

Beyond Reform

A Submission to the Pathways to Post-School Success by Learning Creates Australia

Context

[Learning Creates Australia](#) is a pioneering, independent non-profit organisation that strives to catalyse equitable transformation in education. Our mission is to create a learning system that effectively meets the needs and values of our young people, communities, and nation in the 21st century. Guided by a diverse and growing alliance of stakeholders, including young people, educators, parents, policy makers, First Nations communities, employers, academics, and tertiary providers, we drive positive change across the Australian learning landscape.

Over the past three years, our work has involved convening expert advice from various voices in education and learning including direct and deep engagement with over 3000+ students, community members, professionals in education policy, regulation, research and industry and system leaders. These insights echo the findings of numerous reports and reviews over the past decade, highlighting that our current learning system is outdated and stagnating, and at times, underperforming.

Learning Creates Australia commissioned [a comparative and analytical review of twenty-two of these recent reports and reviews](#), exploring their insights and implications. The analysis lays out the challenges for young people, many of which are also echoed in the Discussion Paper, and that despite the consistent efforts of many, and a will for change, it has repeatedly proven difficult to make a significant impact on education system change over the past decade.

There is significant agreement about why it is both important and urgent that Australia makes changes to the ways in which young people navigate transitions from school to a successful and productive life of work and learning.

Learning Creates Australia is building on our past three years of community engagement work to grow robust evidence on the links between how young people have their skills recognised and the impact that has on both their learning and employment pathways and their in-school experience. Core to this work is '[The power of recognising more](#)', action-research study. It is convening 100+ first-mover school communities and leading practitioners (including government), engaged in innovating and testing new approaches. Insights from this study will shed light on how broader learning recognition can act as a catalyst for wider systemic change. The project could be expanded to include a broader set of data, encompassing longitudinal studies or incorporating different jurisdictions and student types.

Beyond Reform: Building a Thriving Learning System

Learning Creates Australia appreciates the focus of the review on the provision, quality and equity of senior secondary pathways. We also recognise that while reform efforts are necessary, they are insufficient in response to meeting the demands of a rapidly changing world. Transformation of our learning systems are required.

Learning Creates Australia recommends the Panel considers the need for exploratory work focussed on:

- New measures for learning success
- New purpose for senior secondary schooling
- New approach to student engagement

New Measures for Learning Success

Australia has many examples of positive incremental change and aspects of our education system have served many young people well, but how we define and measure success in learning is limiting young people's ability to prepare for their future – regardless of their background, abilities or efforts. Currently, successful learning in our education system focuses on academic performance and standardised testing, which has not yielded the desired outcomes and often leaves marginalised students behind. Australia has the fourth most segregated education system in the world¹, which means disadvantaged students are highly concentrated in disadvantaged schools, adding further to this challenge. We need to build a new way of recognising success that leaves no one behind.

Our social and economic future hinges on a fit-for-purpose learning system that equips all young people with the skills they need to thrive and contribute to society. We are currently not delivering on this promise to our young people. We must adopt future-ready metrics that capture cognitive, social, and emotional development to prepare students for a rapidly changing world and the work of today. The core problem is the misalignment between what we measure as educational success and the learning goals we aspire to. Correcting this misalignment provides a powerful opportunity for impact. If assessment and recognition changes, so too do the curriculum and organisation of learning.

The dominant recognition system for senior secondary schooling includes the Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank (ATAR) rankings for tertiary selection and senior secondary certificates, yet only 26% of university entrants actually use an ATAR to gain access to their further learning. It is not utilised in any other post school pathway. In spite of this limited utilisation, the ATAR has a disproportionate impact on secondary schooling curriculum and assessment and our school system is geared to ATAR outcomes even though it's well documented these are insufficient indicators of a young person's potential for further education and employment.

Today, the most significant predictors of a young person's ATAR are their socio-economic status, postcode and the school they attend. This ranking system inadvertently reinforces cycles of disadvantage and

¹ OECD (2017). PISA 2015 Results (Volume III) – Students' Well-Being, OECD Publishing, Paris.

rewards young people already in positions of advantage. Australia is the only country in the world that ranks our students at the end of their schooling. In other countries, students are given a score, but they are not placed in rank order.

*So, while the ATAR provides an indication of scholastic aptitude and is a reasonable predictor of first-year grades, few would claim that is the right tool for indicating likelihood of success of disadvantaged or low-scoring students, or for predicting the capacity of anyone for lifelong learning, or capacity to thrive in professional practice, or in community life.*²

The system is long-established, deeply embedded, it sets syllabuses, defines study rules and regulations for students, sets assessments and examinations, calculates scores, monitors and moderates standards and issues certificates. Scoring is (usually) competitive and not standards-based. It tends to privilege examinable academic knowledge, rather than know-how, the capacity to learn or the exercise of learner agency. It has the effect of marginalising vocational and community-based learning and learners often have to put aside their own interests, passions, cultural contexts and motivations and the cultural, economic and educational needs of their communities.

At Learning Creates we are mindful that those who can find a way to thrive will continue to do so, if not more so. All students – and especially those who experience disadvantage – stand to gain from a more extensive range of pathways that are more informative for recruiters and selectors.

A recent review of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF)³ suggested that the qualification type for the Senior Secondary Certificate of Education should be more clearly defined and represented in the AQF, as a distinct qualification type, in recognition of its role in preparing young people for a range of pathways, at different levels. Learning Creates Australia supports this as a key enabling policy framework for many of the issues discussed in this submission.

We need to expand recognition and certification processes beyond traditional academic achievements, celebrating a student's holistic learning journey. By embracing digital advancements and leveraging data, we can design measures that cater to diverse student needs, allowing for personalised learning journeys that emphasise growth and progression. By doing so, we can foster an entrepreneurial mindset, encouraging creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills among students. Our reports [Recognition of learning success for all](#), [Generating trust and utility in senior secondary qualifications](#) and [Framing Success for All](#) identify implications for assessment and changes to the regulatory system that could be made to senior secondary certificates to support the new definitions of success that learners, teachers and employers want and need.

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 overcoming the complexity of Western Australia's schooling environment requires collective effort and collaboration. By fostering partnerships between further education providers and secondary education, we can develop a shared understanding of broader learning success, leading to effective

² Milligan, Mackay and Noonan (2023) *Reforming senior secondary certification: Directions for improving the interface between school and tertiary study*

³ Noonan, P (2019) Review of the Australian Qualifications Framework (Final Report), Department of Education, Australia.

certification and credentialing of skills. Transparent assessment and reporting practices will ensure seamless transitions into further education and the workforce.

There is emerging practice across the country that is pushing beyond the existing confines and measures of learning success to more fundamentally consider and address what we need and what we value from our learning system and the learners it supports. A group of early movers - schools, academics, employers, universities, admissions centres and jurisdictions - have independently been developing programs, activities and projects to recognise more. And as was identified in the Environmental Scan, there is a desire in Western Australia to explore and recognise these broader capabilities.

This work is showing promise to improve transitions and school experiences. Practices include: Learner Profile pilots, alternative entry pathways to Universities, peer or student self-assessment, learning experiences outside of school, assessment of complex capabilities, micro-credentialing and work integrated learning of work-ready skills.

Some of this work is still at very early stages of development, other work is further developed, some even evaluated - all are part of a growing network 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.

Early movers in this space have come together through *The Power of Recognising More* study to focus on probing common, complex and challenging questions that are necessary to build robust evidence on the impact and value of broader recognition of learning. Working through these questions is integral to the trajectory of change. There is enormous scope to broaden the set of data to encompass longitudinal studies or incorporating different jurisdictions and student types and assess the impact on pathways and learning experiences for young people.

The voices of young people are critical in this conversation. Learning Creates has worked directly with thousands of young people across Australia to listen to their perspectives and ensure young people's voice and agency is embedded at all levels of our work particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. In the last 4 years of work, over 1200 young people have been involved to provide their expertise and lived experience of the current learning system.

Overwhelmingly, young people said they felt inappropriately defined by success or failure in school and through examinations and assessments associated with senior secondary certificates. They rejected the idea that the breadth and depth of who they are, what they know and can do is represented in those credentials or reflected in their learning environments. We need to find ways to value the resilience, competencies and capacities of a young person who has cared for a loved one, supported their family financially, managed their own illness or experienced other forms of disruption or disadvantage in their formal schooling. The Environmental Scan identified the challenges and aspirations of young people to recognise their context and provide a broader set of pathways to support their transition.

The common themes emerging in official reports and expert opinions and in the views of young people, is that schooling in Australia does not reliably deliver or recognise what young people need if they are to thrive and contribute to a healthy economy and society. This situation is counter-productive for learners and for the economy, for society, for communities and for families.

Recommendation 1

Resource and foster collaborative learning ecosystems which encourage schools, communities, and industries to work together in place-based partnerships that build the enabling environments for transformation of learning in schools and communities and grow the skills and knowledge needed to implement innovative teaching practices and new assessment methods. This should include targeted support for schools with significant communities of low socioeconomic and/or First Nations learners to ensure barriers to school engagement are addressed.

New Purpose for Senior Secondary Schooling

A new purpose for learning is essential to guide the transformation of Western Australia's education system.

Redefining the purpose of education is one of the most powerful levers for transforming the system and inclusive and intentional dialogues are needed to surface values and beliefs about education and to develop a broadly shared vision of the purpose of education.

We believe that the first crucial step towards establishing a new purpose for learning is engaging in a compelling community-driven public dialogue. The objectives set out by the Expert Panel are the right ones, but they won't be lived out in the system unless the whole learning community owns them.

By engaging young people, parents, employers, and educators, we ensure all stakeholders have a say in shaping the future of education. This inclusive approach will encourage participants to think beyond the confines of current educational experiences, envisioning an improved and relevant system. It is vital to consider the unique needs of young people, communities, and First Nations people, fostering a shared understanding and agreement on the purpose of education.

This shared vision will serve as a powerful lever for driving systemic change. Learning Creates Australia has observed a strong desire for transformation among Australian stakeholders, mirroring a global trend seen in UN member states working towards educational visions for 2030. To achieve this, open, inclusive, and intentional dialogues are essential to surface the values, beliefs, and aspirations of education and learning in Australia.

Drawing inspiration from successful global models, such as the [Big Change](#) and their [Big Education Conversation](#) based in the United Kingdom, or South Australia's [We Are More campaign](#) and co-hosted [We Are More event](#), Western Australia can develop an effective engagement strategy tailored to its context. By igniting a collective spark for change, we can pave the way for transformative advancements in our learning system, empowering young minds to shape a brighter future for themselves and their nation.

Recommendation 2

Resource and support a Western Australia Dialogue to create a new purpose for learning engaging young people, parents, employers, and educators to ensure all stakeholders have a say in shaping the future of education and encourage participants to think beyond the confines of current educational experiences, envisioning an improved and relevant system.

New Approach to Student Engagement

To foster effective learning, it is crucial that young individuals experience a sense of safety and well-being within the educational environment. The relevance of school to their individual lives and a feeling of belonging are essential components, which can be reinforced through strength-based approaches.

Unfortunately, establishing such a culture faces increased challenges due to a noteworthy surge in the prevalence of mental health disorders among young people, [rising by 50% in the past 14 years](#). This surge has also led to a rise in school refusal, as numerous young individuals grapple with anxiety that hinders their attendance. Two recent Federal Senate inquiries into [school refusal](#) and [classroom disruption](#) have begun a process of mapping the national picture. A [recent survey](#) found that almost 40% of parents agreed that their children had experienced school refusal in the past year.

Although these rates of students experiencing higher rates of disengagement in schools appear to be a consequence of COVID-19 alone, there is a long trend of evidence pointing to student disengagement. Despite significant resources and targets set for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders students as part of the Closing the Gap initiative, we've seen a [decrease in school attendance](#). A [Grattan Institute report from 2017](#) found that 40% of students are disengaged in classrooms.

Education and well-being share a symbiotic relationship, and addressing one aspect significantly influences the other. Explicit efforts, such as implementing a well-being-focused curriculum, and implicit measures, like creating conducive learning conditions, contribute to observing and discussing well-being as an integral part of the learning process. This dual approach encourages positive changes in teacher behaviour, emphasising the importance of building connections and fostering environments where young people are emotionally prepared for learning. Lea Waters' research on [Visible Wellbeing](#) illustrates how teacher practices evolve when there is a heightened awareness of the significance of well-being, shifting from merely delivering content to ensuring students comprehend and engage with the material. Studies consistently highlight the pivotal role of wellbeing in enhancing student engagement and influencing academic outcomes. It serves not only as a precursor to learning but also as an outcome shaped by the educational process ([Waters, 2021](#)).

Students, and their teachers are facing unprecedented levels of stress, pressure, and mental health challenges. Any solutions will require a partnership with these two stakeholders who spend the most time in schools and a prioritisation of their wellbeing.

The Centre for Community Child Health and National School Reform Agreement Panel Member Pasi Sahlberg [recommended several principles](#) that could guide this approach to prioritising wellbeing in schools earlier this year.

Another model worth considering is the [Northern Territory Learning Commission](#) which makes sense of the data and experiences on the ground by putting the analysis into the hands of students and teachers.

Recommendation 3

Prioritise wellbeing for students to increase engagement. It is strongly recommended that Western Australia prioritise and integrate comprehensive wellbeing initiatives. This involves not only explicit teachings but also creating environments that foster wellbeing implicitly. Such an approach can lead to positive transformations in teaching practices, ultimately enhancing the overall educational experience and outcomes for young learners.

Recommendations

To bring about the transformation needed Learning Creates Australia makes the following recommendations for investment and action from the Commonwealth Government:

1. **Resource and foster collaborative learning ecosystems** which encourage schools, communities, and industries to collaborate or work together in place-based partnerships that build the enabling environments for transformation of learning in schools and communities and grow the skills and knowledge needed to implement innovative teaching practices and new assessment methods. This should include targeted support for schools with significant communities of low socioeconomic and/or First Nations learners, this should be designed to address the barriers to school engagement in the pilot.
2. **Resource and support a Western Australia Dialogue to create a new purpose for learning** engaging young people, parents, employers, and educators to ensure all stakeholders have a say in shaping the future of education and encourage participants to think beyond the confines of current educational experiences, envisioning an improved and relevant system.
3. **Prioritise wellbeing in students to increase engagement**
It is strongly recommended that Western Australia prioritise and integrate comprehensive wellbeing initiatives. This involves not only explicit teachings but also creating environments that foster wellbeing implicitly. Such an approach can lead to positive transformations in teaching practices, ultimately enhancing the overall educational experience and outcomes for young learners.

Conclusion

Learning Creates Australia's submission to the Pathways to Post-School Success Review advocates for a transformative shift towards a future-ready education system. By redefining success measures, engaging in inclusive dialogues and prioritising the wellbeing of students, we can build a thriving learning system that empowers our young people to succeed in the 21st century and beyond. Together, we can shape a brighter future for Western Australia, where education unlocks the full potential of every individual, enriches communities, and drives the nation towards unparalleled success.

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Learning Creates acknowledges 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, present and emerging 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.