Career guidance?

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What if? papers are designed to compare, increase, and re-evaluate understandings of popular topics relating to vocational education and training (VET).

Starting with an overview of the topic, these papers then ask the question 'What if...?' to create a space for readers to revisit these topics with a fresh perspective and consider contrasting ideas and alternative possibilities.

Why ask ‘what if?’

Displacement felt throughout the workforce for many years has been caused by a number of factors including automation, digital transformation, globalisation, demographic trends, the push for greener economies, and the influence of artificial intelligence (AI) now becoming apparent as well. Automation particularly has had long-term significant influence. Whilst the recent COVID-19 pandemic propelled displacement into the forefront as restrictions and lockdowns caused immediate impact on everyday lives. Currently we are seeing even more fall-out from the pandemic, with businesses closing due to slowing economies, lost revenue, and work from home options causing changes to spending.

This is a fast-moving work environment and, in response, careers have become less defined. Career guidance has had to evolve quickly, and continue to do so, to keep up. In this paper, we look at career guidance through the lens of recent impacts from COVID-19 with consideration to longer term redundancies caused by automation. What was once a reasonably straightforward task, though still complex, has become increasingly ambiguous and poses the question, what if A plus B no longer equals Career guidance?

Choosing a career

A long-term trend, across many countries, has seen young people leaving education more highly qualified than any previous generation, and in many cases, this could be associated with lower levels of adult unemployment (OECD, 2021). Despite this, agencies were becoming increasingly focussed on the importance of investing in career guidance due to the changing world of work, particularly in response to automation. Once the COVID-19 pandemic set in, a ‘systematic, deep and disproportionate’ impact for young people was seen (OECD, 2021, p.1), with those aged 20-29 years impacted most through unemployment and precarious future job prospects (Walsh & Gleeson, 2022). Since the pandemic, attention on youth decision making around careers and employment prospects has increased further (OECD, 2021).

Many young people have remained in education longer and are experiencing challenges and pressure around their decision making. This is mainly due to factors such as inaccessible career guidance support, the nature of jobs during and since COVID-19, a sense of belonging that was impacted by isolation, and balancing desires for jobs they are passionate about and the new realities of job insecurity (OECD, 2021; Jemini-Gashi & Kadriu, 2022). In 2021, a survey of more than 6,500 students and graduates in the UK¹ asked how the pandemic was impacting their career decisions and experiences. Results indicated that more than a quarter of respondents had changed their career plans and 37% were still uncertain about what they would do (Prospects, 2021). Of course, this data reflects mid-pandemic attitudes, occurring during restrictions and lockdowns and these attitudes may have changed since. Nonetheless, it does support the view that career guidance aimed mainly at job satisfaction may no longer be effective in this environment. Instead, employability and stable work are increasingly important post-COVID, and there is growing evidence which ‘points to the valuable role that career guidance has to play in preparing students psychologically to deal with a jobs market that might not live up to their expectations’ (OECD, 2021, p.3).

In 2020 and 2021 face-to-face career guidance, including career guidance in schools, was suspended in many countries, or was conducted remotely in response to COVID-19 restrictions. The use of digital tools and platforms that were already under development intensified and brought with them a new focus on the quality and methods of career guidance delivery that was being provided. Regions and education systems were required to shape their policy development accordingly and work out their own individualised strategies to make the necessary

¹ <https://www.prospects.ac.uk/prospects-press-office/27-percent-of-students-and-graduates-change-career-plans-due-to-covid-19>

technological leap (Holt-White, Montacute & Tibbs, 2022; OECD, 2021; Sergeev, 2022). However, in many countries around the world, career guidance quality and quantity had historically varied within school settings. The experience of disadvantaged students with career guidance and how this shapes their post-school future was already a concern prior to the pandemic. With the digital divide growing exponentially in the last few years, the impact on these students has also increased (Groves et al. 2023; Mares, Cojocariu & Cirtita-Buzoianu, 2021; OECD, 2021). Career guidance practitioners face many new challenges, as forecasting a post-COVID world of work is an ever-shifting task with restrictions to employment opportunities possibly continuing to impact short- and long-term career experiences, opportunities, and trajectories (Gonski & Shergold, 2021; Groves et al. 2023). Prospects were heavily impacted during COVID-19, and young people who had already been engaging in precarious casual work found themselves with few or no options left (Walsh & Gleeson, 2022). Post-pandemic career guidance has a central role to play in preparing students psychologically to deal with this new world of work and the economies supporting it, which may take decades to fully recover (OECD, 2021).

Groves et al. (2023) highlight the long-term psychological effects of the pandemic impact on young people citing Akkermans, Richardson & Kraimer's (2020) discussions of 'career shock' (p.3) and the possibility that the pandemic may have 'significant career consequences for several years' and 'long-term psychological effects' for this cohort (Akkermans, Richardson & Kraimer, 2020, p.3). Being able to direct people's readiness and resources for dealing with situations as they arise (Villiers, 2020) will become an important part of any career development professional's wheelhouse if it hasn't already. Adaptation and application, already becoming a central focus for young people before the pandemic, are now critical skills and the new cornerstones of career decision making and job seeking. However, as Villiers observes, 'many people, but particularly young people, affected by COVID-19 will not be in a position to easily adapt, due to their social, educational and financial circumstances, and mental and/or physical health' (Villiers, 2020, p.24). It will be vital to help get aspirations and careers back on track whilst giving people ongoing career management skills, which was also a focus pre-COVID, so they can 'continue to make informed choices and decisions throughout their lives' (Villiers, 2020, p.24).

In Australia, as part of the 'myfuture Insights' collection², Hooley (2022) presents a paper on how to take account of COVID-19 effects when supporting young people in their career explorations. The paper highlights the impact at micro, meso and macro levels, lays out a nine-step recovery plan and explains how career education can support a deeper level of understanding,

Young people may tend to focus on the micro level, recognising what they are feeling and the immediate difficulties they are facing. Encouraging them to perceive the meso and macro levels will help them to see that the pandemic is not just happening to them and that many of the challenges they are facing are not their fault and are out of their control. This can be a good basis to build opportunities for peer learning and support and a sense that 'we are all in this together'. Ultimately, young people need to be empowered to build their careers in difficult circumstances and to avoid blaming themselves for things that they cannot control (p.3).

Waugh & Circelli (2021) also point out, 'in any economic downturn, carefully considered career guidance for young people becomes critical' (p.9), discussing the need for career guidance to support students more broadly than expected, and clarifying the advantages of individualised guidance that reinforces the mind-set of young people combined with supporting individual aspirations and skills.

Looking for a change

A decades-long downward trend in the movement of workers between jobs in the Australian labour market (Black & Chow, 2022) intensified with the onset of the pandemic. The labour market was significantly disrupted, many workers were 'stood down' from their employment, meaning they were still employees but stopped working and

² <https://myfuture.edu.au/assist-others/insights>

were not paid. Many also had their work hours greatly reduced. Job mobility fell sharply as people became reluctant to change jobs during this uncertain time with fewer job opportunities and the effect of the Government wage subsidy JobKeeper, which kept ‘workers linked to their employers’ (Black & Chow, 2022, p.25). When lockdowns and restrictions were finally lifted, job mobility rose. During the year ending February 2023, 1.3 million Australians changed their jobs, causing a 9.5% job mobility rate, the highest recorded since February 2012 (ABS, 2023). Of the 2.3 million people who left or lost a job in the 12 months prior to February 2023, 32% left their job ‘to get a better job or just wanted a change’ (ABS, 2023, Left or lost a job, para. 1), a significant increase from 21% who cited these reasons during the pandemic (ABS, 2023).

Independently of COVID-19, non-market driven conditions that cause a career change by choice are personal, health-related, or family driven (Kreisberg, 2015). Identity driven career change, where people express their identity through their job and feel that their current job no longer fulfills that aspect of their lives, is also prominent (Kreisberg, 2015). Haasler & Barabasch (2015) discuss career transitions affecting individuals across all professions and specialisations, from highly skilled to low-skilled workers. They highlight that self-directed or voluntary mid-life or mid-career transitions tend to be the most formative as they reflect the struggles between a sense of self and the demands of the external world and broader societal expectations. It is at the mid-life or mid-career stage that some individuals question their life’s purpose and look to change their career path to be more aligned with their interests and values, to give their life meaning (Haasler & Barabasch, 2015).

More recently, international news stories suggest a great resignation or great reshuffle in the labour market. Many of these stories contain interviews with people describing their reasons for changing jobs or career path because of the pandemic. For example:

- A recent university graduate working for a large advertising firm in the UK quit her job to become a full-time artist working from a studio in her home. The pandemic made her realise that life is short, ‘you might as well be doing something that you love and are passionate about’ (Corker, 2021, para. 13).
- An audio engineer in the American music industry who was furloughed during the pandemic wanted a more family-friendly career after spending a few months being a stay-at-home dad. After investing in a coding boot camp, he was offered a job as a data engineer where he can work from home (Ladifi, 2022).
- An Australian former corporate banker who quit his job to set up a dog washing franchise, which satisfied his love of animals (Theocharous, 2023).
- Another Australian worker quit a 30-year career in insurance to pursue his passion for drawing and started working as a tram driver to support this passion, stating in the article that he’s ‘the happiest I have ever been, living my dream’ (Theocharous, 2023, para. 9).

When we talk about career change, what we mean is when a person moves to participating in work, or an occupation, that is different to what they have done previously. This can be a new occupation with the same employer or moving to a new employer. In both cases, the individual usually learns new skills to make this change (Kreisberg, 2015). Career guidance might help alleviate some of the challenges faced when changing careers by choice, by helping with the initial decision making as well as providing information about how to put the decision into action. Well-developed self-motivation, agency, and self-efficacy shape how well individuals cope with career change and develop their careers, but having access to career counselling and guidance at all points across a working life enhances success and potentially prevents missteps (Barabasch, 2017). Indeed, a position statement by the Career Development Association of Australia (Villiers, 2020) argues that the pandemic has highlighted the need to establish ‘a highly visible, lifelong career guidance system that ensures all people have access to career support across their lifespan’ (Villiers, 2020, p.11). Villiers (2020) argues the importance of continuing government funded career information collection and dissemination, particularly when people of all ages and stages of life will need access to accurate career information.

Changing due to necessity

Neering & Davis (2023) define a displaced worker as 'someone who is unemployed or underemployed due to a persistent reduction in demand for their job and unlikely to find a similar job with similar compensation' (p.3). Before the outbreak of the pandemic, workplaces in Australia and around the world were changing at an unprecedented rate and the numbers of displaced workers were increasing. These changes were mainly in response to globalisation of trade and technological advancements, particularly the automation of job tasks (Cavanough, Wherrett & Zerbib, 2021; Neering & Davis 2023). Labour demands had already started to move away from manufacturing, whilst new and emerging occupations associated with a greener, carbon-neutral economy, and advances in science and technology also emerged and drove up demand for higher skills (Kim et al. 2021; Myers, Harding & Pasolli, 2021; Oschinski & Nguyen, 2022; Topalovic & Mullock, 2022). On top of these existing challenges in the workforce, retrenchments and redundancy escalated globally due to COVID-19. Labour market disruption grew further as the pandemic intensified a 'shift to remote work and virtual interactions, the surge in use of e-commerce and other digital platforms, and the deployment of automation and AI' (Lund et al. 2021, p.5). Inequities were accentuated for the most vulnerable groups in the labour market along with those workers who were most affected by COVID-19 restrictions and the need to move services online. Young people, the low-skilled, migrants, racial and ethnic minorities, and low-wage workers became over-represented in sectors exposed to a higher risk of COVID-19 infection or job loss, such as the care sector, hospitality, travel, leisure, and retail (OECD, 2022; Kanders et al. 2020; Zelloth et al., 2020; Forti & Mullock, 2021; Oschinski & Nguyen, 2022). Emerging from this disruption was also a new wave of non-trade displaced workers, including those from the professional and business service sectors (Cavanough, Wherrett & Zerbib, 2021; Neering & Davis, 2023). With low and middle skilled occupations continuing to disappear, transition options for workers into similar roles were reduced, making retraining for a new occupation the new norm for many (Neering & Davis, 2023; Henehan, 2020; Kanders et al. 2020; Scarpetta, Quintini & Navarro-Palau, 2022). Affected workers found they needed to confront automation sooner, retrain in a different occupation or upgrade skills in their current occupation (Kanders et al. 2020; Locke, 2022). These labour market challenges highlight that the skills required to continually manage careers are important, especially as individuals may undergo several career transitions in their working lives (CDAA, 2022; Cedefop, 2020; Zelloth et al. 2020).

Within this dynamic environment the quality, accessibility and relevance of career services were being questioned, even before the pandemic, including for displaced workers. An Australian study carried out prior to the pandemic found that career support information was not readily available to all, not representative of all careers and pathways, sometimes difficult to understand, and of variable quality (PricewaterhouseCoopers Australia, 2017, p.ii). With the migration to online services due to the pandemic, there was an opportunity to raise the standard by innovating, increasing access, and aligning services to client needs and preferences (Cedefop, 2020; Scarpetta, Quintini & Navarro-Palau, 2022; Forti & Mullock, 2021; Hector, 2021). For example:

- The Australian program designed for employees from Dnata Catering whose positions were being made redundant during the pandemic. These long-term workers were diverse in age, many had limited English, no access to computers or few digital skills. Modifying their usual approach, Career Money Life (CML) combined online, face-to-face, and virtual services, to provide a tailored, self-service online platform underpinned by personal assistance from professional staff (CDAA, 2022, p.47).
- Pandemic related career initiatives such as the Future Skills Centre and Ontario Tourism Education Corporation (ONTEC) collaboration in Canada, that developed an online platform about financial aid, training, job opportunities and options to work in related industries for displaced tourism and hospitality workers.
- In the UK, City & Guilds partnered with the online learning platform FutureLearn to create Skills Bridges, online courses to help displaced workers transition to jobs in higher growth industries (Hector, 2021, p.46). The UK government launched Skills Bootcamps that later transferred online and were 'tailored to industry

needs and, in some cases, bespoke designed for some particular employers or occupations' (Williams et al. 2021, p.82).

- In the United States, the Rapid Skilling programme was designed for low-skilled, low-income adults to gain competency through short online courses that delivered the minimal amount of training required for in-demand occupations (Scarpetta et al. 2020).

Well before COVID-19, employment services, usually aimed at job matching and getting people back to work quickly, tended to apply a one-size-fits-all approach, which no longer works. Whilst innovation, increasing access and aligning services to user needs are all important changes in this area, the prospect of changing careers can be daunting for a displaced worker due to the anxiety and stress involved. They may need to move away from their community, return to learning to upgrade skills or undertake retraining activities, as well as confront digitalisation in work or learning contexts for the first time; sometimes they are faced with rebuilding their occupational identity at the same time as building their identity as a learner (Cedefop, 2016). Employment services could be paired, or replaced, with career guidance that considers these more personal aspects of change that have been heightened further through the pandemic (Sultana, 2012; Cedefop, 2014; Topalovic & Mullock, 2022). Indeed, the research shows that it is now essential for career guidance provision to regard ongoing pandemic-related impacts and include mental health counselling for those clients impacted and who may be dealing with its aftermath (Autin et al. 2020), whilst taking into consideration pre-COVID labour market trends which are predicted to persist long-term (Lund et al. 2021; Scarpetta, Quintini & Navarro-Palau, 2022).

A pressing issue for policymakers before the pandemic was to help displaced workers move across sectors into lower risk jobs that are less susceptible to automation, and which offer better employment security (Bateman & Ross, 2021). This has amplified since the pandemic and underscores the importance of ready access to good quality career guidance and advice, particularly as many displaced workers from both pre- and post-pandemic times have valuable employment experience and job skills, often transferable, making targeted retraining easier and faster for the most part. They are best served by career guidance tools and strategies that identify their existing skills, individual experience and interests then direct them to relevant employment opportunities and skill upgrading options (Oschinski & Nguyen, 2022).

Broad impacts to VET career guidance in Australia

The recent impact of COVID-19, through high unemployment and skills shortages, has seen Australian policy initiatives introduced, such as fee-free TAFE courses in high demand industries³. As outlined below, some states have also introduced free in-person or video conferencing sessions with a career practitioner; people who are currently employed but who require advice or guidance in changing their career are also able to access these services:

- Careers NSW⁴: provide lifelong careers information, advice, and professional guidance
- Skills and Job Centres Victoria⁵: offer free career, employment, and training support services
- Job and Skills Centres Western Australia⁶: one-stop shops for careers, training and employment advice and assistance; services are free, and accessible to all members of the community.

The remaining states and territory governments provide primarily online information. The Skills and Job Centres in Victoria and Western Australia are located at TAFEs, in both metropolitan and regional areas, where information and advice regarding skill development in vocational education and training (VET), and industries and

³ Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, *Fee-free TAFE*, viewed February 2024, <https://www.dewr.gov.au/skills-reform/fee-free-tafe>

⁴ <https://www.nsw.gov.au/departments-and-agencies/department-of-education/careersnsw>

⁵ <https://www.vic.gov.au/skills-and-jobs-centres>

⁶ <https://www.jobsandskills.wa.gov.au/jobs-and-skills-centre>

jobs that are in-demand are their focus. Although online information has boomed since the pandemic and suits those who are self-motivated and possess competent digital and research skills enabling them to navigate this information, the provision of information is very different to a personalised service, and may not be accessible for everyone, causing this type of career guidance to be unsuitable or out of reach for some.

One area where we can see change is in enrolment numbers for VET programs, which saw a rise of 39,620 (1.5%) in 2022 compared to pre-COVID-19 levels in 2019 (NCVER, 2023). However, we cannot ascertain from the data if the increase was driven by choice or through necessity because of redundancy. There were some notable differences by age with those aged between 40-64 exhibiting a decrease in enrolments and the under 40 and over 65 age groups increasing over the same period, as follows:

- 14 years and under, rose by 175 enrolments (+2.8%)
- 15-19 years, rose by 14,925 (+2.0%)
- 20-24 years, rose by 11,525 enrolments (+2.5%)
- 25-29 years rose by 1,455 enrolments (+0.4%)
- 30-39 years rose by 32,620 enrolments (+6.3%)
- 40-64 years decreased by -24,180 enrolments (-4.1%)
- 65 years and over rose by 3,650 enrolments (+15.2%)

Based on interviews conducted in 2021, VET providers have indicated that the reasons for people turning to VET after COVID-19 have changed, with learners motivated to choose fields with sustainable employment prospects and job security, choosing work-integrated options such as internships and apprenticeships, and/or taking up government incentives that target key industries. These providers noted that the people deciding on a career change were more able to do so because of specific funding initiatives being made available to them, such as fee-free TAFE courses (Trimboli, Lees & Zhang, 2023). For displaced workers, transitioning into sustainable employment in higher growth industries is a good outcome as these industries, though still susceptible to automation, will be more secure whilst making the best use of their transferable skills. The Career Development Association of Australia (2022) proposes that awareness and take up of VET pathways for displaced workers can be enhanced and facilitated by career development services offered by VET/TAFE providers.

Such services would ideally be characterised by strong industry links, good understanding of labour market trends, and the capacity to provide individually tailored, holistic approaches to enable suitable matches between skills and employment opportunities (CDAA, 2022, p.12). Also, using easy to interpret, 'real time' local labour market information (LMI) is seen to help career guidance practitioners and individuals to identify roles and sectors offering sustainable employment along with the skills needed for those jobs. Training options can be matched to jobs best suited to individual skills and experience with potential to maintain earnings and skills (Oschinski, M & Nguyen, T 2022; Hector, 2021). However, not everyone has the ability or competence to understand LMI. Alexander, McCabe & De Backer (2019) caution that 'facilitating client access to, and interpretation of, LMI is often more valuable than direct provision of information as it helps build skills and competence in information handling' (p.12).

One example of this 'real time' information is the Jobs Hub⁷, launched initially as an Australian government response to COVID-19, to provide data on jobs in demand by location and current vacancies by industry, and used as a tool for individuals (particularly displaced workers) to find out in which other occupations they could use their skills. The Australian Government has released the beta version of Jobs and Skills Atlas⁸ to provide labour market data at regional, state and national levels across occupations, skills and industries.

⁷ Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, *Jobs Hub*, viewed February 2024, <https://www.dewr.gov.au/jobs-hub>

⁸ Jobs and Skills Australia, *Jobs and Skills Atlas*, viewed March 2024, <https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/data/jobs-and-skills-atlas>

LMI is useful for all people making career decisions and looking for new, in-demand career options. Several jobs requiring a vocational qualification fall into this category with the top 20 ‘in demand’ occupations reported in Jobs and Skills Australia’s December 2023 labour market update including child carers, aged and disabled carers, chefs, metal fitters and machinists, and electricians (Jobs and Skills Australia, 2023, p.30). Given the demand for these occupations, VET may be an attractive option to individuals, and this might be further driven by the Australian Government funding an additional 300,000 fee-free TAFE and VET places in partnership with states and territories from January 2024⁹.

What if...?

The currently turbulent labour market is likely to persist due to the continued fall-out from the pandemic in conjunction with the longer-term changes that have been accelerated due to technological innovation. Patterns of AI, automation, digital transformation, globalisation, demographic trends, and increased drive towards greener economies require both contingency and recovery plans for learners and workers (WGCG, 2021). Career guidance can and should play an important role, especially if/when supporting people more holistically, including the provision of wraparound supports, for example childcare, and advice to help overcome barriers to training faced by working-age adults (Myers, Harding & Pasolli, 2021).

To enable individuals to reach employment goals, adapt to change personally and professionally, and apply knowledge and skills to a wider range of job opportunities, many believe this holistic approach needs to be individualised with the collaboration of several service providers (CDAA, 2022; Cedefop et al. 2020; Neering & Davis, 2023; Topalovic & Mullock, 2022). The OECD also recommends career guidance delivered in schools be individually tailored to account for changing labour market requirements both long and short term. Personalised career guidance is particularly successful if commenced at a young age, as evidenced in OECD research, and is especially important among disadvantaged students who have historically experienced poor levels of career readiness during economic turbulence (Holt-White, Montacute & Tibbs, 2022; OECD, 2021). Considering these many factors, we might ask questions like:

- What if a single, lifelong career guidance and support system was available for all people in Australia? Could it include:
 - individualized and holistic support with the collaboration of several service providers?
 - increased support for emotional and psychological aspects?
 - access to ‘real time’ local LMI and effective skills profiling tools? Would this result in more people being directed towards efficient retraining for skills in demand?
 - the voices of various user cohorts in conversations about how effective current strategies are, and potential innovations?
- What if changes to the labour market, especially recent disruption from COVID-19, are encouraging more people to consider VET?
 - If relationships between employers, career guidance practitioners, and job seekers were stronger, and a career guidance system was based on these stronger relationships, would this facilitate greater participation in vocational pathways?
 - Could fee-free TAFE courses and/or other financial incentives in targeted industries continue?

⁹ Australian Government National Careers Institute, *Your Career*, viewed January 2024, <https://www.yourcareer.gov.au/fee-free-tafe>

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