



Independent Review of Education in Tasmania

University of Tasmania Submission

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UNIVERSITY of
TASMANIA 

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Introduction

The University of Tasmania strongly supports the Tasmanian Independent Review of Education (IER) and believes the Review will make an important contribution to improved educational attainment for all Tasmanians and thus realise the broader social and economic benefits which only education can deliver. Now more than ever, Tasmania needs an education system that is accessible and supportive of the increasingly diverse needs of students across the entire state. We also need an education system that provides young people with the necessary knowledge, resources and skills to access pathways into further education and employment in a rapidly changing society and increasingly knowledge-intensive economy.

We all recognise the transformational role of education in supporting young people to realise their ambitions that enable them to contribute to our community in a wide range of ways. Improving educational outcomes for all students, regardless of their background or where they live, is the single most important contribution we can make to enhancing Tasmania's future productivity, prosperity and community wellbeing.

It is clear we need to improve levels of educational attainment, and we can achieve the necessary change by prioritising specific reforms that will promote educational success for all students and schools across the state. As a community we need to support students to succeed in education and foster a culture in which education is valued and prioritised for everyone. At the University of Tasmania, improving educational access and addressing barriers to learning while promoting success for all students is central to our place-based mission to be a university for Tasmania. This important mission can only be achieved by working together in partnership with the community, industry, government and other educational providers.

We are pleased to provide this submission to the IER. We focus on five priorities for reform, which together would materially improve educational outcomes in Tasmania and make a significant contribution to our community's future prosperity and wellbeing.

We have chosen to focus on five priorities because we believe that the evidence of successful education system reform around the world demonstrates that improvement can only be achieved where there is a clear focus on a limited number of initiatives designed to improve the performance of the overall education system. Our view is that reform in Tasmania has failed in the past because there have been too many initiatives and projects which neither individually nor collectively have changed the fundamental performance of the overall system.

We recognise that the Tasmanian government faces significant budgetary constraints, so our initiatives have been designed to work within current resourcing parameters. In addition to the five proposed reform priorities, we recommend that the Department review all existing initiatives and projects and only continue with those clearly aligned to focused strategy for reform.

We are optimistic about what can be achieved by working together in partnership for Tasmania and for Tasmania's young people.

The Tasmanian Context

The Tasmanian IER is timely, with the Australian Universities Accord highlighting that in the coming decades at least 90% of young people will have to complete year 12 and be prepared to pursue tertiary or further education to meet future workforce needsⁱ. The growing gap in demand for skilled workers relative to levels of educational attainment is already evident in the Tasmanian community. Tasmania's recently released Youth Jobs Strategy highlighted that, in 2021, 64% of jobs advertised in Tasmania required a Bachelor-degree qualification or higher, but only 25% of Tasmanians held such a qualificationⁱⁱ. Equipping Tasmanians with the skills necessary for today's labour market, let alone the increasingly skilled labour market of the future, requires a clear commitment to system reform and innovation to dramatically increase young Tasmanians' educational attainment.

We need to develop a system where more Tasmanians complete Year 12 with a clear and accessible pathway to further and higher education. As Saul Eslake has argued, improving educational outcomes and attainment will deliver profound benefits for our people and communities: 'there is an overwhelming body of evidence, from Australia and abroad, that the probability of a person being employed, the probability that a person who is employed will be employed full-time, and a person's earnings in employment (which are closely correlated with his or her productivity) increases with levels of educational attainment'ⁱⁱⁱ.

Our challenge in meeting these important goals has four elements:

1. Tasmanian school students are behind where they need to be. NAPLAN results consistently show that Tasmanian schools perform below the national average across all key learning domains at all year levels tested^{iv}. This means that meeting current and future workforce needs will require more work here than in many other parts of the country.
2. Our small population is highly decentralised compared to the rest of the country. A greater share of Tasmanians live in sparsely populated rural or regional areas than the residents of any other Australian state or territory^v, which means that resources are spread more thinly and consistent, high-quality service delivery is relatively more expensive due to diseconomies of scale.
3. Our population faces higher levels of disadvantage than the national average, especially in rural and regional areas^{vi}. As a result, students in Tasmanian schools typically require more support and are more likely to be disengaged than their mainland peers.
4. We are less prepared than most of the country for education and workforce changes associated with the ongoing transformation in digital technology^{vii}.

The good news is that these disadvantages are not insurmountable. Educational reform research clearly demonstrates that school systems can improve irrespective of their starting point and that dramatic, sustained improvement does not depend on a system's size or its resources.

On the contrary, examples abound of small and disadvantaged school systems achieving far better reform outcomes with fewer resources than their larger and wealthier peers. The key to success is to develop a detailed, evidence-based understanding of the system's current performance, design and commit to stage-appropriate interventions, and implement those interventions in a way that is sensitive to the system's context and conditions^{viii}.

Priority One: Starting with strong foundations

There is compelling evidence that investment in the first 1000 days of a child's life produces the greatest educational returns across their lifetime. This priority connects the milestones from the early years through to formal schooling to support an early trajectory of educational success.

The formative early years of life until formal schooling commences are vital foundations for educational success across an individual's lifetime. The B4 Early Years Coalition, established by the Tasmanian Government in 2016, emphasises the importance of the first 1000 days of a child's life and the effects that early experiences have on children's brain development and biological systems which influence learning, wellbeing and personal relationships^{ix}. Children who commence formal schooling with well-developed foundational skills and positive engagement with learning are better prepared to succeed in schooling. Further, the early years are a good opportunity to engage families in their children's learning and begin to break down the barriers to education which can exist from multi-generational disadvantage.

While the IER does not directly examine early childhood education and care, the Review should consider recommending the adoption of a universal parenting program for Tasmania that aligns with the work of the B4 coalition and is supported through all touch points of the early years for Tasmanian children. This should be supported through CHaPs nurses, primary care providers, paediatricians, allied health workers, and other workers in community settings, libraries or in the home who work with families and caregivers.

Equity of access to quality early childhood education and care is vitally important so that Tasmanian children do not fall behind the national averages in their developmental milestones before they reach school. Beyond provision of foundational learning experiences through formal early childhood education, access to the education support ecosystem for children and families who would benefit from early consultations with allied health professionals or social or well-being support to set young Tasmanians up for success in early years of formal schooling should be prioritised. Families with young children in regional areas are particularly at risk of not having timely access to necessary allied health support (for example speech pathology, occupational therapy) or medical specialists prior to beginning school, by which time they may already be experiencing challenges.

Achieving this will need the foundations set up in the first 1000 days and the early years to be aligned with school system milestones, and for the monitoring from the early years to continue through to the schooling system in a more connected way. An example of how educational and developmental milestones and monitoring can be connected throughout an individual's lifetime and across the education stages is the Tasmanian Government's Lifting Literacy Implementation Plan. This Plan identifies milestone targets for literacy achievement from early years, through to school years and adult years^x.

Priority Two: Young people as engaged and active learners, where no child falls behind

Ensuring all children stay engaged and on track with their learning is essential to achieve improved educational outcomes for Tasmania's young people. This priority focuses on preventing disengagement with learning, and ensuring no child falls behind in their education.

Engagement in education is an important factor in supporting students to stay in school to complete Year 12 and to have education and learning as a central consideration for their post-school pathways. When children fall behind their peers in the classroom, they risk disengagement which will further hinder their educational progress and achievement. They can also lose confidence in themselves as learners, and this in turn can negatively impact aspirations. Additionally, when children fall behind and become disengaged, they can experience lowered expectations from others in their community or support networks, further widening the gap and placing significant barriers on re-engagement in education. As highlighted in the IER Discussion Paper, teaching the curriculum to an overly diverse classroom where some students are significantly behind or ahead of expectations can create challenges for teachers in teaching effectively and equitably to meet these diverse needs.

For Tasmania's education system to be most effective, strategies are urgently needed to minimise the gap of educational progress between students and their peers, and to support attainment and aspiration for those who do fall behind. Early identification and intervention is critical for students at risk of disengagement, and programs which identify and target individual student needs will prevent young people from 'falling through the cracks' and being left behind. This will achieve equity in education, where every child is taught where they are at, and not left behind without a defined and supported pathway to catch back up to their peers.

During the early 2010s, Finland's education system was widely recognised for its effective approaches to identifying and supporting students at risk of falling behind. This approach involved using a continuous and embedded assessment of learning to enable early identification and support for at-risk students. To support self-engagement in learning, students were also encouraged to actively monitor their own progress through self-assessment and reflection.

Teachers received focussed training to recognise early signs of learning challenges to facilitate early intervention and provide timely support to students before they fell behind and disengaged from learning. Where intervention was needed, specialist teachers and support staff in schools were able to provide targeted assistance including facilitating small group sessions to address specific learning needs and support students to build skills and confidence, and catch up with their peers. Importantly, this approach also focussed on addressing social and emotional needs in addition to academic support.

Implementing aspects of Finland's approach for the Tasmanian context to ensure early identification and targeted support for students at risk of falling behind would be transformative for many Tasmanian students, supporting them as active and engaged learners and supporting teachers with well-resourced, small group interventions. For students who have already fallen behind their peers and are struggling to re-engage with

learning, an intensive catch-up program should be deployed immediately to support these students. Working quickly and in partnership across the education sector can turn around the future for some of Tasmania's young people who are currently in school.

The University of Tasmania would be pleased to work with the Department for Education, Children and Young People on implementing a focussed, intensive catch-up program in Tasmanian schools while longer-term, system wide engagement strategies are developed and implemented.

This could include during or after school clinics, supported by university teaching students through a student placement initiative, such as the America Reads work-study program, established in 1997 as a strategy to support all American children to read independently by the end of Grade 3^{xi}.

In partnership with schools, university teaching students would work with school students providing small group tutoring targeting specific capabilities such as reading and math skills. Leveraging the capabilities of university teaching students would relieve resourcing pressures on existing teachers in schools, enabling this approach to be implemented quickly and at the scale needed to make a difference across Tasmania. This approach should also engage aligned NGOs and community organisations to contribute to the implementation of this intensive program to ensure the scale of resources needed are available to every young person requiring intensive support.

A combined approach to long term strategies for early identification and intervention, alongside immediate, supportive action within Tasmanian schools, is needed to move the State's education system from where it is today to where it needs to be for the future, ensuring all children are supported to stay engaged with their learning.

Priority Three: A great curriculum for every child in every classroom

Delivering a Tasmanian curriculum will need a partnered approach, to focus our State's limited resources and ensure adequate support for students and teachers in the classroom. This priority outlines how this can be achieved through collaboration and strategic resource allocation.

Tasmania faces unique challenges in considering opportunities for educational reform, as a small jurisdiction with limited resources, budget constraints and high levels of educational disadvantage within the education system. Ensuring Tasmanian students have access to a contemporary and relevant curriculum that can be delivered with fidelity across schools requires support for teachers through professional learning and resources as well as regular review and updating to ensure relevance and alignment to educational standards.

Acknowledging that Tasmania has limited resources for this work, effort could be focussed on adopting and adapting existing curriculum from another jurisdiction to the Tasmanian context, rather than on developing and implementing our own curriculum. The Department of Education, Children and Young People should explore a partnered approach to curriculum reform in Tasmania by adopting the curriculum of another Australian jurisdiction with a well-resourced curriculum team, provision of comprehensive teacher and student resources, and

a well-established professional development program to support the delivery of the curriculum. In the first instance, NSW could be a suitable option for consideration.

This partnered approach would allow Tasmania to leverage the resources and expertise available in NSW, ensuring that Tasmanian students have access to high quality, evidence-based educational material without unnecessarily duplicating efforts in our resource constrained environment. Leveraging curriculum which has been developed in a state such as NSW, where there is sufficient resourcing to employ specialist curriculum designers, will enable the Tasmanian curriculum team to focus their efforts on contextualising and adopting curriculum, including supporting the teaching staff delivering the curriculum.

The University of Tasmania would be pleased to work with the Department and other sector stakeholders on a supported approach to adopting and translating curriculum for the Tasmanian context.

In the senior secondary years, there is an opportunity to evolve introductory university units offered through the University Connections Program (UCP) to become more broadly available in the curriculum. The UCP is a partnership between the University of Tasmania, Tasmanian Schools, and the Office of Tasmanian Assessment Standards and Certification (TASC), which provides opportunities for year 11 and 12 students to undertake introductory university units designed for senior secondary students. The UCP currently includes several subject areas across business and finance, humanities, music, and fine arts. Many of these units can be counted as TCE points and used in ATAR calculation. To date, these units have been delivered to complement and address gaps within the TASC curriculum.

A partnered approach to how curriculum is developed and delivered in Tasmania would ensure students and teachers have access to quality, contemporary curriculum, while constrained Departmental resources can be focussed on adopting this curriculum to the Tasmanian context and supporting implementation of the curriculum within Tasmanian schools.

Priority Four: Supporting Tasmanian teachers to continuously learn and develop

Teachers play a critical role in learner engagement, aspiration and education outcomes - “the performance of an education system can’t exceed the capability of its teachers”^{xii}. This priority considers the importance of supporting our teachers to ensure they can effectively engage and educate Tasmania’s young people.

Teachers are not only responsible for delivering learning content and completing assessments in the classroom, they are also fundamental in education engagement, through building and maintaining relationships with students and their families. These relationships are central to encouraging continued engagement in education and can make a significant difference to the lives of young people.

To improve engagement and aspiration among Tasmania’s young people, we must invest in the continuing development of our teachers through regular and consistent professional development across the workforce, alongside upskilling for Tasmanian specific needs including STEM capabilities and Trauma-Informed Practice approaches.

Providing continuous and regular professional development across the teaching workforce, for all teachers at all stages of their careers, is important to support Tasmanian teachers for the roles they need to play within the education system. Well-trained teachers are better prepared to engage students, address diverse learning needs, and implement contemporary teaching practice, leading to improved student performance and engagement. As noted in the Review Discussion Paper, Tasmanian teachers currently engage in less professional learning than their peers nationally. Addressing this gap will better support our teachers and foster a collaborative learning environment within the profession leading to innovative practices and professional growth of the Tasmanian workforce.

An approach to reconceptualising teacher and teacher leader education should involve access to continuous professional learning, available in blended formats with intensive support including opportunities for practical observation to create a meaningful feedback loop.

In addition to regular and continuous professional development for teachers, Tasmania needs a sustained focus on upskilling the current workforce in specific areas of need – such as STEM capabilities. Engagement in STEM education in Tasmanian schools is concerningly low and has been declining in recent years – in 2023, in Tasmania only 179 students in year 11 and 12 studied specialist mathematics, only 299 studied physics, and 456 studied chemistry^{xiii}. This impacts on higher education attainment levels in the state, with fewer students completing school who are prepared and able to study STEM-related disciplines at a tertiary level.

These impacts extend to our teaching workforce, where we are already experiencing statewide shortages of teachers with specialist qualifications in maths and science. While the Tasmanian Government have committed to employing an additional 25 maths and science teachers across the state, current enrolment rates in STEM teaching qualifications are too low to address the workforce shortage or to replace qualified teachers as they exit the school system.

This shortage is evident across Australia, with 29% of teachers delivering science classes and 40% of teachers delivering mathematics classes teaching “out-of-field”, without specialist qualifications in these disciplines^{xiv}. To address the current and worsening shortage of qualified maths and science teachers, specialist in-service training for existing teachers is urgently required to upskill STEM capabilities in the teaching workforce. This could be delivered by the University, in partnership with the Department, available through combined on-line and intensive in person attendance formats.

Another area of professional development specifically needed for the Tasmanian context is brain science and trauma informed practice for education, given the scale of multi-generational disadvantage experienced within many of our communities. Adversity and/or trauma in childhood has long-lasting impact and affects various aspects of young people’s development and wellbeing, including aspects of education. This can have a significantly negative impact on school attendance and classroom behaviour, increasing the likelihood of academic challenges or failure to complete school.

Upskilling Tasmania’s education workforce in trauma informed approaches to learning will ensure educators understand the adverse impacts of trauma on individual learners, and

within this context teachers can facilitate a sense of safety and belonging for students, increasing engagement and educational outcomes. Implementing trauma informed practice in classrooms can be supported with existing resources from the education sector, and the University's Trauma Informed Practice in Education Lab research centre is actively working to building Tasmanian education sector capacity in understanding and responding to trauma in classrooms. Our Initial Teacher Education courses are already embedding knowledge of the impact of trauma and best practice in responding to learning and behaviour needs, and this can be supplemented by professional development for teachers already in the workforce.

Supporting Tasmanian teachers with access to high quality and regular professional development and specialised training is critical in achieving a more effective educational system in Tasmania. The University of Tasmania would be pleased to work with the Department and the sector on a collaborative approach to developing in-service continuous professional development for Tasmanian teachers and school leaders, including opportunities for reskilling in areas of distinct need.

Priority Five: Clinical Schools to model and build the future

Preparing Tasmania's future teachers to succeed requires early and continued classroom experience in best-practice, contemporary settings. This priority outlines a suggested approach to establishing Clinical Schools to model and build the future of education in Tasmania.

Pre-service training for teachers requires completion of professional experience placement in classrooms, to develop and apply practical skills. This provides teaching students the opportunity to practice in a supervised setting before they enter the workforce as a qualified teacher. An opportunity exists to establish clinical schools which expand on the existing pre-service placement model, to ensure future teachers are well prepared with well-supported practical experience in classroom settings. Clinical schools are specialised facilities for university teacher education which enable more intensive, classroom experience over longer durations for teaching students.

Existing models of Clinical Schools and school-university partnerships exist within Australia and globally and are examples of what could be achieved in the Tasmanian setting. In NSW, the Nexus Primary Program as part of the High Achieving Teachers (HAT) initiative to address teacher shortages in disadvantaged, regional and remote areas. Participants in the Nexus program complete a Master of Teaching from LaTrobe University while working as paraprofessionals in NSW schools, where they receive mentoring and support from experienced teachers throughout their training, preparing the new teachers for the classroom after graduation. Upon completion of the Nexus program, teachers are eligible for guaranteed employment at a NSW primary school.

In the United Kingdom, the Cardiff Partnership for ITE led by Cardiff Metropolitan University in collaboration with local schools, provides student teachers with extensive practical experience through Clinical Practice Schools. During extended school-based placements, teaching students develop their practical experience and are mentored by experienced teachers within the classroom.

Based on these existing models, the establishment of clinical schools for the Tasmanian setting would need to include early classroom experience, ideally with students starting work in classrooms within their first year of study, mentoring from experienced teachers and education leaders for continuous and immediate feedback, and integration with university study requirements so theoretical knowledge and practical experience are developed alongside one another. This model also provides an opportunity for experienced teachers to develop mentoring capabilities and creates an environment to practice leadership skills, supporting the next generation of teacher leaders in addition to developing the capabilities of student teachers.

The proposed model could build on the current High Achieving Teachers Program that will be expanded to Tasmania from 2026, and available to 40 students at the University of Tasmania. This program provides financial assistance, mentoring and training to teaching students through an apprenticeship model, as an initiative to address the national teacher workforce shortage. Participants will be employed as teaching assistants in year one of their degree, progressing to co-teachers by the final semester of their course. Following completion of their degree, participants will be employed in high-need public schools for a minimum three-year period. This model has been co-funded by the University, the Department for Education, Children and Young People, and the Federal Government.

Piloting a similar approach to early in-classroom experience and supported mentoring, through Tasmanian Clinical Schools, will offer more teaching students the opportunity to develop their skills in a supervised classroom setting, embedding them within Tasmanian schools and preparing them for a teaching career. This Tasmanian model could be piloted at existing schools within areas of low SES communities or regional settings, which could also address the challenges in recruiting and retaining teaching staff to these settings.

Conclusion

The reform priorities proposed within our submission have been designed to focus on key areas of opportunity for improvement within the education system, and we would welcome the opportunity to provide further information to the Review Panel on the proposals within this submission.

We look forward to continuing to work with the Department of Education and other Tasmanian education partners on the development of initiatives to improve our state's education system, support our teachers and deliver better outcomes for the young people of Tasmania.

ⁱ Australian Universities Accord Final Report, 2024. <https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord>

ⁱⁱ Tasmanian Youth Jobs Strategy, 2024. https://www.youthjobsstrategy.tas.gov.au/the_strategy

ⁱⁱⁱ Saul Eslake, Independent Review of Tasmania's State Finances, August 2024. <https://www.sauleslake.info/independent-review-of-tasmanias-state-finances/>

^{iv} Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2024. <https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/naplan-national-results>

^v Australian Bureau of Statistics, Regional population by age and sex, 2024.

<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/regional-population-age-and-sex/2023>

^{vi} Australian Bureau of Statistics, Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA), Australia, 2023.

<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/socio-economic-indexes-areas-seifa-australia/latest-release>

^{vii} Thomas, J., McCosker, A., Parkinson, S., Hegarty, K., Featherstone, D., Kennedy, J., Holcombe-James, I., Ormond-Parker, L., & Ganley, L. (2023). Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: Australian Digital Inclusion Index: 2023. Melbourne: ARC Centre

of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society, RMIT University, Swinburne University of Technology, and Telstra. <https://www.digitalinclusionindex.org.au/dashboard/National.aspx>

^{viii} McKinsey & Company, 2010. <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/education/our-insights/how-the-worlds-most-improved-school-systems-keep-getting-better>

^{ix} B4 Early Years Coalition, www.b4.education.tas.gov.au

^x Department of Premier & Cabinet, Lifting Literacy Implementation Plan. <https://www.dpac.tas.gov.au/literacy/home>

^{xi} University of Virginia, America Reads Partner Information. <https://education.virginia.edu/research-initiatives/community-outreach/america-reads>

^{xii} McKinsey & Company, 2007. <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/education/our-insights/how-the-worlds-best-performing-school-systems-come-out-on-top>

^{xiii} TASC Course Scaling Data, 2023

^{xiv} AITSL, Australian Teacher Workforce Data National Teacher Workforce Characteristics Report, December 2021. <https://aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/atwd/atwd-teacher-workforce-report-2021.pdf>