

Markers of Success: A Submission to the Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper by Learning Creates Australia

[Learning Creates Australia](#) is an independent non-profit, catalysing equitable transformation in education so that it better meets the 21C needs and values of our young people, communities and nation. Our work is activated through a diverse and growing alliance who are committed to driving change in their spheres of influence, experience and expertise. Over the past 3 years, this has included thousands of young people, educators, parents, policy makers, First Nations communities, employers, academics and tertiary providers across the Australian learning landscape. The stories and the expert advice we've collected and convened over that time echo what the many reports and reviews that have been undertaken in the last decade tell us - our learning system is outdated and stagnating at best - underperforming at worst.

The Accord provides an unique opportunity for tertiary and further education to take a leading role in shifting the learning system, moving beyond targeted programs for disadvantaged young people and school communities, to systemic approaches that will support lifelong learning, access and participation in further education and the development of citizens who are work-ready and able to contribute more broadly to our community.

To activate this shift Learning Creates Australia recommends that the tertiary sector leads with a focus on:

- Recognition of skills required for lifelong learning, including transparent assessment and trusted certification and credentialing;
- Building new and trusted mechanisms for 'matching' rather than 'ranking' of students at key transitions points;
- A new national purpose for learning, privileging the voices of young people and those who are currently most marginalised in the system;
- Building new, necessary data; and
- Implementation of the revised AQF as an enabling policy environment.

Recognition of skills

As we face increasingly complex major global challenges, Australia's social and economic future is reliant on a fit-for-purpose learning system that equips and empowers all young people with the skills they need to thrive and contribute to our community.

Australia has identified two goals for a fit-for-purpose, national education system. Firstly, that it promotes equity and excellence, and, secondly, that all young Australians become confident and creative individuals, successful lifelong learners, and active and informed members of the community¹, however the structures, focus and functions of our learning system are not delivering on these goals.

The path to and skills needed for active and informed citizenship has radically shifted in the 21st Century. Work has changed and the requirements of our economy are different, but our learning system hasn't kept

¹ Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (2019)

pace and Australia is falling behind in adapting to the requirements of the present and future. Despite the efforts of educators and schools to move in the right direction, while the markers of success reinforce old standards we will not experience the radical change needed and will continue to fall behind internationally.

Learning Creates Australia has focussed the last three years of our work on recognition at the end of secondary school as a key lever to shift our learning system. Our ambition is informed by international evidence and benchmarks that identify what our young people need to know, become and be able to do as they transition from compulsory education. It is based on the premise that deeper information will also assist the alignment of an individual young person's ambition and skill to further learning, training and employment opportunities. From where we sit, this premise is true for the transitions a learner will make into and from further education into work through a life-long learning journey.

What and how we recognise learning is of vital importance not only because it determines pathways to further learning and work but because it has a flow through effect into what and how we teach and assess.

To support and develop a culture and commitment to lifelong learning and increase the access and participation of under-represented groups in post compulsory education we need to re-think the ways in which we assess and recognise learning. We need to redefine the markers of success in learning.

However, Australia has a particularly complex set of arrangements that govern the schooling environment, which make change particularly difficult. These arrangements have evolved over time rather than been designed with intent. They represent the confluence of many interests including two levels of government, thousands of schools, dozens of school systems and seven school jurisdictions, each with their own curriculum and assessment authorities.

The Accord provides a unique and timely opportunity for further education providers to take leadership in driving this shift to the recognition of broader skills and capabilities, which these institutions know are key to success in higher education, in the future of work and in lifelong learning. The shift must begin in schooling in order to have the required impact on higher education as without a fit-for-purpose way of recognising who young people are, what they know and can do, we are putting limits on how our further education providers and employers see and select them.

There is significant emerging practice already being tested on the ground in many schools across the nation. Higher education providers, together, can lead by developing a shared understanding of broader learning success in partnership with secondary education providers. This must be centred on the learner and include what transparent assessment and reporting can be effectively utilised for certification and credentials of skills.

Access and Participation - the role of ATAR

The ATAR remains the dominant representation of success in schooling, yet only 26% of university entrants actually use an ATAR to gain access to their further learning. It is not utilised in any other post school pathway. In spite of this narrow utilisation, the ATAR has a disproportionate impact on secondary schooling curriculum and assessment. Our school system is geared to ATAR outcomes even though it's well documented these are insufficient indicators of a young person's potential for further education and employment.

Today, the most significant predictors of a young person's ATAR are their socio-economic status, postcode and the school they attend. This ranking system inadvertently reinforces cycles of disadvantage and rewards young people already in positions of advantage. Australia is the only country in the world that ranks our students at the end of their schooling. In other countries, students are given a score, but they are not placed in rank order.

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

In response to this, all universities have developed access programs to mitigate the well documented limits of ATAR pathways. If we are serious about breaking this cycle of disadvantage, we need to move beyond the ATAR era towards an admission process designed to match young people with courses of study and employers by best fit based on skills, capabilities and interests, not rank.

For some the ATAR is seen as efficient and effective as a tool to predict a young person's capacity to succeed in higher education. However, it is also widely acknowledged that the ATAR is of limited use in predicting the kinds of learning success that tertiary institutions, employers and schools now value alongside the specific knowledge and skills of a domain, such as being a good communicator or collaborator, or a critical or creative thinker, citizen or community contributor or leader, or to be able to exercise acceptance, inclusion and openness to new ideas.

To add to this complexity (and in many cases in an attempt to assist with overcoming inequities), increasingly, universities are utilising a variety of criteria alongside or independent of the ATAR. The processes and evidence required differ between institutions and sometimes rely on individual relationships between schools and institutions and/or disciplines. The resulting 'mash up' lacks transparency and fairness and leaves applicants, in many cases those most disadvantaged, jumping extra hurdles to meet requirements of a pathway.

Our review of 22 policy papers and reviews on senior secondary pathways from the past four years, including federal and state policy and curriculum reviews and reports from The Business Council of Australia and other leading academics revealed:

- Universal agreement that there is an over-reliance on the ATAR; which is increasingly irrelevant to post school pathways and is often unfair especially to those who are already starting from a position of educational disadvantage.
- Maintaining the status quo isn't good for Australia's economic strength and resilience and has a negative impact on civil society as disconnection and disengagement in learning entrenches disadvantage.³

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

³ Learning Creates Australia (2021) *A New Path Forward: A look at Senior Secondary Recognition and Pathways*, Melbourne Victoria

A new national purpose for learning

Learning Creates research has illuminated an appetite amongst Australian educators and education stakeholders for serious reform to educational recognition systems and the subsequent benefits to school and higher education connectedness. This reflects change across developing nations around the world. UN member states have been rallying to create and share visions and plans for transforming education between now and 2030. Redefining the purpose of education is one of the most powerful levers for transforming the system(s) and inclusive and intentional dialogues are needed to surface values and beliefs about education and to develop a broadly shared vision of the purpose of education.

Australia needs to redesign our education system to prepare young people for their future rather than for our past. Without a fit-for-purpose learning system for young people, we are putting limits on their engagement and the outcomes of their learning. This has a flow on effects that impact individuals, communities and our economy.

The first step is a community engaged public dialogue, with young people, parents, employers, educators, designed to ensure participants feel secure enough to think beyond the current reality of their experience of an education system. There are global models this could be based on such as [The Big Education Conversation](#) and [Big Change](#) in the UK. These models could inform us in developing an appropriate form of engagement in Australia which would need to take into account the unique needs of our young people, community and First Nations people.

The voices of young people are critical in this conversation

Learning Creates has worked directly with thousands of young people across Australia to listen to their perspectives and ensure young people's voice and agency is embedded at all levels of our work particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. In the first 2 years of work, over 1200 young people have been involved in The Learner's Journey project to provide their expertise and lived experience within the current learning system.

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

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

Matching not ranking is a fundamental shift required

For many students the journey through learning pathways is littered with barriers that require navigation. Some are expensive, others are not obvious or heavily competitive, causing young people to narrow their choices and options. The system of ranking encourages students, parents and carers to "spend" or "use" their points rather than focus on their strengths, passions and interests.

Tertiary institutions also face considerable challenges with attrition during and at the end of first year university (somewhere between 15-20% leave after the first year of study). This churn is costly and disruptive for students and the institutions. An improved understanding of all applicants interests, capabilities and aspirations will support improved matching with the educational opportunities on offer.

There is work being undertaken in schools and universities to rethink and adopt broader, more transparent entry criteria and design entry pathways and update admission processes to enable the recognition of the skills and knowledge required to succeed at an undergraduate level.

The learner should not have to jump hurdles and decipher rules and regulations or navigate a system that is no longer functioning well. Through the Accord, higher education has the opportunity to be more learner centred by:

- Demanding a more sophisticated understanding of an applicant's skills, strengths and competencies, based on a combination of in and out of school learning and experience through a common mechanism, which is a comparable, trusted, schools sponsored - eg a learner profile⁴
- Creating a more systemic response to admissions that goes beyond the ATAR and seeks improvement across the board, rather than more targeted programs that are only focused at the designated disadvantage, and can, inadvertently, contribute to the continuation of the cycle of disadvantage.
- Creating a learning continuum between senior secondary school, Vocational Education and Training and Higher Education, so that there can be more fluid transitions between school and the tertiary system on the one hand and within the tertiary system (between VET and Higher Education and vice versa) on the other.

Building new, necessary data

Between now and 2025 Learning Creates Australia will be convening an action research project that brings the field together to connect up new and existing data on new recognition approaches to demonstrate the impact on pathways into higher education and on learning experiences for young people. The study will reveal insights on the impact of recognition on learning experience, access and matching to pathways and recognition as an effective lever for wider change. This study could be expanded to also consider a broader set of data, including a longitudinal focus, or including further jurisdictions or student types, if Government were interested.

A key enabling policy framework - The implementation of the revised AQF

A recent review of the Australian Qualifications Framework⁵ suggested that the qualification type for the Senior Secondary Certificate of Education should be more clearly defined and represented in the AQF, as a distinct qualification type, in recognition of its role in preparing young people for a range of pathways, at different levels. Learning Creates Australia supports this as a key enabling policy framework for many of the issues discussed in this submission.

⁴ Shergold, P (2018) Looking to the Future - Report of the review of senior secondary pathways into work, further education and training, Education Council, Australia.

⁵ Noonan, P (2019) Review of the Australian Qualifications Framework (Final Report), Department of Education, Australia.

To date, the AQF has played little part in the design and delivery of senior secondary certificates, partly because school qualifications are quite different from tertiary qualifications. However, many senior secondary students currently undertake studies at school that both count towards a certificate and can provide credit for tertiary qualifications.

Should the senior secondary certificate be more clearly identified in the AQF in terms of its role in preparing young people for a range of pathways, at different levels then reporting of learning outcomes could also be defined more flexibly, and provide an avenue for charting learner progression in ways that didn't lock students into learning at particular levels.

The Australian Qualifications Review suggested that utilisation of a common language for the reporting levels of the AQF (including that all Australian qualifications should also include the learning, assessment and reporting on general capabilities) would also service transition, credit transfer and recognition between such qualifications. Better articulation, and support for credit transfer between senior secondary and the tertiary qualifications would be another step toward a learner centred system.

Bronwyn Lee, CEO, Learning Creates Australia

bronwyn.lee@learningcreates.org.au | [REDACTED] | learningcreates.org.au

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.