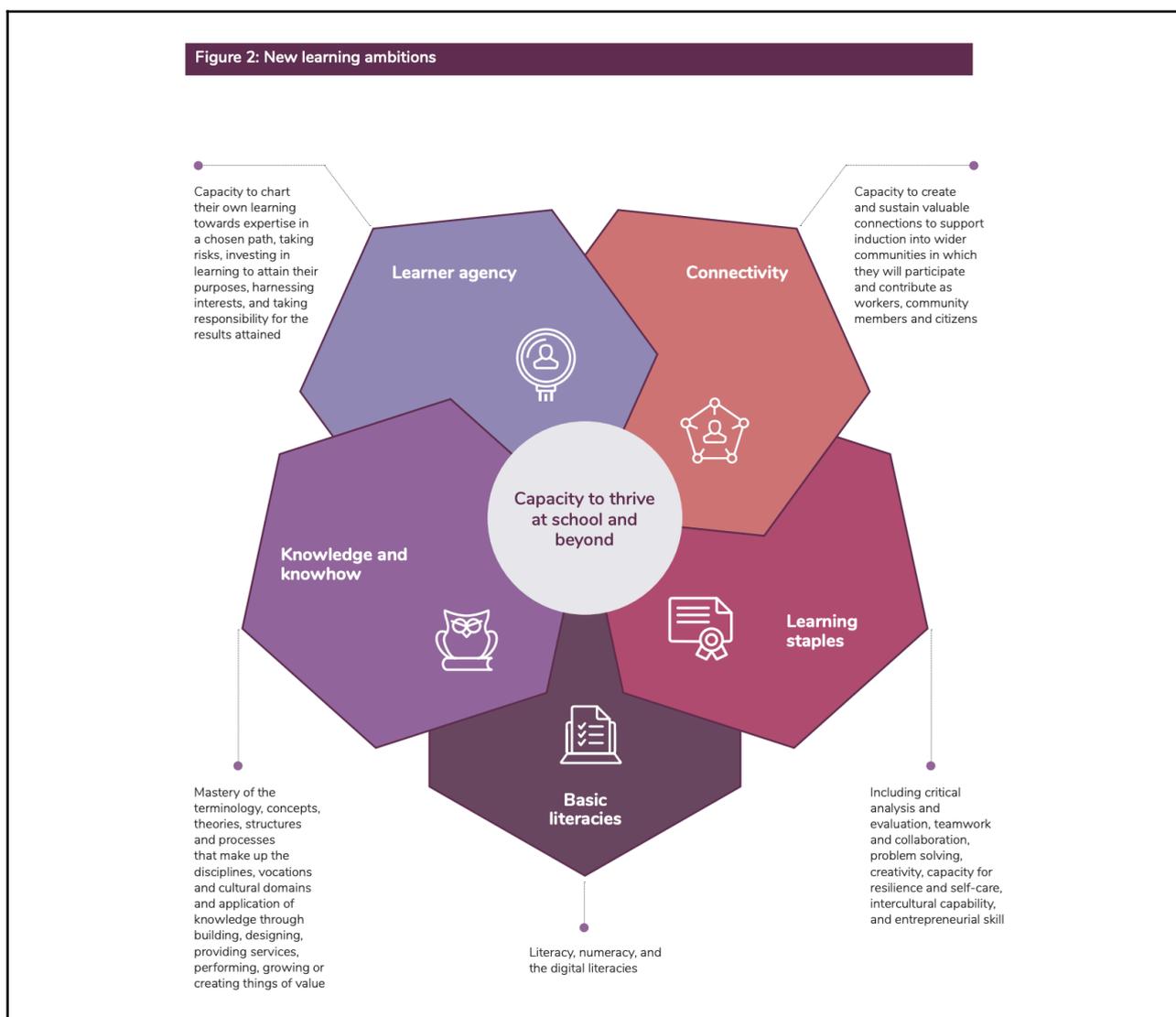


Learning Creates Australia Context Note: Exploring Learner Agency

Since 2020, Learning Creates Australia has commissioned and developed a number of pieces of work that highlight the importance of learner agency. Below are a brief description on some key outputs and themes explored.

Agency as a core capability

Learner agency was articulated as a *Learning Ambition* in our foundational report [Recognition of Learning Success for All](#) (Melbourne Metrics, University of Melbourne, 2020). This report frames learner agency as a core driver of meaningful outcomes - where young people are recognised not only for what they know, but also for their ability to make choices, take initiative, and influence their own pathways. It shows that when learners are given genuine opportunities to shape their learning, they are more engaged, more capable of building complex skills, and more likely to thrive across a range of measures.



The importance of learner agency as a core capability for young people was reiterated in the [Learning on Purpose Report](#) commissioned with CSE and expressed by Charles Leadbeater:

“In a world that is increasingly volatile, unstable, uncertain and unequal, education needs to help students exert some control and purpose over their lives. To do that they need to develop a sense of agency so that they can: understand what matters to them and the communities they are a part of; sense opportunity and act on it; take risks; make commitments; and learn in action how to recover from setbacks, to adjust their plans when things do not work out as they had hoped. They need to do all that by working with others, collaboratively and to develop and apply their learning in the real world, not just in the classroom. They need to learn to thrive by drawing on what makes them fully human: their ability to connect, to make meaning together and to act on fundamental moral purposes.”

Young People Agree

From the outset, young people themselves have told us that agency matters. In our three-year Social Lab (2020-2022), they defined agency in their own words as “voice, choice and ownership in our learning.”

This framing has remained consistent across our projects and was elevated in [The Whole Learner Report \(2024\)](#), which shares from the learner-perspective how agency underpins wellbeing, identity, and learning success.

Having agency to chart their own journeys and pursue interests was described as core to a good educational experience. Students explained that when they had real choice and ownership, alongside meaningful learning relationships with their teachers and peers, they were more motivated and invested. The report highlights how embedding agency into everyday practice strengthens belonging and identity, rather than treating it as an ‘add-on.’

This theme also surfaced in the youth-led [WAM Podcast](#), where young people reflected on the importance of being recognised as their whole selves. One episode, for example, explored the Big Picture Learning Credential, showing how students valued having control over how their achievements were recognised.

Impact on Young People

The impact on young people, when they have greater agency in their learning, has been evident in a number of ways - including from talking with young people themselves. The **learner stories (attached)** gathered through our work illustrate vividly why agency matters:

Harley’s journey shows how a change of environment and recognition of his strengths transformed him from being labelled “bad” to discovering all the things he could do, finding his voice as a communicator and leader.

Nathan highlights how limiting it is when success is defined only as academic achievement, and how ownership of his learning allowed him to build confidence and wellbeing: *“If you don’t have ownership it’s a waste of time, you don’t get the most out of your learning.”*

For Is, true agency came only when they moved beyond mainstream schooling into settings that allowed real choice, where agency meant the capacity to change things, not just pick subjects.

And Gabriella's story as a migrant student reflects how new-found independence in Australia gave her the ability to pursue creative pathways and say, *"It meant I felt like everything was up to me for a change."*

These stories show that agency can mean the difference between disengagement and flourishing. Schools too, who have focussed on agency are showcasing strong outcomes for their students. E.g at **Plumpton High School** and their focus on agency and pathways has transformed outcomes including

- 97% of graduates now in work, education or training (up from <75% locally).
- Higher university offers, with many students gaining early entry.
- Strongest HSC results in 20 years.
- Suspensions halved, from 1,100 days in 2014 to just 168 in 2024.

The Importance of Co-Agency (and Context)

Our [Reimagining the Learning Profession \(2024\)](#) report and [Learning on Purpose](#) both highlight that learner agency cannot flourish unless teachers themselves are trusted as agents of change.

"Student agency requires students and teachers to do great work together. It is power with, the power that comes from relationships, rather than power over that comes from hierarchy, in action."

This "iron law of co-agency" reminds us that students only become agents when capable teachers are also empowered.

Building on this same concept, the **Pulse Lab** work, developed through the Social Lab, explored early on some practical ways for schools to grow co-agency and tested these within schools across South West Sydney and South Australia. The work began with a *Learner Agency Roadmap and Rubric*, designed to help schools assess progress across four developmental standards:

Rubric for learner agency: a framework that shows ways to create and measure learner agency progressions

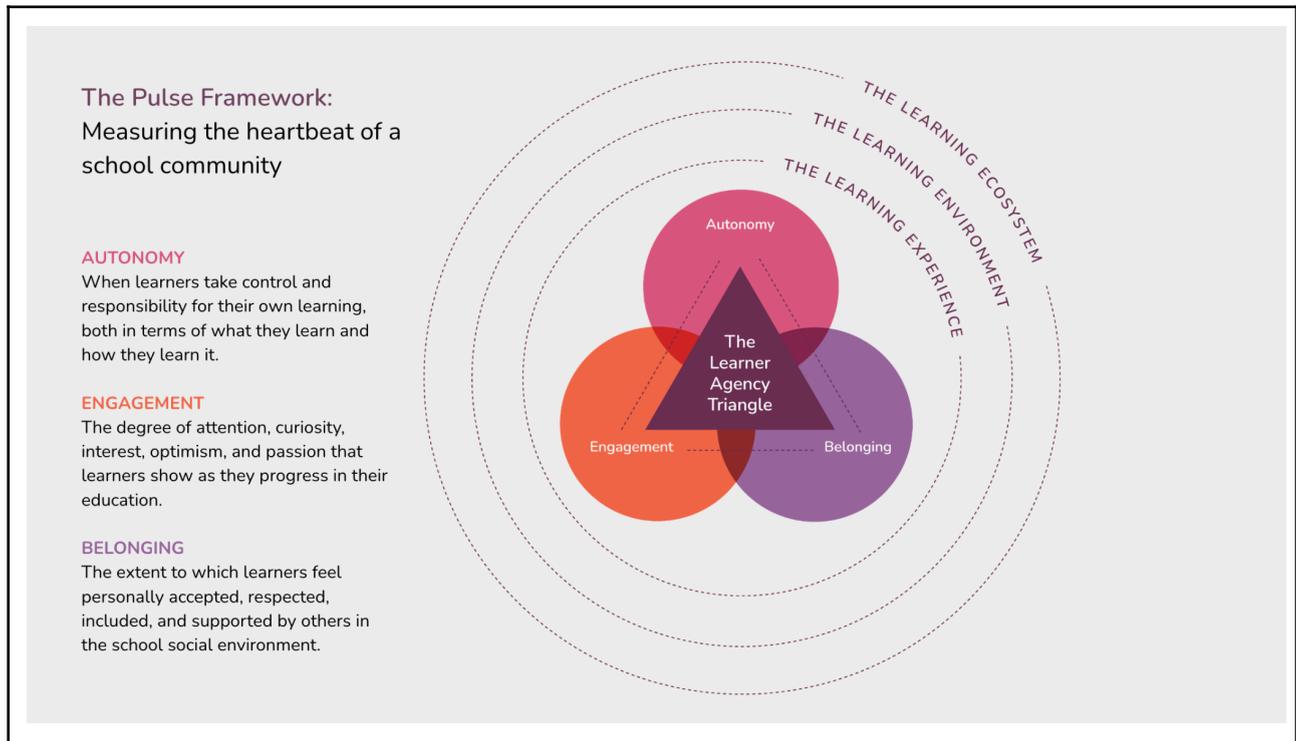
It has been developed as an input for the roadmap.

The rubric outlines four standards of learning (emerging, developing, mastering and transforming) for assisting schools to determine their current level of agency. It aligns well to the Assessment Research Centre, University of Melbourne, New Metrics initiative that supports 37 schools nationally to shift how they measure and monitor learning. The 7 elements of agency have been adapted from multiple conceptual models, many of which are grounded in Self-Determination Theory and Personalised and 21st Century learning movements, but especially work by Barbara Bray and Kathleen McClaskey, and Charles Leadbeater following consultation sessions. It is currently in first draft and ready to be tested with Community Partners.

	1 - Emerging	2 - Developing	3 - Mastering	4 - Transforming
Voice	Consultation: Offers opinions, answers questions, takes surveys, provides input and gives feedback.	Participation: Attends activities, plays a role in decision making, articulates action steps to meet learning goals.	Partnership: Collaborates with teachers and learners, contributes to design of lessons, projects, and assessments.	Leadership: Identifies problems, generates solutions, advocates for and leads change, co-plans, makes decisions and accepts responsibility.
Choice	Participant: Selects from a menu of options, chooses how to access, engage and express based on teacher direction.	Designer: Chooses topic based on interests or questions, identifies ideas for designing activities, tasks and roles.	Advocate: Identifies challenge or problem, chooses strategies, resources and people to develop an action plan.	Entrepreneur: Self-regulates learning for passion and purpose, expands purpose by inventing products, projects or businesses.
Ownership	Compliant: Little commitment, follows instructions, answers questions about learning, completes homework for a grade.	Understanding: Develops a learner profile, determines learning goals, shares evidence of learning with teacher and peers.	Investment: Works independently and collaboratively with others, decides goals and action steps, collects evidence of mastery.	Autonomy: Pursues interest and passions innovatively, self-monitors progress, showcases ideas, products or processes.
Engagement	Compliant: Does not talk about own learning, follows directions, learns about objectives from teacher.	Committed: Builds relationship with teacher, investigates topics, starts taking responsibility for learning.	Connected: Explores new ideas to discover, connects to others with same interests, learns from and teaches others, responsible for their own learning.	Flow-State: Pursues passion and purpose, designs and showcases process and product, intrinsically motivated, in control and responsible.
Motivation	Instrumental: Motivated by tangible rewards, avoiding negative consequences and is entrenched in a fixed mindset.	Social: Motivated by social acceptance, pleasing others and comparison of performance with peers.	Achievement: Motivated to succeed and meet learning goals, perseveres, demonstrates mastery and develops a growth mindset.	Self-Actualisation: Motivated by the love of learning; understanding, creating, fostering a skill or pursuing their purpose.
Purpose	Conformity: Follows rules, is measured by extrinsic factors, may not understand his or her purpose.	Self-Awareness: Expires interests and aspirations, seeks self-discovery, recognises hopes and dreams.	Discovery: Excited to try new ideas, discovering what matters in life, intrinsically motivated to investigate passion.	Making a Difference: Embraces challenge, looks beyond self-interest to a meaningful life, has sense of purpose.
Self-Efficacy	Cautious: Has a difficult time making decisions, voices opinion but may not act on them, concerned about what others think.	Self-Esteem: Builds relationships, exercises voice consistently, reflects on relationships (with self, others and the world) and appraises own worth.	Self-Confidence: Believes in ability to learn, guides own emotions, thoughts and actions to reach goals, intrinsically motivated to voice a position.	Perseverance: Embraces challenges, views failure as opportunity, develops resilience, willing to take risks and go the extra mile to achieve any goal.

Teacher-Centred • • Learner-Centred • • Learner-Driven

This work later evolved into a whole-school approach embedding students, educators, and families in cycles of inquiry, with autonomy, engagement, and belonging as foundations. Tools such as the *Pulse Check Survey* enabled schools to track and grow agency in real time across the three domains outlined below.



Notes from the Field

Our three-year action research project *The Power of Recognising More (2023-2025)*, has also explored the importance of agency in learning through the lens of practitioners in the field trialling new things - as documented in [Notes from the Field, 2025](#). The case studies in this report showcase how over time we have seen ambitions for student agency deepen within schools, from initial steps of enabling student voice on extra-curricular activities to supporting co-design and partnership with students across all aspects of their learning. The report also explores things like the role of AI and Technology in supporting agentic learning practices. A few examples of practice include:

Templestowe College allows students to choose their own classes and co-create subjects based on their interests, ensuring their curriculum, and timetable, is responsive and unique to student needs.

SEDA College makes space for senior secondary students to demonstrate their learning through projects rather than formal subjects, giving students agency to learn alongside industry partners, in practical contexts.

At Hunter Sports High School, there are different academies that focus on different skills, so students can find one that matches their interests and abilities.

Some schools use tools like self-assessments and student-led reporting to help students reflect on their progress:

At Heathfield High School, teachers work with students to clearly define roles in group projects, such as leadership and facilitation, to help students take responsibility and contribute effectively to their teams. At

Rooty Hill High School students co-construct their own academic report comments by assessing their own learning goals in each subject.

EREA Flexible Schools use a shared assessment approach that helps students see how they're doing and understand their strengths and areas for growth.

Indigenous-led Learning Charters developed with NIYEC emphasise the importance of self-determined learning. For First Nations young people, agency is inseparable from culture, country, and identity. When learners are able to bring their whole selves to education, belonging and wellbeing are strengthened.

Rooty Hill High School CASE STUDY

Rooty Hill High School shows how local context matters when developing and embedding agency. They've been intentionally and systematically building student agency for more than a decade. Their story shows how they've grown and expanded agency over time, based on what their community needs and what they have capacity to implement.

Rooty Hill High School defines agency as "the capacity of individuals to think for themselves, act independently, take responsibility for their own actions and make informed choices for the present and future."

Agency is built into everything they do at the school cascading from their strategic plan, from personalised learning to focusing on building skills and encouraging students to set their own goals and track their progress.

Responding to local context

Rooty Hill High School knows its community well and has created personalised learning and wellbeing programs to fit student needs. The school draws from a community that is socially, culturally and linguistically diverse. According to NCOSS, 23% of 16-year-olds living in the community live in poverty.

The school works to give every student opportunity despite the challenges they face. The school offers lots of opportunities for students to find and follow their interests, both in and out of the classroom. It wants to help students get ready for life after school, whether that's going to further education or getting a job. The school also works with local businesses and community groups to give students chances they might not get otherwise, like finding mentors, getting work experience, and learning important life skills.

Personalised learning for every student

Each student at Rooty Hill High School has a personalised learning plan. When students enroll, they're interviewed with their families to help the school understand their interests, expectations, needs, and goals. From there, teachers can create learning programs that build on each student's needs and strengths. As students move forward, they create their own academic goals and keep track of their own progress. This gives students a deeper understanding and sense of ownership of their learning and progress.

Using data and tools

Rooty Hill High School uses data and tools to support its approach, including student data from interviews, assessments and surveys like Tell Them From Me (TTfM). Students play a big role in analysing and using this data, including having conversations about their learning plans twice a year to set and reflect on academic and social goals. A "Student Analyst Team" works with each Year Advisor to analyse the TTfM student survey and give feedback to staff and students. Staff mentors work with students to create learner profiles that show what they know, do and understand, which they can use for making job applications and applying for university entry.

Driving whole school action and improvement

Rooty Hill High School's approach to building agency involves the whole school. It's a key priority and changes over time based on what's going on – for example, after COVID, the school focused on building resilience to help students with self-regulation and wellbeing. School leadership structures and professional learning are targeted to support agency, with teachers and support staff having a key role in supporting and challenging students

Expanding Agency at the System Level

Through initiatives in jurisdictions like South Australia and the Northern Territory, students are being given opportunities to have greater ownership of their learning, environments and their records, with space to showcase achievements beyond traditional measures. This ensures agency is built not only at the classroom and school level, but across systems.

SACE Board has enabled agency across South Australia and Northern Territory at the system level, making space in the year 11-12 curriculum for schools to contextualise learning to meet diverse student needs.

The Northern Territory Learning Commission (NTLC) is getting students involved in making school better - as co-creators of their learning environments. You can read more about this work in the case study below from Notes from the Field, and in the commissioned CSE report [Beyond Voices: Students as partners in improvement](#).

The Northern Territory Learning Commission CASE STUDY

They believe that since students are the ones who experience school every day, they should have a say in how it's run. It's a partnership between students, teachers, school leaders, and policymakers.

Why partner with students?

The NTLC partners with students because they're the ones who are most affected by decisions made about their education. They have firsthand experience and can offer valuable insights. As one person put it: "Those who are most directly impacted by our decisions should be a partner in those decisions."

The NTLC has noticed that young people are really enthusiastic about making education better. Young people articulate an "urgency for things to be better, accompanied by an ability to describe what this change could be and how it might be experienced, but also an energy and advocacy for the change of practice required to make it a reality."

The NTLC wants students to be co-creators of their learning environments and involves them in designing, testing, and implementing changes to improve their schools.

Trust is key

The NTLC's success in getting students involved comes down to trust. They're transparent about how decisions are made and make sure everyone has an equal chance to participate by preparing both students and teachers.

"Students experience environments where they can be valued and heard. Trust is built through transparency in decision making processes despite the complexity. (When) students trust that their insights are valued and their contributions can lead to real change, they engage more deeply, take more risks and feel a greater sense of belonging."

It's also important to make sure students and teachers have the right skills to contribute effectively. This includes things like professional learning in data analysis and facilitation for both students and teachers.

Making sure everyone is heard

The NTLC draws on the lived experience of students who are disengaged or disengaging, capturing and sharing this to ensure the contributions of students who are not at the table are heard and considered. They want to make sure everyone's voice is heard so that any changes they make will benefit all students.

What our schools and systems have been grappling with



When do we have direct instruction, and when is more agency appropriate? What is the role of teachers?

Schools and systems are learning that agency isn't a single construct and that it can be used to create a more engaging and effective learning environment for students.

The role of teachers remains crucial both in direct instruction and building strong relationships with learners.

Young people have told us how important teachers are in challenging them to set bigger goals and in building their self belief.



Capturing the benefits of agency

We are seeing how agency is key to supporting all young people to engage with learning. When learning has personal meaning and relevance young people engage.

Young people are talking about how they feel more engaged, that learning is relevant whilst teachers are expressing joy at being able to meet a breadth of student needs.

These benefits are emerging, and difficult to capture separately as schools have a myriad of parallel initiatives.



Preparing schools, teachers and students

Agency doesn't just happen. We've seen how schools who have been on this path for a long while are embedding agency in their strategic plans.

Schools are looking at what tools teachers and students need to be able to enact agency.



Starting small, but needing to expand

Schools speak of starting small with student agency, with issues like extra-curricular activities.

They talk about the need to expand to areas that are more directly linked to academic outcomes, that young people need to have a substantive say in their overall learning for agency to lift levels of engagement.

We are seeing this as a key change over time, as schools expand their definition and application of student agency.

Key Links

- [Recognition of Learning Success for All \(2020\)](#)
- [The Whole Learner Report \(2024\)](#)
- Learner Stories (attached)
- [Reimagining the Learning Profession \(2024\)](#)
- [Beyond voice - students as partners in improvement](#)
- [Learning on purpose report](#)
- [Notes from the Field \(2025\)](#)
- Pulse Lab overview (attached)
- Agency Rubric (attached)
- [WAM Youth-led Podcast episode](#)