Article

Young Australians Navigating the 'Careers Information Ecology'

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Abstract: The policy orientations of advanced neoliberal democracies situate young people as rational actors who are responsible for their own career outcomes. While career scholars have been critical of how this routinely ignores the unequal effects of structural constraints on personal agency, they have long suggested that young people should have access to the best available 'roadmaps' and advice to navigate the uncertainties baked into the contemporary economic landscape. Complementing the significant attention that is given to the (potentially emancipatory) experience of formal careers guidance, we present findings from a multi-method study. We explore young Australians' (aged 15–24) navigation of careers information through a nationally representative survey (n = 1103), focus groups with 90 participants and an analysis of 15,227 social media comments. We suggest that the variety of formal and informal sources pursued and accessed by young people forms a relational 'ecology'. This relationality is twofold. First, information is often sequential, and engagements with one source can inform the experience or pursuit of another. Second, navigation of the ecology is marked by a high level of intersubjectivity through interpersonal support networks including peers, family and formal service provision. These insights trouble a widespread, but perhaps simplistic, reading of young people having largely internalised a neoliberal sensibility of 'entrepreneurial selfhood' in their active pursuit of a range of career advice. Throughout our analysis, we attend to the ways that engagement in the career information ecology is shaped by social inequalities, further underscoring challenges facing careers guidance and social justice goals.

Keywords: careers; career guidance; youth; youth transitions; social justice

1. Introduction

Driven by economic restructuring and neoliberal policy imperatives, young people in industrialised societies are normatively charged with managing their transition from education to the labour market in a quasi-entrepreneurial fashion [1]. To navigate the uncertainties and individual nature of careers, young people are widely situated as needing 'extensive knowledge of both themselves and the educational and occupational opportunities open to them' [2] (p. 472). Formal careers guidance and information, located as a matter of both individual and public policy interest, is considered by policy-makers and international agencies, such as the OECD [3], to have a fundamental role to play in delivering this knowledge [4,5]. While relevant for all stages of a contemporary life course that often necessitates lifelong learning [6], research attention and policy discussion and public investment is most commonly aimed at young people and careers guidance within compulsory education [4]. Our approach in this article follows this dominant focus, attending to careers guidance for young people.

Partly breaking away from its roots in psychology, contemporary careers guidance research has increasingly sought to problematise the predominantly technocratic approach of guidance provision that emphasises matching individual young people to employers' needs. Humanistic approaches to careers guidance practice that centre personal growth and self-actualisation have proliferated, but the issue of whether and how these approaches can 'be of the greatest benefit to the least advantaged' [7] (p. 5) is now firmly part of the scholarly agenda. As well as addressing issues of quality of provision [8] and inequality in access and experiences [9], research in this vein has also paid significant attention to the roles of families and communities, as well as careers practitioners, in enhancing young people's agency.

In this paper, we complement the substantial attention given to experiences of, and the (potentially emancipatory) role for, formal careers guidance by mapping and exploring a breadth of careers guidance activity. We suggest that exploring young people's access to and use of a wide range of resources is fruitful to further nuance our understanding of what formal services can and might do, and deliver more insights into the impediments to social justice. We set out to explore what Australian young people do and what they consider to be effective (or ineffective) careers guidance and information. While other stakeholders, such as careers guidance counsellors, can produce rich and useful insights in respect of trying to improve services, we follow Kashefpakdel and Percy's [10] (p. 16) empirically grounded assertion that '[the] contemporary judgements of young people themselves demand respect'. Doing so situates young people as 'legitimate knowers' of their own experience [5] and can add more meaningful insights than might be gleaned from adult-centric approaches.

Accordingly, we present findings from a multi-method study, drawing on analysis of 15,227 social media comments, focus groups with 90 participants (age 16–24) and a nationally representative survey of 15 to 24-year-olds (n = 1103), to explore young Australians' navigation of careers information in the broadest sense. Attending to the breadth of activities and sources that young people engage with, and how this engagement is marked by social inequalities, we present the idea of a 'careers information ecology'—expanding existing descriptions of an online 'matrix' [8] of careers information. We argue that this is an important starting point to assess any aspect of careers related engagement (and/or its absence) and its capacity to enhance young people's agency.

We suggest that the careers information ecology should be understood as relational, in the sense that no one activity is necessarily independent from another; but also relational, in the sense that the role of peers is a key feature of the information-seeking and giving we observed. While illustrating a high degree of awareness about, and very active pursuit of, careers information, the degree of interdependence observed in our data further undermines the idea that young people have largely internalised a neoliberal sensibility of independent 'entrepreneurial selfhood' [11]. As we discuss our findings, we also examine the ways that access, engagement and experiences to different sources of advice are sometimes determined by unequal access to social resources.

2. Literature

Our study is informed by two sets of intertwined, yet sometimes antagonistic, literature. On one hand, we are informed by critical studies of youth transitions, which has historically concerned itself with understanding drivers and constraints in young people's journeys to adulthood. The education-to-work transition is a vital part of that journey, making it important to understand how careers services—alongside other factors, such as education systems, occupational organisation, discursive norms and social and cultural resources—fit into the broader context of differentiated and unequal labour market outcomes for young people. This is the field of enquiry from which we launched the current investigation. On the other hand, our study is unavoidably informed by, and contributes to, the more narrowly focused literature that attends, both theoretically and empirically, to the practice and possibilities of careers guidance.

2.1. Structure, Agency and Young People's Careers: Contestation and Theoretical Developments

Debates about the usefulness and function of careers guidance and its impact on young people's transitions to adulthood have existed for many decades. Looking back at a lively exchange between Ken Roberts and Phillip Daws [12,13], we can identify chief concerns of the field that continue to echo in research today. The former offered a scathing assessment of the increased emphasis on 'occupational choice', and the idea that 'young people were encouraged to continuously appraise themselves and their opportunities, to make their next steps accordingly' [14] (p. 357). Roberts—for four decades [12,14,15]—argued that critical analyses of youth transitions should emphasise the role of opportunity structures, which 'limit the genuine careers that are available, restrict the scope for individual occupational choice, and likewise circumscribe the role available for vocational guidance' [12] (p. 4). The role of careers guidance is, for Roberts, at best, 'marginal', given it can 'not change other social institutions for the better' [12] (p. 7) and, at worst, might ensure that 'young people will become less able to adjust to the world as it is' [12] (p. 7) as a result of receiving too much information. Rejecting many of these concerns with social structures, Daws' rebuttal derived from, and extolled, the virtues of psychological (and to some extent interdisciplinary) approaches: motivation, self-concept, aspiration, inter-group difference and the role of the individual were all emphasised in Daws' contention that careers guidance should 'help children transcend socially-imposed barriers [through] a full awareness of choice and opportunity' [13] (p. 14) and 'must also play the role of catalyst in the production of desirable social change' [13] (p. 17).

These tensions, while not necessarily resolved, were productively developed over the next two decades, with sociologists of youth paying more attention to the complex interplay between social and cultural influences and individual decision making. Notably, Willis [16] and Williamson and Williamson [17] produced fascinating accounts of processes of social (and occupational) reproduction, despite new aspirations, in the lives of working-class young men; meanwhile Griffin [18] and Bates [19] considered similar questions for young women. Drawing on the argument that individuals in 'late modern' societies need to reflexively manage their own life trajectories [20,21], others have critiqued the neoliberal impulse among policy-makers in so-called 'advanced' countries that emphasised 'that individuals can and should be responsible for their own decisions and careers' [22] (p. 31).

Informed by an increasing attention to how structure and agency are co-constitutive and symbiotic [20], Hodkinson and Sparkes' theory of 'careership' [22] offered an important contribution. They combined attention to 'pragmatically rational decision-making; choices and interactions within a field [of training and guidance]; and choices within a life course consisting of inter-linked routines and turning-points [22] (p. 32). Emerging from this, the idea of 'horizons for action' offered a useful frame for understanding the social and cultural constraints that serve to restrict agency in particular ways, but nonetheless give sufficient scope to understand social actors as necessarily agentic (see also Evans' work on 'bounded agency' [23]). This understanding, or variations of it, has since become mainstream, and sociologically informed critical careers scholars have long suggested that young people should have access to the best available advice to help negotiate the uncertainty baked into the contemporary economic landscape, which influences outcomes in study and work. While we might expect that psychologically inspired studies of career would include a heavy emphasis on individual choices, these too have often proceeded with appreciation of social and contextual factors. The work of Ingrid Schoon provides notable examples where, through longitudinal quantitative research into the role of agency processes (such as competency, resources, skills and aspiration), she has repeatedly demonstrated the impact of historical context and social origins (such as parental occupation and gender) in career development [24–27].

The question of the role of agency, and its weight in the equation, remain a matter of importance—and of debate—for both youth transition scholars and careers guidance researchers. In respect of the former, Schoon, for example, has built on two decades of findings to elaborate a 'Social-Ecological Developmental Perspective', in which 'agency

is understood as a relational construct that emerges through interaction with a wider socio-cultural context' [27] (p. 137), and sets this against literature where agency is 'conceptualized as a sheer individual level construct, [or] as the mere reproduction of existing social structures' [27] (p. 137). Nonetheless, such developments have co-existed alongside persistent concerns about an emphasis on the role of aspirations in life trajectories. While not entirely echoing his critique on the utility of careers guidance, many researchers have continued to parallel Roberts' [12] concern with opportunity structures by drawing attention to how raising aspirations cannot act as a vehicle for improving life chances without 'corresponding demand' in employment opportunities at the top of the economy [28,29]. This point is made through research, not only in the Anglo-world, but also internationally. Bellino's study of young people in a refugee camp in Ghana [30], Koo's account of migrants in China [31] and Petesch et al.'s exploration of youth in rural Pakistan [32] are all instructive examples of the constraints that opportunity structures have on young people's employment prospects in diverse settings.

2.2. Parallel Advances in Careers Scholarship

Complementing the insights in the youth transitions literature, the careers scholarship now abundantly recognizes that 'career transition is influenced by social, cultural, and political conceptions of success, progress, and agency' [33] (p. 617). Yet, an important starting point is a recent argument made by Hooley [4], who wrestles with the loose definitional boundaries of what careers guidance is—before even considering what such guidance *does*—in contemporary times. For Hooley [4] (p. 662), the meaning of 'careers guidance' is unclear and is best considered an 'empty signifier': a term able to withstand shifting political purposes, yet remain broadly hegemonic in institutional thought (such as for the OECD) [34]. Without fully addressing what careers guidance is, we can still see that, given its role in facilitating the allocation of life chances, it is inarguably part of a profoundly political process. Importantly, there are, among others, conservative, liberal, progressive and radical perspectives on the potentials for careers guidance practice [35]. That is, while the origin of careers guidance and vocational support emerged from concerns for social reform [36], 'it faces the issue of whether it serves to reinforce such inequalities or to reduce them' [37] (p. 351). Ultimately, careers guidance practitioners are left with 'a fundamental choice':

> ' . . . that is, to be technocrats that skilfully help others fit into the world as it is, or [. . .] to work within a zone of professional discomfort and challenge injustices evident in contemporary labour markets and social relations more broadly, while at the same time doing their best for their clients within the constraints of the here and now' [36] (p. 5).

It is the second line of thinking that has arguably become dominant, with an increasingly significant emphasis placed on social justice as a (and possibly, *the*) central aim of careers guidance [4,35,36,38,39]. This continued and growing commitment to the idea of careers guidance as having emancipatory potential has occurred, in no small part, because of, in the words of Hooley and Sultana, a 'flourishing of interdisciplinary inputs from a range of other perspectives' [36] (p. 6), including anti-racist (rather than simply 'not racist') and intersectional approaches to practice [40], as well as sophisticated theoretical accounts of, for example, institutionally embedded epistemic injustices [5].

As part of its attention to social justice, the careers guidance literature—as with the youth transitions literature—still wrestles with the question of young people's agency. Many authors argue that the agency of young people is currently overstated by careers services and government, and that there is not enough recognition of the constraints that individual young people face in finding work [8,41,42]. Further still, scholars have pointed out that careers guidance often operates within understandings of agency as related to individualised traits of autonomy, independence, self-determination, goal-directedness and perseverance [39,43].

Despite these critiques, there is a simultaneous belief among many critical careers scholars in the collective capacity for agentic change, which practitioners and researchers may help to enable [4,41,44]. This orientation is one which underscores agency's 'ineluctably social nature' [39] (p. 513) and relational character where 'actors and actions are tied to intersubjective relations and structural hierarchies of power' [43] (p. 549). We build on these co-agential relational perspectives with our conception of a careers information ecology.

2.3. Empirical Observations of Ongoing Inequalities

While sometimes offering potential solutions to tackling social inequalities, the empirical careers scholarship often reveals more problems that, in some ways, reaffirm the earlier concerns by the likes of Ken Roberts [12,15]. That is, for all the concern with trying to ameliorate social disadvantages, studies often reveal that, in practice, there remain deep divides in who accesses careers guidance, and for whom it is effective. In Australia, for example, analysis of the Longitudinal Study of Australian Youth illustrates that students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to access most forms of careers information, including from careers advisors and from universities [45]. Where students from low-SES backgrounds access such information, it is most likely to be about non-professional pathways [45]. In part, this is because lower-SES students are more likely to view information on vocational routes as more important than information on university [45], speaking somewhat to the cultural influence of 'horizons for action' [22], as well as Alexander's emerging agenda for spatialised understandings of careers informed by Bourdieusian theory [46].

Galliot and Graham's online survey of 706 Australian high school students tells a similar story [47]. While ostensibly divided into those who were 'career certain' and those who were 'career uncertain', low-SES students are found to be particularly career-uncertain; and those who were uncertain were less likely to have accessed any career support. An interesting parallel comes from Trottier's qualitative study of low-SES university students' experiences of a four-week online community of practice [48]. Here, Trottier begins from the understanding that students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds are particularly unlikely to engage with careers services. Trottier's interview data provides insights into some crucial barriers, including academic and financial pressures, and 'identity threat' [where students] 'may be self-conscious of sharing and asking for help, as this may further reinforce stereotypes associated with their background' [48] (p. 149). The challenges in pursuing social justice are writ large here: working class/low-SES people are less likely to engage with services, let alone actually benefit from them. Moote and Archer's investigation of experience of careers service and work placements among school students in the UK further elaborates issues of diversity [9]. Their findings include that those from 'less advantaged social backgrounds (with lower levels of cultural capital)', including low-SES and minority ethnic students, received less support and placements, and reported lower satisfaction with their experience of support [9] (p. 48). Girls, too, lost out in this process, feeling less satisfied than boys with the support they were given. Moreover, the groups most likely to need careers guidance in the immediate sense—those who were planning to not undertake further education—were least likely to take up the provision.

Taken together, there is an active concern to expose, think through and resolve inequities in young people's pathways from education to work. In many ways, the issues of interest have striking (and perhaps obvious) parallels with the critical core of education studies: whether and how educational institutions and processes underscore and reproduce disadvantages is counter to the narrative of education as the 'great leveller' of life chances [49]. Cognisant of the prevailing neoliberal policy context and the critical scholarly backdrop, we turn our attention to contemporary Australian young people's engagement with careers guidance services and support during (normative) transitional periods. We aim to produce a broad account of the types of careers activity that young people engage in. Our analysis, in the spirit of the concerns with social inequality and social justice, also includes attention to how social differences come to mark our findings in various ways.

To contextualise the study, the next section outlines the policy landscape in Australia, and then details the study's research design.

3. Project Context and Research Methods

Public careers guidance and services in Australia—administered through federal government departments and agencies, often in conjunction with private providers [50]—are similar in their approach to other capitalist democracies, such as the United Kingdom [9]. Australia's employment services have steadily undergone marketisation since the 1970s (arriving at full marketisation in 1997) [51], with private companies often competing to deliver various aspects. These include education, training, as well as job seeking, job matching and individual case management. While these services apply to citizens of all ages, young people are often a key focus, as their needs and obligations—in the broad space of 'careers'—intersect with domains of education *and* employment. As such, policymaking and services provision in this space is forced to cope with fragmentation [8], including an economy divided by geography, resource types and projections about the availability or shortage of certain occupations and skills [41]. For example, a 2019 review of vocational education and training (VET) pathways [52] led to the establishment of a National Skills Commission (NSC), which provides ongoing labour market intelligence, such as 'where the jobs in demand are, and what skills are needed to do those jobs' [53]. NSC data then informs the provision of education, employment and transitory services, which include online, print and in-person resources for multiple audiences, including students, parents and teachers. Straddling multiple audiences and policy priorities, careers guidance therefore focuses on the relationship with 'certainty' (be this a clear career pathway, or a sense of post-school 'next step'), while attempting to navigate the tricky terrain of individual agential capacities.

Despite claims that Australia has 'no national careers service' [8] (p. 562), advancements have been made toward nation-wide careers offerings. Launched on October 8, 2020, the National Careers Institute (NCI) provides a range of careers services, including the 'YourCareer' resource hub and a telephone service [54]. It is these federal Australian government (Commonwealth Government) initiatives that provided funding for the study that informs this paper. Our research was rigorous and critical, though it included some minor features (specific survey questions and focus group prompts) tied to privileged information and internal resources, and we are unable to report on these elements specifically.

Given that education and employment policy in Australia is shared between state/territory and federal government agencies, we recognise that our project—via relations to initiatives, such as the NSC and NCI (above)—sits in a somewhat complex space. However, the research aligns with a widespread recognition that there is a need to address under-resourcing in careers services. Further, rather than proposing interventions, our work explores intersections—tensions and contradictions included—between economic and fiscal policy, industry representation, social justice and pedagogy. The study was granted ethical clearance by Monash University Research Committee (project ID: 23657).

3.1. Research Design

Our integrated, multi-method study comprises three interrelated components, conducted between June and October 2021: a social media content analysis, 17 focus groups (n = 90) and a national survey (n = 1103). These were designed iteratively, with each component of the research informing the next. We describe each mode of data collection in turn, in the sequence they were conducted.

3.1.1. Social Media Analysis

We collected 15,227 online comments and posts from four digital platforms: 'ATARNotes', 'Whirlpool', 'Reddit' and 'Bored of Studies'. Whirlpool and Reddit are broader social network/discussion forum spaces with sub-areas specifically for school leavers, whereas ATARNotes and Bored of Studies are dedicated, unofficial platforms for students. These spaces provided insight into 'organic' discussion among young people, allowing us to under-

stand their concerns and issues as they emerge in situ without researcher interference. Online data were collected through a range of strategies, including focusing on specific platforms related to students in their final years (10th, 11th and 12th) of school, and recent school leavers; examining specific employment and career-related discussion forums; and filtering online discussions by the search terms 'career advice' and 'careers services'. A reflexive thematic analysis [55] was conducted to analyse online comments and posts and a combined deductive and inductive coding approach was adopted to identify and generate key themes. This process mutually informed the development of our focus group schedule and mapped onto the broader themes our project sought to analyse around information-seeking practices; knowledge sources; imagined and projected career and life pathways and; experiences navigating and utilising careers services. In our findings, quotes from online sources have been edited and reworded to prevent re-identification. In each case, the affect of the prose has been retained to properly convey the narrative while remaining representative of the experience depicted [56]. This practice is in line with dominant ethics guidelines for researching online forums, especially those that return results via search engines [57].

3.1.2. Focus Groups

Ninety young people participated in 17 focus groups, conducted and recorded via Zoom video conferencing software. Recordings were transcribed and analysed in the cloud-based qualitative data analysis platform Dovetail (which offers CAQDAS functionality analogous to NVIVO). Focus groups were divided into age cohorts, 16–17 and 18–24, to allow for contextually appropriate discussions between peers about school and work: the younger group were nearing the 'traditional' school-leaving age and planning for their next steps in work or education, while the older groups were working and/or studying at university, with some of the eldest being post-university. Focus group prompts covered how young people sought information on careers; the kinds of sources of information and resources they drew on, reflections on this information and; personal experiences with careers services. The focus group data centres the perspectives of young people, drawing out their collectively held experiences and perceptions [58], and permitting more nuanced understandings of intentions to engage careers services and the barriers to doing so. The use of Zoom, pandemic necessity aside, provided opportunities for younger, diverse and hard-to-reach cohorts [59].

Young people from all Australian states and territories were included in this research phase. The school-attending age focus groups included 47 young people, with a gender composition of 25 men, 15 women and 7 non-binary (including 2 open responses: 'fluid' and 'not sure'). The left-school age group included 43 young people with a gender composition of 19 men, 22 women and 2 non-binary. In this paper, when using the data, we describe these participants in an anonymous manner, indicating their gender identity (woman [W], man [M], non-binary [NB]), age and state of residence. There was some variability in the types of schools the young people had attended or did attend, with the majority having attended public schools, a significant minority having attended private school, and some having attended alternative provision.

3.2. Survey

The survey was constructed to measure the range of sources of careers information that young people engage with and the factors that may affect engagement. The survey collected demographic data including age, gender, rural/urban status, disability, Indigenous status, language spoken at home, schooling status (at secondary school/left secondary school) and highest level of education. Reflecting the mixed results of education-focussed research on the association between SES and parents' involvement [60], rather than collecting socio-economic status data, the survey used a proxy variable, a composite that we called 'parental support'. This was designed to capture the transmission of both cultural and economic resources. Young people were asked how frequently they received seven different forms of support from their parents: (a) financial (e.g., help paying bills); (b) emotional (e.g.,

advice or comfort); (c) career or employment support; (d) help around the house (e.g., with shopping, paperwork or similar; (e) help with childcare (if applicable); (f) help with school (if applicable). Response options were coded in ascending frequency from minimum of 1 = 'Never' to maximum of 5 = 'Daily'. A parental support score (similarly ranging from 1 to 5) was calculated by taking the average frequency of support each respondent reported across all applicable dimensions of support. For ease of interpretation in the analysis, three tiers of support were classified: low (a score of 1 to 2.5), moderate (2.5 to 3.5) and high (3.5 to 5). Since support levels on this measure account for both breadth and frequency of support, a young person who frequently receives only one type of support may share a similar 'score' as someone who receives several types of support, but less frequently.

The survey then asked questions under two headings, 'Career Help-Seeking Behaviours' and 'Career Attitudes & Intentions'. The questions for these survey sections were drawn from pre-existing scales (e.g., 'self-efficacy' [61] and 'career maturity' [62]), pre-validated measures included in the Longitudinal Study of Australia Youth, and supplemented by additional questions to investigate, for example, which activities respondents have ever done to help with career decisions, which they would likely do in the next 12 months, and their confidence in the effectiveness of such activities. This article focuses only on questions related to the help-seeking data.

The survey was created and shared within the Qualtrics platform, with responses filled by Qualtrics panels [63]. Quotas, which follow Australian Bureau of Statistics data, were employed to achieve broad representation across age (filling three brackets; 15–17 years, 18–21 years, 22–24 years), gender (of which only a limited consideration was possible) and location (limited to metropolitan/regional).

The survey collected 1108 responses. Some of the key demographics of the sample are described below (Table 1).

Table 1. Survey respondent characteristics.

Sample	1108	Respondents
	39.5%	15–17
Age (years)	30.4%	18–21
	30.1%	22–24
	50.3%	Women
Gender	47.9%	Men
	1.8%	Identifying as non-binary, gender diverse, or other
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander	5.1%	Identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander
	18.5%	Have a disability
Disability status	80.0%	Do not have a disability
	1.5%	Prefer not to say
	88.3%	English
Language	10.0%	English and other
	1.7%	Other
Schooling status	51.5%	In secondary school
	48.4%	No longer in secondary school

3.3. Research Limitations

We acknowledge our research design's limitations associated with both focus groups and cross-sectional surveys, which are well articulated in the literature as critiques of 'snapshot' research [46]. Without longitudinal data, we cannot accurately report on intentions, outcomes, or relations therein: for example, we do not know whether aspiration to go to university will be achieved [28]. Regarding our survey sample, we have proportionately over-represented, for example, Indigenous young people relative to the wider Australian population, but acknowledge that voices of other marginalised groups may not be proportionately included across the study, which means our discussion of social inequalities is limited. For instance, we did not collect further measures of ethnicity beyond the question of Indigenous status and the question on language(s) spoken at home. Similarly,

the research did not collect information on sexuality for a combination of reasons tied to harm reduction and trust, following national guidelines regarding research with young people under 18 [64] (p. 65–67) and university-level research ethics guidance around this age group. We do, however, emphasise key measures across several measures of social difference that are statistically significant. For example, we focus at different times on location (regional and rural versus metropolitan), Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander status, gender, and two non-standard measures 'parental support' (see above) and a binary school status ('at school' versus 'left school').

Given the importance of educational intentions and outcomes to this work, we also caveat that the vast majority of focus group participants were planning for, currently at, or had completed, university. Similarly, 60% of the 'at school' survey respondents (n = 571) intended to attend university immediately after high school graduation, and of the 'left school' (n = 537) group, 26% had already completed a university degree and 66% were engaged in some form of post-secondary study. While far from uniform, university trajectories are disproportionately associated with higher socioeconomic status [49], and we are cognisant of this bias in the sample.

4. Findings: Careers Information Ecology

Rather than focusing on specific careers guidance services, we asked young people to explain what career-planning activities they engaged in. This, in part, reflects our interest in Hooley's [4] comments about the lack of clarity around the definition and purpose of careers guidance. We also see this as a pragmatic stance that enables centring young people's agency. We discuss the patterns of engagement below, but our primary observation is that young people were exposed to a plurality of different careers advice sources, while simultaneously identifying highly individualised careers guidance needs. We observe the presence and significance of a diverse and contingent range of sources that young people encounter. This ranges from advice given by family and friends to self-directed internet searching of official government resources and unofficial social media. As such, we situate career-related behaviours and specific engagements (or lack thereof) as taking place in an 'information ecology' that we seek to map out here. This framing captures diverse ways to research, intervene in and implement careers guidance, complementing literature on more specific interventions.

4.1. Sources of Information in the Ecology

All focus groups participants had experienced some form of school-based careers guidance. This varied in duration and structure, sometimes being embedded into a curriculum and delivered in a sustained fashion, sometimes more piecemeal; sometimes mandatory and sometimes voluntary. In addition, participants identified the role of peers, family members, trusted educators (teachers or lecturers) and online sources of information about careers throughout their schooling and early experiences in the workforce and higher education. Online sources included job aggregation platforms, such as Seek or Indeed, social platforms, such as LinkedIn, government service websites, youth centric advice forums and various career quizzes, tools and aptitude tests. Much of the focus group data revealed that such sources were often actively sought and engaged with, but importantly this was especially the case when young people felt disappointed with the effectiveness of school- or university-based formal careers guidance:

> 'I actually like using LinkedIn Learning for like [personal development] and for enhancing my skills. I think it's really well set out and don't think it's something my university provides enough because I went out on my own accord to do' (F, 20, WA).

> 'I'm on the services like StudentEdge. I don't know if you guys know about that, but it's like a student service, to be honest, I get more information off like these websites than I do off do from the careers counsellors in school and things like that' (NB, 16, VIC).

'It's kind of half and half. Like I've gotten some information from like counsellors at school or whatever compulsory staff, but from there I've kind of picked up things where I've gone in research myself online' (F, 16, SA).

Importantly, though, some young people described themselves as passive recipients of this online advice or careers information, rather than active searchers:

'The only thing I've really seen is a page called Year13 [a youth-centric publisher]. I've seen on Instagram and that's more [about] what to do after school and it has like, different people who have expressed their experiences, you know? If they've taken a gap year, what they've done and just giving you different options. But other than that, I haven't really seen anything else' (F, 17, SA).

However, online resources were challenging for young people to navigate, often requiring appropriation and translation *by other young people*. For example, online discussions framed LinkedIn as a kind of insights platform: a repository for the CVs of 'successful' people, able to illustrate the 'pathway' of a given career. As we return to below, we also found substantial peer leadership in this regard. For example, ATARNotes users collated a list of government careers resources (with hyperlinks) to help others. Drawn from our social media analysis and supplemented by the focus groups, then, the following list of options was put to our survey respondents, where they were asked which—if any—of the following types of service they had ever used (Figure 1).
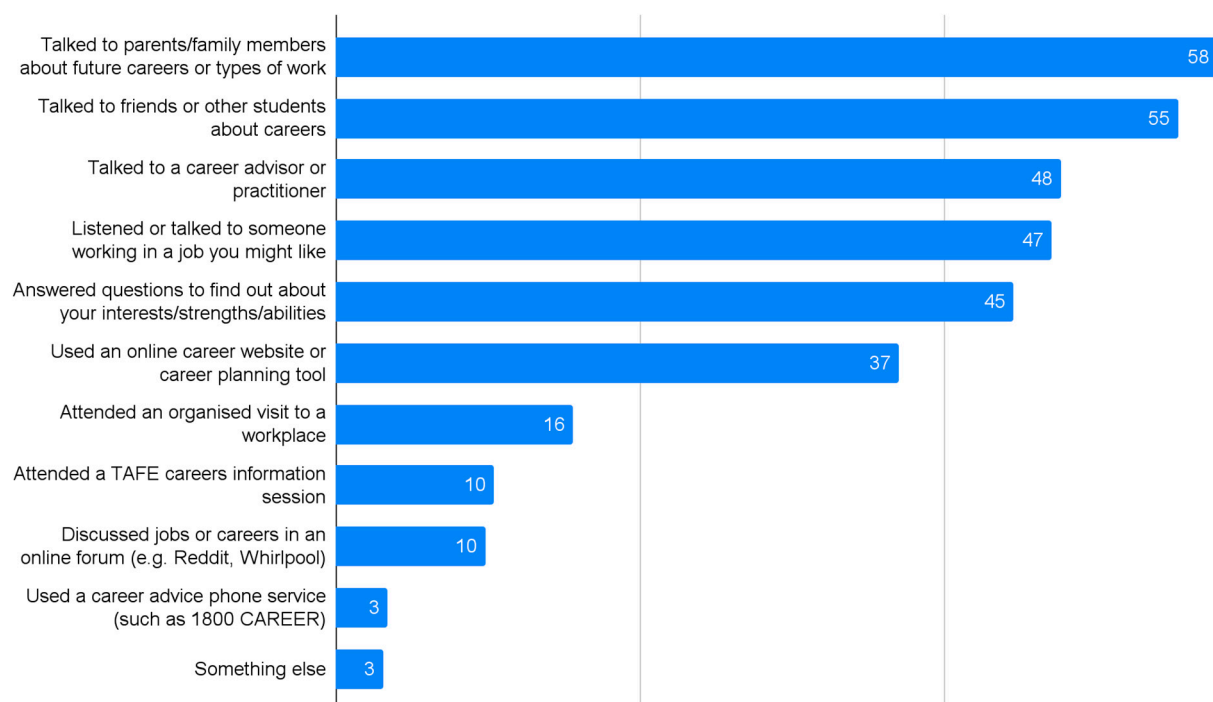

Figure 1. Which of the following activities have you ever done to help make decisions about your future career? (Data source: Survey. n = 1046 [excludes 62 (6%) respondents who selected 'none of the above']).

As is evident, the option for advice that most young people had previously sought was in talking to their family members (58%). The importance of networks of intimacy [65] beyond the family is highlighted with 'talked to friends or other students' being the second highest ever undertaken activity (55%). This is then followed by 'talked to professional career advisors or practitioners' (48%) and then 'listened to or talked to someone' in the field the young person would like to be employed (47%). At the lower end of the scale, just 3% of the sample indicated that they had ever used a phone-based careers service. However, it is important not to be tempted to read this as indicative of a generational

rejection of 'older' modes of communications, especially when compared to the finding that 37% of the sample had used an online careers tool. The low rates of use of phone services does not reflect a lack of interest, but more so a lack of knowledge of the existence of such options. Indeed, as we explore below, young people are open to alternatives to face-to-face service provision.

4.2. Confidence in Different Sources of Information

While young people can, and do, choose to take up more than one option, the proliferation of careers guidance materials and activities puts these sources of information at least partially in 'competition' with one another. Indeed, it is important to note that formal careers guidance, while an important part of the information ecology, is sometimes considered by young people to be a minor or narrow part of the overall landscape. Oftentimes, there was significant frustration with formal provisions, as these focus group extracts illustrate:

> 'I don't think I really got like much [from it] [. . .] it was good for finding like, the necessary paperwork and necessary legal requirements [. . .] to apply for courses and whatnot, but there wasn't really any information from the careers counsellor' (M, 17, VIC).

> ' . . . basically the information that we get is just [to] make sure that you have enough points [upon completing high school] or you're taking the right subjects to get into your university course. They [school careers counsellors] don't really go deeply into that, I guess' (F, 17, SA).

> ' . . . if you look at like, a lot of the career services [they] tend to sort of say the same things. Or there's either way too much information—in like, small print— that goes into way too much detail that you're not looking for it, [or] there's just not enough information to be useful at all. So you sort of, you do end up sort of getting forced into a position where you do need to do your own research about careers' (NB, 16, VIC).

Reflections on school-based careers guidance were markedly mixed, regardless of the content and structure of provision (e.g., mandatory or voluntary; piecemeal or embedded). This mix of good and bad experiences was evident across and between focus groups, but was not particularly patterned by (dis)advantage. For instance, one young man, who was in an alternative school for young people excluded from mainstream provision, pushed back against the general tone of disappointment among his focus groups peers:

> 'I just wanted to comment real quick. My career's counsellor has been absolutely fantastic [. . .] what has helped me is having a careers counsellor who actually knows all the different ways of accomplishing goals. As compared to just a year where we call a 'pathway course', which most people go down' (M, 17, VIC).

Given that young people seek—or feel pushed—to triangulate insights from across the 'careers information ecology', an important concern for careers guidance scholarship is to further investigate how these combinations of guidance are received vis-a-vis social (dis)advantage. This is because the wider informational context might act as a barrier to young people's engagement with formal careers services, with some sources of information seen to be more important, useful or accessible than others. This is illustrated in Figure 2 (below), which shows young people's levels of confidence in each of the careers information activities as sources of useful information.

There is generally a large amount of confidence in all sources of information in the careers information ecology. However, the source of information that held the most confidence was 'listening or talking to someone working in a job you might like' (67% confident or very confident), closely followed by talking to 'parents or family' (61% confident or very confident), or 'friends and other students' (62% confident or very confident). The idea of 'talking to a career advisor or practitioner' holds a moderate level of confidence, relative to

the whole list, but less than half were confident or very confident in its usefulness to deliver a positive outcome (48%), falling well behind attending a workplace visit (59%). While largely indicating confidence in self-directed social media discussions and phone-based careers advice services, these activities are also marked by being near-equal in terms of being the sources of information that young people felt 'not at all' or 'not very' confident about.
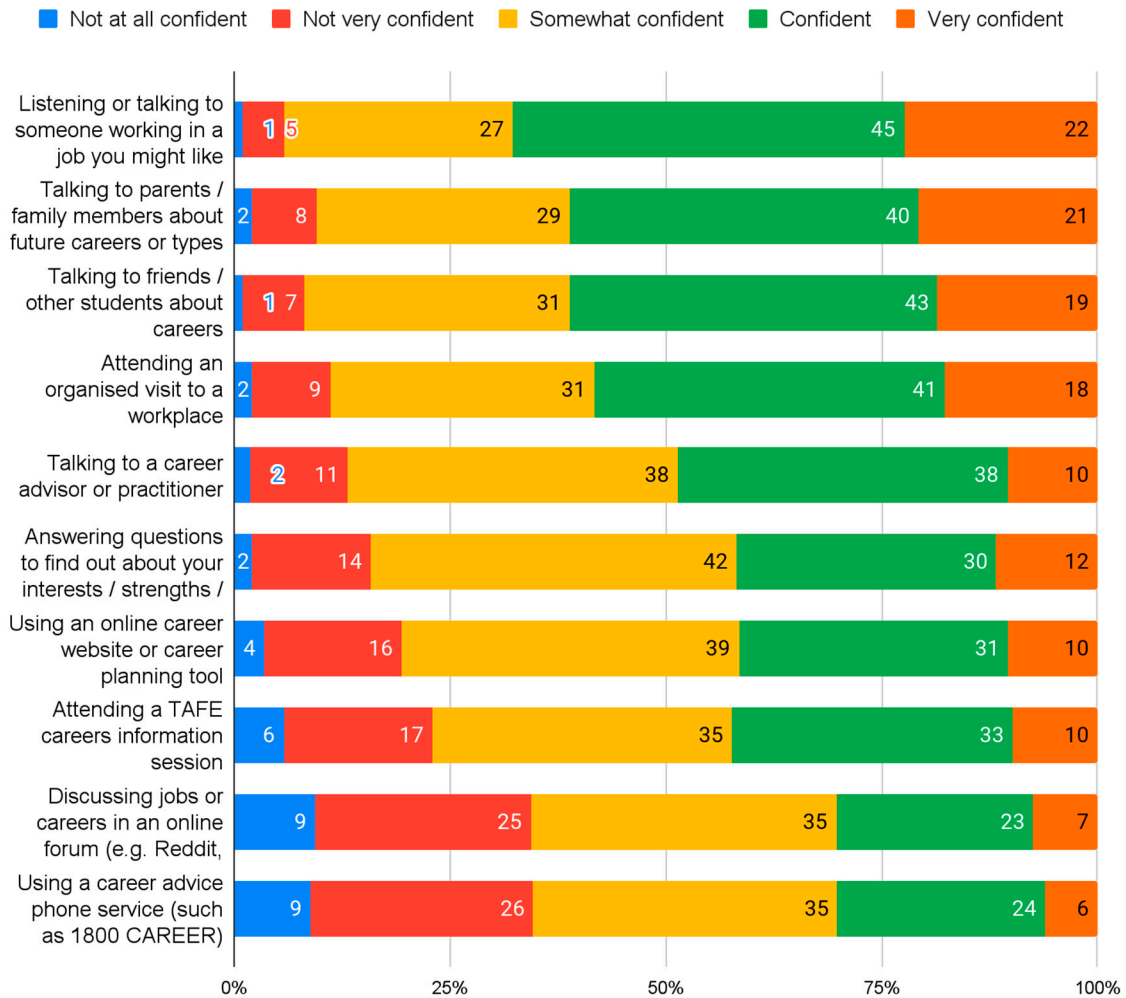

Figure 2. How confident are you that these activities would provide useful information? (Data source: Survey. n = 996 [excludes 112 (10%) respondents who reported in the preceding question that they were unlikely to undertake any of these activities in the next 12 months]).

The high degree of awareness about, and very active pursuit of, a wide range of careers information evident in our data appears to speak to the ways young Australians have seemingly internalised a neoliberal sensibility of 'entrepreneurial selfhood' [11] (though we trouble this notion, below). In focus groups, young people often talked at length about making their own efforts to find information from other parts of the careers information ecology by undertaking their own research, including canvassing university course materials online, exploring virtual training, and 'DIY' social media accounts. This often resulted in a sense of understanding formal careers services as limited or redundant:

'I don't need it, like, 'cos I feel the internet itself is just enough because when you find and dig information about the career . . . I feel like you get that information into your head better than just like reading it or just getting it thrown to you. Like you have to fetch it yourself. You know what I mean?' (16, M, QLD).

'For me, it's pretty similar where I know how to get into my course. And so like, I don't really need any other extra information, say like, I didn't know how to get into my course then I would be more willing to seek advice from a person' (M, 17, SA).

4.3. Peer Relations and Support in the Ecology

As the critical literature clarifies, careers information is constituted and navigated collectively, rather than individually [4,48]. This is particularly pronounced online, where we observe young people's often lengthy and detailed calls for help and advice—the kind of questions and stories that careers guidance services might expect to field—are met with a range of assistive interventions from peers. Interestingly, these discussions suggested that traditional sources of careers information were 'under-serving' a wide spectrum of young people. While we recognise that career uncertainty has cascading impacts for under-served marginalised groups [47,48], our online data showed a more general relationship between users self-identifying as 'indecisive' or 'unsure' and negative experiences of services. Posts by two ATARNotes users (below) indicate that formal channels were only suited to those with clear ideas about their future employment, leaving other young people to rely on (and highly value) communal knowledge and experience:

'Upon completing Year 12, what do you plan on doing? Who is interested in taking a GAP year, travelling, working, going straight into uni . . . I want to hear from you! This is mostly because I have nfi [no fucking idea] of what i want to do' (AtarNotes User).

'I don't like how they tell students what they THINK reflects what happens in the real world, honestly, you're better off researching yourself, looking up jobseek or careers and finding out what employers are looking for and how many jobs there are . . . etc, also stuff like average pay . . . etc' (AtarNotes User).

Another common form of peer support that was observed was directed from older to younger peers. These included older users sharing negative experiences, such as missing out on jobs, dropping out of their first university degree or changing their career pathways. This sharing intended to provide current students with encouragement, and highlighted opportunities outside of the linear, narrow career visions they may perceive. In such stories, dropping out, changing one's mind about career or education directions and 'failure' were often narratively re-constituted in positive ways to depict that such challenges can be, and often are, overcome successfully. In this Reddit story, for instance, support is offered in response to a young person's concerns about changing their career track:

'Go for it! Life is too short. My partner and I have both changed careers and love it. Money was decent, but we hated working in high pressure industries and side-jobs on weekends. At the risk of sounding like a motivational speaker: if there is something you are passionate about, do it. It might take some time if you are starting again in a new industry, it did for us, but don't give up. Let me know if you have any questions and I'll try to help!'

In a similar vein, stories about one's own education and career journey were often used to address others' feelings of uncertainty, loss and fear regarding their financial situation, education and employment endeavours. These are often marked by compassion and empathy, as per this comment from a Reddit user:

'I've been there. Try not to be too hard on yourself, and definitely don't talk-down to yourself. It is admirable that you are still pursuing education, and it's something that we should all do over our whole lives, not just at school. Experiences are important even if they don't lead to the school grades you wanted. There are also opportunities for learning at local councils, and you're the right age to access government youth services. But please don't overlook your mental

health in the short term; reach out to a GP or Headspace [Australia's National Youth Mental Health Foundation] for support.'

We note though that, in other posts, we often observed comments that, even when aiming to be supportive and motivating, emphasise hard work and self-responsibility as key to overcoming structural barriers. For instance—and notably counter to evidence that those without money and contacts have, for over seventy years, been locked out of the cultural industries because of the necessity for unpaid work [66]—this Reddit user argues the case for everyone having a chance if they are prepared to 'hustle':

'I work in television production. Moved countries, didn't know anyone, but hustled to find work. You don't need to have family or family friends in the business. Prove yourself as a team player and an asset, and you'll be set. I've hired heaps of people, and we don't judge based on education. It might sound old school, but it's all about talent, making new networks, and good impressions. Good luck!'

Crucially, the advice sought and given in such spaces cannot fully account for, nor change, the socially structured disadvantages that will impede the chances of success for some groups. Nevertheless, we argue that peer-led discussions enact at least some of the tenets of socially-just careers guidance. While many of the questions and responses are framed through individual circumstances, the systemic nature of labour market challenges and awareness of structural barriers (like gender and race) are built into some of these conversations. There is strong correspondence here, with many of the items in the 'scope of emancipatory careers guidance interventions' mapped out by Hooley and Sultana [36] present, to at least some extent, in the behaviours we document in peer sharing, including helping to empower vulnerable groups, calling out forms of disrespect and drawing attention to structural problems which are often experienced and individual failings. The key point here is that, just like the diversity of approaches that currently exist within the scope of professional careers guidance, the range of views and approaches offered by peers in the information ecology also varies in its attention to the role of the self and social circumstances.

Cognisant of concerns about the effectiveness of more formal online careers provisions relative to face-to-face services—especially for diverse cohorts [8,42]—we recognise informal online advice is not a panacea. Differences according to social characteristics in access to, and awareness of, the type of peer support documented here remain a concern and there is still a reliance on young people's agency and assumptions about 'the extent of readiness to act as their own agents of change' [42] (p. 204). Nonetheless, elevating awareness of peer-led sources could aid in overcoming some of these problems. Online storytelling and advice, especially related to risk-taking and possible failure, also nuances the image of an autonomous and wholly internalised entrepreneurial self [11]. Instead, young people who participate in these online forums are highly engaged in an intersubjective and relational process that has all the hallmarks of community engagement that can lead to the productive development of capability and co-agency [43].

4.4. Social Differences in Engaging with the Careers Information Ecology

The issue of differences in social and cultural resources that we began highlighting above is also an important lens through which to understand the use of and engagement with different components of the information ecology. Indeed, there are some striking gaps across dimensions of difference. This is apparent in Figure 3, which shows the three most-commonly undertaken careers advice activities, and the differences in relation to parental support, gender and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander status.

Parental support was a consistent predictor of careers advice-seeking across all three activity types. Those receiving a high level of support are significantly likelier to report 'talking to a career advisor or practitioner' than those with low parental support (52% vs.

42%; *p* = 0.009), somewhat reflecting the research literature that shows that young people from low-SES backgrounds are less likely to engage with services [9,48].
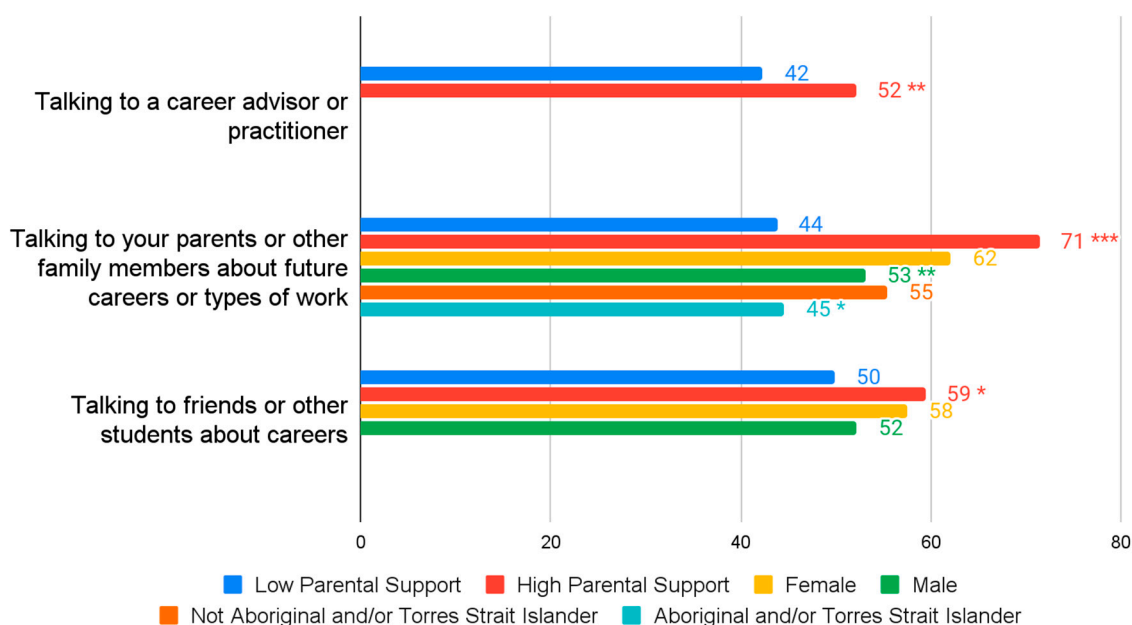

Figure 3. Which of the following activities have you ever done to help make decisions about your future career? (Data source: Survey. n = 1108. * *p* < 0.05; ** *p* < 0.01; *** *p* < 0.001).

This disparity in advice seeking is much more pronounced with respect to talking to parents or other family members about careers. While it is perhaps unsurprising that young people with 'high parental support' are much likelier to talk to their parents or family about work and careers than those with low levels of parental support (71% vs. 44%, *p* ≤ 0.001), it is a striking difference in access compared to other elements of the 'careers information ecology'. The practice of seeking careers advice from parents and family also varied according to other important social characteristics. Young women were likelier to report discussing careers and work with their parents or family than young men (62% vs. 53%; p = 0.003), and non-Indigenous respondents were likelier to report engaging in this activity than those who identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (55% vs. 45%; *p* = 0.04).

Furthermore, there are indications that these differences extend beyond the family context to shape the extent to which young people seek advice from friends or peers. Talking to friends or other students about careers was the most common advice-seeking activity among respondents who received low parental support. While half of these young people sought advice in this manner, this was still lower than respondents who received high parental support (50% vs. 59%; *p* = 0.01). Although only bordering on significant, it appears that young women are also likelier to seek careers advice via this more informal, social avenue than young men (58% vs. 52%; *p* = 0.08). Combined with the observed gender difference in obtaining advice from parents, young women's access to advice from informal sources represents a clear inequity. Such concerns are echoed in recent research from Gleeson and colleagues, which found that over half of young women 'did not believe that their family, friends, culture, or background would help them achieve their career choices' [67] (p. 13).

Further social distinctions become evident when we consider future intentions to engage with the careers information ecology. Figure 4 (below) shows young Australians' responses to the prompt 'I am likely to seek career advice within the next 12 months'. The graph shows the distribution of the levels of agreement with the statement across the sample overall, and then presents a series of columns that illustrate contrast agreement

across selected variables. The differences reported here are those which are statistically significant (based on *t*-tests comparing the mean inclination scores between groups). Our analysis detected no significant differences in relation to gender or disability, and so these are not presented.
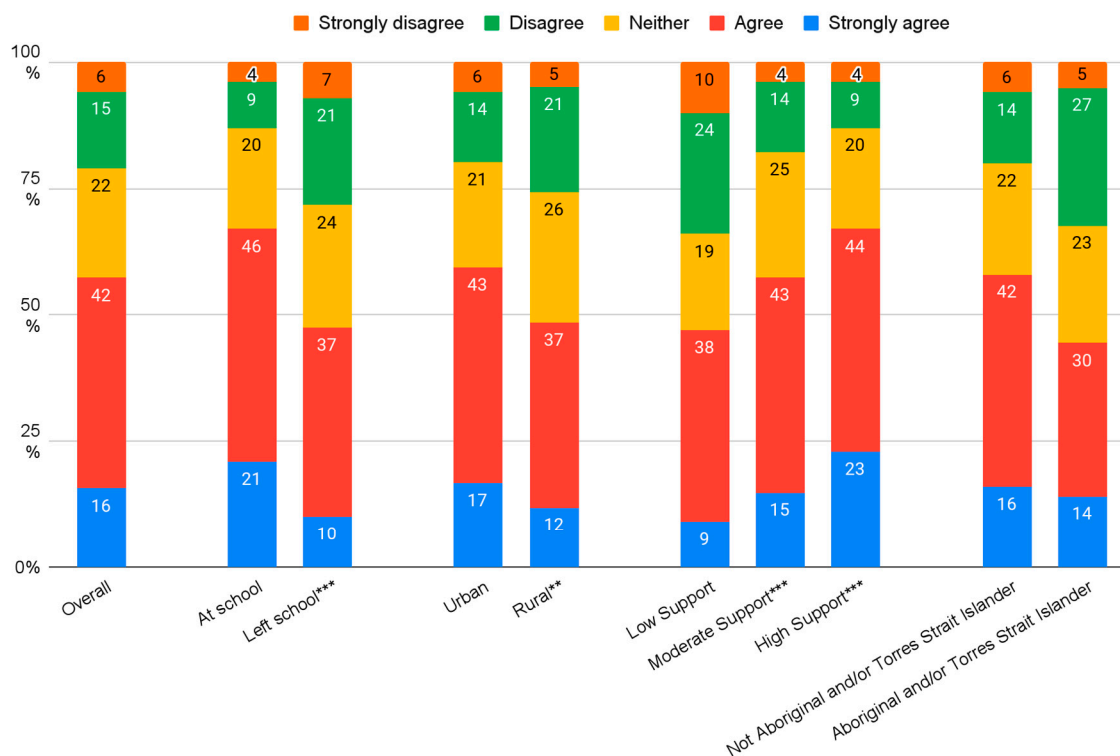

Figure 4. 'I am likely to seek career advice in the next 12 months' (Data source: survey; n = 1108. ** *p* < 0.01; *** *p* < 0.001).

While the majority of young people across the sample suggested that they are likely to do so, the proportions of those who 'strongly disagree' or 'disagree' are markedly higher for those groups who are traditionally more socially marginalised, and agreement or strong agreement is markedly lower for such groups. For instance, the responses were consistent with well-documented material inequalities between rural and urban located youth [46,68]. Young people living rurally displayed a significantly lower average intention to seek careers advice in the next 12 months than those living in major cities (t [1108] = 2.7; *p* = 0.004). Just under half (48%) of all rural young people surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that they would seek advice, compared with 60% of urban respondents. Similarly, a gradient appears in respect to the impact of parental support, where those receiving low parental support were less inclined to seek advice than young people receiving a moderate level of support (t [716] = −4.8; *p* < 0.001) or high level of support (t [713] = −7.3, *p* < 0.001). While 47% of young people with low support agreed or strongly agreed that they were likely to seek advice, this rose to 58% for those with moderate support, and 67% for those with high support. Finally, young people who identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander were less inclined to seek careers advice than those who did not identify as such (t [1102] = 1.7, *p* = 0.04), though the difference was borderline significant, likely due to sample size constraints. This apparent gap is illustrated by the proportion of Aboriginal-and/or Torres Strait Islander-identifying respondents who intended to seek advice in the next 12 months (44%) when compared to non-Indigenous respondents (66%).

The key point here is that marginalised and disenfranchised young people, those who arguably are the most significant audience of a socially just system of careers guidance, have lower rates of intention to seek any advice at all. This echoes much research looking

at specific interventions in education settings [9,45], and underscores a clear connection between all forms of advice and guidance and advantaged status. For Indigenous young people, the lower likelihood of seeking any advice is further bound up with the experience of institutional racism, where formal settings have perpetuated long-standing health and educational inequities [69], and a rejection of the colonial imposition of normative career aspirations [70].

These gaps in likelihood to seek advice that are so vividly marked by social difference are, of course, evidence of social injustices. We subscribe to established explanations in social theory to make sense of these gaps, starting with Hodkinson and Sparkes [22], who suggest that 'horizons for action both limit and enable our view of the world and the choices we can make within it'. This is an important perspective in continuing to challenge the idea that marginalised groups are characterised by a poverty of aspiration; instead, in a 'pragmatically rational' fashion, people from marginalised groups understand that such sources of advice are unlikely to serve them in the same way that they might serve more advantaged groups. This is reflective of a long tradition in sociological research, including Willis' [16] suggestion that working class people can 'penetrate' and see through the myths of education being a vehicle for meritocracy, and Weinger's study in which children as young as five years old have a strong understanding that 'society provides better future job opportunities to non-poor children while limiting those of the poor' [71] (p. 320).

Arguably, recognising young people's engagement in the wider ecology of careers information allows for further elaboration of, and attention to, the agency of young people. That is, the pursuit and navigation of careers information beyond the school setting is not simply (if at all) a reflection of rational choice in action: instead, the entire careers information ecology is a context that is a part of the relational constituents of agency. Secondly, the type and depth of engagements in the broader ecology of information are not only informed by societal and discursive structures and realities; each experience within this information ecology can, and often does, have an impact upon young people's engagement with another part. Here, then, we situate the careers information ecology as being an additional, and hitherto broadly unnamed, context that sits alongside, or is further part of, what Toiviainen [43] describes as the main drivers of co-agency: the counsellor–counselee dyad, the community context and the broader societal context. Adding this detail ensures a fuller conceptualisation of the 'interactions, relations, networks and alliances as the building blocks for agency in guidance practice' [43] (p. 552) in such a way that permits sufficient attention to how structures can simultaneously constrain (e.g., via structural inequalities) as well as enable individual action (e.g., via (even diffuse, online) social networks) or be otherwise productive [72].

5. Conclusions

There is now a large strand of social justice-focussed careers research seeking to smooth out social divisions in the transition into the labour force, and which emphasises the interplay of structure and agency and rejects the idea of a free and rational choice-making individual [4,5,22,40] in ways similar to critical youth research more broadly [27]. Our aim has been to add to this literature by locating formal careers guidance interventions in a wider context that captures a fuller range of careers advice experiences, as suggested in the words of young people. Drawing on data from a multi-method study involving Australian young people, we have pointed to an interconnected range of activities that young people undertake or are exposed to which form what we refer to here as the 'careers information ecology'. Our data illustrates that young people have variable confidence in the effectiveness of each. While nearly half of young people feel confident in formal careers guidance, a much higher degree of confidence was observed in talking to friends and family and in talking to people from the industry where the young person wants a job. If we are to take young people's voices seriously and see them as 'legitimate knowers' [5] of what is right by and useful for them, the implications of this finding must be considered.

In undertaking such a consideration, we emphasise the relationality of careers information. It is relational in the sense that experience with one source *might* impact perceptions of the other, but also in the sense that the multiple sources of information are all part of the complex web that can constrain or produce (co)agency. This is similar to Toiviainen's [43] recent argument about formal guidance practice. However, what we are suggesting here is that such practice should be analysed as part of a bigger and more complex 'careers information ecology', whose component parts include formal education and employment service structures. The presence of this ecology is both a driver and symptom of an agent-focussed system that emphasises access to the right information as a vehicle for achievement of beneficial career outcomes as part of self-entrepreneurial activity. However, importantly, there is significant analytic value for future research in paying critical attention to young people's breadth of engagement with the broader information ecology in terms of grasping a fuller understanding of the development of, and impediments to, agency in the relational sense. That is, all evaluations or critical assessments of specific programmes, practices or interventions would arguably benefit from considering what else young people do, and what structures constrain and/or enable their doing so, in terms of their career information journey. As Alexander has recently advocated, we need to 'go beyond the boundaries of single places and beyond a focus on young people's decision making at school' [46] (p. 16) if we are to properly understand, let alone expand, horizons for action in socially just ways.

This concern with places beyond school—and beyond the formal careers guidance that is offered therein—necessarily draws attention to a variety of online spaces and the ways that these provide scope to reach outside of users' normal networks and connect with others who may have knowledge of, or experience in, jobs and fields of interest. This warrants ongoing attention because it showcases agency in action, both in terms of young people's active reaching out to seek information at all, and specifically beyond formal service provision. The active assistance that many young people are met with is also illustrative of agency as 'profoundly embedded in interactive processes of co-construction and co-action' [43] (p. 549) that further undermines the idea in some careers theories that emphasise qualities such as autonomy, independence and self-determination. Understanding the full range of possibilities that exists in online fora is, in some ways, a natural extension of the attention given to role of families and communities as productive and enabling social structures [72], and represents a fruitful avenue for exploring alternative options for intersubjective efforts to combat and/or expose structures of oppression. This is particularly important because, as we have also illustrated, engagement with the careers information ecology is socially patterned. Young people from, for example, rural areas, or Indigenous backgrounds, and those who have less parental support, are all less likely to engage to seek *any* careers information, not just formal education-based careers guidance. At the same time, more work is required to understand the value and effectiveness of the information available, and whether this can be harnessed to work in the service of social justice.

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