

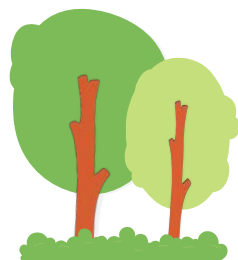
The Whole Learner

Young people on the next chapter in
learning beyond limits

THE POWER OF RECOGNISING MORE RESEARCH SERIES

This report was led by young people.

We would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to all the young people who shared their experiences and insights, making this work truly reflective of their perspectives and journeys.



We would like to acknowledge the incredible design work of **Megan Adrain, Jaden Huynh and Ellie Stephenson** whose creativity and vision have visualised a report that reflects the heart of a youth-led initiative. Special thanks to **Anaïs Rose Nagy-Smith**, whose illustrations bring these ideas to life with vibrant artistry, capturing the spirit and stories of young people throughout and to **Jye Marshall** for his passion and early input in shaping the research design.

Learning Creates Australia is a pioneering, independent non-profit organisation. We believe in the potential of young people and the power of learning. Through collaboration, evidence-driven innovation, and a shared vision of equity - we are dedicated to removing the structural barriers that compound education inequity - ensuring our learning systems are designed to empower young people and where schools become transformative spaces that nurture their unique talents and aspirations.

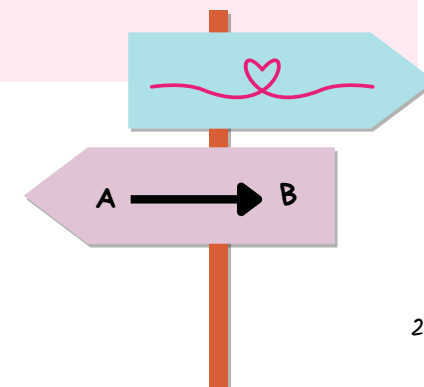
We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land throughout Australia who have been learning and educating on Country for over a thousand generations. We pay our respects for their Elders past, present and emerging for they hold the memories, traditions, cultures and hopes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia. We acknowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to live in spiritual and sacred relationships with Australia.

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Prologue: We Are More

Learning can and should be a meaningful experience for everyone. When nurtured as a lifelong capability, the act of learning can be a catalyst for individual and collective change.

The findings from this report and our conversations with young people across Australia have shown that the current education system is failing to meet the needs of young people.

Since we released the first report in this series, *Learning Beyond Limits*, the signs remain clear: nationwide test scores are declining - in Australia¹ and internationally², and engagement with end-of compulsory schooling measures like the ATAR³ is dwindling as young people seek new pathways into the workforce, society, and further education. The conversations we have had with Australia's young people reflect these changes.

We've heard that how we recognise and value young people for their learning is not working.

Currently, learning success is largely focused on academic performance and standardised testing. Australia is the only country in the world that still 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.

Influenced significantly by the contexts in which a young person learns and lives, this ranking system reinforces experiences of disadvantage and rewards young people who are in positions of advantage. Young people describe it as a rigid and structured context to learn – not reflective of our world today.

While the ATAR remains our dominant form of recognition in secondary schooling, more than 75% of our young people do not utilise their rank to pursue post-school pathways^{4,5}.

So, while the ATAR provides an indication of scholastic aptitude and is a reasonable predictor of first-year university grades, few would claim that is the right tool for indicating likelihood of success for 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.

This system, as we know it, is long-established and deeply embedded. It results in narrowing of the content taught and learned as schooling progresses and emphasises calculating scores, monitoring and standardising achievement. Scoring is (usually) competitive and tends to privilege examinable academic knowledge, rather than knowhow, creativity, curiosity, collaboration, the capacity to learn or embodied learner agency. It has the effect of marginalising vocational and community-based learning, which as a result often forces learners to put aside their interests, passions, curiosity, and unique lived experience and knowledge. The system also fails to consider and promote the interrelation of cultural, socio-economic and educational context of communities.

There is, however, emerging practice across the country that is pushing beyond the existing confines and measures of learning success to address what we need and value from our learning system. These shifts are evident throughout the system at every level and are showing great promise to improve young people's school experiences and post-school transitions. Practices we have identified 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.

These shifts in turn flow on to what is taught and learnt in schooling, and also has an impact on what we assess and how we assess young people at school. In this way, it is a powerful lever for systemic change.

Some of this work is still nascent - other work is further developed. All are part of a growing network of people, organisations and a vision that seeks to create sustainable and equitable transformation in education to better meet the needs and values of our young people, and communities.

Early movers in this space have come together through *The Power of Recognising More participatory action research study* to surface a number of common, yet unaddressed challenges in regards to recognition of learning within the current education system⁷. Through this study we aim to build robust knowledge and a community of practice on the impact and value of broader recognition of learning.

Spanning three years, from 2023 to 2025, the study brings together innovative schools, young people, universities, employers, and community and system leaders to uncover how recognising learning beyond current metrics can enhance depth of learning, lifelong learning opportunities, and student wellbeing. With this, it is our hope *The Power of Recognising More* will contribute to an education system that is flexible and able to service the needs of current and future generations.

Fundamental to the approach and in line with best practice, is valuing the voices of young people in the design of new systems^{8,9,10}. This report reflects the focus of the Power of Recognising More's second action-research cycle - young people - and how we can learn from and alongside emerging generations to co-design a learning system in which all young learners can thrive.

This 'young person' cycle of the work was co-led by emerging researchers, who have had recent experience in secondary education, alongside the expertise of the University of Western Sydney Young & Resilient Research Centre and the Learning Creates Australia team.

Through this research cycle, our focus was to uncover and make sense of young people's perceptions and lived experiences of broader recognition of their learning by integrating their lived experiences into the design, delivery, data collection, analysis, sense-making and communication of its findings.

In workshops and interviews with young people from different parts of Australia we heard about small iterative strategies through to bold, innovative approaches that help students find interests, confidence and joy in their learning journeys.

The bravery and honesty shared through young people's stories are woven throughout this report and offer actionable wisdom. They show us how we can write the next chapter for our education system - together.

"The stories we tell literally make the world. If you want to change the world, you need to change your story. This truth applies to both individuals and institutions." - Michael Margolis, CEO, Get Storied

We need to learn, listen, and collaboratively work together - bringing all members of the learning ecosystem into its evolution - young people, teachers, parents, guardians, schools, industry and community leaders, policy makers and systems influencers.

Maintaining a stagnant story of what is possible doesn't help us.

It's time for the next chapter.

Our Intergenerational Team

Philippa Collin

Philippa (Pip) Collin is Professor and Co-Director of the Young and Resilient Research Centre at Western Sydney University. Her research and advocacy over 20 years has focused on developing approaches and methods to undertake actionable research with young people on the systems and services that shape their lives. A staunch advocate for youth participation and intergenerational collaboration, her work aims to contribute to the transformational knowledge and change that can be achieved when we value, work with and respond to the experiences and views of young people.



Charlie Connell-Tobin

Charlie Connell-Tobin is a passionate first-year university student, having recently completed the International Baccalaureate (IB). With a keen awareness of the disconnect in education between students' passions and their future pathways, Charlie advocates for greater recognition of young people's voices in shaping their own futures. Dedicated to fostering community and belonging through intergenerational connections and collaboration, Charlie's experiences highlight the importance of listening to and valuing young people's stories. This commitment has inspired an interest in systems change and research, with the hope that educators and key stakeholders will integrate the insights from this study into their daily practices to create more supportive and inclusive educational environments that help students thrive.



Linh Dang

Linh is a first-year university student. Having previously been involved in shaping educational initiatives, she advocates for a more inclusive, culturally responsive approach to learning. With experience in youth engagement roles, Linh is dedicated to amplifying young voices and fostering a culture of co-agency. She hopes this study will contribute to transforming the education landscape into a more inclusive, dynamic system that values young people as holistic individuals.



Andrew Kellett

Dr Andrew Kellett is an early career academic and has worked at Western Sydney University since 2014 in a variety of teaching and research roles. He has multidisciplinary teaching experience in psychology and public health, including health psychology and the social determinants of health. Andrew's PhD research focused on the employment and training experiences of young unemployed people in Western Sydney with their employment brokers. He is a mixed methods public health researcher and currently supports ongoing collaborative projects in youth co-research.



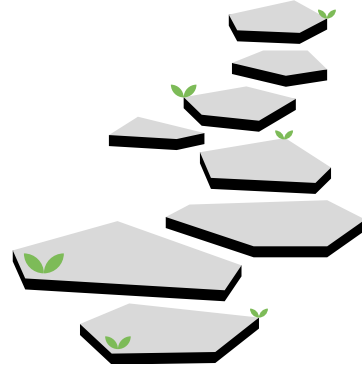
Mietta Symmons-Joyce

Mietta is an emerging systems practitioner and storyteller passionate about empowering young people to 'step into the arena' and co-create a regenerative future. She aspires that the contributions of Learning Creates Australia and this study will create momentum, uniting members of the education ecosystem in service of more collaborative, holistic and dynamic recognition processes for present and future generations.



CHAPTER 1:

The Research Journey



Our Methodology

While system influencers (educators from all levels of schooling, policymakers, tertiary institutions, community and industry leaders etc) frequently discuss educational issues and the need for systemic change, the voices of those most affected - Australia's young people - are often tokenistically collected or even overlooked. Our work with Australia's young people has revealed they often feel they are engaged mainly through ineffective single-instance youth consultations.

Our study, by way of difference, seeks to co-create with young people, through designing for a deep understanding of the experiences of those living the realities and outcomes of the current learning system - young people. Today's young people experience education and learning in a world that is radically different from previous generations, and from academic results through to the crisis in wellbeing, it is clear the system simply isn't working for them.

It is our view that if we empower and create continued space for their voices and ideas for action, they can be active contributors of the solution.

The things that we're doing here right now, this is amazing. This is not something I've ever seen done before, and there needs to be more of this. There needs to be more, you know, students or peers sharing things between each other, discussing ways to improve schools and education systems as a whole, but also the system itself, reaching out to students. - Participant

This research has been co-designed and delivered in collaboration with three young community research associates, researchers from the Young and Resilient Research Centre at Western Sydney University and Learning Creates Australia.

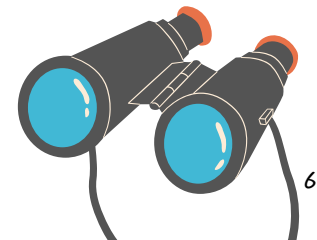


Our methodology and research questions seek to surface and understand, through a collaborative, youth-centred and strengths-based approach, the breadth of young people's experience from a range of different perspectives.

It seeks to understand young people's lived experiences of learning and their perspectives on when they have felt recognised and valued for their knowledge and capabilities. We seek not just to understand the problems but the positive experiences and ideas that young people have that can inform changes in approaches and systems.

By integrating the stories and lived experiences of young people into the methodology, rationale, and communication of this work, we can move closer to co-creating an education system that truly serves current and emerging generations.

See page 27 for more detailed information.



Charting Our Course

We used a **participatory co-creation approach**^{11,12} drawing on the expertise of the Young and Resilient Research Centre¹³ and Learning Creates Australia.

This looked like:

5 participatory workshops in 4 settings based primarily on the method of 'Conversation Circles' And **10 x 1-1 Interviews**

Activities Took Place Across:

2 x school settings
1 x university setting
1 online session
10 online interviews

Our research was guided by the following questions:

1. How do young people experience broader recognition of learning?
2. What difference does it make when young people learn more about ourselves?
3. How does this knowledge impact young people's next steps in life?
4. How can broader recognition help us overcome the disadvantages young people face?

Located:
Tasmania
Victoria
South Australia
NSW

We worked deeply with young people to surface and explore their experiences.

Our Participants:

82%
in school

18%
post school

60
young people
(15-29 years)



Participants shared from a range of perspectives including:

- First Nations
- Regional / rural / remote
- Disability
- English as second language
- Neurodiversity
- Financial hardship and poverty
- Homelessness or significant housing insecurity
- Experiences and exposure to trauma or family violence

60% in school
22% in flexible learning
15% in tertiary study
3% other e.g. gap year, work

57%
15-18 years

43%
19-29 years



She/Her - 30
He/Him - 23
They/Them or Unknown - 6



Navigating the Findings

An invitation to learn and listen

Before you engage with the story-bites presented in these findings, we encourage you to take a moment to prepare to listen, learn and activate the wisdom young people have shared. We ask you to hold their stories and honour them in your actions moving forward.

Our participants express both appreciation and frustration with various aspects of Australia's education system. They are passionate and aware. They are by no means complaining, or despondent. The honest and reflective communication of lived experiences and ideas clearly demonstrates the commitment of those we spoke to, to work alongside education and industry stakeholders to create lasting change - not only for this generation but for those to come.

Central to their insights is the need for young people to be recognised and acknowledged as their whole selves, in both formal and informal ways. They articulated how meaningful it is to young people to feel seen and valued, much more than students fulfilling academic roles. They told us that the idea of recognition goes beyond praise or grades; it means being appreciated for their unique contributions, talents and experiences both within and outside of the school context. It means being valued as whole people, who evolve and grow.

Our participants highlighted the importance of respect, trust and supportive relationships with educators and their peers. They shared how these relationships foster a sense of belonging and safety within learning environments.

For instance, when students are trusted and given responsibility to demonstrate their capabilities, such as leading group projects or contributing to community initiatives, they gain confidence in their potential. This opportunity for responsibility is crucial, as it empowers students to learn in a way that is relevant to their place.

Furthermore, having agency to chart their own learning journeys and pursue their interests is crucial to the young people we spoke to. It is core to a desired educational experience. When students have this agency, they are more motivated and more invested in their learning.

Participants also emphasised the importance of prioritising wellbeing in the education system. The young people we spoke to shared how environments that promote mental and emotional health, where students feel safe and supported, enables them to thrive academically and personally. Safe learning spaces where students feel they belong are core to fostering an inclusive environment that respects diversity, encourages open dialogue and allows students to take more risks with their learning.

Our conversations with young people have shown that they are engaged and aware that change is needed. They are eager to contribute to the solution. And they feel it is urgent. The current education system's narrative has been written about and for young people rather than with and alongside them. This approach has created a gap between the system and those it aims to serve.

Drawing from the conversations we had with young people, our research shows that young people want to see a new narrative - one that reflects the diversity of their perspectives.

As young people, we are calling for a collaborative approach, co-written with all members of the learning community - students, parents, guardians, schools, teachers, and community leaders - to create a more inclusive, dynamic, and resilient learning system.

With thanks - Mietta, Linh and Charlie



CHAPTER 2:

Our Discoveries

“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.”



What young people have said

Relationships are essential, inside and outside the classroom

- When a range of people provide feedback it enhances perception of value, strengthens sense of self
- Conversations outside of formal learning, make students feel more seen as a whole person (eg. out-of-class conversations with a teacher)
- A diversity of people (educators, guardians, mentors, peers etc.) is core to expanding broader recognition of young people
 - Different people saying 'give it a try' or seeing potential in a young person gives them another perspective on themselves
 - Friends and others see more of the process or journey a young person went on rather than just the final result and they can validate that

Being seen and valued as whole people matters to young people

- Broader recognition increases young person's self awareness and internal recognition of their own abilities
- Self validation leads to greater resilience, rather than relying on external validation
- Without being seen for what they really know, young people report feeling disconnected from their learning

Young people want both formal and informal recognition in their learning

- Formal recognition can be motivating, encouraging students to push themselves academically and further develop their capabilities
- Informal recognition makes students feel valued, seen and validated
- Combination of formal and informal can lead to students fostering and further developing new skills and interests
- Making the invisible, visible - young people may not know they have a talent or potential to do something well until they get a signal that it is being recognised



Impact of broader recognition of young people

When young people are recognised for their whole selves, there is a direct impact on their learning.

Feeling safe: Young people feel they can learn and grow at their own pace because the focus is on the learning process, not an exam or assessment result

Engagement: Turning up to school because the experience is positive and empowering

Community connection: through opportunities and experiences in the wider community young people possess a deeper understanding of their contributions and talents

Managing the balance between pressure and passions: Young people recognise that pressure is integral to the learning process, but need this to be grounded and balanced so they can be well

Identifying diverse paths to further learning and work: young people described making plans and understanding pathways that were more aligned with their interests and skills

SAFE — Learning Environment — UNSAFE

ENGAGED — Schooling — DISENGAGED

CONNECTED — Community — DISCONNECTED

PASSION — Wellbeing — PRESSURE

ALIGNED — Futures — UNCERTAIN

The impact of broader recognition for those who experience disadvantage

When students from disadvantaged and marginalised backgrounds have access to broader recognition of their learning it can:

- ✓ Help to dismantle perceived barriers that often limit aspirations
- ✓ Reduce stigma around learning disabilities or mental health challenges
- ✓ Provide young people with a way to see the strengths they have cultivated due to navigating complex situations
- ✓ Enable young people who don't fit the traditional academic mould to make different choices about their learning and pathways
- ✓ Strengthen self efficacy around learning trajectories because they feel seen and heard
- ✓ Support the process of ownership, accountability and responsibility for learning
- ✓ Create a safe space for testing and trying, without fear of failure



CHAPTER 3: Uncovering the story that shapes our system

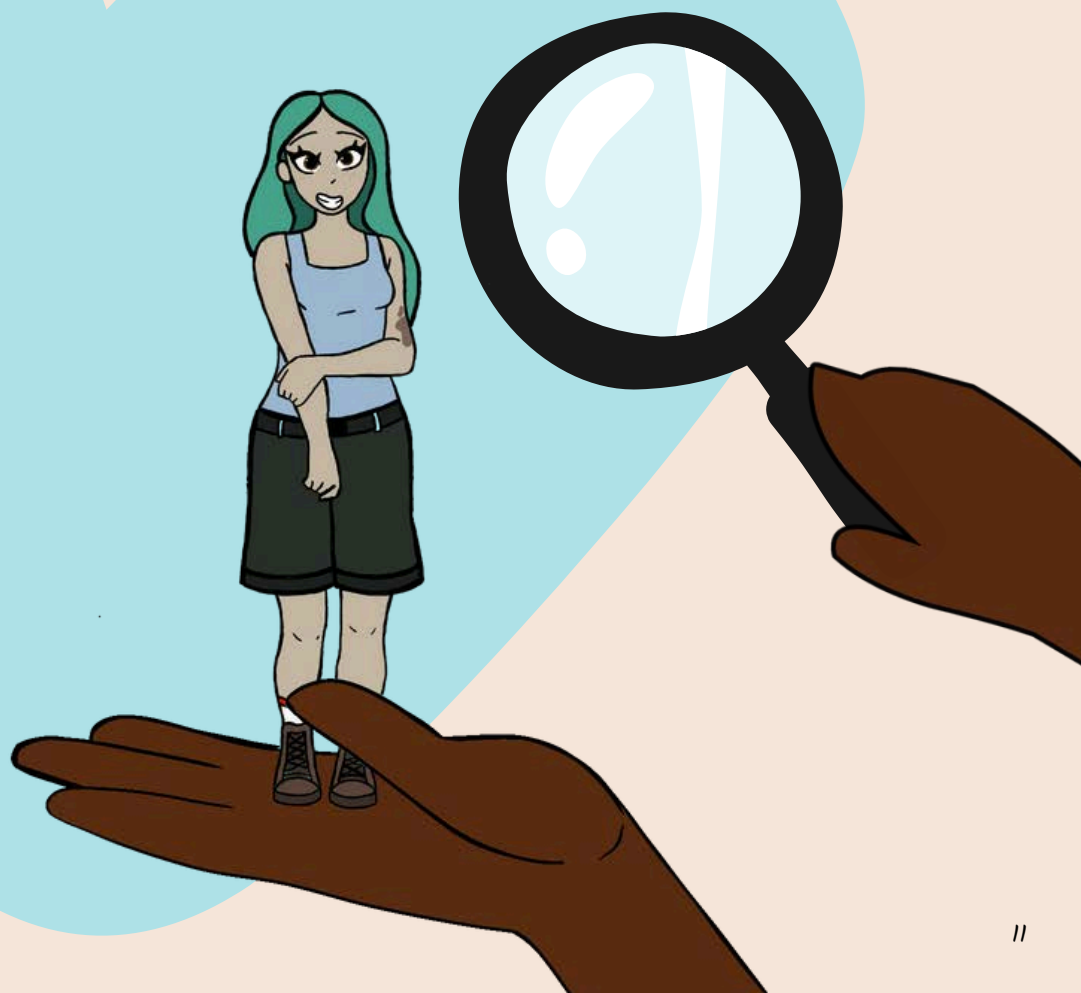
Young people have highlighted a recurring narrative that continues to shape their education experience. They shared that this narrative can dictate how and why they learn and how their efforts are recognised. This current narrative pushes students to focus on achieving an ATAR, IB, or similar secondary certificate, implying that their school results will forever shape their lives and choices.

However, young people feel that this one-time measure fails to reward or recognise the diversity of their identities, skills, and experiences. It doesn't support the depth of learning they are capable of, often leading to disconnection, stress, and negative impacts on mental health, wellbeing, and identity.

Many young people feel torn between pursuing their passions or conforming to 'the narrative.' They sense a disconnect between their interests and the rigid pathways they're expected to follow. Year 11 and 12, instead of being empowering, can often narrow pathways, further increasing this stress and anxiety.

'Imagine... people going and doing things because they were actually interested in that topic... that subject and that area of life or study.'

“School is a big part of mine and other young peoples' lives so it's important we are excited about our learning. But right now, that's not really happening, because the current narrative focuses more on getting the best grades than our passions. It's time for that to change.”



How this impacts young people and their learning

It promotes conformity over creativity

In our conversation circles, young people discussed the challenges they have experienced regarding their decision-making on pursuing post-secondary pathways.

[When I consider] TAFE subjects, it's kind of, like, shame... I feel like they think - oh because you're a TAFE student you're obviously not sitting exams or, because you do TAFE, you're not as smart.

When excellence and learning is only measured by rigid metrics such as marks, grades and rankings, students feel pressure to conform to a particular way of learning in order to experience the associated achievement. Such formal and structured measurement creates hierarchies where some types of knowledge are seen as more valued than others. That impacts how students perceive themselves, their peers and their options.

This can be restrictive and have negative impacts on young people's mental health, wellbeing and sense of identity.



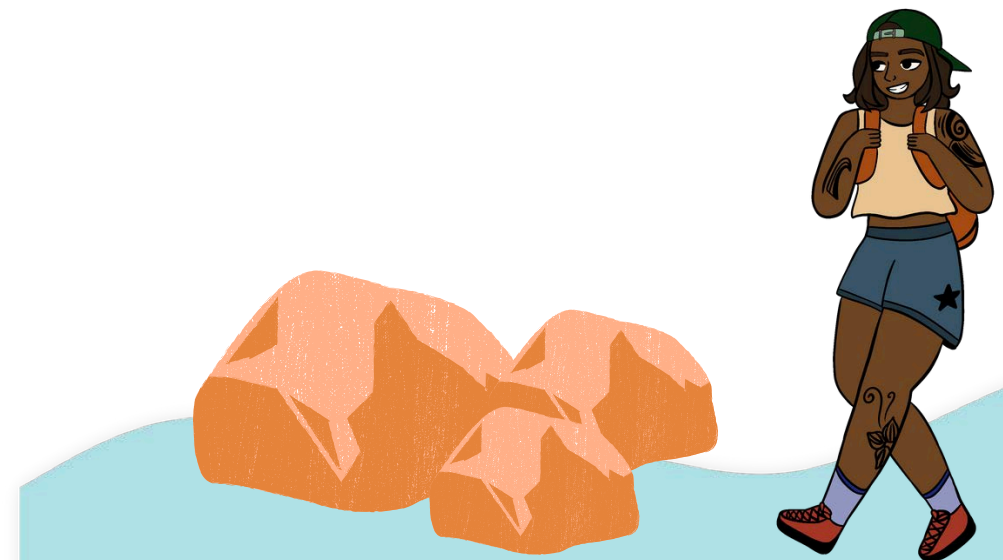
It disconnects young people from their personal potential

Some young people told us that they know what their interests and passions are, but at times they feel like they are forced to grapple with a society that overly values stable, predictable and safe careers - rather than pathways that are more challenging to define, but potentially more personally rewarding.

Young people told us that they felt that if they could say no to pre-constructed pathways and focus on their passions, perhaps they could meet their true potential, rather than making so many compromises. Young people reported that their sense of identity and uniqueness often feels cast aside and they long for a school environment that empowers students to learn and experiment, where the capacity to try new things and learn is embraced.

I tried to do different things, sort of here and there, and they [my school] would allow it, to a point.

I feel like there could be more opportunities for kids to be able to learn to trust themselves and take risks.



What Young People Have Said

A lot of us have come from spaces where the teachers or the people in power don't necessarily recognise the effort it takes to get school to do the work, to get the qualifications. It's just, you know - oh, you did it - onto the next thing. Which can be really disheartening, because if you put in all of this work and no one so much as acknowledges it, it makes you feel like it was all for nothing. Whereas having that validation, knowing it's appreciated and seen and valued, it gives you the drive to keep going and to want to do it more, because it's not all just for nothing.

"The HSC felt like the be-all and end-all. Even before the HSC, I look back at my schooling and somewhat regret that I sacrificed meaningful potential memories and was too caught up in my studies."

"School is very very small compared to the real world and the school is great at giving us opportunities within our schooling years but they don't share the opportunities beyond the gates."

"For me what would have been really valuable... sitting down and being able to go through that question of what do you love and how can you make money from it? Rather than... how hard can you work and to go get the highest thing, and then you finish school, finish uni six years later, and then you still don't know what you're gonna do."

"It kind of dampens my creative drive. Because you've got all of these things that you want to do and the stuff you want to express, and after so long not being able to do that properly, you kind of just lose it."

"I did homeschool every third term ..So I was entrusted with a lot more freedom than most of my peers and that left me with more opportunity to sort of see that school wasn't everything."



CHAPTER 4: Charting the Next Chapter in the Future of Learning



When focus is limited to academic performance, young people feel the push to be ‘the best’

For some students, this kind of environment can be positive. It pushes them to aim high and be their best selves. The young people we spoke to let us know that not all pressure is bad - they know it's a part of learning, building resilience, and growing up.

Some students told us they feel like they have to pick “bright subjects” to look smarter, even if it's not what they really want to do. But the constant push for top marks can sometimes mean that individual learning and progress get overlooked. One student reflected “you've got to really pretend that you're good at everything”.

This research has identified there is significant power in recognising more - and that young people who experience meaningful, broader recognition of their strengths, interests, skills and capabilities are more likely to pursue their passions, discover their own purpose and stay connected to their education.

Recognising the whole learner - diverse and contextualised forms of recognition

Young people consistently expressed wanting to feel seen and recognised for who they are and what they know and can do. Most significantly, while most people want to be acknowledged for their efforts, our findings reveal that young people want this recognition to feel authentic and meaningful. The challenge is that young people are diverse, dynamic, and all have their own way of feeling appreciated for what they do - a one-size-fits all approach doesn't work.

Recognition as a product of meaningful, trusted and expansive relationships

The conversations we had with young people show that a school's emphasis on building strong student-teacher relationships can be really empowering for young people and add a depth of meaning to how they are recognised. Developing a culture of co-agency, where students are not only participants but also co-creators of their educational experience, fosters a sense of ownership and agency in their learning.

When students have the power to co-design and inform what is valued in their education and how these values are demonstrated, it fundamentally shifts their level of involvement in their learning. This collaborative approach increases students' satisfaction and trust in their learning process, as they feel their voices and perspectives are genuinely considered.

Co-agency also allows for a more personalised and responsive educational environment, where teachers are attuned to the individual progress, strengths and aspirations of their students.



Some students have described how a teacher's deep understanding of their abilities and potential helped them take on new challenges they never imagined themselves capable of. For example, one student described how his business teacher recognised his aptitude and encouraged him to pursue economics in year 11. This encouragement not only opened up new academic opportunities for him but also reinforced his confidence in exploring unfamiliar subjects.

In this context, the teacher's role extends beyond mere instruction; they become facilitators of learning who help students realise their potential and engage with their learning in a more meaningful way. This dynamic partnership between students and teachers is a key element of co-agency, as it empowers students to take an active role in shaping their educational journey and fosters a deeper, more trusting relationship between students and their learning environment.

“Definitely teachers [were] the reason I even took economics... I wasn't even going to pick economics... That teacher really thinking about me and pushing me to do more, because I could do it, felt amazing.”

Another young person described how powerful it can be when a teacher understands and supports students to work to their strengths:

They [teachers] know how to work with me and how to make my day's work in ways so I can actually get the most out of my education.

These testimonials from young people show that when teachers build genuine relationships with students, understand their strengths and challenges and support them to adjust their learning accordingly, it gives them more control. It's empowering and keeps students engaged.

For some, being recognised in a formal and public way is important. This might involve receiving a certificate or an announcement in assembly. Such recognition can serve as a powerful affirmation of their hard work and achievements. The formality of public recognition can also give a sense of legitimacy.

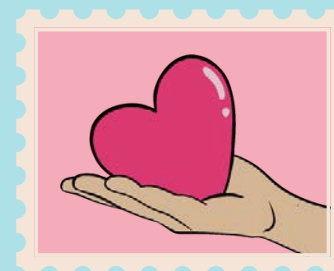
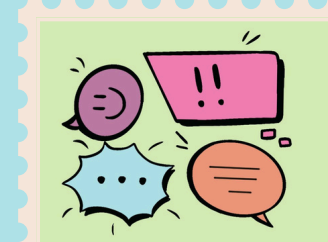
Despite public praise and recognition provoking feelings of awkwardness or discomfort for some young people, many agree that the desire for acknowledgment still exists. Whether through report cards, announcements, and awards, formal forms of recognition can make a difference to how young people feel about their efforts.

Personally praise makes me very uncomfortable. When people appreciate my efforts, I don't like it when they tell me... I don't know... it's just so uncomfortable. I guess it depends on how they do it though, like, if it is a simple 'good job', you're like, thanks. It also depends who.

However formal acknowledgements doesn't capture the whole picture.

One young person we spoke to clearly loved getting the 'snitch award' for doing good deeds, while another student who got many awards at the end of year 11 didn't feel as accomplished because they didn't think their effort matched up to students at other schools.

These insights provided by our participants highlight the importance of an individualised approach to recognition. By delivering recognition in a way that aligns with each student's values, we can ensure that it feels authentic, meaningful, and truly supportive of their growth and development.



Not all recognition is 'formal'.
Informal recognition...

Happens
through
everyday
activities



Is
individual

Is anchored in
relationships with



Educators



Friends



Mentors

Despite not being captured formally, young people describe
it is as meaningful because:

It creates awareness of skills and interests

It builds self confidence

It empowers decision making

The power and value of informal recognition

Recognition is multidimensional and relative to the person offering and receiving it. Young people told us that its significance and meaning depends on each individual. In this report, informal recognition relates to everyday (routine) activities anchored in the relationships young people have with educators, friends and mentors.

Put simply, informal recognition of activities or actions can make young people more aware of their different skills and interests. This can build young people's self-confidence and empower them to make decisions that suit and align with their passions.

Interestingly, young people said that the most meaningful forms of recognition are often not able to be captured formally. We must shift the value proposition of success in learning beyond simply measuring things - so we don't reductively quantify aspects of young people's lives that are inherently complex and dynamic.

For a young IT student, a small gesture of appreciation has opened them up to a world they did not previously understand about themselves.

A moment of realisation for me is when I help another student... and I actually see their smile afterwards. Like, their face beams of 'oh my God, thank you so much for solving my problem'. That's very impactful to me, because I like seeing this shine on their face. It's such a powerful moment for me as I realised that I genuinely enjoy helping people.

Young people are telling us that small moments of genuine recognition can impact on their understanding of themselves. It does not need to be formally recognised in an award or a certificate. Often a small moment of verbal appreciation from educator to learner, or peer to peer can be enough. These moments of authentic, informal recognition are reiterated throughout the data.

The provision of trusted learning opportunities and continued support from educators and mentors

For many young people, the most genuine way to be recognised is through trusted learning opportunities. The young people we spoke to reference that when someone in power, like a teacher, trusts them with something important, it feels really empowering for them. It can show that they have been seen as a whole person.

A good example of this is a Year 12 student who talked about their experience with their teacher and surf lifesaving club:

I was recently recognised by my mentor and my surf club. They referred me to people at the Bells Beach Pro because I love photography... I got to go in the water with all the pros, like Kelly Slater and Jack Robinson. It was really crazy to be able to do that. I've never really been recognised for [my photography]. I guess because it's not something that I can do professionally, obviously, but I got recognised and it was the best thing ever.



This story shows how powerful it can be when young people are encouraged to take on a role or a responsibility - inside or outside the classroom - that is based on their passions and emerging skills. The teacher not only gave the student an incredible opportunity but also demonstrated how their passion for photography could evolve into a potential career.

Many of the young people we spoke to expressed a strong desire for more responsibilities and opportunities from their teachers, parents, and others in charge. However, they emphasised that it's not just about the responsibility; it's about what it signifies: 'they trust us'.

One university student currently studying law shared her experience of being uplifted by a tutor. Coming from a refugee background, she had different lived experiences compared to many of her peers. However, her experiences and the capabilities she had developed in response, were seen as valuable by one of her tutors who invited her to play a support role for a refugee in a legal case. When reflecting on this experience, she explained:

I think I figured out that I need a job where I'm helping people. I'm making a difference. I'm being an advocate with and for people... because otherwise, I'm not going to have a life that I'm going to love.

For students who face socio-economic challenges, opportunities like short courses and certificates provide opportunities for young people to be recognised for practical skills, making many students feel more valuable and in control of their work, income, and learning.

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

The short courses we do here are really helpful, like getting your RSA or white card.

These opportunities enable young people to be recognised beyond traditional academic measures. Key is how broader experiences like this can be translated into strengths, interests, or skills - forming a recognition process. This should not only be a privilege for those who have good teachers and connections.

What Young People Have Said

"Yeah, like, unless you're an amazing sports person, or you're some Saint, you're not really getting recognised for anything outside of school. No one really knows what I do outside of school, other than my family and my friends."

"It [school] was really awesome but it lacked any direction other than university and ATAR. So like, my whole education was around getting a good ATAR. The whole of year 10 was preparing me for year 12."

"I think the way that we guide our students shouldn't be based so much on that you're going to be happy once you earn a certain salary. It should be, what do you do in your life right now? Or like, what opportunities can we create for you, so that you can see all of the ranges of things that are options in this world."

"And it's like, it didn't really, I didn't feel like I was learning anything. You just felt like I was proving that I knew stuff, you know."

"I think growing up in my culture, at least, you're kind of taught to be humble. You can't brag about yourself. You don't want to sound like you're bragging about yourself. But when I come into this space and I come into another country, that's kind of how you can move forward - to show who you are, what your skills are, and it's not bragging, it's advocating for yourself."

"I developed these skills through a traumatic childhood."

"And that's when I realised, okay, I actually have to have empathy. It is actually important, even though the main understanding is that, oh, if you're going to be an IT developer, you're going to be interacting with machines. You're not going to interact with humans at all. But no, that's actually not true."

"I like validation. Being praised makes me feel good. Not being praised makes me want to give up. Others opinions matter to me much more than it should."

"I have developed these skills because of my family. My family are all creative in some kind of way and same with empathy."

"I think students already have an idea of what their interests are. But they don't want to let it interfere with schooling... You can't mix your hobbies with schooling, and I think you should be able to mix those together a little better."

"Recognise people's different learning styles/abilities. Take bullying much more seriously and hold bullies accountable for their actions. Go less strict on uniforms, let people express themselves."

"I'm a pretty avid gamer...And I feel like I play a lot of simulation games... But there's a lot of strategy to it...they will sort of narrow down where everything is and what your objective is, and I guess it's a massive ... game of cooperation. But also there's so much downtime that could be utilised in something like gaming."

"Yeah, and I think sometimes people hesitate to tell each other that they're doing a good job, or they're strong in certain scenarios, because sometimes we think that they already know that, and vice versa."

"I think not so much being recognised for what I'd achieved because it felt very external to the system. So I understand that they probably didn't really know that I had those capabilities. But providing more opportunities for kids like me, who had all these experiences in different areas, other than just, you know, going to school and doing well in your essays and your tests and stuff."

"I also think that not many people can reach the heights of academic awards and stuff. Like you could be studying a lot and trying your best, but you don't get recognised for it. And you never reached that level that you wanted..."

Why does this matter?

Impact on self



Impact on learning and school experience



Impact on future pathways

Impact on self

When young people are valued and recognised as their whole selves, they gain a strengthened sense of self and improved mental wellbeing. Broader recognition allows young people to learn and better understand their capabilities, which in turn boosts their self-confidence.

Students spoke about the impact that being seen and valued has had on their education experience:

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.

I feel like getting in touch with your cultural identity really helps a person find themselves and ground themselves and feel connected... but also feel more confident in themselves, like they know who they are, because they are Samoan and they value what's in the [Samoan] culture, which are respect, love, kindness, that can be in other cultures as well. But I feel like cultural identity is something that's very important.

This holistic approach to education, where students are seen and valued for their whole selves, can be a catalyst for deeper engagement, personal growth, and overall wellbeing.

Impact on learning and school experience

School can be really challenging for young people when they don't feel like it meets their needs. This message has been loud and clear throughout our research. Young people have told us that the rules seem outdated, and they don't always reflect the different ways people learn. For many students success is narrowly defined by standardised tests and assignments.

This one-size-fits-all approach fails to accommodate the diverse range of learning styles, talents, and strengths that students bring to the table. Just because a student doesn't excel in conventional learning activities doesn't mean they're not capable or able to achieve.

Our findings indicate that the lack of flexibility in the education system can make it difficult for students to stay motivated. When a young person's strengths aren't recognised early on, school can feel like an uphill battle. This often leads to a disconnect between the student and their education, as they struggle to find meaning and value in a system that doesn't seem to acknowledge or appreciate their whole self.

This disconnect can have significant consequences. When students feel overlooked or undervalued, it can have a negative impact on their engagement in school.

A key finding that has risen from this research is that the need to be seen and recognised is a fundamental to students 'success' in school, and when this need isn't met positively, students may seek it out in less constructive ways.

One student shared:

I was doing dumb stuff to get attention... and feel that validation [of being seen]. If you don't get it in a healthy way from your teachers helping you learn and grow, you can get in a negative way by trying to cause a big disruption in class. If you don't get [recognition] in a healthy way, you're going to [find it] in an unhealthy way.

When the system **does** provide recognition in meaningful ways, it can have a profoundly positive impact. Another student shared how their school recognised and nurtured their interest in photography:

"The other thing that really encouraged that sort of interest, and what I ended up making money with now, is my school then asked me would you take photos for our events and stuff - so house swimming or any house spirit events. I started taking photos for them, just using the school camera, then if they liked any of them, they'd use them in the sort of media stuff that they do and, and social media and posting and things. And like the book that they had that was like the school's yearly recap and promo and everything that's happening in the world of my school. So that was cool."

This finding was further supported by another student who had moved schools, revealing that their new school's current metrics make them feel less "like just another number" and gave them a unique place in the community. The focus on building strong student-teacher relationships was particularly empowering. It changed how the student felt at school for the better.

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.

These stories shared by our participants show us the importance of opportunities for personal growth and development. As such, a more inclusive approach to education, one that acknowledges different ways of demonstrating knowledge and ability is core to helping all students feel seen, valued, and motivated.

By recognising and celebrating the diverse ways in which students can contribute, schools can help to build a more equitable and supportive learning environment, one where every student has the opportunity to succeed on their own terms.



Impact on post-school pathways

Through this research, we heard many stories of broader learning recognition (or lack of it) having an impact on young people's post school pathways. When young people understand their needs, desires, and passions, they can trust their personal goals and interests more confidently.

Young people who reported receiving broader recognition for their skills, shared a greater sense of agency, and better acceptance around failure. This self awareness helps young people pursue paths that align with their interests.

For some students, broader recognition of their learning and achievements, whether academic, creative, or otherwise, can serve as a powerful motivation for young people to pursue post-school pathways, such as university or TAFE. This recognition not only validates their efforts but also reinforces their sense of agency. It provides them with a sense of direction and purpose, enabling them to navigate their future with greater confidence.

What Young People Have Said

"I think, having set classes that are just around how to be, like, live a happy life, it's not so much about directing towards university, but directing towards living well, and making money through things that you'd like to do, you know, rather than just living these unhappy lives."

"You know, there should be more flexibility... where I could be allowed to learn from home instead of going to school every day.... I find it stressful most of the time, you know, spending hours in school trying to learn - so I feel like it's not necessary."

"I went from taking teachers' word as gospel to then, trusting in my own work more than the teachers. So if I put in the effort to learn in a class, I would take more out of it. Whereas if I had had to keep this old structure, I wouldn't have put in as much effort, because there was too much structure."

"I was this timid person... I had this low self esteem. I never knew I could actually lead a set of people to achieve a particular goal and task. So I was just entrusted with responsibility one time.... that's where I discovered I could actually lead, and it was a huge success here. We came out the best."

"I thrive off of me-time, and that's the same with my school work. I thrive off of being able to go home, get it done by myself... I love that there's the option to be in the study room, and I think that really served a lot of my peers, but I personally just thrived off being like - okay, go to school, grab all the tasks... I'd write down a list, I'd get it done, and then I had the rest of my day to sort of do my own thing."

CHAPTER 5: Recommendations from Young People

Momentum is building in schools and communities and we are already seeing the national conversation starting to shift towards approaches that value recognising the whole learner. The young people we spoke to have offered us solutions for a way forward that can inform both our policy and practice.

The following can be seen as shared invitations offered by young people to reimagine how we can move forward in writing this next chapter and what we need to prioritise.

How Can We Start Enacting These Shifts Now?

Our top 10 Recommendations:

1

Celebrate our Progress

Shift recognition to emphasise individual growth and effort, not just final achievements. This helps us see value in our journeys and fosters our resilience and engagement.

2

Utilise Formal and Informal Recognition

A mix of formal recognition and informal acknowledgement reinforces our sense of being seen and valued.

3

Recognise Responsibility and Leadership Skills

Give us responsibilities and opportunities that demonstrate trust and respect for our capabilities. These are significant forms of learning.

4

Cultivate Informal Acknowledgment in a Range of Spaces

Create opportunities outside of formal assessments to recognise achievements, which helps us feel seen in more holistic ways.

5

Highlight Personal Talents and Skills

Recognise and celebrate our unique skills (like creativity, communication, or problem solving) to help us identify strengths we may not be aware of.

6

Encourage Identity-Driven Pathways

Support us to explore pathways that align with our interests and identities, validating our diverse ambitions beyond rigid and traditional paths.

7

Support and Value Varied, Real-World Learning Opportunities

Support and value the diverse settings and experiences we learn in - like community-based projects, internships, caring responsibilities and work. These allow us to demonstrate our skills outside of school.

8

Provide Individualised Feedback Across Relationships

Foster recognition that comes from a range of people (teachers, peers, mentors), as different perspectives and relationships offer meaningful validation and strengthen our self-perception.

9

Facilitate Goal-Setting and Reflection Opportunities

Allow us to set personal goals and reflect on our progress, fostering self-awareness and promoting a sense of ownership over our learning journey.

10

Celebrate Failures as Part of Growth

Recognise us for trying new things and learning from our failures. Celebrating these efforts can validate risk-taking and learning through experience.

Epilogue:

The Power of Recognising More

What now? How can we take action on this?

This work is a representation of what we have heard from young people from across Australia with diverse learning and life experiences. Our study is not representative of all students, yet the insights about what forms of learning and recognition they value, the pressure points they experience, and what really matters to them, provide powerful guidance for educators and system leaders.

Our work is a snapshot - a collection of stories that offer an invitation into the experiences and insights of Australian young people. We hope their generous insights can become the much needed catalyst for changing the narrative of what is success in learning. It is clear that when young people are recognised for their whole selves, there is a direct impact on their learning.

Young people need to have agency to be able to shape, determine and navigate their learning journeys. This personal learning journey is, by definition, embedded in place, and must be enabled in a way that is true to that context. Schools and educators also need agency to make relevant decisions based on their unique vantage point and depth of knowledge of the learner and their family.

In this future that our young people can see, systems wrap around communities to enable change, not prescribe it.

We must write the next chapter together, in innovative and different ways to advance a just and vibrant learning system that leaves no young person or place behind.

Contribute to the study:

As we continue to build an evidence base, we are interested in hearing from more places and communities who are transforming learning and practices to recognise more of young people's diverse skills, capabilities and attributes.

There are multiple ways to get involved and even if you're only at the early stages of this work - we'd love to hear from you - so we can paint a national picture that speaks to the promise and potential of this work.

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The End(notes)

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Additional information on the methodology

In this approach, we positioned young people at the centre of the research design process in the construction of research tools and the implementation of them 'in the field', as well as the gathering and analysis of data, and interpreting of findings and their implications. In this way, our participatory and co-research approach aimed to redress the power imbalance that is embedded in most educational research - and to advance change in knowledge, narratives and actions with young people.

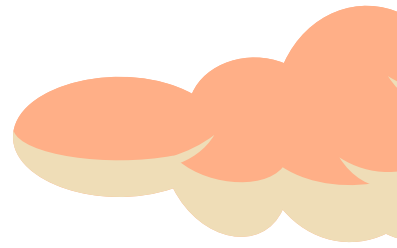
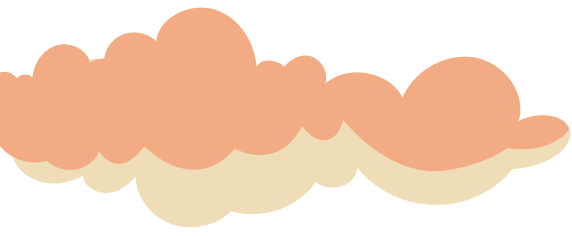
We utilised a series of qualitative research methods. One-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted either online or face-to-face with a sample of 10 interview participants aged 17 - 21. The participants were recruited through Learning Creates Australia's social media channels, partner organisations, employee personal connections, and educational institutions in which the organisation had conducted workshops. The interview guide included open ended questions designed to prompt detailed reflections on their educational and broader recognition experiences.

Secondly, we conducted four workshops with two core components: Conversation Circles interspersed with reflection time in which participants were asked to create individual artefacts that communicated their key thoughts from the Conversation Circle prompts. The workshops were conducted both in-person and online.

Conversation circles allowed participants to have a free-flowing naturalistic discussion on the topic in a group setting, allowing a different dynamic from an interview. The reflection time provided an opportunity for participants to reflect and debrief after each circle. They were also invited to record any additional contributions in pictorial and text form by adding to whiteboards and arts media.

Data Collection: As our data contained a variety of sources- audio, text, and graphics- we divided up the tasks between the research team to manage the data. All of us had a role in the transcription of interview and conversation circle audio data (in most cases the interviews they had performed) and cleaning of the transcribed texts. We uploaded photos of the text and pictures from the workshops.

Data Analysis: Our qualitative analysis was thematic and semantic, looking for explicit mention of the key broader recognition issues above. We held regular meetings to discuss the coding frame and the specific issues we had noticed. As with data collection, each of us contributed to the coding, yielding a multifaceted analysis drawing on multiple perspectives, with some of us focusing on the conversation circles and reflections, while others focused on the interviews. Throughout the analysis, we drew upon our sustained knowledge of the participants and the settings in which the data had been obtained to guide our interpretation.



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:

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