Thinking in a joined-up way: the importance of the 'careers information ecology'

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By exploring young people's access to and use of a wide range of career resources, we can further nuance our understanding of what formal services can and might do. This includes where we might direct young people to find more information and/or alternative perspectives.

Researching the 'careers information ecology'

Career guidance research and practice often focuses on the two-way relationship between career counsellor and client. But for young people, this is likely to be only one of a wide range of career information sources they engage with. Online career information services have proliferated, targeting a variety of education needs and audiences (Hooley & Staunton, 2021). Young people access both formal and informal services and have discussions with many groups of people.

In our recent research, we set out to document the kinds of information-seeking activities young Australians engage in. We analysed what sources they were most confident in and how these connect with each other. To do this, we developed a unique multi-method study, revolving around three original newly generated datasets:

- a survey of 1,103 young people aged 16–24
- focus groups with 90 young people (half still at school, half having left school)
- 15,000 comments scraped from four relevant social media platforms (ATARNotes, Whirlpool, Reddit and Bored of Studies).

As per Figure 1, we observed a wide range of activities that young people have undertaken in relation to making decisions about their career. Just under half have consulted a career advisor. We also noted the significant role in career advice provision played by 'networks of intimacy'; 58% had consulted parents and family members, and 55% had talked to friends or other students.
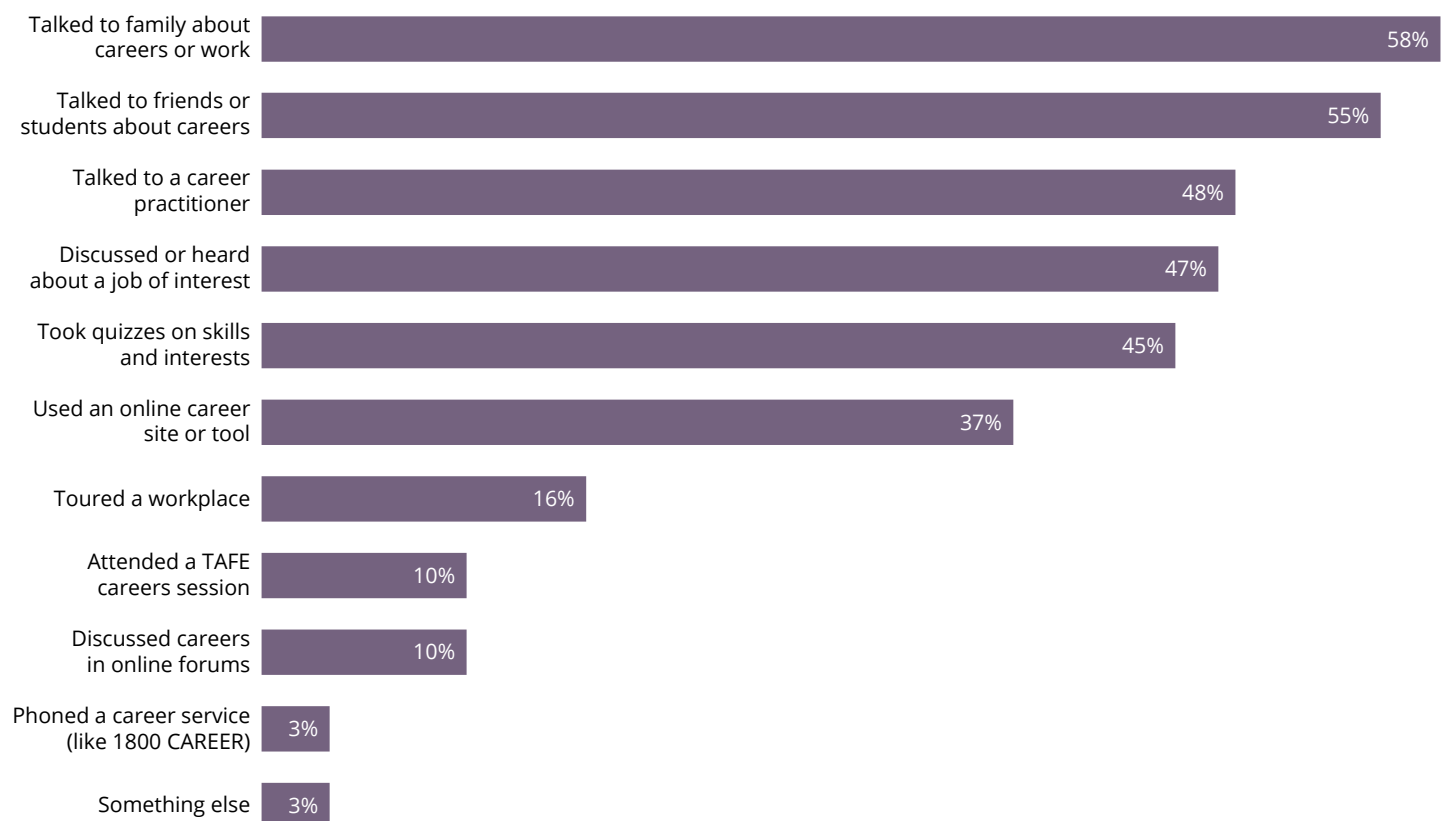

Figure 1: *Which of the following activities have you ever done to help make decisions about your future career? (Data source: Survey. n = 1,046 [excludes 62 (6%) respondents who selected 'none of the above']).*

The presence of a 'careers information ecology' – with multiple sources of valued information – comes into clearer view in the next figure. This shows how confident young Australians are that these activities are useful. At first glance there is variation in confidence and a hierarchy of sorts. For example, listening to or talking to someone in a job the young person aspires to inspires the most confidence. This is closely followed by talking to parents or family members and talking to friends. While there is a marked drop-off in the proportion who are very confident in the usefulness of talking to a career practitioner, the overall level of confidence remains high. Indeed, young people generally appear to have confidence in all sources of career information.

Our focus groups revealed that confidence gaps for school-age young people were linked to mixed experiences of guidance within school. Post-school, young people gravitated toward hands-on experience: they felt the pressure (as well as the opportunity and excitement) to keep learning, and/or to begin applying learning in the workforce.

These different sources might appear to be in competition with one another. However, by thinking of them as components within a career information ecology, we can see that each operates relationally and in an interconnected fashion. Like any good ecosystem, the component parts sustain and work with one another productively and in tandem. Each experience within this information ecology can, and often does, have an impact upon young people's engagement with another part.

We believe that such an understanding can ensure that practitioners, researchers and parents pay full attention to the range of 'interactions, relations, networks and alliances [that are] the building blocks for agency in guidance practice' (Toiviainen, 2022), ensuring that young people's capacity to make informed decisions is optimised. It is even more important when we consider that access to many of these sources is also constrained by familiar contours of inequality such as socioeconomic background, rural versus urban location, and Indigenous status (Roberts et al., 2023).
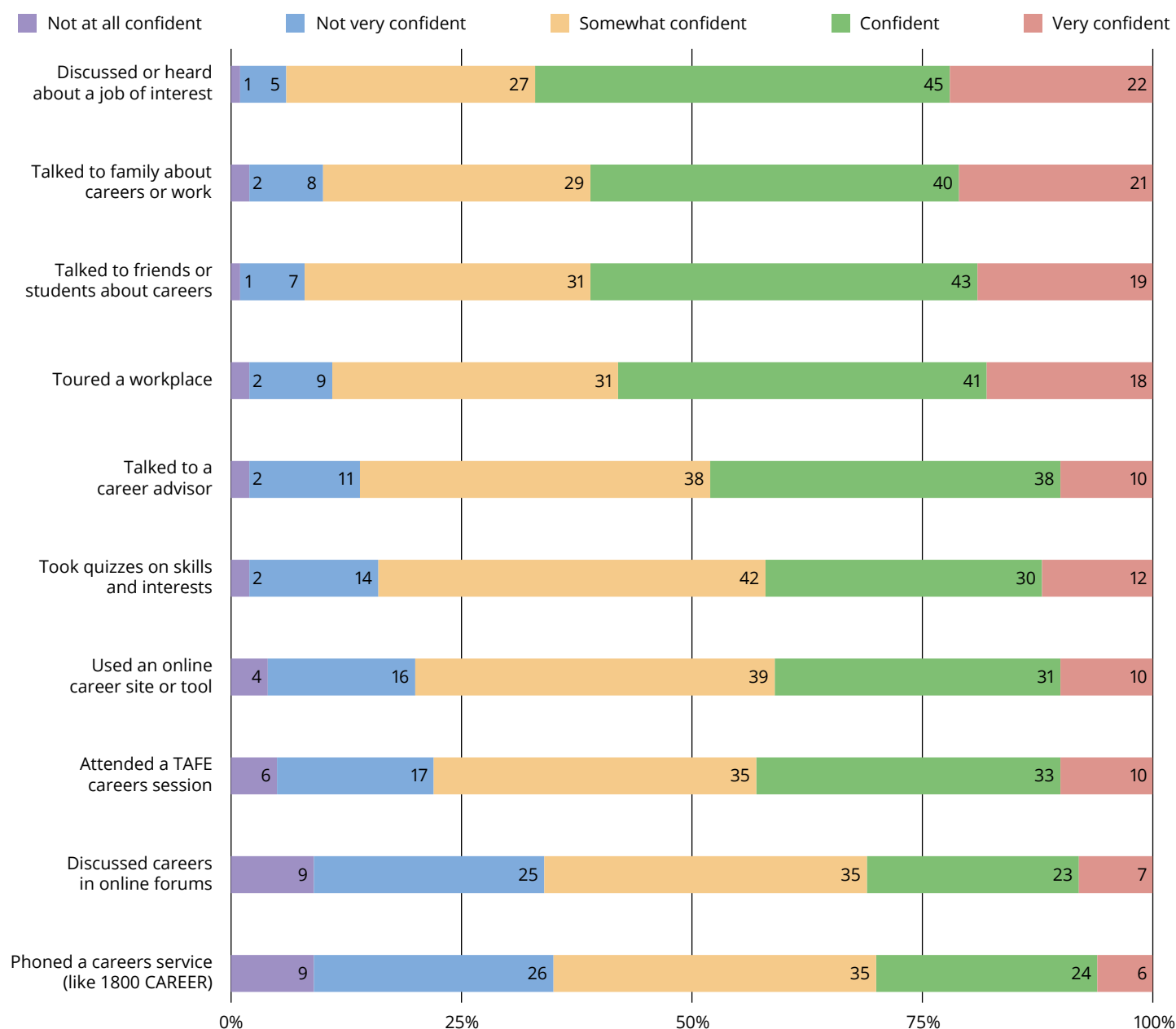

Figure 2. How confident are you that these activities would provide useful information? (Data source: Survey. n = 996 [excludes 112 (10%) respondents who reported in the preceding question that they were unlikely to undertake any of these activities in the next 12 months]).

The importance of peer support … and in trusting online settings

An important aspect of the connectedness of the career information ecology is found in the ways that young people share with one another. As noted above, talking to friends or other students about careers was esteemed almost to the same extent as speaking to a parent. However, peer support extends beyond immediate friends. This is most evident in our analysis of social media data.

Against the grain of popular concerns about the internet, and social media in particular, being a place imbued with hostility and/or misinformation (Sampson et al., 2018), the interactions we observe are cause for optimism. What we found was abundant evidence of young people helping one another in a non-competitive manner, asking and responding to questions in thoughtful and detailed ways. This is another reminder that careers information is constituted and navigated collectively rather than individually.

What becomes clear is that these online spaces can give young people scope to reach outside of their normal networks and connect with others who may have knowledge of, or experience in, jobs and fields of interest. The sharing and support we observed provided students with encouragement and highlighted opportunities outside of linear narrow career visions. In such stories, dropping out, changing one's mind about career or education directions, and 'failure' were often narratively reframed in positive ways to depict that such challenges can be, and often are, successfully overcome.

Often composed in a self-aware manner, we believe these exchanges offer generalised career skills and that simply having these conversations is beneficial. Some nuggets of advice emphasised an individual's hard work and self-responsibility. However, the systemic nature of labour market challenges and awareness of structural barriers (such as gender and race) are built into some of these conversations. We contend that raising awareness of peer-led sources such as these could aid in overcoming variable uptake of careers information among marginalised groups.

Tips for practitioners

1 **Think ecologically:** Educators often worry that too much information might become confusing. But note that any one source of information is one cog in the machine. Directing young people to other sources of information could be fruitful.

2 **Encourage young people and parents to engage in multiple sources of information:** There is no such thing as a definitive or comprehensive source of careers information. The best insights are often those assembled from a variety of sources.

3 **Curate and aggregate:** Educators have an important role to play in helping students find and assess quality information sources. For example, various levels and areas of government provide labour market resources. Introduce students to these and help them to evaluate their worth within the career information ecosystem.

4 **Trust young people to trust other young people:** Peer advice is more of an opportunity than a threat. Young people can assess the reliability of their sources of information. Broad information ecosystems provide checks and balances by virtue of their diversity.

5 **Think about a student's out-of-school life:** When evaluating specific career education programs, practices or interventions, consider what young people do outside of the boundaries of the classroom or counsellor's office. Think about how the various information sources interconnect in terms of those students' career information journeys.

6 **Make career planning plural and open:** Engage with social media sources to get a sense of the conversations being had and *encourage* your students to engage with a wide variety of online sources themselves.

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References and further reading

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