A NOTE ON YEAR 12 RETENTION AND ATTAINMENT IN TASMANIA*
Updated 12 July 2014

There is some confusion over the rate of retention from year 10 to year 12 in Tasmania. For example, when the Productivity Commission *Report on Government Services 2014* was released, *The Mercury* (29 January) claimed that the Tasmanian Education System 'is in crisis as year 12 retention rates hit a new low', reporting the retention rate as 67%. http://www.themercury.com.au/news/tasmania/tassie-education-system-in-crisis-as-year-12-retention-rates-hit-new-low/story-fnj4f7k1-1226812501430

The then Opposition Education Spokesperson, Michael Ferguson, used the retention data (actually, *apparent* retention – we come back to this below) to promote the Liberal Party policy of extending all government high schools to year 12 over a ten year period, targeting rural and regional schools first.

The then Minister for Education, Brian Wightman, retorted that 'when the State's high proportion of part-timers were included, the rate was excellent, at 91 per cent, compared with 82 per cent nationally', and claimed that the Liberal's policy would 'destroy the college system'.

The conflicting figures are explained if we go to the Productivity Commission *Report on Government Services 2014*, Chapter 4, School Education, Table 4A.122 (PDF page 428/510)
http://www.pc.gov.au/gsp/rogs/childcare-education-training

For 2012, the latest year for which data is given, the Productivity Commission's Report gives the following data, first for full time students, then for full and part time students combined.

Before looking at the table, note that this is **apparent** retention data, which means it is the number of students in year 12 in one year, divided by the number of students in year 10 two years earlier. There are several problems with this, including what is defined as year 12 (or year 12/13), whether the definitions of full and part time are the same in all states and territories, and especially that movement of students from one state to another, one schooling system to another, or from another country to Australia may not even out. All this means that the apparent retention figure can be very different to the number of actual students who were in year 10 in one year and continued into year 12 two years later – indeed, it is possible that the apparent retention rate can be more than 100% whereas the 'real' retention rate – called the 'direct continuation rate' could never be.

With that warning, here is the data the politicians were discussing.

Table 4A.122. Apparent retention rates of secondary students from years 10-12 (per cent)

		NSW	VIC	QLD	WA	SA	TAS	ACT	NT	AUST
Full time secondary students										
	Gov	70.7	75.7	76.6	75.0	82.2	67.1	100.7	68.2	74.8
	Non Gov	83.5	89.1	91.9	81.7	92.6	67.3	76.4	49.7	86.4
	All	75.5	81.2	82.2	77.8	86.3	67.1	89.3	62.1	79.3
Full time and part time secondary students										
	Gov	73.0	77.9	78.5	77.2	92.4	93.8	101.9	69.4	78.2
	Non Gov	83.5	89.3	92.1	81.7	94.5	67.3	76.4	50.2	86.6
	All	76.9	82.5	83.5	79.1	93.2	85.4	90.0	63.1	81.4

So both the Liberal and Labor spokespeople were using data from the Report, with the Liberals using the data for full time students, and Labor reporting the data for full and part time students combined, and for state schools only in Tasmania and for all schools nationally (at least these are the figures in the table closest to the 92% and 82% Mr Wightman used).

Which should we think gives the more accurate picture of what is actually happening in our schools?

The Productivity Commission warns against considering the combined data for full and part time students as the measure of apparent retention, adding a note (e) to the table, which reads:

> Inclusion of part time students in the calculation of apparent retention rates increases the apparent retention rates in SA and Tasmania due to a significant number of part-time adult learners (in Tasmania) and other students recorded as year 12 that were not part of the original year 10 cohort two years prior.

Indeed, this is part of the problem with using apparent retention data, and it is surely wise counsel, since if we include part time students we get at least counter-intuitive results.

When part time students are included, Tasmanian apparent retention rates for all schools are the third highest in the nation, after SA, then the ACT, with QLD and VIC following in that order. But no other data suggests that SA – which like Tasmania has a relatively large part time senior secondary cohort - is outperforming the ACT in retaining students to year 12, nor that QLD is more successful than Victoria.

In addition to this, the Productivity Commission's cautionary note explains that Tasmania has "a significant number of part-time **adult** learners", who are clearly returning to senior secondary education after leaving school prior to completion. We can be confident that, as early school leavers, these adult learners (whether full or part time) would not have been present in the year 10 cohort upon which apparent retention is calculated. So their appearance in year 12 likely over-states and distorts that calculation because they have **re-entered** senior secondary education rather than being **retained** within it.

Adults returning to complete their secondary education is something to be celebrated, and most especially that there are significant numbers of them, but this should not be confused with a high rate of retention from year 10 to year 12.

The combined data for **full and part time** students retained to year 12 is thus not data that we would use as an indicator of the success of senior secondary education in Tasmania.

But that is not to say we should ignore part time study and just look at the full time students, nor that we should ignore the significance of returning students, of whatever age. Indeed, encouraging and supporting the return and re-engagement of early school leavers should be a policy priority along with retaining young continuers to the completion of their secondary education. Thus we need to understand why Tasmania, like SA, has more part time senior secondary students, how many of them are adult returners and how many are young continuers, and most importantly, whether this is a pathway to success for these students.

Which brings us to the most important point. Retention is not an end in itself. Rather it is important because you need to stay at school to attain a TCE, or the equivalent high school graduation certificate in the other states and territories. The success of schooling should be measured first and foremost by the proportion of young people who achieve this goal and thus graduate from high school.

The latest data from the Tasmanian Qualifications Authority, which gives direct continuation and attainment rates, [http://www.tqa.tas.gov.au/2349, table 3] says that of young Tasmanians in the year 10 age cohort in 2011(counting continuation as taking a half time load or more), as at 15 April 2014

- 3.6% did not complete a pathway plan in year 10,
- a further 25.2% did not continue from year 10 to year 11,
- 14.5% more left between years 11 and 12,
- and of those remaining to year 12, only 77% completed their TCE.
- Thus just **43.7%** of Tasmanians who were in year 10 in 2011 had completed their TCE by 2013.

This means that less than half of our youth are graduating from high school – by which we mean, as everywhere else in Australia, gaining their year 12 certificate.

Perhaps some of these young people focus more on work for a time and study at less than the half time rate. Perhaps they return to study as adults after a break of a year or two, or later still. But even if this is so, the data just given shows that school loses its central place in the lives of more than half of our young people before they graduate, if they ever do.

No other data, no matter how comforting, can make this a situation we can accept.

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*Revised 1 July 2014. Thanks to Reg Allen for clarification of issues with apparent retention. In what can be a politically charged debate, it should be clear that the authors are solely responsible for the content of this note including any remaining errors!