

Education for the common good

Exploring exemplary education and the positive impacts of Christian education in society



ACS
Associated Christian Schools
Christian education for the common good

mccrindle

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Introduction

Education is a foundational part of life. Individuals continually grow and develop throughout their lives, being formed by different teachers, mentors, family members as well as their own life experiences.

While education is multifaceted and ongoing, education institutions such as schools and universities, are a key part of the education process. This report, commissioned by Associated Christian Schools, seeks to understand the role of education in society and what 'exemplary education' looks like.

Data for this report has been collected through [ten in-depth interviews with education professionals](#) and a [nationally representative survey of 1,000 Australians](#).

Executive summary

Australians believe education should equip students to contribute to the common good of society

Australians agree the role of education in society is to provide students with knowledge and understanding (88% strongly/somewhat agree). Knowledge provides a base for students to start thinking for themselves and developing skills and character. When given the chance to respond freely many Australians believe the purpose of education is to prepare students for their life ahead, particularly in preparing for work.

While Australians agree education plays a role in developing the individual person, they are more likely to believe in the collective benefits of education – seeing the education system’s role in contributing to the common good of society. Four in five Australians (85%) strongly/somewhat agree students should leave school with the desire and the skills to contribute to the flourishing of human society compared to three in five (64%) who believe education should equip students to be successful individuals.

Five principles for exemplary education

This research analyses the five factors which Australians believe comprise an exemplary education.



1. Students feel safe and valued within the educational environment



2. Students are taught to serve, interact and collaborate with others



3. Education is oriented towards the development of the whole person



4. Students are challenged to think beyond their current knowledge and experience



5. Values are integrated into the life of the institution through a shared culture and purpose

Educating for the common good by equipping students with the desire and the skills to help society flourish

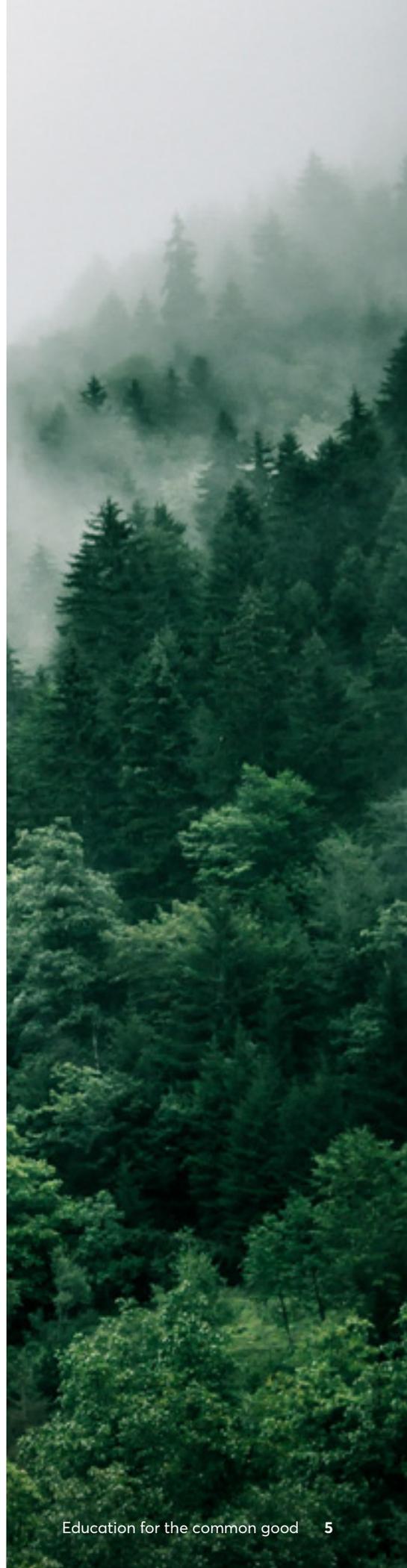
There are several ways education can contribute to the good of society as a whole. More than four in five Australians (82%) strongly/somewhat agree education can contribute to the common good of society by equipping graduates with skills which are beneficial to society. Beyond skills development, however, education plays a key role in producing graduates who care about the needs of others (81%) and who have a desire to make a positive difference (81%).

Positive impacts of Christian education

Seven in ten Australians (72%) strongly/somewhat agree it is beneficial to society to have various education options available, such as government schools, faith-based schools and selective schools. Christian education is not the only good education option, but it does impact its students and the wider Australian community in a number of positive ways.

Australians believe the most positive contribution of Christian education in society is that students are encouraged to ask the big questions in life such as 'why am I here?' and 'what is the meaning of life?' Almost three in five (57%) believe this has an extremely/very positive impact in society, while 88% believe it has a positive impact overall (extremely/very/somewhat). Christian education, by virtue of being upfront about its aims and intentions, can provide students with opportunities to explore these questions. Australians also believe Christian education has a positive impact on society by providing students with the opportunity to explore questions of faith and belief (48% extremely/very positive impact).

Christian education can also have a positive impact in society by encouraging students to love others and serve their community and by developing students holistically. More than half of Australians (55%) believe Christian education has an extremely/very positive impact on society because it encourages students to love and serve others. A similar proportion (54%) believe Christian education's focus on educating the heart as well as the mind has an extremely/very positive impact on society as a whole.



The role of education in society

Cultivating knowledge and understanding

Fundamentally, education is the giving and receiving of knowledge. Almost nine in ten Australians (88%) strongly/somewhat agree the role of education in society is to provide students with knowledge and understanding. More than four in five (83%) believe it is extremely/very important that students acquire knowledge and learn to think critically through the education process.



Australians

"[The purpose of education is] to cultivate knowledge & understanding among the younger generation."

A number of Christian education professionals also believe passing on knowledge is a key purpose of education, suggesting students cannot develop skills or grow in character without a base of knowledge to learn from and interact with.

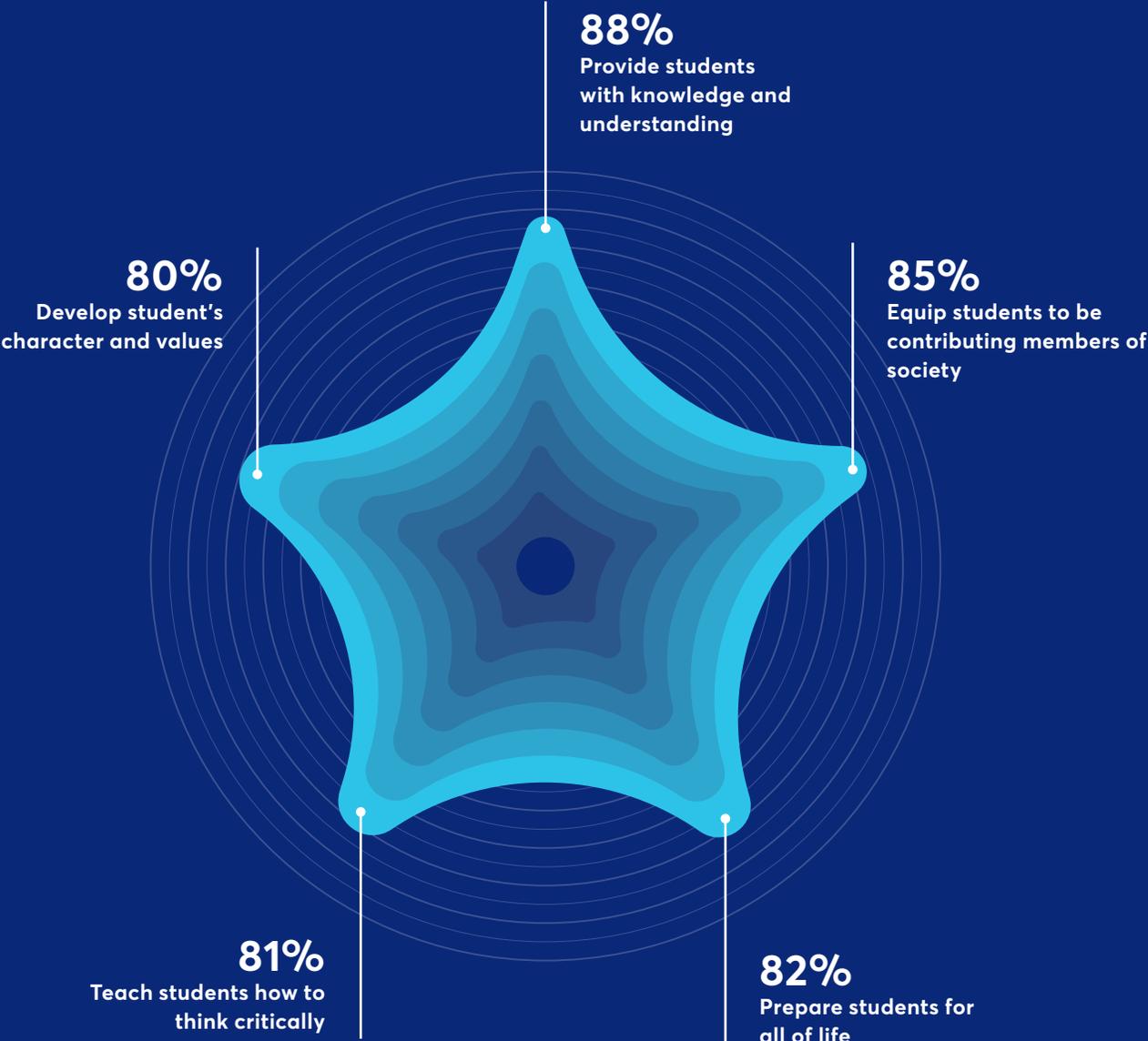


Education Professional

"The very first thing is to transmit [our] vast cultural heritage...history, values, religion, social structures, knowledge... if you haven't got knowledge first then I think you are acting and living in a vacuum."

Australians believe the role of education in society is to:

% strongly/somewhat agree



Preparing students for life and work

When asked the question 'What do you believe is the purpose of education in society?', Australians think of the role education plays in preparing students for their life ahead. The knowledge, skills and character traits learned throughout the education process are primarily seen as tools for facing the challenges of adulthood.

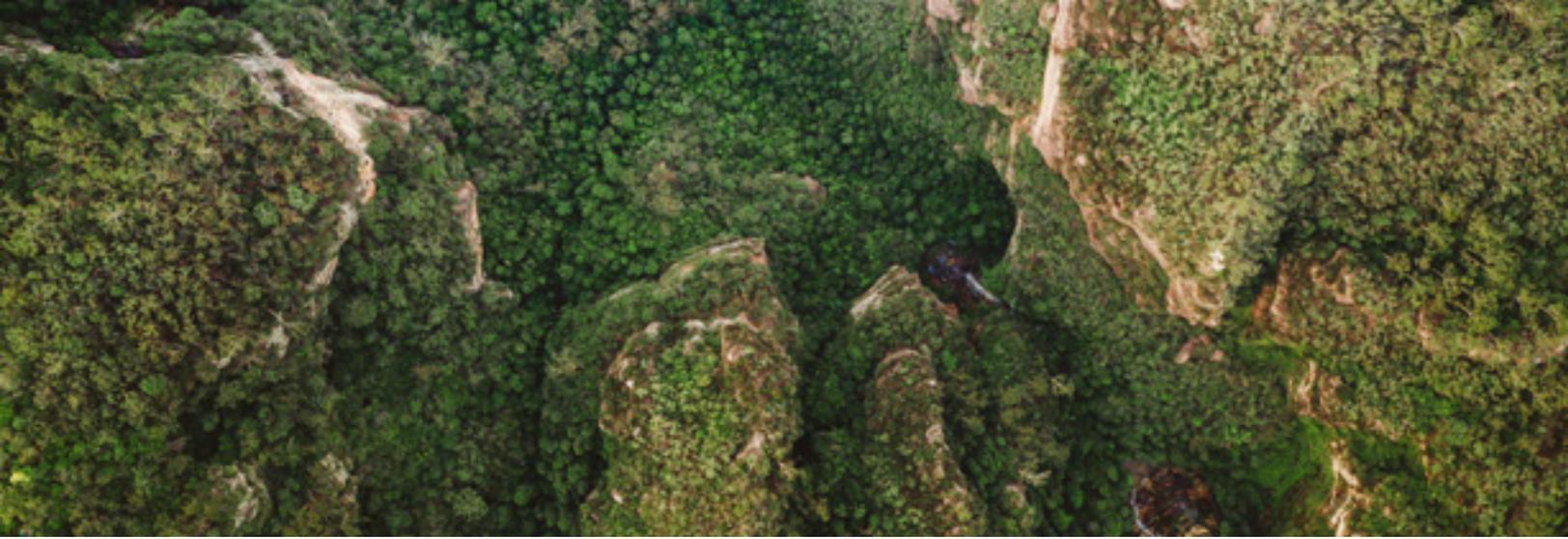


"To prepare our children for life by teaching them values, critical thinking and learning skills for their future... It's also to build their self-esteem so they can grow into adults able to face challenges of work and adulthood."

A key part of adulthood is work. Many Australians view education as a vital pathway to employment and believe a key role of education is to prepare students to enter the workforce. Education is not only seen as important for obtaining a job, but as a means for securing a 'good job'.



"To prepare children for their lives ahead - giving them the knowledge which will enable them to find a good job."



Developing students to be functional members of society

Some Australians, however, acknowledge the role of education beyond individual development in preparing children to become members of society. Education teaches students about the norms and values of the society in which they live and how to interact with different people. As a result, children learn how to participate in society.



Australians

"To give students the knowledge and skills they will need to operate effectively in contemporary society."



Education Professional

"Educating people about the values of the society in which they live, to create good citizens and to form people to live well with other people."

Equipping students to contribute to human flourishing

Most Australians (85%) believe the role of education is to equip students to be contributing members of society. Education can benefit society as a whole by forming individuals who can and want to make a positive difference.



Australians

"Have people who are able to make a difference and use their intellect for society."

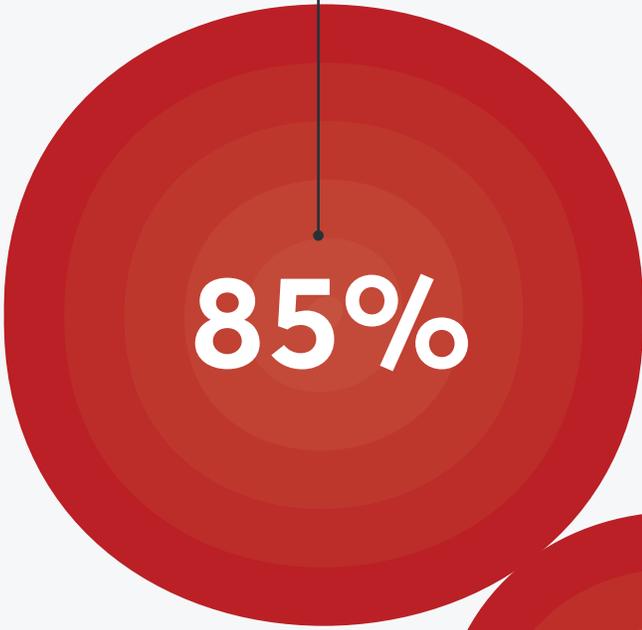


Education Professional

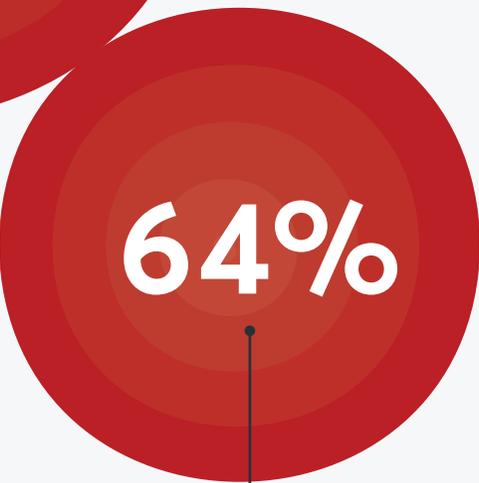
"It contributes to society by educating people not just in their skills and knowledge but in their place in the world... and it inspires them to have the desire to make a difference."

While Australians agree education plays a role in developing individuals, they are more likely to believe education plays a role in contributing to the common good of society. More than four in five Australians (85%) believe students should leave school with the desire and the skills to contribute to the flourishing of human society. Only three in five (64%), however, agree education should equip students to be successful individuals rather than focusing on how they can contribute to a flourishing society.

of Australians believe students should leave school with the desire and the skills to contribute to the flourishing of human society.



85%



64%

of Australians believe education should equip students to be successful individuals rather than focusing on how they can contribute to a flourishing society.

What is exemplary education?

Exemplary education is education that fulfills its role in society. Australians believe there are five key factors which contribute to exemplary education.

1. Students feel safe and valued within the educational environment

When thinking about education done well, the most important factor to Australians is that students feel safe within the education environment. More than four in five Australians (83%) believe this is extremely/very important in contributing to education done well. Feeling safe encompasses physical safety, as well as a sense of belonging and trust within the educational environment.



"If the learning environment is not a safe place for them to be, they will not learn. They cannot learn. In order for the learning environment to be a safe place, there has to be trust."

It is important to Australians that students feel valued within the educational environment (80% extremely/very important). The relationship between the teacher and the student plays a key role in this. Australians are nearly four times more likely to believe the relationship between the teacher and the student (79%) has a larger influence on student growth and development than teaching technologies and resources (21%).



Australians believe teachers can crucially shape the development of today's young people



"I am convinced that the dynamic between the teacher and the learner is the single most important factor [in terms of educational transformation and change]."

The aspects which are seen to contribute most to a positive dynamic between teacher and student are that teachers genuinely care about their students (64%), teachers believe in their students' potential (63%) and that teachers seek to make the subject matter relevant (57%).



"I think an excellent teacher is someone who loves their students. Someone who actually cares about their students, not just about their job, or about how much they're getting paid, or many hours they're working."

Almost all Australians believe teachers play one of the most important roles in contributing to the good of society by educating the next generation (95% yes, definitely/somewhat). Despite this, almost half of Australians (46%) believe teachers are not rewarded enough for the work they do (no, not really/not at all).



Most Australians believe it's very important students are taught to think about the needs of others and serve their community.

Top 3 contributors to a positive dynamic between teacher and student.



64%

1. Teachers genuinely care about their students



63%

2. Teachers believe in their students' potential



57%

3. Teachers seek to make the subject matter relevant



2. Students are taught to serve, interact and collaborate with others

Schools and universities are great training grounds for students to learn how to interact with other people. More than four in five Australians (83%) believe it is extremely/very important for students to learn to interact and collaborate with people who are different from themselves. Exemplary education recognises this opportunity and teaches students to understand, interact and collaborate with others.



"In real life, we look to different people for different resources. You've got that in the classroom, some kids are great drawers, there's some kids that are good at quickly adding up things... A good classroom draws them out and get the kids good at using one another and validating one another."

Christian education professionals believe education done well teaches students to become others-focused and serve their community. Australians agree, with three in four (75%) believing it is extremely/very important that students are taught to think about the needs of others and serve their community.

3. Education is oriented towards the development of the whole person

Christian education professionals believe education should foster holistic growth, rather than just academic development. This includes developing students cognitively, physically, emotionally, socially and spiritually. Three in five Australians (63%) believe schools should educate the whole person, rather than just focusing on academics. Another three in ten (30%) believe holistic education is beneficial but suggest academic development is most important. Only 7% believe schools should just focus on academics rather than educating students holistically.



"Holistic education means we're not just 'brains on sticks'. We're not just thinkers, we're doers. And we're people who love. We love others, we love ideas, we love things. So, the education of the heart is an idea that makes sense to me. Holistic education would be a kind of education which acknowledges intellectual, practical, and heart aspects of a person and cultivates all of those rather than just pure intellect."

A key part of holistic education is a focus on educating the heart as well as the mind. Australians believe it is important for students to develop values throughout the education process so that they can take on life's challenges, interact with others and be more fulfilled in their own life.

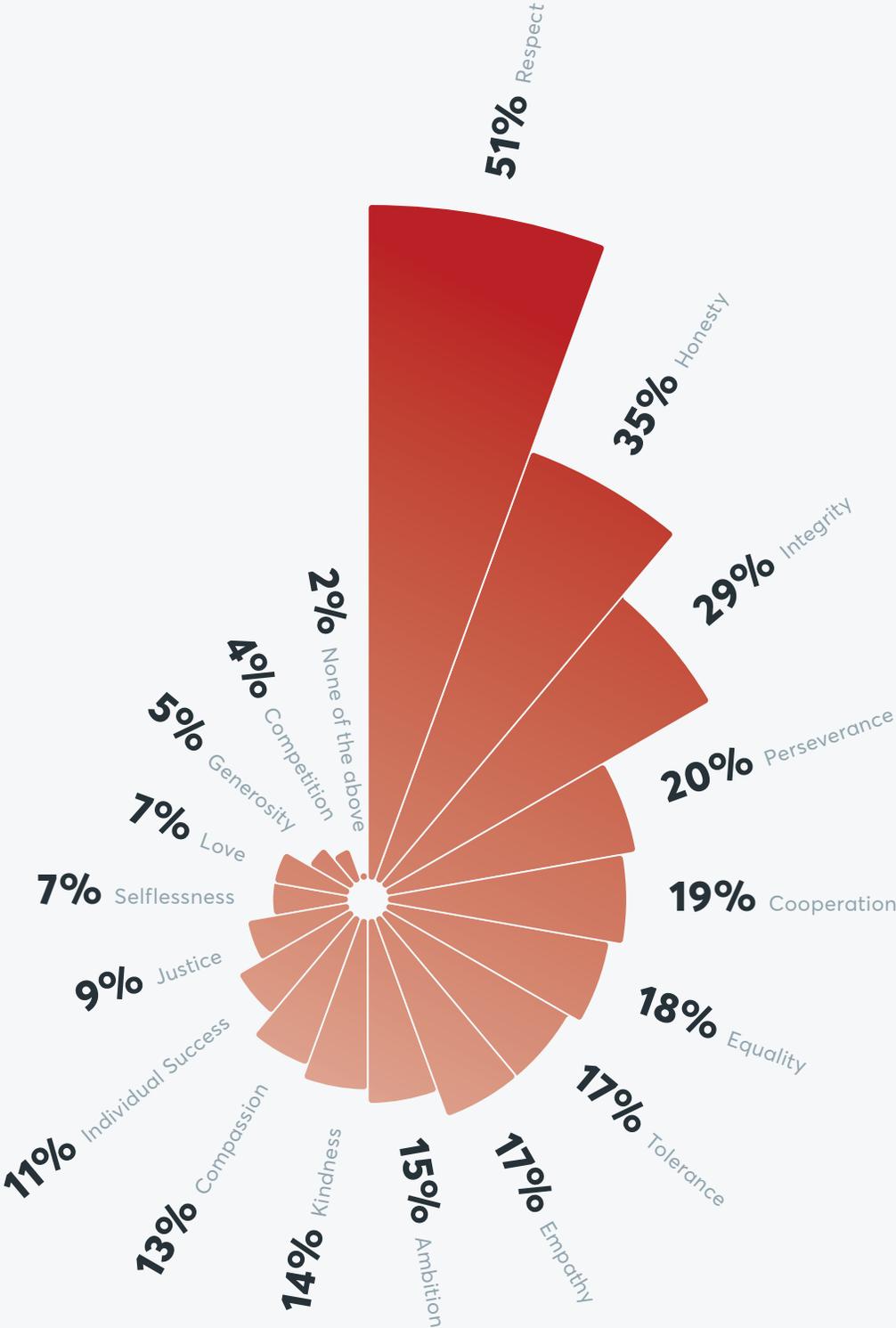


"I think these values would allow students to be able to not only be independent thinkers but be more willing and able to collaborate with different people of different values."

Almost all Australians (98%) believe students should develop personal values throughout the education process. The top value which Australians believe students should develop is respect (51%), followed by honesty (35%) and integrity (29%). Three in four Australians (75%) believe it's extremely/very important for students to be taught the same values at school that they are taught at home.

Which of the following values do you believe students should develop through the education process?

Please select up to three values that you believe would be most important for students to develop



4. Students are challenged to think beyond their current knowledge and experience

While Australians believe it's important for education to reflect the values they are taught at home, they also believe good education exposes students to concepts and beliefs that are different from their own (72% extremely/very important). Students should be challenged to think beyond their current experience.



"I think broad exposure to difference, diversity, even disagreement and challenge (is really important). I think if you don't spark people to realise that there's more than is already in their head, then they're normally not prepped to want to engage further. And I think that means setting up an environment of wonder that there is an open asking, an open wondering at the world."

Three in four Australians (76%) strongly/somewhat agree students should have opportunities to explore life's big questions, such as 'why am I here?' and 'what is the meaning of life?' Australians believe asking these questions is helpful for students' cognitive development and provides context for them to explore and form their own opinions. Most Australians (77%) strongly/somewhat agree it's important for education institutions to guide students to understand what they believe and why they believe it.



"Because these are the formative years where they benefit from being challenged and expanding their creative thinking. It encourages growth."

The big questions in life also include questions of faith and belief. More than half of Australians (55%) strongly/somewhat agree schools should provide opportunities for students to explore questions of faith and belief, compared to just 10% of Australians who strongly/somewhat disagree. Asking these questions can help students begin the process of moral and spiritual formation.



5. Values are integrated into the life of the institution through a shared culture and purpose

Australians and Christian education professionals believe in the importance of a school or educational institution intentionally living out its values. Almost two in three Australians (64%) strongly/somewhat agree that schools should be empowered to live out their values in all aspects of their operation.

Christian education professionals believe an institution's values do not naturally permeate through to the classroom and the students. Instead, these values need to be intentionally built into the life of an institution through a shared purpose and culture.



Education Professional

"A lot of schools have missions and values, and nobody even knows what they are... When a school's mission, values, and culture is lived out in a tangible and real way, that has an impact."

Australians also believe schools with a shared culture and purpose can have a positive impact. More than seven in ten strongly/somewhat agree that a school community with a shared culture and purpose has a positive impact on students' learning and development (73%) and on society as a whole (72%).



Most Australians agree students should have opportunities to explore life's big questions.

How important are the following in contributing to 'education done well'?

Extremely/very important

Students feel safe within the educational environment

83%

Students learn how to interact and collaborate with people who are different from themselves

83%

Students acquire knowledge and learn to think critically through the education process

83%

The education process is orientated towards the development of the whole person

80%

Students feel valued within the educational environment

80%

Students are stretched and challenged to think beyond their current knowledge and experience

78%

Students are taught to think about the needs of others and serve their community

75%

Values are integrated into the life of the institution through a shared culture and purpose

74%



Values should be intentionally built into the life of an institution through a shared purpose and culture.



Education for the common good

Equipping graduates with skills that are beneficial to society

There are several ways education can contribute to the good of society as a whole. More than four in five Australians (82%) strongly/somewhat agree education can contribute to the common good of society by equipping graduates with skills which are beneficial to society. As students use the skills they have learned, they can support themselves and their family, as well as giving back to society and the economy through work.

Producing graduates who want to make a positive difference

Christian education professionals acknowledge the role education plays in not only equipping students with the skills to contribute to society, but also with the desire to make a positive difference. Many Australians strongly/somewhat agree (81%) that education can contribute to the common good of society by producing graduates who have a desire to make a positive difference. Educational professionals believe this desire to make a positive difference comes from the development of character and values.

Producing graduates who care about the needs of others

Four in five Australians (81%) strongly/somewhat agree that education can contribute to the common good by producing graduates who care about the needs of others. Graduates who have the knowledge and skills to be productive in society as well as an altruistic approach to life are likely to impact society in a positive way.



"If education produces flourishing human beings who are altruistic and have a sense of service, that can greatly influence society for good. What it achieves is an antidote to narcissism, or hyper individualism, or consumerism. And the sense that there's something more than just serving yourself and your own interests of comfort and prosperity. That's a vital contribution, that schools can form people with that kind of view."

Do you agree that education can contribute to the common good in the following ways?

Strongly/somewhat agree



By equipping graduates with skills which are beneficial to society



By producing graduates who have a desire to make a positive difference



By producing graduates who care about the needs of others



By providing opportunities for students to serve their local community



Positive impacts of Christian education

The importance of choice

Seven in ten Australians (72%) strongly/somewhat agree it is beneficial to society to have various education options available, such as government schools, faith-based schools and selective schools. Christian schooling is currently one of many education options available in Australia.

Christian education, by nature of the values and beliefs it is founded on, has a number of key aims. These include developing students holistically, providing opportunities for spiritual exploration and educating the heart as well as the mind. Christian education is not the only good education option, but it does impact its students and the wider Australian community in a number of positive ways.

Students are encouraged to ask the big questions in life

Christian education, by virtue of being upfront about its aims and intentions, can provide students with opportunities to explore life's big questions, such as 'why am I here?' and 'what is the meaning of life?' This allows students to be stretched and challenged to think beyond their current knowledge and experience. Many of these big questions have a spiritual or philosophical basis and Christian education professionals suggest public education is less able to provide students with these opportunities because they are required to be neutral.



"(Christian education) speaks to the whole person, spiritual and moral as well as cognitive and intellectual... There's an assumption that neutrality requires secularism and excludes questions pertaining to the spiritual for sure. So, I think it's very hard for schools in the public system to go there."

Australians believe the most positive contribution of Christian education in society is that students are encouraged to ask the big questions in life. Almost three in five (57%) believe this has an extremely/very positive impact on society as a whole. Christian education also provides students with the opportunity to explore questions of faith and belief. Almost half of Australians (48%) believe this has an extremely/very positive impact on society, and a further 31% believe it has a somewhat positive impact.

Students are encouraged to serve their community and love others

A key aim of Christian education is to teach students to love and serve others. More than half of Australians (55%) believe this has an extremely/very positive impact on society as a whole. Christian education professionals believe that Christian education contributes to the common good of society by teaching students the values of the Christian faith including love, generosity, integrity, kindness, justice and equality. There is a sense that Christian education develops students of good character, even if they do not adopt the Christian faith themselves.



"I think that, quite rightly, there is an emphasis on love [at our school]. We believe in love not as a nebulous concept or a feeling. It's a very specific, concrete way of acting and being that involves honesty, patience, kindness. And I hope that some of those Christian principles, attitudes and ethos are translated into the characters of our pupils. I hope that whether they're Christians or not, that they go out with an appreciation of the importance of tolerating, and respecting persons of very different lifestyles even if they fundamentally disagree."

Education of the heart as well as the mind

Christian education is holistic in its approach because it is deeply concerned with educating the heart as well as the mind. Students are recognised as whole beings with the ability to grow and develop cognitively, physically, emotionally, socially and spiritually. More than half of Australians (54%) believe Christian education has an extremely/very positive impact on society as a whole because of its focus on educating the heart as well as the mind.



"One of the things that Christian education is known for is that attention to the whole person and the attention given to the big questions."

Australians are more likely to believe Christian education is having a positive impact in society than a negative impact.



Students are encouraged to ask the big questions in life

11.4x more likely



57%



5%



Students are encouraged to love and serve others

13.8x more likely



55%



4%



Students have opportunities to explore questions of faith and belief

8x more likely



48%



6%



There is a focus on education of the heart as well as the mind

10.8x more likely



54%



5%

↑ extremely/very positive

↓ extremely/very negative

Do you believe the following aims of Christian education have a positive or negative impact as whole?

Students are encouraged to ask the big questions in life



Students are encouraged to love and serve others



There is a focus on education of the heart as well as the mind



Students have opportunities to explore questions of faith and belief



0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%



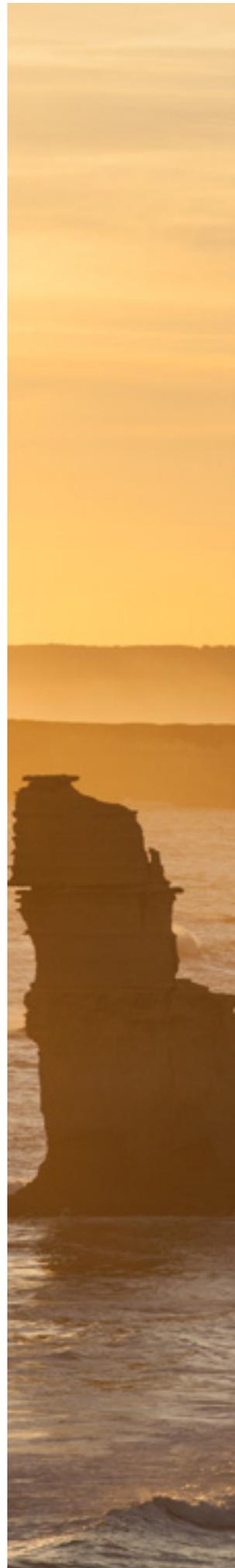
Methodology

In-depth interviews with Christian education professionals

Ten in-depth interviews were conducted with leading professionals working in the Christian education sector. These professionals included principals or retired principals of Christian schools as well as directors and lecturers of Christian higher education providers. These interviews were conducted between the 30th of September and the 11th of October 2019, each running for between 30 and 45 minutes. Quotes from these interviews are used throughout this report to illustrate and support key findings. Throughout this report, these respondents are referred to as 'Christian education professionals.'

Nationally representative survey of Australians

A 35-question online survey was completed by a sample of Australians, nationally representative by age, gender and state. The survey was in field from the 6th to the 12th of December 2019, yielding 1,000 completed responses.





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