

# Defining Success for Every Learner

## A Submission to Independent Review of Education in Tasmania

### Context

[Learning Creates Australia](#) is a pioneering, independent non-profit organisation. We believe an Australian education should equip every young person to dream, achieve, and thrive. Our mission is to advance a just and vibrant learning system that leaves no young person or place behind. Guided by a diverse and growing alliance of stakeholders, including young people, educators, parents, policy makers, First Nations communities, employers, academics, and tertiary providers, we are focused on catalysing transformation in this next critical decade.

Over the past four years, our work has involved convening expert advice from various voices in education and learning including direct and deep engagement with over 3500+ students, community members, professionals in education policy, regulation, research, industry and system leaders. These insights echo the findings of numerous reports and reviews over the past decade, highlighting that our current learning system is outdated and stagnating, and at times, underperforming.

We welcome this Independent Review's key objective to ensure young Tasmanians gain the skills they need to lead their best lives and fully contribute to the community and economic future.

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

There is common agreement in the reports and reviews about why it is both important and urgent that Australia makes changes to ensure more young people finish senior secondary school well and are able to navigate transitions from school to a successful and productive life of work and learning.

Australia has many examples of positive incremental change and aspects of our education system have served many young people well, but how we define and measure success in learning is limiting young people's ability to prepare for their future – regardless of their background, abilities or efforts. Currently, successful learning in our education system focuses on academic performance and standardised testing, which has not yielded the desired outcomes and often leaves marginalised students behind.

Assessing and credentialing learning success more broadly has the power to shape both young people's learning experiences and their pathways after school. It also has a flow on effect to what we teach and what and how we assess young people at school. It is, as such, a powerful lever for systemic change.

Learning Creates has been working in collaboration with the Department of Education, Children and Young People along with the Northern Territory and South Australia's education systems on a series of national convenings that share learnings and strategies as each works towards improving learning outcomes for young people.

[We Are More Hobart](#) brought together 175 people from almost every State and Territory and included young people, schools, communities, employers, tertiary institutions and governments. Importantly many Tasmanian young people, educators and school leaders made up the bulk of the event's representation.

At the heart of the transformative discussions in Hobart lay a collective aspiration for redefining success in education, it also highlighted the significant progress Tasmania has taken towards a more coherent and inclusive definition of educational success. There were four key themes from the room that emerged:

- **Adaptability and lifelong learning:** Across all stakeholder groups, there was a resounding emphasis on the importance of adaptability and lifelong learning. Participants recognised the need for young individuals to be prepared for a dynamic world where continuous learning is essential.
- **Practical skills and knowledge:** Employers and tertiary providers underscored the significance of practical skills and hands-on experience, essential for navigating the workforce effectively.
- **Emotional and social development:** While educators valued emotional and social development, it was noted that other groups placed less emphasis on these aspects.
- **Self-confidence and empowerment:** Students expressed a strong desire for self-confidence and empowerment, highlighting the importance of feeling confident and capable in their chosen paths.

There is, we believe, a huge opportunity in a jurisdiction like Tasmania, where the whole schooling system can meet in the same room and hold strong ties with their peers, communities and employers, to reach agreement and coherence about broader definitions of learning success. As one participant said at *We Are More Hobart*: "It takes many parts to work together to make a whole system - that's why we're here today as an education ecosystem."

Our contribution to this review recommends that Tasmania's education system should continue to prioritise working towards an inclusive and fit-for-purpose definition of educational success. And that work will be most effective and powerful when undertaken collaboratively with young people.

## Defining success in learning

The dominant recognition system for senior secondary schooling includes the Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank (ATAR) rankings for tertiary selection and senior secondary certificates, yet only 26% of university entrants actually use an ATAR to gain access to their further learning. It is not utilised in any other post school pathway<sup>1</sup>. In spite of this limited utilisation, the ATAR has a disproportionate impact on secondary schooling curriculum and assessment and our school system is geared to ATAR outcomes even though it's well documented these are insufficient indicators of a young person's potential for further education and employment. Australia is the only country in the world that ranks our students at the end of their schooling. In other countries, students are given a score, but they are not placed in rank order.

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

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

Underpinned by new definitions of success, we need to expand recognition and certification processes beyond traditional academic achievements, celebrating a student's holistic learning journey. Traditional assessments often overlook essential skills like creativity, collaboration, and resilience - qualities crucial for navigating today's complex environment. By shifting how we assess learning, we can build a more holistic understanding of student development and better equip them for the challenges ahead. As noted in the Public Consultation paper young people are increasingly disengaging from school education. Year 12 retention rates have hovered around 80 percent nationally and 70 percent in Tasmania for the last decade<sup>3</sup>. By the time they get to year 10, around 40 percent of young people were regularly missing school<sup>4</sup>. A 2023 senate inquiry into school refusal, subsequent reporting and a recent poll have revealed that close to 40 percent of families have children that have experienced school refusal in the past year<sup>5</sup>. Some young people are more likely to miss school, including those from low socio-economic backgrounds, from regional and

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<sup>1</sup> Learning Creates Australia (2023). *Learning Beyond Limits*. Available from: <https://www.learningcreates.org.au/findings/learning-beyond-limits-report>

<sup>2</sup> Milligan, Mackay and Noonan (2023.) *Reforming senior secondary certification: Directions for improving the interface between school and tertiary study* In *Rethinking Tertiary Education*. Available from: <https://www.mup.com.au/books/rethinking-tertiary-education-electronic-book-text>

<sup>3</sup> Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority. (2023). National Report on Schooling in Australia. Retrieved from <https://acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia>

<sup>4</sup> Productivity Commission. (2023). Report on Government Services 2023. Retrieved from <https://www.pc.gov.au/ongoing/report-on-governmentservices/2023>

<sup>5</sup> ABC News. (2023, November 8). Family, children and school refusal problem bigger than thought. Retrieved from <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-11-08/family-children-school-refusal-problem-bigger-thanthought/103073010>

remote areas and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people<sup>6</sup>. Disengagement from school increases as a young person progresses through secondary school<sup>7</sup>. Building a culture of belonging and wellbeing is made more challenging by the dramatic increase in the prevalence of mental health challenges in young people, increasing 50 percent in the last 14 years<sup>8</sup>.

Young people need to see school as relevant to their lives, with a sense of belonging supported through strength-based approaches. When learning systems define success in ways that prioritise young people's completion of school with robust wellbeing and a strong understanding of themselves, students are more likely to feel a deeper sense of belonging and connection to their learning. This focus on wellbeing can be actioned explicitly (teaching a curriculum of wellbeing) as well as implicitly – creating conditions for learning that enable wellbeing to be observed by students and teachers, discussed as part of learning. Both of these approaches can drive changes in teacher behaviour, with greater recognition of the need to create connections and environments where young people are ready to learn. Studies show wellbeing contributes to engagement and drives student outcomes. It is both a precursor to learning and a product of education<sup>9</sup>.

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

Our research is showing that by broadening the definition of success so that it captures not only cognitive abilities but also social and emotional development, we support young people to feel a sense of belonging in their educational environments and prepare them for a rapidly changing world.

In the most recent action research cycle (the report is soon to be released) we heard directly from young people through workshops and interviews which underlined that when young people are recognised more broadly there is a direct impact on their learning and engagement at school. They report:

- 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

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<sup>6</sup> Australian Government, Indigenous Health Performance Framework. (2022). Education outcomes of young people. Retrieved from <https://www.indigenoushpf.gov.au/measures/2-05-education-outcomes-young-people>

<sup>7</sup> Sydney Morning Herald. (2023, January 19). School attendance has plummeted, and it's not just because of COVID. Retrieved from

<https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/school-attendance-has-plummeted-and-it-s-not-just-because-of-covid-20230119-p5cdy1.html>

<sup>8</sup> McGorry, P., Coghill, D., & Berk, M. (July 2023). Mental health of young Australians: dealing with a public health crisis. The Medical Journal of Australia.

<sup>9</sup> Waters, L. (2021) Positive education pedagogy: Shifting teacher mindsets, practice, and language to make wellbeing visible in classrooms. In M. L. Kern & M. L. Wehmeyer (Eds.), The Palgrave Handbook of Positive Education. (pp. 137-164). Springer Press

- 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

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 mould to make different choices
- 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

Moving towards more comprehensive and future-focused metrics will allow learning to be more inclusive, relevant, and personalised, fostering learners who are not only academically capable but also emotionally intelligent and socially conscious. This shift is critical in creating a system where success is defined not just by test results, but by students' readiness for life

Our reports [Recognition of learning success for all](#), [Framing Success for All](#) and [Generating trust and utility in senior secondary qualifications](#) identify implications for assessment and changes to the regulatory system that could be made to senior secondary certificates to support the new definitions of success that learners, teachers and employers want and need.

High-performing education systems globally have recognised the urgency and importance of redefining what learning success should look like. Countries such as British Columbia, Estonia, Finland, Hong Kong and South Korea are all high performers on traditional metrics of learning but have recognised the need to value more than the basics of learning to prepare for challenges of a post-industrial society and economy<sup>10</sup>.

As noted in the Public Consultation Paper, we've also seen a surge of recent reviews and education strategies in [South Australia](#), [Northern Territory](#) and [Western Australia](#) that worked closely with all education stakeholders to define an inclusive and future-focused definition of what success should look like at the end of year 12.

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<sup>10</sup> Masters, G. (2023). *Building a world class learning system*. Available from: [https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1041&context=tll\\_misc](https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1041&context=tll_misc)

## Young People at the Centre

Increasingly jurisdictions nationally and internationally are putting young people at the centre of the design of systems that impact on them<sup>11 12 13</sup>. Young people bring fresh perspectives, lived experiences, and innovative ideas. When they are directly involved, systems can better reflect their needs and aspirations, ensuring that policies and programs are more inclusive, adaptive, and future-oriented. Additionally, empowering young people to contribute builds their leadership skills and fosters a sense of ownership and agency, which helps drive long-term engagement and commitment to the outcomes. By making space for youth participation, institutions also signal their commitment to a more inclusive, democratic society. This approach ultimately leads to stronger policies that are co-designed, more effective, and aligned with the dynamic realities young people face today and will face in the future.

At Learning Creates we have found that involving young people in decision-making processes leads to stronger, more equitable systems. Young voices help challenge entrenched practices, pushing for reforms that are more responsive to social, environmental, and economic challenges.

In the last five years we have engaged with thousands of young people across Australia to listen to their perspectives. We have been particularly focussed on young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who have provided their expertise and lived experience of the current learning system. Overwhelmingly, young people have told us they felt inappropriately defined by success or failure in school and through examinations and assessments associated with senior secondary certificates. They rejected the idea that the breadth and depth of who they are, what they know and can do is represented in those credentials.

South Australia developed its new [education strategy for public education](#) with [850 learners](#) at the heart of their process to better understand what learning should look like. In the Northern Territory, they've developed a system-wide school improvement mechanism called the [Northern Territory Learning Commission](#) that centres students as commissioners who are partners in the improvement process. The Commonwealth [Heads of Agreement for Better and Fairer Schools](#) also recognises the importance of learner agency in “empowering students to be active and engaged in their learning”.

## Conclusion

Tasmania is already on a pathway towards a more inclusive and broader definition of educational success. We commend the Independent Review's focus on prioritising a broader definition of educational success and point to the many examples of systems nationally and globally that are also on this path, working together with young people to define it with them.

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<sup>11</sup> Cavet, J., & Sloper, P. (2004). *The participation of children and young people in decisions about UK service development*. Retrieved from: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/15527472/>

<sup>12</sup> Swanton, R., Collin, P., Sorensen, I., & Burns, J. (2007) *Engaging, Understanding and Including Young People in the Provision of Mental Health Services*. *International Journal of Adolescent Medicine and Health* 19(3), 325-332

<sup>13</sup> Cahill, H. & Dadvand, B. (2018). *Re-conceptualising youth participation: A framework to inform action*. Retrieved from: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0190740918304614>

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