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AUSTRALIA

The Rising Tide: From ripples to waves -
How recognising more transforms learning

Findings from The Power of Recognising More
Action-Research Study - December 2025

The tide at a glance – What the Evidence Shows

Across Australia, a new tide is rising. Schools, systems and communities are widening the circle of what counts as success in learning, and when they do, everything begins to shift:
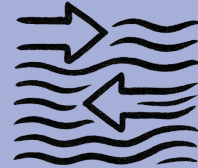
Engagement rises like a swell

Wellbeing steadies

Achievement deepens

Pathways that once felt narrow open into broader channels

Led with a diverse coalition of partners and driven by Learning Creates Australia, **the Power of Recognising More study** has followed this movement over the past three years. Across hundreds of schools and several systems, the participatory research has built a practical, real-world evidence base showing what happens when we recognise a broader range of young people's learning, skills and capabilities.

The findings are clear. When education systems value diverse ways of learning and succeeding, young people thrive, teachers rediscover a sense of purpose, and systems begin to move toward increasing equity and relevance.

Explore: The evidence base >

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This summary traces that rising tide – what it means for young people, teachers and schools, systems and the wider economy – and how the ripples already in motion can become lasting waves of change.

Young people's reflections:

This work sits alongside a youth-led short film, **Letter to the System,** which carries these insights in the voices of young people themselves, showing why our systems must evolve and how they can better support every learner.

Contents – Let's dive in

A Letter To The System

In shallow water:
Why recognise more?

Beneath the surface, the currents are troubling. Gaps in learning outcomes are widening, particularly between advantaged and disadvantaged students. Youth mental health concerns and declining wellbeing are rising.[1]

Thousands of children and young people are not in school[2] and First Nations students continue to face systemic exclusion.[3]

**For too many young people, today's learning system feels like shallow water.**

I am good at things and worthy of everything.

Watch: Rose (19yrs) on the need for safe learning environments >

I think that learning in a way that honors my Aboriginality

Watch: Alyssa (24yrs) on the importance of learning that honours her Aboriginality >

At the same time, the world around them is changing fast. An aging population, the climate crisis and rapid advances in AI demand that young people develop strong human capabilities – collaboration, creativity, empathy, problem-solving – alongside academic knowledge.[4]
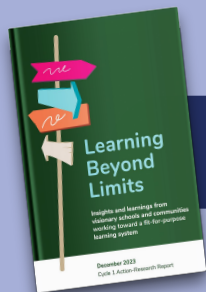
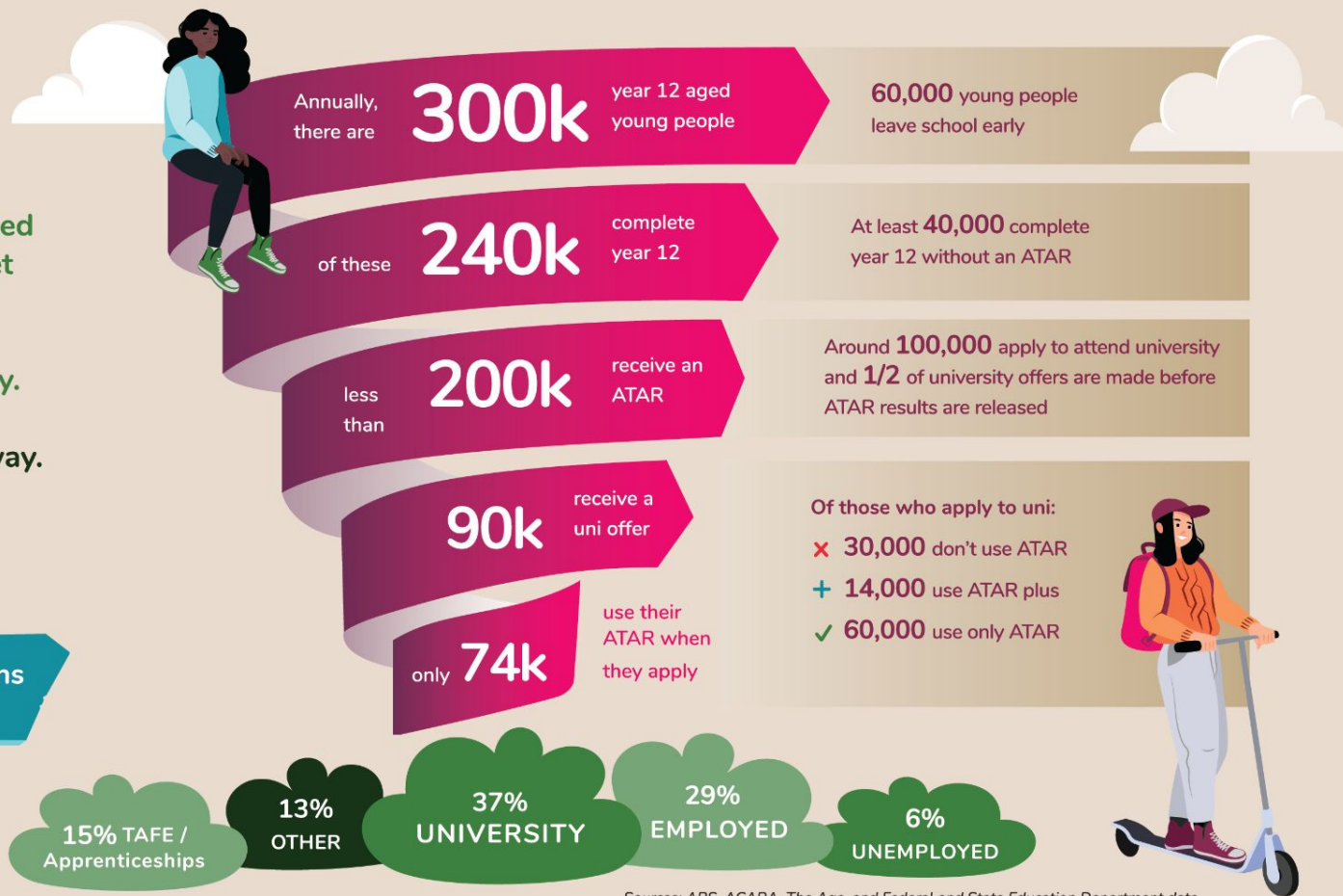**Discover: What's changing and why we need new measures of success >**

Yet the system still largely judges success through narrow measures, such as the ATAR, even though the majority of young people do not rely on it for post-school pathways.[5]

This mismatch is a riptide, pushing learners away rather than drawing them in.

ATAR is **not used** by more than **75%** of our young people[5]

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.

Post-school destinations for 18 year-olds:

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

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

15% TAFE / Apprenticeships

13% OTHER

37% UNIVERSITY

29% EMPLOYED

6% UNEMPLOYED

Tracing the current – Five cycles of learning

Over hundreds of conversations, classrooms, communities and evaluations, the study followed five connected cycles of learning over three years – each illuminating a different movement within the same current of change.

Structural barriers – showing how narrow measures limit opportunity, and how some schools are widening access and success.

Young people leading – revealing how recognising lived experience and capability builds belonging, agency and motivation.

Practitioner insight – documenting how educators redesign learning so more young people, especially those marginalised by the system, can thrive.

First Nations knowledge – centring culture, identity, Country and self-determination as foundations for meaningful learning.

The economic imperative – modelling the scale of potential national benefit from broader learning recognition.

The learning emerged through stories, data, artefacts, modelling and lived experience, from different starting points. It cannot be used to draw effect sizes or establish causation; however, the growing body of evidence is compelling. While the work is not yet complete, after three years there is much to celebrate.

Our Research Action Plan

Partners in 'The power of recognising more' action research study 2023 - 2025

Discover: Where we started and what we set out to achieve >

Changing Seas - What we found

Across these cycles, currents converged. Schools in vastly different contexts reported similar patterns: when they broaden the recognition of learning success, young people see themselves differently, teachers teach differently and communities begin to move with the change.

This is not simply a shift in practice – it is a shift in culture, in what we value and how we see one another as learners.

The tide is changing one wave at a time. The waves represent the major domains where broader recognition is reshaping Australian education: young people, practitioners, systems and the economy.

Within each wave, the ripples are the real stories, data and examples that show the change in motion.

The Rising Tide

When we recognise more of what young people know, can do and care about, we do more than create ripples of change…

We lift the tide for learners, teachers, communities and systems – and help to reshape the future of learning in Australia.

Ripples into lives

- Increased engagement and achievement
- Increased agency, wellbeing and belonging
- Confidence in skills and capabilities
- Clearer and accessible pathways

Ripples across systems

- Significant uptake of new approaches
- Jurisdictions and higher education institutions re-imagining credentials and pathways
- Growth in community and parent demand

Ripples through practice

- Teachers growing in confidence and agency despite learning curve
- Supporting greater understanding of their students
- Revitalisation of the workforce

Ripples of prosperity

- Broader credentials could deliver up to $5B annually[6]
- Up to $260k in benefits per young person, with the greatest gains for those currently underserved[6]
- SEL could generate up to $22B in economic benefits across the current cohort of school aged young people[7]

Beneath the surface, the currents are troubling:

Inequity
Wellbeing decline
Systemic exclusion
Disengagement

The next swell - where the current leads:

Greater tracking and inquiry of:

- *Learner credentials*
- *Teacher impact*
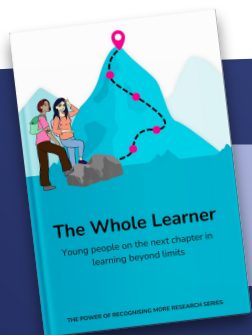- *AI-enabled personalisation*
- *Wellbeing and agency*

Wave One –
Ripples into lives

Seeing the Whole learner

When schools recognise the whole learner – their interests, culture, strengths and experiences – students feel more connected, valued and confident.

Many describe a shift from being "just another number" to feeling like contributors to their school community.[8]

The Whole Learner
Young people on the next chapter in learning beyond limits

THE POWER OF RECOGNISING MORE RESEARCH SERIES

"It makes me feel so much better, and it makes me feel like I'm valued, whereas before, I just didn't feel anything for schooling, because I just felt like I was just there as another number. But now I feel like I'm here as a supporter and an asset and a student ambassador, because I like helping people and doing things like that is how I'm going to learn the best and how I'm going to show them that I can learn things in different ways. And it's just, I don't know. I just love it. I love it."[8]

There should be more ways to express students' strengths and value them - that aren't just a number. Why are we valued by a number? We have so much more to us than our academics. More appropriate ways should be implemented that explore our strengths... because the real world is more than exams, tests - it's communication and expression.[8]

Centering belonging and wellbeing

Indigenous-led approaches such as the Tunuba Learning Charter show how centring culture, wellbeing and relationships strengthens belonging and agency for First Nations students. The Charter recognises learning in its entirety: personal and leadership skills, cultural knowledge, caring for Country and community contributions. This builds safety, identity and equal standing between schools and Aboriginal communities.[9]

Watch: The development of Indigenous-led Learning Charters >

Teachers across a range of schools also reported similar impacts for students who were previously disengaged or excluded within the current system.

"I just saw these amazing changes with students. From students who had behaviour issues, attendance issues, social issues, or general teenage issues - they all ended up getting something positive out of it."[10]

Equity and achievement follow

Findings also showed that when engagement and agency increase, equity and achievement follow.

Behavioural incidents reduce, learning becomes more consistent and academic outcomes begin to improve over time.

Plumpton High School: Expanding Pathways

🚀 97% of students now transition into work, training, or education – up from less than 75% locally.

🎓 University offers are rising, and academic success is at its highest in 20 years.

📉 Suspensions have halved - showing what's possible when students feel supported.

💡 Their approach?
Strong industry and university partnerships, clear pathways, and putting student agency at the centre.

At **Plumpton High School**, suspension days fell from 1,117 in 2014 to 415 in 2023. Retention, attendance and achievement all strengthened, with more students achieving high HSC bands and strong post-school outcomes.[10]

Big Picture Learning schools in NSW show similar patterns – students are 600% less likely to be suspended than their mainstream peers and more students stay engaged in Year 11-12. These schools report rising retention and attendance at a time when less than half of secondary students in government schools attend 90% of the time.[11]

Read: The Plumpton case study in - Notes from the field >

Watch: The experience of Big Picture Students >

Skills of the future

Recognition of diverse learning is also helping young people build capabilities that matter for life beyond school including:[5]

Working collectively, including leadership, and building capacity in others

Critical thinking including problem solving

Managing self including time management, agency, self-regulation

Ethical behaviour and active citizenship

Social and emotional wellbeing including resilience

Literacy and numeracy including communication and digital literacy

These capabilities are developed in many places: in classrooms, at home, in cultural and community settings, and through interests, responsibilities and work.

Recognising a broader range of skills and capabilities builds students' **confidence and capability.**

Many discover strengths they didn't know they had, develop leadership, and gain practical skills that matter now and in the future. This recognition especially motivates those who rarely receive positive feedback.[8]

"Our school offers heaps of stuff like barista training, food handling, first aid... it's things like that which can make an actual difference."[8]

"Having a teacher or someone in a position of power telling you that you're doing good and that you are recognised for your skills. It's really impactful, especially for me, like the way that I learn, the way that I interact with school, knowing that those skills are recognised and appreciated is amazing."[8]

I think that student agency is really important in learning
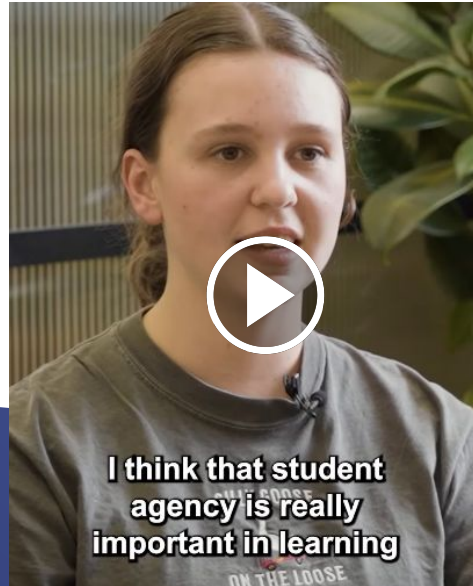
Watch: Megan (21yrs) on the importance of student agency >

It didn't feel like that much work, having that connection
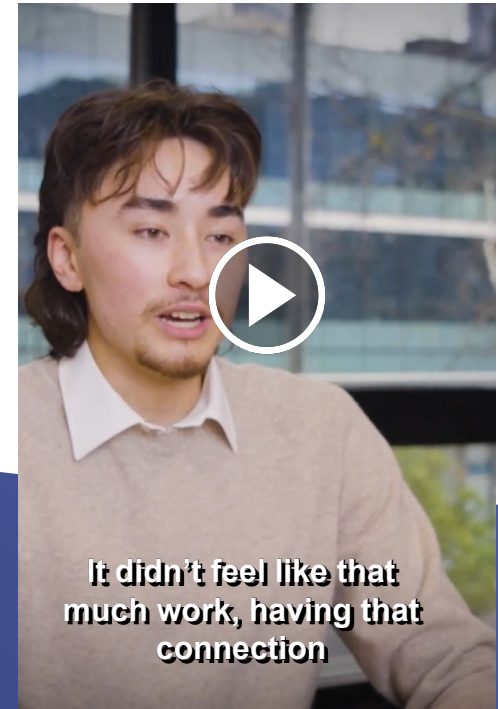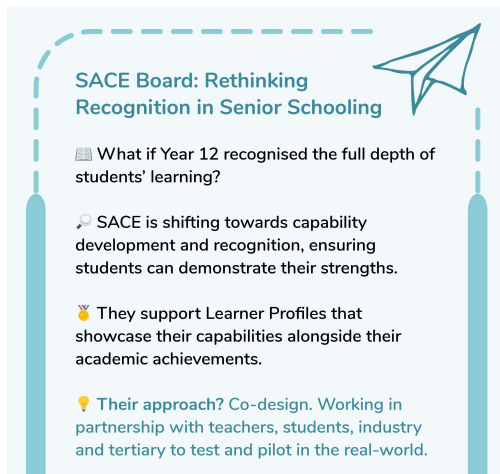
Watch: Jaden (20yrs) on learning by solving problems >

System-level work – such as the **The SACE Board Learner Profile and Capabilities Pilot**[12] – is helping young people understand and articulate skills like personal enterprise, quality thinking, self-motivated learning, principled action and collective engagement. A learner profile sits alongside a student's academic achievements, and highlights capabilities developed in a range of school and non-school contexts.

Most students in the pilot say they can grow these capabilities beyond school and see how they support future pathways.[5]

SACE Board: Rethinking Recognition in Senior Schooling

📖 What if Year 12 recognised the full depth of students' learning?

🔍 SACE is shifting towards capability development and recognition, ensuring students can demonstrate their strengths.

🏅 They support Learner Profiles that showcase their capabilities alongside their academic achievements.

💡 **Their approach?** Co-design. Working in partnership with teachers, students, industry and tertiary to test and pilot in the real-world.

Read: The SACE Board case study in - Notes from the field >
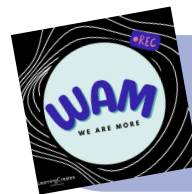
Watch: Hassan Mekawy on the benefits of recognising more >

- **79% of students feel equipped to develop SACE capabilities beyond school**
- **75% of students understand how capability development supports future pathways**
- **53% see formal recognition of capabilities as important**[5]

Improved pathways

Young people are beginning to navigate their transitions from school to further education and work with greater confidence.

Increased learner agency and new learning opportunities are helping students understand what they enjoy, what they are good at and where they want to go - giving them a clearer sense of purpose:

"I think I figured out that I need a job where I'm helping people ... otherwise, I'm not going to have a life that I'm going to love." [8]

Schools are seeing the difference

Across settings where learning focuses on students' strengths and gives them space to explore - students consistently report clearer aspirations, greater confidence, and a stronger sense that what they are learning matters.

Teachers report stronger pathways planning,[13] with students better able to articulate their skills and interests and connect learning to real-world options, including VET and work. Students are more engaged when learning feels relevant, and more optimistic when they can see how school connects to life beyond the classroom.[8, 10]

"Understanding self is the foundation of careers education. If students understand themselves, their strengths, interests and skills then they can make sensible decisions about their future – including basic things like choosing the right subjects, engaging in a VET program etc. A successful experience in school can also build confidence beyond school."[10]

Early entry is supporting students to conceive that they are capable of higher education studies,[10] often despite the complex life circumstances in which they find themselves:

"I don't believe I would have gotten into university if it wasn't for the early entry. I didn't think university was an option for me, ever, because of the town that I grew up in, my family's low economic status and especially going through homelessness... everything just kept piling on. Going through this early entry scheme 100% gave me the confidence to be able to pursue this career and be able to do life in general". (Paris, student, Bachelor of Science). [14]

More than you think:
Growing career pathways in Liverpool for young people

Skills. Pathways. Possibility.

There are also emerging models showing pathways connected to place as demonstrated in the **Liverpool pathways project.** This work shows how mapping real local industries, skills and job progression can debunk myths about opportunities, sectors and reveal accessible, meaningful careers for young people.[15]

Watch: Jye on his journey taking his own pathway >

Discover: Analysis and findings in the Liverpool 'More than you think' report >

While the Liverpool Project draws on local data analysis - it shows a story applicable nationally of the many potential pathways into growth industries, no matter where you start. Below are 3 example options for Samara, a young person looking at a career in the aged and disability care industry:[15]

Year 10 School Leaver

Studying a **Certificate III** in Individual Support at TAFE

Entry point 1: Residential Care Officer

Furthering studies by completing a **Certificate IV** Ageing Support while gaining real experience through an industry traineeship.

Career progression: To a disability services project manager

This pathway offers:

- Local job opportunities with good remuneration
- Ability to start learning, working and earning earlier without needing an ATAR or degree
- Lower-cost study options close to home that can be built up over time.

Year 12 School Leaver

Studying a **Bachelor** of Nursing at University

Entry point 2: Registered Nurse

Gaining on the job experience and training in the workplace (7% of technical skills and 90% of future-ready skills developed as a registered nurse are relevant to clinical director roles)

Career progression: To a nursing clinical director

- Fast route to a qualification and professional-level role
- requires attending university and completing a degree-level qualification up-front

Transition from other Occupation

Studying a **Certificate IV** in Ageing Support at TAFE

Entry point 3: Aged Carer

Furthering studies at by completing a **Bachelor** of Nursing with a focus on aged care while working part time and gaining on the job experience.

Career progression: To a registered nurse for an aged care home

- Uses skills developed in another industry to get a foot in the door
- Can start earning earlier and building qualifications as you go
- Offers flexibility

Wave Two –

Ripples through practice

What changes for teachers

From narrow measures to deeper understanding

When schools use more expansive ways of understanding learning success, teachers report greater confidence and satisfaction in their work too. Teachers describe renewed engagement and enjoyment as they see students' strengths more clearly.[5]

Watch: Educator Rebecca Baker shares the benefits of recognising more through the SACE Learner Profile Pilot >

"[The approach] empowers me as her teacher to recognise what she is capable of doing beyond traditional assessments. It allows me to see her strengths in real-time and support her in ways that highlight her capabilities and build her confidence."[10]

- Over half of teachers say broader measures help them understand students moderately or a lot.[13]
- Almost half report increased job satisfaction as a result [13]
- Teachers also describe a mindset shift - moving beyond narrow academic indicators to a fuller picture of learning, identity and progress.[5]

How practice changes

Stronger relationships, more collaborative teaching

Broader measures of success encourage teachers to work together to design learning that reflects students' strengths and aspirations. Teachers build confidence through shared reflection and collaborative practice.[10]

"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."[16]

Schools develop a shared belief that expansive measures of success support engagement, wellbeing and outcomes.

Active leadership that protects time, supports professional learning and allows flexibility is a key enabler.[10]

Watch: More from Rebecca Baker on some of the challenges >

"This work has revitalised our practice and increased enjoyment in the teaching process." – Yeronga State High School [5]

What it takes - and what improves over time

Early effort, growing confidence:

- Teachers are clear that adopting broader measures of learning success requires time and support.
- Early implementation can feel challenging alongside curriculum and system demands
- Time pressure and workload remain the most common barriers [13]

Explore: Practitioners sharing their learnings from across their work in - Notes from the field >

Experience makes a difference:

- Teachers who use broader measures more frequently find the work easier
- Nearly two-thirds report it becomes easier over time and expect continued improvement
- Most report only a small to moderate increase in workload
- As practice matures, broader measures of success become embedded, more efficient, and professionally rewarding [13]

For First Nations learners, broader recognition becomes powerful when grounded in co-agency, belonging and relationships.[17]

Thread 1: Co-agency

Co-agency is enabled through strong relationships and a sense of belonging, allowing students, educators and communities to share power and shape learning together. When young people feel valued and heard, they can actively influence decisions that affect their learning.

Thread 2: Belonging

Belonging is strengthened through co-agency and relationships that affirm identity, culture and lived experience. When students see themselves reflected in learning and are trusted as contributors, engagement and wellbeing are supported.

Thread 3: Relationships

Relationships underpin both co-agency and belonging. Trusting, respectful connections create the foundation for shared decision-making and culturally safe learning spaces where young people feel seen, supported and able to participate fully.

Read more: Claiming space and shifting narratives >

First Nations young people and researchers describe how learning shifts when learning environments centre culture and work with communities. They reveal practical ways to create culturally safe, relational classrooms where young Mob feel seen, supported and able to succeed as themselves.[17]

Wave Three –
Ripples across systems

Evidence of system shifting

Across schools, systems and pathways, there are clear signals that learning is being reshaped to better support wellbeing, engagement and future readiness.

What's changing:

1. Growing school, jurisdictional and community uptake

Momentum is building, with hundreds of schools, prototyping participants and system leaders engaged in this action research alone. Seven jurisdictions have recently reviewed senior secondary recognition and pathways, alongside tertiary pilots of learner profiles.[18]

2. Expansion of holistic learning environments

Enrolments in settings that integrate wellbeing – including alternative and special assistance schools – have doubled since 2015, responding to rising disengagement, anxiety and "school can't".[19]

3. Shifts in post-school pathways

More than **75% of students** now transition without relying on ATAR alone. Universities are increasingly adopting alternative entry pathways, early offers and broader measures of success.[5]

Melbourne Metrics: Next-Gen Assessment & Recognition

📊 What if we could measure the skills that matter most for the future?

🔍 MM is pioneering new ways to assess and credential complex capabilities – like collaboration, creativity, and problem-solving.

🔧 Their tools support thousands of schools to capture a broader picture of what students know and can do.

💡 **Their approach?** Cutting-edge digital assessment tools, research-backed credentialing, and partnerships that transform learning recognition at scale.

Led by the University of Melbourne's *Melbourne Metrics* together with key partners, a new ARC Linkage project is exploring how broader measures of learning success can better match students to university courses. The work signals a growing shift from ranking toward pathways aligned with students' strengths and aspirations.
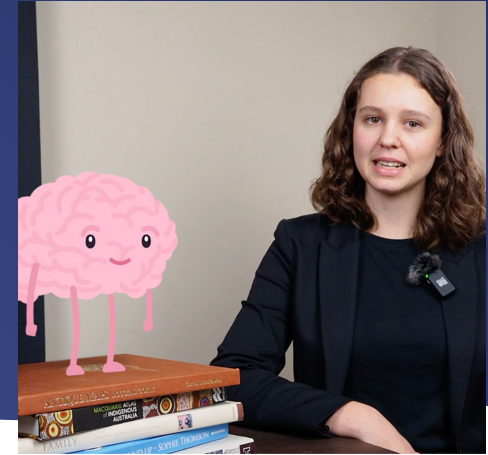
Students engaging in non ATAR pathways programs are reporting increased confidence, for example students undertaking **U@Uni** Academy at UTS - which focuses on 21st century skills over - report a 94% increase in confidence to complete school.[10]

Tertiary Admissions Centres (UAC and VTAC) are also reshaping their role. SkillSpark is a new strengths-based pathway that reimagines current Education Access Schemes. It allows students to apply for university by highlighting their individual strengths, skills and capabilities alongside traditional admission criteria.

Explore: Matching for success announcements >

Listen: to Sonal from UTS on the U@Uni pathway >

Explore: The SkillSpark pathway >

4. Culture is shifting

Community demand for broader purposes of schooling – particularly the inclusion of wellbeing and whole-of-family support – is growing.

Parents often support the idea of recognising the whole child, while also wanting assurance that new measures will still keep pathways open.[5]

EXCLUSIVE Education An hour ago

ATAR angst amid pressure to pick 'bright' subjects

There are calls for a rethink of Year 12 results as a new report reveals students are "torn between pursuing their passions, or conforming to the narrative" to optimise their ATAR.

The Daily Telegraph: on why it's time to rethink learning success >

Watch: The parent perspective with Megan O'Connell >

What all this means for outcomes: Improved achievement takes time and follows engagement and connection. Teachers report that when students have greater agency and feel recognised, cognitive engagement increases – particularly for those previously disengaged. While achievement is a lagging indicator, schools embedding these approaches over longer periods are seeing stronger academic outcomes emerge.[10]

These are the currents of a changing sea – reviews, pilots, community campaigns, institutions and new partnerships all pulling in the same direction.

Wave Four –
Ripples of prosperity

The new economics of education

As AI reshapes work and an ageing population increases demand for care, the capabilities that make us human – communication, collaboration, problem-solving, ethical judgment, cultural competence – become more valuable, not less.

Until recently these capabilities have been harder to measure and assess, and to quantify their impact. But emerging practice and evidence is changing this - making it easier to quantify their potential impact.

Drawing on the study and supported by local and international evidence **we modelled two aligned scenarios that show what's possible. We found that:**

1. **Improving transitions** through broader, trusted credentials at the end of school can deliver gains of up to $260,000 per young person between 21 and 30, and around $5 billion each year for the economy.[6]
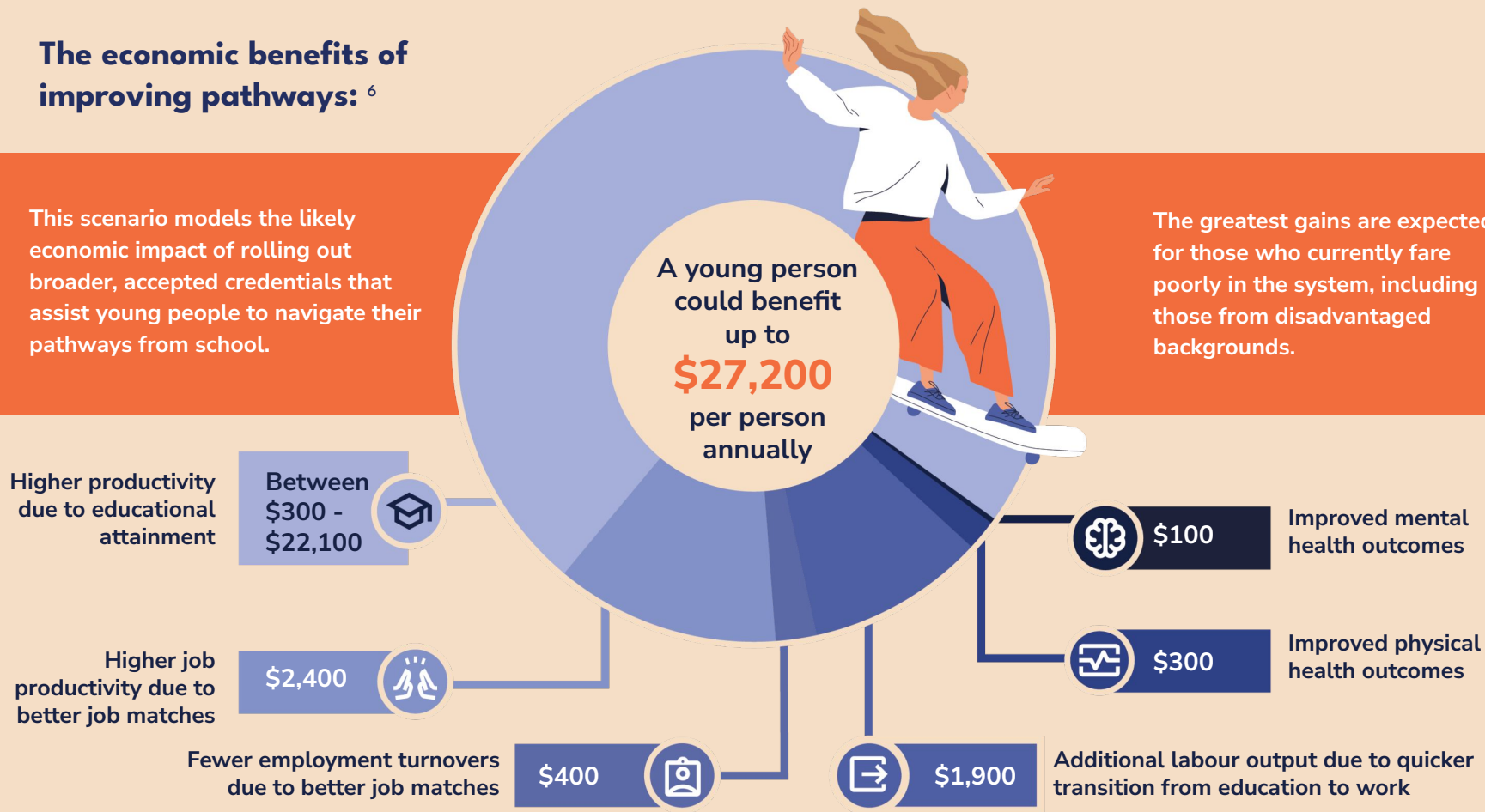

The economics of effective transitions:
Improving young people's transitions through clearer pathways

June 2025

Download: The economics of effective transitions report >

Watch: Martin Westwell from the SA Dept for Education on why change can't wait >

The economic benefits of improving pathways: [6]

This scenario models the likely economic impact of rolling out broader, accepted credentials that assist young people to navigate their pathways from school.

The greatest gains are expected for those who currently fare poorly in the system, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

A young person could benefit up to **$27,200** per person annually

Higher productivity due to educational attainment — Between $300 - $22,100

Higher job productivity due to better job matches — $2,400

Fewer employment turnovers due to better job matches — $400

$1,900 — Additional labour output due to quicker transition from education to work

$100 — Improved mental health outcomes

$300 — Improved physical health outcomes

By the age of 30, a young person could realise up to between $42,000 and $260,000

2. Investing in social and emotional learning for the current cohort of school-aged children and young people can generate up to **$22 billion in economic benefits.**[7]
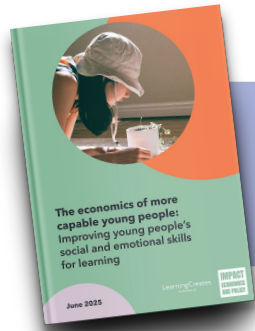
Download: The economics of capable young people report >

Watch: Louka Parry on the importance of investing in social and emotional skills >

Watch: Julie Sonneman from Impact Economics shares key analysis findings >

Together, the modelling shows that recognising more is not just the right thing to do – it is the smart thing to do. It builds a more adaptable, capable and resilient generation at a time when Australia needs exactly that.

Supporting change: Convening, Evidence, Momentum

THroughout this study, Learning Creates Australia has acted as both anchor and channel – convening first movers, amplifying young people's voice, generating and translating evidence and creating spaces for shared learning and action.

Regular gatherings and co-designed projects have helped educators and system leaders see what is possible, feel less isolated and build internal and external cases for change. Written evidence has supported this work on the ground, from visual tools and videos, to case studies of schools where broader recognition has transformed outcomes. This evidence is being used in schools, systems, tertiary institutions and governments to redesign policy, governance and practice.

The Next Swell – Where the Current Leads

The tide has turned, but the journey continues. The next phase calls for deeper mapping of the evidence base, long-term tracking of learner credentials, better documentation of teacher impact, stronger exploration of AI-enabled personalisation and further youth-led inquiry into learning, wellbeing and agency.

The evidence is now clear: when we recognise more of what young people know, can do and care about, we do more than create ripples of change. We lift the tide for learners, teachers, communities and systems – and reshape the future of learning in Australia.

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.

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

Discover - Collaborate - Invest
in education transformation

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