
Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities

The Tasmanian Government's Submission, prepared by the Department of Education, to the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Committee

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1 Introduction

Rural and regional areas, with a greater proportion of people from low socioeconomic backgrounds, have a history of comparatively lower participation and educational attainment. In order to improve attainment rates it is important to provide accessible, affordable and practical education to all Australia regardless of their locality.

Tasmania currently faces considerable challenges in increasing higher education participation and outcomes. In recognition that education attainment has a significant influence on an individual's life including employment, income, health and wellbeing, the Tasmanian Government has committed to strengthening secondary and tertiary education for all Tasmanian's regardless of where they live.

Tasmania is the most decentralised jurisdiction in Australia and a high proportion of its population are from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Tasmania's currently has low levels of retention and qualifications when compared to other jurisdictions. Within Tasmania, there is also evidence that students from rural and remote areas are less likely to go on to complete year 12 or go on to higher education and have lower qualifications rates than Tasmanians as a whole.

In short:

- Tasmania has the lowest apparent retention rate, from Year 10 to year 12, at 65.3%;
- the proportion of Tasmanians aged 15-64 with post-school qualifications is lower than the national rate;
- the proportion of Tasmanians with higher level qualifications is much lower than the national average;
- Tasmania has a high proportion of 15-29 year olds leaving for interstate or overseas for 12 months or more.

Low performance in retention from Year 10 to Year 12, and the proportion of the population with post-secondary qualifications and higher level qualifications places a large proportion of the Tasmanian population at risk of becoming or remaining disadvantaged. As such, Tasmania has embarked on major reforms to improve retention, and to encourage the attainment of qualifications.

This submission has been prepared in accordance with the Committee's Terms of Reference and includes a description of the recent reforms to Tasmanian post Year 10 education AND TRAINING through the replacement of secondary colleges (years 11 and 12) and TAFE institutions with the Tasmanian Polytechnic, Tasmanian Skills Institute and the Tasmanian Academy.

Key Directions for Tasmania

The new post-Year 10 institutions established through *Qualifications and Skills for Tasmania Tomorrow* began in January 2009 and are intended to substantially increase Year 12 or equivalent completion rates and the skill levels of mature-aged Tasmanians, leading to

improved individual opportunity and a change in productivity. This initiative addresses major challenges, including:

- retention – keeping Tasmania’s young people in education and training after Year 10 to enhance their employment and social potential;
- skills shortages – ensuring that both young and mature age Tasmanians can acquire the qualifications that employers are looking for; and
- productivity – making sure that Tasmanian employers and enterprises can access the skills and people they need to make their businesses profitable and productive.

The Tasmanian Polytechnic, Academy and Skills Institute are separate entities; each governed by an independent board and tailored to different educational needs. The Tasmanian Academy focuses on academic learning, with a curriculum and academic pathway for Year 11 and 12 students seeking university entrance. The Tasmanian Polytechnic has a focus on practical learning, with a vocational pathway, supported by academic courses as well, for both Year 11/12 and mature-age students seeking employment outcomes or university articulation. The Skills Institute provides skills development for employees in enterprise, in line with their particular skills needs.

In conjunction with these new arrangements, the University of Tasmania is developing closer interrelationships with the new institutions, including the formation of direct pathways, credit transfer and integrated delivery arrangements enabling higher achievers to progress more quickly and to provide flexible support for other students wishing to proceed to tertiary education.

2 Response to Terms of Reference

The financial impact on rural and regional students who are attending metropolitan secondary schools, universities or TAFE

The major financial barriers to accessing education by rural and regional students in Tasmania have been identified as transport, access to suitable accommodation when living away from home, access to childcare and the changes made to the independence threshold for youth allowance.

- Transport

There is a limited rural and regional bus network outside the Hobart area which is essentially based on an 8am – 4pm day with no flexibility. This schedule and infrequency of service makes attending early or late classes extremely difficult for those students not living centrally. In addition, there is a financial impact on students who are over the age of 18 who are ineligible for student fare discounts, therefore being forced to pay the full bus fare which may not be manageable on a regular basis.

- Accommodation and living away from home

There is a significant extra cost to those students who are forced to live away from home in order to pursue their educational aspirations. In addition to the cost of living away from home there are not enough suitable places to house younger students to meet the demand on the service. There are also social repercussions associated with living away from home, in particular family dislocation and the lack of parental support, encouragement and nurturing.

- Access to childcare

For students returning to education following the birth of a child there is a lack of adequate and affordable childcare within a reasonable distance from the educational facilities.

- Changes to independence threshold for youth allowance

As at January 2010, students will be eligible for independent Youth Allowance at a younger age – it will gradually fall from 25 to 22. Those under 22 will not qualify unless they have worked 30 hours a week (formally 15 hours a week) for 18 months within two years. Rural and regional students have argued that this change disadvantages them in that there are not enough employment opportunities for them to meet the 30 hours a week criteria in order to be eligible for the full benefits of Youth Allowance once they begin university studies.

The education alternatives for rural and regional students wanting to study in regional areas

The Tasmanian Government has devised three major initiatives to ensure that students who wish to study in regional areas have access to high quality alternative education programs. These include:

- Distance Education

Distance Education Tasmania (DET) is delivered to students from Kindergarten to Grade 10. One of the criteria for enrolment is isolation which covers students who do not have reasonable daily access to appropriate government schooling owing to their geographical location, or a student who is isolated because the road is impassable, or a very young student for whom a certain daily bus journey is too long.

The DET curriculum is delivered using telephones; the Internet (especially Centra software); home visits; email; printed materials; curriculum days in the south; north and north-west; student and family visits to school; and camps and residential.

- LINC_s

Learning and Information Network Centres (LINC_s) are being built across regional Tasmania with the aim of integrating community learning, libraries and technology access with other government services such as Service Tasmania, Centrelink and the Magistrates Court. For example the LINC at Huonville in Southern Tasmania offers a range of vocational education and training programs including adult literacy support, volunteer training and literacy sessions for pre-school children.

- Flexible Learning School

A Flexible Learning School is currently being developed for operation in 2010. This will focus on e-learning flexible provision for students unable to attend mainstream schools and disengaged students.

This school will supplement local learning options for rural and regional students. It will also support existing flexible provision options particularly through the Vocational and Applied Learning (VAL) curriculum which included online courses in literacy and numeracy to complement other vocational programs.

The school will result in a state wide network of teachers and schools that connect existing and emerging local providers to form a networked learning community that over time will develop the capacity of teachers and schools.

The learning materials developed in the process of providing for these students will be shared with the network through a managed online collection of resources.

Services / courses would be provided by the hub over distance and time eg online, by post, computer, mobile devices such as handhelds, iPods and other MP3 players, telephone and combinations of these.

The impacts of current and proposed government measures on prospective students living in rural and regional areas; and

The short and long-term impact of current and proposed government policies on regional university and TAFE college enrolments.

The Tasmanian Government is committed to a social inclusion agenda to better serve Tasmanians who experience deep and persistent social exclusion, which includes the ability

to access high quality education regardless of location. One of the barriers to social inclusion is the inability to access information. That is, a lack of life literacy skills such as being able to read signs or pamphlets and fill in forms; lack of computer and internet access. The Tasmanian Government has appointed an independent Social Inclusion Commissioner and is in the process of developing a Social Inclusion Strategy which will include tactics for improving access to education for the entire Tasmanian community, urban and rural.

Tasmania's general and vocational education institutions are taking more ownership of their strategic direction and setting individual missions, recognising their current and future local community needs and leveraging the capabilities they have build up over decades. A particular aspect requiring a new approach in Tasmania is the development of more reliable mechanisms of monitoring and responding to labour force skill needs.

The State Government is keen to enhance institutions' capacity to partner, regionally and locally in processes to increase innovation across the breadth of established and emerging industry and economic activity in Tasmania. In addition partnerships with business will enable education to be tailored to address particular skills shortages to meet the productivity demands. There is a clear need for a better synthesis of national and State regional analysis of education and skills demands and provision of resources.

From 2009, the school, training, higher education systems and employers are being brought closer together to equip all Tasmanians, regardless of their location, with the skills they need to participate in the workforce and society. Of particular importance, is bringing industry and the vocational education and higher education sectors closer together and build on the State's high level skills through strategies such as improving credit transfer arrangements and increasing usage rates.

Other related matters

Additional Support Provided to Rural and Regional Schools

Incentives are provided to encourage staff to work in rural, remote and hard-to staff schools through three programs:

- Isolated locations incentives – teachers in specific isolated schools are eligible to receive incremental payments if they continue to work in the school longer than three years.
- Professional experience in isolated and rural schools (PEIRS) – this program provides final year interns with:
 - Petrol costs for 3 return trips by car or 2 return flights (Bass Strait Islands) from the intern's home to the location of their school placement;
 - Accommodation costs if necessary – this may be in DoE housing or commercial accommodation organised on the intern's behalf; and
 - A welcome package of food and other basics.
- Graduate Recruit program – this program targets vacancies in rural and remote areas but may also include urban schools. Graduate recruits are paid one salary level above that normally paid to similarly qualified graduates in their first year of employment. Subject to competing a successful probationary year, they are confirmed as permanent

employees. They remain one salary level above similarly qualified and experienced teachers until they reach the top of the base-grade teacher salary. Those on the program may also qualify for relocation expenses.

Schools in regional and rural areas are provided with a broad range of support from their Learning Service. These schools also receive funding through the Isolation Index to compensate for the additional costs that can be incurred due to the distance from major centres and/or major trunk routes.