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"Our most important national resource is the creative capacity of our people."
(J.P. Guilford)

CREATIVE CONFIDENCE

ESSENTIAL ECONOMIC INFRASTRUCTURE

A submission to the Productivity Commission's Five Pillars of Productivity Inquiry:

Building a skilled and adaptable workforce.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Australia faces persistent productivity challenges that are undermining individual prosperity, community resilience, and national economic growth. These productivity issues have far-reaching negative impacts, from stagnating real wages to reduced living standards and diminished capacity to address complex societal challenges. In response, the government has developed an ambitious productivity growth agenda centred around five pillars and which aim to reverse these concerning trends and position Australia for sustained economic success.

The Productivity Commission has been tasked with developing meaningful and measurable productivity-enhancing reforms under each of these pillars to support these growth ambitions. The Commission's mandate is to identify the highest-priority reform areas that have the potential to materially boost Australia's productivity growth going forward.

This submission is a response to the Productivity Commission's Interim Report (2025a) on the pillar of **building a skilled and adaptable workforce**. It proposes that the highest priority reform to impact the desired outcomes of productivity, innovation and adaptability is the recognition of creative confidence as essential economic infrastructure. It asserts that creative confidence is the critical capability that must be built within our students, across the workforce and within business leadership at all levels. Moreover, it is the cultural characteristic that must be fostered across communities and the country if the required productivity growth is to be achieved.

Creativity—defined as the production of novel and useful ideas—is the fundamental driver of all meaningful change and progress. It powers productivity through enhanced problem-solving and efficiency gains, drives innovation by generating and implementing new solutions, and enables adaptability by providing the cognitive flexibility needed to navigate uncertainty and change. Conversely, without creativity, individuals, organisations and nations experience stagnation and slow growth, all symptoms we see occurring across Australia and which have prompted this inquiry.

However, reaping the benefits of creativity requires individual confidence in one's creative abilities. Creative confidence—comprising both a creative growth mindset[1] and creative self-efficacy—determines whether and how people will express their creative potential when opportunities arise. Creative confidence is a function of individual competencies and characteristics, but also depends heavily on broader organisational and socio-cultural elements that either support or suppress creative expression.

Introduction (cont'd)

Specifically, this submission provides a response to **draft recommendation 1.2** - Lead national efforts to ensure equitable access to educational technology (edtech) and artificial intelligence (AI). It asserts that, in addition to equitable access to educational technologies, there must also be equitable access to creative confidence-building resources, as it is this capability that will help address the persistent issue of social inequality. Additionally, it is recommended that a concerted effort be made to **match investments in AI training with equivalent attention to creative confidence.** This will minimise the risk of homogeneity and learned helplessness, which has already been shown by research to be a real risk, especially in student groups. **Creative confidence is also suggested to be central in teacher professional development** to ensure they have the requisite capabilities to enhance the creative growth mindset and self-efficacy of their students.

The submission also directly addresses **information request 2.4(4)** - Do Australian SMEs have persistent capability gaps that an advisory or consultation service should prioritise? Through evidence, it is shown that **creative confidence is the capability that should be prioritised across SMEs**, especially amongst business leaders. A concentrated effort to expand a creative growth mindset and creative self-efficacy will directly translate into a workforce that is more innovative, adaptable and productive.

Given the critical role that creative confidence plays in Australia's productivity and prosperity, additional recommendations have been proposed to ensure that we acknowledge creative confidence as essential economic infrastructure and to address current deficits in a holistic and integrated manner. It is recommended that:

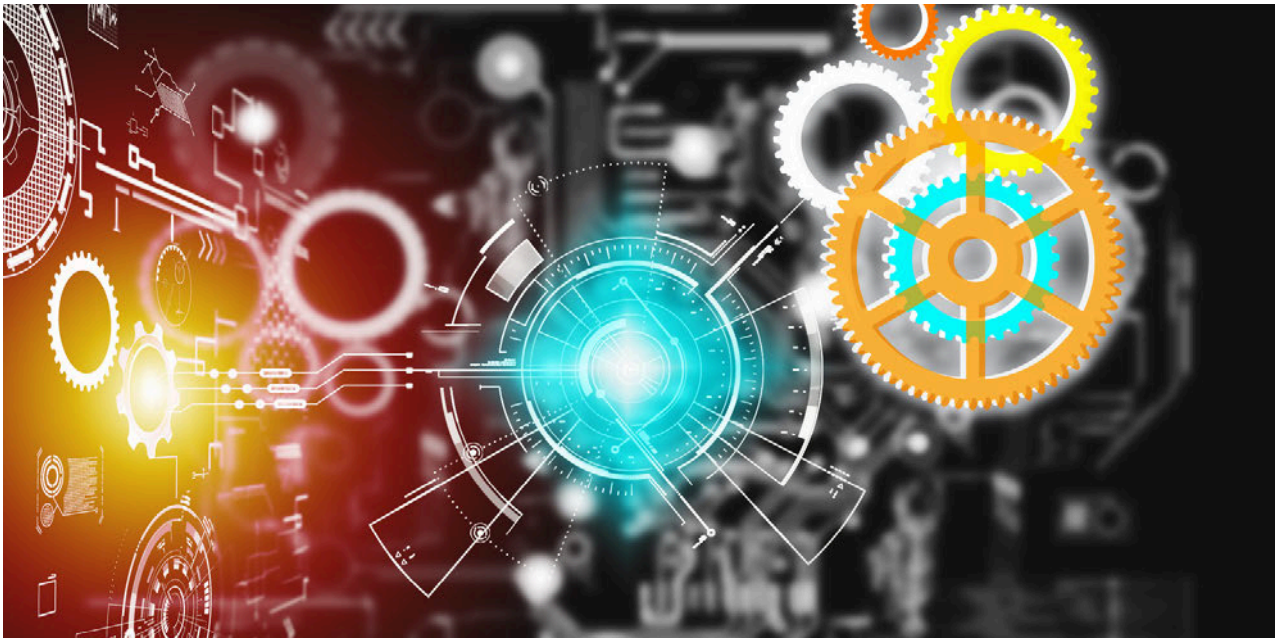
- ·Creative confidence is recognised as essential economic infrastructure, and the Productivity Commission should undertake further inquiry into its current state, particularly amongst SMEs.
- **Include creative confidence in the Measuring What Matters framework** to ensure this critical input to innovation and productivity is being acknowledged and addressed.
- **Position Australia as a creative country** by acknowledging the contribution the Cultural and Creative Sectors (CCS) play in boosting productivity and harnessing their power to build creative confidence across the nation.

It is through targeted interventions across the education and business sectors that we can establish Australia as a creative country and provide a global example of how nations can systematically build the creative confidence needed to thrive in an increasingly complex world.

This submission supports and complements one lodged for the interim report on creating a more dynamic and resilient economy, titled: Creative Confidence: Essential Reform Infrastructure (Belinda Tobin, 2025).

[1] The growth mindset referred to in this submission is the belief that abilities can be developed through effort. It is to be distinguished from the growth mindset referred to in the Productivity Commission's report Growth mindset: how to boost Australia's productivity (2025), which is defined as "elevating economic growth and its benefits in policy decisions".

What Is Creativity?



Each person reading this document brings a unique set of ideas about what creativity is, with these beliefs shaped by the opinions of our parents, teachers, peers and our own recent experiences. As a result, there can be significant confusion surrounding the word 'creativity,' with it frequently being conflated with arts and crafts. While creativity certainly includes all forms of artistic expression, it is far more fundamental than this narrow conception.

Anything (be it an idea, product, process, service or system) is creative when it is both original in its context and judged useful or impactful for its intended purpose.

The widely accepted definition, documented by researcher Teresa Amabile, defines creativity as "the production of novel and useful ideas" (Amabile, 1996). This understanding has been adopted by academics and practitioners, leading to the recognition that creativity is the ability to deliver something new and valuable.

What Is Creativity? (cont'd)

Creativity = Novelty + Value.

Both novelty and value are contextual concepts, assessed individually by each person involved. For example, a technological system may be groundbreaking to a small organisation. However, it can be considered business-as-usual to a large corporation that has made investments in digital transformation. Similarly, what may be deemed a valuable innovation by one stakeholder due to its impact on efficiency can be perceived as simply disruptive by another who sees negative effects on customer service.

Moreover, there are many different levels of novelty and value. The following table outlines a commonly adopted model developed by Kaufman and Beghetto (2009), which illustrates a spectrum of creativity ranging from personal insights to paradigm-shifting breakthroughs.

Table 1 – Levels of creativity

C Level	New To	Description	Examples
Mini-c Creativity	An individual	A new and personally meaningful insight.	A frontline worker discovering a more efficient way to process applications, even if that method is already known elsewhere.
Little-c Creativity	The immediate environment	Incremental changes to existing, routine processes.	Amending a training protocol that improves team performance or improvements to communication processes that increase stakeholder engagement.
Medium-c Creativity*	The immediate environment	New but conventional processes in line with the current way of thinking.	Development of custom reporting dashboards that centralise and streamline decision-making.
Pro-c Creativity	Professional domains	Radically new processes and products that divert from the current way of thinking.	Policy innovations that are adopted across jurisdictions or the application of private sector models to public sector contexts.
Big-C Creativity	Entire fields or cultures	Innovations that change entire domains or societies, be it domestically or globally.	Transformational technologies that reshape public service delivery or trade relationships that reinvigorate entire nations.

** The Medium-c Creativity level is an addition to the typology made by Glenn Houtgraaf (2022a) to support his analysis of creativity within the public sector. Further information is provided below.*

While the Pro-C or 'new-to-the-world' innovations garner significant attention and investment, as reported by the Productivity Commission (2023), they only emerge from the 1-2% of Australian businesses operating at the technological frontier. Likewise, it has been found that in the public sector, only 20% of reforms fit this revolutionary characteristic. Most of the creativity coming out of both the private and public sectors comprises the mini-c and medium-c creativity and is focused on reacting and adapting to external forces or making internally driven incremental improvements.

What Is Creativity? (cont'd)

Nevertheless, these lower levels of creativity are essential because this is where all innovation begins. Something cannot be new to the team, agency, community or the world until it is first new to the inventor. Personal insights always precede expansive change, and in this way, creativity always first comes from an individual.

Given the definition of creativity as simply comprising novelty and value, and the recognition that it occurs at different scales, it is easy to see how it is found in all aspects of our lives. Yes, it appears in the arts, but creativity is core to effective education, building personal and professional relationships, solving problems and for individual and organisational resilience.

Most relevant to the Productivity Commission's current lines of inquiry, creativity is also the driver of innovation and productivity improvements, and is at the heart of achieving workforce adaptability.

Creativity Powers Productivity

It is recognised that there is an imperative to improve productivity across the nation, and that two key mechanisms to achieve this are through encouraging innovation development and diffusion, especially in the non-market sector and fostering an adaptable workforce (Productivity Commission, 2023).

These outcomes are essential; however, it must be realised that they all require creativity as a precursor to achieve meaningful change.

Creativity:

- Powers productivity
- Precedes innovation
- Empowers adaptability
- Is foundational for the future of work
- Is paramount for solving wicked problems
- Positively influences individual wellbeing

Creativity Powers Productivity

In response to the continual decline in productivity, the government has developed an ambitious five-pillar agenda with a focus on empowering people, investing in skills, reforming key systems, and embracing new technologies. Ultimately, though, it has been acknowledged by Alex Robson, the Deputy Chair of the Productivity Commission (Productivity Commission, 2025b), that there are two fundamental requirements for growth:

1. New ideas
2. The application of the new ideas.

Therefore, the solution to productivity is creativity – the development and implementation of new and valuable ideas.

At the individual level, studies clearly show that creativity has a direct and positive effect on job performance by improving such qualities as independence, confidence, openness to risk and resilience (Duarte et al., 2021). Moreover, creativity is at the core of people's ability to solve problems, build positive relationships, harness the power of innovation, and, most importantly, is core to their physical and mental wellbeing, all factors which improve their quality of life every day and contribute to their overall work capacity.

Organisations that invest in creative cultures consistently outperform their less creative counterparts across multiple productivity metrics. Comprehensive research by Basadur (1993) demonstrates that organisational creativity delivers measurable economic outcomes, including increased efficiency, higher quality output, lower costs, faster project completion times, and improved resilience in the face of unexpected challenges.

Organisations with creative cultures also experience significant people outcomes that support productivity: higher job satisfaction, increased motivation and commitment, better teamwork, reduced turnover and absenteeism, and enhanced strategic thinking capabilities throughout the organisation. The evidence shows that these benefits compound over time, with creative organisations developing superior resource allocation capabilities and more effective decision-making processes that not only deliver but sustain productivity advantages.

Similarly, nations that concentrate on building the creative capacity of their people reap the rewards of enhanced productivity. OECD research provides compelling evidence that strong cultural and creative sectors (CCS) function as direct drivers of productivity through four main spillover mechanisms: supply chain linkages that embed creative inputs throughout the economy, geographic proximity effects that generate innovation clusters, skills movement that transfers creative capabilities across sectors, and collaboration networks that facilitate knowledge exchange and co-innovation (OECD, 2021c).

Interestingly, research also confirms that highly educated people working in creative occupations are the most relevant component in explaining total factor productivity (Marrocu & Paci, 2012). Therefore, if governments are committed to achieving productivity gains, making substantial investments in CCS is an evidence-based initiative that would generate economy-wide spillover effects.

Creativity Precedes Innovation

In 2019, Australia, along with over 40 other countries, signed the Declaration on Public Sector Innovation (OECD, 2019), in which it made a concrete commitment to support, improve and expand public sector innovation. The definition used in the declaration is that innovation is "implementing something novel to the context in order to achieve impact." This definition reveals three critical elements: novelty, impact (as an indicator of value), and implementation—demonstrating that innovation is fundamentally applied creativity.

Therefore, when we talk about innovation, we must recognise that creativity is its essential precursor, or as more succinctly stated,

"Creativity is the origin of innovation" (Houtgraaf, 2022b).

Creativity constitutes innovation's crucial front-end, representing the initial process of generating ideas. Innovation adds onto creativity, encompassing the subsequent process of practical implementation. You cannot have innovation without creativity; it is "part of the essential lifeblood of innovation" (OECD, 2017).

This understanding positions creativity not merely as a nice-to-have, but as an indispensable foundation upon which all meaningful innovation is built. It makes it clear that if leaders are seeking innovation, they must first make proactive investments in creative capability. This is as true for innovation adoption as it is for innovation diffusion. Because even if the new system, structure or process exists elsewhere, as we have seen in the multiple layers of creativity, the mere fact that it is new to that individual or organisation makes its adoption a creative act.

Creativity Is Paramount For Solving Wicked Problems

In addition to the positive impact of creativity on productivity and innovation, it must also be noted that it is a critical component in solving what are known as "wicked" problems - ones that arise from a complex, interconnected and ever-changing environment.

The United Nations Development Program undertook a comprehensive analysis of design thinking applications in government, which are interventions aimed at stimulating creativity. They found that such creative approaches deliver measurable benefits to public decision-making, including comprehensive problem perspectives, reduced duplicated efforts and policy inconsistencies, enhanced synergies and better-addressed trade-offs, reduced risks of unintended consequences, and higher chances of delivering complete and lasting solutions (UNDP, 2019).

Therefore, if the government is commited to addressing the most pressing social issues, then investments in building creative confidence are crucial.

“The most creative people are motivated by the grandest of problems.” ~ Unknown

Creativity Empowers Adaptability

Adaptability is the ability or willingness to change in response to altered conditions. It involves acting in different ways to ensure a continued positive outcome. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, health services rapidly adapted by expanding telehealth, reorganising physical spaces, developing new protocols, and embracing new roles—ensuring continued care and safety for patients despite unprecedented challenges. When we talk about an adaptable workforce, we are seeking one that is continuously able to respond to technological advancements, environmental challenges and industry needs.

Being adaptable is all about having the capability to behave in new ways, with these new behaviours delivering value by better suiting the conditions and enabling continuity of service and improving performance. We have seen how the characteristics of newness and value combine to define creativity. So, in this way, adaptability is also a creative act.

At the individual level, creative capability constitutes a fundamental cognitive resource that enables effective coping with stress, uncertainty, and change. It allows people to consider multiple perspectives, challenge established assumptions and generate alternative approaches to problems—precisely the psychological flexibility skills necessary for agility and responsiveness.

From an organisational perspective, creativity is a strategic imperative for institutional resilience. Organisations that systematically nurture creative capabilities demonstrate superior capacity to anticipate challenges, adapt to disruptions, and emerge from crises stronger than before. This is because creativity enables rapid sense-making during ambiguous situations, supporting flexible decision-making processes, and fostering the experimental mindsets necessary for learning (Amabile & Kramer, 2011).

As organisational culture scholar Edgar Schein observed, resilient organisations actively cultivate environments where curiosity, experimentation, and open-mindedness are cultural norms rather than exceptional behaviours (Schein & Schein, 2017).

These creative cultures also have tangible performance impacts. Research by Boston Consulting Group found that companies ranking in the top quartile for innovation capability were 2.6 times more likely to experience above-average growth rates and demonstrated superior resilience during economic downturns (Ringel et al., 2019). These organisations do not merely respond to change—they proactively drive transformation by encouraging employees to suggest process improvements, pilot experimental approaches, and collaborate across traditional departmental boundaries.

At the community level, creativity functions as both a catalyst for social cohesion and a mechanism for collective problem-solving. It has been demonstrated that communities with active creative sectors and strong creative engagement develop robust social capital, exhibit superior capacity to adapt to challenges, maintain social cohesion during disruptions, and experience a resilient recovery (OECD, 2021).

Creativity Empowers Adaptability (cont'd)

The Creative, Community, Wellbeing and Resilience Hub in New South Wales provides compelling evidence of creativity's role in community resilience. Established by the Blackheath Area Neighbourhood Centre in response to the devastating 2019-2020 bushfires, subsequent natural disasters, and the COVID-19 pandemic, the Hub delivered 217 workshops and events attended by more than 2,500 people over 18 months. The program integrated creative activities (art therapy, animation, writing, Indigenous crafts), practical skills (community gardening, bushfire preparedness), and wellbeing sessions (psychoeducation, support groups) (NSW Government, 2023).

Evaluation research found that participants reported increased confidence in coping with emergencies, stronger social connections, greater sense of community belonging, and measurably improved wellbeing. Most significantly, the creative components of the program appeared to enhance the effectiveness of practical resilience training by increasing engagement, improving retention of emergency preparedness information, and building the social networks necessary for effective collective response (NSW Government, 2023).

Creativity Is Foundational For The Future of Work

The World Economic Forum (WEF, 2025) has also made it clear: creativity is now a fundamental competency across all sectors. The Future of Jobs Report published by the WEF in 2025 draws on a sweeping survey of over 1,000 employers across 55 economies, representing 22 industry clusters and a workforce of 14 million people. What the report shows is that creative thinking ranks fourth among essential skills, with 57% of employers considering it crucial—a remarkable position, given that it outranks other top-of-mind capabilities, including customer service, AI and big data, technological literacy, cybersecurity, teaching and mentoring, quality control, and environmental stewardship.

This ranking makes sense because, within a complex and ever-changing context, it is creativity that enables the continual success of all the other skills. The ability to develop new and valuable ideas, or to behave in new and valuable ways, is essential in a constantly shifting world.

What is also striking is how many of the other top-ranking skills for the future rely on creativity. Creative thinking is not just a standalone skill—it is foundational to many of the other competencies. For example, analytical thinking, the top-rated skill at 69%, relies on creativity to ask the right questions, reframe challenges, make sense of complex information, connect disparate ideas, and generate novel solutions to unfamiliar problems.

Similarly, as we have just discussed, resilience, flexibility, and agility —the second most valued skill set at 67%—are all about adapting to change, overcoming setbacks, and finding new ways forward when the old paths no longer work, all of which are the hallmarks of creativity. Leadership and social influence (61%), too, are inseparable from creativity. Effective leaders inspire others by using their imagination to see beyond the status quo, sell the story of the organisation's future, encourage diverse perspectives and build the conditions for others to grow and express their creative capability.

Creativity Positively Influences Wellbeing

Most importantly, creativity is essential to human wellbeing. Creating something new, whether it's a piece of art, a vibrant garden, a positive social relationship, or an improved work process, calls on our entire being and has a profoundly positive effect on both our mental and physical health.

Everything from improved cardiovascular and cognitive health (Motlagh et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2018) to reduced stress (Kaimal et al., 2016) and disease prevention (Løkken et al., 2021) can be linked to creativity.

Creativity also has a positive effect on mental health by increasing positive emotions, reducing stress and anxiety, and enhancing overall psychological wellbeing. Research shows that engaging in creative activities promotes feelings of happiness, fosters purpose and self-expression, and can even help people better cope with emotional challenges and trauma.

Moreover, we all know wellbeing is a key driver of productivity. In this way, for the good of the people and for economic growth, creativity is a no-brainer. It is the fundamental capacity that drives all other desired outcomes.

What Is Creative Confidence?

Like every other skill we hold, creativity is a potential. It is an ability that we must actively choose to use. The invention of novel ideas and the implementation of new behaviours always involves some risk, be it personal, social, financial or reputational. With this risk comes discomfort.

So, while we may have the capability to think creativity or to change our actions to align with new situations, we must first feel both compelled and supported to overcome the discomfort and engage in the creative endeavour.

The extent to which we enact our creative potential depends greatly on our environment.

While creativity begins with an individual, it operates within a system, emerging (or not) from a rich mix of personal skill and beliefs, leadership behaviour, and broader societal boundaries around what is possible or acceptable.

Creativity is either helped or hindered by multiple, interconnected layers of a national culture, as shown in the following diagram.

Figure 1 - The multiple layers of the creativity system

What Is Creative Confidence? (cont'd)

At the very heart of this system lies an individual's domain knowledge—the deep, personal, substantive expertise that provides the raw materials from which new ideas emerge. This domain core is essential because, as research consistently shows, people generate their most original ideas in areas where they hold deep expertise in any given domain. On top of technical skills, you can build capabilities around creativity, adding on such strategies as brainstorming techniques, creative problem-solving methods, design thinking and systematic innovation approaches.

However, the extent a person will utilise their creative capabilities to develop new or improved outputs is bound by a person's creative confidence. While there can be a considerable investment made to boost individual skills, the effectiveness will always be limited by how people see themselves and their own creative potential. Creative confidence (also called creative self-belief) shapes how, when, and if creativity is expressed and is comprised of two distinct but interconnected components (Beghetto & Karwowski, 2017):

1. Growth creative mindset
A growth creative mindset refers to the extent that a person believes that creativity is a skill that can be developed. Research by Karwowski (2014) using the Creative Mindset Scale found that individuals with growth-oriented beliefs about creativity showed a greater willingness to engage in creative tasks and demonstrated more persistence when initial attempts were unsuccessful. Additionally, the OECD makes it clear that:

"Holding a growth mindset about creativity, along with higher levels of imagination and adventurousness, openness to intellect, curiosity, perspective taking and persistence, are all positively associated with better creative thinking performance." (OECD, 2024).

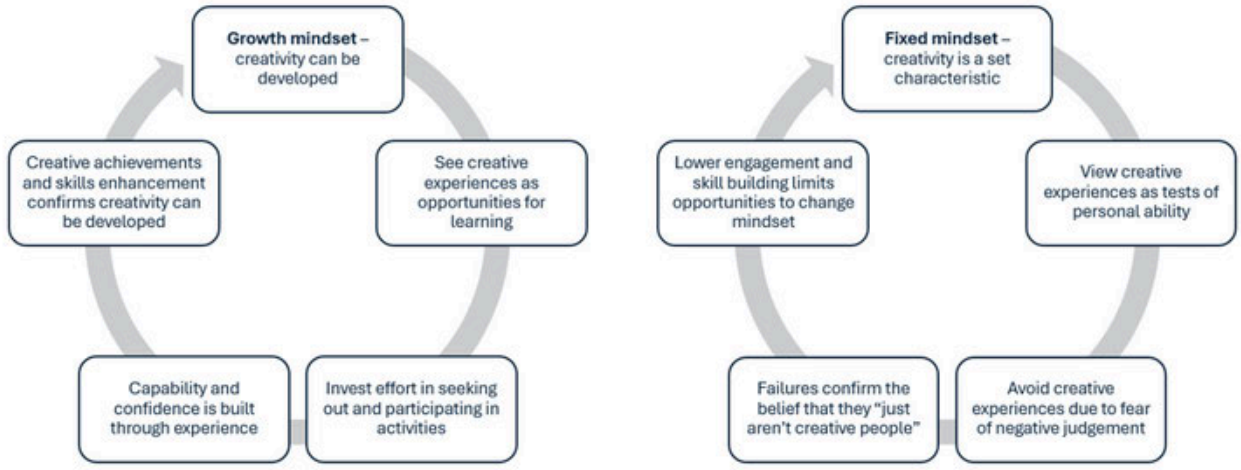
2. Creative self-efficacy
Creative self-efficacy refers to the belief that a person can successfully engage in creative activities and overcome related challenges (Beghetto & Karwowski, 2017). Individuals with high creative self-efficacy are more likely to initiate creative projects, set challenging creative goals, persist through difficulties, and recover from setbacks (Pretz & Nelson, 2017).

Creative self-efficacy has also been found to be a significant predictor of creative performance in organisational settings, as indicated by idea generation, the development of novel solutions, and the implementation of new and valuable approaches to tasks (Gong et al., 2009; Jaiswal & Dhar, 2017).

While growth mindset and creative self-efficacy are distinct constructs, they operate in a sequential, interdependent relationship, working to either enhance or erode creative confidence, as illustrated in the following diagrams.

What Is Creative Confidence? (cont'd)

Figure 2 - The reinforcing cycles of growth and fixed mindsets



Creative confidence then essentially answers the question: "Will this person engage creatively when the opportunity arises?" These findings hold important implications for creativity training interventions, making it clear that while investing in specific creative skills is beneficial, without equal support to build growth mindsets and creative self-efficacy through practical experience, these skills may deliver little tangible benefit.

As shown in Figure 1, creative confidence is influenced by an individual's own personality and preferences but also by the climate of the team they have around them (including family, friends, coworkers and classmates), the broader community cultures in which they live and work, and the social context of their country. In Australia, a lack of risk appetite is identified as a substantial barrier to innovation at the national level (Australian Parliament, 2015). It is public narratives that prioritise risk aversion, accountability, and cost efficiency that can create fear around innovation, particularly when failure in the public domain attracts significant scrutiny.

Therefore, enhancing creative capability requires not only a multi-layered but also an integrated approach.

We have heard that creativity is the driver of productivity, innovation, and adaptability, as well as individual and community wellbeing. Our prosperity relies on people being creative by instigating and implementing new and useful ideas. However, it is a capability that will come to the fore when people have the confidence to enact it. Here lies the crucial issue and opportunity for Australia – how can we improve creative confidence?

The Creative Confidence Concerns

It is essential to begin by congratulating both Australian students and the broader educational sector on the nation's impressive standing in creative thinking—ranking fourth globally for 15-year-olds, according to the latest Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).

This outstanding result demonstrates significant creative capability and stands as a testament to the educational sector's ability to foster these essential skills in young Australians (OECD, 2024)

However, as illustrated in Figure 1, while creative skills can be developed, their use in any given situation is not assured.

Whether people will use their creative capability is dependent on an individual's creative confidence. To understand the current state of creative confidence in Australia, it is essential to examine data on growth mindset and creative self-efficacy.

Worrying Levels Of A Growth Mindset

As promising as the results in creative thinking ability are, there are serious concerns regarding students' belief in their capacity to develop their creative potential further. PISA data reveal that only 50% of Australian Year 10 students believe they can meaningfully improve their creativity, instead viewing it as an innate talent—unchangeable by education, training, or experience. This "fixed mindset" is reported as worrying by PISA, as fostering engaged and innovative learners at all stages of life depends on a widespread belief that creativity is a developable skill, much like literacy or numeracy (OECD, 2024).

Socio-economic divides also present a concerning picture. Only 47% of disadvantaged students in Australia hold a growth mindset about creativity, compared to 52% of advantaged students—a five-point gap. However, both scores stand above the OECD average of 44.4% (disadvantaged) and 47.8% (advantaged). Ireland, in comparison, achieves growth mindset rates of 61.5% (disadvantaged) and 63.7% (advantaged), with a gap of just 2.2%, highlighting substantial room for improvement in Australia's level and equity of creative confidence (OECD, 2024).

The implications of these findings are significant: half of Australia's students may be limiting their own creative potential, which has direct consequences for adaptability, problem-solving, and innovation across the future workforce.

Confidence Wanes Within Specific Contexts

Equally concerning is the pronounced sensitivity of creative self-efficacy to context. While most students report high levels of self-efficacy in general, this confidence drops considerably in school settings. More than 80% of students across OECD nations enjoy learning new things overall. Concerningly, however, only half of the students report genuinely loving to learn at school. Similarly, while 71% feel capable of creative thinking in everyday problem-solving, this dropped to 62% when students were asked about their level of confidence to generate creative ideas for school projects (OECD, 2024).

Notably, despite Australia's fourth-place result for creative thinking ability, it places just 31st in world rankings for creative self-efficacy, with a mean index score of 0.02—slightly above the OECD average of 0, and far behind leading performers like Panama (0.43) (OECD, 2024).

These statistics underscore the significant influence of environment and culture on creative confidence. Without supportive contexts, true creative capability is crushed. It cannot thrive or reliably translate into workforce potential and innovative capacity. The impact of context on creative confidence has also been proven to play out in the organisational context, where it is the creative confidence of the leader that establishes the permission and processes for others to enact their creativity.

Confidence Wanes Within Specific Contexts (cont'd)

Leaders who are confident in their own creative abilities encourage their teams to pursue creative problem-solving and are more likely to build environments that foster creativity (Huang et al., 2016). Research demonstrates that leader creativity is positively correlated with business growth, as creative leaders actively seek out new business opportunities, make more valuable discoveries that drive the creation of new value, and maintain competitive advantage through innovative thinking (Li et al., 2022). Conversely, if leaders do not have creative confidence, then it will be highly unlikely that their staff will either. This interrelationship between managers and staff means that organisational leaders provide the crucial context for creative confidence, directly shaping their team's willingness and ability to innovate.

The Issues Are Amplified In A Workplace

The contextual sensitivity of creative confidence identified in educational settings becomes critically amplified when these students enter the workforce. Given the established evidence that creative capability requires supportive environments to flourish, the workplace context becomes the determining factor in whether Australia's creative potential translates into productivity, innovation, and adaptability outcomes (OECD, 2024).

The amplification effect occurs through multiple interconnected pathways. First, students with fixed creative mindsets—representing 50% of the cohort—enter organisations where, without intervention, they encounter leaders and colleagues who likely share similar limiting beliefs about creativity. Research demonstrates that leaders who lack creative confidence create environments that stifle creative expression in their teams, establishing organisational cultures where innovation is discouraged or unsupported (Huang et al., 2016). This influence creates a self-perpetuating cycle where creative potential is systematically undermined at the organisational level.

More concerning is the impact on the leadership pipeline. Today's students with fixed creative mindsets will become tomorrow's managers, business owners, and organisational leaders. Without growth mindsets, these future leaders will be unwilling and unable to take creative risks, drive change, or establish environments that encourage staff to innovate and improve processes. Through their influence on individual staff and corporate cultures, a single leader lacking creative confidence can negatively impact entire teams and organisations, creating widespread barriers to the adaptability and innovation that the Productivity Commission identifies as essential for economic growth (Productivity Commission, 2025).

The equity implications are particularly troubling. Disadvantaged students, who already demonstrate lower levels of creative growth mindset (47% versus 52% for advantaged students), are most likely to enter workplaces that provide limited support for creative confidence development (OECD, 2024). This flow-on effect perpetuates and amplifies existing inequalities, denying those who would most benefit from creative confidence—as a pathway to better opportunities and improved wellbeing—the very environments needed to develop and express these capabilities.

Creative Confidence Is Imperative With AI

As artificial intelligence tools become increasingly integrated into educational and workplace environments across all sectors, there is compelling evidence for their potential to enhance individual creative output. Research demonstrates that AI-assisted creative work can produce measurable improvements, with generative AI increasing novelty by 5.4% and usefulness by 3.7% in creative writing tasks. When users can choose from multiple AI suggestions, these improvements reach 8.1% in novelty and 9.0% in usefulness, representing genuine creative enhancement rather than mere efficiency gains (Doshi & Hauser, 2024).

The democratising effect proves most pronounced for those initially struggling with creativity, with individuals scoring low on divergent thinking tests showing creativity gains of 10.7% and usefulness improvements of 11.5% when AI-assisted. AI tools can promote divergent thinking by forcing associations among remote concepts and enabling users to explore novel combinations they might never have considered independently (Doshi & Hauser, 2024).

However, the widespread adoption of AI technologies without conscious attention to the development of creative confidence poses significant risks that could undermine these benefits. Research reveals that frequent AI tool usage correlates negatively with critical thinking abilities, with a comprehensive study of 666 participants finding that cognitive offloading—delegating cognitive tasks to AI rather than engaging in deep analytical reasoning—was inversely related to critical thinking performance (Gerlich, 2025). Most concerning, younger participants aged 17-25 showed the highest dependence on AI tools and correspondingly lower critical thinking scores, with these deficits persisting even when attempting cognitive work without AI assistance.

The risk of AI dependence creates a paradox at the heart of AI adoption. While the technology can enhance individual creativity, it simultaneously risks creating learned helplessness that erodes the very creative confidence needed to harness AI's power effectively. When individuals reflexively reach for machine assistance rather than struggling productively with ambiguity and challenge, they surrender opportunities to strengthen their own imaginative skills. AI reliance can lead to lower creative self-efficacy, building a generation trained to assume their own resourcefulness is irrelevant (Doshi & Hauser, 2024; Gerlich, 2025).

Additionally, while AI enhances individual creativity, it paradoxically reduces collective novelty through algorithmic homogenisation. As more people turn to AI for creative input, the pool of ideas grows increasingly similar rather than diverse, creating what researchers term "model collapse", where machines training on their own outputs progressively narrow the possibility space for truly original thinking (Landis, 2024).

Therefore, any comprehensive AI adoption strategy—whether in schools responding to the Productivity Commission's recommendations on educational technology or workplaces seeking productivity gains—must prioritise building creative confidence alongside technological capability. Without conscious investment in creative growth mindsets and self-efficacy, AI risks creating a workforce characterised by dependency rather than adaptability, conformity rather than innovation, and algorithmic compliance rather than the creative courage needed to address complex challenges and drive genuine productivity growth.

Research Gaps Are Limiting Evidence-Based Interventions

There is a lack of research in Australia specifically examining the creative growth mindset or creative self-efficacy of leaders and the broader workforce, and how this may be impacting productivity, adaptability, and innovation.

The research done to date focuses upon:

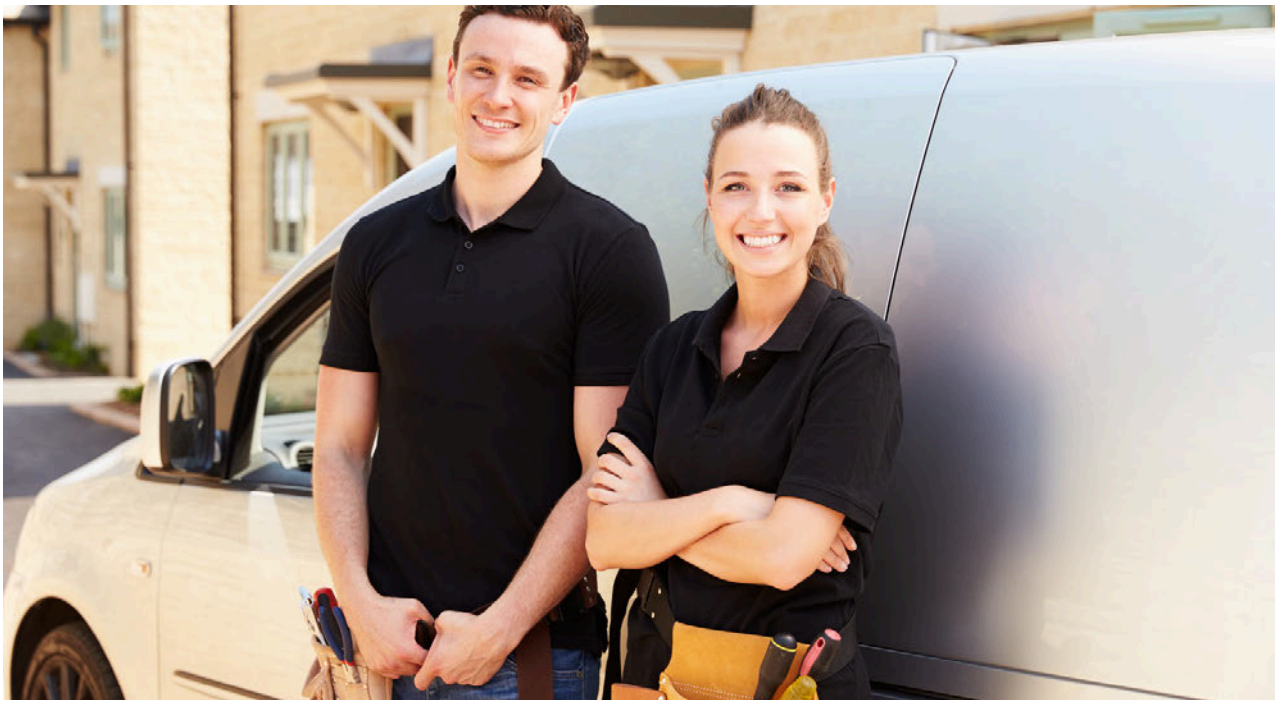
- Creative industries workers specifically (Goodwin, 2019 and Creative Australia, 2025)
- Students in educational contexts (OECD, 2024 and Ginns et. al., 2023)
- The outputs of creative confidence including workplace innovation (development and diffusion) and productivity.

The research done in educational contexts is comprehensive and compelling, providing a clear picture of the scale of challenge, but also the causes and contributors to deficiencies in creative confidence, allowing for well-advised policy and practice changes. However, currently, there is no systematic measurement of creative confidence in the workforce across different industries, sectors, or leadership levels, nor is there a clear understanding of the best way to boost this within Australia's specific cultural workplace contexts.

To date, SME skills-based interventions have primarily focused on business ownership fundamentals and general management practices, rather than core capabilities such as creative confidence, which have been proven to enable adaptability and innovation (Productivity Commission, 2025). However, without substantial research, it is difficult to determine exactly what current confidence levels look like across sectors and where and what interventions will deliver the most value for the investment made.

Without comprehensive data on the current state of creative confidence across Australia's workforce, it becomes difficult to develop evidence-based policies that could systematically address the productivity, innovation, and adaptability challenges the nation faces. Therefore, it is recommended that the Productivity Commission invest resources into researching creative confidence, including it as a key area for future lines of inquiry.

The Opportunity – Building Australia's Creative Confidence



There are two sides to every coin, and every challenge also presents an opportunity. Simply put, creativity is necessary to deliver all the improvements desired by the reform agenda, including productivity, innovation and adaptability. Additionally, as illustrated, creative capability is only fully enacted when an individual possesses creative confidence.

Therefore, if we want to see productivity improve, we have an opportunity to target and positively shape creative confidence across the country.

Recommendations:

- Recognise creative confidence as essential economic infrastructure.
- Undertake research to inform evidence-based programs.
- Make educational investments in developing growth mindsets.
- Target SME advisory activities to build creative confidence.
- Undertake a national culture change program to position Australia as creative country.

Recognising Creative Confidence as Essential Economic Infrastructure

There is a significant opportunity for Australia to position itself as a global leader in understanding and investing in the critical capability of creative confidence. Creative confidence is the core to achieving all the desired economic outcomes. Yet, it remains largely invisible in policy frameworks and discussions of economic infrastructure. By formally recognising creative confidence as essential economic infrastructure—similar to how we recognise physical infrastructure, digital infrastructure, and human capital—Australia can pioneer a new approach to productivity enhancement that addresses root causes rather than the symptoms, such as productivity slumps.

Comprehensive Workforce Research to Guide Evidence-Based Policy

The current research gaps around creative confidence in Australia's workforce present an opportunity to develop world-leading insights that can inform targeted interventions. While substantial research exists on innovation outcomes and student creative confidence, combining these areas could determine the exact state of creative confidence across the workforce. Moreover, there is the opportunity to focus on leadership positions that shape the contexts and cultures for others. This research would provide the evidence base needed to design precise, cost-effective interventions that deliver maximum return on investment in terms of productivity, innovation, and adaptability outcomes.

Educational Investment in Creative Confidence

The finding described as worrying by the OECD, that 50% of students hold fixed creative mindsets presents a clear opportunity. Investments can be made in schooling programs that improve growth mindsets and creative self-efficacy for the wellbeing of the students and their communities, as well as boosting innovation and productivity potential. PISA research demonstrates that creative confidence can be developed through educational interventions, meaning that targeted curriculum changes and teacher professional development could fundamentally shift Australia's creative confidence baseline for future generations. They would represent a strategic investment in long-term economic competitiveness and individual wellbeing.

As acknowledged by draft recommendation 1.2, equitable access to educational technology (edtech) and artificial intelligence (AI) is imperative. However, just as critical is the opportunity to address the socio-economic gap in creative confidence, where disadvantaged students demonstrate lower levels of creative growth mindset (47% versus 52% for advantaged students). This disparity has profound flow-on effects, as those from disadvantaged backgrounds who would most benefit from creative confidence—as a pathway to better opportunities, improved wellbeing, and economic mobility—are being systematically denied the very mindsets needed to develop and express these capabilities.

Educational Investment in Creative Growth Mindsets (cont'd)

By ensuring equitable access to creative confidence-building supports across all schools and communities, Australia can break cycles of disadvantage while simultaneously strengthening the national creative capacity essential for productivity growth. Addressing this gap is not merely a matter of social equity—it represents a strategic economic opportunity to unlock the creative potential of entire population segments and build a more resilient, adaptable, and innovative society.

Targeted Advisory for Leaders and SMEs

The amplification effect whereby leaders with low creative confidence create environments that stifle innovation presents an opportunity to achieve an outsized impact through focused interventions. Information request 2.4(4) in the interim report asks, "Do Australian SMEs have persistent capability gaps that an advisory or consultation service should prioritise? The evidence provided in this submission shows that creative confidence is the capability that should be prioritised across SMEs, especially amongst business leaders.

Targeting advisory for SME leaders—who are responsible for developing and implementing innovations and creating environments that foster creative confidence in others—could prevent the loss of creative potential as students transition to the workforce. Such programs would ensure the creative thinking abilities we see in students translate into workplace innovation and improved productivity.

National Cultural Transformation

The sensitivity of creative confidence to cultural contexts presents an opportunity to foster creative confidence as a defining national characteristic through coordinated leadership and interventions at all levels of the economy. By embedding creative confidence development into national frameworks, industry standards, and organisational cultures, Australia could create a self-reinforcing cycle where creative confidence becomes a competitive advantage that attracts investment, talent, and innovation opportunities from around the world. The government could position Australia as a creative country, and invest in concentrated culture change programs that both harness the power and expertise of our vibrant CCS and address the risk aversion stifling innovation development and diffusion.

Conclusion

Creative Confidence - The Essential Economic Infrastructure

The opportunities outlined previously demonstrate that Australia can take decisive action to build the creative confidence infrastructure that underpins individual and collective wellbeing. The following recommendations present a coordinated approach that will not only strengthen Australia's workforce but also position the nation for sustained productivity growth and improved prosperity.

The recommendations throughout this submission recognise that creative confidence is not an optional add-on to existing productivity strategies —it is the essential foundation that determines whether those strategies will deliver their intended outcomes. By addressing creative confidence systematically, from early education through to leadership development, Australia can unlock the full potential of its human capital and establish a competitive advantage in an increasingly complex and rapidly changing global economy.

The proposals outlined on the following page directly respond to the Productivity Commission's draft recommendations and requests for information while also addressing the deeper systemic issues that are limiting their effectiveness. Together, they represent an integrated strategy to build Australia's creative confidence as essential economic infrastructure, ensuring that current and future productivity initiatives are built on the solid foundation of a workforce confident in its ability to innovate, adapt, and drive meaningful change.

Recommendations

There are seven recommendations aimed at establishing creative confidence as economic infrastructure and building a distinctive national competitive advantage.

INTERIM REPORT: Draft recommendation 1.2 - Lead national efforts to ensure equitable access to educational technology (edtech) and artificial intelligence (AI).

Recommendation 1 – Ensure equitable access to creative confidence programs

Draft Recommendation 1.2 of the Interim Report relates to ensuring equitable access to educational technology and AI. This focus on treating social inequity in technological literacy is imperative; however, it is recommended that this initiative be expanded to ensure that measures to build equitable creative confidence are considered. Dedicated effort must be directed to ensuring the creative confidence development of the disadvantaged socio-economic groups so that systemic factors sustaining inequity can be addressed.

Recommendation 2 – Match investments in AI with equivalent creative confidence building

The results from the PISA report show there are opportunities to improve both the levels and equity of creative confidence. It is recommended to establish and/or strengthen the targeted core programs in the school curriculum, specifically designed to build creative confidence and growth mindsets. The importance of these initiatives is escalated when considering the encouragement being provided to expand AI's use in both educational settings and workplaces.

While AI has considerable creative benefits, without disciplined and dedicated investments in creative confidence, Australia risks our students and staff becoming less creative, thus impeding future innovation and adaptability outcomes. It is recommended that wherever AI capability programs are deployed, at least equal investments should be made into the development of creative growth mindsets and creative self-efficacy. This matching between technological and creative capabilities will ensure the great potential in the human/AI partnerships is realised and build the confidence for continual skill development and creative enactment beyond the influence of technological tools.

Recommendations (cont'd)

Recommendation 3 – Embed creative confidence in teacher professional development programs

Educators cannot teach others what they first do not have themselves. Therefore, it is recommended that there be a comprehensive investment made in teacher professional development programs focused on building educators' own creative confidence. This professional development should encompass both a creative growth mindset and creative self-efficacy, enabling teachers to reap the benefits of creativity in their own lives and nurture these essential capabilities in their students.

INTERIM REPORT: Information request 2.4(4) - Do Australian SMEs have persistent capability gaps that an advisory or consultation service should prioritise?

Recommendation 4 – Target advisory services to building SME creative confidence

Information request 2.5(4) in the Interim Report seeks information about persistent capability gaps and the types of assistance that would be most valuable for SMEs. Current interventions primarily focus on the practical aspects and responsibilities of running a business. These aids must be congratulated, and no doubt provide valuable support to SMEs. However, the lack of innovation diffusion in Australian SMEs, combined with evidence of low rates of creative growth mindset in the incoming workforce, suggests that creative confidence represents a significant barrier to productivity improvement.

Advisory services should be designed and delivered to build creative confidence among SME leaders and managers, addressing the leadership pipeline effect where those with fixed creative mindsets create environments that stifle innovation and adaptability in their organisations.

Recommendations (cont'd)

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS: to support a holistic approach to building creative confidence across Australia.

Recommendation 5 - Recognise creative confidence as essential economic infrastructure and undertake further inquiry

The Productivity Commission should formally recognise creative confidence as a foundational skill that must be fostered and as essential economic infrastructure—a critical input to productivity and innovation outcomes. This recognition would position creative confidence alongside physical infrastructure, digital infrastructure, and human capital as a core element of Australia's economic foundation.

Additionally, given the evidence linking creative confidence to productivity, innovation, and adaptability, this warrants consideration as a topic for a future Productivity Commission inquiry to understand the current state of this capability, especially across SMEs, and to develop comprehensive policy frameworks and measurement approaches.

Recommendation 6 - Include creative confidence in the Measuring What Matters wellbeing framework

Currently, the Measuring What Matters wellbeing framework includes measures around productivity and innovation, which we have seen are outputs of creative confidence. Therefore, including a lead indicator such as creative confidence or creative growth mindset will ensure this framework is more holistic and measure the vital inputs into the broader economic objectives. This national recognition and measurement would also set the scene for broader national discussion about the importance of creative confidence to both individual wellbeing and economic prosperity, while providing baseline data to track progress over time.

Recommendations (cont'd)

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS: to support a holistic approach to building creative confidence across Australia.

Recommendation 7 – Position Australia as a creative country

Central to all these recommendations is the potential vision and positioning of Australia as a creative country.

This inspirational ambition can be supported by a coordinated national cultural change initiative promoting Australia as a nation where creative confidence is recognised and systematically developed as essential economic infrastructure. Supporting initiatives could include Creative Confidence Centres of Excellence, national frameworks and assessment tools, cross-sector collaboration programs, and public awareness campaigns that celebrate creativity as a core Australian value.

A specific and significant part of this program would be recognising and harnessing the power contained within the Cultural and Creative Sectors (CCS). As outlined by the OECD research, strong CCS functions as a direct driver of productivity through supply chain linkages, geographic proximity effects, the transfer of creative capabilities across sectors, and collaboration networks that facilitate knowledge exchange and co-innovation (OECD, 2021).

Australia's CCS represents a natural laboratory where creative confidence is actively developed and sustained, offering valuable insights for addressing broader workforce creative confidence deficits. Further research can be undertaken to identify how creative confidence is fostered within these industries and to adapt these practices through existing spillover mechanisms to build creative confidence in non-creative sectors, including manufacturing, healthcare, finance, and public administration.

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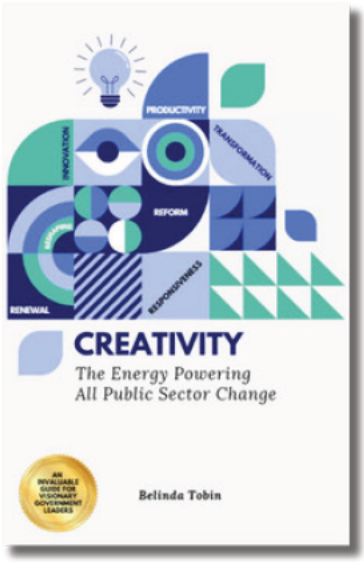
About The Author

Belinda Tobin holds a BCom from the University of Wollongong and an MBA from the University of Queensland. She spent her early career consulting on governance and strategy to multi-national corporations and implementing change projects in governments across Australia. Over the last 20 years, she has shaped the governance, strategy, and performance systems in various Queensland state government agencies, providing her with deep insights into the practical challenges of driving productivity, innovation, and adaptability in large-scale organisations.

Through her personal creative pursuits, Belinda has realised the power of creativity as a fundamental driver of meaningful change. To this end, she has spent the last few years researching and writing about creativity's nature and preconditions, integrating her extensive public sector expertise with lived experience and academic investigation. She has published **Understanding Creativity**, which provides a comprehensive view of creativity from multiple perspectives. In 2025, she published **Create Your Classroom**, which illustrates the importance of creativity not only for the educational sector in general but also as a personal imperative for all educators.

Her forthcoming book, **Creativity: The Energy Powering All Public Sector Change**, will demonstrate how creative confidence is the core driver behind all innovation, transformation, reshaping, and reform, and how it is the public sector leader's own creativity that precedes every change. Through her proprietary model, The Creative Energy Equation, she shows how public sector leaders and agencies can harness the power of creativity for flourishing in both their personal and professional lives.

Through her consultancy, Belinda helps organisations of all kinds understand the power of creative confidence and supports individuals to foster it for themselves. Her unique combination of governance and strategy expertise, public and private sector experience, and deep creative research positions her to understand both the practical barriers to productivity growth and the creative confidence solutions needed to overcome them.



Belinda passionately believes that creative confidence is not only a key source of personal and community wellbeing but is essential economic infrastructure that drives national and global prosperity. This submission supports her belief by showing how Australia can become a creative country and offers evidence-based recommendations for positioning our country as a global leader in creative confidence development.

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