

Headline Summary **AI Capability in Australian Secondary Schools**



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Headline Summary

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About this document.

The study behind this summary was commissioned by a private capital investment firm. The commissioner had no role in the analysis or the findings, and the views here are Insight into Impact's own. Insight into Impact also develops assessment and review material informed by this research.

Names.

Schools and interviewees are not named. Schools are described only by whether they are independent or government, and by whether they sit in a city, on the edge of a city, or in a regional area. The descriptions are deliberately broad so that individual schools cannot be identified. Commercial products are named, because a review of the market that does not say what it reviewed cannot be judged.

What this is.

This is a headline summary of a longer study. It carries the study's central findings and nothing else. It draws on a purposive, non-random sample of schools and interviewees chosen because they had visible AI work to examine, not a random sample of Australian schools generally. The Findings Report, which holds the complete evidence base, methodology, market and school reviews, interview findings and references, is available on request.

See Where to find more, at the end of this document.

What this study found

This study asks two questions. What does an Australian student need to know about AI to leave school as a credible learner and a credible future employee. And what can other schools copy from the schools that are leading in this space.!

To answer them, the study looks at the same problem from three separate directions. It reviews twelve AI products sold to Australian secondary schools. It reviews twenty schools that have put something on the public record about their AI work. And it draws on twenty-three interviews with school leaders, classroom teachers and people who work across the sector in five states.

Seven things every student needs. Students need to know what tool they are using and why they chose it. They need to check what it tells them. They need to be able to say which parts of their work are their own. They need to know what not to type into it. They need to spot when it is confidently wrong. They need to use it to sharpen their thinking rather than to skip it. And they need to understand what these tools are when they start to feel like a companion. Weakness in any one of the seven undermines the rest.

The market sells access rather than capability. The products available to schools are strongest on the things a school can buy, such as safety settings and privacy controls. They are weakest on the things a school must teach. The market's response to students using AI in assessment has largely been software that tries to detect it, rather than material that helps teachers redesign the work.

Some schools are doing more than their public record shows. Three of the twenty schools reviewed publicly were also interviewed. In all three, the interview showed more work underway than the public record revealed, by a consistent margin. Three cases is a small number, and this is a signal rather than a proven pattern across the sector. It points in one direction, and it matters, because work that cannot be seen from outside a school cannot be copied by another school.

Teacher confidence sets the pace. Across the interviews, nothing reached students faster than teachers could carry it. Where teacher confidence was low, little happened downstream regardless of policy, platform or budget.

Authorship in assessment is the widest gap. Being able to account for which parts of a piece of work are a student's own is the weakest of the seven areas in every part of this study. It is also the area where the products available to schools offer the least help.

There are two ways to fail rather than one. In some schools, students hand their thinking to the machine. In others AI is banned and students leave with no idea how to use it. Both appear in this study, and both leave students short.

Money does not explain the differences. Regional independent schools and city government schools in this study score above expensive city independent schools on the same measures.

And the limit of it all. Every school in this study can show what it has built. None provided measured evidence that its students are more capable as a result. Most interviewees said they have no baseline data on student capability and no confirmed way to test outcomes in their own school. So, everything here is a finding about what schools are doing. Nothing here is a finding about what students can do.

The seven things every student needs

This is the study's answer to its first question: what a student needs to leave school as a credible learner and a credible future employee. Six of the seven are confirmed by all three directions of evidence together, the market review, the twenty-school review and the interviews. The seventh, distinguishing AI from a companion, rests on thinner ground: the market and the school reviews are largely silent on it, so most of what the study knows here comes from the interviews alone. That is why it gets its own note below, as an emerging concern rather than an established one.

	What students need	In plain terms
1	Knowing the tool	Can say what they used and why, what it does badly, and can recognise it as AI even when nothing says so
2	Checking the output	Tests what it produces before relying on it
3	Owning the work	Can say which parts are theirs and what the task allowed
4	Staying safe	Knows what not to put into it, anywhere, not only on the school platform
5	Spotting confident errors	Notifies when it is fluent, certain and wrong
6	Thinking with it rather than instead of it	Uses it to sharpen reasoning rather than to skip it
7	Distinguishing from a companion	Knows what it is when it begins to feel like a friend

A note on the seventh. Three interviewees raised it separately, without being prompted, framing it in three different ways: one through child safety, one through the school's values and the dignity of the person, one through the risks to students who are already vulnerable. Three people reaching the same worry from three different angles, without comparing notes, says more than three people agreeing in one conversation.

The Findings Report sets out the evidence behind each of the seven, area by area, in Section 8.

What the evidence points to: the order to work in

Fourteen practices came out of the interviews. Each was tested against six criteria, including whether an ordinary school can do it and whether it produces evidence over time, and each ties directly to one of the seven areas. The full list, with the source of each practice and how it was tested, is set out in the Findings Report.

Two findings determine the order below. Teacher confidence first, because nothing reaches students faster than teachers can carry it. Authorship second, because it is the widest gap.

Stage	Timing	Focus
1	0 to 6 months	Teacher confidence, and one named person responsible
2	3 to 9 months	Authorship built into assessment, task by task
3	6 to 9 months	Teaching students directly
4	9 to 12 months	Assessment that cannot be completed without thinking
5	12 to 18 months	Publishing what worked, and using existing pastoral programs

The timings overlap. Because the seven areas depend on each other, the evidence does not support completing one stage before beginning the next.

Most of the fourteen practices require nothing beyond what a school already has, and the remainder sit inside ordinary operating budgets. The practices that transfer best in this study concern teaching and relationships rather than technology.

As with everything else in this study, these fourteen practices are proven only in the sense that schools are doing them, not that they improve student capability. The order above is what the evidence points to, not advice tailored to any one school.

Where to find more

This headline summary carries the study's central findings. Behind it sits the full evidence base: twelve products reviewed, twenty schools reviewed against five measures, twenty-three interviews across five states, the complete scoring methodology, the six tests applied to fourteen practices, what the study cannot claim, and the full reference list.

The Findings Report sets all of this out in detail, including the evidence behind each of the seven areas, what the market sells and what it does not, what the twenty schools show publicly, what teachers and leaders said in the interviews, and where this sits against the Australian curriculum. It is available on request.

Insight into Impact does not sell programs or platforms.

Some of the material behind this study has also been developed into resources a school can use now. Three exist today:

A self-assessment for schools. A short instrument a school completes itself, using the same five measures applied to the twenty schools in this study. It shows a school what it has built and where the gaps sit, and it can be submitted to see where the school falls against the study's range.

A classroom activity that tests thinking. A structured task and marking guide for a single class. It examines what students can do when they must question what AI has told them, using only what they already know.

A review instrument. A short, defensible way for a principal, board or external reviewer to establish where a school's students currently sit against the seven areas, with a parallel version for teacher practice.

Further material is in development, including work on testing what students can demonstrate rather than what they report about themselves.

Anyone who would like the Findings Report, or to discuss what these findings might mean in a particular setting, is welcome to contact Dr Marcus Curcija directly at mc@insightintoimpact.com.au, or visit insightintoimpact.com.au.