

The power of recognising more: a qualitative study of young people's perspectives on broader recognition for learning and wellbeing

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The known: Education is a social determinant of health, yet systems often prioritise academic outcomes over wellbeing, overlooking the diverse ways young people learn and succeed — especially those experiencing disadvantage.

The new: This youth-led co-research project found that broader recognition of learning, through non-formal learning, trusted relationships, supportive environments and learner agency, strengthens wellbeing across three dimensions: knowledge and skills, subjective wellbeing, and social connection.

The implications: Young people must be well to learn well. Redefining success in education to include recognition of broader learning — shaped by learners and their contexts — can enhance engagement, improve outcomes, disrupt disadvantage, and support more equitable systems that promote wellbeing and lifelong learning.

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land throughout Australia who have been learning and educating on Country for more than 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.

Education systems have, traditionally, prioritised academic achievement over the broader skills and capabilities that contribute to student wellbeing and future success. In Australia, policy has increasingly favoured narrow, productivity-driven measures such as the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR).¹ While designed for tertiary entry and workforce preparation, the ATAR has been widely criticised for its negative impacts on mental health, stress and equitable access to post-school opportunities, and its increasing irrelevance to post-school pathways.² Despite this, quantitative indicators like attendance and exit scores continue to dominate, with far less attention to students' satisfaction, belonging or wellbeing.³

Internationally, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) advocates for a more holistic educational approach that values diverse competencies beyond traditional academic measures, and the interconnectedness of learning, wellbeing and future readiness. This position is based on substantial evidence of the importance of cognitive, social and emotional development and wellbeing alongside academic achievement.^{4,5} The United Nations Sustainable

Abstract

Objectives: To investigate how young people's experiences of recognition in learning influence their wellbeing and to identify practical strategies for a more holistic and equitable educational approach that values diverse competencies beyond traditional academic measures.

Design: The project used a youth co-research and participatory design. Young people with recent experience of secondary education led the study alongside university and industry-based researchers.

Setting: Data were collected between 13 May and 27 June 2024, through five participatory workshops and 10 in-depth interviews, conducted online and in person. Workshops were conducted across four contexts: two school settings (one mainstream school, one flexible learning school), one university setting (with students admitted through non-Australian Tertiary Admission Rank pathways), and one online context.

Participants: 60 young people aged 15–29 years from Tasmania, Victoria, South Australia and New South Wales.

Main outcome measures: Subjective and qualitative expression of knowledge and skills, wellbeing, and social connection.

Results: Young people reported that the current education system values conformity over creativity and forces them to follow prescribed pathways through learning, rather than pursue interests, curiosities and passions. This contributes considerably to poor sense of self, heightened anxiety and stress. Comparatively, when young people experience broader forms of recognition, they have greater understanding of themselves, feel safe, are engaged, can identify knowledge and skills they have acquired, have developed social connections and have a sense of subjective wellbeing. Forms of broader recognition that acknowledge non-formal learning, adopt alternative assessment and credentialing, foster supportive relationships and assert a commitment to overcoming disadvantage are essential to educational experiences that promote wellbeing.

Conclusions: Broader recognition of learning, through non-formal learning, trusted relationships, supportive environments and learner agency, strengthens wellbeing across three dimensions: knowledge and skills, subjective wellbeing, and social connection. Redefining success in education to include recognition of broader learning — shaped by learners and their contexts — can enhance engagement, improve outcomes, disrupt disadvantage, and support more equitable systems that promote wellbeing and lifelong learning.

Development Goals 3 (“good health and well-being”) and 4 (“quality education”)⁶ and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child⁷ — which affirms every child's right to education and health — further affirm the need for policy that serves human development alongside economic productivity. In Australia, the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration⁸

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has more recently articulated a broader vision, emphasising the importance of fostering intellectual, physical, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development, alongside flexibility, resilience, creativity, and a lifelong passion for learning. These are important qualities because disengagement from education and employment leads to lower lifetime earnings and poorer physical and mental health outcomes.^{9,10}

Australian data underscore the urgency for change. There are persistent gaps in school completion¹¹ and Australians who are younger than 25 years experience higher rates of unemployment and underemployment than older Australians.¹² Future workforce projections warn of skills–jobs mismatch, suggesting that broader recognition of learning could better prepare young people for future work.¹³ Broadening recognition of learning success involves acknowledging non-cognitive skills, such as resilience, adaptability and social competencies. These are also social capacities that are shared and generated through and in relation with others.¹⁴ Expanding recognition to include these capabilities can support a more inclusive, strengths-based approach to education that empowers students through better relationships, improved confidence and reduced pressure to conform to narrow academic pathways.^{15,16} Educational engagement and success are also known to increase when people engage in activities that are valued and match their skills¹⁷ and are supported by learning and pathway alternatives.^{18–22}

This article is part of the 2025 *MJA* supplement for the Future Healthy Countdown 2030,²³ which examines how learning and employment pathways affect the health and wellbeing of children, young people and future generations. Reimagining learning success to support engagement, wellbeing and attainment must centre the views and experiences of young people in the design.^{24–27} As such, this study adopted a youth co-research approach to investigate:

- how young people experience current measures of success in learning;
- what difference learning more about themselves makes; and
- how broader recognition helps overcome disadvantages and support wellbeing.

Recognising that wellbeing is a contested concept,²⁸ we draw on the World Health Organization definition of wellbeing as a positive state determined by social, economic and environmental conditions and encompassing both quality of life and a sense of meaning.²⁹ This definition provides the conceptual foundation for our analysis: recognising that individual outcomes are inseparable from broader systemic factors, including education policy and practice. This includes subjective wellbeing — an individual's perception of their life as positive and meaningful regardless of whether external assessments align.^{30,31} By adopting the WHO framing, we examine how redefining success in learning can directly influence subjective wellbeing and compensate for other wellbeing determinants such as demographics, socio-economic status, social support, geography and infrastructure.^{32,33} To do this, we looked at young people's lived experiences of learning recognition in light of three of the OECD's 11 dimensions of wellbeing:³⁴ knowledge and skills, subjective wellbeing, and social connections. These are significant for their alignment to the national goals for learning articulated in the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (listed in [Box 1](#)).

1 Model for guiding and monitoring the contribution of broader recognition to student wellbeing

Contribution of broader recognition to student wellbeing

Guiding questions:

- How do students experience broader definitions of success in learning?
- What does knowing more about themselves contribute?
- How does this impact their next steps in life?
- How does broader recognition help to overcome disadvantage?

Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration

- Goal 1 — the Australian education system promotes excellence and equity
- Goal 2 — all young Australians become:
 - ▶ confident and creative individuals
 - ▶ successful lifelong learners
 - ▶ active and informed members of the community

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

- Key dimensions of current wellbeing:
 - ▶ knowledge and skills — capability, confidence, awareness
 - ▶ subjective wellbeing — positive and negative affect, life satisfaction
 - ▶ social connection — interactions, support, contribution
- Resources contributing to future wellbeing:
 - ▶ natural resources
 - ▶ economic resources
 - ▶ human and social capital

Indicators

- New learning ambitions are identified and pursued
- Activity or skill or capability identified
- Activity within and beyond the classroom
- Awareness of skills
- Learning settings, experiences and relationships are positive
- Students experience broader recognition of learning success
- New assessments are used
- Key actors are involved
- Actions valued by students are taken
- Benefits are identified
- Credentials reflect capabilities
- Contributions of increased self-knowledge — to overcoming disadvantage

Signals of change

- Young people:
 - ▶ are self-aware of their skills, competencies, dispositions and attributes
 - ▶ have confidence in and language for talking about their capabilities
 - ▶ have a strengthened sense of self, their value and belonging
 - ▶ have confidence that they can pursue goals and be successful on their own terms
 - ▶ can perceive and connect to a positive future
 - ▶ have a clearer sense of their goals for learning and beyond
 - ▶ feel worthy and supported to achieve their goals
 - ▶ know the steps to take to achieve their goals for their post-school pathways

Methods

Study design

We adopted a youth participatory action and co-research approach.^{35,36} Four community associates (aged 18–22 years) were recruited to work alongside two senior researchers and two education professionals in the research design, methods and tools; collection and analysis of data; interpretation of findings; and creation of all project outputs. Of the four associates, one stepped down from the project due to work commitments — they remained an adviser to the project and is acknowledged in this article. This study is reported according to the consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative studies (COREQ) checklist³⁷ (Supporting Information).

Setting, and participant recruitment and selection

Workshops and in-depth interviews were conducted online with young people from across Australia, and in person at sites in New South Wales and Victoria, Australia. We aimed to recruit 50–60 young people for workshops and 8–12 for interviews, with roughly two-thirds from secondary schools and one-third from university or other post-school pathways. In-person workshop sites were selected to represent schools above and below the median value of the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage, a scale that reflects students' socio-educational backgrounds, based on factors like parental education and occupation, and school context.

Eligibility was limited to young people who were currently attending school or who had left within the previous 3 years. Recruitment occurred via workshop sites, Learning Creates Australia social media, partner organisations, and their networks. All participants were briefed on the research purpose and methods and provided written consent for participation. While not a requirement, schools, university sites and online recruitment partners were chosen for their existing engagement in broader assessment, credentialing models or alternative pathways, which meant that most participants had a general understanding of the key concepts explored.

Data collection

The team collected data through five participatory workshops and 10 semi-structured interviews, which were designed and facilitated by the community associates. The workshops were scheduled for 3 hours, included 6–15 participants, were conducted in-person or via Zoom, and used conversation circles interspersed with reflection time. The conversation circles supported free-flowing naturalistic discussion on set prompts (Box 2). Reflection time allowed participants to consolidate their thinking and create individual artefacts to communicate their ideas. This included adding pictures and text to worksheets and adding ideas to whiteboards and arts media. Notes and audio recordings captured conversations within each circle, and individual worksheets and other contributions were collected or photographed at the end of each workshop. The semi-structured interviews ran for 30–60 minutes and were conducted one-on-one with young people in-person or via Zoom. An interview guide was used to support the conversations, which were video or audio recorded.

Data analysis

Audio from workshops and interviews was transcribed and cleaned using artificial intelligence transcription service Otter

2 Conversation circle prompts

Conversation circle	Prompt
1	Think of a time you felt meaningfully valued and celebrated for what you know or can do. What did it look and feel like?
2	What impact did being valued or celebrated for these skills make to your identity, wellbeing, future pathways, or other areas of your life?
3	What could action look like within our school system to better value and recognise you for what you know and can do?

(Otter.ai). Workshop data captured only site location; no participant identities were recorded. Interview transcripts were deidentified and pseudonyms were assigned. Text and graphic data were transferred into a structured spreadsheet. Data were stored securely, with access limited to the research team.

Qualitative thematic and semantic analysis was conducted using NVivo software (Lumivero), broadly drawing on key steps for collaborative, qualitative analysis.³⁸ Drawing on the research questions and Learning Creates Australia signals of change, which reflect anticipated shifts in learning recognition aligned to OECD wellbeing dimensions,³⁴ a coding framework was developed to guide the analysis. This framework incorporated both deductive codes (represented as indicators in Box 1) and inductive codes derived iteratively from patterns identified in the data through analysis and team workshops. This collaborative coding yielded a multifaceted analysis drawing on multiple perspectives. Throughout, we drew on our sustained knowledge of the participants and the settings in which the data had been obtained to guide our interpretation. The model that we used for guiding and monitoring the contribution of broader recognition to student wellbeing is summarised in Box 1.

Ethics approval

This research received ethics approval from the Western Sydney University Human Research Ethics Committee (reference H15943).

Results

Participants

In total, 60 young people aged 15–29 years from Tasmania, Victoria, South Australia and New South Wales took part in the workshops or semi-structured one-on-one interviews between 13 May and 27 June 2024 (Box 3). The five workshops were held online (one workshop), in a university setting (one), at an independent school (one), and in a flexible learning setting (two) that caters to students who are at risk of disengaging from school. Only age, pronouns and current education status (school, university or post-school) were explicitly collected, as additional demographic analysis was beyond the scope of the study. However, researchers observed diversity of ethnicities, cultural backgrounds and genders through participants' statements and the recruitment process.

Determinants of wellbeing

Analysis of the workshop and interviews showed that broader recognition of learning strengthens wellbeing across three

3 Research participants

Characteristic	Data collected
Age	- Age range, 15–29 years - Mean age, 18.8 years* (standard deviation, 2.5 years)
Pronoun	30 used she/her 23 used he/him 7 used they/them or another term[†]
Context	23 were in a mainstream school 17 were in a flexible learning setting 18 were in tertiary education 2 were in another educational context

* Some school-based participants were older than 18 years, because they turned 18 in their final year or attended a flexible learning school for young people at risk of disengagement, where later graduation was common. † Includes participants for whom pronoun was undisclosed or unknown. ♦

4 Signals of change: knowledge and skills

	Related signals
Young people are self-aware of their skills, competencies, dispositions and attributes	Young people articulate their strengths and learning journeys with greater clarity, recognising that their growth is shaped by both effort and experience, not just final outcomes.
Young people have confidence in and language for talking about their capabilities	With broader recognition of their skills, both inside and outside the classroom, young people develop a strong sense of self-belief and the language to express their abilities. This empowers them to advocate for themselves, pursue opportunities, and shape their own futures.

key dimensions of wellbeing: knowledge and skills, subjective wellbeing, and social connection. Signals of change related to each of these dimensions are described in [Box 4](#), [Box 5](#) and [Box 6](#), respectively.

Knowledge and skills: confident, creative individuals

Today's young people want knowledge and skills to help them navigate a rapidly changing world. Beyond traditional academic knowledge, they seek to develop confidence, creativity and resilience — skills that help them manage pressure, adapt to new challenges and shape the world around them. Environments where incremental efforts are acknowledged rather than solely judged by results help them feel seen, confident, and able to articulate their strengths. In an interview, a student in a flexible learning setting shared:

A couple of years back when I only recently started at school, back when food tech was a thing, I had a really good connection with the teacher there and it was really nice. There was one day we were doing something in the kitchen ... I cooked this dish, and she had a bite of it, and she said that it was one of the best dishes of the day. And knowing that I'd done good, and that I had that skill, was a cool little realisation.

5 Signals of change: subjective wellbeing

	Related signals
Young people have a strengthened sense of self, their value and belonging	Young people develop a deeper understanding of their worth and contributions, feeling recognised not just for what they achieve but for who they are and the role they play in their communities.
Young people have confidence that they can pursue goals and be successful on their own terms	Through meaningful learning recognition and trusted learning opportunities, young people build the self-belief and agency to pursue pathways that align with their strengths, interests and aspirations — even when they deviate from societal expectations.
Young people can perceive and connect to a positive future	With a stronger sense of identity, capability and support, young people can see beyond immediate challenges, envisioning futures where they have the tools, capabilities and opportunities to thrive.

6 Signals of change: social connection

	Related signals
Young people have a clearer sense of their goals for learning and beyond	Young people articulate their aspirations with greater confidence, as they feel more connected to their identities, their strengths, and the possibilities available to them.
Young people feel worthy and supported to achieve their goals	The recognition and relationships they experience — both inside and outside of school — foster a sense of value, foster belief in their capabilities and support steps towards their ambitions.
Young people know the steps to take to achieve their goals for their post-school pathways	Access to recognition, mentorship and practical opportunities empowers young people to navigate their futures with clarity, opening doors to education, employment and community engagement.

For many, learning becomes meaningful when it connects to their identity and passions, and signposts future aspirations. In an interview, a Year 11 student attending a mainstream school described feeling disillusioned with repetitive tasks in class, but was passionate about the ocean and outdoor leadership. She said: “I want to do my divemaster ... so that I can work for mum and dad ... I was focusing all my attention on this homework ... it didn't feel like I was learning anything”. With family support, she left school before starting Year 12 to pursue work aligned with her goals: “It was one of the best decisions I ever made”.

Regardless of the setting, when young people see their efforts and growth recognised in formal and informal ways, it can give them a fuller picture of their abilities and help them stay connected to their educational journey. In a school-based workshop, one student shared: “When I am praised for my efforts, I feel motivated to do better and improve myself and [that] makes me feel confident in my skills”. Another student said: “When I am recognised for how well I manage my time and schoolwork, while balancing my extracurriculars, [it] makes me feel validated and push myself to keep working”. And a university student in a workshop reflected: “I never really tried to connect with people before, but then, through my activities as a peer networker, I realised that I actually like helping people”.

A student attending school in a flexible learning setting (for young people at risk of disengaging from learning) highlighted the value of school-provided short courses in obtaining job qualifications. They shared:

More of those in our schools would be great, because getting things like your [Responsible Service of Alcohol training], your white card, like those things will be really expensive ... having access to that provided by the school is really helpful ... it also allows people to explore different fields that they're interested in ... they almost feel like compensation for difficult lives.

They emphasised the financial barriers that otherwise exist and the impact that these broader measures of success and recognition can have in equipping young people to feel confident and creative in navigating a future beyond present circumstances.

Subjective wellbeing: successful lifelong learners

Young people's wellbeing is deeply intertwined with their learning experiences. They need to feel valued not just for their academic performance, but as whole individuals with unique talents, perspectives, and aspirations. During a workshop, a student who had entered university through a non-ATAR pathway shared: "Being celebrated and valued made me feel more at peace with myself and all of my overwhelming feelings. [It] has helped me grow as a person".

However, young people overwhelmingly felt that the current educational system values conformity over creativity, forcing them to follow prescribed pathways through learning, rather than pursue their interests, curiosities and passions. They reported mental health challenges, heightened anxiety and stress, linked to academic pressure, performance expectations and rigid success metrics. For students from disadvantaged backgrounds, these pressures can be intensified by additional systemic barriers, such as family responsibilities, financial instability and social stigma. In a system that prioritises academic achievement — often validated through performance-based recognition such as grades and awards — self-worth can become directly tied to results. Students in highly academic-focused schools report considerable pressure to excel in all areas, which negatively affects their self-perception and wellbeing. One student attending a mainstream independent school described in a personal workshop reflection:

In the past I wasn't doing well in school, even when I tried really really hard. It was only when my grades started to improve, and I became top of my year, did I get recognised. All of those years beforehand of long endless study were glossed over. Yes I got recognised for my grades, but the only thing recognised is the result, not the process, and that recognition only came when the grades started to match the effort.

Another student from the same school noted: "Unless you're extraordinary ... unless you're the very top, you're not celebrated at all". This culture of competition can overshadow individual progress and deter students from pursuing subjects they are passionate about. Some students in both workshops and interviews admitted to choosing "bright subjects" over personal

interests to secure a competitive ATAR, prioritising external validation over their curiosities or passions.

While academic pressure can drive students, excessive stress may hinder both learning and personal growth. Striking a balance — valuing academic achievement while also recognising diverse learning strengths — is essential for a more inclusive and supportive educational experience. Young people express that when they have opportunities to explore their interests and make choices about their education, they feel a greater sense of purpose and motivation. However, when their agency is restricted, learning becomes an obligation, which can diminish engagement and personal development. In the online workshop, one student attending an independent school with a low Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage value described how they sought attention through disruptive behaviour because they were not being recognised for their learning. "If you don't get [recognition] in a healthy way from your teachers helping you learn and grow, you get [it] in a negative way — trying to cause a big disruption in class". Disruption becomes a way of saying "I'm here and I matter". Environments that support student agency, trying, trusting and responsibility — and even failure — helped them become more confident to take on challenging tasks and pursue interests.

Young people also expressed that being trusted with broader learning opportunities is the most genuine form of recognition. When someone in power, like a teacher, entrusts them with something important, they feel valued and empowered to pursue other forms of learning and development. During a workshop at a mainstream independent school, one Year 12 student explained:

I was recently recognised by my mentor and my surf club. They referred me to people at [a surfing competition] 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, but I got recognised and it was the best thing ever.

For this student, the opportunity they received was fostered by a respectful relationship between their teacher, the surf lifesaving club and themselves. They all had a deep understanding of each other, which made this experience authentic and extremely meaningful. This example also demonstrates how trusted relationships, in which learning and capability are recognised, can be more meaningful than praise or awards and can help students see how their interests can turn into a career.

Social connection: active and informed community members

A sense of belonging is more than just feeling included. When young people feel like they belong and are valued, not only in the classroom but also in their broader community, they are more likely to engage, contribute and grow. Our research revealed that when young people feel safe to be themselves and form meaningful relationships, a deeper sense of belonging emerges — one that is essential to their wellbeing and future trajectories.

The impact of this is echoed in young people's reflections on recognition of learning. Whether it was receiving an award,

a teacher's words of encouragement, or seeing their efforts acknowledged within their communities, these experiences left lasting impressions. In the online workshop, one young person shared: "I felt great at the fact that my teacher and school recognised my efforts because it showed that they had a level of care for environmental issues and personal growth". Feeling they had a relationship with like-minded others reinforced this young person's sense of self and their belief that they can make a meaningful impact. Recognition, when done right, does more than celebrate achievements; it tells young people that they matter, that their contributions are seen, and that they belong. This highlights how wellbeing is relational — shaped by the quality of interactions with others.

Young people consistently highlighted the benefits of strong, trusting relationships with teachers and peers. When such relationships are present, students report feeling more engaged, motivated and confident in their abilities. However, when this connection is absent, young people often experience alienation, disengagement and a diminished sense of self-worth. When a Year 11 student who was working towards an International Baccalaureate certification and who self-identified as experiencing attention deficit hyperactivity disorder was interviewed, she spoke about how her teachers supported her learning success: "They know how to work with me and how to make my days work in ways so I can actually get the most out of my education". She described the impact that this had on her learning 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". The importance of broader recognition of learning, as a process, does not stop at school; it reaches into larger social and community contexts.

Outside of the classroom young people seek acknowledgement from their peers, families and broader communities. Being recognised for their contributions, whether through leadership roles, extracurricular activities, volunteering or employment, can have a transformative impact. These moments of external validation reinforce their skills and abilities, shifting their perception of what they are capable of and their sense of what is possible. For example, in the online workshop, a student attending school in a regional town and for whom English is a second language shared:

Receiving the award at the conference made me feel appreciated and recognised by my community and by people I look up to ... it made me feel capable and confident that I can achieve more.

For many young people, cultural identity and a sense of belonging are entwined. A student who had entered university through a non-ATAR pathway reflected during a workshop discussion:

I feel like getting in touch with your cultural identity really helps a person find themselves and ground themselves and feel connected to other [Samoans], but also feel more confident in themselves, like they know who they are.

This demonstrated how being able to celebrate heritage and difference in learning fosters confidence, strengthens identity, and creates a deeper connection to both self and community.

When young people are encouraged to explore who they are, they are more likely to learn in ways that matter to them.

Students highlighted how belonging is also about supporting others. During the same workshop, another university student shared a powerful experience of helping a peer:

Whenever I help ... 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 ... I realised that I genuinely enjoy helping people.

Meaningful relationships that support learning and self-discovery help young people navigate the challenges they face and help them make informed decisions about their futures. When supported to identify and follow diverse paths, they can pursue opportunities that align with their interests and strengths, fostering a sense of purpose and direction that extends well beyond the classroom walls.

Discussion

Our findings demonstrate that, regardless of the educational setting, when students experience broader forms of recognition of learning the benefits include fostering wellbeing and educational engagement and outcomes. When young people feel valued beyond traditional academic metrics, they experience increased motivation, a better sense of self and a deeper connection to learning. Conversely, rigid educational structures that prioritise conformity and academic outcome over creativity contribute to stress, poor mental health and disengagement from learning.

While students during workshops in a mainstream education setting reported experiencing validation through performance-based recognition such as grades and awards, they also said this creates immense pressure that can reinforce a mindset where self-worth is directly tied to academic outcomes. By contrast, students who have experienced disengagement from schooling in the past reported they can experience a general lack of recognition, leading to a diminished sense of belonging, disengagement from learning and increased self-doubt — reinforcing cycles of disadvantage and systemic barriers that make success feel out of reach.

Our results show that where learning environments cultivate trust, support and psychological safety, students develop knowledge and skills and experience positive subjective wellbeing and social connectedness. This suggests that traditional assessment systems need to evolve to accommodate key aspects of broader recognition, including:

- **Recognition of non-formal learning activities:** Activities such as extracurricular programs, volunteering and work experience, which provide essential social and personal skills that traditional lessons cannot, should be recognised. Ensuring that enrichment activities are integrated into education can support holistic development and equitable access for all students, particularly those from marginalised backgrounds who may not have the same opportunities as others outside of formal schooling.
- **Broader assessment and credentialing:** A lack of recognition of skills, competencies and dispositions can contribute to

disengagement, mental health challenges, and a sense of exclusion from future opportunities. Conversely, when young people feel acknowledged for their diverse skills, they develop a stronger sense of self-efficacy, motivation and resilience.

- **Meaningful and supportive relationships:** Students who reported strong, supportive relationships with teachers and peers were more likely to feel engaged and confident in their learning. These relationships provided emotional security, motivation and a sense of belonging. This also suggests that using participatory action research and co-design with students in educational settings would help identify, design and implement approaches that reflect what students value.
- **Commitment to overcoming disadvantage:** Broader definitions of learning success can act as a circuit breaker for young people experiencing disadvantage. Our results indicate that when these students are recognised for their learning in ways that reflect their personal strengths, contributions and aspirations, they are more likely to engage with their education and identify their future pathways, and this supports their wellbeing.

Our results show how redefining success in learning could enhance capabilities across key wellbeing dimensions and contribute to a model that can be adapted to local contexts (Box 1). A broader and more flexible, learner-centred system has the potential to substantially improve student wellbeing and educational outcomes.

Limitations

While this qualitative study provides valuable insights into the dynamics of the relationship between broader learning recognition and young people's wellbeing and educational engagement, the purposive sampling strategy and limited sample size means that the findings cannot be generalised to all young people across different educational settings and country contexts.

Conclusion

The wellbeing and learning outcomes of students are not well supported by existing approaches to learning recognition. International and Australian research has highlighted for many years how high stakes testing narrows curricula, prioritises test-focused teaching over holistic education, and undermines critical thinking and creativity-essential skills for modern learning environments. For many students, current approaches increase stress and anxiety while diminishing their self-esteem and love of learning.

Instead of existing approaches, young people want to have agency to be able to determine and navigate their learning journeys. Schools and educators also need agency to make relevant decisions based on their unique vantage point and knowledge of learners and their families and carers, with governments acting primarily as enablers (not regulators) of education (Box 7).

The potential of working with young people in learning, rather than delivering education to them, is demonstrated through

7 Potential policy implications arising from this study

Outcome	Evidence of change
Re-regulation of the underpinning frameworks in which teachers and schools operate	• Trusted forms of learning recognition are issued by those who know the student, and warranted by those who understand the learning design • Schools have agency to make relevant decisions regarding assessment according to their school setting and knowledge of the learner and their family or carers • The primary role of government is to be a key enabler, rather than a regulator
A new accountability for education via learning ecosystems	• Communities work alongside schools to create a learning environment that is responsive to the place they are located • Schools and education systems adopt mechanisms to engage in co-design of forms of learning and recognition, and that support them to be directly accountable to young people

this research. Young people, who co-authored this article, were involved in the creation of new knowledge, informed by their lived experiences, thereby challenging traditional power dynamics in educational research. Challenging these dynamics within learning systems is essential to ensuring that education is not just something done to young people, but something shaped by them. Young people should be active architects of their own learning, because when education respects their lived experience and aspirations, it empowers them to thrive, not just succeed. Young people must be well to learn well.

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Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information is included with the online version of this article.