



# Learning Beyond Limits

Insights and learnings from  
visionary schools and communities  
working toward a fit-for-purpose  
learning system

December 2023

Cycle 1 Action-Research Report

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This report brings together insights and learnings from early-mover schools, academics, employers, universities, admissions centres and jurisdictions who are working to transform how we recognise learning beyond academic measures. It articulates the burning platform for change, where and how work is already taking place and the early evidence of benefits to young people and educators.

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land throughout Australia who have been learning and educating on Country for over a thousand generations.

We pay our respects to their Elders past and present for they hold the memories, traditions, cultures and hopes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia. We acknowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to live in spiritual and sacred relationships with Australia.

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This study has been commissioned by Learning Creates Australia and is supported by our research partner, Nous Group.

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## Contributions, sense-making and research design in collaboration with:

Australian Industry Trade College, Carey Grammar School, David Scott School, Eastern Flexi Schools Network, Edalex, Edmund Rice Education Australia, Hunter School of Performing Arts, Learning Vectors, Liverpool Boys High School, Mastery Transcript Consortium, Megan O'Connell, Melbourne Assessment, National Indigenous Youth Education Coalition, Peter Carnley ACS, Plumpton High School, SEDA College of South Australia, Templestowe College, The SACE Board of South Australia, Universities Admission Centre, University of Technology Sydney, Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre, Woodleigh Institute, Yeronga State High School.

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# Introduction

**The final weeks in December are pivotal for Year 12 students, where 13 years of hard work come down to one number.**

**Or so we've been led to believe.**

Whilst congratulations are due to the young people who top the ladder, we know success is more than this.

And by celebrating only those who top the ladder, we're reinforcing a system that doesn't serve most young people very well.

We know paths to further learning and work are becoming more flexible, yet still we define success at the end of schooling by a narrow measure that excludes more young people than it celebrates.

**Out of the 300,000 young people each year who could have completed year 12<sup>1</sup>, the system is set up to focus only on the ~100,000 who aim for a direct university pathway<sup>2</sup>.**

While privately, parents, carers and young people acknowledge and value a variety of pathways and choices, the system is set up so that the pinnacle of success points to a single outcome.

We don't publicly applaud the close to 100,000 who complete Year 12 and enter other pathways<sup>3</sup>. These pathways include TAFE, employment as well as the option of entering university with a portfolio or an early entry.

And we definitely don't celebrate the one in five young people who leave school before Year 12, or do not complete Year 12 due to overwhelming stress – even if they have amazing skills and abilities.

Privately, many parents and carers celebrate that their children have survived the system, lasting through their exams and coping well enough. At worst they speak with fear about their children's future – a future where young people who, despite being academically successful, do not know what pathway they want to take, what they like and are good at or how to navigate their options.

Parents decry the toll that the stress of aiming for a high score has placed on their family and their previously lively children. They describe how their children have given up their part-time jobs and isolated themselves from their peers as Year 12 is a solitary venture.

Families, teachers, and employers intrinsically know that young people are more than a number. This is an important acknowledgement when socio-economic status, postcode and school are the strongest predictors of that number.

Even the organisations who are the sole users of the number (such as universities) know that a number alone isn't the whole story and as a result, have developed a range of alternative entry schemes so they can attract a range of students.

**We know that In the 21st Century, we can recognise achievement in far more sophisticated ways than exams or test scores alone, as these point-in-time assessments do not reflect the breadth and depth of what young people know and can do.**

**But our measures of success haven't moved at a system level<sup>4</sup>.**

And this is a problem, because measures drive what is taught in schools, as well as how learning is delivered.

This drives the narrowing of young people's learning experience to a focus on easily measurable knowledge and skills<sup>5</sup>. It alienates young people, who want their whole selves valued.

It impacts teachers, who instead of inspiring passion for learning, spend their time managing the behaviour of young people who attend but aren't engaged.

In a world where young people need creativity, collaboration and critical thinking, knowledge and skills alone are not enough.

**Our young people need more.**

Change is possible. Across Australia there are promising practices. In many schools and communities, future-ready approaches are emerging that show us what is possible and that learning can be broader and help all young people to identify and reach their goals.

By continuing to measure success in education in a narrow way, we are holding our young people back.

And we're holding back young people in low socio-economic communities the most. They fare the worst under our current model, and are less likely to have access to the promising practices that are delivering more to young people.

We need a national discussion on the purpose of learning in Australia, and what our learning goals are for our young people.

**Young people are capable of more. It is time we recognised this.**

# ATAR is **not used** by more than **75%** of our young people

Out of the 300,000 young people each year who could have completed year 12, the system is set up to focus only on the ~100,000 who aim for a direct university pathway. ATAR is not used in any other post-school pathway.



Annually, there are **300k** year 12 aged young people

60,000 young people leave school early

of these **240k** complete year 12

At least **40,000** complete year 12 without an ATAR

less than **200k** receive an ATAR

Around **100,000** apply to attend university and **1/2** of university offers are made before ATAR results are released

**90k** receive a uni offer

Of those who apply to uni:

- x 30,000** don't use ATAR
- + 14,000** use ATAR plus
- ✓ 60,000** use only ATAR

only **74k** use their ATAR when they apply

Post-school destinations for 18 year-olds:

15% TAFE / Apprenticeships

13% OTHER

37% UNIVERSITY

29% EMPLOYED

6% UNEMPLOYED



Sources: ABS, ACARA, The Age, and Federal and State Education Department data<sup>6</sup>



# There's a burning platform in education

We know that workforce needs are changing and as a result young people need to keep learning — throughout their working lives. However, young people are increasingly struggling to attend school and increasingly ill-equipped for their post-school life. On top of this, teachers are under pressure and leaving the profession at higher rates than ever before.

We have a widening gap between our advantaged and disadvantaged learners<sup>7</sup> and our education system, strained before COVID-19, is now fracturing at the seams.

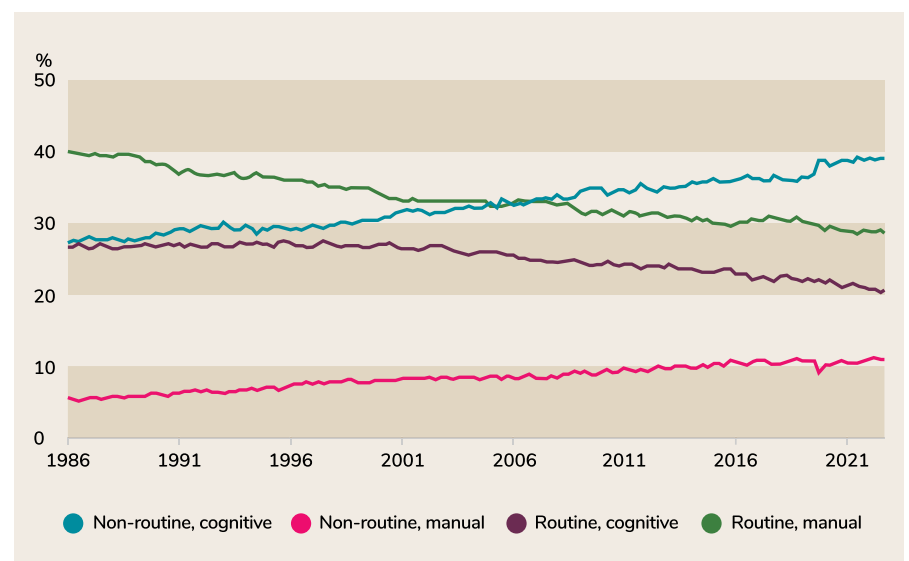
## Education is more important than ever before

With more than 90 per cent of new jobs requiring post-secondary education, young people need to be supported not just to finish school but to go on to further education<sup>8</sup>. Routine jobs are declining as the graph below shows. Just knowing things is not enough. Young people need to be equipped to learn complex skills and capabilities, whether they are entering a trade or becoming an accountant.

**FIGURE 1:**  
Share of employment,  
by skill type

Source: Treasury analysis of ABS Labour Force, Australia, Detailed May 2023.<sup>9</sup>

Note: Data and classifications from Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations using Reserve Bank of Australia skills structure framework.



School education provides a crucial base for young people. We know young people who finish school fare better in life. They are less likely to have chronic health problems, to commit crimes and to receive welfare payments, and more likely to have higher earnings.<sup>10</sup>

*'It's about students finishing and feeling like they've achieved something without having to sacrifice anything, without losing part of themselves...'* (Teacher)

## Young people, universities and employers are seeking alternative options

Some young people are voting with their feet, trying to shape the system to better suit their needs.

Many young people are choosing to complete Year 12 without an ATAR. This looks different across the country.

The number of young people in Victoria choosing to complete Year 12 with an unscored VCE, meaning non ATAR, has doubled to over 10 per cent in 2022<sup>11</sup>. In Western Australia at least sixty per cent of students don't use an ATAR to access their post school destination<sup>12</sup>. In South Australia, around a quarter of students finishing year 12 do not attain an ATAR<sup>13</sup>. In Tasmania 80 per cent of young people completing Year 12 take the ATAR pathway, although just under half of young people don't complete year 12<sup>14</sup>.

*'I hate school so much, that stops me from showing the best I can do. I guess... finding a way to show superiors what I can do. Teachers just don't see into it because it's their job not to. It's their job to apply criteria and apply to the rules, not their fault really.'* (Young person)

*'I don't do anything for fun. I do it to compete. To get good grades. We become so focused on good grades, and we forget about learning. I just focus on getting good grades, I don't learn for passion! When I started year 11, my passion for learning just disappeared.'* (Young person)

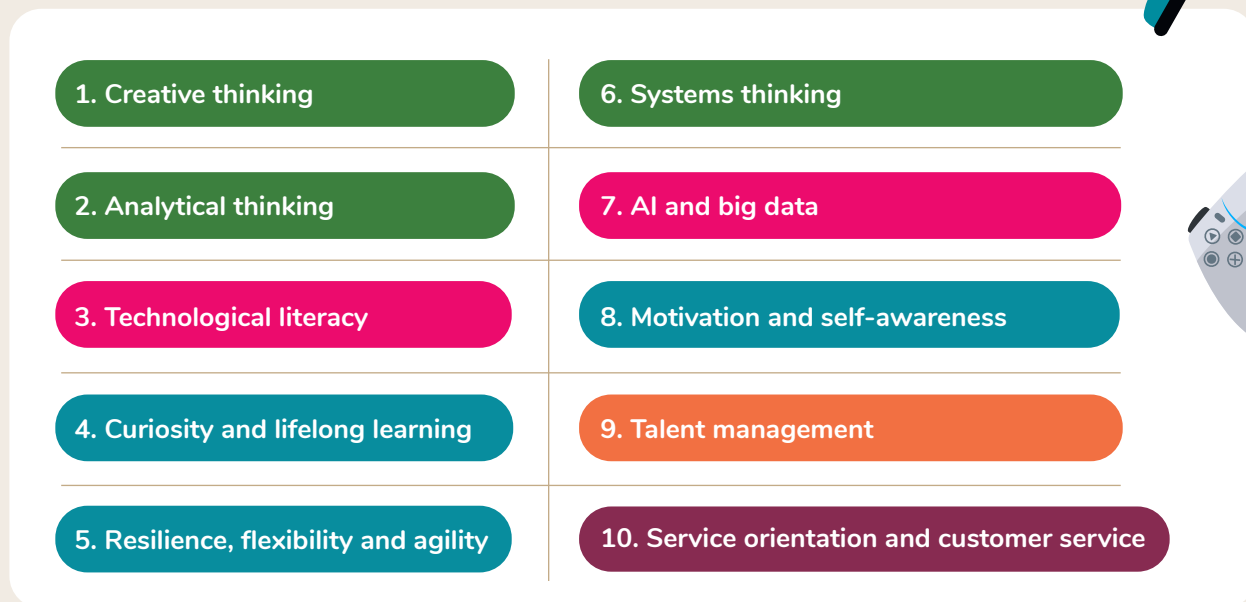
*'(We have).. a very hierarchical system that doesn't fully measure success but perhaps measures privilege.'* (Young person)

*'(There is)...pressure to prioritise specialised learning in school subjects rather than feeling safe to take a step towards learning a new skill.'* (Young person)

Universities are wanting to diversify their campuses and are looking for different ways to identify, attract and support young people on non-ATAR pathways. The skills and capabilities young people need for university are not generic — skills for medicine differ vastly from skills in design. Acknowledging this, higher education institutions use a wide range of selection tools. Over 60 per cent of all university offers are not based on ATAR<sup>15</sup> and around half of university offers are made before Year 12 results are released<sup>16</sup>.

Employers want to know that young people have a raft of capabilities that they value, with capabilities such as creative thinking and analytical thinking vital for current and emerging roles.

FIGURE 2: Top 10 skills on the rise



Type of skill:

- Cognitive skills
- Self-efficacy
- Management skills
- Technology skills
- Working with others
- Engagement skills

Source: World Economic Forum, Future of Jobs Report 2023.<sup>17</sup>

Note: The skills judged to be increasing in importance most rapidly between 2023 and 2027. Source: World Economic Forum, Future of Jobs Report 2023.

## Disengagement from education

Young people are increasingly disengaging from school education. This isn't just a COVID-induced problem, although COVID seems to have accelerated the rate of disengagement. Year 12 retention rates have hovered around 80 per cent for the last decade<sup>18</sup>. However, these numbers do not equate to engagement or outcomes.

One indicator of disengagement is attendance levels – that is the percentage of students who attend school at least 90 per cent of the time, hence missing no more than a day a fortnight of school on average.

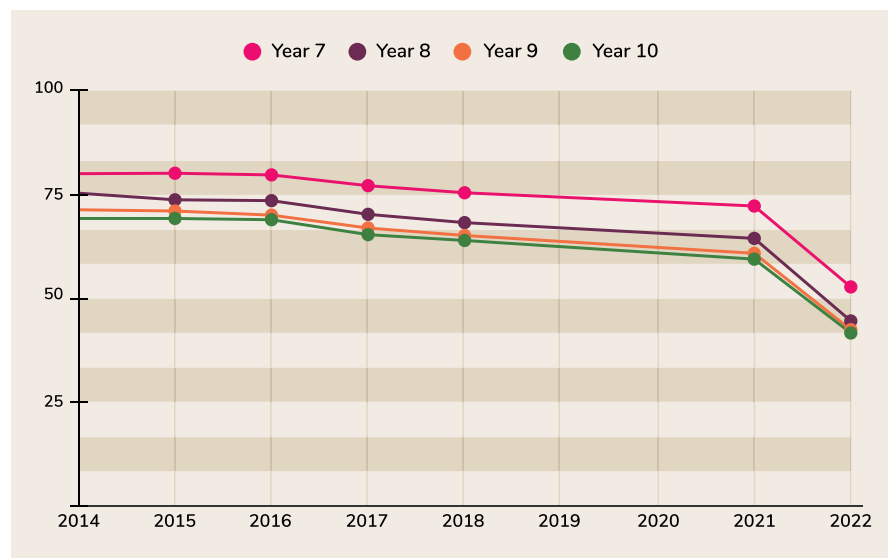
By the time they get to year 10, around forty percent of young people were regularly missing school prior to COVID<sup>19</sup>. This increased to close to sixty per cent of young people missing school during COVID<sup>20</sup>. We don't know yet what attendance in 2023 looked like, but we do know school refusal is an ongoing issue. A 2023 senate inquiry into school refusal, subsequent reporting and a recent poll have revealed that close to 40 per cent of families have children that have experienced school refusal in the past year<sup>21</sup>.

Some young people are more likely to miss school, including those from low socio-economic backgrounds, from regional and remote areas and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people<sup>22</sup>.

Disengagement from school increases as a young person progresses through secondary school as the graph below shows.

**FIGURE 3:**  
Percentage of students attending school 90 per cent or more by year level

Source: ACARA National Report on Schooling Student Attendance Data<sup>23</sup>



## The imperative to focus on wellbeing

In order to learn, young people must feel safe and well. Education and wellbeing have a symbiotic relationship.

They need to see school as relevant to their lives, with a sense of belonging supported through strength-based approaches. Building a culture of belonging and wellbeing is made more challenging by the dramatic increase in the prevalence of mental health challenges in young people, increasing 50 per cent in the last 14 years<sup>24</sup>. School refusal has increased in response with many young people too anxious to attend<sup>25</sup>.

A focus on wellbeing can be both explicit (teaching a curriculum of wellbeing) as well as implicit – creating conditions for learning that enable wellbeing to be observed by students and teachers, discussed as part of learning. Both of these can drive changes in teacher behaviour, with greater recognition of the need to create connections and environments where young people are ready to learn.

Leading work demonstrates how teacher practice changes in response to growing recognition of the importance of wellbeing, including from delivering content to ensuring students understand and engage with wellbeing-related content<sup>26</sup>. Studies show wellbeing contributes to engagement and drives student outcomes. It is both a precursor to learning and a product of education<sup>27</sup>.



## We're not performing well, nor set up for future success

The current education system is under strain. Australia's performance against international education benchmarks like PISA has fallen over the last twenty years<sup>28</sup>. Despite the fact that Australia delivers longer hours of education than other countries, we're not reaping the rewards.

Teacher wellbeing is falling and burnout is increasing<sup>29</sup>. Up to 70 per cent of teachers are contemplating leaving the profession even though they have a strong sense of belonging<sup>30</sup>.

### **Young people aren't thriving, nor is the teaching workforce.**

The world has changed significantly since the current model of schooling was introduced. The increasing use of digital tools and Artificial Intelligence will promote even faster change and challenges.

Our education system is doing its best, but we cannot keep on applying bandaid reform solutions.

We need a system that can build and recognise the breadth of skills and capabilities that young people possess so they can successfully navigate a complex world. We need to engage all young people in learning that is relevant to their lives.

We need a system that reduces professional isolation by supporting teacher collaboration. We can re-engage teachers by valuing and respecting their capacity to deploy their skills creatively to support each young person to achieve learning success.

**Thankfully, promising practices are emerging that we can learn from.**





# Promising practices to recognise a breadth of learning are emerging

There is emerging practice across the country that is pushing beyond the confines of existing measures of learning success to more fundamentally consider and address what young people need and what they and others value from our learning system.



## **A group of early adopters have independently been developing programs, activities and projects to recognise more of what young people know and can do.**

These include over a hundred schools, representing a diversity of sectors, sites and contexts either directly or through clusters and networks with academics, employers, universities, admissions centres and jurisdictions. Some are backed by government, others are driven by teachers and school leaders eager to re-conceive success in education.

Some of the early adopters are independent schools who understand that a high ATAR alone isn't setting their students up for long-term success. They are seeking to cultivate and recognise young people's capabilities, to grow connection and wellbeing and to ensure young people have the skills to identify and pursue their strengths and passions. Early adopters seek validated, respected and trusted credentials that young people, employers and universities can rely upon.

Other early adopters include special-assistance schools (sometimes known as flexi, alternative or re-engagement schools) where the young people who attend are often described as failing in the mainstream system. What often isn't acknowledged is that they may have experienced immense personal or socio-economic challenges — often relating to why they may be several years behind other learners of the same age.

These schools also want to support young people to experience a sense of belonging and to engage in learning in a way that will drive them to succeed.

They are less bound by societal pressures, or government expectation, as they are engaging young people who are otherwise unlikely to attend school at all.

Early adopters are united by a common belief that young people are capable, have diverse experiences and are our future. They want to increase each young person's sense of belonging and engagement – essential precursors to learning and foundational to every young person's wellbeing.

They are making changes to enable young people to understand and recognise their capabilities, skills and knowledge. They are measuring and credentialing learning in a way that employers and education institutions can trust and in a way that young people can utilise to inform their choices, next steps and future pathways.

## **These changes are promising as they are showing improved transitions and school experiences.**

Some changes are at very early stages of development while other changes are further developed, some even evaluated. Each is part of a growing network of early adopters that seeks to create equitable transformation in education so that it better meets the modern needs and values of our young people, communities and nation.

In the following section we discuss what we can learn from these promising practices, including what changes are needed at a system level to facilitate broader learning success.

# What can success in learning look like?

Our participatory action research has a vast reach across multiple sites including five jurisdictions, eleven individual schools and hundreds more through school networks, tertiary admissions providers, universities, academia and edtech.

Across these sites we're listening and learning from young people, their teachers, schools, parents, policy leaders, training providers and universities.

We're learning that delivering more means building and recognising a range of skills and capabilities in young people. It means improving young people's sense of belonging by recognising learning attained in activities that matter to them, and building on their individual strengths.

Success in learning looks different for each young person, but includes the competencies young people need to navigate their post-school life, including work and study:



This list is not exhaustive, but generally marries with the capabilities in the Australian Curriculum.

## Capabilities in the Australian Curriculum<sup>31</sup>

- Literacy
- Numeracy
- Information and Communication Technology Capability
- Critical and Creative Thinking
- Personal and Social Capability
- Ethical Understanding
- Intercultural Understanding

**These capabilities encompass knowledge skills, behaviours and dispositions to assist young people to live and work<sup>32</sup>.**

Capabilities are in the Australian curriculum, but this curriculum only covers Foundation to year 10.

The system acknowledges capabilities are important but at the moment they are not covered or assessed in the senior secondary curriculum (except where they happen to cross over into core content, like literacy in English). In many cases they aren't assessed earlier in a young person's schooling either. What isn't measured isn't prioritised, and this permeates throughout school, narrowing what we mean by success. But in partner projects capabilities are part of the core.

# What is happening and what is changing?

Change in education can be hard. It requires tools and resources, and it requires a mindset change. Early adopters are showing how change is possible.

## Growing understanding of the need for change drives action

Across early adopter sites, teachers are reporting a mindset change driven by a growing and shared belief that young people need more. Partners note that all levels of a school community need to understand why and what we value in learning. This includes building understanding across students, parents and school leaders that broader measures will improve engagement at school, young people’s wellbeing and their capacity to navigate school and life beyond secondary education. This takes time but is a precondition for engagement, acceptance and action.

Early adopters who have embarked on pilots are able to spread their understanding:



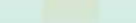
*“My passion for Learner Profile supports mindset shifts because I can genuinely convince my colleagues of its worth. I can reassure them that it won’t be extra work for teachers but will involve having regular meetings to look at capability assessments. As the new team has taken the Learner Profile forward, it has become much clearer. I am now able to explain the pilot to new members of the team because I had the same questions when I first started.” (Teacher)<sup>33</sup>*

Teachers play a pivotal role as learning facilitators as well as subject matter experts. They are exploring how to utilise the curriculum, exploring new teaching and learning techniques to build and assess the knowledge, skills and capabilities of each learner within and beyond subject specific learning. This includes designing tasks and assessing students in new ways that are still rigorous and valid. The teacher’s role is on a spectrum, corresponding with student’s learning trajectories, and can vary from direct instruction to mentoring students.

## Articulating how teachers’ roles change and impact on task design

**Melbourne Assessment**, a social enterprise at the University of Melbourne, leads the research-practice partnership New Metrics for Success, a collaborative venture with a network of 35 cross-sectorial schools from across Australia and

New Zealand. They work together to create and utilise new assessment practices to measure capabilities, referred to as complex competencies. The graphic below shows how the role of a teacher changes as learners grow in competence and are able to undertake more sophisticated, self-directed activities.

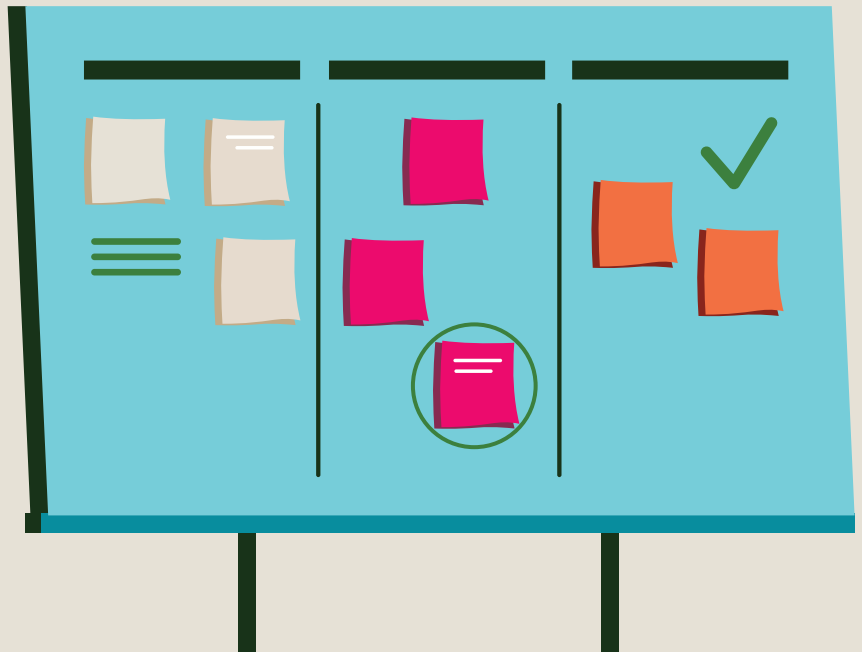
Generalised trajectory for task design (K – 12, novice – expert)	Purpose	Evidence of learning	Openness of process	Supervision	Scope of discipline knowledge and skill required	Authenticity	Scale	Connection to others
 <b>TEACHER AS MENTOR/ADVISOR FOR SELF-DIRECTED LEARNER</b>	<p>Focuses on solving or participating in the solution of a practical problem for which the solution is unknown (i.e. goes beyond mastery of knowledge to application)</p> <p>Stems from learner’s interest</p> <p>Contributes to something in their lives or community.</p> <p>Engages emotionally and practically, as well as in the mind.</p>	<p>Learner curates and designs evidence used to demonstrate skill (e.g., portfolio)</p> <p>Evidence sourced inside and outside of school</p>	<p>The process is open and challenging, with little guidance provided by the teacher.</p> <p>Allows for learners to conceptualise, construct, organise, analyse and test their own process, and make their own mistakes.</p>	<p>Learner mentored and advised on request</p>	<p>Learners need to be self-directed and collaborate to master new and deeper knowledge and skill</p>	<p>Replicates real world experiences, or is a real-world experience</p> <p>Outcome has significance beyond the classroom</p>	<p>Requires long term (e.g., a semester) commitment and allows for flexible application</p> <p>Allows revisiting, reflection and reconceptualization of ideas and mistakes with a capacity to immerse</p>	<p>Learners independently build connections with new people and places outside of school</p>
 <b>SCAFFOLDED TEACHING</b>	<p>Shaped, but not defined, by a learner’s interests</p> <p>Includes choices within product or process</p>	<p>Learners negotiate how they will evidence their learning (e.g., product)</p>	<p>Process is defined with scope for interpretation and variation by the learner</p>	<p>Learner’s work is supervised</p> <p>Provided with guidance, examples, modelling.</p>	<p>Requires application and exploration of knowledge or skill in the related domain that goes beyond what the learner already knows and can do</p> <p>Requires learner initiative to develop required knowledge or skill</p>	<p>Is relevant to the learners’ immediate lives outside of the classroom</p>	<p>Scope for demonstrating depth and commitment (e.g., a five-week unit of work)</p>	<p>Learners independently connect with familiar people and places outside the classroom, (e.g., grandparents, neighbours)</p>
 <b>DIRECTED INSTRUCTION</b>	<p>Goals, product, process, content determined by the teacher</p> <p>Context selected by the teacher so that it is likely to appeal to learners</p>	<p>Learners use provided templates to demonstrate learning (e.g., worksheet, template for a project)</p>	<p>Learner provided with familiar steps to follow</p>	<p>The learner is directed and supervised</p>	<p>Requires knowledge or skill that is mostly already known to the learner</p> <p>Knowledge/skill is recently acquired or is obtained through familiar channels</p>	<p>Designed for classroom learning</p>	<p>Short, fixed duration (e.g., a focus for a few days) time limited, timetabled.</p>	<p>Involves familiar school-based people</p> <p>Connection with external others is planned and facilitated by the school</p>

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For some schools, networks like New Metrics and Mastery Transcript Consortium provide an established base of additional resources, professional learning and collaboration to accelerate their capacity to implement change.



## New ways of working supports shifts in professional identity

Teachers are reporting a shift in their professional identity as they embrace new ways of thinking and working. Despite initial trepidation with exploring curriculum and pedagogy change, most gain comfort as they explore, critique and amend their practice.

Teachers are thinking and talking about skills and learning with colleagues and students, including how to create and assess learning opportunities around broader capabilities.

*"A significant change for me was looking and listening to my students more, not so much in terms of subject content but more for personal qualities I can see in the students. While I have always valued this learning, involvement in the pilot has helped me consider these types of skills more deeply. I found I had moments in class that made me think "how could I assess this?" (Teacher)<sup>35</sup>*

This includes teachers working together, and with others such as industry partners and students, to co-design learning activities that draw upon young people's interests. Teachers are expanding who and what is in their learning community, and working in collaboration instead of isolation.

Teachers' reported an increased sense of belonging as they began to feel comfortable questioning their own practice, and trying new approaches with others.

A supportive whole school culture enables teachers to build confidence in trying new ways of teaching and assessing, with teachers themselves embracing their role as learners.

*"We were exploring pedagogical practice and saw change as the teachers started to think differently about what they were looking for. Almost all pilot teachers said they would... provide more formative experiences for the students" (Partner)<sup>36</sup>*

Rather than being burdensome, some teachers are finding this approach gives them more satisfaction, by enabling them to connect with and support the whole learner.

Teachers are focusing on individual strengths and successes, with tools such as learner profiles supporting them to see more of young people:

*"I have discovered my passion for this change through conversations about Thrive and the Learner Profile. I am [a] big believer in removing the institution from schooling because with the profound task of teaching each student individually, you realise students don't fit a mould as there is no mould of what it looks like be an adult." (Teacher)<sup>37</sup>*

## Changes to assessment processes are supporting schools to recognise more

There are promising practices emerging across hundreds of schools.

Some are focused on supporting students who have disengaged from mainstream school to recognise their capabilities more holistically – thus creating a fairer way to capture their student success. This includes supporting students to gain university entry through alternative pathways. These practices are based on rigorous frameworks so they can be trusted by employers and educational institutions.

### Utilising industry endorsed skills recognition for young learners facing additional barriers to learning

#### Edmund Rice Education Australia Flexible Schools Ltd

runs a network of 22 schools across Australia. Children and young people attending these schools have significant complex personal barriers, including barriers to education, and are less likely to be able to demonstrate their capabilities within the traditional curriculum.

They are working towards broader recognition of skills against an industry endorsed standard.

The Human Capabilities Standards Framework was developed by the Institute for Working Futures with Deakin University and Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre. It is aligned with the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). Edmund Rice Education Australia Flexible Schools Ltd are looking to develop both a learner profile and micro-credentialling options that use the framework.

Other partners are drawing on new technologies to support students to recognise their own capabilities. This both reduces the burden on teachers, and enables young people to develop skills they will need for life, including identifying and evidencing their strengths.

### Online platforms enabling efficient recognition of capabilities

**Hunter School of Performing Arts** introduced Mastery Learning for years 7 to 10 in 2023. Using open data standards, the whole-of-school digital recognition system maps and aligns student data to credentials, producing a dynamic learner evidence record and digital badge.

The approach includes the formal learning theory, capabilities and co-curricular (outside of school) learning.

**Melbourne Assessment** has developed an online assessment platform that supports teachers to generate reports on student competency to inform teacher practice and school reporting for learners and families. It produces credentials following warranting and moderation.

Early adopters are using and sharing a number of characteristics, processes and frameworks. They show a change in how assessment is used, from a pass/go point to assessment as learning and improvement. A key characteristic is ensuring validity, reliability and trust in how students are assessed so that new methods do not equate to lower standards.

A focus on growth and formative assessment	Looking at assessment as learning, with assessment showing growth over time
Broader range of learning recognised	Recognising learning outside of traditional curriculum
Multiple opportunities	Re-submission of assessment material to enable improvement over time
Digital platforms	Dashboards to reduce burden and enable open access to data to students, teachers and parents
Consistency but not ranking	Consistent formats to demonstrate strengths, but not comparing students
Frameworks and moderation mechanisms	A calibrated set of standards with moderation to ensure fairness, rigour and build trust.

# Emerging evidence on the benefits of recognising more



## 1. Engagement is growing as learning is focused on young people's interests

Young people are more engaged with learning when they see it as relevant to their lives and interests and especially if they have agency in their learning.

Young people are unlikely to disengage from school if they are interested in what they are learning. Across early adoption sites there is an increase in student engagement, often driven from greater understanding of and tailoring of tasks towards student interest:

*"Starting with student interest meant [they] changed the way young people related to curriculum, to their teachers, peers and community, to pedagogical practices and learning spaces within a school... but most of all, it helped them to find the passion and meaning that would drive them forward in life." (Big Picture)<sup>38</sup>*

Young people are more empowered to learn as they start to understand their unique strengths. Arts-based activities in the Y Connect Project at Yeronga State High School helped young people better understand themselves and connect with their peers, their school community, learning, arts, and their future possible selves.

*"He was one of those kids that was quite known for being disruptive or was very disengaged.... then the next time I came into the school, he ... was like, "I need to show you this song that I've written"... and I think a lot of people were quite shocked that he had invested himself into what we were doing." (Artist reflection on student)<sup>39</sup>*

Young people's engagement is also growing due to their connection with other students and a broader community. Project partners report increases in trust, engagement and student attendance. Young people are building skills in connecting and collaborating, rather than competing in isolation.

## 2. Young people are recognising and talking about capabilities

This is vital as young people need to understand their strengths to be able to identify what makes them unique and explore possible future pathways.

Young people need to be able to talk about their capabilities to employers, who are seeking people who have capabilities like analytical and creative thinking<sup>40</sup>.

Young people also need to recognise and demonstrate their skills and capabilities for entry to the university courses where ATAR alone isn't sufficient, such as design courses.

Tools and resources developed by early adopters are supporting the identification of capabilities:

*"One of my students sees herself as "not as smart" as their siblings but if the Learner Profile existed for all students then it would be easier to have conversations about how remarkable their other achievements are and that grades are not the only measure of intelligence or success." (Teacher)<sup>41</sup>*

### 3. Young people are finding different pathways and possibilities

Young people are developing a sense of their options and their ability to navigate different pathways and possibilities. This includes thinking beyond an ATAR pathway, which can only be used for entry to tertiary education.

In one pilot 76 per cent of young people agreed developing capabilities supported their future options, whilst 79 per cent agree they had the skills they needed beyond school. Plumpton High School has observed significant improvements in the number of students achieving early entry offers to university, following Plumpton's sustained changes to the ways it engages with and supports students to learn.

Young people's sense of possibility is expanded when they are able to draw on their strengths and find their passion, as one young person articulates:

*"If I wasn't in [this program] not only would I not be pursuing my passion, I wouldn't have found my passion."*  
(Young person)<sup>42</sup>

Early evidence from across a range of partners suggests young people can identify and extend on their passions and find pathways through broader recognition.

Some young people are exploring and receiving early offers to university, including through programs like U@Uni at UTS which is focused on developing capabilities to support young people from low SES backgrounds to transition to and thrive in university.

Some projects have negotiated specific arrangements to enable students undertaking their credentials to access university. For example, the International Big Picture Learning Credential (IBPLC) record of achievement, has enabled 140 students to get into the university and course of their choice, from one of the 19 Big Picture university partners.

The IBPLC provides a record of achievement for students from Big Picture schools that enables students agency in how they are represented. It is externally credentialed by Melbourne Assessment, at the University of Melbourne. To date 800 credentials have been issued which students are successfully utilising as they navigate their further learning and work pathways.

### 4. Recognising more suits more learners, and more teachers

Recognising learning beyond traditional curriculum works for a wider range of learners.

Evidence is indicating that whilst a diversity of students have benefitted from broader recognition, in particular, young people who have struggled to perform well in the current education system have flourished.

Early adopters found that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds benefited from exposure to a breadth of learning experiences. Big Picture Learning found their model supports academic and social learning growth equally in young people with and without a disability. A student-centred approach was found to support all students to engage, reduce disciplinary problems and deliver positive outcomes.

First Nations students have an increased sense of belonging when their cultural learning is recognised. This supports building engagement and achievement through the delivery of strengths-based culturally relevant learning and assessment.

Teachers are excited by and attracted to a new model of learning that supports them to engage students and think deeply about student strengths, which revitalised teachers across a number of early adopter sites:

*"The impact of the Y Connect Project on teachers [included] a revitalisation of practice leading to enhanced enjoyment and engagement in the teaching process."*  
(Yeronga State High School)<sup>43</sup>


Teachers are learning to work in different ways, including finding freedom to focus on supporting each student rather than feeling pressured to cover a wealth of content that students may not be absorbing.



# What we are learning about enablers and barriers

Through this action research study, we've found that when the whole school supports a different approach it is more likely to succeed.

But this requires buy in across all levels, from leadership to teachers, students and parents.



**Teachers need guidance, time, space and encouragement** — to practice and identify different ways to assess students. This can be developed and resourced, including through networks of teachers and the adoption of resources.

**Current metrics can pose barriers** — it can be hard for Principals to broaden their focus if their accountability measures are centred on measures like NAPLAN and ATAR.

**Resourcing and technology can make a difference** — by reducing the burden on teachers, technology can empower students to have greater agency in the recognition of their capabilities. This includes digital recognition systems and digital dashboards.

**Parents recognise that better experiences are important** — but they need access to clear information on how and what children are learning, and to see the proof points that an approach that delivers more will benefit their child. Whilst they know the current model isn't working, there is still a fear of the unknown.

**It is hard for parents to shift their mindset** — when the measures of success are centred on NAPLAN and ATARs. Even though only a minority of students go to university, and even less compete, the system of education is geared to this.

**Parents need improved information** — about the potential transitions young people are pursuing. We also need to make young people's pathways through TAFE and employment more visible and acknowledge young people are moving in a less linear fashion than the generations before.







# Next steps

Our action research to date has included a review of submissions covering work taking place across hundreds of sites, but we know there are hundreds more across Australia not yet represented in this analysis.

**We want to hear from more schools and a diversity of learning sites to understand what you are learning and the challenges you are facing.**

We want to amplify the voice of promising practices on the ground, and to push for the systemic change that is needed to recognise more for every student, not just those who are lucky enough to access well resourced schools or alternative education models.

This includes advocating for resourcing to support teachers to shift their practice, knowing this will result in greater student engagement and professional reward.

**We all aspire for young people to be engaged in school, to know and build their strengths, and to develop their capabilities.**

We want them to feel like they belong, to have the knowledge and confidence to embark on their future, achieving their hopes and dreams through a variety of pathways.

To achieve all of this, we need to deliver more. We need to broaden our measure of success as a nation because relying on narrow measures alone holds our young people back.

We are in a pivotal era in education, with governments looking at transformational change across the education landscape from early childhood education to tertiary education.

**The time is right to commence a national conversation about the purpose of learning.**

# Appendix

## The action research study methodology

The participatory action research study, conducted over three years, 2023-2025, is seeking to understand, across five action research cycles, whether evidence of each learner's broader skills, capabilities and attributes can be trusted and used to enable young people's transition to further learning and employment.

This research will help us build an increasingly robust and compelling knowledge base about the broader recognition of learning over time. See figure below showing the action research cycles planned to take place.

The study is guided by overarching research questions in three domains:

1. What impact does broader recognition of learning have on the educational experience of young people and their pathways to further learning and work?
2. What arrangements need to be in place to enable equitable broader learning recognition approaches?
3. What conditions in the learning system are enabling (or preventing) broader learning recognition?

Answers to the three research questions will help us understand what more we need to learn, communicate and apply to emerging practice to build momentum for broader learning recognition. The nature of action research is iterative and therefore the study, and what we learn together in each cycle, and how, will continue to evolve and develop as the cycles progress.

## Action research cycle 1 methodology

The focus of action research cycle 1 was to understand initial insights partners have gained across all research questions. This would enable us to form a 'baseline' of understanding about the work underway, what we're learning and what we want to learn more about in subsequent cycles. The action research is a collaborative effort, as shown below in the roles played by different participants.

### Data collection

Twenty-two partners contributed to data collection efforts for Action Research Cycle 1. The study received approximately 55 different documents and data from participating partners. We also gathered a range of research documents publicly available online.

### Data analysis

To help us understand what partners are doing, seeing and learning through their work, Nous systematically logged the documents received and mapped them against the study's research domains, research questions and research sub-questions. We then conducted a structured secondary analysis of partners' information against each research question, capturing the achievements, learning and priorities documented in the information provided by partners in a coding frame.

Nous then thematically analysed this material to identify emerging insights into the research questions from across the partners' work. We identified whether each of these overarching insights either:

- Validated or confirmed what we already knew or suspected.
- Offered new insight or learning about what partners are doing and thinking.
- Presented new data/evidence that spoke to the underlying hypothesis/assumptions.

See Appendix A (on pages 20-21) for the list of domains, research questions and sub-questions.

Learning Creates Australia and Nous later synthesised the key insights and provided the summary to study partners as part of a sensemaking session. During that session, 17 partners reviewed the summaries of insights and indicated whether they agreed or disagreed with the points, what they were surprised about, and what they wanted further information on.

### Research reporting

Learning Creates Australia led the development of outputs from action research cycle 1, *Learning Beyond Limits*, drawing on the insights developed through data collection and analysis. Action research cycle 2 will commence from March 2024 and will be focussed on the experiences of young people.

**For any further information on the Action Research Study methodology, please reach out to Annette Cairnduff from Learning Creates Australia at [annette.cairnduff@learningcreates.org.au](mailto:annette.cairnduff@learningcreates.org.au)**

## Action research cycles (2023-2025)



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## Appendix A: Domains, research questions and sub-research questions

Domain	Research questions	Research sub-questions
Impact	Can a broader conception of learning success make it easier (or not) for a young person to describe their capabilities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What new language and concepts are being trialled/used to describe learning success and young peoples' capabilities?</li> <li>How are these new language and concepts being taught to young people?</li> <li>What are the intended outcomes of teaching these new language and concepts, and why do they matter?</li> <li>What actual outcomes have been observed to date/are in progress, for whom? What is influencing these outcomes?</li> <li>What are we learning about the difference it makes if young people have a broader way of describing their capabilities?</li> </ul>
	How does this, in turn, affect (or not) their sense of potential and willingness to engage in learning?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What are teachers doing to cultivate a greater sense of potential among young people?</li> <li>What are the intended outcomes of cultivating a greater sense of potential and why does this matter?</li> <li>What actual outcomes have been observed to date/are in progress? What is influencing these outcomes?</li> <li>How is this affecting a young person's willingness to engage in learning?</li> </ul>
	To what extent does this translate (or not) into an improved capacity to identify options and chart a course to further learning or work?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What are teachers doing to improve a young person's capacity to identify and follow their chosen post-school pathway?</li> <li>What are the intended outcomes of improving capacity and why does this matter?</li> <li>What actual outcomes have been observed to date/are in progress? What is influencing these outcomes?</li> <li>How is this affecting a young person's confidence to be successful in their post-school pathway?</li> </ul>
Arrangements	How do school-level approaches to broader recognition of learning change teachers' mindsets?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What new school-level approaches are being trialled/used to describe broader recognition of learning to teachers?</li> <li>How are these new approaches being developed with teachers and others in the education community?</li> <li>What are the intended outcomes of teaching these new approaches and why do they matter?</li> <li>What actual outcomes have been observed to date/are in progress? What is influencing these outcomes?</li> </ul>
	How are school-level changes impacting teaching practices?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What new approaches are being trialled/used by schools to teaching practices?</li> <li>How are these new changes being developed with teachers?</li> <li>What are the intended outcomes of these new approaches, and why do they matter?</li> <li>What actual outcomes have been observed to date/are in progress. What is influencing these outcomes?</li> </ul>
	How are assessment processes changing and what are the responses to this?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What new assessment practices are being trialled/used by schools?</li> <li>How are these new assessment practices being developed with teachers?</li> <li>What are the intended outcomes of these new practices, and why do they matter?</li> <li>What actual outcomes have been observed to date/are in progress. What is influencing these outcomes?</li> </ul>
System Conditions	What are the sufficient pre-conditions for successful introduction of broader learning recognition?	<p><b>What are the beliefs (teachers, communities, young people)?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How do teachers perceive the concept of new approaches to learning, and what factors influence their perspective?</li> <li>How do students view the idea of new approaches and what factors influence their perspective?</li> <li>What role do parents and the community play in fostering support for new approaches?</li> </ul>

Domain	Research questions	Research sub-questions
System Conditions (cont..)		<p><b>What are the operational/tangible resources required?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What existing educational frameworks support or hinder the implementation of broader learning recognition, and how can they be addressed?</li> <li>• Are there specific skills or competencies of teachers that are critical to integrate new approaches into their pedagogical practices?</li> <li>• What funding conditions must be in place to introduce new approaches to learning?</li> <li>• What technology is necessary to introduce and sustain broader learning recognition systems?</li> <li>• What role does the evidence regarding the impact of broader learning recognition on student outcomes and overall educational quality influence the uptake of new approaches?</li> </ul>
	<p>What is facilitating school-level implementation of approaches to broader learning recognition?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How confident do teachers feel in their ability to implement new approaches and what factors contribute to or hinder their confidence?</li> <li>• To what extent do teachers receive peer support or collaboration in incorporating new approaches into their teaching practices?</li> <li>• How does the backing or involvement of school leaders impact the successful implementation of broader learning recognition at the school level?</li> <li>• What early indicators or signs of a positive difference are observed by teachers and school staff during the implementation of new approaches?</li> <li>• In what ways do families of young people contribute to creating a supportive environment for broader learning recognition, and how can this support be enhanced?</li> <li>• How are students prepared or “primed” to be receptive to new approaches in broader learning recognition, and what role do parents play in encouraging their openness?</li> <li>• What specific guidance or resources are currently provided to support teachers in implementing new approaches?</li> <li>• What challenges related to time management are faced by teachers and school staff when integrating broader learning recognition, and how can these challenges be addressed?</li> <li>• What assessment tools are currently used by schools for evaluating the effectiveness of broader learning recognition initiatives, and how practical and reliable are these tools?</li> </ul>
	<p>What is supporting or getting in the way of efforts among First Movers to broaden learning recognition?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do First Movers within the education system maintain commitment and momentum in their efforts to broaden learning recognition over time?</li> <li>• What responses from system level authorities, whether supportive or resistant, have been encountered by First Movers, and how do these responses impact their initiatives?</li> <li>• To what extent do workload issues and competing priorities affect the ability of First Movers to focus on implementing broader learning recognition initiatives?</li> <li>• What challenges do First Movers face in demonstrating the success and impact of their broader learning recognition efforts, and how are these challenges being addressed?</li> <li>• How have First Movers navigated challenges related to changes in school leadership and its potential impact on the continuity of broader learning recognition efforts?</li> <li>• What communication and outreach methods have proven effective for First Movers in building support and understanding within their educational communities?</li> <li>• How effectively are First Movers able to engage employers in their initiatives, and what strategies have proven successful in gaining their interest and endorsement?</li> </ul>
	<p>What is supporting or getting in the way of Indigenous self-determination, diversity and equality with broader recognition?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How does positive engagement from school leadership and teachers impact the integration of broader learning recognition within the framework of Indigenous self-determination?</li> <li>• How is the acknowledgment of the current system’s marginalisation of First Nations young people and disadvantaged young people influencing the direction and focus of broader learning recognition efforts?</li> <li>• What specific initiatives or approaches have been successful in building trust within Indigenous communities?</li> <li>• How do new approaches address the unique cultural and educational needs of Indigenous communities, ensuring inclusivity and equality?</li> <li>• In what ways are Indigenous perspectives integrated into the design and evaluation of broader learning recognition initiatives to ensure they align with diverse cultural contexts and aspirations?</li> </ul>

All young people should be able to finish school with what they need to keep learning, working and exploring their future.

If you'd like to get involved in the study or to find out more, please contact:

Annette Cairnduff  
[annette.cairnduff@learningcreates.org.au](mailto:annette.cairnduff@learningcreates.org.au)

Learning Creates Australia  
[learningcreates.org.au](http://learningcreates.org.au)

