

Submission for the ACER Review of Years 9-12 in Tasmania.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to your wide ranging review of education for students in years 9 to 12 in Tasmania. As the parent of a student who is now in her second year at university after attending government public schools for her whole education, I would like to comment on a number of aspects. I have also been on the School Associations of the schools and college which she attended, and remain as a Community Representative on the Don College Association.

Retention and Attainment Rates

I believe that trying to compare retention and attainment rates from education systems around Australia is very misleading, because the criteria used in each system are different. In most systems the school starting age is lower than in Tasmania and the leaving age is 18 years, and so those students are turning eighteen towards the end of their year 12, so most finish at the end of year 12. In Tasmania some students may already be 18 years at the start of year 12 and the rest turn 18 during that year. The official leaving age, currently, is on turning 17 years old, so students can legally leave the education system at the start of, or during year 11. This of itself means that Tasmania will have a lower retention rate.

An additional factor in the Tasmanian apparently lower retention rates is that the figures published by the Department of Education only show students transitioning from years 10 to finish year 12 within the school system. They do not take into account all those students who leave the school system to enter apprenticeships, traineeships, or private education and training colleges. They also miss those students who move interstate or commence fulltime work. The Department of Education informs me that they do not collect information on what happens to students who leave after years 10 or 11, and are unable to provide information on the numbers of students who enter apprenticeships at that stage. Apprenticeships, many of which are 3 years +, are valued and valuable career pathways providing practical education and training, should be counted as such, and students counted in the retention figures as they are in some interstate systems. As an example, Don College has traced students who did not complete the full year 10 to year 12 period (finishing in 2014) and found that of the 257 students, 207 students, or 80%, were in apprenticeships, traineeships, employment or pursuing other educational activities such as TAFE or private colleges, or studying interstate. A further 18 students (7%) were unable to attend for medical or other personal reasons. The figures for 2015 are similar.

The State Government's proposed amendments to the Education Act will require students to stay in the school system until they are 18 years, finish year 12 or attain a certificate 3. This may be challenging for those students who would like to pursue an apprenticeship because of its physical hands on learning environment, and will need adjustments by TAFE and employers.

Attainment rates similarly should not be compared across Australia's jurisdictions, as the criteria to be met at the end of year 12 differ widely. In some states, apprenticeships are connected with a school and are called school based apprenticeships, some use completion of courses irrespective of results, some count community or full time work as a school subject. In Tasmania, to attain the TCE students must meet Numeracy, Literacy and ICT standards and achieve a satisfactory level of achievement in 1200 hours of course work or other accredited study such as an apprenticeship. TASC courses are accredited in 50, 100 or 150 hour courses with the vast majority requiring 150 hours of successful course completion before achievement towards the TCE is recognised. There is no capacity in Tasmania for students to be recognised for partial completion of courses. Many

students are not working at certificate 3 or pre-tertiary course levels in years 11 and 12, so fail to get their TCE for that reason. The application of the 'ticks' criteria are also inconsistent. For example, when my daughter was in year 12 (only 18 months ago) an IT 'tick' could be obtained by doing a pre-tertiary subject which required work to be submitted online (so using Word and email) but the actual IT test done by those not doing such subjects was much harder and required much more extensive IT knowledge. It was also not possible to get the maths 'tick' by doing the pre-tertiary physics course - you had to have done Maths Methods at level 2.

Year 11 and 12 in Colleges and High Schools.

Tasmania and the ACT are the two jurisdictions which have college systems, so they are often compared. However, the populations are different both on the basis of socio-economic status and geographic distribution of the population. The statement is also made that since mainland schools all go through 7-12 Tasmanian schools should do so too. I feel that this does not take into account the fact that many Tasmanian High Schools are small and do not have the student numbers to warrant trying to provide a broad range of subjects. From an economic point of view, I feel that it would not be the best use of education dollars to have lots of teachers teaching the same subjects to small classes scattered across high schools which are in close proximity to each other in urban areas.

The current college system allows students to be brought together to provide a critical mass so that a wide range of subjects can be taught. For example, Don College in Devonport brings together the students from 4 high schools, one district school and some students from the local private schools to produce a student body of 900 to 1000 students. With this number the college has the critical mass to provide a wide range of courses from level 3 pre-tertiary, level 2, level 1, VET (vocational education and training) certificate courses 1, 2, and 3, and special needs / transitional education courses. So that a student could study Specialist Maths, French level 2, Introduction to Food and Nutrition, and a VET automotive course all under the same roof if they so desired.

Students physically present in a classroom together benefit from engaging with and being stimulated by each other - this is more difficult online. They gain from taking subjects with like-minded students of a similar ability, instead of in the mixed ability classes with behavioural issues students so common in high schools.

It is apparent in the college system that some students who became disengaged in high schools become re-engaged when they move into the different college environment with different courses and with a change of peer group from their high school days. Don College has seen some impressive results from previously struggling and disengaged students.

I believe that there is a place for some provision of years 11 and 12 in remote and rural high schools where the travelling time to the nearest college is measured in hours each day, but I do not believe that it is appropriate or beneficial for students in urban areas to stay at high schools where a college is just up the road. The colleges provide a less regimented environment where the student begins to take more personal responsibility and the move helps build resilience in the transition to adulthood. It should be noted that colleges provide hostel accommodation for students from remote areas.

Some rural and remote district schools are farm schools whose assets could provide valuable practical courses in agriculture and aquaculture. However, I believe that in some areas, issues of bus transport of students from different school areas is a stumbling block. If buses are to pick up students from each of a group of high schools running years 11 and 12, the time and money involved

would be great. Whereas, for example, at Don College this has been minimised - students interested in the Agriculture and Dairy courses held at Sheffield District School travel to Don and are then bussed by the college to Sheffield. This allows the students to combine their farming courses with other subjects.

As a side note, outside of the main city areas, students travel on school buses (for students only) and the provision of these is the responsibility of the Department of State Growth – not the Department of Education – and it appears to parents that co-ordination between these departments is not all it might be, and anomalies exist in the costs of bus fares particularly for rural and out of town students.

Year 11 and 12 Curriculum.

Tasmania currently has one year courses which can be taken in either year 11 or 12. Some courses are pre-requisite for others, such as Physical Science before Chemistry or Physics, but most level 3 courses (pre-tertiary) stand alone. Level 2 courses build towards level 3 courses. One year courses allow students to take a range of 8 (up to 10 for brighter students) courses over the two years at different levels – gaining an ATAR from the best 5 of their level 3 subjects. This means that, for example, a student intending to continue to university doing a science course, could in addition to studying science subjects, English and Maths, study music, a foreign language and outdoor education as well. I believe that this has the potential to produce more well-rounded leavers better equipped for their future.

If there is a move to 5 two year courses to obtain an ATAR score, I feel that the group of subjects which will be most affected would be foreign languages – something which will be very important to our children's future in the globalised world. At level 3 it is difficult for students learning a foreign language to get high marks because of the presence of background native language speakers also taking the exam. When an ATAR depends on the results, these subjects would be avoided. Students are more likely to take them if they can be an extra or fun subject for one year. Tasmania also has a lack of native foreign language speaking teachers, native foreign language speakers generally, and very few teachers of the Federal Government's priority foreign languages.

I believe the introduction of The Australian Curriculum for K to 10 has given Tasmanian students a structure which was previously lacking. A gap between the knowledge required at year 10 and level 3 subjects studied in year 11 is apparent in some subjects, and I believe there is work to be done in the fields of moderation, and scope and sequence in year 10 to improve the transition of 10 to 11. I believe that high schools should shoulder the responsibility of ensuring that they provide the content to allow the more able students to proceed seamlessly to level 3 subjects.

Provision for gifted and highly able students.

Your research at ACER has demonstrated that the academic results for students in Australia, particularly amongst the top levels, has declined both domestically and when compared with their international counterparts. At ground level as a parent, there appears to be limited provision, funding, expertise, support and knowledge for and about gifted and highly able students. They are usually at the bottom of the lists for psychological assessments to determine their needs.

At Primary School level it is widely accepted that students in a class can be separated into several groups and each group can be doing different work at their own ability level. However on entering High School all changes, and any suggestion that students be streamed or grouped with others of

similar ability is frowned upon. There are no selective government schools in Tasmania as there are in Victoria and NSW.

My experience is that within high schools most teaching is pitched towards the lower to middle of the class and those at the higher ability end are not challenged with work at their level. In the last few years the Department of Education has introduced 'Differentiation' as a focus within its Teacher Professional Learning. Hopefully with time this will help all students, but at present many highly able students have good and less good years depending on who teaches them. My daughter, after a very mediocre year 7 and slightly better year 8, was able to be in a Personalised Learning Class for years 9 and 10 which was a great improvement and allowed her to explore subjects in more depth. The existence of this class was opposed by a number of other teachers in the school including some at a senior level. Since then, the teacher has retired and the class stopped, and all students are now in regular classes. My daughter greatly appreciated the move to college, being taught by specialist teachers teaching at a higher level and being in class rooms with like-minded students.

Specialist teachers and teachers teaching 'out of field'.

I note that you have already collected data and reported on teachers teaching 'out of field' in Tasmania, and how the numbers of 'out of field' teachers increase in rural areas.

One of the benefits I see in the college system is that it brings together students into one place where there is a core of specialist teachers used to teaching a particular subject at the required high level. I have concerns that if students are to stay at high schools to do years 11 and 12, as is the Government's plan, then many students will be taught by many inexperienced 'out of field' teachers for both academic and vocational courses. As an example, Don College has a Fashion and Design teacher whose students each year compete and win State and National awards. Her expertise is invaluable to her students who benefit from working together and feeding ideas off each other. I feel the importance of teaching 'in field' rises in the later years of education, and feel that the college system is the best way to provide that for a small dispersed population such as Tasmania's.