



AUSTRALIA

Research Report

SUSAN BUSH-MECENAS, JONATHAN SCHWEIG, V. DARLEEN OFFER

Learning Creates Australia

Evaluation of the Learner's Journey Social Lab



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About This Report

Social labs have recently been gaining traction in a wide range of sectors internationally; and have been applied to many complex social problems, including food system security, poverty and labour market revitalisation. Social labs convene participants to collaborate and work collectively on developing prototypes that are iteratively refined and improved. Ultimately, social labs aspire to make macro-level changes that address a core problem.

Learning Creates Australia launched just prior to the onset of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic in 2020 with the objective of convening an alliance of people and organisations that could systematically reform the Australian education system to ensure that all young Australians have opportunities to learn and develop the knowledge, skills and competencies that will enable them to become successful in school, find productive employment and actively engage in their communities. Given the complexity of this task and scale of this reform effort, Learning Creates Australia adopted a social lab methodology to frame and guide their work. The RAND Corporation was engaged to conduct a mixed-methods evaluation study that would offer formative feedback to the social lab implementation team and ultimately provide a summative assessment of the progress of the organisation over the first phase of their work.

RAND Education and Labor

This study was undertaken by RAND Education and Labor, a division of the RAND Corporation that conducts research on early childhood through post-secondary education programs, workforce development; and programs and policies affecting workers, entrepreneurship, and financial literacy and decision-making. This study was sponsored by Learning Creates Australia.

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Contents

About This Report	iii
Figures and Tables	vii
Summary	ix
Acknowledgement	xiii
Abbreviations	xv
CHAPTER ONE	
Background and Context	1
Social Labs Are an Innovative Approach to Address Complex Social Challenges	2
The Learner’s Journey Social Lab Focuses on Certification and Credentialling in Australian Secondary Schools	4
CHAPTER TWO	
The Development and Design of The Learner’s Journey Social Lab	7
The Learner’s Journey Social Lab	7
CHAPTER THREE	
Aims and Methods of the Evaluation	13
A Conceptual Framework for The Learner’s Journey	13
Data Collection and Analytic Methods	15
CHAPTER FOUR	
How Were the LCAust Social Labs Implemented in Practice?	21
Social Labs Engaged Diverse Participants, Modified Team Membership over Time	21
Social Labs Established Trust and Commitment, Extended Participants’ Networks	25
Social Lab Process Balanced Autonomy and Structure	26
Management of Social Labs Proceeded Smoothly	28
First Nations Team Embodied Self-Determination and Indigenous Values	28
Social Lab Teams Developed Capacity in Understanding Problems and Embracing Co-Design	31
Social Labs Engaged Communities in Prototyping in Later Cycles	33
CHAPTER 5	
To What Extent Did LCAust’s Phase I Activities Lay the Groundwork for Systemic Impact?	35
LCAust Published Three Research Reports to Inform Policy/Industry Engagement and Prototyping	35
LCAust Acted as Intermediary Organisation Convening Policy and Industry Leaders	36
Prototypes Developed at Different Rates, with Different Levels of Success	38
CHAPTER SIX	
What Factors Enabled or Constrained Implementation?	41
LCAust Added Value as a Neutral Convenor with Strong Policy Connections, Engagement of Diverse Stakeholders	41
LCAust Balanced Urgency for Change with Methodical Process	42
LCAust Was Responsive and Adaptive to Challenges	42
Connections Between Research, Policy and Prototypes Still Developing	43

CHAPTER SEVEN

Summary and Recommendations..... 45

 Recommendations for Learning Creates Australia..... 45

 Recommendations for the Use of Social Labs..... 47

References..... 49

Figures and Tables

Figures

1.1.	Stages of a Social Lab Model	3
2.1.	Timeline of Social Lab Process	7
2.2.	Social Lab Cycle Aims	9
3.1.	Conceptual Model	14
4.1.	Social Lab Participants Valued the Perspectives of Their Team Members	22
4.2.	Percentage of Returning Participants Across Three Social Lab Cycles	23
4.3.	Social Lab Participants Reported Strong Social Engagement with Teams.....	26
4.4.	Participants Held Positive Views of the Overall Management of the Process.....	28
4.5.	Participants Reported Key Ways in Which Participating in the Labs Increased Their Capacity.....	31
4.6.	Participants' Ratings of Prototyping Dispositions and Mindsets Were High Across All Three Cycles.....	32
5.1.	The Majority of Community Partners and Stakeholder Respondents Believed the Prototypes Could Be Effective and Measurable but Were Less Sure About Feasibility or Scalability.....	40

Tables

2.1.	Planned Community Partnerships.....	10
2.2.	Final Prototypes and Community Partnerships	11
3.1.	Guiding Research Questions of This Evaluation.....	13
3.2.	Number of Interviewees and Interviews by Stakeholder Group	15
3.3.	Social Lab Participant Survey Topics and Items.....	17
3.4.	Survey Response Rates, by Social Lab Cycle	17
3.5.	Ecosystem Survey Topics and Items.....	18
4.1.	Social Lab Roles by Cycle.....	24
5.1.	Research Products	36

Summary

Social labs have recently been gaining traction in a wide range of sectors internationally, and have been applied to many complex social problems, including food system security, poverty and labour market revitalisation. Social labs convene participants to collaborate and work collectively on developing prototypes that are iteratively refined and improved. Ultimately, social labs aspire to make macro-level changes that address a core problem.

Learning Creates Australia (LCAust) launched in 2020 just prior to the onset of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic with the objective of convening an alliance of people and organisations that could systematically reform the Australian education system to ensure that all young Australians have opportunities to learn and develop the knowledge, skills and competencies that will enable them to become successful in school, find productive employment and actively engage in their communities. Given the complexity of this task and scale of this reform effort, LCAust adopted a social lab methodology to frame and guide its work.

LCAust invited the RAND Corporation to conduct a mixed-methods evaluation study that would offer formative feedback to the social lab implementation team and ultimately provide a summative assessment of the progress of the organisation over the first phase of its work. RAND sought to address three research questions in this evaluation: (1) How were the social labs designed and implemented to solve persistent problems of practice? (2) What factors enabled or constrained implementation? (3) To what extent did LCAust's Phase I activities lay the groundwork for systemic impact? This report details findings from this evaluation.

Learning Creates Australia's Social Lab: The Learner's Journey

LCAust's social lab, called 'The Learner's Journey', is aimed at reforming the Australian educational system to ensure that all young Australians have opportunities to learn and develop the knowledge, skills and competencies that will enable them to become successful in school, find productive employment and actively engage in their communities. For this social lab, the organisation focused on one specific aspect of the problem that research suggests may play a key role in reproducing inequities in the educational system: assessment and accreditation. Specifically, The Learner's Journey focuses on exploring alternative ways to design, assess and accredit learning that better reflects the diverse knowledge sets, skills and dispositions of students.

There are four hallmark characteristics of The Learner's Journey social lab:

1. The social lab was designed to be centred on young people, and young people were given decisionmaking authority throughout the social lab with the intention of ensuring that the prototypes that emerged were appropriate for their intended purpose.
2. The experiences of Aboriginal and/or Torres Straits Islander people and communities were centred in a self-determined leadership model, and Aboriginal and/or Torres Straits Islander people drove their own stream of work within the context of the social lab. The First Nations team designed their own team structure in order to determine the focus of their team's workflows and processes and how they would test and engage the community in their team's work.
3. While all participants in The Learner's Journey were focused on the challenge question described above, participants were also organised into smaller prototyping teams that focused on a specific area of the core challenge.
4. The prototypes were adapted and tested in communities, with meaningful community involvement in the prototyping process.

Planning for The Learner's Journey began in March 2020 with the engagement of diverse stakeholders to pre-plan the work of the social lab. The first phase (Phase I) of LCAust's social lab work was designed to take place over three cycles, with lab activities taking place between October 2020 and October 2021. Each cycle would engage a single cohort of participants who would engage in the lab activities and advance the prototypes towards completion.

Study Approach

The study analyses draw on 37 interviews and focus groups conducted with 13 lab participants and 45 other stakeholders and community members engaged in the work. These interviews and focus groups are supported with surveys administered to lab participants (85 unique respondents) and other members of the community (20 unique respondents). To analyse our data, we began by coding interview data across different levels of abstraction using codes that were descriptive (e.g., respondent characteristics, role), thematic (e.g., root cause analysis, tools and protocols, panel activities) and analytic (e.g., reach, feasibility, inclusion, trust, legitimacy). Dedoose qualitative research software was utilised for this part of the analysis. We then completed structured thematic analysis to understand key themes and their prevalence across respondents. Where possible, we utilised matrices to understand variation across respondents (Bush-Mecenas and Marsh, 2018; Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, 2018). To enhance the internal validity and accuracy of our findings, we triangulated data across multiple sources, comparing interviews between various respondents and using document data, where available, to confirm key findings.

In addition to interview, focus group, and survey data collection, we also conducted 13 observations of social lab events in order to understand how the information was shared across the lab teams, panels and research partners. We also collected and analysed relevant documents and artefacts of the social lab process including PowerPoint presentations from convenings and meetings, research reports, panel meeting agendas and presentations, documentation of participation, community partner dossiers, communications with participants, and media articles referencing LCAust's social lab work.

Findings

How Were the Social Labs Designed and Implemented to Solve Persistent Problems of Practice?

LCAust's social labs engaged a range of participants over the course of the three cycles, including educators, parents, students, consultants focusing on design thinking and prototyping, leaders in youth-serving organisations, and representatives from tertiary education and industry. The majority of survey respondents believed that their team members represented diverse lived experiences and had relevant research knowledge. The majority also agreed or strongly agreed that team members listen to each other, trust each other, and value each other's experiences and expertise. Consistent with the intended design of The Learner's Journey, young people were engaged in a variety of roles in the social labs; and members of the First Nations team noted that the overarching social lab methodology was consistent with, and allowed for appropriate acknowledgement and centring of, First Nations cultural values.

Lab participants also perceived that they had developed capacity in understanding problems and embracing co-design. The majority of participants believed their professional networks had expanded as a result of participating in the labs and that they had gained a better understanding of the problems they were addressing with their prototypes.

Across all cycles of the social labs, respondents noted challenges in consistently attending all meetings and events given their busy work, school and personal schedules. Social lab activities required about 5–15 hours a week of time, which presented challenges for experts, educators and students alike.

Other implementation challenges that arose during the lab process included difficulty in differentiating roles and responsibilities and challenges in developing relationships in virtual settings (due to COVID-19 restrictions on in-person gatherings). Despite their apprehension regarding the loosely structured nature of the social lab process, respondents generally held positive views of the overall management of the process.

What Factors Enabled or Constrained Implementation?

Three factors were articulated as key for social lab implementation. First, respondents across our data collection agree upon a key value in LCAust acting as a neutral convenor with strong policy connections and meaningful engagement of a variety of stakeholders. Respondents including social lab participants, policy panellists and LCAust leaders articulated this role as the organisation acting as an ‘intermediary’ that is ‘trusted and valued’. Many respondents, particularly social lab participants in Cycles 2 and 3, described the impressive connections of LCAust leaders with key policymakers and government actors. They believed these connections were vital to the implementation and scalability of prototypes and, ultimately, systems change. Second, lab participants believed that the current education ecosystem lacked enough active change-makers and a sense of urgency, which LCAust was helping to rectify. Finally, participants perceived that LCAust was responsive and adaptive to challenges that arose as the work of the labs progressed.

Of note, a few participants noted that most participants were already proponents of systemic change in education. They questioned the potential for policy change in certain states or settings that might be strongly opposed to these reforms. Respondents also noted challenges in integrating the research, policy and prototyping activity across the various aspects of LCAust’s work (including its social lab, policy and industry engagement, and research activities).

To What Extent Did LCAust’s Phase I Activities Lay the Groundwork for Systemic Impact?

While The Learner’s Journey is a central component of LCAust’s activity, the organisation has adopted a three-pronged approach to lay the groundwork for systemic impact, including not only the social lab activities but also research work and policy/industry engagement. As part of this work, the organisation has commissioned a series of reports and white papers that synthesise existing research and data to support its work, provide case studies of the experiences of learners to amplify the voice of young people, and discuss possible policy solutions. To support the work of The Learner’s Journey social lab, LCAust engaged stakeholders from the larger educational ecosystem (through a series of forums and roundtables) to raise awareness for the work and create the conditions necessary for prototypes to become adopted at scale. Regarding the prototypes themselves, there was variation in the pace at which prototypes were developed and their perceived feasibility. It took time for the teams to develop prototypes that were feasible and scalable. By Cycle 3, community partners and other stakeholders were generally positive about the prototypes developed, in terms of their relevance and the extent to which the prototype developers understood the needs of their community. However, there was less consensus around whether the prototypes were scalable for bigger impact. Respondents saw connections to state and, rarely, national, scaling, but also identified uncertainty and challenges in reaching these levels of scale.

Conclusion

We conclude this report with several implications for program leadership with regard to ongoing programming and LCAust’s potential to for systemic impact. First, we suggest that organisations utilising the social lab methodology to enact systems change carefully weigh the commitment of time and effort

against the pressure to engage the appropriate stakeholders in social lab work, such that individuals key to implementation and scaling are integrated into the work from its start. Second, we recommend that organisations identify problems that have appropriate granularity to address through this kind of methodology and that, where problems are divided into manageable parts, these pieces are integrated at key points in the social lab process. Third, coherence between research, leader engagement, and prototyping appears to be key to the ultimate ability of these efforts to achieve systems change. Attention to the inherent trade-offs in arranging these streams of work may facilitate translating social lab work into meaningful systemic change.

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In the spirit of reconciliation, the authors of this report would like to acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea and community. We pay our respect to their Elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples today.

Abbreviations

ACARA	Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority
ACT	Australian Capital Territory
AIATSIS	Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
ATAR	Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
IAHA	Indigenous Allied Health Australia
LCAust	Learning Creates Australia
LGBTQI+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, plus
MCEETYA	Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training, and Youth Affairs
NSW	New South Wales
NT	Northern Territory
PwC	PricewaterhouseCoopers
QLD	Queensland
SA	South Australia
SES	socioeconomic status
TAFE	technical and further education
TAS	Tasmania

Background and Context

As labour markets change and global economies become increasingly interconnected, students require opportunities to develop skills and competencies that are essential for success and life. Success in young adulthood and beyond requires not only traditional academic and vocational skills and competencies, but also requires what have been broadly categorised as ‘21st century skills’, which include communication skills, leadership skills and critical-thinking skills, among others (Nagaoka et al., 2015; National Center on Education and the Economy, 2007; Saavedra and Opfer, 2012). What’s more, the novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and its continuing impact on all aspects of public life have amplified the importance of these 21st century skills: working and studying from home has required individuals to develop self-motivation and self-regulation skills, and the economic and social uncertainty caused by the pandemic has increased the need for adaptive, flexible and creative thinkers (Huong and Au, 2020).

Prior to the pandemic, there had been substantial policy interest in Australia for education systems (e.g., state/territory government educational agencies, vocational education and training providers, universities) to prioritise essential skills beyond traditional academic and vocational skills in primary and secondary schools. In fact, policymakers and educators have advocated for a more expansive and inclusive agenda for Australian education for nearly four decades. In 2019, the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration was released by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Education Council and builds on past declarations, including those signed in Hobart (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs [MCEETYA], 1989), Adelaide (MCEETYA, 1999), and Melbourne (MCEETYA, 2008), and articulates two goals for Australian education, with a focus on (1) recognising the importance of 21st century skills for promoting life satisfaction, workplace engagement, and individual goal fulfilment; and (2) creating greater equity in educational access and opportunity by supporting historically underserved students at risk of educational disadvantage, including Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples (Education Council, 2019).

However, the Hobart, Adelaide, Melbourne and Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declarations, along with other national and state initiatives, have so far not had a significant and sustained impact on Australia’s education system. The goals outlined in these declarations remain pressing as data suggest that large numbers of students are not fully engaging with educational opportunities. According to 2020 estimates, nearly one out of every five school-aged Australians does not attain a Year 12 certificate or equivalent, and almost one-third of Australian young adults are not engaged fully in education, training and work. Among 24-year-olds, approximately 28 per cent of Australians are not mastering the skills to become confident in self and the future (Lamb et al., 2020).

These trends suggests that large numbers of students may be missing out on opportunities to learn the skills necessary for life satisfaction, workplace engagement, and individual goal fulfilment. Importantly, in spite of national and state attention given to promoting equitable education systems, young people from rural, remote and low socioeconomic status (SES) communities; those from Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities; those with specialised needs; and those who are refugees or immigrants remain more likely than their peers to be missing out on these opportunities (Ford, 2013; Lamb et al., 2020; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2018). In fact, historically entrenched gaps in educational opportunity and attainment in Australian schools are among the highest in the OECD, particularly relative to other peer OECD countries. Social background remains a significant predictor of educational success in Australian schools (OECD, 2018), and even as disparities

in opportunity and attainment have narrowed in other countries, evidence suggests that such disparities have remained unchanged in Australia (OECD, 2018). These inequities emerge early in schooling and widen throughout students' lives (Ford, 2013; OECD, 2018).

Supported with funding from the Paul Ramsay Foundation, PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) Australia and the Foundation for Young Australians, Learning Creates Australia (LCAust) launched in 2020 with the objective of convening an alliance of people and organisations that could systematically reform the Australian education system to better meet the goals of the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration. Given the complexity of this task and scale of this reform effort, LCAust adopted a social lab methodology to frame its work, with guidance from PwC's Impact Assembly, a social venture with prior experience convening social labs. The term 'social lab' describes a method for devising solutions to complex social problems. Social labs are intensive and experimental, and work by convening a diverse array of individuals who are affected by and involved in the problem at hand (Hassan, 2014; Timmermans et al., 2020). Social lab participants devise prototype solutions and test them out in iterative, collaborative cycles of consultation, experimentation and revision. Typically speaking, lab participants convene and meet in person. However, LCAust's social lab implementation coincided entirely with the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting travel restrictions and lockdowns mandated by national and state governments in Australia. Instead of meeting in person, LCAust relied on videotelephony software to facilitate the team-based interactions throughout the first phase of their work.

Shortly after the launch of LCAust, the RAND Corporation was engaged to conduct a mixed-methods evaluation study that would offer formative feedback to the social lab implementation team and ultimately provide a summative assessment of the progress of the organisation over the first phase (Phase I) of its work. This report is organised into seven chapters. In the remainder of this chapter, we provide some background on the social lab methodology, as well as more specific context for LCAust's social lab. Chapter Two describes in more detail how LCAust's social lab was structured and implemented. Chapter Three describes the evaluation questions and research methods. Chapters Four through Six outline our main findings for each evaluation question. Finally, Chapter Seven outlines the main reflections on key issues and challenges, and recommendations for LCAust going forward.

Social Labs Are an Innovative Approach to Address Complex Social Challenges

The term 'social lab' was introduced by Hassan (2014), who defined three central characteristics of the methodology: (1) they are social, in that lab participants collaborate and work collectively; (2) they are experimental, in that lab participants develop prototypes, collect data, and refine those prototypes iteratively; and (3) they are systemic, in that they aspire to make macro-level changes that address a core problem. Social labs provide time, space and resources for experts and other stakeholders to collaborate on addressing complex social problems in a practical context (Hassan, 2014). Social labs have recently been gaining traction in a wide range of sectors, and have been applied to many complex social problems, including food system security (McLachlan et al., 2015), poverty (Hassan, 2014) and labour market revitalisation (Muirhead et al., 2018). For example, the New Brunswick Economic Immigration Lab (New Brunswick, Canada) convened stakeholders to develop new approaches to address economic immigration in New Brunswick and to prototype approaches that may attract and retain newcomers who would contribute actively to New Brunswick's economy. Prototyped solutions for attracting newcomers included a concierge service that would simplify hiring new employees from outside of Canada by providing guidance on government requirements (NouLAB and COLAB, 2018).¹ Though enthusiastically

¹ See NouLAB and COLAB, 2018, for additional examples of prototypes.

endorsed among advocates of the methodology, social labs are not widely known or applied in the context of educational policy and research.

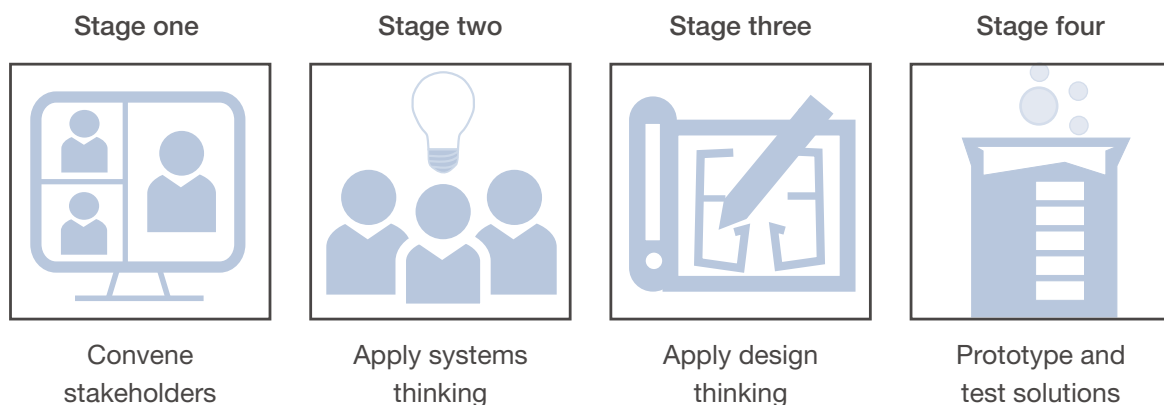
Generally speaking, social labs operationalise their central characteristics through a four-stage iterative design process (Figure 1.1). In the first stage, stakeholders and experts are convened to form a social lab team or teams. Social labs require active participation from individuals with a diversity of lived experiences who can facilitate a richer and more nuanced understanding of the focal problem. Ideally, participants should represent different social sectors and have different technical expertise. This may include, for example, policymakers, businesses, researchers, young people or government officials (Popa, Blok and Wesselink, 2018; Timmermans et al., 2020). Engaging a wide range of participants also allows individuals to form new relationships that can be leveraged to better effect change (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). In the second stage, the convened social lab teams apply a systems-thinking approach (Checkland, 1999; Stroh, 2015) to describe the social, cultural and policy contexts for the problem. Systems thinking describes a framework for developing a macro-level understanding of a complex problem or phenomenon: examining how facets of a complex system are interrelated, exploring how individual parts of a system influence one another, and exploring the historical roots of the problem (Stroh, 2015).

In the second stage of the social lab, participants may conduct interviews with individuals that have been affected by the problem in some way, conduct neighbourhood or community observations, and develop system maps that provide a high-level perspective on the events and factors that contribute to or perpetuate the challenge (Weinlick and Velji, 2016). Through this research, lab participants collaborate on determining a specific aspect of the problem that will form the starting point for experimentation and prototyping (Popa, Blok and Wesselink, 2018).

In the third stage, lab participants take the research they have conducted and use a design-thinking process to generate ideas that could be prototyped to address the core problem. This involves, for example, conducting group brainstorming activities, exploring ideas from other fields that may be relevant to the current problem, and building on existing work in the field (Weinlick and Velji, 2016).

Finally, in the fourth stage, the most promising ideas are developed into prototypes, which are then tested and refined. Social lab participants use these prototypes to test their assumptions about potential effective solutions. Lab participants go out in the real world and test their ideas with communities. Feedback from communities is tracked and integrated into further iterations of the prototype. A key characteristic of the prototyping process is to learn both from ideas that are successful and from things that do not work: in fact, the prototyping process is often characterized by productive failure, and prototypes that ‘fail fast and fail forward’ (Carroll, 2014, p.1) are believed to provide value by offering new insights into the challenge, and uncovering novel issues or aspects of the challenge (NouLAB & COLAB, 2018).

FIGURE 1.1
Stages of a Social Lab Model



SOURCE: Adapted from NouLAB & theCOLAB, 2018.

The Learner's Journey Social Lab Focuses on Certification and Credentialling in Australian Secondary Schools

LCAust's social lab, called 'The Learner's Journey', is aimed at reforming the Australian educational system to ensure that all young Australians have opportunities to learn and develop the knowledge, skills and competencies that will enable them to become successful in school, find productive employment, and actively engage in their communities. For this lab, the organisation focused on one specific aspect of the problem that research suggests may play a key role in reproducing inequities in the educational system: assessment and accreditation. LCAust adopted the position that current measures of success in learning focus too narrowly on academic skills and potentially limit students' engagement in the workforce and productivity. Furthermore, the organisation argues on its website that

young people develop capabilities from diverse life experiences inside and outside of the classroom but because many of these capabilities are not measured or credentialled by Australia's formal schooling system they are not recognised or visible to recruiters and employers. (LCAust, undated-b)

Specifically, The Learner's Journey focuses on exploring alternative ways to design, assess and accredit learning that better reflects the diverse knowledge sets, skills and dispositions of students (LCAust, undated-c). The ideas and initiatives developed through the social lab would, if adopted at scale, provide an alternative to current forms of assessments and accreditation such as to the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR), school certificates, and Vocational Education and Training (VET) qualifications. In particular, the ATAR is the primary mechanism for tertiary school selection and senior secondary certification in Australia. ATAR scores are heavily based on metrics of academic success, including High School Certificate results, Year 12 completion and secondary school performance.^{#2}

The focus on assessment and accreditation is driven by two specific factors: first, there is a long-established research tradition in international literature that suggests that assessment influences programmatic and curricular priorities for schools and teachers; knowledge and skills that appear on tests encode values about the kinds of knowledge that are valued by society, and if tests focus exclusively on a narrow range of topics or skills, schools often end up narrowing their curriculum to align to these testing priorities (e.g., Hargrove et al., 2000). Systems like the ATAR tend to privilege testable, academic knowledge and do not recognise other kinds of knowledge that might be important for success in work and life. A statement attributed to the State of Victoria Department of Education and Training on LCAust's website summarises the organisation's position on the influence of systems like ATAR:

The systemic shift toward school improvement appears to have led to an undue emphasis on academic outcomes, such as ATAR scores, rather than an overall view of what students have learned, know and can achieve as individuals. For example, the current presentation of the Senior Secondary Certificate of Education (SSCE) tends to outline only a student's grades, rather than providing a broader picture of their skills, capabilities and maturity. A student's workplace experience and community engagement may help provide a much better indication of their drive, resilience and developmental potential. (LCAust, undated-b)

Second, there is evidence that reliance on systems like the ATAR reinforce the opportunity and attainment gaps described above. In particular, research has shown that metrics like secondary school performance and Year 12 completion are highly correlated with student social background and tend

² Alternative pathways to ATAR exist in Australia, including the Big Picture program (Big Picture Education Australia, undated), and there has been a recent trend for universities to prioritise other information when making admissions offers. This trend has been accelerated by schooling disruptions prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic (see, e.g., Branley and Duffy, 2021), which has prompted a rise in early offers at several Australian universities. This mirrors recent international trends in college admissions (McDonnell Nieto del Rio, 2021).

to disadvantage youth from rural, remote and low-socioeconomic communities, those from Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities, students with specialised learning needs, and those who are refugees or recent immigrants (e.g., OECD, 2018; Palmer, Bexley and James, 2011). Recent data suggests that students with disabilities are approximately 25 per cent less likely to complete Year 12 as compared with those without a disability (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, undated), and students living in very remote regions of the country are half as likely to complete Year 12 as those living in metropolitan regions (Regional Education Expert Advisory Group, 2019). Young people who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander are significantly less likely to be engaged in education, training or work at age 24 compared with their non-Indigenous peers (Lamb et al., 2020). As one researcher described, as long as the ATAR is the preferred selection method for universities, the university system is ‘unlikely to ever achieve a student mix that reflects Australia’s population’ (Blyth, 2014, p. 269).

Planning for The Learner’s Journey began in March 2020. Over the next six months, stakeholders were engaged in a series of virtual events to discuss the mission of the organisation and to articulate a specific challenge question for the social lab. Ultimately, the challenge question was focused on accreditation and assessment and was articulated thus:

How might we develop new and trusted ways to recognise learning that enables every young person to thrive in learning, work and the community?

The central hypothesis for The Learner’s Journey can be stated thus:

If assessment and accreditation changes *then* school curriculum and organisation of learning will change, too.

In turn, expanded recognition and credentialling systems can improve life outcomes by promoting self-efficacy and making young people aware of the contributions they can make to the workforce and society. Some examples of alternative assessment and accreditation systems include learner profiles, complex performance tasks, developmental assessment and micro-credentials, which are short, competency-based recognitions that allow learners to demonstrate mastery in a particular area. While rigorous research and evaluation on the effectiveness of these alternative systems is still emerging, early evidence points to their potential to address opportunity gaps and improve college readiness (Fine and Pryiomka, 2020; Zaber, Karoly and Whipkey, 2019). Ultimately, the goal of The Learner’s Journey is to shift Australia’s education and learning system towards formally recognising a range of capabilities and alternative pathways.

The Development and Design of The Learner’s Journey Social Lab

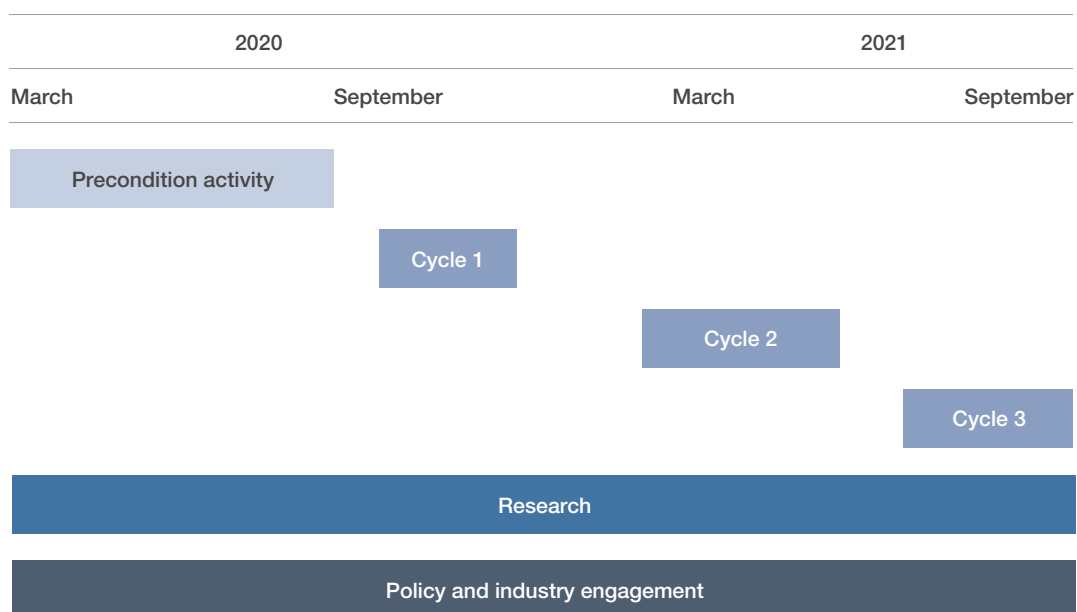
This chapter describes the development and design of The Learner’s Journey social lab. Drawing upon documentation of the process, we provide detailed descriptions of how each of the key activities was designed, beginning with the details of the social lab.

The Learner’s Journey Social Lab

Planning for The Learner’s Journey began in March 2020 with the engagement of diverse stakeholders to pre-plan the work of the social lab. These stakeholders were engaged in a series of virtual events between March and September 2020 (Figure 2.1) to discuss the mission of the organisation, define the objectives of The Learner’s Journey social lab, and articulate the specific challenge question that would focus the work of the lab participants. Ultimately, more than 460 individuals were engaged in this pre-planning work, including young people (15–19-year-olds), Aboriginal and/or Torres Straits Islander people, school principals, teachers, parents and individuals from industry.

The first phase (Phase I) of LCAust’s social lab work was designed to take place over three lab cycles, with lab activities taking place between October 2020 and October 2021. Each cycle would engage a single cohort of participants who would engage in the lab activities and advance the prototypes towards completion. There are four hallmark characteristics of The Learner’s Journey social lab prototyping process (see text box). Initial recruitment for Cycle 1 was conducted in August and September of 2020. As

FIGURE 2.1
Timeline of Social Lab Process



mentioned above, because of health and safety policies in Australia that restricted travel and in-person convenings during this period of the COVID-19 pandemic, Cycle 1 launched with a virtual kick-off session in October 2020.

Hallmark Characteristics of The Learner's Journey Social Lab

- The social lab was designed to be centred on young people, and young people were given decisionmaking authority throughout the social lab with the intention of ensuring that the prototypes that emerged were appropriate for their intended purpose.
- The experiences of Aboriginal and/or Torres Straits Islander people and communities were centred in a self-determined leadership model, and Aboriginal and/or Torres Straits Islander people drove their own stream of work within the context of the social lab. The First Nations team designed their own team structure in order to determine the focus of their team's workflows and processes and how they would test and engage the community in their team's work.
- Rather than have all lab participants focused on developing a single prototype, participants were assigned to smaller prototyping teams that would focus on specific aspects of the core challenge question. These prototyping teams were designed for five to ten participants, in addition to an LCAust convenor and a Lab Champion. Each team was also supported by the LCAust Project Team.
- The prototypes were adapted and tested in communities, with meaningful community involvement in the prototyping process.

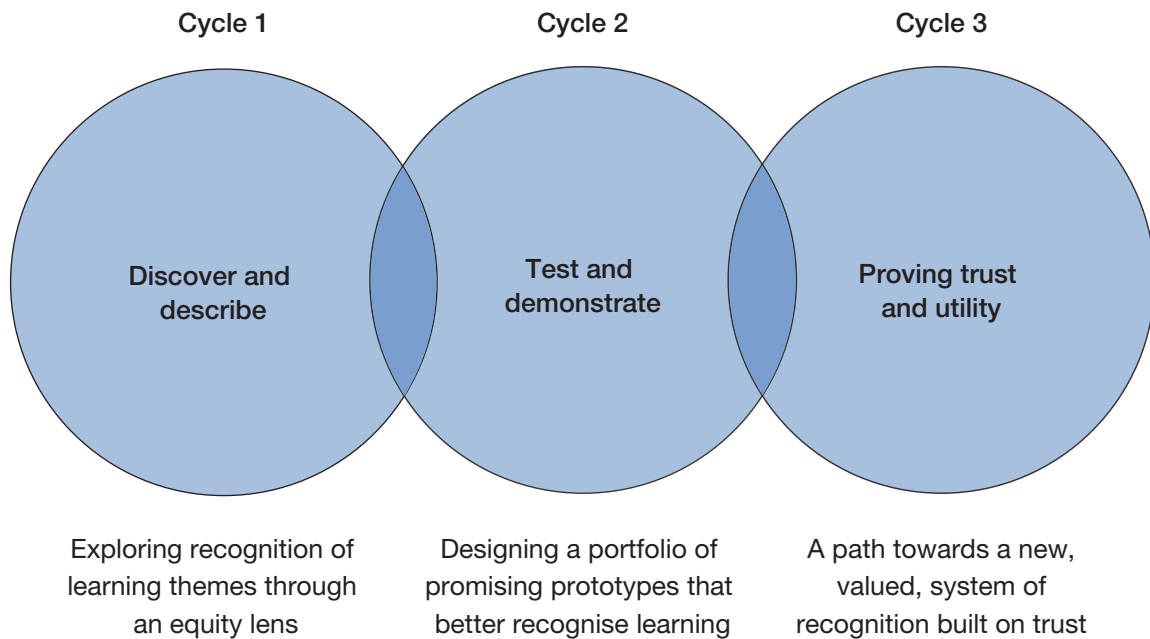
Lab Cycle 1: Discover and Describe

The goal of the first cycle was to explore assessment, accreditation, and systems for recognising senior secondary learning in Australia through an equity lens, and the outputs of Cycle 1 align with the first two stages of the social lab process described in Figure 2.2. LCAust invited a diverse set of stakeholders and experts, including young people, community members, subject matter experts, and Aboriginal and/or Torres Straits Islander people. Lab participants applied a systems-thinking approach to identify and map out how young people in Australia currently navigate the educational system, including identifying learners that are not well supported by the current system. Lab participants were tasked with exploring the broader context for the challenge question and fostering a deeper understanding of learning recognition from the perspective of learners with significant disadvantage. Lab participants convened regularly to build relationships, make connections with organisations, and better understand current activity in the policy space. After investigating the factors and interactions that could be contributing to the challenge problem, lab teams worked to articulate ideal learner journeys, system interaction and design principles. The final stage of Cycle 1 involved lab participants identifying and articulating critical features of accreditation and assessment systems that would better align with the ideal learner journeys they had articulated.

Five social lab teams were formed to enact the work of Cycle 1. These teams were

- **Learner as a Person 1:** Learners with diverse needs and abilities, where the system does not meet their individual needs (neurodiversity, mental health, disability, and trauma).
- **Learner as a Person 2:** Learners with diverse needs and abilities, where the system does not meet their individual needs (low SES, culturally and linguistically diverse, including migrants and refugees, LGBTQI+).
- **Learning in a Setting:** Learners in non-mainstream settings that are experiencing significant challenges to their learning (alternative schooling, out-of-home care, juvenile justice, online-only, homeschooling).
- **Learning in a Place:** Learners in non-mainstream settings that are experiencing significant challenges to their learning (regional, rural and remote, low-SES urban areas).
- **First Nations-Led Learning:** Learners in non-mainstream settings that are experiencing significant challenges to their learning.

FIGURE 2.2
Social Lab Cycle Aims



Lab Cycle 2: Test and Demonstrate

The objective of Cycle 2 was to apply design-thinking to develop a portfolio of promising prototypes for alternative credentialling and certification systems that better recognise learning for all young people. In Cycle 2 the lab teams developed and refined prototype concepts with the goal of developing working representations of prototype ideas that could eventually be field tested and refined.

There were significant changes in the constitution of the prototyping teams in Cycle 2, based around the critical features of accreditation and assessment systems that were identified in the first cycle. In Cycle 2, the five prototyping teams were

- **Learner Agency:** recognition of learning that gives young people voice, choice and ownership
- **Enabling Community Environment:** a framework for school communities to identify learning ambitions that can be recognised
- **Tertiary Pathways:** prototyping a pact between schools, universities, and technical and further education (TAFE) institutes
- **Industry Pathways:** a pathway to employment through recognition
- **First Nations:** recognition of learning that maintains First Nations' sovereignty and self-determination.

Throughout the second cycle, LCAust engaged with community partners across Australia who were already engaged in work with young people who experience significant disadvantage in the current education system. Community members provided input and feedback on the prototype process, and were directly engaged through a community leadership panel, community meetings, and membership on the prototyping teams. The community partners would ultimately advance the prototyping process into Cycle 3 by facilitating prototype field testing for viability to scale nationally. The plan was for community partnerships to support the prototyping teams by deepening the teams' understanding of local context, building local support for prototype implementation, and assembling a coalition of local actors who could collectively advocate for systemic change at a national level (see Table 2.1).

TABLE 2.1
Planned Community Partnerships

State/Territory	Partner	Description
Queensland (Yahhera, Jaggera and Turrbal Country)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indigenous Allied Health Australia (IAHA) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> IAHA is an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander allied health organisation, leading sector workforce development and support. IAHA supports Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander allied health students and graduates, adding value to existing professional development, educational and cultural support structures.
New South Wales (Darug Country, Eora Nation and Ngunnawal Country)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Eastern Creek Schools Network NSW & ACT Tertiary Providers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Eastern Creek School Network is made up of four schools within Western Sydney including Rooty Hill, Erskine Park, Plumpton and St Clare. Rooty Hill High School is our main connector within the network. Representatives from Western Sydney University, University of New South Wales, University of Newcastle, Australian National University, University of Technology Sydney, Macquarie University, University of Sydney, University of New England, TAFE NSW, and NSW high schools.
Victoria (Dja Dja Wurrung and Taungurung Country, Wurundjeri and Boonwurrung Country)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bendigo Inner Northern Local Learning Employment Network (INLLEN) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A growing network of education, industry and community partners. The Bendigo 'Tech School', run by La Trobe University, is our main connection within the Bendigo Community. Melbourne's Inner Northern Local Learning Employment Network (INLLEN) is an independent community organisation operating across Darebin, Moreland and Yarra local government areas.
Tasmania (Palawa Country, Lutruwita Country)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collective ed. Burnie Works 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collective ed. is the Beacon Foundation's place-based initiative, and our main connection to their work within regional Tasmania, where they work across six communities. Burnie Works is a place-based Collective Impact initiative. It's a community-driven approach working across sectors and the community to support schools and young people in the region.
South Australia (Peramangk Country)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> South Australia Entrepreneurial Schools Network 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Entrepreneurial Specialist Schools Network is a South Australia Government Department for Education initiative of five special entry schools. Heathfield High School, is our main connector within the network.
Northern Territory (Larriki Country)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> IAHA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> See above

Lab Cycle 3: Proving Trust and Utility

The objective of Cycle 3 was to test the prototype solutions in the field (Stage Four, Figure 1.1). The most promising prototypes from Cycle 2 were carried forward for testing in the third cycle. Throughout this cycle, lab participants focused on testing prototypes with communities, employers and national partners. Lab participants collected user feedback and reviewed other data to revise and refine the prototypes to improve their functionality and prepare them for wider implementation and potentially for national scale. Lab teams in the third cycle continued to develop relationships with community partners to increase organisational trust, and to maximise the potential for the prototypes to be trusted and valued by credentialing authorities, parents and the community members. In Cycle 3 the prototype teams were reorganised based on the work of Cycle 2. In Cycle 3 the four prototyping teams were

- **Schools Enabling Agency:** recognition of learning that gives young people voice, choice and ownership
- **Tertiary Pathways:** prototyping a pact between schools, universities and TAFE
- **Industry Pathways:** pathways to employment through recognition
- **First Nations Self-Determined:** recognition of learning that maintains Nations' sovereignty and self-determination.

Table 2.2 provides a brief description of the final prototypes and the community partners for each prototyping team (as of the end of Cycle 3).

TABLE 2.2
Final Prototypes and Community Partnerships

Team	Prototype Description	Cycle 3 Community Partners
Schools enabling agency	A National Pulse Lab to understand and increase the level of agency within school communities. The lab supports schools in their development against 3 measures of learner agency: autonomy, engagement and belonging. It also captures the level of agency experienced across the whole school community through an annual Pulse Check that reflects their collective experience and progress.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eastern Creek Schools Network • Heathfield High School
Tertiary pathways	A pact between schools and universities for a more equitable, consistent and transparent way for all young people to demonstrate broader and deeper skills and attributes they need to succeed in higher education in a way that is clear and trusted for use in any state or jurisdiction.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NSW & ACT Tertiary Providers
Industry pathways	A national approach to work-ready learning that can be applied in any local context and is valued and trusted by employers, young people, their schools and communities—a trustmark or credentialling system for out of school learning linked to skills. The approach develops new ways to recognise learning that happens in and outside of formal schooling—reflecting more of what young people know and can do.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beacon Foundation/Collective ed. • Burnie Works • Hydro Tasmania • Bendigo Tech School/Girls in STEAM
First nations self-determined	Indigenous-led charters, or agreements, with secondary schools that outline local traditional owners protocols, goals and actions for learning and caring for young people on their country. The charters are centred on building new and trusted relationships with educators and learning systems, that value the importance of Indigenous perspectives of wellbeing in a young person's learning journey.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IAHA • Darumbal People Aboriginal Corporation

Aims and Methods of the Evaluation

In this chapter, we outline our evaluation aims and present our evaluation questions. We begin by presenting a conceptual framework that connects The Learner’s Journey social lab to two other activities in which LCAust has engaged in order to bolster the social lab work and increase the potential for meaningful systemic change in assessment and accreditation: engaging stakeholders from policy and industry sectors, and conducting research. After presenting this conceptual model, we then provide details on the study methods, including data collection and analysis.

Our evaluation of The Learner’s Journey had two main overarching goals: to provide *formative* feedback to the social lab implementation team and ultimately provide a *summative* assessment of the progress of the organisation over the first phase of their work. The summative evaluation was designed to examine whether LCAust had successfully established the pre-conditions necessary for The Learner’s Journey social lab to realise its intended outcomes, and to document and describe early indicators that the work was having impacts on policy or practice. Specifically, we address the evaluation questions listed in Table 3.1.

First, we examine how the social labs were designed and implemented, including the extent to which diverse perspectives were integrated and valued; the expertise, level of participation, and roles of team members; and the extent to which participation in social labs developed participants’ capacity (e.g., mindsets, understandings, knowledge and skills). We also identify factors that enabled or constrained implementation of the labs. Finally, we examine the extent to which LCAust’s overall Phase I activities laid the groundwork for systemic change, including the prototypes themselves, policy and industry engagement activities, and integration of research.

TABLE 3.1
Guiding Research Questions of This Evaluation

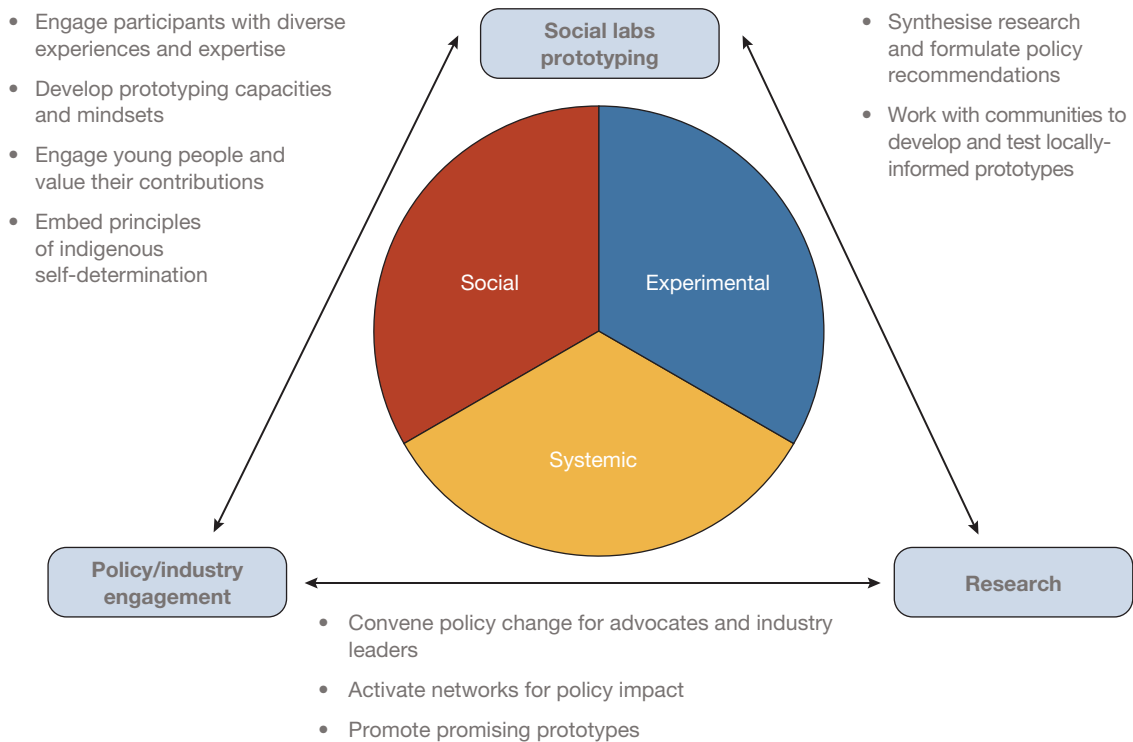
Number	Research Question
RQ 1	How were the social labs designed and implemented to solve persistent problems of practice?
RQ 2	What factors enabled or constrained implementation?
RQ 3	To what extent did LCAust’s phase I activities lay the groundwork for systemic impact?

A Conceptual Framework for The Learner’s Journey

Figure 3.1 depicts a conceptual framework of the social lab implementation that guides our analysis by contextualising the lab process in the larger policy and research efforts in which the organisation has engaged. We centre the three elements of a social lab—social, experimental, and systemic—as identified by Hassan (2014). We overlay the elements of LCAust’s Learner’s Journey social lab, which included the social lab prototyping process, support from policymakers and industry leaders, and engagement with research.

As described previously, there are four hallmark characteristics of The Learner’s Journey social lab prototyping process, which we summarize again here. First, the social lab was designed to be centred on young people, and young people were given decisionmaking authority throughout the social lab with the intention of ensuring that the prototypes that emerged were appropriate for their intended purpose. The organisation established participation norms to ensure that young people had opportunities to speak, to

FIGURE 3.1
Conceptual Model



SOURCE: LCAust Organisational Context. Australian Education & Industry Contexts.

be heard, and to be listened to, and engaged YLab, a co-design and consulting social enterprise that was initiated by the Foundation for Young Australians to help guide this work and ensure that diverse youth voices were represented throughout the social lab processes. Second, the experiences of Aboriginal and/or Torres Straits Islander people and communities were centred in a self-determined leadership model, and Aboriginal and/or Torres Straits Islander people drove their own stream of work within the context of the social lab. The First Nations team designed their own team structure in order to determine the focus of their team's workflows and processes and how they would test and engage the community in their team's work. And finally, while all participants in The Learner's Journey were focused on the challenge question described above, participants were also organised into smaller prototyping teams that focused on a specific area of the core challenge. And finally, the prototypes were adapted and tested in communities, with meaningful community involvement in the prototyping process.

Through interactions with policy and industry sectors (reciprocal arrow in Figure 3.1), stakeholders across the ecosystem were engaged and developed a shared sense of the core problem and potential solutions. Engaging cross-sectorial stakeholders allowed individuals to accumulate social capital (i.e., develop their formal and informal relationships to increase their access to resources and expertise that can increase their innovative capacity); stakeholders engaged in the social lab for new relationships and connections that increase policy impact and enable change beyond their own organisation or community (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Engaging policy and industry sectors also allowed for promising prototypes to be promoted and potentially scaled for systemic impact.

Moving anticlockwise around Figure 3.1, both the social lab prototyping activities and policy and industry engagement are thought to interact with research. The research can inform the conversations among the policy and industry sector participants (reciprocal arrow in Figure 3.1) and is broadly intended to ensure that the work of the social lab is 'grounded in technical rigour' (LCAust, undated-c) and provide an empirical justification for LCAust's work. LCAust has engaged in all three of these activities since its launch. As seen in Figure 3.1, we summarise some of the main features of each of these activities, and

conceptualise all of these activities as embedded with the LCAust organisational context as well as the broader Australian education policy and industry contexts.

Data Collection and Analytic Methods

The evaluation used a flexible, multiple-methods approach to address the three main research questions (see Table 3.1) that included interviews, focus groups, surveys, and document review. Data collection took place at the end of each of the three cycles of the social labs. This evaluation was approved by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) Research Ethics Committee (study reference EO215-20201110). The AIATSIS Research Ethics Committee ensures that research including Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people is conducted in accordance with the key principles of Indigenous self-determination, Indigenous leadership, impact and value, and sustainability and accountability. An overview of the data sources, including the details of the focus groups, interviews and surveys, as well as the documents reviewed, follows.

Interviews and Focus Groups

All of our data collection was aligned with our guiding research questions and was adjusted to better capture the social lab work and supports as they were implemented and adapted. We used an embedded, illustrative case study design that draws on several levels of analysis (Yin, 2013). Specifically, we follow the development and implementation of the social lab process across all three cycles, as well as the supporting policy, industry and research activities. We interviewed LCAust leaders, social lab participants in each cycle (following the same individuals over the course of the three cycles where possible), the full First Nations team, community leaders, policy panellists, industry panellists and community associates (young people employed as social lab support staff). Table 3.2 provides the number of interviews and/or focus groups as well as the number of participants (where participants participated in group interviews or focus groups instead of individual interviews, or where multiple interviews were conducted with the same individuals over time).

For all leader-level interviews (LCAust leaders, policy panel, industry panel, community leads), we selected individuals who were the most closely and intensely involved with the work. Social lab participants were selected to reflect the diversity of respondents, such that we selected one individual from each prototyping team for each cycle (six in Cycle 1, six in Cycle 2, five in Cycle 3). We sampled to include respondents with a variety of roles and careers as well as ensure we reflected young people. Where possible, we followed the same individual throughout the full social lab process; due to attrition, we were only able to follow four individuals through at least two consecutive cycles. For both the First Nations team and the

TABLE 3.2
Number of Interviewees and Interviews by Stakeholder Group

Group	Number of Participants	Number of Interviews/ Focus Groups	Cycles
Social lab participants	13	17	1 (January 2021), 2 (July 2021) and 3 (November 2021)
Community leads	5	4	2
Community associates	19	4	2 and 3
First Nations team	5	1	3
LCAust leaders	8	8	3
Industry panel	4	1	3
Policy panel	4	2	3
Total	58	37	—

community associates, we invited all members of these groups to participate in focus groups conducted during the times of regularly scheduled social lab activities. We conducted one focus group with five members of the First Nations team (in addition to an individual interview with a First Nations team member in Cycle 2 as part of the social lab participant interviews) and conducted two focus groups in Cycle 2 with 19 community associates and two additional focus groups with the same 19 community associates in Cycle 3.

Prior to interviews and focus groups, we began with an Acknowledgement of Country¹ and informed consent procedure. All interviews and focus groups utilised semi-structured interview protocols, tailored to the respondents. We asked respondents about topics including the design and implementation of social lab activities; the prototypes in development and their feasibility; respondent's own recruitment, training and participation; and overall reflections on the LCAust activities and potential for influence. All interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed prior to coding and analysis.

To analyse our data, we began by coding interview data across different levels of abstraction, including codes that were descriptive (e.g., respondent characteristics, role), thematic (e.g., root cause analysis, tools and protocols, panel activities) and analytic (e.g., reach, feasibility, inclusion, trust, legitimacy) utilising Dedoose qualitative research software. We then completed structured thematic analysis to understand key themes and their prevalence across respondents. Where possible, we utilised matrices to understand variation across respondents (Bush-Mecenas and Marsh, 2018; Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, 2020). To enhance the internal validity and accuracy of findings, we triangulated data across multiple sources, comparing interviews between various respondents and using document data, where available, to confirm key findings.

Surveys of Participants

We conducted three surveys with social lab participants. The surveys, which took place at the end of each cycle, were sent to all lab participants at the time. The initial selection of survey topics was informed by LCAust's theory of change, which identified the desired short-, medium- and long-term goals for the social labs. In addition, selection of constructs was guided by the evaluation and focused on topics that aligned with the research questions. All survey items were reviewed by stakeholders at LCAust, and survey instruments were iteratively reviewed and refined until final survey specifications were codified. Where possible during survey development, we relied on intact scales or items from existing instruments. We reviewed existing instruments and scales and prioritising instruments that had been used in social lab evaluations or had a track record of use in research and evaluation. In particular, the following two sources were used:

- Measuring Design Thinking Mindset Scale (Dosi, Rosati and Vignoli, 2018)
- Q Improvement Lab Survey (Liberati et al., 2018).

The surveys consisted of eight main parts. Table 3.3 provides the survey topics and number of items for the lab participant surveys.

All surveys were administered online using RAND's SelectSurvey system. Participants were sent an email invitation to participate in the survey and non-respondents were sent weekly reminders. Table 3.4 provides the number of lab participants who were invited to take the survey in each cycle. The overall response rate for the three administered surveys was 43 per cent.

Surveys of the Ecosystem

In addition to the lab participants survey, we conducted two ecosystem surveys with participants in the industry and policy panels, as well as with individuals who participated in the community meetings.

¹ The Acknowledgement of Country is a way to pay respect to Indigenous peoples as the traditional owners and ongoing custodians of the land. We began our interviews with the acknowledgement of the traditional owners of lands and waters and paid respect to Elders past, present and emerging.

TABLE 3.3
Social Lab Participant Survey Topics and Items

Topic	Number of Items	Example Items
Helpfulness of lab activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cycle 1: 5 • Cycle 2: 5 • Cycle 3: 5 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How helpful were the social lab activities for increasing your understanding of the Learner Journey Social Lab goals?
Development of social capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cycle 1: 3 • Cycle 2: 3 • Cycle 3: 3 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has the Learners Journey Social Lab contributed to you forming new relationships or collaborations?
Teamwork	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cycle 1: 11 • Cycle 2: 11 • Cycle 3: 11 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent does your prototyping team include the necessary education, government, and employment sector leaders to support prototype implementation?
Prototyping capacities (including tolerance for uncertainty; embracing risk; human centredness; empathy; mindfulness; holistic view; problem reframing; teamwork; multi-disciplinary collaboration; openness to different perspectives)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cycle 1: 16 • Cycle 2: 16 • Cycle 3: 16 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent are you comfortable in dealing with unsolved problems? • To what extent do you trust in the process to find solutions, rather than focusing on where the outcomes may fail? • To what extent are you comfortable accepting your team's decisions, even if you have a different opinion?
Social lab challenges and barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cycle 1: 10 • Cycle 2: 12 • Cycle 3: 13 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What would be a barrier to the social lab contributing to effective and sustainable improvements in the education landscape in Australia, in terms of the internal working of the Learners Journey Social Lab?
Quality of supports for social lab work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cycle 1: 6 • Cycle 2: 9 • Cycle 3: 8 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent were the materials and meetings clear and organized?
Improving understanding of the problem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cycle 1: 6 • Cycle 2: 6 • Cycle 3: 6 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent did reviewing relevant research by consulting research experts, panels, and/or champions contribute to your understanding of the problem?

TABLE 3.4
Survey Response Rates, by Social Lab Cycle

Group	Number of Social Lab Participants	Number of Respondents	Response Rate (percentage)
Cycle 1	98	34	35
Cycle 2	90	43	48
Cycle 3	23	14	57

NOTE: For survey administration, contact information for social lab participants was provided by LCAust to RAND researchers.

These surveys were conducted at the end of Cycle 3, and the objective of these surveys was to obtain perspectives on the extent to which the social lab had established the necessary pre-conditions to support systemic change, with a focus on the development of social capital, the establishment of community trust, and stakeholder perceptions of prototype quality. In developing the ecosystem surveys, we reviewed existing instruments and scales and prioritising instruments that had been used in adapted items from the following two sources:

- Sense of Community Survey (Independent Sector, undated)
- Q Improvement Lab Survey (Liberati et al., 2018).

The surveys consisted of eight main parts. Table 3.5 provides the survey topics and number of items for the ecosystem surveys.

All surveys were administered online using RAND's SelectSurvey system. Participants were sent an email invitation to participate in the survey and non-respondents were sent weekly reminders. The overall response rate for the ecosystem surveys was 48 per cent ($N = 20$).

TABLE 3.5
Ecosystem Survey Topics and Items

Topic	Number of Items	Example Items
Enabling conditions	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How will Learning Creates Australia enable you to contribute to effective and sustainable improvements in the education landscape in Australia, if at all?
Social capital	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How important is the network of Learning Creates Australia participants for spreading an understanding of the problem to be solved?
Outcomes	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In your opinion, what outcomes have Learning Creates Australia achieved in relation to learning recognition?
Personal outcomes	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Which of the following statements describe how your involvement with Learning Creates Australia impacted you?
Community and trust	8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learning Creates Australia and the prototyping team have been successful in meeting the needs of my community
Prototype process	8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent were the materials and meetings clear and organized?
Prototype scalability	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The prototype is likely to be supported by key stakeholders.
Prototype viability	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The prototype is likely to be effective in addressing the challenges and needs of my community.

Observations and Document Analysis

In addition to interview, focus group, and survey data collection, we also conducted observations ($N = 18$ hours) of a subset of social lab events including cycle convenings or reviews ($N = 7$) and policy/industry and research forums and planning meetings ($N = 5$). The aim of observations was to understand how the information was shared across the social lab teams, panels and research partners. We also collected and analysed relevant documents and artefacts of the social lab process including PowerPoint presentations from convenings and meetings, research reports, panel meeting agendas and presentations, documentation of participation, community partner dossiers, communications with participants, and media articles referencing LCAust's social lab work. In total, about 50 documents were reviewed.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study that warrant consideration. First, our evaluation of The Learner's Journey was both *formative* and *summative*. The *formative* aspects of our evaluation had the goal of providing the LCAust with feedback to improve the design and delivery of the social lab. We provided the organisation with interim briefings at the end of Cycles 1 and 2 based on our data collection and engaged in regular phone meetings with the program staff about the program's theory of change, long-term goals and implementation. Over the course of Phase I, as LCAust reflected on and learned from this formative evaluation—in conjunction with its own internal program adaptations and adjustments made in response to its experiences with conducting the social lab—the social lab changed and evolved from its original conceptualisation. For example, LCAust has revised its theory of change and modified the structure of the social labs. While such changes are on the one hand the desired result of a positive and productive formative evaluation, they also complicate the *summative* aspects of our evaluation. The summative aspects of our evaluation had the goal of characterising whether The Learner's Journey was producing outcomes that were consistent with expectations. However, adjustments to program goals, structure and hypotheses about the mechanisms through which program activities are intended to produce the desired outcomes presented real and immediate challenges for tracking and monitoring the successes and limitations of the social lab.

A second limitation is that we were able to interview only a relatively small, non-randomly selected group of social lab participants and individuals from the larger ecosystem. The data collected from these

interviews, then, may not represent the views of all the individuals who were engaged in work with LCAust. A similar issue arises because of the relatively small and self-selected proportion of eligible individuals that participated in the social lab surveys. On average, only around one-half of the eligible participants in the social lab (and less than half of the eligible survey respondents in the ecosystem) opted to participate in the survey administration. These participation rates pose a threat to validity of inferences about program experiences because of the possibility of selection bias. It is not clear whether the individuals who opted to participate in the surveys are different from other students in some way.

A third limitation also involves the surveys. Our original survey administration design assumed that there would be a substantial and consistent set of lab participants across the three cycles, so that we could track changes in reported capacity and understandings over time. In practice, two issues arose with this design. First, only a relatively small proportion of participants engaged in all three lab cycles (approximately 28 per cent of participants). Second, only a fraction of those who participated *consistently* participated in the surveys. This meant that it was not possible to link survey responses over time to monitor the experiences and capacity building of participants.

Finally, the design of this study allowed us to conduct systematic, in-depth fieldwork with the lab participants and members of the ecosystem. However, the design was also limited in its ability to attend to *negative cases*. We were limited in our ability, for example, to interact with individuals who had disengaged from the social labs, or with more sceptical members of the communities in which LCAust was engaged. Our understanding of the strengths and accomplishments of LCAust and The Learner's Journey would be increased by searching for and analysing disconfirming evidence and negative cases (Patton, 2015).

How Were the LCAust Social Labs Implemented in Practice?

In the next three chapters, we present our findings organised by research question (Table 3.1). We first present our findings about the social lab design and implementation, followed by our appraisal of the factors that enabled or constrained successful lab implementation. Finally, we present our findings about the extent to which the totality of the Phase I activities (including The Learner's Journey, research, and policy/industry engagement) laid the groundwork for systemic impact. Within each of these three chapters, we discuss relevant themes and present the evidence from the interview, focus group and survey analyses that support these themes.

First, we sought to understand how the social labs played out in practice, compared with their original design. We examine how participants were engaged (who was engaged, what were their roles, what did their participation look like); how the labs were managed and what tools and processes were used; and the extent to which participants expanded their social capital in terms of their networks and individual capacity.

Social Labs Engaged Diverse Participants, Modified Team Membership over Time

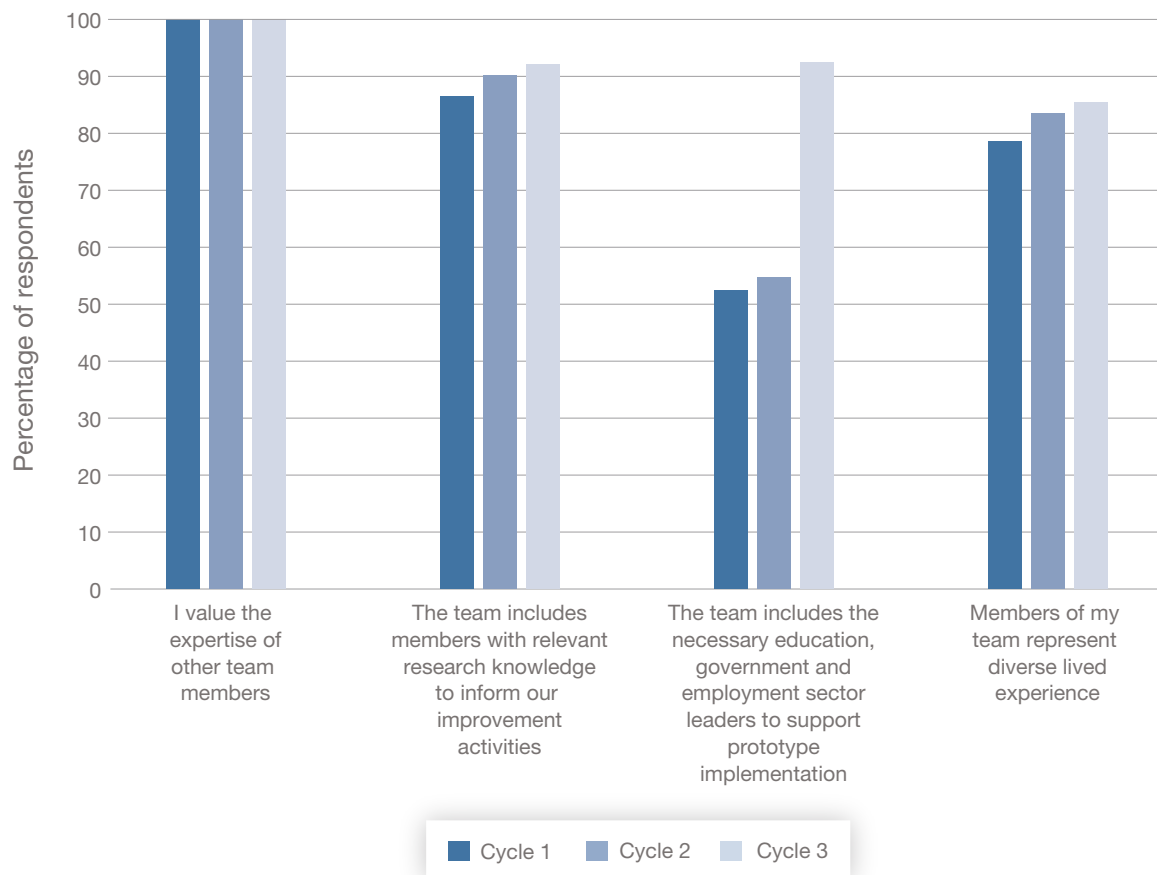
The social lab methodology relies upon the active engagement of a committed set of individuals with both appropriate expertise and diversity of perspectives. The LCAust social labs engaged a range of participants over the course of the three cycles, including educators, parents, students, consultants focusing on design-thinking and prototyping, leaders in youth-serving organisations, and representatives from tertiary education and industry. The majority of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their team members represented diverse lived experience, had relevant research knowledge, and that they valued team expertise (see Figure 4.1). On the whole, interview respondents were similarly supportive of the mix of team members.

In particular, in Cycle 1 interview respondents noted the value of the diversity of team members. As one team member shared,

We've got all the right people. We've got students, policymakers, we've got a very broad range of people on the social labs, we just need to give ourselves a little credit, and push for the changes that we want to see.

While respondents were universally supportive of the diversity of the team, they also noted some challenges in developing common understandings of the issues at hand given their very different exposure to research on these complex education topics. Our survey found that, in Cycles 1 and 2, only about half of respondents (52 per cent and 54 per cent, respectively) believed that social labs had the necessary education, government, and employment sector leaders to support prototype implementation. Similarly, interview respondents articulated the challenges of engaging experts and novices in these complex discussions, as they needed to spend a good deal of time to help all team members, in the words of one respondent, 'to understand definitions and boundaries to be able to have a coherent discussion'.

FIGURE 4.1
Social Lab Participants Valued the Perspectives of Their Team Members



NOTES: Percentages of respondents reflect the combined responses of respondents who indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed with each statement. Cycle 1 $N = 36$. Cycle 2 $N = 41$. Cycle 3 $N = 10$.

A few respondents in Cycle 2 noted the need for adjustments in the membership of teams over time. In particular, broad engagement in early phases may have presented challenges for sustaining engagement with experts. As one respondent shared,

There are phases for this social lab stuff. [Engagement of diverse actors, including novices,] has a role in the expansive phase and it needs to be switched off, in my opinion. And when you are trying to be contractive, I think what you'll find if you ask people is, I know that the experts who were in certain teams or in certain parts did not participate after a period. Well, the ones have spoken to me was it was too hard to bring up these people up to speed. Like, we can have these discussions. I had these discussions ten years ago, kind of stuff. So, when you're dealing with wicked problems, expertise is required. And it's also a real chain, because it means that you discount things out of the box early as well, right? So, I don't have an answer to this, but I could say that I know at least two experts who were like—the social labs, I just don't have time for it. When they've got to some conclusion, I'll put something back into it.

By Cycle 3, LCAust had adjusted the membership of the social lab teams to better match the ongoing prototyping activities. Teams became much smaller (up to six individuals) with a greater representation of industry, policy and community partners to facilitate implementation. In contrast to prior survey results, in Cycle 3 almost all respondents (92 per cent) believed that social labs had the necessary education, government, and employment sector leaders to support prototype implementation.

Across all cycles of the social labs, respondents noted challenges in consistently attending all meetings and events given their busy work, school and personal schedules. Social labs activities required about 5–15 hours a week of time, which presented challenges for experts, educators and students alike. Most

interview respondents noted that they were able to work with their team to mitigate the effect of absences, but they also noted the ongoing challenge of sustaining engagement at this level.

In fact, the teams changed both membership and topic over the course of the three cycles. As Figure 4.2 demonstrates, about half of Cycle 2 participants had participated in Cycle 1 and 28 per cent of participants in Cycle 3 had participated in all three cycles. Some changes to participation appeared to be strategic and related to changing aims and needs of the social labs in each cycle, but some attrition may be due to other causes (e.g., limited time).

Confusion Arose over Roles and Responsibilities in Social Labs

Social lab teams included three to four different roles: *convenor*, *coach* (only in Cycle 1), *prototyping team member*, and *lab champion*. In theory, convenors and coaches were responsible for scheduling meetings, facilitating discussions, and managing administrative aspects of team activities, while lab champions were intended to function as experts participating at a slightly lower time commitment (about 3–5 hours per week). In Cycles 1 and 2, a little over half of the social lab participants were prototyping team members, about a quarter were lab champions, and under 10 per cent were convenors (see Table 4.1).

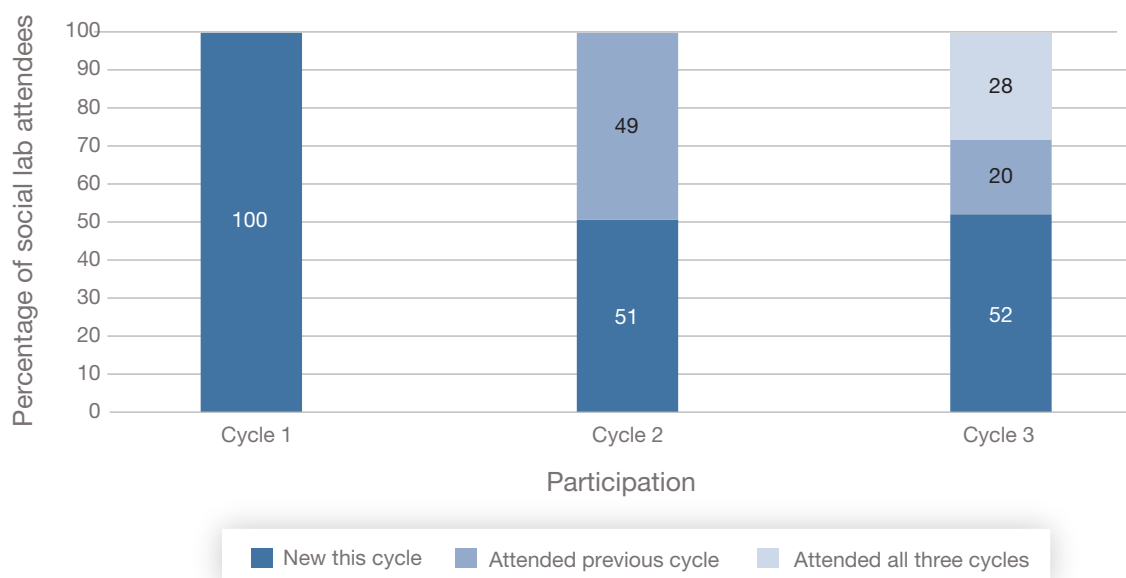
In practice, social lab participants struggled to differentiate the roles and their responsibilities. As one team member shared,

In our group there were range of roles developed, participants and coaches, and I think, and facilitators. And I'm not sure those roles were fully understood by the people in the group, or there was a difference between them, in the way they're operating.

Lab champions, in particular, often had similar qualifications to some prototyping team members, but had less time available to fully participate. This caused tensions for some teams, as described by one respondent,

They [lab champions] did not attend a lot of meetings as well, so a lot of it was driven by us. And when they attended, they did provide valuable contribution but sometimes, I think because they had not attended a couple of our meetings, that the level had already progressed. Then they would come back and give some feedback and it was like, 'Okay, we've gone three steps back for the day.' There was that tension at times.

FIGURE 4.2
Percentage of Returning Participants Across Three Social Lab Cycles



NOTE: Data taken from participant rosters provided to RAND by Learning Creates Australia. Cycle 1 $N = 74$. Cycle 2 $N = 69$. Cycle 3 $N = 25$.

TABLE 4.1
Social Lab Roles by Cycle

Role	Cycle 1 (percentage)	Cycle 2	Cycle 3
Coach	7	N/A	—
Convenor	8	1	—
Lab champion	27	22	—
Mentor	3	N/A	—
Multiple roles	1	N/A	—
Project team members	53	68	—

NOTES: N/A = role did not exist. — = data not available. Cycle 1: *N* = 74; Cycle 2: *N* = 69.

These challenges around confusion and levels of engagement were brought up by about three-quarters of the interview respondents in Cycles 1 and 2. By Cycle 3, these issues appeared to have dissipated, possibly due to changes to size and expertise in each core social lab team.

Young People Were Engaged in Multiple Roles Across Social Labs

Young people were engaged in a variety of roles in the social labs. First, about 15 young people (aged 15–25) served directly on social lab teams during Cycles 1 and 2. In Cycle 3, only a few post-secondary young people (aged 20–25 years) were engaged with the social labs, as the nature of the work changed to some extent. For these young people, participating on the teams presented a steep learning curve in become accustomed with the social lab methodology as well as the complex education policy landscape. The terminology and complex roles of the lab were particularly challenging for young people who were participating, though LCAust provided additional support calls and points of contact to ensure young people were comfortable with their participation.

These participants offered unique perspectives to team discussions, particularly around their own experiences with the education system. One young person participating on a social lab team noted the need for greater engagement from secondary students, saying,

[I think we need] more young people's points of view—by young people I mean students. Because it's going to directly impact them. And there's only so much I can say about my experience until we need to move on to someone else's experience.

Other team members also greatly valued the perspectives of young people and discussed the importance of strengthening and broadening their engagement. They noted that young people contributed equally to adults on the team and that they learned a great deal from the experience of young people with the education system. One young person described the extent to which they felt their opinions were valued by fellow lab members as follows:

To see that my opinions and what I had to put forward was valued at the same level as a person who had worked in the industry for 40 years was incredible. . . . It was just universally felt that everyone here, their opinions mattered and were of the same importance, which is inspiring, because we're all from different places, very different backgrounds, very different experiences of life.

Similarly, the majority of survey respondents agreed that their team members respect the perspectives of young people in the group (86 per cent in Cycle 1, 90 per cent in Cycle 2, 100 per cent in Cycle 3).

Second, each social lab team made efforts to collect data and stories directly from young people. These efforts included surveys and interviews, often conducted within school settings. These data helped

to inform the team's understanding of the problem of practice and its root causes. In practice, time and access constraints presented challenges to gathering data from a broad range of young people, leaving most teams to access convenient samples of students. These data, however, were highly valued by all teams.

In Cycles 2 and 3, LCAust formalised these efforts with a new stream of engagement for young people—the Community Associates program. LCAust selected 19 young people to serve as community associates, acting as a conduit between the social lab team and diverse young people. The community associates were hired on to collect data on young people's perspectives, review prototypes and related instruments, and even facilitate meetings for the social labs. These selected young people were compensated for their time and received introductory training on a range of topics, including co-design methodologies; meeting facilitation; interview, focus group, and survey methods; qualitative data analysis techniques; video production and graphic design; and project management skills.

In collaboration with the social lab teams, community associates reached out to young people to gain their feedback on elements of hypotheses and prototypes. Initially, community associates primarily collected data from their friends, siblings and classmates. Over time, they reported also using social network platforms to recruit young people for their data collection efforts, especially where they were seeking to understand specific populations, such as young people who were first in their family to go to university, young people living with a disability, and young people from diverse cultural linguistic backgrounds. In Cycle 2, community associates noted that both the young people they spoke with and they themselves found the prototypes confusing and believed they would be unlikely to be implemented. By Cycle 3, however, community associates engaged more deeply with specific social lab teams and expressed stronger understanding of and support for the prototypes.

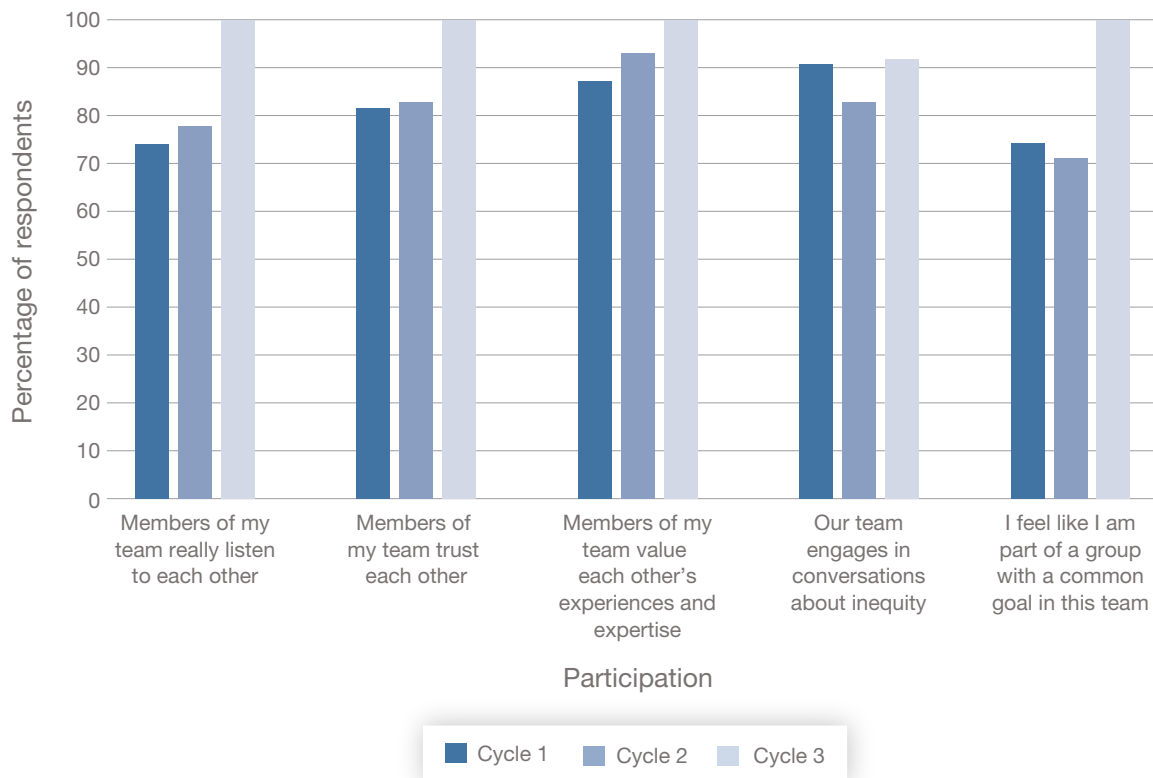
All community associates were enthusiastic about the benefits they received from participating, especially in terms of building their capacity to manage their time, work with technology, and facilitate meetings and communicate. These young people believed that participating in the program had substantially improved their future job prospects, as they were able to gain professional skills and introductory work experience outside of the hospitality industry. In fact, in response to their interest in better reflecting these experiences to future employers, the community associates developed 'recognition of learning' websites—essentially individualised online CVs that highlighted not only their education and work experience, but relevant skills and experiences and recommendations from prior employers and colleagues. Community associates even reported engaging in some initial 'UX testing' to determine the usability of these websites. The majority of community associates also appreciated the opportunity to support efforts to improve the educational system and help the next generation of young people.

Social Labs Established Trust and Commitment, Extended Participants' Networks

Even as the teams involved a broad range of actors with diverse backgrounds, social lab team members reported strong social engagement within teams. Relationships of this kind are important for individuals to access new perspectives and knowledge, and thus to develop content expertise, prototyping skills and capacities, and to embed the learning of the social lab into their professional practice (Burt, 1992; Granovetter, 1973; Haythornthwaite and De Laat, 2010). For example, the majority of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that team members listen to each other, trust each other, and value each other's experiences and expertise (see Figure 4.3). Similarly, all interview respondents noted that all perspectives were valued equally within team meetings. Most survey respondents also believed that they shared a common goal within their team and reported engaging in conversations about inequity.

Survey and interview respondents noted that they had also developed lasting relationships and networks through their teams. They reported connecting with others who work in their sector (e.g.,

FIGURE 4.3

Social Lab Participants Reported Strong Social Engagement with Teams

NOTE: Percentages of respondents reflect the combined responses of respondents who indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed with each statement. Cycle 1 $N = 36$. Cycle 2 $N = 41$. Cycle 3 $N = 10$.

equity-based reforms, educational consulting, Indigenous education) through the labs. In most cases, respondents noted developing relationships with team members who worked locally to them, but a few were energised by the potential to develop relationships across Australia.

Social Lab Process Balanced Autonomy and Structure

LCAust and its partners at PwC utilised a loosely structured social lab process, designed to elicit collaboration. During Cycle 1, meetings were mainly focused on understanding the core problems in the educational system and their root causes. Teams did so by engaging in discussions in which they defined key terms, shared personal experiences, and contributed ideas and research. These free-flowing discussions were supplemented with a few standard assignments for all teams. These included collecting information, via surveys or interviews, about the lived experiences of young people related to each team's main focus. Out of these discussions, teams summarised their understandings of the experience of learners using videos, diagrams and visual displays, and narratives. At the end of the cycle, each team shared their experience and findings through a cross-team convening.

During this first cycle, interview respondents expressed mixed views on the process and its efficacy. Most noted that there was little structure provided to move the discussions and process forward. In the words of one team member,

From my experience with running another social lab, you need to develop a shared understanding around the methodology tools and practices; and I'm not sure that was there . . . there were at some point a range of tools produced. They weren't formally introduced into the lab I was working with.

On almost all teams, respondents discussed drawing upon tools or design methodologies familiar to team members to help structure their discussions together. Nonetheless, team members expressed a desire for greater structures, tools and protocols. As one team member shared,

The facilitation of our lab was, you know, friendly and congenial, but I'm not sure there was a method to that, beyond just the way a gallery of people might normally be conducted. It lacked a bit of drive and focus at different points in time; and the way we're working was a bit more ad hoc. It wasn't following particular tools or strategies or practices that were formalised.

Some respondents familiar with design-thinking were more comfortable with the complexity of the process, but still believed that the lack of explicit instruction or direction presented challenges for participants' understanding. Our survey confirmed these challenges, as only about a third of Cycle 1 respondents (36 per cent) and less than half of Cycle 2 respondents (44 per cent) reported that they expected to use the social lab process or resources in their own work.

Interestingly, despite wanting greater structure for the team discussions, respondents noted that the cross-team assignments (e.g., surveying young people about their experiences) seemed to arise suddenly and with great urgency. Most respondents expressed that they experienced challenges in finding the time and access to young people needed to collect these data. One respondent noted that additional support for this process would have been helpful:

I actually think making the process a bit clearer. I mean the milestones are really clear. What you're expected to share in those milestones is pretty clear. How you get to those milestones is really unclear.

In later cycles, respondents noted that they had benefited to some extent from engaging in unstructured discussion to understand the key problems and causes at play. One team member reflected on this process, saying,

We've gone through the discovery phase a lot, it's—there was a need to be unstructured so you can allow for the discovery to happen, for the creativity to happen. Now is the time we need to be a bit more structured because you're actually going into the design phase and it needs to be implemented. The structure is very important that I think Learning Creates needs to start providing.

In the latter half of Cycle 2, LCAust staff provided additional consulting-style support directly to teams to help them to make their hypotheses and initial prototype ideas more streamlined and concrete. This set the stage for more pragmatic work with communities in Cycle 3.

In Cycle 3, the social lab work shifted substantially from understanding the problems and root causes to developing prototypes. While still informed by a national lens, the prototypes were developed in collaboration with local communities and partners on a compressed timeline. As one respondent shared,

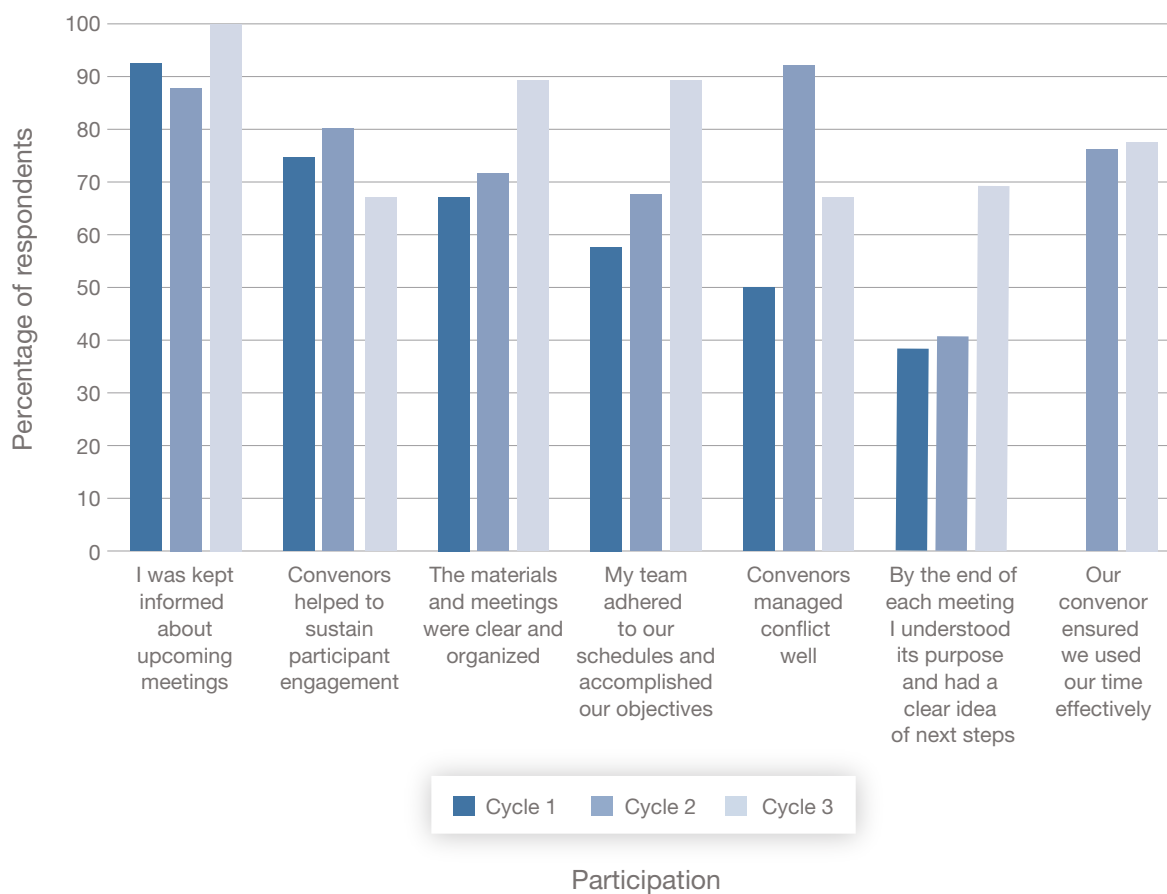
In Cycle 3, it will be technical work because we've done a lot of theoretical discussions. Cycle 2, I feel, was very much about theoretical and philosophies, doing a bit of research, finding what works, and understanding the needs. Cycle 3 is where we're actually pushing and actually doing the work.

As such, challenges regarding a lack of structure in the process subsided during Cycle 3. During Cycle 3, smaller teams worked directly with community partners to operationalise, pilot and test their prototypes. This involved focused discussions of the defining components of the prototypes (such as the desired characteristics of potential employees to capture in the trustmark, or the constructs involved measuring young people's connection to their school communities). The press to develop concrete prototypes led to more pragmatic discussions regarding prototype planning, in contrast to more theoretical discussions during previous cycles.

Management of Social Labs Proceeded Smoothly

Despite their apprehension regarding the more loosely structured nature of the social lab process, respondents generally held positive views of the overall management of the process. For example, the majority of survey respondents reported that they were kept informed of upcoming meetings, that materials and meetings were clear and organised, and that convenors helped to sustain participant engagement (see Figure 4.4). A smaller percentage in Cycle 1 reported that they understood the purpose of each meeting and next steps, but the percentage of respondents agreeing on this item increased in Cycles 2 and 3.

FIGURE 4.4
Participants Held Positive Views of the Overall Management of the Process



NOTE: Percentages of respondents reflect the combined responses of respondents who indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed with each statement. Cycle 1 $N = 36$. Cycle 2 $N = 41$. Cycle 3 $N = 10$.

Interview respondents similarly strongly endorsed the professionalism of the LCAust team and overall management of the social lab process. In particular, the central LCAust team provided support to teams in communications, graphic design, facilitation and consultation that teams found very useful.

First Nations Team Embodied Self-Determination and Indigenous Values

Early in its Phase I work, LCAust leaders recognised the necessity of acknowledging, understanding and serving the Aboriginal and/or Torres Straits Islander communities through its social lab work. Through conversations with well-respected Aboriginal and/or Torres Straits Islander leaders in existing organisations committed to educational change, LCAust took steps to create a First Nations stream of work self-determined by Aboriginal and/or Torres Straits Islander people. LCAust appointed an experienced leader

engaging in efforts to empower Indigenous young people around transforming the educational system as a co-chair of the organisation and lead of a self-determined First Nations social lab team.

The First Nations social lab team was firmly rooted in the principle of self-determination.¹ As such, this team designed their social lab process independently (from the other teams) and with great respect for the cultural safety of the team members. One team leader described the importance of this approach to the social labs as follows:

It was really important to have a self-determined space so that First Nations people felt comfortable coming into Learning Creates and not necessarily coming in having to justify why they went there . . . Sometimes when we talk about integration or inclusion it becomes a little bit of labour on First Nations people to justify why—I didn't want that to happen [here] at all. The only way that I could see that happening was through just having our own separate team where we could create the ways in which we wanted to work and [the areas we wanted to] focus on.

Some respondents from the First Nations team emphasised that they had previously been involved with educational reform activities in which Aboriginal and/or Torres Straits Islander people were asked to consult or provide expertise in the context of broader discussions. In this capacity, they often had to take on the additional labour of educating and advocating, rather than creating solutions designed by and for their own communities.

By bringing together a team of Indigenous educators, advocates and young people, the First Nations team was also able to centre the First Nations values around learning, knowledge and sovereignty. Redesigning recognition systems, for this team, was focused on redefining the values of the system. In the words of one team leader,

I think the thing with recognition is really it's saying what we're going to value, what skills we're going to value, what knowledge we're going to value. When we focus on what we're valuing, then we can think about then well, how do we want people to learn? What do we want people to learn? What kinds of things do we think are important for young people to take into that next part in life? . . . When the question is about who is deemed worthy of being recognised and what is it that we're recognising, I think that puts everyone on an even playing field, and it . . . starts to change the language around First Nations young people and what they bring with them to school and what they need to be recognised for.

Another team member reiterated this point and emphasised that First Nations young people, particularly those living and learning 'off Country', would benefit from recognition of important cultural activities as part of their education, such as time with elders, time learning language, and contributions to family and community.

In addition to focusing their attention to the particular challenges of the recognition system for First Nations young people, the team structured their work together in culturally appropriate, self-determined ways. In practice, team members reported that they found it easy to develop a way of working together, attributed to common values, experiences and ways of communicating. To better understand the challenges facing First Nations young people and the root causes of these challenges, the team drew heavily upon the important cultural practice of 'yarning'—a non-linear, collaborative discursive practice of 'sharing information, exploring ideas in explaining new topics, leading to understandings' (Bessarab and Ng'andu, 2010, p. 40). Levels of yarning ranging from surface-level understandings of a person's profession or background to root level understandings of their personal history and experiences with racism, intergenerational trauma, and historical erasure and abuse were identified. Team members reported that

¹ The principle of self-determination underpins many of the rights outlined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2013). Self-determination affirms the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples and acknowledges the rights to agency and decisionmaking, both individually and in their institutions.

their ways of collaborating emerged naturally out of cultural common ground. In the words of one team leader,

We're empowered to make our decisions about who we wanted to bring on and how to follow the social lab process. It actually works really well with First Nations people. I found it really liberating. I mean, this is probably the toughest work that I've ever done in terms of the deep thinking that's needed. That is what the social lab process actually creates. It makes you think deeply about things. You've got all of these different people in our team thinking very deeply about one particular issue or a couple of different issues. The lab process for us, because it's so centred on humans doing the work as opposed to a formula or anything or a really specific structure or a specific methodology, we just went naturally into the way that we know how to work with each other.

On the whole, team members noted that the overarching social lab methodology was consistent with, and allowed for appropriate adaptation to, First Nations cultural values. One team member described how the combination of the social lab methodology and the principles of self-determination provided a safe and productive environment for prototype development, as follows:

The thing I really liked about this process was the cultural safety of First Nations team. That that wasn't a questioned thing—it was just part of the process. I haven't experienced that [in the past]. . . . I thought that was quite significant, compared to other projects.

Another team member summarized the value of utilizing a self-determined approach in modelling the principles that they sought to integrate into prototypes. As this team member shared,

I think it's been really important in creating the prototype to embed self-determination within the kind of ignition system. So, it would have been kind of contrary to that if we weren't able to work in a self-determined way. So, it was kind of, I guess, embedding the principles, not only in like the work that we're producing, but in the way we're working. And it's allowed us to really drive it in the way that we want.

In this way, the self-determined team structure provided opportunities to both create cultural safety and a generative space for prototyping, as well as embodying the same principles that the First Nations team sought to centre in their prototypes.

Together, the team explored several frameworks to understand the data gathered through yarning with young people and among team members, such as wellbeing and Aboriginal psychology frameworks drawn from research in Australia and abroad. Ultimately, the First Nations prototype involved an Indigenous-led pact with secondary schools centred on Indigenous wellbeing as a foundation to recognise learning of Aboriginal and/or Torres Straits young people through their involvement with community, Country and language. In the final stages of Cycle 3, the team worked in depth with community partners involved in supporting Indigenous allied health careers and with leaders from a Registered Native Title Body Corporate to help further develop and test this pact in future work.

Both leadership and social lab participants (from other teams) were very supportive of the aspects of self-determination of the First Nations team. Respondents universally emphasised the importance of Indigenous leadership and design of prototypes to address the challenges experienced by Indigenous young people. Nonetheless, tension arose around acknowledging, understanding and serving the interests of Aboriginal and/or Torres Straits Islander young people across the other social lab teams. That is, respondents from other teams noted that they wanted design prototypes that would best serve Indigenous young people but did not have the requisite understandings or authority to meaningfully and respectfully do so. These respondents noted tension between wanting to have additional Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander team members embedded on their teams or providing insight in a consulting capacity, while also wanting to avoid placing the additional burden of education and representation upon Indigenous people and acknowledging the crucial importance of self-determination.

The First Nations team leaders, too, acknowledged this challenge and the immense value of the self-determined approach. As one leader shared,

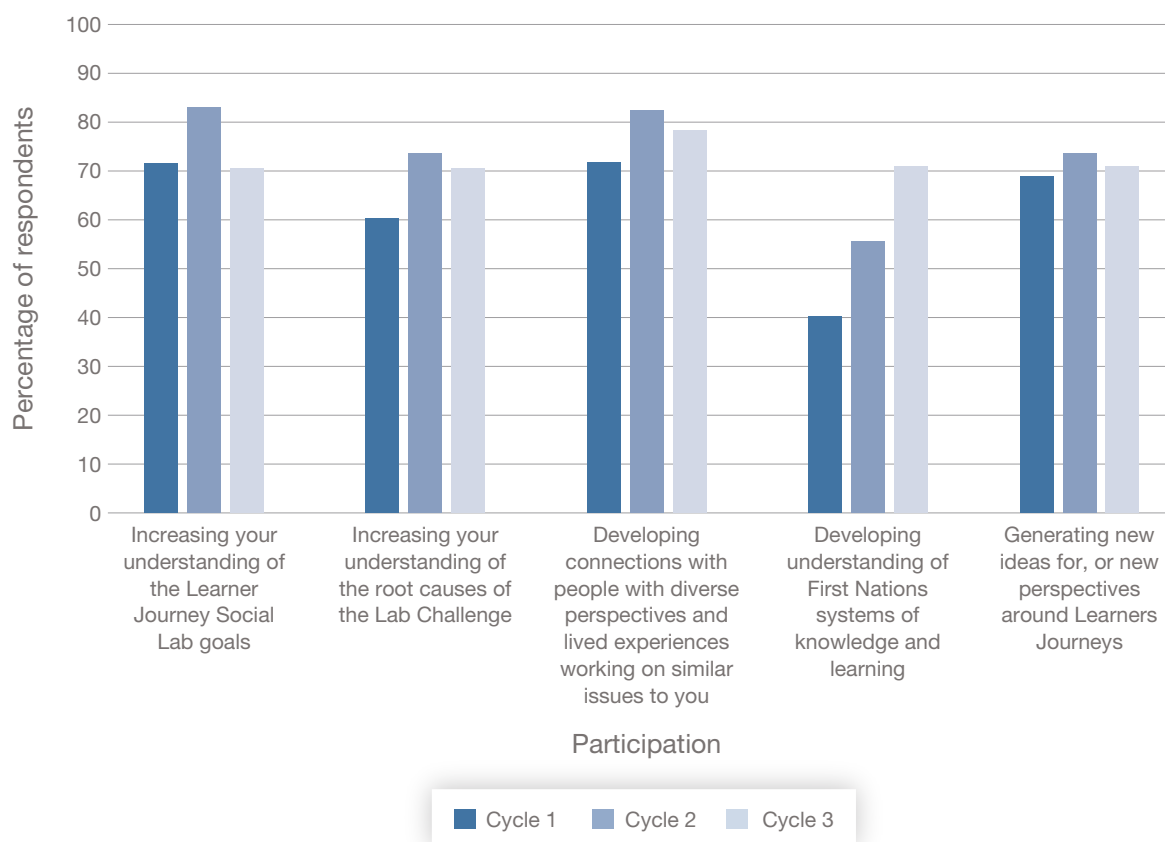
I think one of the tensions that has been throughout the whole lab is between self-determination and integration, which I still struggle with. Feeling sometimes the pressure of, well, how do all the other team integrate this approach, or how do they all consider First Nations people? I get that's important, but yeah, I think that's just been the ongoing tensions by having such a huge focus on our own and creating that safe space. Some of the other teams have felt they don't exactly know what to do in this space either . . . but I think what we've gained is something a lot stronger.

Ongoing work with other teams involved generally educating team members on embedding Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination into their prototype designs, rather than proactively indigenising the prototype or treating Indigenous young people as an 'equity subgroup'. As such, this remained a puzzle for future expansion and integration of recognition work.

Social Lab Teams Developed Capacity in Understanding Problems and Embracing Co-Design

Social lab participants reported several key ways in which participating in the labs increased their own capacity. First, as mentioned above, the majority of respondents noted that they had extended their professional network through participating in the labs (73 per cent in Cycle 1, 83 per cent in Cycle 2, 79 per cent in Cycle 3; see Figure 4.5). Their expanded network included new within-sector and cross-sector

FIGURE 4.5
Participants Reported Key Ways in Which Participating in the Labs Increased Their Capacity



NOTE: Percentages of respondents reflect the combined responses of respondents who indicated that they found a topic "somewhat helpful" or "extremely helpful." Cycle 1 N = 36. Cycle 2 N = 41. Cycle 3 N = 10. The item "Developing understanding of First Nations systems of knowledge and learning" was revised in the Cycle 3 survey to read, "Understanding First Nations self-determination and experiences of learning." Cycle 1 N = 36. Cycle 2 N = 41. Cycle 3 N = 10.

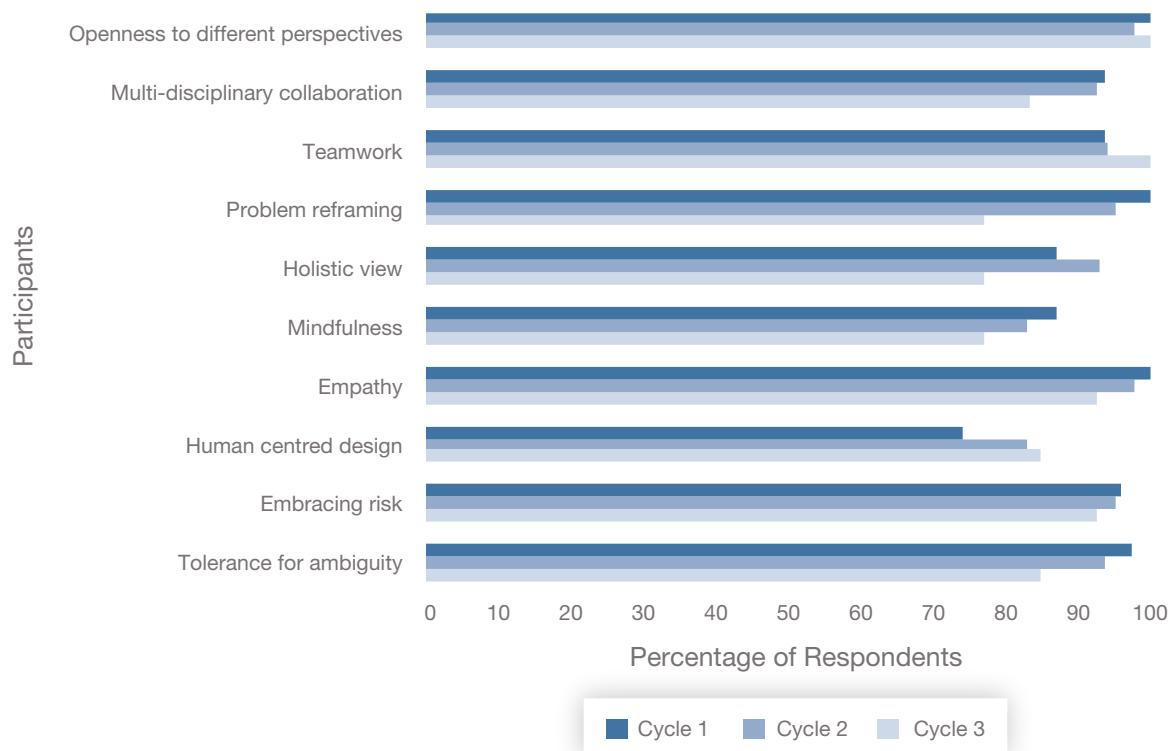
local and national connections, which respondents said they would use to amplify their own work to improve the educational system.

Second, most social lab participants also noted that they had gained a better understanding of the problems they were addressing with their prototypes. Drawing on the experiences of young people, social lab participants gained a more nuanced perspective on what young people actually need to change in the existing educational system. For example, on our survey, more than 60 per cent of respondents across cycles believed that participating in the social labs had helped to improve their understandings of the root causes of the lab challenge, and more than 70 per cent believed that the social labs helped them to develop new ideas or perspectives around The Learner's Journey topic.

Third, our survey respondents reported that the social labs helped to improve their understanding of First Nations systems of knowledge and learning, with rates of agreement increasing from 41 per cent in Cycle 1 to 57 per cent in Cycle 2 and 71 per cent in Cycle 3. This may be attributed to cultural competency trainings offered by LCAust. In addition, several interview respondents noted that they had learned a great deal more about Indigenous knowledge systems through cross-team sharing from the First Nations team during the cycle reviews.

Of note, our survey also measured several of the key mindsets and dispositions related to design-thinking, such as risk tolerance, comfort with ambiguity, human-centred perspectives, empathy, trust and systems-level thinking (Figure 4.6). Interestingly, self-reported ratings on these items were generally high across the cycles. It is unclear whether this is an artefact of social desirability, illusory superiority, or if this is related to the recruitment of individuals to participate in the social labs that may have attracted a greater proportion of individuals who already had experience in design-thinking or possessed these necessary dispositions. Of note, Cycle 3 participants were slightly less likely to say that they trust in the

FIGURE 4.6
Participants' Ratings of Prototyping Dispositions and Mindsets Were High Across All Three Cycles



NOTE: Percentages of respondents reflect the combined responses of respondents who indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed with each statement. For survey topics with multiple items, percentages reflect the average percentage of respondents that agreed or strongly agreed with each statement. Cycle 1 $N = 36$. Cycle 2 $N = 41$. Cycle 3 $N = 10$.

process to find solutions, are interested in better understanding the problem, or are comfortable dealing with problems that may not be solvable. These responses may be a function of the changing membership of the social labs and/or the focus on prototyping in Cycle 3.

Some survey respondents also reported that they had used, or expected to use, the social lab process or team resources in their own work (36 per cent in Cycle 1, 44 per cent in Cycle 2, and 62 per cent in Cycle 3). Similarly, about half of the interview respondents also noted that they had learned some new techniques to put into place in their own work, ranging from meeting facilitation techniques to new understandings of design-thinking and co-design processes. A few interview respondents reported that they had also benefited from the exposure to more research and evidence regarding the problems in the educational system. As one social lab team member shared,

The work that Learning Creates is doing . . . and their research work and the reports they've put out, I've been . . . using them to basically qualify and say to my colleagues and parents, 'Looking at the statistics and things, did you know that businesses actually not looking for this or that? Did you know that industry wants students with these particular skills, and we know that they [students] might have these particular skills? But how do we actually tell industry that?' I feel really comfortable having those conversations now [with research evidence], as opposed to a teacher with a hunch. It's also they've given me access to not only all that research and whatnot, but they've also given me access through meetings and things to all these stakeholders from different walks of life and different industry and different backgrounds. It's just been fascinating to sit in and have conversations with these people while working with these people because again, it qualifies why change is needed and in what areas, basically put a fire in the belly.

Social Labs Engaged Communities in Prototyping in Later Cycles

In Cycle 2, LCAust began engaging community partners across Australia to collaborate on adapting prototypes to local contexts and testing the prototypes in communities. These community partners, including schools, organisations, employers and universities, engaged directly with prototyping teams as co-leads of the work. Community partners spanned non-profit service providers like IAHA and the Darumbal People Aboriginal Corporation; organisations engaging in local co-design like the Beacon Foundation's Collective ed. in Burney, Tasmania; secondary schools like the Bendigo Tech School and Heathfield High School; university administrators at a variety of tertiary institutions; and employers like Hydro Tasmania. While prototypes were originally developed with state or national application in mind, they were substantially adapted to meet local needs.

The approaches to co-design and adaptation varied substantially across teams. For example, in Cycle 2, the tertiary team prototype involved a pact between schools and universities to provide avenues for young people to demonstrate broader and deeper skills and attributes. The tertiary team then worked with a group of university administrators at universities in New South Wales and Australian Capital Territory to develop the components of the pact together and prepare for potential piloting in their university settings. Similarly, the learner agency team prototype involved increasing understanding and level of agency in schools through a mechanism for measuring learner autonomy, engagement and belonging. In Cycle 3, this team worked with Heathfield High School to develop the appropriate survey instruments and mechanisms for learner voice. As such, this formed the setting for piloting their prototype. Both of these applications reflected fairly straightforward development in collaboration with local settings and piloting.

Some teams collaborated with local partners in ways that more substantially informed prototype design and made it more locally tailored. For example, the industry team had envisioned prototyping a trustmark to recognise learning that happens in and outside of formal schooling. To develop this trustmark, the industry team took two locally informed approaches. In Bendigo, the industry team worked with local programs such as Girls in STEAM, an initiative in which young people convert a car from

fossil fuel to electric, to determine what a trustmark for these skills might look like. In Tasmania, the industry team worked with a large employer, Hydro Tasmania, to determine how employer needs and existing training programs might inform the trustmark components. The First Nations team pursued a prototype focused on Indigenous-led charters with secondary schools to outline protocols for caring for young people. To inform this work, the team worked directly with IAHA and with the Darumbal People Aboriginal Corporation around approaches to wellbeing for Indigenous young people.

Despite these activities, 78 per cent of survey respondents believed that their team engaged with community partners in Cycle 3, compared with 92 per cent in Cycle 2. Similarly, just 17 per cent of respondents reported that connecting with communities to learn about their contexts and share ideas was a challenge in Cycle 2, compared with 44 per cent in Cycle 3. It is unclear why this decline occurred from Cycle 2 to Cycle 3. COVID-19 restrictions interrupted ongoing community engagement activities and may have constrained the development of relationships and implementation of prototypes. It is also possible that, as they began to further develop and try out prototypes, prototyping team members grew more aware of challenges in balancing the pressure for local versus scalable solutions.

Perspectives around the quality of community engagement and co-design activities was similarly mixed. Most respondents (including social lab team members, community leads and LCAust leaders) endorsed the meaningful engagement with community. In the words of one social lab team member,

One of the things that I think is really special, and quite kind of unique about Learning Creates is that we are working directly with community partners to solve the problems. . . . That's certainly not something that I've been part of, and I don't see happening in many of the program and policy spheres that that I've come across.

Others noted some of the challenges engagement. About a quarter of respondents suggested that prototyping may have been more successful if community stakeholders had been engaged since Cycle 1. As one community partner suggested, this may have contributed to a quicker identification of the problems and potential solutions:

I think they [community partners] should have been there from day one of the social lab. . . . [Community partners] did a kind of 'Duh, yeah, that's the problem. Yep, we know. What are you going to do with that?'

This tension arose as teams balanced urgency and local knowledge and needs with the need for a scalable, broadly applicable solutions.

To What Extent Did LCAust's Phase I Activities Lay the Groundwork for Systemic Impact?

The social lab process represented just one part of the LCAust's efforts to lay the groundwork for systemic impact. One LCAust leader described the activities as a three-legged stool, with the social lab activities, research work, and policy/industry engagement forming the foundation for systemic impact. Underlying their work was the vision that engaging and convening policymakers, industry leaders, researchers, practitioners and users, and facilitating a range of activities, would promote change. In the words of one LCAust leader,

And I think that was definitely always part of the original intent was the recognition that for the education system to evolve, you need to engage with and take on a journey, many, many players across the ecosystem, and that many were already trying to create the context for it to change. And so it was always being very clear that this was not going to work if we were a traditional kind of organisation that tried to carve out territory in a very busy, busy ecosystem. Instead, it was about really trying to play that intermediary role that helps connect it up, so that we can enable the system to evolve to create better outcomes for young people, especially those who've experienced disadvantage.

In this intermediary role, LCAust leaders commissioned research reports to describe and summon the evidence for these changes, convened key policymakers and industry leaders to generate and mobilise support for systems reforms, and facilitated the user-centred prototype development process.

LCAust Published Three Research Reports to Inform Policy/Industry Engagement and Prototyping

LCAust has also maintained a stream of work that summarises the existing research and evidence base and formulates specific policy recommendations. Through a series of four research forums, tertiary sector leaders and academics heard about emergent research and reports. The organisation has also commissioned a series of reports and white papers that synthesise existing research and data to support its work, provide case studies of the experiences of learners to amplify the voice of young people, and discuss possible policy solutions (see Table 5.1). In collaboration with researchers from the University of Melbourne, LCAust has published three primary publications intended to identify and describe a coherent agenda for systems change. The first is a report, *Recognition of Learning Success for All*, which outlines desired changes to the senior secondary certification in Australia, drawing upon evidence from broader study of reform efforts as well as useful illustrative quotations from young people participating in the social labs. The second, 'Shifts and Flows in Learning and Work', is a discussion paper that examines case studies of systems implementing the kinds of desired changes, including some of the social lab prototypes, and presenting lessons learned across these cases. Another report, to be completed in 2022, will provide a prescription for LCAust's future work.

These publications were made publicly available and were also a focus of attention in the social lab convenings and policy and industry forums. As such, they provided useful insight across these elements of the organisation's work. In particular, it appeared that these resources were useful to the

TABLE 5.1
Research Products

Product	Description
<i>Recognition of Learning Success for All</i>	The research team has summarised the existing case for change and gathered input from people across education, government, business and philanthropy—including young people—to address the misalignment between what we measure as educational success and the learning goals we aspire to.
'Shifts and flows in learning and work'	The paper presents insights on the changing relationship between employers and young people, through a survey and set of interviews with employers, intermediary organisations and young people. New stories about shifts and flows in learning and work demonstrate that small scale large impact interventions, with the support of intermediaries are hugely beneficial. Doing nothing is no longer an option and employers are re-thinking their recruitment and development practices with young employees.
<i>A New Path Forward</i>	LCAust undertook a comparative and analytical review of twenty-two reviews, studies and reports from Australia and internationally looking at policy and practice for school to work transition exploring their insights and implications.
Sentiment analysis	While not representative of all communities, the sentiment analysis enables LCAust partners, governments and collaborators to better access and understand current community insights being expressed through social and online forums about education, before and during the global pandemic (COVID-19).
Learning pathway case studies	In addition to the young people involved in the prototyping work directly, we also spoke with young people from a range of backgrounds and lived experiences about their learning journeys within senior secondary education.
Dissenting views analysis	LCAust has also captured and articulated dissenting views around relevant issues and themes to do with the work and considered and demonstrated ways to appropriately respond or mitigate risk.

work of the policy forum, as they provided useful evidence to support ongoing efforts to engage government leaders around key systemic changes, such as learner profiles.¹ In the social labs, our interview respondents indicated that the research reports helped to build their confidence in the work and provide support for their prototyping work. One commonly discussed drawback, however, was the timing of the reports versus the policy and prototyping work. One LCAust leaders noted that, ideally, the research would lead up to the social labs and guide the direction of prototyping work. Social lab participants, too, noted that they valued the reports but wished they had received them in advance of their work together.

LCAust Acted as Intermediary Organisation Convening Policy and Industry Leaders

To support the work of The Learner's Journey social lab, LCAust engaged stakeholders from the larger educational ecosystem to raise awareness for the work and create the conditions necessary for prototypes to become adopted at scale. Beginning with the lab planning in March 2020, the organisation has engaged leaders in policy and industry through a series of forums and roundtables intended to foster and maintain relationships, integrate networks for policy impact, and promote promising prototypes.

In 2020, two key moments presented opportunities for LCAust to play an increasingly important role as an intermediary. First, in May 2020, the Australian government disbanded the COAG, which typically

¹ Learner profiles are digital documents that describe a young person's learning attainments, including a variety of skills, knowledge and capacities in addition to traditional academic performance. For examples of learner profiles.

convened an Education Council to engage in quarterly meetings regarding policy priorities nationwide. Concurrently, in July 2020, the Education Council published a report authored by a review panel led by Peter Shergold, which outlined a vision for reforming pathways from senior secondary to further education, work and careers. These two events presented a valuable opening for LCAust. As one LCAust leader described,

There was nobody really convening the states to come together, national dialogue. And at the same time the Shergold review was handed down . . . on exactly the thing that we're talking about, and then there was no national forum for people to convene and discuss and talk about the implications and what people are doing. So we were able to step into that space . . . and so DepSecs [Deputy Secretaries] and CEO of ACARA [the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority]. . . . They all came, and so all of a sudden we had this forum with all of the leaders meeting together and discussing things and wanting to meet with us. . . . They were looking for policy frameworks.

LCAust convened four policy forums, which have included CEOs of the Australasian Curriculum, Assessment and Certification Authorities (ACACA) from three Australian states (South Australia, Victoria, Western Australia), deputy secretaries of Education Departments (New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria), as well as the CEOs of ACARA, the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) and Education Services Australia (ESA). During these forums, LCAust presented research to the policymakers in attendance and facilitated discussions regarding the policy agenda. Policy forum attendees whom we interviewed described LCAust's role as 'defining a purpose'. During the forums, LCAust provided research papers and engaged speakers; attendees reported these were useful and offered new information.

With this unique structure, policy forum respondents reported that it took time to develop a way of working with LCAust in the forums. In the words of one policy forum respondent, at first working with LCAust was 'wonky and hard . . . to figure out what was meant to be done and how it was meant to be done'. Over time, however, they reported gaining more 'momentum' and expected to see products and changes emerging over the next few years of their work together. One policy forum respondent identified 2022 as the year in which they expected LCAust's work 'around engaging voices, listening to people, the research evidence' to manifest in 'greater traction and engagement with jurisdictions'.

In addition to structuring the forums, policy forum respondents also noted that LCAust fulfilled a unique role and function. First, respondents universally emphasised the high profile and respect for LCAust leadership and their ability to reach and engage crucially important government actors and policymakers, and to 'convene really open and honest and respectful discussions'. All of the policy forum respondents also described LCAust as neutral, in contrast to other organisations that might be more partisan or have vested interests. One respondent described the organisation's reputation as follows:

It [LCAust] is independent, there's no doubt about it. [Key leader] certainly has the appeal to get into the door of all key decisionmakers and get listened to. So, neutral, trusted, and I haven't heard otherwise.

Another respondent attributed this reputation for trust and neutrality to LCAust's unique level of respect for diverse perspectives. Most policy forum respondents similarly endorsed the organisation's ability to respectfully and meaningfully engage a range of actors. In the words of one policy forum attendee,

I think too, the work that Learning Creates has done with First Nations people is the best I've ever seen, because it's not an add-on, it's embedded in the work that they do, and it's trusted, and it's genuine. And I think that's—I've never seen it, work done with First Nations people as honest and genuine. And I can say that from a systems perspective, I've never seen it in the country. And I think it's outstanding. And certainly, the work that they've done around engaging young people, but particularly First Nations people, they could write the handbook and distribute that across the country and people would read it because it hasn't been done.

Despite their support for the LCAust's ability to convene a broad range of stakeholders and policy-makers, one respondent did note that future work may rely upon involving additional individuals with opinions that conflict with the LCAust vision for systems change.

LCAust also convened a panel of industry leaders under a similar model. Panellists represented a range of employers from different sectors including healthcare, venture capital and green energy. During their regular meetings, LCAust staff shared research reports, updates on the work of the prototypes (particularly the industry teams') and facilitated discussion. Panellists that we interviewed expressed support for the work of LCAust. One respondent described their participation as a function of the challenges in attracting skilled young people into their growing profession, where few young people held appropriate credentials or had useful skill sets. Another described their interest in reorienting the education system around those values that they find most employable in their sector: creativity, emotional intelligence, imagination, and technical skills.

Panellists held great respect for the ability of LCAust to connect with institutions and policymakers that they could not influence through their own channels and networks. As one panellist shared,

The value in it [LCAust] for me . . . comes in the form of people who understand the bigger picture, understand how we're going to make systemic changes in education and in the way we teach young people. . . . How we get legislators to pay attention to this and how we move policy. That's not something that anyone in my industry knows how to do. We've actually been historically awful at it. To me, that was the real value for me is knowing there are people who they're interested in this problem, but they come with the experience necessary to actually make those larger, systemic changes.

While very supportive of LCAust as an organisation, panellists did note challenges with regard to the clarity of their panel activities (e.g., what was required, what was not) and constraints on their time and level of involvement. In addition, they expressed limited visibility into the work of the policy forums and how the research, engagement and prototyping strands of LCAust's work fit together.

Prototypes Developed at Different Rates, with Different Levels of Success

On the whole, the prototypes varied substantially in terms of both their level of development and the target system level for intervention. For example, the Schools Enabling Agency prototype, called the Pulse Lab, involved a school-level intervention. Under this prototype, a team of teachers, administrators, parents and students at a secondary school met regularly to discuss their concerns and goals for the school. They helped to develop and administer a survey-like tool, called the Pulse Check, to gauge student sense of belonging, engagement and autonomy. These data were intended to guide collaboratively determined change at the school level. In contrast, the Industry Pathways prototype was intended to develop a national trustmark, or common indicator, to communicate the skills and attributes young people gain through vocational training programs to potential employers. The particulars of the trustmark were still under development as the prototype was rolled out in collaboration with both local vocational training programs in one community and with a large employer in another. As these examples demonstrate, prototypes differed in the level of implementation, scale and state of development at the conclusion of Cycle 3 of the social labs.

This variation was also evident in the pace at which prototypes were developed and their perceived feasibility. It took time for the teams to develop prototypes that were feasible and scalable. As one LCAust leader described,

The first cycle didn't produce what we hoped it would produce, I think that, as we said, because of online working, the teams took a lot longer form than usual, they really struggled with the process, it was really uncomfortable for a lot of people. . . . I don't think we got to anything close to what a pro-

prototype would be in cycle one, which in some ways was the intent because it was mainly about really discovering through the equity lens, different learner journeys through a system. That's where we had a huge pivot on the way Learning Create Australia supported these team. And the way we helped develop the prototypes that went from being very, very self-organised to something that had a lot more core support. . . . And so now, when I look at the prototypes that are emerging, I think they're really powerful. I think they are where we want them to be, they are what we were expecting, but it wouldn't have happened if we hadn't made that pivot halfway through a cycle to, to really make sure that they were getting there.

In addition to shifting their focus of support to help develop feasible prototypes, LCAust leaders noted that the theory underlying social labs intends that only a subset of prototypes will 'rise up' and be scalable. The LCAust leader quotes above also noted the importance of developing prototypes as proof points for policy solutions:

The prototypes would demonstrate what could be and will make a difference in some places, but they're not policy solutions, but [what matters is] how we get them to influence policy and demonstrate what is possible, what young people and educators and parents and community members, businesses want, and then use that as a platform to influence bigger policy agenda.

In early cycles, social lab team members expressed concerns about whether they would be able to generate feasible prototypes. They noted concerns about whether there was adequate support of policymakers to push forward eventual implementation and scaling. Similarly, social lab participants and LCAust leaders shared concerns about how prototypes would be scaffolded and sustained during implementation because the LCAust organisation was not designed or intended to run prototyped programs in the longer term. These concerns appeared to subside somewhat with the increased involvement of community partners interested in implementing prototypes in later cycles.

By Cycle 3, community partners and other stakeholders (who attended social lab community events but were otherwise not part of the design team) were generally positive about the prototypes developed. In Cycle 3, 88 per cent of community partners and 76 per cent of other stakeholders agreed that the prototype is relevant and addresses the core challenge of the social lab. Similarly, 71 per cent of community partners and 86 per cent of other stakeholders agreed that the prototype developers understood the needs of their community.

The quality of prototypes was defined as their ability to be feasible, effective and measurable. Of these elements, over three-quarters of community partners and stakeholder respondents believed that, on the whole, the prototypes would be effective and measurable. In contrast, just above half of the respondents believed that the prototypes were feasible (see Figure 5.1).

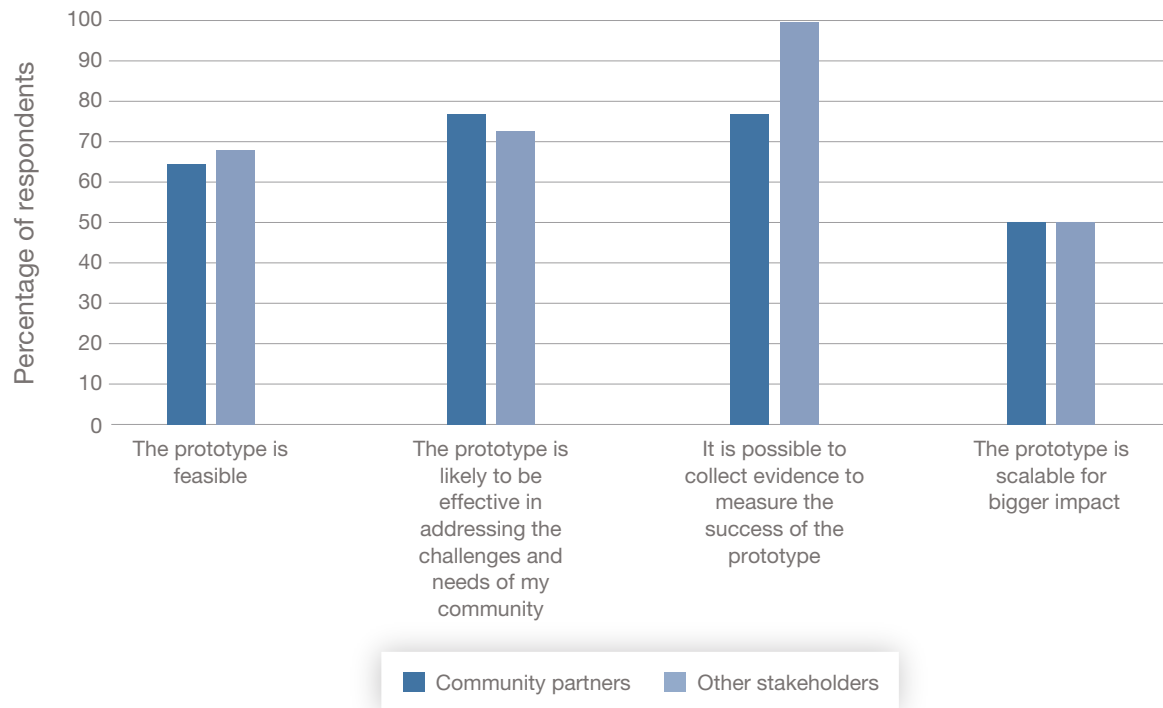
LCAust leaders also acknowledged these challenges, in particular the limited time to fully pilot and test the prototypes. As one leader noted,

We definitely don't have yet the runway needed to do it. . . . It takes time to get these to a point of implementation and we need more time. I think secondly, each prototype will have a different path to scale, but they're going to need other sponsors and champions from within the mainstream system that really want to help drive and implement them, and that could be local drivers and community context, or it could be more state based policy and institutional sponsors, or it's probably unlikely it's going to come at the federal level.

As this quotation also demonstrates, another major tension arose in identifying whether prototypes were intended and/or had potential to be scaled to the state or national level or if they were driven by local community contexts. Half of all surveyed community partners and other stakeholders agreed that their prototype was scalable for bigger impact, while the other half neither agreed nor disagreed. Social labs interview respondents similarly saw connections to state and, rarely, national, scaling, but also identified uncertainty and challenges in reaching this level of scale. LCAust leaders articulated scaling as entailing

FIGURE 5.1

The Majority of Community Partners and Stakeholder Respondents Believed the Prototypes Could Be Effective and Measurable but Were Less Sure About Feasibility or Scalability



NOTES: Percentages of respondents reflect the combined responses of respondents who indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed with each statement. Community partners: $N = 9$; Other stakeholders: $N = 10$.

a broader idea of prototypes demonstrating ‘transformative opportunities’ and exposing ‘the barriers and blockers to change’. In essence, prototypes would present examples of innovation and ‘play this hinge role to create the opportunities’ for broader policy change.

What Factors Enabled or Constrained Implementation?

Across the various social lab activities and cycles, we also sought to understand factors that appeared to enable or constrain their work together. We find strong support for the essential role of LCAust as a neutral convenor with strong policy connections and the ability to meaningfully engage a variety of stakeholders. In playing this role LCAust is filling a crucial gap in the existing education ecosystem. Respondents also found that the responsiveness and adaptiveness of the organisation and its social lab work helped to enable the process. Constraints to implementation included a primary focus on participants who were already proponents of systemic change along with limited involvement of detractors who might ultimately stand in the way of the intended policy changes. Respondents noted challenges to integrating the three streams of LCAust work (i.e., research, policy/industry engagement, prototyping) in an ideal arrangement.

LCAust Added Value as a Neutral Convenor with Strong Policy Connections, Engagement of Diverse Stakeholders

Respondents across our data collection agree upon a key value in LCAust as a neutral convenor with strong policy connections and the ability to meaningfully engage a variety of stakeholders. Respondents including social lab participants, policy panellists, and LCAust leaders articulated this role as the organisation acting as an ‘intermediary’ that is ‘trusted and valued’. In the words of one social lab participant,

I think the good thing about Learning Creates is it is seen as a third party. It is seen as a group that does not have any agenda, any KPIs [key performance indicators] that are related to them. Their KPIs, their goals and objectives, are related to the broader society. If you talk about an institution, a university has its own KPIs and goals. . . . Schools have their own KPIs. Governments have their own KPIs. There isn't that mutual body that can have the trust value, and Learning Creates has that trust value because it is seen neutral. For Learning Creates, the value add is to actually improve the education system for the young people.

In addition to its role as an agenda-free third-party, social lab participants strongly endorsed the policy connections of LCAust. Many respondents, particularly in Cycles 2 and 3, described the impressive connections of LCAust leaders with key policymakers and government actors. They believed these connections were vital to the implementation and scalability of prototypes and, ultimately, systems change. In addition, some respondents noted the value of extending their own networks of practitioners, institutional leaders and reforms. As one social lab participant explained,

[Usually] we don't have access to the rest of the players in the sector. . . . For us to scale an institution's reach nationally and contribute to that, that's what Learning Creates is able to provide.

Nonetheless, a few participants also described that most of those involved were already proponents of systemic change in education. They questioned the potential for policy change in certain states or settings that might be strongly opposed to these reforms. While those engaging with LCAust might hold

varied perspectives on the means, mode, or pace of reform, most were interested in the LCAust agenda in principle. Indeed, several LCAust leaders, policy panellists, and social lab participants described the LCAust network as a ‘coalition of the willing. As they move forward, at least one LCAust leader acknowledged the importance of engaging ‘not just the converted, but maybe the contestable.’

LCAust Balanced Urgency for Change with Methodical Process

One key challenge that arose across The Learner’s Journey activities was the tension between pursuing change with urgency and engaging in methodical meaning-making and planning processes. In Cycles 1 and 2, several social lab respondents expressed frustration with the theoretical or academic focus of the social labs. In retrospect, one social lab participant shared,

We did spend a lot of time in Cycle 1 and 2 talking about theory and philosophies and doing a lot of the research and finding things. I could see that it’s a journey, so everyone needed to take the journey so we could actually become a team.

As the process progressed, social lab participants acknowledged an increasing role in enacting concrete change. In the words of one social lab participant,

The education system has a lot of theorists and philosophers and people that can debate about this issue. The thing that is missing . . . is actually the doers. The social lab actually creates that space for the communities to actually drive a lot of what the things needs to be, what the process and system need to be, and implement that in the policy level.

On the whole, these participants believed that the current education ecosystem lacked enough active change-makers and a sense of urgency, which LCAust was helping to rectify.

LCAust Was Responsive and Adaptive to Challenges

In Cycles 1 and 2, social lab participants noted common challenges in having adequate structure and tools to support their inquiry and prototyping process, and in engaging the right stakeholders at the right time. In their early phases, social lab participants found the structure inadequate to support momentum in their team while also finding some of the assignments and deadlines difficult to meet. In addition, the complex lab terminology was confusing at first. Most stated that they would like additional support to structure their work together. One social lab participant described this challenge as follows:

I found it really tough because of the language that was used and trying to decipher what things were, what cycles were and what sprints were and things like that. Also, that’s part of the problem between schools and industry, secondary schools and industry, because there are two different forms of language that are used.

As the social labs moved from Cycle 2 into Cycle 3, LCAust staff responded to these challenges by using a more hands-on, consulting-style approach to help push forward prototype development.

Questions also arose about ideal forms of participation in the social lab process. Some participants suggested that community partners should have been involved earlier on in the process. Others believed that, particularly in Cycle 1, young people offered useful perspectives but were not always equipped with adequate time or capacity to engage in the complex social lab work. Similarly, some participants noted that the mix of expertise within labs, along with limited structure, meant that the teams spent a great deal of their time together defining key terms and problems. Adjustments to the process to address these challenges were made later in Cycles 2 and 3, like the creation of the Community Associates program to consistently engage young people in data collection and prototype review, or integrating community

partners onto smaller prototyping teams to work on prototype development and implementation in local context. While these adaptations appeared to support the implementation of the social labs, the limited structure in early cycles and high levels of responsiveness contributed to a lack of clarity among social lab participants.

Connections Between Research, Policy and Prototypes Still Developing

Several respondents across levels of The Learner's Journey work noted challenges in integrating the research, policy, and prototyping work. One LCAust leader described the envisioned integration of these three streams as follows:

We were going to insert into this [social lab methodology] what we saw as being good research work, papers commissioned, shifting potentially the focus of the labs, as we were informed by either practice on the ground with an evidence base that was coming from the profession, alongside what was coming from thought leadership, alongside what was coming from policymakers who were doing serious work, commissioning a whole variety of related activity, and how could you actually bring all of that together.

In essence, the aim was to focus on LCAust as a pragmatic process engaging a range of grassroots stakeholders while also infusing or 'braiding together' streams of research, evidence-based practice, and policy thought-leadership.

In practice, in Cycle 1 these three streams of work were independent and interacted very little. For example, social lab participants had very little understanding of ongoing efforts to engage policymakers and reported drawing upon existing research to a limited extent. Because prototyping teams were granted full autonomy to innovate, these efforts were not always aligned with extant research or policy agendas. By Cycle 2, LCAust leaders noted the need to 'hover around attempting to make sure that at certain moments the knowledge base could be helpful'.

While later cycles saw increasing exposure to the LCAust-commissioned research papers in the social labs, some respondents felt that they accessed the research too late in their process. One LCAust leader acknowledged this tension and suggested,

There's one area I think we need to get much stronger in, as I said, which is the integration of the research with the labs, I think that role of the research partner, ideally would be much more integrated into the work of the labs, as well. So what we're learning through the prototypes is informing the research and what the research is learning is informing the prototypes. So I could, I think it would be a really important way to strengthen it is to make the research much more adaptive and responsive and perhaps a little less academic.

Some suggested that the lack of exposure to research and evidence-based practice led to duplication, as social lab teams were not aware of existing programs and innovations in the field. The developed prototypes, too, were not always aligned with the broader research and policy agenda.

Respondents across levels of The Learner's Journey also noted the importance of aligning prototypes with the policy agenda. LCAust leaders expressed the importance of using prototypes to demonstrate success in a tangible way. Nonetheless, because the policy agenda was not integrated into the social lab process, the prototypes were not explicitly tied to existing policy directions. As one LCAust leader noted, changes might be necessary to further integrate these efforts:

We're getting prototypes that are starting to mature, none of them are going to be sufficient, if we can't find pathways for them to scale and be more adopted by the main dominant system today. And so we need to really flip the roles that some of those panellists have played, and turn them from being I suppose, almost like advisors that sit on the outside to champions that feel a real sense of collective ownership and responsibility for the work.

A few LCAust leaders suggested that ideally the research would inform the policy agenda, which would then inform the social lab's work, which would in turn inform research and the policy work. Others emphasised the importance of continuing to pull the research and policy work 'more to pragmatic, practical, tactical solution finding' and 'bolting on the apparatus of the policy group and the employer group' to move the work forward. Either approach produces trade-offs, as evidenced in the work so far.

Summary and Recommendations

This evaluation was intended to address three primary research questions to understand the LCAust social lab process. Our findings are summarised as follows:

How were the LCAust social labs implemented in practice?

- LCAust successfully engaged a diverse range of participants, including meaningful participation of young people and a self-determined stream of work valuing Indigenous knowledge, capacity and sovereignty.
- Participants perceived improvements in their capacity around understanding problems and embracing co-design, and expanded their professional networks.
- Social labs engaged communities from across Australia in prototyping in later cycles.
- Participants noted challenges in achieving an ideal level of structure to help facilitate the social lab work and process.

To what extent did LCAust's Phase I activities lay the groundwork for systemic impact?

- LCAust published research reports to inform policy and industry engagement and prototyping.
- LCAust acted as intermediary organisation convening policy and industry leaders.
- Prototypes developed at different rates, with different levels of success; questions arose over the scalability of prototypes.

What factors enabled or constrained implementation?

- LCAust was perceived as a neutral convener with strong policy connections but involved mainly those already ideologically aligned with the LCAust mission.
- LCAust acted responsively to challenges in developing the prototypes by making adjustments to various elements of the process. At times these changes led to lack of clarity among participants.
- LCAust integrated its related work in research, policy and industry engagement; prototyping remained a work in progress.

Overall, LCAust's The Learner's Journey social lab process demonstrated promising practices and unearthed important learnings and implications for future work. First, we offer recommendations for LCAust as it conceptualises its future work. Second, we provide recommendations for other organisations that may be considering using the social lab methodology for systems change.

Recommendations for Learning Creates Australia

As this summary indicates, this evaluation has documented both the promise and challenges of LCAust's social lab approach. We consider these findings in the context of the organisation's goal to 'bring together diverse stakeholders across the Australian community to create innovative, practical solutions to deeply entrenched and systemic educational challenges' (LCAust, undated-a). In terms of engaging diverse stakeholders, our evaluation indicates particular strengths in engaging Indigenous Australians, young

people, and a powerful network of proponents in policymaking roles. These strengths, however, are accompanied by recommendations for future work to realise the organisation's ultimate goals.

Despite strong work with Indigenous Australians, LCAust will need to remain cognisant of tensions between self-determination and broad consideration of the interests of Indigenous young people. LCAust's work with Aboriginal and/or Torres Straits Islander communities embodied the principles of Indigenous leadership and Indigenous self-determination, core to ethical and meaningful engagement. This approach was particularly apt for addressing the needs of Indigenous young people living 'on Country', embedded within their ancestral culture, history and community. Nonetheless, future LCAust work may require the organisation to address the tension between representation and ownership. Members of other social lab teams at times noted that they would like to better integrate Indigenous perspectives in their prototyping work and thereby address the needs of Aboriginal and/or Torres Straits Islander young people living 'off Country'.

LCAust should consider how to expand its engagement of young people to build a strong base of support for change. LCAust saw particular success in engaging young people through the Community Associates program. Through this program, young people experienced great benefits in terms of building their own skills and capacity, engaging in a supportive community, and working on an exciting and impactful agenda. As LCAust seeks to build a groundswell of support for systems change, these efforts may require broader engagement of young people.

We recommend that LCAust design future efforts to engage a larger set of communities and local actors to generate grassroots support. The underlying theory of action of LCAust appeared to mobilise both established, high-level policy connections and grassroots, public support for systems change. Despite meaningful engagement with these varied groups, these engagement efforts have remained fairly small in scale. Though the social labs and their connection to communities were complex undertakings, they engaged relatively small populations in their activities. Of course, the COVID-19 pandemic may have influenced opportunities for participation and outreach.

If LCAust wish to play a larger policy role, this may mean attending to those with conflicting perspectives and seeking common ground and support. LCAust has demonstrated strong connections with a network of policymakers committed to a shared cause. While involved policymakers held diverse perspectives on the right means, mode, or pace of change, they were essentially interested in the LCAust agenda. Questions arose, however, about the ability of LCAust to engage those who were not already ideologically aligned with its goals.

To better mobilise its efforts along each of these elements, we suggest that LCAust engages in strategic planning to identify a clear, shared agenda and activities to support and advocate alongside grassroots engagement and development of innovative pragmatic approaches. Our evaluation examined each of LCAust's interconnected elements: the social labs, research work, and policy and industry engagement. We find that several of these efforts were well conceived and implemented, with some particular bright spots around engagement. A major challenge arose, however, in the integration and coherence of these elements. The agendas of each group appeared to vary, with limited engagement between them.

Future work may require functioning as an intermediary to more deeply address fragmentation in the system, its institutions and agencies, and its policies. While we identify promise and challenges in the social labs, research, and policy work, questions remain as to whether these efforts are well suited to the problems at hand. The selected focus of the LCAust work is decidedly broad and the problem sufficiently complex that it may require additional or alternative strategies. While social labs had the potential to generate interesting change ideas, additional consideration is needed to determine if this approach is best suited to the overall aims of LCAust. We also acknowledge that the work of LCAust is building upon myriad similar efforts and research on their implementation and effects. As LCAust moves into a role as an intermediary, the organisation may be well positioned to bring together and synthesise existing innovations, reforms and research.

Recommendations for the Use of Social Labs

For organisations seeking to utilise a social lab methodology, we make several recommendations derived from these findings that may inform design and implementation. Specifically, others seeking to implement social labs should devote attention and effort to identifying the appropriate individual participants needed to design and test prototypes, the appropriate granularity and types of problems to be solved through the methodology, and the importance of the integration and coherence of research, policy engagement, and prototyping activities.

Careful attention to which actors need to be involved to design, implement and scale prototypes, and at what times, may help to define the best-suited arrangement of activities and time commitment. The social lab methodology required substantial time and effort on the part of participants. This investment of time may have been prohibited to sustain participation in the process over time and also may have precluded the direct involvement of key individuals (in this case, policymakers, government representatives or staff, or industry representatives) who may ultimately play an important role in building support for prototype implementation and scaling.

Future social lab designers may need to consider how to facilitate integration across teams at key points to ensure alignment of their work and/or define align team aims more closely to a research-informed agenda. In this case, the identified challenge of reimagining recognition systems was substantially large and encompassed reform across a wide range of institutions, necessitating division of the social lab into smaller, topic-focused teams. While breaking the problem into smaller segments helped to facilitate teams' work, it also presented challenges in ultimately integrating prototypes and ensuring a coherent holistic policy agenda.

Those seeking to utilise the social lab process to achieve systems change would be well advised to carefully consider the integration of research, engagement of key leaders (in this case, policymakers and industry leaders) and the prototyping work. There are inherent trade-offs in combining the theoretical, political and pragmatic elements of systems change across the national, state and local levels. For example, while prototyping autonomy provided useful opportunities for diverse actors to imagine new institutional arrangements and innovative practices, this held potential to duplicate already-researched or in-use programs. It also presented fewer opportunities for a tightly aligned change agenda, where prototypes might not be targeting the level or modes needed to demonstrate scalable innovation or proof of success. On the other hand, in a context where research and policy leaders have dominated the discourse around systems for decades, on-the-ground practitioners, young people and communities may be crucial to generating new understandings and unique approaches, and to catalysing urgency in change efforts. Even with high-quality research, leader engagement and prototyping efforts, coherence may hold the key to translating social lab work into meaningful systemic change. Given the complexity of systems change work, piecemeal efforts at change are unlikely to see success. Instead, these efforts should be aligned, such that they pursue a shared agenda and engage in coordinated actions timed to feed into one another (e.g., research into social labs, prototypes into policy advocacy).

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s labour markets change and global economies become increasingly interconnected, students require opportunities to develop skills and competencies that are essential for success and life. Success in young adulthood and beyond requires not only traditional academic and vocational skills and competencies but also what have been broadly categorised as '21st century skills', which include communication skills, leadership skills and critical-thinking skills.

Learning Creates Australia (LCAust) launched in 2020 with the objective of convening an alliance of people and organisations that could systematically reform the education system to ensure that all young Australians have opportunities to learn and develop the knowledge, skills and competencies that will enable them to become successful in school, find productive employment and actively engage in their communities. In this report, the authors evaluate 'The Learner's Journey', a social lab designed by LCAust to explore ways to assess and accredit learning that better reflect the diverse knowledge sets, skills and dispositions of students.

Social lab participants included educators, parents, students, and consultants focusing on design-thinking and prototyping; and representatives from youth-serving organisations, tertiary education and industry. The authors conducted 37 interviews and focus groups conducted with 13 lab participants and 45 other stakeholders and community members engaged in the work. These interviews and focus groups were supported with surveys administered to lab participants (85 unique respondents) and other members of the community (20 unique respondents). The findings of the evaluation highlight both the promise and challenges of LCAust's social lab approach.