

# Learning to Change Tasmania

*We are continually faced  
with great opportunities  
which are brilliantly disguised  
as unsolvable problems.*  
Margaret Mead

Eleanor Ramsay  
Michael Rowan  
Visiting Professors, Inglis Clark Centre, University of Tasmania  
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*Capacity-building initiatives like the Tasmanian Leaders Program ensure that we continue to recognize and nurture those who will lead Tasmania to a strong future and ensure our efforts remain focused on where our strengths lie* Tasmania's Economic Development Plan.<sup>1</sup>

## **1. Are we there yet?**

'Are we there yet?' is not the question we would usually ask about education, but thinking of education as a vehicle for getting passengers – individuals, communities, our whole State – from where we are now to some desired future destination does make it easy and natural to ask some hard questions – questions which we really need to answer before we join the current debate about how we might change education in Tasmania. It also reminds us that while it is important to think about the vehicle – performance, resourcing and maintenance of the system – the whole point of the journey is arriving at the desired destination with all the passengers still on the bus.

So let's travel with that metaphor for a bit and see where it can take us.

## **2. What is our destination?**

An obvious question: before we know whether we have arrived, and whether we have lost anyone *en route*, we need to be clear about where we are trying to go and who is coming along for the ride! So, where can education take us, as individuals, and as a community, and as the State of Tasmania? And among those possible destinations, what have we chosen, here in Tasmania?

Globally, enhancing educational outcomes from schooling have never been seen as more important, for social cohesion and social prosperity, for economic competitiveness, and for the employability, health and well-being of citizens. Governments throughout the world, including and in many respects especially in our region, are giving a much higher priority to education, recognising that improving educational outcomes across the board is fundamental to other cornerstones of nation-building, such as economic development, trade, innovation, sustainability, and global economic competitiveness. In particular, according to the OECD,

Graduating from upper secondary education has become increasingly important in all countries, as the skills needed in the labor market are becoming more knowledge-based and as workers are progressively required to adapt to the uncertainties of a rapidly changing global economy.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Economic Development Plan – Overview*, Minister's Foreword, Government of Tasmania, August 2011, p. 3.

[http://www.development.tas.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/46292/Economic\\_Development\\_Plan.pdf](http://www.development.tas.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/46292/Economic_Development_Plan.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> *Education at a glance 2013: OECD indicators* p. 42 <http://www.oecd.org/edu/eag.htm>

The heightened public policy attention being given to educational attainment is reflected in correspondingly increased levels of national investment. And it is also evident from the development and use of sophisticated internationally applicable tools for measurement and comparison, enabling countries to track their progress against national aspirations and compare their educational achievements against those of other countries.

Amongst the most widely applied of these latter are the OECD's measures of whole countries' achievements, and of students' knowledge and skills across three key learning domains, reading, mathematics and science. With respect to countries, *Education at a Glance 2013: OECD Indicators*<sup>3</sup> reports on the performance of whole education systems using a rich, comparable and up-to-date array of indicators to inform policy, program and systemic improvements. And at the level of students, the OECD's Program for International Student Assessment (PISA)<sup>4</sup> tests randomly selected 15 year olds from over 70 countries every three years to evaluate "to what extent students at the end of compulsory education, can apply their knowledge to real-life situations and be equipped for full participation in society"; ie PISA tests not students' knowledge of the curriculum but rather how well they can apply and transfer what they have learnt to everyday situations, one of the three learning domains being the focus of the tests every three years.

So much for the international public policy priority on educational improvement, but what about here in Australia, and more to the point, here in Tasmania?

Nationally the heightened public policy priority on education is best evidenced and encapsulated by two key documents, both of which have been agreed to and signed off by every government in Australia. The first is the statement of our national educational aspirations for schooling which was adopted in 2008, officially entitled the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*<sup>5</sup> but generally called the *Melbourne Declaration*. And the second, which followed in 2009, sets out how and when this declaration of national aspirations and intent is to be implemented. Entitled the *National Partnership Agreement on Youth Attainment and Transitions*<sup>6</sup>, this second document specifies the agreed state and territory targets, timeframe and reporting arrangements, for meeting the aims and targets of the *Melbourne Declaration*.

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<sup>3</sup> OECD, Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/>

<sup>5</sup> The *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australian*, Canberra, Dec. 2008  
[http://www.mceecdya.edu.au/mceecdya/melbourne\\_declaration,25979.html](http://www.mceecdya.edu.au/mceecdya/melbourne_declaration,25979.html)

<sup>6</sup> *National Partnership Agreement on Youth Attainment and Transitions - 2008-9 to 2013-14*, Council of Australian Governments (COAG), Canberra, 2009  
[http://www.federalfinancialrelations.gov.au/content/npa/skills/youth\\_attainment\\_transitions/national\\_partnership.pdf](http://www.federalfinancialrelations.gov.au/content/npa/skills/youth_attainment_transitions/national_partnership.pdf)

The *Melbourne Declaration* begins with the following introductory preamble:

As a nation, Australia values the central role of education in building a democratic, equitable and just society – a society that is prosperous, cohesive and culturally diverse, and that values Australia’s Indigenous cultures as a key part of the nation’s history, present and future.<sup>7</sup>

The *Declaration* has two goals:

- firstly that Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence,
- and secondly that all young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens.

This latest national educational declaration differs from the two previous ones (the Hobart Declaration in 1989 and the Adelaide Declaration in 1999) in three significant ways. Firstly, it very clearly expects that achieving these aspirations and goals will be a responsibility not just of the schooling systems - while acknowledging their vital, pivotal role - but also of the wider community. Secondly, it is written with an understanding of the ways in which the world has become more complex and challenging since the earlier declarations, and emphasizes the educational implications of these changes for the futures of young Australians. Finally while asserting that Australia has “developed a high quality, world-class schooling system”<sup>8</sup> and mentioning that we ranked in the top ten OECD countries across all three domains in the 2006 PISA results, it candidly acknowledges three areas in which we need to make significant improvements: educational outcomes for Indigenous Australians and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and the overall rate of completion of Year 12 or its equivalent.

Another powerful indication of the higher and wider significance accorded to education in Australia is the on-line interactive data tool designed to measure and track the economic competitiveness of Australia’s 560 Local Government Areas (LGAs) and 55 Regional Development Australia (RDAs) regions. Called [In]sight,<sup>9</sup> this useful and informative interactive mapping tool was developed by the Regional Australia Institute,<sup>10</sup> modeled on the World Economic Forum’s Global Competitiveness report.<sup>11</sup> And education (or Human Capital as it is called in this context) has been selected as one of the ten core themes for measuring regional economic competitiveness and one of the drivers for future success, both as an indicator and a determinant of economic competitiveness – right up there alongside more predictable themes, such as infrastructure, market size, technological readiness, labour market efficiency and natural resources. Usefully for Thinkbank participants, this tool provides comparative data for each of Tasmania’s 29 LGAs, as well as for Tasmania as a whole.

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<sup>7</sup> *Melbourne Declaration op. cit.*, p.4

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p.5

<sup>9</sup> <http://insight.regionalaustralia.org.au/>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.regionalaustralia.org.au>

<sup>11</sup> [www.weforum.org/issues/global-competitiveness](http://www.weforum.org/issues/global-competitiveness)

In Tasmania, some recent key government documents are relevant to unpacking our State's view of the importance of education and the goals for our education system here. Firstly, improving Year 12 retention (and presumably, completion) rates is emphasized as fundamental to Tasmania's economic development, the overview document summarizing Tasmania's *State Economic Plan* stating unambiguously that:

Increasing educational outcomes and year-12 retention rates are key to ensuring a skilled workforce and Tasmania's long-term future. Lifting Tasmanian year-12 retention rates and increasing the number of Tasmanians with post-secondary qualifications is a central component of the Tasmanian Government's years 11 and 12 education and training strategy.<sup>12</sup>

As with the *Melbourne Declaration*, the *Tasmanian Economic Development Plan Overview* stresses that "industry and the wider community" shares "collective responsibly"<sup>13</sup> with the Government, through its Department of Education (DOE), for achieving these objectives.

And of course, Tasmania, as a signatory to the *Melbourne Declaration*, has expressed a formal commitment to its aspirations and goals. Tasmania's response<sup>14</sup> to the *National Partnership Agreement*, which specifies our state targets and a timeframe for reaching them (discussed below), includes the following aspirational statement:

To enable every Tasmanian to reach their potential, at all stages of life.  
To nurture a culturally rich, socially cohesive and economically productive community.<sup>15</sup>

The same Tasmanian document explains that the *National Partnership Agreement* was developed:

to achieve a national Year 12, or equivalent, attainment rate of 90 per cent by 2015, provide an education or training entitlement to young people aged 15-24; better engage young people in education and training; assist young people aged 15-24 to make a successful transition from schooling into further education, training or employment; and better align Commonwealth, State and Territory programs and services related to youth, careers and transitions.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Economic Development Plan – Overview*, Tasmanian Government, 2011, p.3  
[http://www.development.tas.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/46292/Economic\\_Development\\_Plan.pdf](http://www.development.tas.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/46292/Economic_Development_Plan.pdf)

The *Economic Development Plan* in full can be accessed at <http://www.development.tas.gov.au/>

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>14</sup> *Implementation Plan for the National Partnership Agreement on Youth Attainment and Transitions – Tasmania*, undated  
[http://www.federalfinancialrelations.gov.au/content/npa/skills/youth\\_attainment\\_transitions/TAS\\_IP.pdf](http://www.federalfinancialrelations.gov.au/content/npa/skills/youth_attainment_transitions/TAS_IP.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p.5

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p.3

Finally, all these fine words have been matched with significant additional investment in education in Australia, as in other countries, culminating here in federal funding to implement the Better Schools or 'Gonski' reforms. For Tasmania, that alone means an additional \$360m for schooling, including \$130 million from the State Government. Clearly those holding the purse strings want to speed up the bus.

### **3. Why do we want – or need – to go there?**

As mentioned briefly above, the introductory sections of the *Melbourne Declaration* sets out the five significant ways in which the world has changed, or in which change has accelerated, in the decade since the *Adelaide Declaration*, such that completion of schooling for all (ie year 12) has become fundamentally important, for individuals, for communities, for regions and for the nation as a whole. These changes are as follows:

1. The rapid increase in global integration and international mobility, opening up new and exciting opportunities for young Australians but requiring that they have an appreciation of and respect for social, cultural and religious diversity, and a sense of global citizenship.
2. The growth and increased global influence of India, China and other Asian nations such that Australians need to become 'Asia literate', as we engage with and build stronger relationships with Asia.
3. Due to this globalisation as well as technological change, skilled jobs now dominate jobs growth with the very nature of the jobs available to young Australians changing ever more rapidly. As a result, those with university or vocational education and training qualifications fare much better in the employment market than early school leavers (ie those who leave school without completing Year 12). Therefore, to maximise their opportunities for healthy, productive and rewarding futures, Australia's young people must be encouraged not only to complete secondary education, but also to proceed into further training or education.
4. Complex environmental, social and economic pressures such as climate change that extend beyond national borders pose unprecedented challenges, requiring countries to work together in new ways. To meet these challenges, Australians must be able to engage with scientific concepts and principles, and approach problem-solving in new and creative ways.
5. Rapid and ongoing developments in communication and information technologies (ICTs) are changing the ways people share, use, develop and process information and technology, such that young Australians need to be highly skilled in the use of ICT.<sup>17</sup>

So, in summary, the nature and pace of changes to the world in which we all live mean that the demands of contemporary life have become much more complex, for everyone, with direct implications for enhancing educational attainment levels across the entire population – just for living a good life, let alone achieving our full potential, both as individuals and as a community. Hence completing

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<sup>17</sup> *Melbourne Declaration, op, cit.*, p. 4-5

twelve years of schooling has become the foundation stone and key to the rest of our young people's lives and futures, certainly in terms of employment security and income levels, but also for their health, independence, and social prosperity; in other words, for living and thriving in the twenty first century.

Looking in more detail at the employment-related impacts of improving educational attainment, the OECD's research across multiple countries indicates that the probability of employment increases with level of education, with 64% of people with below upper secondary education working full time compared to 71% for those with upper secondary and 75% for those with a tertiary qualification.<sup>18</sup> In terms of income levels, across the OECD countries, on average, the relative earnings of tertiary-educated adults are over 1.5 times that of adults with upper secondary education, while individuals without an upper secondary education earn 25% less than their peers who have attained that level of education.<sup>19</sup> Here in Australia, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has recently calculated that 86 % of Australian jobs now require Year 12 or a Certificate II at the entry level to employment.<sup>20</sup> Further, the OECD research adds that earnings tend to increase with age for those with higher educational qualifications whereas those with below upper secondary education tend to decrease with age<sup>21</sup> – a double whammy.

In addition to these employment related benefits of education, the OECD analysis of international data from a large number of countries shows the many specific ways that education contributes to health, including mental health, independence and well-being. Because of the timing of its production, the impact of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) is a recurrent theme of the OECD report, with evidence that increased levels of education contributed both to ameliorating the impacts of the crisis, for individuals and for countries, and to faster recovery rates. It also shows that non-completion of school (Year 12) not only brings severe difficulties in both entering and remaining in the labor force, but not surprisingly, increases the risk of poverty and the likelihood of welfare dependency. The OECD also found that adults with a tertiary education are half as likely to be obese and 16% less likely to smoke, these differences in health-related indicators being independent of income levels and gender.<sup>22</sup> Finally, the OECD cites research showing a positive correlation between increased levels of education and improved mental health.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>OECD *op.cit.*, p.101

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p. 14

<sup>20</sup> *Future Provision of Years 11 and 12 in Regional Tasmania – A Discussion Paper*, Department of Education, Tasmania, p.3

<https://www.education.tas.gov.au/documentcentre/Documents/Future-Provision-of-Years-11-and-12-Education-in-Regional-Tasmania-Discussion-Paper.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> OECD *op. cit.*, p.101

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, p.149

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p.330



#### 4. Is anyone in the world leading, and so perhaps showing us the way?

The *Melbourne Declaration* tells us we need to be aiming for both equity and excellence. We have examples to guide us in both cases.

In terms of excellence, there is again a wealth of comparative international data available from the OECD's *Education at a Glance 2013*.<sup>24</sup> Looking first at upper secondary completion rates, in 2011 Slovenia was well ahead, with Finland, Japan and Korea following closely behind.<sup>25</sup> Korea leads the OECD countries in terms of the proportion of the adult population (25-64 year olds) with a tertiary qualification, with Japan, Canada and the Russian Federation next, and Australia running in twelfth place. But much more indicative is the **rate and extent of improvement** revealed by the proportion of younger people (that is, 25-34 year olds) with such qualifications in comparison with the proportion of the entire adult population (that is, 25-64 year olds). Korea leads again, but it is Poland which comes second - starting from a much lower base of education among older adults and ranking 21<sup>st</sup> overall, but making up ground fast - followed by France and Japan ranking equally.<sup>26</sup> Countries on the move!

Equity is the equally important other half of the *Melbourne Declaration*'s first goal. Significantly, the OECD reports PISA country-specific data to track the relative success of national efforts to close the equity gap between students who are relatively advantaged in their opportunities and outcomes from education, and those who face socio-economic and geographic barriers. While these analyses indicate "that no country or economy has reached the goal of creating a completely equitable education system...some are much closer than others."<sup>27</sup> Indeed "Some countries and economies have shown that improvements in equity can be achieved at the same time as improvements in overall performance, and in a relatively short time."<sup>28</sup>

The following OECD conclusions are sharply relevant to whether and how we can challenge and change the very different educational outcomes across our Tasmanian communities:

The fact that countries and economies vary in the degree to which learning outcomes are linked to socio-economic background demonstrates that **social background is not destiny, and that policy and practice can make a difference**. Moreover, countries can pursue equitable learning outcomes while also moving towards high student performance....(since) many of the countries and economies with the greatest equity in student outcomes are also top performers.<sup>29</sup> (Our emphasis)

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<sup>24</sup> OECD, *op. cit.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p.42

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, Chart A1.1, p.26 and p.36 Table 41.4a

<sup>27</sup> *PISA in Focus*, an on-line resource consisting of a series of education policy-oriented notes designed to describe a PISA topic in a concise, user-friendly way.

See <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisainfocus/-d.en.199059>

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid* *Are countries moving to more equitable education systems?*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*



For example, of the thirteen OECD countries showing improvements in reading scores between 2000 and 2009, in most it was large improvements amongst their lowest-performing students which powered the overall national advance.<sup>30</sup> The gap in reading scores between the highest- and lowest-performing students narrowed in the majority of these countries; and in some the impact of socio-economic background on performance weakened between 2000 and 2009. Proving not only that equity and excellence can be pursued together, but that the former enhances the latter, a case of leading from the bottom.

And in answer to the question whether the wealth of a country determines its educational achievements, the OECD analysis of comparative international PISA results concludes as follows:

Money alone can't buy a good education system. **Strong performers in PISA** are those countries and economies that **believe - and act on the belief - that all children can succeed in school**. Among wealthier economies, those that prioritize the quality of teachers over smaller classes tend to show better performance. When it comes to money and education, the question isn't how much? but rather for what?<sup>31</sup> (Our emphasis)

Finally the OECD has this to say about the best schooling systems based on its extensive time-series data-set of PISA results from multiple countries:

**Successful PISA countries also invest something else in their education systems: high expectations for all of their students.** Schools and teachers in these systems do not allow struggling students to fail; they do not make them repeat a grade, they do not transfer them to other schools, nor do they group students into different classes based on ability. Regardless of a country's or economy's wealth, school systems that commit themselves, both in resources and in policies, to ensuring that **all** students succeed perform better in PISA than systems that tend to separate out poor performers or students with behavioural problems or special needs.<sup>32</sup> (Our emphasis)

We are not suggesting that exactly the strategies pursued by, for example, Korea or Poland or Finland are what we need to do in Tasmania. Rather, we draw the general lesson that commitment to improvement for all, confidence that it can be achieved, agreement on measures of performance and the willingness to adapt strategies until ambitious targets are met, is the foundation for major improvements in outcomes independent of the wealth (or geography) of the country – or state - concerned, its culture or its educational history. **What counts most is determined effort to achieve challenging goals while normalizing expectations of achievement and attainment, and challenging under-achievement and failure.**

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid* *Improving Performance: Leading from the Bottom*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, *Does money buy strong performance in PISA*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*

## 5. What are our milestones, here in Tasmania?

In pursuit of the overall objective that Australian school students should acquire the knowledge and skills to participate effectively in society and employment in a globalized economy, the *National Partnership Agreement on Youth Attainment and Transitions*<sup>33</sup> includes the following targets:<sup>34</sup>

1. Lift the Year 12 or equivalent (Certificate II or above) attainment rate to 90 per cent by 2015
2. Lift the Year 12 or equivalent (Certificate III or above) attainment rate to 90 per cent by 2020
3. Halve the gap for Indigenous students in reading, writing and numeracy by 2018
4. At least halve the gap for Indigenous students in Year 12 or equivalent attainment rates by 2020

Additionally, this agreement – to which Tasmania is a signatory - commits all governments to report on the literacy and numeracy achievements of Year 3, 5, 7 and 9 students in national testing, and the proportion of students in the bottom and top levels of performance in international testing.

As indicated by the targets above, the agreement was largely focused on improving Australia's performance in post-compulsory education – year 12 or the equivalent. This led to all state and territory governments agreeing to set targets for, among other things, increasing the number of 20-24 year olds who have attained Year 12 or a Certificate II or above. Each state and territory subsequently negotiated individual targets as their contribution to Australia reaching the 90% target. Here is a table<sup>35</sup> showing the targets for Tasmania, compared to those for Australia as a whole.

	2008	2012	2015
TAS	75.1%	78.35%	81.6%
AUS	83.5%	86.7%	89.9%

Two matters stand out from these Tasmanian targets. Firstly, by the end of the agreement period in 2015, Tasmania is aiming to get near to the 2008 completion rate for Australia as a whole: that is, by the **end** of this Great Leap Forward, Tasmania hopes to be **almost but not quite** at the same spot as we were nationally at the **beginning** of this period. And secondly, should we

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<sup>33</sup> COAG, *op. cit.*

<sup>34</sup> Conveniently expressed in the recent report on progress *Education in Australia 2012: Five years of performance*, p. 5. [http://www.coagreformcouncil.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/Education in Australia 2012, Five years of performance.pdf](http://www.coagreformcouncil.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/Education%20in%20Australia%202012,%20Five%20years%20of%20performance.pdf)

<sup>35</sup> COAG, *op. cit.*, excerpted from table 9, p.20

[http://www.federalfinancialrelations.gov.au/content/npa/skills/youth\\_attainment\\_transitions/national\\_partnership.pdf](http://www.federalfinancialrelations.gov.au/content/npa/skills/youth_attainment_transitions/national_partnership.pdf)

achieve these targets, the gap between the Tasmanian and the Australian national average completions rates will not have narrowed: ie while we will have improved completion rates here, Tasmania will not have caught up at all with the rest of the country. And since the Department of Education's Strategic Plan<sup>36</sup> - wonderfully brief, on one page – does not contain any targets, these appear to be **the** attainment targets for (public) education in Tasmania..

## **6. Why have we aimed low?**

The document *Implementation Plan for the National Partnership Agreement on Youth Attainment and Transitions - Tasmania*, essentially our response to the COAG Agreement, provides this explanation for Tasmania's targets. While written in 2008-9, it remains relevant and we quote it at length.

Currently our post Year 10 retention rates are low with only 61.8% of students staying on to complete Year 12 and we have the lowest post school qualifications in the nation (Table 2)... Several factors contribute considerably to this situation, particularly demographics, culture and structure of education in Tasmania.

As an island state, Tasmania has unique demographics, where more of the population live in rural and regional communities than in the capital city and we have one of the highest proportions of the population living in areas of low socio-economic status of any state in Australia as defined by ABS Socio-Economic Index for areas (SEIFA)....

Research also indicates that the degree of both rurality and low socioeconomic status impacts on young peoples' aspirations and consequently their participation in education and training. This is accentuated by the limited provision of post-Year 10 sites in regional areas of Tasmania.

Young people in Tasmania living in low socio-economic regions have increased truancy, broken attendance, more suspensions and higher rates of early leavers than their counterparts in other regions. Their family background has considerable influence on their aspirations and participation in education. Of particular relevance are educational background and occupation of parents. Parental aspirations and values in this context are considerable in influencing a young person's desire and motivation, or lack thereof, to engage and complete Year 12 or equivalent.

Culturally this has a significant impact on young people particularly in the development of the social capital of their families and communities. A priority for Tasmania is to raise the expectations of some parents and communities in valuing education and training. Research continually demonstrates that young people turn to their family and friends for advice and unless we raise the expectations of these people in valuing

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<sup>36</sup> *Learners First: connected and inspired - 2014/17Strategy*, Department of Education, undated. <https://www.education.tas.gov.au/documentcentre/Documents/DoE-Strategic-Plan-2014-2017.pdf>

education and training as a means to economic and social independence we can not, by restructuring our education system to provide increased multiple learning pathways and career counseling alone increase our participation and attainment targets.<sup>37</sup>

In short, we have aimed low because we:

1. begin from a low base,
2. are working with a geographically dispersed population many of whom live far from any school offering education beyond year 10,
3. and have a relatively poor population, which historically has not seen the value in education post year 10,

and because all of the above makes it difficult, apparently much more difficult than for other parts of Australia, to increase attainment of year 12 or equivalent. Which may all be true, but begs the question, 'How will this be changed other than by significantly boosting the State's economy?'

## **7. But Tasmania's Economic Development Plan says education is the lever!**

The first goal the State's *Economic Development Plan*<sup>38</sup> puts forward is 'To support and grow businesses in Tasmania.' This is broken down into five areas for action, the first being infrastructure and the second skills. The Skills section begins with a clear and strong statement:

Increasing educational outcomes and year 12 retention rates are key to ensuring a skilled workforce and Tasmania's long-term future.<sup>39</sup>

So according to the State's economic plan, we need to increase educational outcomes, and particularly the completion of year 12, to support economic development. But our education plan says we need enhanced economic development – increased wealth in the community – in order to improve educational outcomes, and especially to be able to catch up with educational attainment levels in the rest of Australia.

Clearly, we have a cycle in danger of going nowhere here - chasing economic chickens around the barnyard to get them to lay educational eggs, or vice versa, depending which document you read first.

Either we need to find a way to boost economic performance and thus community wealth, and thereby improve educational outcomes, or we need to focus on education, improve opportunities and outcomes there, and use that as a basis for development of the economy. Since the Government has the power to

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<sup>37</sup>Implementation Plan for the National Partnerships Agreement on Youth Attainment and Transitions, p. 5ff.

[http://www.federalfinancialrelations.gov.au/content/npa/skills/youth\\_attainment\\_transitions/TAS\\_IP.pdf](http://www.federalfinancialrelations.gov.au/content/npa/skills/youth_attainment_transitions/TAS_IP.pdf)

<sup>38</sup>[http://www.development.tas.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/46292/Economic\\_Development\\_Plan.pdf](http://www.development.tas.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/46292/Economic_Development_Plan.pdf)

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, p.10

change education, while its capacity to directly increase the wealth of the economy is limited, intervening to lift educational outcomes is clearly the place to break the cycle of under-achievement. If indeed we are under-achieving.

It is time to look at some performance data.

## 8. Where are we now?

Two recently released reports give us a picture of educational attainment in Tasmania.

The report *COAG Reform Council Education in Australia 2012: five years of performance*<sup>40</sup> provides good news on literacy. At all of years 3, 5, 7 and 9 there is no statistically significant difference between Tasmania's NAPLAN performance in reading and those for the rest of Australia. Given the recent media attention to adult literacy in Tasmania this can only mean things are on track to get much better (or that NAPLAN does not measure the same things that we think of as adult literacy). On numeracy the news is not so good. No significant difference at year 3, but significantly lower performance in years 5, 7 and 9, with the gap widening at each later year level. Writing is much the same, with Tasmania performing significantly below the national mean from year 5, and the gap increasing at year 7 but then holding at that level.<sup>41</sup>

The latest and recently released *Annual Report of the Tasmanian Department of Education (DoE)*<sup>42</sup> notes a reduction in the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students achieving expected standards in reading and numeracy at all year levels tested, from 8.3% prior to 2011 to 7.3% in 2012, which the report says is half the gap for Australia as a whole. This looks like very good news too.

Tasmania's performance in Year 12 attainment was recorded as 77% in 2011, compared to 85% nationally.<sup>43</sup> With respect to the latter, the COAG Reform Council report concludes that Australia is unlikely to meet its COAG target of 90%, although ACT is already there. But the good news is that Tasmania has achieved the greatest increase of any state, going from 65% in 2001 to 77% in 2011.

The data just reported comes from the 2011 Census. It is thus a (near) complete report of the educational attainment of Australians, which is more reliable than the data we get for non-census years from the Australian Bureau of Statistics' *Survey of Education and Work*. Indeed, the error margin for this survey prompted Tasmania to make the following comment in accepting Year 12 attainment targets:

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<sup>40</sup> [http://www.coagreformcouncil.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/Education in Australia 2012, Five years of performance.pdf](http://www.coagreformcouncil.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/Education%20in%20Australia%202012,%20Five%20years%20of%20performance.pdf)

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid* p.110ff

<sup>42</sup> *Department of Education Annual Report 2012-13*, State of Tasmania, Department of Education, 2013 <https://www.education.tas.gov.au/documentcentre/Documents/DoE-Annual-Report-2012-2013.pdf> p. 39

<sup>43</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics - 2011.0 - *Reflecting a Nation: Stories from the 2011 Census*, <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/2071.0main+features552012-2013>

While Tasmania accepts the baseline data for assessing attainment rates in 2012, the current confidence intervals for the ABS Survey of Education and Work data (6.9% in 2007) used for the year 12 or equivalent attainment baseline will make it difficult to measure significant change and success over time towards the targets.<sup>44</sup>

But while the census does not have the sampling error of the *Education and Work* survey, the data is collected by self-report which introduces a different sort of inaccuracy. If we want data from a more verifiable source, we would have to look to the Tasmanian Qualifications Authority (TQA), and the data from this source is a little less favorable.

Looking at the cohort of students in year 10 in 2010, by 2013 only 39.8% had attained the TCE, and 16.7% had attained a VET certificate.<sup>45</sup> Even if we assume there is no overlap between these groups (and VET certificates can be counted towards the TCE so this may be erring on the generous side), that only gives us 56.5% attaining Year 12 or the equivalent, when our target for 2012 was 78.35%.

Presumably if we used real attainment data for other states rather than the ABS *Education and Work* survey, or even the self-report in the Census, their claimed performance would suffer a similar decline. But that is not really the point: if we need almost 90% of our young people attaining Year 12 or the equivalent, the TQA data tells us we have a long way to go.

## 9. Can we just keep going as we are?

So far as literacy and numeracy are concerned, Tasmania seems to be well on track with good NAPLAN results in the early years, which will hopefully be maintained in years 7 and 9 by these students. But we have a real problem with Year 12 attainment, however, where we just seem to be stuck, as the following illustrates.

Here is what the DoE's *Retention and Attainment Strategy Years 10-12*<sup>46</sup> says about "ensuring that all students registered in Year 10 government schools in Tasmania make the transition to further education and training in the following year":

It is imperative that we engender the expectation that everyone goes on to further education and training.<sup>47</sup>

And here is what the DoE's *School Life: Information for parents and carers about Tasmanian Government Schools 2013*<sup>48</sup> says about education beyond year 10:

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<sup>44</sup>[http://www.federalfinancialrelations.gov.au/content/npa/skills/youth\\_attainment\\_transitions/TAS\\_IP.pdf](http://www.federalfinancialrelations.gov.au/content/npa/skills/youth_attainment_transitions/TAS_IP.pdf) p.4

<sup>45</sup> <http://www.tqa.tas.gov.au/1782>, Direct Continuation Rates 2007-2012 Table 1

<sup>46</sup> *Retention and Attainment Strategy Years 10-12*, Department of Education, September 20 2011 <https://www.education.tas.gov.au/documentcentre/Documents/Retention-and-Attainment-Strategy-Years-10-12.pdf>

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, p.5



*School Life* is designed for parents and carers of students entering Tasmanian government schools for the first time or transitioning from primary to high school. Students entering colleges should refer to the Years 11 and 12 guide available on our website.<sup>49</sup>

and

The Department of Education is responsible for education from the early years to Year 12 and Vocational Education and Training (VET) delivered through schools, colleges, the Tasmanian Polytechnic and adult learning (LINC). There are 200 Tasmanian government schools and colleges (including the Tasmanian Polytechnic) grouped into three Learning Service areas: North, North-West and South, each managed by a General Manager.<sup>50</sup>

In the whole of *School Life*, the official ‘welcome document’ for parents and carers sending their students to a Tasmanian state school, there is **no mention** of the Tasmanian Certificate of Education (TCE), or any encouragement to see education beyond year 10 as something for **everyone**, and no indication that the new Australian curriculum<sup>51</sup> (which is discussed in at least page length detail) is a curriculum designed for Foundation to year 12 – which makes the description of schooling beyond year 10 as ‘further education and training’ to which students ‘transition’ very odd indeed.

Just for comparison, here is what *School Life* says about head lice

#### Head lice (nits)

As parents, you have the primary responsibility for detecting and treating head lice. If your child has head lice, they must remain at home until an initial application of head lice treatment and preferably all eggs (nits) are removed. To help prevent the spread of head lice, we ask that you:

- notify your child’s school as soon as you detect head lice or nits in their hair
- wash your child’s hair in a lice-killing shampoo available from your local chemist or pharmacy
- apply plenty of conditioner and comb your child’s hair with a fine nit comb, looking out for the lice’s empty egg cases or ‘nits’. The lice themselves are harder to spot, but look out for brown or grey insects about the size of a match head that lurk at the roots of your child’s hair
- teach your child not to share brushes, combs, hats, swimming caps or hair bands
- braid long hair, or tie it back while your child is at school.

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<sup>48</sup> *School Life: Information for parents and carers about Tasmanian Government Schools 2013*, Department of Education, November 2012

<https://www.education.tas.gov.au/documentcentre/Documents/School-Life-2013.pdf>

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, extract from the welcome from the Department’s Secretary, Colin Petit

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, p.4

<sup>51</sup> <http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/>



While there is information about years 11 and 12 for parents and careers on the DoE's home page even this does not include any mention of the TCE. (Some of the other states are not much better, but have a look at the information on secondary schools for parents in Victoria<sup>52</sup> which features the VCE prominently.)

**Messages are important and these official information sources do little to challenge community perceptions that year 10 marks the end of schooling in Tasmania.** The school formals for students ending year 10 and the high profile provided to them by the photographs and coverage in local papers reinforce this unhelpful notion.

Clearly we cannot continue like this if we genuinely want all students, their families and their communities, to **expect** that all young people will continue their education beyond year 10 and indeed that they will complete year 12. Year 10 should be no more of a milestone for students than year 9, another important year on the way to completing a full basic education of 12 years, culminating in the award of the TCE.

And if we look at what a student needs to achieve to be awarded the TCE – and here it is:

To get this qualification a person must meet - or do better than - requirements for standards in:

- everyday adult reading, writing and communication
- everyday adult mathematics
- everyday adult use of computers and the internet
- the amount and level of participation and achievement in education and training
- pathway planning.

People can meet these requirements in different ways, in different settings and over different periods of time. People can meet these standards through a school or college program, through a VET program, through an apprenticeship, at the Polytechnic and through a mix of part-time study and training. Some employers may offer a program of work and training that will allow someone to meet the standards for getting the Tasmanian Certificate of Education.<sup>53</sup>

then it is hard to see how a student ending their initial education with anything less than this can be part of the 'skilled workforce' that the State Economic Plan says is needed to secure 'Tasmania's long-term future'. (And note that it is important that people gain the certificate itself and not just the knowledge and skills which it requires, as **gaining the certificate provides evidence of the**

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<sup>52</sup> <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/parents/secondary/Pages/default.aspx>

<sup>53</sup> <http://www.tqa.tas.gov.au/1906>

**capacity of the Tasmanian workforce which would be available to a prospective investor.)**

No less important, if a person moves into their adult life without everyday adult competencies in reading, writing, communication, mathematics and the use of IT, how can they fully participate in the life of their community and, of great importance, how can they fully exercise their democratic rights as citizens?

The sharp questions that we need to pose then, are:

1. **Do we really expect this of all students.** Do teachers, schools, the DoE, and the community as a whole, look at each and every child commencing their education in kindergarten and envisage, indeed expect to see that child gaining the TCE?
2. **How are we communicating this expectation** to students and parents and communities?
3. Are we examining the way that education is organized to **ensure that there are no road blocks, or slippery slides out and down**, in the smooth transition from each year to the next, from kindergarten to the TCE?

## 10. Could we start a revolution?<sup>54</sup>

Let's put that the other way around. What would stop Tasmania revolutionizing education in the State, achieving, say, the nationally highest level of completion of Year 12 or the equivalent, certified by the award of the TCE?

For example:

1. Are young Tasmanians just as able to learn as other young Australians, or indeed as young Finns, young Singaporeans from all their ethnic backgrounds, or as Korean and Chinese young people?
2. Are Tasmanian parents any less concerned about the future welfare of their children than parents elsewhere?
3. Would Tasmanian communities benefit just as much as any other communities from the increases in self-esteem and good health that would come with higher levels of education?
4. Do Tasmanian business leaders think their workplaces would benefit from more highly educated workers, a workforce with higher skills, including the 'soft skills' of teamwork, communication and negotiation required for high level customer service and continuous quality improvement?
5. Will the Tasmanian economy keep pace with the leading economies nationally, in our region, and internationally? And if so, will our economy develop in a way that puts increasing demands on the hard and soft skills and knowledge of workers?
6. Can Tasmania commit sufficient resources to education to significantly increase educational attainment, if it does not yet (including the increase to flow following the Better Schools/Gonski reforms)?
7. Are all the principal players in education – teachers and their unions, school leaders, and the relevant state government departments - committed to raising educational attainment?
8. Do our organizational structures for schooling and training facilitate the achievement of increased educational attainment?
9. Have we the necessary learning to change Tasmania?

If we can find a way to answer 'Yes' to all those questions - or if we cannot do that, if we can design and enact strategies and interventions that might turn the situation around - we will, in fact, have started a revolution.

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<sup>54</sup> We will not be the first to try. The recent history of education in Tasmania includes various attempts to change policies or structures to improve outcomes at Year 12. The current state of play is summarized in the Minister's *Action Plan for the Future Provision of Years 11 and 12 education in regional Tasmania* (<http://www.education.tas.gov.au/documentcentre/Documents/Future-Provision-of-Years-11-and-12-Ministers-Action-Plan.pdf>) and the Education Department's *Retention and Attainment Strategy, Years 10 – 12* (<https://www.education.tas.gov.au/documentcentre/Documents/Retention-and-Attainment-Strategy-Years-10-12.pdf>)