

AEU Submission

ACER Review  
of Years 9-12 Education  
in Tasmania

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## **AEU SUBMISSION**

### **ACER REVIEW OF YEARS 9-12 EDUCATION IN TASMANIA**

#### **The Australian Education Union Tasmanian Branch**

The Australian Education Union Tasmanian Branch (AEU) is a trade union representing approximately 6,000 teachers, school support staff and other education professionals in Tasmanian state schools. The AEU welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the State Government's Review of Years 9–12 Education in Tasmania. AEU members who work in the 9-12 area have a strong interest in the range of professional and industrial matters this Review will address. Following the Review, the union looks forward to working with the State Government and Department of Education to provide the best possible educational opportunities and outcomes for our young people.

Although an ostensibly industrial organisation, the AEU on behalf of its members provides representation on a much wide range of issues. In particular, this includes matters relating to the professional aspects of educators' work as well as broader social justice issues in relation to which AEU members see their union having an activist role. So, it is with this broad remit that we make this submission.

#### **Context**

The AEU notes some concerns with the context of this Review of Education 9-12 in Tasmania. With the exception of some delimitations as noted below, the brief of the Review is a very wide one. Neither ACER nor the Tasmanian Government have provided background research material or guiding questions that may help focus submissions towards some mutually understood goals. The listing of "issues" in the Terms of Reference does however provide some help in setting the parameters of a relevant submission, but the possible scope of each of these issues is wide. Nevertheless, in the interests of comprehensibility, the AEU seeks to make a concise contribution to the Review process.

The objective of the review is noted as focused toward recommendations to the Minister for Education and Training on:

- Current curriculum provision, attainment data, and pathway information for students in Years 9 to 12 in all Tasmanian schools, including vocational education and training
- The effectiveness within the local and national context of current curriculum provision
- The alignment and effectiveness of assessment and moderation practices from Years 9 to 12
- Proposed future direction with regard to Years 9 to 12 curriculum provision and design
- Workforce characteristics, including qualifications and specialisations (where available), particularly in Years 11 and 12

The Review is also to take place within the context of a number of Tasmanian Government social, economic and educational imperatives, currently being implemented in efforts to improve Tasmania's retention and attainment data. These reforms are significant, in many cases already under way, and need to be viewed in the light of this Review. They include:

- The Extending Government High Schools to Years 11 and 12 Program
- The Office of Tasmanian Assessment, Standards and Certification Act (2003) replacing the Tasmanian Qualifications Authority Act (2003)
- The My Education career and life planning initiative in government schools
- The Education Bill (to progress through Parliament in 2016)
- The Years 11 and 12 Curriculum
- The University of Tasmania High Achiever Program and University College Program

The AEU notes that some of these policies have a major impact on the capacity of schools and colleges to provide a meaningful curriculum, guarantee student achievement and lift levels of student attainment and school completions. If the review process is to be a full one, it would seem that each of these policies should themselves form an important focus of ACER's Review of Education 9 -12 in Tasmania. Analysis of the value and efficacy of some of these initiatives is provided in the latter part of this submission.

It is noted in the Review's Terms of Reference (ToR) that Tasmania's policy settings and structural differences, particularly in regard to senior secondary provision, are not in alignment with interstate jurisdiction and that this may or may not be a factor that is reflected in Tasmania's educational performance as reflected via controversial Years 11 and 12 data and Tasmania's rates of retention and attainment to the end of Year 12. The AEU observes that, educationally, no two Australian educational jurisdictions have identical structures and, despite the obsession of policy makers with educational structure and recent failed attempts restructure post year 10 schooling in Tasmania under Tasmania *Tomorrow*, research holds that the structure of schooling plays a very minor part in influencing student engagement and retention in Tasmania (Baynes et. al., 2002).

### **Issues**

There are number of key issues noted in the Review ToR, particularly around the curriculum, its structure and offerings, that require further consideration and national comparison, and the AEU would like to respond to these points as listed.

#### Tasmania's single year courses in Years 11 and 12

One-year courses for year 11 and 12 students in Tasmania were developed so that Colleges could provide students with highly individualised, engaging opportunities across the curriculum.

This has been the case for many decades and has always been supported by the University of Tasmania, as it allows students to experience a wider range of subjects prior to entering university study. This structure supports students focused on University entrance and those on a less academic pathway, as well as allowing for the combination of VET and TASC subjects, providing students with the opportunity to make informed decisions with regard to their choices post-College. In the case of students who have felt alienated by the school environment for some time prior to attending College, the opportunity to choose subjects based on personal interest emerges time and time again as a key driver for their engagement in post year 10 secondary schooling. There has been an argument mounted that the offering of single year courses means a lack of in-depth study of science pre-requisite subjects, but this is refuted by a simple comparison of subjects like Mathematics, Physics and Chemistry, where Tasmanian students cover all the same content areas at the same level of depth as their interstate counterparts. The AEU therefore recommends single year courses in years 11 and 12 be retained.

#### Tasmania's 50, 100 and 150 hour courses in Years 11 and 12, and where relevant, alignment to the Australian Curriculum

There is perhaps an assumption inherent in this point that close alignment between the Australian Curriculum as it operates K-10 and curriculum offerings in 11-12 is desirable. The AEU believes that this is only necessary in the sense that the offerings of year 11 and 12 follow on from year 10, so it is appropriate to avoid duplication of any content covered in previous years.

It is acknowledged that ACARA has been working with state and territory curriculum, assessment and certification authorities on the development of senior secondary subjects. Australian Curriculum courses are written as 60-hour units, with two to be studied each year, making a 120-hour course each year and 240 hours over two years. 50 and 100 hour courses are now uncommon, as the former Tasmanian Qualifications Authority moved away from them in favour of, in its words, "more substantial units of learning". Since the Australian Curriculum courses are only written for level 3, they are of no help in deciding the content of any Level 2 or 1 courses – if Tasmania decides to continue with Level 2 and 1 courses. At Level 3, Tas students would cover the same units as other states do in Year 12, and the additional 30 hours gives adequate time to catch up on any concepts developed in the first two units done in other states (since they are not examined, there is no need to cover that content in the detail required for examinations).

It is worth noting, the Tasmanian Level 3 pass standard is not equivalent to the level 3 pass standard in other jurisdictions; it is significantly more challenging.

#### Tasmania's use of criterion based assessment for internal and external assessment purposes in Years 11 and 12

There appears no good reason to move from this approach to assessment at this stage. Waiting until such time as it has been determined, at least among the majority of jurisdictions, nationally the direction to be taken under the 11/12 Australian Curriculum would seem the more practical approach.

### The alignment between the Australian Curriculum Kindergarten-Year 10 (K-10) and Years 11 and 12 curriculum and assessment practices

The AEU has not been a proponent of A-E style assessment and reporting as it has been developed under the Australian Curriculum K-10. Such an approach is seen as potentially damaging to the self-esteem and self-concept of students who consistently receive low grades. Yet, it is recognised that if other states adopt the A-E for 11-12 it may be necessary for Tas to do so, but there should be no rush to adopt this approach.

### The nature, quality of the delivery and cost effectiveness of Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Vocational Education and Learning (VEL) in sectors and schools and how this aligns with student pathways

ACER research (Brown, 2016) points out that youth unemployment rates have reached their highest levels since 1998 and this is far from evenly distributed. There are significantly high rates of youth unemployment in some parts of Australia and in these places Vocational Education and Training (VET) can play a key role in improving the life chances of our most vulnerable young people. Tasmania is most certain such a place.

#### *VET in Schools*

The AEU acknowledges the submission to this Review by the Tasmanian Secondary Colleges Registered Training Organisation (TSCRTO). TSCRTO provides pathways into industry via a broad range of VET programs for 15 to 19-year-old students at 14 sites across Tasmania. The TSCRTO delivers training and assessment in 71 qualifications, effectively nurturing the future workforce for numerous Tasmanian businesses. The TSCRTO has recently been reaccredited for 7 years, an indication that this is a highly trusted and efficient provider.

Developed over decades with State and Commonwealth funding, VET plays a vital role with between 20 and 30 per cent of all students completing a VET course through year 11 and 12. VET articulates with other applied learning courses and fits well with the two-year model of TCE with many students gaining 60 points for completed VET course towards that certificate. A VET qualification is a useful, portable qualification respected throughout Australia and elsewhere. The graduates of many VET in Schools courses are most welcomed by employers for their appropriate training and job-readiness. Construction industry employers welcome school leavers holding a Certificate II before commencing work. Although these employees may require pay rates approximately six months in advance of the rates for employees commencing with no certificate, those holding a Certificate II, there are clear advantages in hiring them:

1. Demonstrated determination to commit to working in the construction sector.
2. Participated in a two-week block Work Placement program which, differing from a mere work experience program, has provided them with a valuable induction to the industry.
3. Overall advanced knowledge and skills due to having completed industry-specific VET training giving them an excellent start on a Certificate III apprenticeship.

The work placement also works for students who come from less desirable post codes as they can transcend the prejudice associated with their street address by demonstrating their aptitude and application in the workplace – many students do receive job offers as a direct

result of work placements. Employers often contact VET teachers seeking strong candidates for open positions - this long-standing connection between schools and employers is a direct result of the VET structure and provides students with opportunities above and beyond those created through work placements.

Whilst currently VET courses can provide some points towards a TCE, one of the ways VET can be strengthened includes ensuring through TASC that VET courses are able, where appropriate, to provide the “ticks” for literacy, numeracy and ICT competency required towards TCE attainment. Also, where Memoranda of Understanding exist between the TSC Registered Training Organisation and TasTAFE it is vital that these are in fact followed through. The AEU sees that VET and other forms of vocational and applied learning are important curriculum offerings for many Tasmanian year 11-12 students particularly, but not only, because they come from rural and lower SES backgrounds. VET and other applied learning courses are not only attractive to many students who are less academically inclined, but also offer a more rounded education for those who intend going on to university. In fact, many who see themselves as university-bound relish the opportunity to gain skills and qualifications that can see them enter the workforce part time during their years of further study. In general, Tasmania’s relatively high proportion of lower SES and rural families value education for marketable skills. VET, above all other courses in colleges and high schools, offers a tangible and clearly discernible pathway to more immediate employment and a consequent level of economic security to which many young people can aspire.

#### Public perception (including that of employers) of VET/VEL undertaken in schools.

As state above, not all VET and other applied learning options are viewed as a sound starting point for potential new recruits into industry. The requirements of employers will vary across industries and need to be taken into account in the planning of applied learning courses. It needs to be noted that industry too has a clear responsibility to provide further training for young people upon the commencement of employment and apprenticeships and should not rely entirely on school-based VET and job readiness programs to produce recruits who require no further initial training or workplace specific induction.

Vocational learning that does not result in certification that has value in the job market, whilst it may be useful for other purposes, does not hold the same attraction and thus motivation for students and their families to keep them engaged in schooling. The AEU would therefore see an expansion of VET offerings across 11-12 campuses state-wide.

#### *School-based Traineeships/Apprenticeships*

Operating across colleges and a number of Tasmanian high schools are school-based traineeship or apprenticeship known as Australian Schools Based Apprenticeships (AsBA). These are paid employment based training programs for full-time school students who are attending years 10, 11 or 12. The paid employment component is a minimum of 7.5 hours per week and maximum of 15 hours per week during school terms. AsBAs are similarly operating in other states and territories.

These training/apprenticeship programs are extremely popular and successful and at least two of the Southern Tasmanian Secondary Colleges have 50+ students receiving credit for AsBAs as part of their TCE programs. The AEU sees potential to widen the use of AsBAs where students have access to arrangements with a relevant industry and the school/college has appropriate resources to support this.

### *Building Applied Learning Options into the TCE*

The Tasmanian Certification of Education (TCE) is a qualification for Tasmanians who reach the prescribed standards. This qualification is now required for the calculation of an ATAR. The TCE has compulsory requirements including:

- Everyday adult reading and writing in English
- Everyday Adult Mathematics
- Everyday Adult use of Computers and the Internet
- Participation and Achievement Standard

Given that the standard required for reading and writing and mathematics for a TCE is similar to the year 9 NAPLAN benchmark for literacy and numeracy (and most Tasmanian students reach that standard in year 9), it should not be difficult for a much greater proportion of students to gain the necessary “ticks” that result in their attainment of a TCE by the end of year 12 than is currently the case. The challenge is to create learning experiences that are suited to students’ interests, abilities and needs (in addition to providing the much-needed mentoring and pastoral care that helps them maintain focus on their goals).

As well as explicitly vocationally-focused applied learning options such as VET in schools, there is a huge opportunity with a review of the educational provisions of 9-12 to explore the range of ways in which learning, in general, can be more project-based and applied in nature. Creating courses and units of study that have a strongly hands-on component is likely to be more attractive to many students who struggle with subjects which have been taught in a more traditional academic format and classroom setting. In a similar way to the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL), it is possible to structure applied learning approaches as a legitimate pathway to gaining a TCE.

The Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) is a hands-on option for students in Years 11 and 12. It gives students practical work-related experience, as well as literacy and numeracy skills and the opportunity to build personal/life skills. Like the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), VCAL is an accredited “alternative” secondary certificate (VCCA, 2016).

In Tasmanian Secondary Colleges, there is already on offer a range of TASC courses which are applied learning; such as various Art Making, Art Practice 2, Drama, Food and Hospitality Enterprise (run on several campuses in a fully equipped café environment), Food and Cooking Essentials, Electronics, Introduction to Game App Design, Musical Theatre, Music Technology, Technical Theatre Production, Working with Children (often run via Secondary College Playgroups), Workshop Techniques, to name just a few. These courses are immensely popular and the range of them means that for there is likely something on that offers interest and engagement for all students.



The AEU sees it as preferable to develop further integration of applied learning options within the existing TCE rather than having an “alternative TCE” identified. Students would simply gain a TCE via different pathways. In fact, it should be equally possible, and viewed as equally legitimate, to attain a TCE via a wide range of pathways – some traditionally classroom-based and academically focused and others via non-school based programs, in-school applied learning options, VET programs etc.

### **Pathway Planning Standard**

The AEU sees pathway planning for young people as an essential function of schools and colleges. Yet, it is clear that recent government policy has steeply diminished schools’ capacity to perform this function. The scrapping of the Pathway Planning Officer positions in schools has meant the lack of dedicated, qualified people to undertake this vital work. Reliance upon teachers and senior staff in schools and colleges and the use of ME Online has already proven to be an inadequate substitute arrangement.

The AEU recommends that, as part of its Review of 9-12, ACER investigate closely the level of engagement with My Education that is actually taking place in schools. Reports to the AEU suggest that aside from the drafting of individual student pathway plans, as is required under legislation, teachers do not have the time or expertise to provide meaningful guidance for students on the wide range of career pathways and study options.

Whilst ME Online may be developed, over time, into a useful adjunct tool for assisting in the conversations between students, career guidance experts and parents and teachers, far too much is being expected of this new resource in its current form.

### **Extending Government High Schools to Years 11 and 12 Program**

It is noteworthy that, prior to any kind of review or thoroughgoing analysis of educational provisions in the senior high school sector and without appropriate consultation with teachers and schools, the State Government introduced an election promise, which became policy once it was elected, to extend high and district schools to year 12.

The provision of year 11 and 12 subjects in high and district schools in more remote parts of the state had been a gradual development welcomed by schools and local communities who saw the need for such provision; particularly where the time and cost of transport or accommodation to a larger centre meant that students could not complete their schooling. Further extension of these provisions in remote and some less remote, yet still rural, schools as a part of the current Government’s plan has also been welcomed. Yet, insistence on extending some urban and urban fringe high schools to year 12 raises a range of concerns.

The key concern with extending high schools to 11 and 12, beyond what is necessary to allow more isolated students to access senior years of schooling where otherwise they may not, is that valuable education funding can be better spent on ensuring existing institutions are able to fund appropriate programs to engage and retain students to successful completion of year 12. Competition for students between these high schools and local secondary colleges resulting in

the diminished student numbers at the colleges and consequent resourcing capacity to provide valuable programs for “at risk” students. Ironically, it is Claremont College – a college in one of the more disadvantaged parts of the state – that has suffered declining enrolments following the extension of New Norfolk High School and Jordon River Learning Federation to year 12.

On current DoE school resourcing arrangements, the high schools struggle to provide a range of subject options and, despite all the hype, show no evidence yet of improving successful completions of year twelve. In 2014, according to the My School website, Jordan River Learning Federation Bridgewater Senior Campus had nine students complete senior secondary school (year 12) yet none of them attained a Tasmanian Certificate of Education (TCE). TASC figures for 2015 show that 48 attempted and 12 received a TCE.

### **The Education Bill (2016) and raising the school leaving age**

A raft of changes is included in this Bill and the one most relevant to the 9 to 12 sector is raising the school leaving age to 18. The AEU has been clear that its members are opposed to this initiative.

From 2020, students must participate full-time in formal education or training through an approved learning program until they complete Year 12, gain a Certificate III, complete an apprenticeship or turn 18 years of age, whichever occurs first.

The AEU recognises the problem that raising the school leaving age is intended to help to address; Tasmania has a low school completion rate. That is, fewer Tasmanian students successfully complete a year 12 certificate (or equivalent) than students in other states and territories. The extent of this is debated but there is a real urgency to lift completions for:

- Social equity: People who do not complete school have significantly diminished prosperity across a wide range of indicators including personal health and wealth factors
- Economic productivity: Reduced availability of a skilled workforce leads to lower Tasmanian economic productivity.

The Government considers that raising the school leaving age and retaining students, who may leave before the end of year 12, will improve their chances of completing school.

The AEU believes that this initiative is based on some misguided assumptions. A focus on raising the school leaving age assumes:

- Sufficient school/college resourcing to cater for additional reluctant learners
- Students will attend (if attendance enforced) and engage in learning
- Attendance to 18 years of age will lead to an increase in the number of successful year 12 completions
- That other factors do not have great influence on engagement and retention

Recent Tasmanian research indicates that many factors, often combined, influence student engagement and retention to completion of year 12, including:

- Parental attitudes and beliefs (Abbott-Chapman, 2015)

- Student self-esteem and confidence (Abbott-Chapman, 2015; Brewer, 2015)
- Student achievement in key subjects e.g. English and Mathematics (Abbott-Chapman, 2015)
- Being tempted out of education and into increasing levels of paid employment (Hay, et. al., 2015)
- Student engagement from ages 9 to 15 is critical (Hay, et. al., 2015)

Through this recent Tasmanian research, a range of strategies can be seen to improve student engagement and retention, including:

- A rich school curriculum from primary school including the visual and performing arts as well as physical/life education (Hay, et. al., 2015)
- Helping students expand views of themselves and their interests, capabilities and possible futures within a senior secondary context (Brewer, 2015)
- Intervention, personalised learning programs and information re educational choices/pathways (Brewer, 2015)
- Arguably, in the light of Hay et al. (2015), limiting students doing paid work

The AEU sees that raising the school leaving age is likely to cause more problems than it will solve. Without appropriate resourcing for relevant learning programs and mentoring to build engagement and retention, mandated attendance at a school or college will be met with resentment.

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