

Response to 'Review of Tasmanian Education -2024'

(General comments, but some particular relevance to Theme 1 Q4; Theme 2 Q 3 ; Theme 3 Q3).

The Tasmanian Education Act 2016 specifies that persons under 18 years in Tasmania should be in an approved education program until they have completed year 12 or an equivalent such as VET Cert 2 or an apprenticeship, or be in full-time employment.

It seems surprising that the 'completion of year 12' (or equivalent) measure used in Tasmania is still rather narrow, based on the achievement of a TCE certificate [see Minister's response to Question on Notice].

This Minister of Education's response (August 2024) to a Question on Notice from the Hon Mike Gaffney MLC also shows that concerns about year 12 education outcomes in Tasmania relative to other states might be overblown. The reply cited that the Productivity Commission in its 2024 Report on Government Services (ROGS), where it focuses on a table of year 12 certificates issued for the calendar year, explicitly states in the footnotes that data is NOT comparable across jurisdictions because different measures of attainment are used by each state. It is unfortunate that the format of the table seems to invite comparisons across jurisdictions, however, they are invalid.

The Minister's response states that the Tasmanian reported attainment is only based on the number of year 12 students who achieved the TCE certificate in their year 12 year, "it does not include those who completed an apprenticeship or traineeship, Big Picture Credential, the International Baccalaureate or who received a Qualifications Certificate".

Clearly, the commonly cited data when comparing Tasmanian education achievements to those in other states are invalid. The data set on Tasmania is an understatement of actual education achievements.

To illustrate that it is invalid to compare states on the completion of year 12 education data, one can reference South Australian data which, superficially, can be read to have shown sudden improvement. Actually, that state changed its measurement so that students who complete just one 20 credit Stage 2 SACE subject are now considered to have satisfactorily completed year 12 education.

The 2018 ACER review of years 9-12 education in Tasmania highlighted the need to have a more comprehensive definition of success and to include multiple pathways. Clearly more needs to be done in this space.

Comparing data of states, using the oft-used data, is invalid. Nevertheless, attendance and achievement in Tasmanian education is far from perfect. That attendance and achievement rates have changed little since 2014 suggests that the move to 11/12 tops in high schools is not a solution. Most students are voting with their feet and enrolling in senior secondary colleges rather than remaining in their high school for years 11/12.

For most of the the past 30 years the ACT has been recognised as having higher levels of participation and achievement than the states. The ACT long ago adopted and retained Tasmania's years 11/12 college system so it, per se, would appear not to be a problem.

The deficiencies in the public reporting 'comparisons' have contributed to perceptions that there are bigger deficiencies in Tasmanian education than might actually exist. Perhaps this, together with some past reviewer/commentator's limited direct experience of the breadth of Tasmanian senior secondary college operations, has influenced the voicing of criticisms of senior secondary colleges and influenced the decision to introduce year 11/12 tops in high schools.

Some ill-informed criticisms of senior secondary colleges have been voiced for several decades, surprisingly, even after a significant review of year 12 education that was published over a decade ago. Tom Karmel was one of the authors. It too asserted that the so-called completion of year 12 rates should not be compared across jurisdictions because the states and territories used widely different measures. In particular, at that time, Tasmania and South Australia were identified as having relative underestimates of achievement because of their stronger involvement by year 12 age-group students in VET programs and links to TAFE.

The breadth of studies available at secondary colleges in Tasmania is extremely valuable in opening up awareness of fields of study and future employment possibilities. High school tops will always, by comparison, have much more restricted offerings. This is especially so with rural high schools, where options such as foreign languages, extension mathematics and science subjects, music, art and many other fields will be missing from the year 11/12 offerings. Small classes are expensive. It seems self-evident that the extension of high schools into years/12 tops results in a very narrow provision of offerings and/or a much more expensive provision of education. Therefore there will be disadvantage in terms of restricting the future options for significant numbers of rural students limited to high school 11/12 tops.

The high school extension does not seem to be widely supported by the relevant parents and their daughters and sons. Enrolments in high school tops are relatively small. Also, a 5th August, 2024, 'Question on Notice' response from the Hon Jo Palmer (Minister for Education), stated "In Tasmania, from year 10 to year 11 there is a large shift of students who move from the non-government to the government sector for

years 11 and 12.” This, too, illustrates support for the government senior secondary colleges.

Although this drift might slightly affect the retention statistics for the government sector, the Minister’s 5/08/2024 response stated “the (retention rates) data for our Tásmanian Government schools demonstrates that they are now very much on a par with the national average.”

ACARA data reveal a very stark difference between female and male year 12 retention statistics in Tasmania for the more rural/Isolated regions.

Remote/very remote: Male 30.6; Female 82.4%

Outer regional: Male 36.2; Female 59.2%.

These differences invite closer examination. What numbers are entering full time employment (or other options that are alternatives not measured in “year 12 retention”)?

The senior secondary colleges have long been aware that participation rates are sub-optimal and have consequently undertaken numerous actions and programs to address this. The strong engagement in VET and some other vocational programs, as well as partnerships with distant high schools and time-table adjustments to reduce the required days of travel are examples. Teachers at Rosny College a decade or so ago undertook research (unpublished) that found many of the high school students who did not enrol in years 11 or 12 had actually dropped out of their schooling in year 9 or early in year 10. Might their struggles with engagement in high school be a factor in this? Might their difficulties with literacy and numeracy be an underlying cause and remedial action at a much earlier stage of education be called for? Research in some Scandinavian countries certainly supports this view. Consequently, in those countries a very strong interventionist approach seem to be the norm. Students who are falling behind in primary school have one-to-one assistance, sometimes for a period outside their normal classroom, in an effort to catch them up to general standards. The evidence suggests that this intervention approach has been quite successful in those countries. The need for early remedial action in Tasmanian education provision should be addressed.

British programs intentionally provide role modelling for parents interacting with their children, to stimulate development, even before the children are of school age. This has been found especially beneficial in lower socio-economic geographical areas. Access has often involved visits to the home or invitations to “health focussed” gatherings. This appears to be outside the scope of the K-12 review but is worthy of consideration.

Underlying inequality appears to be an issue in Australian education provision. Scandinavian countries in general, and Finland in particular, have young people who consistently achieve at a high level in education assessments. In Finland the recognition and pursuit of the value of equality of opportunity (to the society), led to it being illegal to charge fees for private provision of education.

Jane Caro, in The Monthly of July 2024, points out that, “almost alone among the still functioning democracies, the Australian community has long had to fight to protect public education. No other nation funds education in private schools in the way (to the extent) that we do. Most Australians remain blissfully ignorant of what an outlier we are. That private schools both charge fees and are largely funded federally, and government schools are funded by the states, results in the most advantaged students receiving the most funding for their education and the most disadvantaged students (in government schools) being underfunded”. ...”The Gonski Review set a Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) which is basically the amount each school needs per student to do its job adequately, not brilliantly just adequately. But government schools in Australia do not even get that. Every public school in Australia bar a few in the ACT is underfunded. In Australia we disproportionately overfund the children of the better-off and underfund schools serving children of the poor.”

It also needs to be pointed out that Australian statistics on school/student funding often conceal some of the inequality. For example, some ‘non-educational’ spending on transport costs and depreciation is counted in SRS for public schools but not counted for private schools. The socio-economic status of Tasmania’s population is relatively low and so changes to education funding might remedy some of the educational disadvantage.

Greig Rundle

Concerned citizen and former teacher

New Town