

Working with young people at Learning Creates Australia: our approach and impact

January 2026



We believe in the potential of young people and the power of learning.

At Learning Creates, we centre young people because meaningful systems change is only possible when those most affected by the system have a genuine role in shaping it. Young people engage with our learning systems every day, giving them critical insight into what works, what doesn't, and what needs to shift. Their lived experience surfaces blind spots, challenges long-held assumptions, and strengthens the quality and relevance of solutions.

In all our work, young people contribute as collaborators and co-designers – not consultees. This ensures that ideas for change are grounded in what genuinely supports engagement, agency, purpose and opportunity.

Since we began, a core principle of Learning Creates Australia has been employing young people in paid, purposeful roles – as Associates: co-researchers, facilitators, communicators and advisors.

This overview draws on an associate-led evaluation and impact report researched and written by three young associates (Heidi, Tilly and Ava), capturing what works, what needs to improve, and what makes our model different.



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. [You can read our commitment to First Nations self-determination here.](#)



Our Associate Model

We employ and partner with young people aged 15–25 from diverse backgrounds and lived experiences as casual staff members. They work with us on:

- Research and co-design projects
- Youth-led communications and storytelling
- Community and systems-change initiatives with schools, systems and tertiary bodies

Our approach is built around five key elements that young people identified as most important:

#1
Recognising voices and abilities

#2
Prioritising the needs of the whole person

#3
Leadership, agency and independence

#4
Supporting diversity

#5
Strengthening connections

As one associate reflected, Learning Creates “really cares about young people... they walk the walk”, not just talk about youth-voice and leadership.

What makes our model different?

Young people told us that several features set this model apart from other experiences they have had:

Real jobs, real responsibility

Associates are paid and trusted to lead substantial pieces of work – from developing youth-facing resources and a national podcast, to co-authoring research and shaping pilots. One associate described having “complete creative freedom” within a clear brief, another said they were “steering the boat” on a First Nations-led research cycle.

Designed for agency, not tokenism

Young people repeatedly said their contribution “never felt tokenistic”. Structures – such as who is in the room, how meetings are run and how partners are prepared, are set up to rebalance power so associates can contribute as equals.

Hiring for lived experience and diverse skills

We do not rely on traditional CVs. Instead, we hire for interest, lived experience and strengths, including creative skills and non-linear pathways. As one associate shared, being recognised as an “artist” and not just a hobbyist “made me realise my skills were a big deal”.

A three-part support model

Young people highlighted our three-part model of meaningful employment, structured training and 1-on-1 coaching as key to their growth and wellbeing. This includes support for partners to learn how to work well with young people, not just expecting young people to “fit in” to existing cultures.

Youth-led evaluation and reflection

The evaluation of this model was designed, researched and written by young associates themselves, who interviewed peers and partner organisations and shaped the narrative. As one mentor put it, “if we are going to walk the talk of centring young people in all of our work, there is no better way than to have young people themselves discover and shape the story”.



What young people say about their experience

The associate-led evaluation of our model gathered stories from young people and partners. They spoke about:

Confidence and belonging

Young people described moving from imposter syndrome to feeling “part of the staff and professional” and having “the willingness to share your ideas... instead of being on the sidelines”.



Using and growing their skills

Training and on-the-job opportunities helped associates develop concrete skills – from research and writing, to facilitation, data analysis and communications. “They built up our skills capacity and then recognised that we had those skills... and created a really positive working environment where we could bounce off each other and work in an intergenerational space.”



The ripple effect of growing agency

As one associate put it, their experience gave them confidence “to encourage other young people to own their voices, rather than deferring to people who you think have more experience”. This creates a cycle of youth-led action, where more experienced associates support newer ones.



Flexible, human-centred work

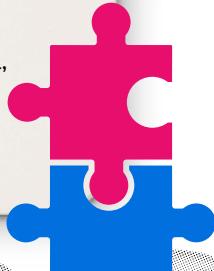
Young people valued flexible hours, hybrid work and understanding of study, family and community commitments. One associate said that if they had only experienced a traditional workplace, they would have been “a lot more anxious” and slower to grow, whereas Learning Creates’ “person-focused approach” became the benchmark for what they seek in future work.

Safety, safeguarding and support

Because we work with young people on complex, sometimes confronting systems-change issues, safety is built in from the start. Over many years of working with young people we have developed and refined strong safeguarding measures, including:

- A safeguarding culture and a Commitment Statement that clearly sets out what young people can expect from us – around safety, respect, agency, voice and honesty and how we will hold ourselves accountable.
- Staff trained in Youth Mental Health First Aid, so the team is better equipped to recognise and respond when young people are experiencing mental health challenges.
- Paid, confidential coaching for associates that covers their whole lives – not just project tasks – giving them a trusted adult to reflect with, debrief and ask for help.
- Additional specialist support where needed, such as partnering with First Nations-led mental health organisations for First Nations associates working with confronting content.

Associates told us this support helped them stay well, learn from mistakes and keep their “spark for change alive” in demanding systems-change work.



Outcomes - for young people and for systems

Young people reported:



Partner organisations report:



New models they can adapt to embed youth expertise in their own work

One school leader described youth-led, peer-to-peer conversations about systems change as "unique" in their complexity and impact, saying that traditionally unheard young people "really valued it". A tertiary partner commented that associates brought "fresh eyes" and "new ways to do things" that staff immersed in content every day could not see.

Why this matters for funders and partners

For funders and partners, this model offers more than youth voice – it is a tested way of shifting power, building capability and delivering better outcomes for young people and systems.

Investing in this work helps to:

- Grow a cohort of young leaders with the skills, networks and confidence to drive change
- Strengthen evidence about how to work safely and effectively with young people in complex systems
- Support organisations to embed youth-centred practices and safeguarding in their everyday work
- Ensure that reforms in education and pathways are grounded in the lived experience of those most affected

This youth-led evaluation confirms that when young people are properly supported, trusted and paid to lead, they change not only their own futures – they change the system for many others.

