

# Achieving more together: Reflecting on collaboration and education in Tasmania's future

Report from the Visiting Scholarship at the University of Tasmania

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Tom Bentley, November 2017

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# 1. Introduction

This paper reflects on the changing role of education in Tasmania's social and economic life, and the potential for Tasmanian education to play the fullest possible role in lifting prosperity and wellbeing across the Tasmanian community.

It discusses the value and application of strategies for *collaboration*, in the context of the recent progress made by Tasmania towards increased educational participation and achievement.

The paper is based on collaborative discussions and research conducted during 2015-17, facilitated by the Peter Underwood Centre. It builds on earlier work on collaboration in education, including *The Shared Work of Learning*, a study examining how some schools and communities in Australia are using collaboration to lift achievement.

In that study we define collaboration as "the sharing of effort, knowledge and resources to pursue shared goals" (Bentley and Cazaly, 2015).

The findings, themes and questions arising from *The Shared Work of Learning* were used as stimulus to discuss the opportunities and challenges of collaboration in Tasmania, and examine how collaborative strategies could add value to the direction of educational change that has already been established in the state.

An emerging vision of Tasmania as a dynamic and inclusive learning community, in which all Tasmanians are able to access meaningful educational experiences in order to enhance their wellbeing and life-chances, has a compelling role to play in supporting Tasmania's long term development.

Education can be, and is becoming, part of the 'glue' that holds together a sense of positive community identity and enables successful, inclusive adaptation to changing global and local conditions.

Collaboration has a pivotal role to play in that shift, both within the formal educational institutions of schools, colleges and universities and, even more importantly, across the education system, communities, and regional economic networks, to enable more successful innovation, adaptation, and community-wide participation in learning.

In doing so, Tasmanian education can build up a series of qualities and capabilities that enable effective and worthwhile collaboration, as detailed in this report.

If education is not to act unwittingly as an agent of further inequality and division, given the prevailing global economic and technological conditions, then a long-term Tasmanian strategy must effectively focus on how to engage, enable, and develop the whole of Tasmania's population as participants in a wider learning system.

Collaboration across the whole state, between the institutions of formal education and wider networks of community and public organisations, appears to be an essential part of that strategy.

## 1.1 Findings

Our discussions found that there is strong demand for greater collaboration, and much positive experience of community-based educational partnership across Tasmania.

Participants in the workshops and symposium sessions also confirmed that there are many barriers to effective collaboration, arising from the historical fragmentation of different institutions, regions and professional responsibilities across Tasmania.

A positive set of opportunities and themes clearly emerged from the discussions, focused on building up a long-term, population-based and evidence-intensive approach to learning and community strengthening. In this approach informal engagement and participation in learning activity is treated as a valuable ingredient in building the trust, communication and organisational networks that can enhance the outcomes of formal education and improve outcomes for all students and families.

At the same time collaboration is essential to strategies for improving educational performance through professional learning; curriculum design and alignment; extension of senior secondary schooling to create better pathways for more students; and transitions between schooling and tertiary education.

The workshops, and analysis of the current range of positive and innovative practice across Tasmania, confirm the extent of positive progress in these directions. The new legislative framework for school and early years provide a new foundation to link these efforts together and bring about a long term shift in Tasmania's educational culture and performance.

As well as the school system and a widespread network of health, family, community sector, employer and industry partners, the University of Tasmania – including the Peter Underwood Centre as a partnership between the University and State Government – has a fundamental role to play as 'anchor and broker' in further enabling this transition.

## 1.2 Conclusions

The paper discusses how these different roles and evolving practices could develop, informed by the perspectives and experiences of workshop participants, and by analysis of what makes collaboration difficult, worthwhile and successful in different contexts.

It concludes with a series of suggestions about how and where to focus collaborative effort on tangible, medium term goals that will help to link the work of professions, institutions and the community even more strongly to the learning and achievement of students and learners.

## Overview of the priorities for collaboration

### Priority 1: Identify learning need

Identifying specific learning needs which can act as focal goals guiding action over time helps to provide a sense of coherence and progression for the system overall, strengthens the positive long term vision and creates the basis for an ongoing 'improvement cycle'.

This focus on learning needs leads to important opportunities in Tasmania today: to develop shared curriculum materials and methods that reinforce and deepen student learning, and to construct pathways to Year 12 success.

### Priority 2: Build platforms for professional collaboration

Professional learning is always close to the core of educational improvement: harnessing it for system-wide progress requires the building of *platforms* which allow different professionals to aggregate their effort, work together, and learn faster and more deeply from each other.

There are great opportunities to develop school networks around clear, ambitious objectives for student learning, involving teachers and leaders in learning together how to achieve those objectives, and to build new cross-professional collaboration through youth engagement, mentoring, creative community learning projects, health and vocational partnerships.

### Priority 3: Grow community voice

The attitudes, relationships and decisions of the wider community also have a powerful influence on the experience and aspirations of students. Building these stronger relationships with the communities that surround schools can lead to higher educational achievement over time.

This creates numerous opportunities to develop the voices of students, parents and community partners in the education process.

### Priority 4: Sharing pools of data

Another vital aspect of collaborative strategy is creating 'pools' of data which can inform both shared decision-making and differentiated, contextualised learning. The focus is on using the right data for the right reasons to inform decision making in meaningful ways, creating mutual accountability and enabling good practice to spread.

Building a framework for collecting and sharing data and then building community-wide capabilities for interpreting feedback and acting on it, is an important opportunity.

### Priority 5: Structure governance around shared responsibilities for learning

Horizontal accountabilities, place-based coordination, and multi-disciplinary teams and networks can provide generative opportunities for collaborations that benefit students and communities. Doing this will require a courageous effort to stick to relatively few, big and carefully chosen objectives, being rigorous with feedback from data and insights from evidence, while simultaneously treating the participants in the education system – the students, teachers, parents, researchers and community members – as the creators of knowledge about how to really make it work.

Tasmania's agenda and direction create opportunities to build stronger place-based partnerships, dedicated to increasing both the demand for skills and the effective supply of talent and expertise to specific opportunities in those communities.

The University of Tasmania and specifically the Peter Underwood Centre, working alongside government and the school system, can further enhance its contribution as a 'learning intermediary' – supporting a statewide cycle of improvement and innovation and helping to build a 'learning ecosystem' that will support ongoing progress and transformation.

## 2. The context: Education in Tasmania

The role of education in Tasmania's future is obviously framed by a specific context: a set of conditions which influence Tasmania's social and economic development challenges, and the role of education in meeting them.

Tasmania is an island state with a relatively small population, strong cultural identities, and some clear urban, rural and regional differences. It has a history of steep educational and occupational hierarchies, and a society in which the rural and marine environments play a strong part in creating economic, social and cultural possibilities for the future.

One vital aspect of Tasmania's identity is the traditional role of its rural and manufacturing economies, leading to an industry and employment base in which the percentage of jobs requiring higher levels of education is comparatively low. Historically, a relatively high percentage of young people in Tasmania have not continued in education beyond Year 10.

Over the last two decades, the impact of globalisation has contributed to further restructuring of Tasmania's economy and community life, creating both new opportunities for innovation and investment, but also deepening inequalities and forms of disadvantage that have developed over two centuries.

Many of the jobs and forms of work that, a generation ago, might have been accessed by young Tasmanians leaving school without Year 12 qualifications, have vanished with this economic restructuring. The risks and costs of not achieving Year 12 qualifications and ongoing educational participation have, accordingly, increased both for individual Tasmanians and for the whole community.

As Saul Eslake (2017) recently summarised, the Tasmanian workforce is over-represented (40% compared to 28% of the national workforce) in industries where labour productivity is low (less than half the average productivity across all industries). This combines with a situation where less than a quarter (23.4%) of the Tasmanian population aged 25-64 has a bachelor's degree or higher qualification; while more than 30% have completed education only to Year 10 or below (ABS, 2016).

Although there are diverse new sources of economic and educational opportunity in Tasmania, they are increasingly available only to those with the knowledge, connections and specialised skills to access them and gain benefit from them.

This is a common trend around the world, but its effects are especially pronounced in Tasmania, precisely because of its small size, relative isolation, and sharp inequalities between those with who hold wealth, knowledge and opportunity, and those who do not.

The demographic structure of Tasmania's population: one of the oldest and most rapidly ageing in Australia, also heightens these risks. ABS statistics show that Tasmania's estimated resident population was 520 000 persons in March 2017, the third smallest after the Northern Territory (245 000) and the ACT (409 000) (ABS, 2017a).



Compared to the rest of Australia, the Tasmanian population has a lower proportion of people aged between 20 and 44 years and a higher proportion of people over the age of 50 years (ABS, 2015). At 41.9 years, the median age of the Tasmanian population is the oldest median of all Australian states and territories (ABS, 2015). Between 2000 and 2015, the number of 13–18 year-olds in Tasmania has declined from 41 600 to 39 500.

As Saul Eslake (2017, p.13) recently observed:

ABS population projections suggest that the difference between the proportion of Tasmania's population aged 65 and over and the equivalent figure for Australia as a whole will nearly double, from... 3.7 percentage points in 2015-16 to 7.2 pc points by 2038-39; while, conversely, the difference between the proportion of Tasmania's population aged 15-64 and the equivalent national figure will more than double, from 2.7 pc points to 6.1 pc points.

These broad trends point to a future, over the next generation, in which Tasmania's future wellbeing depends increasingly on ensuring the successful participation and productivity of younger people in the island's economy, and encouraging higher levels of education and skills across the whole population.

These broad trends are also strongly affected by the variation in *local* clusters and concentrations of disadvantage and opportunity across Tasmania. These variations are not only about the differences between urban and rural communities, but also more complex patterns of employment, education, housing, intergenerational disadvantage, and other indicators of social stress.

In June 2015, the median age of those living in the Hobart region was 39.8 years, which is 2.1 years lower than the Tasmanian median, while in the Flinders Local Government Area (LGA), the median age was 55.8 years (ABS, 2015).

In Tasmania, 18.2% of the population are children aged between 0 and 14 years. LGAs with more than 20% of the population aged between 0 and 14 are Brighton (24%), Circular Head (21.2%), George Town (20.3%) and Kingborough (20.7%).

As Tony Vinson and Margot Rawsthorne point out in their 'Dropping off the Edge 2015' report, three of these local government areas (Brighton, George Town and Circular Head), in which most young people are concentrated, are also among the most disadvantaged eight local government areas in Tasmania (Vinson and Rawsthorne, 2015).

The role of education, and the place of children and young people, in Tasmania's economy and society are therefore crucial issues influencing the state's future trajectory, as its economy adjusts to changing global pressures, and its communities adjust to changing job opportunities, risks and rewards.

For a small island state the balance between new opportunities and barriers to opportunity is a delicate one. Some parts of Tasmania's economy have been vibrant and dynamic over the last decade, while other traditional sources of employment, especially in forestry and manufacturing, have continued to decline. Of Tasmania's almost 40 000 businesses, 95% are small enterprises (Department of State Growth, 2016). New investments and opportunities are highly uneven in their distribution and impact.

This mix of factors has created a situation where improvements in educational achievement and new job opportunities *co-exist* with educational stagnation and long-term disadvantage for some parts of the Tasmanian community. For example, in Burnie, a stream of new skilled work vacancies in manufacturing and construction-related projects has occurred alongside the persistence and growth of concentrated and entrenched disadvantage.

Statewide recognition has grown in recent years that education is fundamental to growing employment and prosperity, and that the depth and persistence of disadvantage and educational underachievement are major obstacles to this growth.

As Eleanor Ramsay and Michael Rowan (2017, p.7, bold in original) recently asked:

Why is Tasmania's rate of Year 12 or equivalent certificates so low, especially for low SES students where there is a 25% gap to the Australian average, a gap which narrows to 10% for high SES students - **although our high SES students are still below the Australian average for low SES students?**

And why is the gap between the attainment of low and high SES students in Tasmania (24%) **more than twice that of any of the other jurisdictions** (NT put to one side: they have no high SES students in this data)? The figure for Australia as a whole is just 9%.

Such questions have led to intense debates about the right *structures* of education – high schools, colleges, vocational and university providers – and about what roles should be played by different groups and members in Tasmanian society, in order for the community to be better served by education.

In all dimensions of these changes – policy reform, professional educational improvement, changes in curriculum and assessment, and participation in education by individuals, families and wider community partners, collaboration has a potentially important role to play.

## 2.1 Recent progress

In recent years, Tasmania has achieved some important progress towards lifting educational participation and achievement, building longer-term educational foundations for the future and making new commitments to addressing some of the structural problems and conflicts.

In 2015, the University of Tasmania and the Tasmanian State Government (2015, p. 2) signed a long-term agreement, *Making the Future Partnership*, to work in partnership towards five major objectives.

## ***Making the Future Partnership objectives***

1. Access and attainment: Improving educational outcomes in Tasmania by raising the number of Tasmanian students in higher education by 10,000.
2. Economic impact: Growing the research and higher education sector in Tasmania by increasing the turnover of the University so that it reaches at least \$1 billion a year by 2025.
3. Internationalisation: Increasing the flow of international students into the Tasmanian community and doubling their contribution to the economy to \$400 million per annum within five years.
4. A modern economy: Cementing the University's role as one of Australia's top ten research institutions; a leader in workforce development and reform, business innovation and industry development.
5. Revitalised regions: Bringing new capital investment worth more than \$400 million into regional centres and increasing the contribution of students to community life in our cities.

This partnership recognises and reflects the pivotal role of the University of Tasmania in acting as an 'anchor institution' influencing economic and social outcomes across the state and investing directly in both infrastructure and workforce development, within education and more broadly across research-intensive industry sectors, health and human services, cities and regions.

This partnership, and the vision that helped to form it, may be part of the next stage in a broader, long-term transition, where education plays a proactive and vital role at many different levels of society, framing, driving and mediating wider change in employment, enterprise and community life.

The scope of this partnership, including its focus on lifting 'educational achievement and aspiration' alongside global engagement and research investment, illustrates the importance of engaging and supporting the whole Tasmanian community in educational endeavor.

During the last two years there have also been important legislative and policy changes, creating new requirements for senior secondary education and for the early years of schooling.

After intense debate, a new legislative framework has been put in place which could act as a foundation for long term improvement in education for all Tasmanians. Through this framework, the Tasmanian government has created new rules which create universal requirements and expectations of educational participation for every child and young person.

The key parts of this change are the object of the legislation to ensure that every child completes at least 13 years of education, and that completing a Year 12 or equivalent certificate, or participating in a valuable and recognised program of learning, are a universal requirement and aspiration for all children, not just for a subset of the population.

This change to the upper limits of secondary education, which is being implemented through an extension of high school programs to Years 11 and 12 across the state, is combined with a new commitment to providing high quality early years education and care for 3-year olds, offered free by the Tasmanian government to children and families who are vulnerable to disadvantage (Tasmanian Government Department of Education, 2017; Tasmanian Government Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2017).

Exactly *how* these commitments and expectations can best be achieved remains the subject of intense discussion and implementation effort.

## 2.2 Challenges of Tasmanian education

In 2015, the Australian Council of Education Research completed a review of Years 9-12 in Tasmanian Education (ACER, 2016), designed to help inform government policy and community conversation about the future.

The Review's findings, some of which were controversial, provided a stark picture of an education system with some strong features and some recent improvements, but which is not serving the transitions and achievement of all students equally well.

In particular, the relationship between Tasmania's structure of senior colleges for Years 11 and 12, and the progression of some students towards successful completion of Year 12 equivalent qualifications, is a crucial issue. The Tasmanian Government is also scaling up the extension of high school education to Years 11 and 12 through funding, program support and partnership activities designed to support high schools in creating new pathways to Year 12 equivalent qualifications for their students.

The transparency of accurate data about how students are participating from year to year, and what pathways they are following, is central to the discussion, as is the relative progress and life-chances of different groups of students according to their location, family background, and type of schooling.

The Review's key findings (pp.19-26) included:

- While Tasmanian government schools in particular, are criticised for underperforming, it should be recognised that more Tasmanian adolescents than in the past are making the transition from high school to senior college, to complete Year 12.
- Unlike some schools in the non-government school sectors, there currently is a bifurcated system of schools in the government sector, with most students changing schools from high school to attend a college.

- The Tasmanian Years 9 to 12 curriculum best serves those students who live in large, urban centres. The curriculum is less effective for those students who live in regional and rural locations; have a disability; are reliant on transport other than their own; or are Indigenous.
- Close to 90% of Tasmanian recipients of an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) in 2015, applied for a university place. Higher percentages of ATAR recipients applying for a university place only occurred in Victoria, Queensland and Western Australia.
- In 2015, 98% of Tasmanian applicants to university were offered a place and 72% of these offers were accepted.
- In the online student survey, the majority of respondents indicated they plan to complete Year 12, and the most common plan identified for post-school study was to attend university.
- About 10% of the Year 9 and 10 student respondents to the online survey said that they were intending to leave school at the end of Year 10. The majority of respondents indicated they had every intention of going on to Year 11, with boys four times more likely (15%) to say they intended to leave school after Year 10 than girls (4%). Only about a third of boys indicated they planned to attend university.
- Students in urban locations were less likely to indicate they intended to leave school at the end of Year 10.
- There is a lack of trust and a lack of a shared understanding among key stakeholders, school communities and the general public, about priorities in school education in Tasmania.
- The overall structure of the Tasmanian senior secondary curriculum is complicated to understand, and the public information provided is not housed in one single location.
- Tensions exist between what VET and VEL measures of performance are valued at a systemic level, and what is valued by colleges and schools at a local level.
- The curriculum structure, content, assessment and reporting requirements across Years 9 to 12 is complicated, difficult to understand and contradictory in places.
- Student destination data is considered to be valuable information to schools, but is not collected systematically across Tasmania.

There are important debates about the evidence for and interpretation of these findings, and about the recommendations arising from the review. Overall, however, they also illustrate the breadth and depth of the educational challenges facing Tasmania. I would argue that they also point to some of the areas in which effective collaboration is now essential to meeting those challenges.

As discussed above, some of these challenges arise from the small scale and relative isolation of communities and schools serving specific parts of Tasmania.

Some relate to the difficulty of adapting curriculum and program structure to ensure that they are aligned with changing social needs and economic structures. Some arise from entrenched institutional and socio-economic inequality.

Many of the challenges *also* flow from cultures and institutional structures of education which have become fragmented, inflexible, isolated from each other and incapable of joining together in order to create better pathways or outcomes for their students.

They are illustrated by the fact that, for those Tasmanians who are able to apply successfully for a University place, and who want to do so, there are clearly expanding educational opportunities – while for those whose pathway through education is less clear, the barriers and risks have become greater and more complex to navigate over the last decade.

Or, as Eleanor Ramsay and Michael Rowan point out in their response to the Review, the evidence that it gathered helps to highlight the disparity between the strength of positive aspiration among Tasmanian students, and the outcomes that they experience in making the transition from Year 9 to Year 12. They note (Ramsay & Rowan, 2017, p. 18) that:

The Review surveyed students in 52 of Tasmania's 108 schools... and found [Tables 36 and 37, p.74] that:

- 90% of Year 9 and 10 respondents intended to go on to Year 11, and of these
- more than 95% of students, male and female, intended to complete Year 12, and
- 39.5% of the Year 10s intended to go to university.

However, separately gathered statistical evidence about the actual progression of Tasmanian students presents a sobering perspective on these positive aspirations, as they go on to show (p.18):

At the state level, for the 2013 Year 10 cohort, by 2015

- 41.8% of Year 10s in government schools had achieved the TCE, and 21.8% an ATAR
- 69.0% of Year 10s in Catholic schools had achieved the TCE, and 49.1% an ATAR
- 75.4% of Year 10s in Independent schools had achieved the TCE, and 68.2% an ATAR.

The ACER findings, and the varied responses to them, clearly show that the challenge of achieving educational progress involves addressing major issues of shared culture and aspiration, shared information and knowledge, and ease of navigation across organisational systems. Collaboration is pivotal to addressing these issues.

Other sources of analysis and feedback on skills and employment in Tasmania illustrate similar challenges to those facing the school system. Tasmania's economic future relies on developing jobs and industries which can exploit specific

niches created by Tasmania's unique features and comparative advantages, including its landscape, abundance of fresh natural resources, culture, lifestyle and history.

So it is also instructive to think about some of the experiences and challenges faced by employers in Tasmania who might be trying to use training and education to find and develop the skilled workers they need in order to flourish.

Feedback gathered by Skills Tasmania in a recent consultation exercise showed the priorities and concerns of employers are often about knowing how to find the right skills in the right places *within* Tasmanian communities and in timely and relevant ways (Department of State Growth, 2016, p.1).

### ***Feedback from Tasmanian employers***

- There needs to be more on-site, in-region training available.
- What support mechanisms are available to address the suitability of candidates, social problems etc. and where do we find out about them?
- Too often the right training is not available in a specific region or in the State [...]
- We need training tailored to specific business needs – how do we get that?
- We don't always need full qualifications, sometimes we just need our staff to do a few units to fill the knowledge gaps – can we still get funding for this? [...]
- It is difficult to find the right person to talk to or any information on funding available. [...]
- What is the first step? How do we start to train our staff, or take on an apprentice or trainee?

The picture that we have seen so far shows a Tasmanian education system that produces many positive results, but also struggles to provide timely, relevant, meaningful, equitable and high quality educational pathways and connections for many of those Tasmanians who might benefit most from them.

This poses a vital question about the role of education in determining who gets access to new opportunities and to the rewards of a changing economy.

If education can open up new opportunities for the *whole* community by nurturing different aspirations and helping to make them realistically achievable across the Tasmanian community, then it can play an even more fundamental role in shaping the state's long-term future (Eslake, 2016).

Recent initiatives in Burnie, in Tasmania's North West, show how this kind of approach to inclusive economic and educational growth might take shape.

In 2014, the BIG partnership in Burnie was formed, to pursue a vision:

To see our young people converting their great potential into excellent outcomes in their community. (Big Team, 2014, p.2).

With a mission for 2030:

To establish deep and enduring cooperation between business, educational and local government bodies in our community, with a focus on developing the next generation of workers, leaders and innovators. (*ibid*).

Why did they do this?:

The Burnie region has very positive economic prospects; however a very high rate of unemployment, juxtaposed with a continuing stream of unfilled vacancies creates a disturbing and persistent picture. (p.1)

In Burnie, higher education attainment is around half the national average, while unemployment are around twice the national average, while unemployment among 15-24 year-olds, at more than 20%, is higher than any other region in Australia.

At the same time, as the BIG strategic plan points out, Burnie is Tasmania's leading centre for manufacturing activity, has a diverse and dynamic business base, and an innovative and growing dairy industry.

The BIG initiative is an example of the movement towards broad-based partnerships seeking to use collaboration to generate momentum in a situation where more traditional educational structures and social programs have struggled. They aim to bring together the business and education sectors, and spark more widespread community engagement, in an approach that seeks to lift overall levels of educational aspiration, while generating a wider range of relevant and meaningful opportunities for members of that community.



### 3. Collaboration in education: Changing roles

Over the last decade collaboration has become a growing priority in education policy and practice in many countries around the world, including Australia (Bentley and Cazaly, 2015, Munby and Fullan, 2016).

This growth reflects deep and broad changes in the economic and social structures surrounding schools, including the impact of digital networks; greater mobility of people and goods around the world; an economy organised around regional and global supply chains; greater 'sharing' across cultural and community sectors; and growing demand for collaborative skills and problem-solving abilities, both generally across adult organisations, and specifically among our school students and young people. (Benkler 2006, Castells 2010, Leadbeater 2009).

Students leave our schools today to enter a workplace where collaborative skills are critical to many careers. New ways to access, share and coordinate information and support are rapidly evolving through social and electronic networks.

Our economies demand more people with the skills to participate successfully in collaborative environments. Value and profit are created through innovation and differentiation. Being able to work together through projects, integrate and apply information in complex environments, and use interpersonal skills to engage, persuade, coordinate and negotiate with others, are skills that are increasingly prized and in demand from our students and young people (Bentley and Seltzer, 1999).

Partly in response to these pressures, education systems and policies are seeking to refine and move beyond 20th Century 'industrial' models of education, working ever-harder to improve learning outcomes in cost-effective, evidence-based ways.

Collaboration therefore works at many different levels of action, relationship and organisation. It is often treated as an 'intangible good', arising from informal actions and behaviours. But in fact, collaboration needs to be built up intentionally and systematically if it is to create value in timely and relevant ways.

In our study of how collaboration is being used in different areas of Australian schooling, we therefore adopted the following definition:

"Collaboration is the sharing of effort, knowledge and resources to pursue shared goals" (Bentley and Cazaly, 2015, p.25).

Collaboration, and the skills and capabilities that come with it, may be demonstrated and developed **both** by students as part of their education, and by adults working as professionals and community partners to support student learning. Indeed, the examples and models of collaborative endeavour by students and educators may intertwine and reinforce each other (Bentley and Butler, 2017)

As such, collaboration in education may also be seeking to counter and move beyond some of the current, negative, effects of competitive, individual, silo-based structures in schools and school systems.

A generation of school improvement and effectiveness literature reinforced the idea that the individual teacher in the classroom is the basic unit of teaching and learning, and that within-school improvement and between-school competition were the fundamental drivers of better student outcomes.

The vertical silos and behaviours of school-based competition have significant negative effects, causing the professional isolation of classroom and subject-based practices, and entrenching competitive incentives and inequalities of resourcing *between* individual schools.

These difficulties speak directly to the challenges of Tasmania's structurally and geographically diverse school communities, and the need to join up the learning pathways of a higher proportion of students and learners.

The growing emphasis on 'collaborative improvement and innovation' also dovetails with a longstanding emphasis on professional collaboration by advocates of teacher professionalism. This body of work promotes ethics, knowledge-sharing and solving 'problems of practice' as a route towards achieving high-performing schools and systems (Hopkins 2011, Hattie, 2009).

For students, teachers, institutions and communities, educational collaboration appears to offer three key benefits.

## ***Benefits of collaboration in education***

1. Collaboration can support the **efficient coordination and scaling of shared activities**, including learning, communication and knowledge transfer. Large numbers of participants may benefit from sharing in the same set of activities (for example a curriculum, effective teaching practices, or a common approach to organisational development), while also being able to tailor their activities to reflect specific needs, preferences, interests and locations. Being able to use digital networks to share and coordinate information adds to this benefit.
2. Collaboration can generate **authentic engagement and trust**, built through voluntary and reciprocal action. This may create a sense of value and reward that goes beyond the traditional forms of instrumental market exchange or institutional command and control. For example, community-based partnerships like BIG in Burnie may offer opportunities for voluntary and mutual support or membership-based networks structured around issues of shared interest. Learning through communities, developing informal networks of social cooperation, adds an important dimension to the formal delivery of educational curriculum by professionals.
3. Collaboration offers a way to **connect and integrate** forms of knowledge and information that are becoming more complex and specialised, enabling the application of different forms of knowledge to the achievement of shared goals, or solving of problems. For example, knowledge related to public health and early childhood development, alongside schooling and tertiary education, is used increasingly to support community and economic development. With a growing range of professional skills, research evidence and multi-disciplinary methods involved in organising community development, collaboration is an important tool to help integrate and align diverse efforts.

So collaboration *could* be an essential component of our strategies for lifting educational achievement. But do we know how to make it effective?

As discussed above, collaboration is often treated as a kind of intangible, informal benefit. The sharing of effort and knowledge is usually time-intensive, so to be worthwhile it has create positive benefits. What have we learned about how to do it, and how could a collaborative strategy be applied across different contexts and levels of scale in Tasmanian education?

In 2014 we studied Australian schools who are successfully using collaboration to achieve better outcomes for their students, in situations where socio-economic disadvantage is relatively high (Bentley and Cazaly, 2015).

For example, the partnership formed between Dandenong West public school

and St Anthony's Noble Park, two neighbouring primary schools from different sectors on the South-East fringe of metropolitan Melbourne, has enabled a new, shared approach to developing community relationships and capabilities, brought together by the learning needs of their students.

These schools jointly employ specialist workers to extend family and community learning activities, foster language and social skills among parents, support school-readiness among younger children, and collaborate with health, employment and library service providers across the local area.

## 3.1 Seven key features of collaboration

While their focus and circumstances vary, our study suggested *seven key characteristics* of collaboration for learning that are common across different settings, and important for what collaboration can achieve.

### ***The seven features of collaboration***

#### **1. Shared purpose: commitment to learning**

Commitment to student learning is an organising principle for *all* relationships and activities around schools and their communities. This commitment spurs people to seek out and develop new collaborations in order to achieve more beyond the limits of the status quo.

#### **2. Combining longevity and energy in staffing**

Many of these leading examples combined committed, long-serving senior teachers with younger, newer staff who brought new questions, ideas and energy to the mix. In the cases we studied, this created strong teams and led to very effective induction, mentoring and professional learning activities.

#### **3. Collaborative leadership**

School principals and community leaders intentionally and explicitly pursued the collaborative goals and distributed leadership capacity across networks, rather than working only within professional and organisational hierarchies. This approach encouraged wider community partnerships and developed the capabilities of staff, students and parents to further advance partnerships.

#### **4. Community trust, professional trust**

Investing significant time and energy in building both professional trust and wider community trust, developed through networks of 'social capital'.

#### **5. Drawing on external expertise**

Sustained focus on building the professional skills and effectiveness of staff, including by looking outwards to find specialist expertise and ideas from which they can learn.

#### **6. Permeable boundaries**

Sustaining 'permeable' boundaries between schools, teams, and communities, in order to combine coherent organisational routines and responsibilities, with a strong positive emphasis on knowledge-sharing, joint effort, and openness to new ideas and evidence

#### **7. Co-evolution of wellbeing and attainment**

A simultaneous commitment to advancing the cognitive and academic attainment of all students, while also supporting their growth and wellbeing on emotional, social and community domains of learning. The schools we studied invested time and resources in welfare support teams, family-school partnerships, interpersonal skills and resilience, alongside subject-based curriculum content.

(Bentley and Cazaly, 2015)

These seven features describe characteristics of collaboration in practice that appear to be important in explaining how schools and their communities can learn to achieve more by working together, and by developing consistent goals, routines and relationships which help them to achieve valuable learning outcomes.

In order to use collaboration strategically and systemically, however, we need to think about how it might work across different contexts and at different scales, and understand the role of different institutions and different players in helping collaboration to occur (Butler, 2014). The idea of collaboration – of sharing effort and working together – can be valuable precisely because it works across different settings and levels of organisation. It can be a reference point in a shared culture of learning, which can work in families and communities as well as within institutions.

But it will not happen solely by serendipity; it needs to arise from sustained, intentional effort. So how might that agenda develop further and be applied in Tasmania?

## 4. Discussion: How could collaboration support even greater educational achievement in Tasmania?

During 2016, following discussions begun at the Education Transforms symposium in 2015, the Peter Underwood Centre convened two workshops and a range of other discussions to explore this question, building on the work already described.

These workshops were held in Hobart and Launceston, and involved a broad mix of educators, community partners, researchers, policy-makers and others.

The sessions were attended by a wide range of practitioners including school principals and teachers, researchers, senior community representatives from non-profit organisations, local leaders of professional associations and education unions, artists, and careers advisers.

The participants in the sessions quickly agreed that the themes and opportunities have resonance and potential for Tasmania's education agenda, and discussed a wide range of ways in which collaborative approaches might be applied, tested or developed.

### 4.1 The culture and practice of collaboration

A lot of discussion focused on the practical nature of collaboration and its behavioural 'symptoms'. People emphasised that the 'voluntary decision to share' is crucial to effective collaboration, going beyond just 'being in the room' to making an active commitment.

To sustain the commitment, actions like creating temporary placements, releasing time regularly, building organisational networks and consciously sharing information can all be effective in supporting the growth of collaboration.

The groups discussed how an attitude of sharing: being able to 'give up', compromise, learn, mentor, and make positive commitments to working across boundaries, are all important in making it possible for collaboration to flourish.

Participants agreed that these behaviours can be found and seen in many locations across Tasmania's educational communities, but that they are also countered by other behaviours, incentives not to share, and deeply ingrained assumptions and routines which act a blockages to achieving more.

The workshop participants were candid about the challenges of trying to foster collaboration to achieve genuine impact on learning in Tasmania. Some participants were concerned about the risks of creating 'recipes' for change which are not applied consistently or authentically. Some felt that most of the seven characteristics of effective collaboration are present in most schools, but that their uneven application could be a greater barrier than lack of awareness.

## 4.2 Moving beyond role boundaries

The groups found that thinking about collaboration and the nature of shared effort can help to shift the focus of discussion away from the boundaries of individual job roles, and towards helping people to achieve outcomes meaningful to them.

In finding these positive outcomes, it is important to recognise the value of ‘positive side effects’ – unplanned outcomes that can be discovered and developed through the engagement and discussion that is involved in collaboration with others.

These surprises are a valuable addition to the benefits that can emerge from a sustained focus on shared goals or interests. They are consistent with the idea that linking together more diverse groups of people through networks will open up a wider range of possibilities for learning, consistent with the ‘permeable boundaries’ discussed in section 3.

Participants asked, how can we capture the potential of serendipitous developments? Firm them up? Adapt over time? How can small-scale, community-level engagement create critical mass for change at a larger scale?

The most common answer to emerge from the discussions was that **consistency of purpose**, especially the moral purpose of ‘learning communities’, is an essential way to frame the activity and the need for action, in order to create a common point of reference. This point links back in important ways to the earlier question of who our education institutions are serving – and is the interest of the whole community in the functioning of the education system.

## 4.3 Leaders, brokers and entrepreneurs

The workshops also asked, what is the professional glue that holds these varied activities together? There was discussion of the varied ways in which different people and specific roles can help to connect, shape and support collaborative working, and how it is essential to maintain that ‘glue’ in ways that work appropriately to the specific local context and institutional relationships.

The participants also pointed to the role of short term political and bureaucratic cycles in hampering effective collaboration, by directing effort elsewhere, obscuring progress, and encouraging conflict over resourcing and control when a focus on deeper issues of learning and engagement might, over time, be even more influential.

On that basis the importance of a skillset able to engage with different disciplines and professional vocabularies, enthuse and motivate a wide range of people, and persist over time, becomes even clearer.



## 4.4 Student agency

Another strong theme to emerge was the vital importance of a *student-centred* approach to learning and community development.

This central role for student agency is important for the growth of '21st Century skills' which are increasingly demanded as part of the skills repertoire of all young people. In the Australian Curriculum framework these skills are defined and assessed as 'General Capabilities' – including creative and critical thinking, personal and social capability, ethical, and intercultural understanding (ACARA, 2017).

Many participants also felt that disengagement and marginalisation of many young people and families is a major challenge to be overcome through collaboration. This perspective reinforced the importance of addressing fragmented and silo-based organisations, by prioritising how to engage individuals and families in their own learning, and to build more personalised and trust-based relationships between them and the education system.

Many of the workshop participants had direct experience of how to do this kind of 'learner-centred' work in specific fields that included early childhood services, primary and secondary school partnerships, family support services, vocational and careers advice, tertiary access partnerships, arts and public health.

Learner agency, in this context, means empowering learners within the community (in the classroom and beyond) and their ability to act independently and together in a varied range of learning environments (Bentley, 1998).

Collaboration often requires students and teachers to operate in fundamentally different ways from the status quo they are used to. In a collaborative classroom students move from being recipients of learning to co-constructors of learning. Teachers move from being delivery agents of content in the subject area, to experts who craft content that will fit learning intentions established with or by students.

At the level of the classroom or community learning project, for example, a collaborative approach means that students will be gathered together debating and determining a focus for their learning, making decisions and designing a project that will result in an artifact that has meaning to them and others. They collaborate on the work: sharing ideas, testing each others' hypotheses, acting on agreements, and building on each other's learning.

As the workshop participants recognised, this requires support by skilled facilitators of learning, whether they are teachers, other professionals, or contributors from the wider community. In any such learning experience, students need the basic content knowledge so that misconceptions are avoided rather than amplified as they work together. Most critically, they need to have learned *how to collaborate*. This involves teaching how to listen, to establish shared norms, to negotiate and ask questions, to synthesise information, to prioritise and, finally, to make decisions.

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## 4.5 Building systems for collaboration

After identifying some of the common features of local practice in collaboration, and some shared aspirations for what educational collaboration could help to achieve, participants in the discussions moved towards how to build system-wide supports for a 'learner-centred view' that would enable it to work at scale.

One central part of that systemic view is the possibility of a re-shaped curriculum, able to support deeper understanding, a wider range of learning experiences including learning in teams and groups, and more personalised progression and assessment for each student. Participants in the workshops agreed that a curriculum vision of this kind, shared by teachers, educational leaders, families, experts and the wider community, could play a crucial role. The opportunity to replace the existing, over-complex and mis-aligned curriculum structures and content with a more dynamic and integrated approach seems compelling (Ziebell, Ong and Clarke, 2017).

A more personalised and community-wide approach to curriculum would need to be supported by systems for student data and information which could reflect the progress of each individual over time and support schools and community practitioners to focus consistently on the progress of **every** individual learner, rather than seeing them fragmented into standardised, cohort-based measures of attainment.

## 5. A Tasmanian approach to collaborative learning?

Workshop discussion also focused on the challenges of *how* best to collaborate, in order to build up these approaches to achieve impact at scale. On this question, a coherent view emerged from the discussions, that there is a distinctive approach (detailed below) to pursuing educational-community collaboration that is suggested by Tasmania's experience and circumstances.

### ***A distinctive Tasmanian approach***

- Authentic and genuine about both the task and the process, rather than tokenistic or patronising.
- Drawing on local resources of knowledge and seeking to build on strengths.
- Viewing education holistically as a broad sector, rather than dividing it into sub-sectors and localities.
- Taking time to build trust and maintaining realistic, long-term ambitions.
- Collaboratively identifying and determining needs and actions for a given 'community'.
- Using the physical resources of schools and education institutions for the wider community, encouraging them to act as 'community hubs'.

Many participants agreed that local practitioners, including school principals, need the flexibility and discretion to be able to adjust to their community context, but that across Tasmania, lack of leadership capability and organisational fragmentation **also** act as practical constraints on learning and positive impact.

Collaborative strategies may be able to help here, by helping to create shared focus and connecting together different actors and resources across different locations and organisations, bridging between schools, communities, employers and institutional systems. But how do they find the right framing and focus? How can they work together at different levels of scale and in multiple locations, simultaneously?

This goes to the heart of the challenge of achieving a genuinely systemic approach, without reverting to forms of 'top-down' control or standardisation that would undermine the engaging, high quality, locally diverse practices that are needed for education to work effectively for every student and community.

## 5.1 Statewide strategy: Elements of common understanding

Our workshop participants also grappled with this challenge, and came up with some key features of a statewide strategy for Tasmania:

- Identify key social determinants of health and educational attainment.
- Develop shared definition of disadvantage including spatial and family factors.
- Ensure transparent, shared mapping of dimensions of disadvantage.
- Develop a rounded view of the needs of the student, based on the need for educational progression and wellbeing, along with sustained community engagement and support from year to year.
- Focus on valuing education in every household and local community.
- Provide skills development for parents through outreach, family engagement in non-school settings, and strengthening Child and Family Centres.
- Focus effort on the barriers to access.

This approach implies an overall proposition: that it is in *everyone's* interest to have a well-educated society, and that a shared commitment to the aspiration and engagement of all members of the community can be developed and strengthened through shared action *across* the institutions and networks that govern our community.

## 5.2 Multiplying the possibilities

Could such an approach really be built and delivered across the whole state and the whole education system? In part, this goes to the questions of how much we can really expect and demand from our schools; the issues discussed in question two, about how much pressure and performance can really be applied through the single organisations and vertical structures on which our schooling systems are built, and the challenge of framing a vision that is broad enough for people across our different institutions to join together in pursuing it.

One clue to how this might work comes from the way that the BIG partnership, in Burnie, describes its approach to pursuing its strategic goals.

### ***BIG approach to pursuing its 2030 vision and strategic goals***

- Sow the seeds of aspiration with children in the early years of education: the future begins now.
- Build strong and active connections between education providers and business that create pathways for our children.
- Create a community attitude that values the importance and role of education and pathways for our children.
- Embrace a contemporary approach to learning and the changing role of technology.

(BIG Team, 2014)

If there are players in the wider system of community and learning who can actively pursue and enable these kind of connections (perhaps operating as **anchors** and **brokers** for the kinds of collaboration that are really valuable) then the practical possibilities available to the individual providers of education – the schools, families, employers and community organisations – can be multiplied.

## **5.3 The University of Tasmania: Anchor and broker**

Throughout the discussions that have surrounded this work, the role of the University of Tasmania has continuously been raised and revisited as a vital player in creating educational progress and developing new capabilities for action in Tasmanian education.

This role, clearly, is already being played – the creation of the Peter Underwood Centre is one of many valuable actions undertaken through the ***Making the Future Partnership*** described above in section 2.

The University of Tasmania, like so many universities and tertiary educational institutions, already plays a pivotal role, not only in providing graduates for a skilled workforce and undertaking research that contributes to economic development, but also as a major regional employer, as a developer and shaper of precincts and cities, an investor in community development, and as a partner in civic and community leadership.

If Tasmania's vision of the future sees education playing a central, unifying part, in structuring and fuelling the Tasmanian economy, **and** in creating an inclusive underpinning for Tasmanian community life, then the University of Tasmania has a pivotal role as both anchor and broker of the strategies that will realise the vision.

Our discussions highlighted numerous examples of this already in action, from the Children's University initiative, to the annual Vice-Chancellor's dinner with School Principals, to the development of new tertiary pathways including 'associate degrees' which enable learners to access meaningful opportunities for skills development which are compatible with their community location and life experience.

The Peter Underwood Centre organises a stream of events and discussions which enable cross-community dialogue, including among education professionals and researchers, and generate opportunities for collaboration. These events include the biennial Education Transforms symposium and monthly Horizon seminars. The Peter Underwood Centre also currently hosts an Associate Director for Workforce Change, who is employed by the Tasmanian Department of Education to focus on opportunities for reform and innovation in the design of education career paths and professional learning.

The University of Tasmania has established two senior Pro Vice-Chancellor positions – for Community Partnerships and Regional Development, and for Schools Engagement, which are all about deepening and extending collaboration to increase the benefits of education for the wider community.

Both the University and State Government have underlined the significance of the ***Making the Future Partnership*** by appointing an Assistant Director in each organisation to lead coordination of the activities and discussions pertaining to the agreement.

And the University's investments in local infrastructure - as outlined in the ***Making the Future Partnership*** – in Burnie, Hobart and Launceston are also crucially important.

The diagram below, initially developed during the workshop discussions, illustrates the multi-faceted role that the University can play in the long term strategy for educational development.

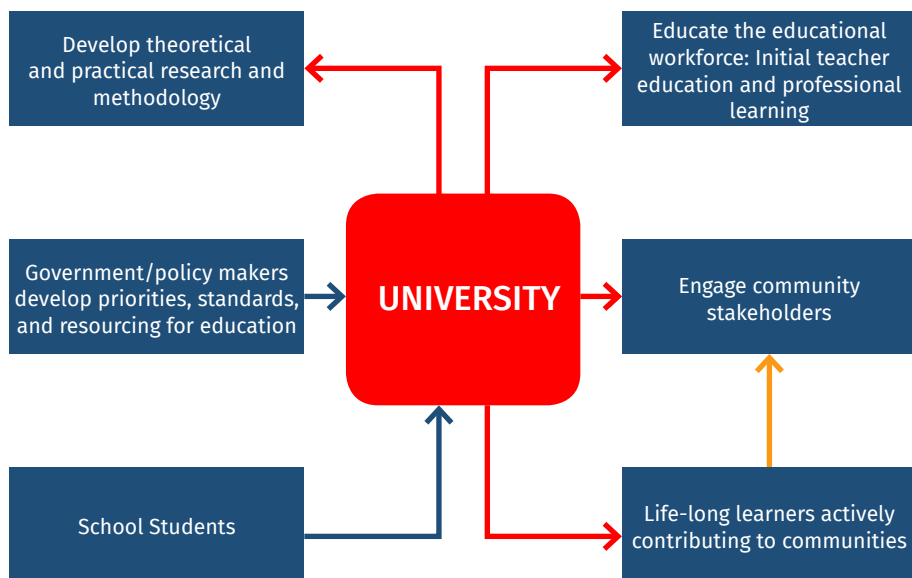


Figure 1. The multi-faceted role of the University in the long term strategy for educational development

Key activities and opportunities identified during the workshop discussions included:

- Developing and drawing on the best possible theoretical and practical approaches, and strengthening the evidence base.
- Enhancing the preparation, skills and professional learning of the state's teachers, through Initial Teacher Education and professional learning.
- Engaging with government policy-makers and public policy processes to influence and advocate for key priorities, including quality and transparency, access, equity and inclusion, appropriate admissions standards and local partnership.
- Engaging and encouraging families and school students to understand and value the educational pathways that they could access beyond school.
- Working with community stakeholders across all sectors, including employers, to encourage and mobilise educational partnership.
- Articulating and demonstrating a shared vision of lifelong learning.

Participants in our workshops helped to identify some of the distinctive characteristics and benefits that this role might bring.

## 5.4 Strategic leadership of educational collaboration

Elements of strategic leadership may include:

- Consistency over time, reducing churn and achieving greater longevity.
- Harnessing the elements of change, engaging openly with other points of view while being resilient to change.
- Growing strong communities of practice.
- Welcoming parents and adult learners from all backgrounds.
- Championing a genuine approach to lifelong learning, where adults are encouraged to learn for broad reasons (not just employment qualifications).
- Long-term commitment to longitudinal approaches (with practical interim measures to guide progress).
- Insulate core commitments from the 'white noise' of short term media debate and actions by special interest groups.

As the discussions, the diagram, and subsequent analysis have shown, clarifying **how** to make those institutional roles and relationships work is not easy or simple.

In particular, the relationships between government and other institutions, including the University, must be carefully designed in order to maximise their contributions to supporting educational progress in schools and communities.

This is a challenge faced in systems all around the world, as the focus of education policy shifts towards collaboration and learner-centred approaches, and as governments navigate more complex, information-intensive environments.

In the final section of this paper, we consider opportunities for action, including through policy and institutional collaboration, arising from the analysis we have worked through and the mix of players and opportunities currently evident in Tasmania.



## 6 Action: Possibilities for the future

Our discussions so far, and many of the partnerships and projects described in this paper, show the great potential for education to play a greater positive role in Tasmanian life, by supporting higher achievement, contributing to resilience and wellbeing in the economy and community, and thus maximising the role of education to long-term social and economic development.

The question motivating our discussions during the last three years has been about what roles collaboration can play in strengthening this role, and how to build specific relationships and capabilities that make such collaboration possible.

As we have seen, collaboration is diverse and multi-faceted. It does not automatically find a relevant focus, and it needs to be cultivated at the right levels of scale, and among appropriate groups of participants in order to be worth the time, effort and skill required to sustain it.

Collaboration can stimulate and sustain fuller and more active participation by a community of learners and partners to support educational achievement. It can enable and help to drive a focus on 'student agency', with activities and working relationships centred on the experiences and progress of students as learners.

Collaboration can strengthen and underpin knowledge-sharing, feedback cycles and information flows which can deepen and accelerate educational improvement, increase the efficiency of investment in professional skills and time, and support coordination across individual schools and local communities. This, in turn, can support a wider range of differentiated learning opportunities and pathways for students, more relevant and localised support structures, and positive growth in mobility and aspiration *within* the Tasmanian community.

As we have seen, the community-wide effort to reform and develop Tasmania's education system has continued in a positive direction in recent years.

The question I seek to address in this final section of the paper is how an ongoing, long-term strategy for educational development could be strengthened by a systematic approach to collaboration – and how collaboration could be applied in ways that help to broaden and deepen the impact of efforts to improve Tasmania's education system for all learners. This means thinking about how the main parts and players of a long-term strategy might relate to each other, and focus on shared goals, in order to maximise progress in the years ahead.

In doing so, I also aim to help identify specific opportunities for action that could contribute to the next stages of Tasmania's educational growth.

## 6.1 ACER's recommendations for improving 9-12 education

In 2016, the Review of Years 9-12 in Tasmanian education by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER, 2016, p.26) made the following overarching recommendations for the future:

1. Take a holistic approach to system and sector improvements.
2. Review and update the formal curriculum, assessment, reporting and accreditation requirements.
3. Consider the establishment of multi-campus schools.
4. Initiate regular long-term strategies to change public perceptions about the value of school education and VET in Schools.
5. Implement a development strategy to support the rejuvenation of the workforce.
6. Improve the status of VET and VEL in schools through community involvement in the development of a future vision and associated implementation strategy.
7. Re-evaluate the nature and use of data collected.

For the issues we have been discussing, the recommendations are telling; they clearly emphasise the importance of a holistic, whole-of-community approach, and of seeking to change educational *culture* alongside the improvement of formal education systems, processes and infrastructure. Collaboration is central to these goals, and to building the organisational and information systems that will support a more diverse, but higher-performing education system that creates effective pathways to Year 12 and beyond for all students.

The recommendations and the review analysis encapsulate the importance of generating a positive, integrating vision of the future to act as a focal point for the whole community, including education professionals.

At the same time many of the individual recommendations address the need for more specific, articulated solutions that work to connect students and communities who might otherwise be cut off from the transformative possibilities of education, to ensure that they can participate, learn and progress in ways that are meaningful to them, and relevant in the wider world.

I believe these recommendations point both to the 'macro' level of cross-state policy and partnership can link together with the 'micro' levels of action of projects, networks and practices by schools and their partners in the community. They highlight the potential for a systematic, cross-community approach to educational improvement, *and* the complexity of making it happen.

For example, whose responsibility is it to foster networks of schools and encourage them to work together through informal networks? Which institutions are best positioned to design and implement campaigns for educational engagement that are really effective? How should such actions be structured and evaluated from year to year?

One reason for this complexity is that the new directions and priorities – for example campaigning for cultural change, fostering networks of schools, and encouraging personalised student pathways - inevitably cut across some of the roles, methods and silos traditionally maintained by our education institutions.

This illustrates the difficulty, not only of clarifying the 'what' of education reform (building the basis for policy consensus and committing to policy reform) but also clarifying the 'how' (building the shared capabilities, understanding and system relationships that are needed in order to *enact* educational commitments in the ways they are intended).

Too often in the effort to create clear structures for resourcing, accountability, and professional responsibility, education systems have ended up creating institutions and implementation structures which exacerbate the problems of fragmentation, top-down control, and disengagement, rather than overcoming them.

Many different systems and jurisdictions are now continuously engaged in the effort to build up these capabilities, to try out new methods, to develop collaborative partnerships as a core part of their educational strategy, and structure governance and accountability arrangements in ways which support better learning outcomes.

## 6.2 Collaborative strategy and systemic learning

In *The Shared Work of Learning*, the study of educational collaboration which sparked the work with Education Transforms and The Peter Underwood Centre, we outlined an approach to action which seeks to transcend the limitations of implementing policy through vertical institutional silos.

The direction we are seeking to pursue is towards the development of 'learning systems' that are more capable of acting together, adapting and adjusting to feedback from data and experience, and pursuing learning goals as part of a more connected and differentiated system of organisation.

That approach to action, governance and system learning is what I advocate, adapt, and seek to apply below. It aims to treat action, not so much as a question of individual impulse, or of organisational command and control, but more as a cycle of anticipation, experience, reflection, deliberation and capability building.

One challenge of applying this approach to our education systems, however, is to structure and focus such cycles so that they can operate at the right level of scale, and timing, for the purposes and needs they are designed to serve.

## 6.3 Priorities and opportunities

This approach outlines five core elements of a systemic approach to change and learning, which can work pragmatically with the structures and contexts in which education already operates, but also work systematically to change them.

### *Core priorities*

1. Identify learning need.
2. Build platforms for professional collaboration.
3. Grow community voice.
4. Create shared pools of data.
5. Reshape governance around learning.

These elements might be best understood as a cycle, or series of aligned cycles, which foster the growth of practical capability through repeated cycles of action, implementation and feedback. They create specific opportunities, which in turn feed the ongoing, systemic process of learning and capability-building.



Figure 2. The cycle of change and learning.

### *Priority 1: Identify learning need*

The cycle starts with identifying forms of learning need which can act as goals and focal points that guide action over time, and provide a sense of coherence and progression for the system overall.

Again and again, at every level of the system, the importance of having shared objectives that are grounded in clear moral purpose emerges as an essential requirement. When goals of this kind are articulated in ways that make them visible, meaningful and practical to a wider community, then the actions that they help to guide can also be broader and deeper. In our traditional institutional and policy methods it is all too easy for system objectives to be expressed as generalised principles or as numerical targets which do not have resonance or relevance for the people who could enact them.

In Tasmania, some guiding long term goals have been clearly established: lifting participation and achievement at Year 12 towards being realistic expectation for all young people; reducing the impacts of disadvantage in the early years and between generations; increasing the range of positive opportunities available to Tasmanians through educational achievement; and making support for educational growth a shared responsibility across the whole community.

The directions already set towards lifting student participation and improving the quality of learning outcomes provide a great opportunity for focusing collaborative improvement over the next few years. These goals clearly demand many different players across the education system and the community to work together to achieve clarity and momentum. Two specific areas of focus present concrete opportunities.

### ***Opportunity 1 Building shared curriculum focus***

Higher educational aspirations require a strong, positive and rigorous focus on the curriculum, especially in the senior years, to overcome the fragmentation and lack of coherence that the ACER (2016) review found, and actively to support improvement in the quality of teaching and learning.

The new requirements of the Education Act (Tasmanian Government, 2017) provide a great opportunity for teachers, researchers, system leaders (especially principals) and community partners to work together in creating, sharing and applying new curriculum materials and methods to meet the learning goals of the Tasmanian system and translate them into materials, resources, and learning expectations that work clearly and practice and can be shared across classrooms and communities.

As has been the case in many systems, there is a sense that each school has to develop curricular and instructional materials for themselves, and historically there has been very little sharing across schools. School systems from British Columbia to Finland and Singapore have found that an open, collaborative approach to developing curriculum materials can increase the depth and the spread of curriculum design to support student learning.

Articulating the purpose and logic of the curriculum (for example, including the general capabilities of creativity, ethical and intercultural understanding) as well as the importance of really understanding maths, history and science, can also be an important way to engage families and the wider community in supporting students and education.

## **Opportunity 2**

### ***Design new pathways to Year 12 success***

Another clear opportunity is to create statewide collaboration in designing, constructing and reviewing pathways towards Year 12 or equivalent qualifications, which bring together new combinations of school-based, vocational, community-based support and digital learning networks for different students and groups of students.

Already, positive progress is evident and can be built on. In 2016, 3767 students achieved their Tasmanian Certificate of Education (TCE) – an increase of 6% on the previous year. The number of students choosing to study Years 11 and 12 at their local high school is growing rapidly, while college enrolments remain strong and overall retention is improving.

The challenge is to make the expanding range of institutional options work more coherently for all students – this creates a great opportunity to work together across schools and communities, testing different approaches in practice, comparing experience and progression among different groups of students, and contributing to an ongoing conversation about what is working and what we can learn from it.

## ***Priority 2: Build platforms for professional collaboration***

Professional learning is always close to the core of educational improvement. Professional collaboration *within* schools and institutions is well established as a priority for improving impact through learning. Professional learning can also dramatically increase when it works effectively across organisations and locations, empowering people to work together across different locations, organisations and disciplines to solve common problems (Meiers and Ingvarson, 2005).

To do this, an important component is to build *platforms* which allow different professionals to aggregate their effort, work together, and learn faster and more deeply from each other. Professional learning is conditioned and constrained by the routines and organisational structures within which people work.

As Tasmania establishes system-wide improvement goals and focuses professional learning on how to achieve them, there is an opportunity to develop these platforms in ways which align policy, resourcing, professional learning and community context.

This is partly an issue for schools, principals and education officials to focus on, to identify the right areas of focus for teaching strategies in the classroom; professional learning activities; and supportive use of data and evidence. But equally important is engaging non-school partners in the same process – using libraries, health and community services, non-profit organisations, employers and professional associations in identifying, understanding and contributing towards these goals.

### ***Opportunity 3 Shape school networks to support student learning goals***

Interest and enthusiasm for school to school networks is still growing strongly in Tasmania, as teachers and school leaders embrace the possibilities for creating new student pathways and better learning outcomes.

For example, the Teganna Collective is a great example of school communities working together to deliver Years 11 and 12. Bayview Secondary College, Clarence High School, Campania District High School, Rose Bay High School, Sorell School, Triabunna District High School and Rosny College are working together to offer students a mix of vocational and core academic courses and to support them to reach Year 12 and achieve their educational goals.

Geographically-based networks can provide an important source of mutual support and shared resources, and enable groups of schools to offer students a wider mix of options and pathways.

The current situation offers a great opportunity to develop school networks around clear, ambitious objectives for student learning, and to involve teachers and middle leaders of schools in learning how to deepen professional knowledge and help overcome specific barriers to student learning.

Encouraging voluntary participation by schools in networks, and building shared improvement projects around specific, tangible objectives for student learning – for example, improving outcomes in particular curriculum areas for particular age groups, or building new approaches to home-school engagement, offers a chance to achieve system-wide improvement.

### ***Opportunity 4 Working across professions***

While school-to-school collaboration on teaching and learning objectives is very positive, there are also compelling opportunities to develop platforms to support shared work between different professionals, and to build up multi-disciplinary teams and networks capable of supporting students and families across a broader range of learning needs.

Another Tasmanian example is the Safe Homes, Safe Families initiative, which involves teams of workers to support children and families affected by family violence. It links social workers, psychologists, and police officers to school-based professionals to offer greater support to children and families to help reduce harm, support recovery and prevent family violence.

Youth and community workers play a vital role in helping to engage young people and build links between the informal experience of community life and the formal structures of education. In the midst of Tasmania's Year 12 change the opportunity to build new cross-professional collaboration through youth engagement, mentoring and career guidance; creative community learning projects; and vocational and employer partnerships is enormous.

### ***Priority 3: Grow community voice***

The attitudes, relationships and decisions of the wider community also have a powerful influence on the experience and aspirations of students. Building these stronger relationships with the communities that surround schools leads to higher educational achievement over time.

Numerous projects and initiatives are already pioneering fresh new ways of engaging with students, including through entrepreneurial, project-based learning, projects like BIG in Burnie, and the University holding community celebrations and outreach events to encourage participation in lifelong learning.

The opportunity to build up regular, meaningful discussion and dialogue with community members as part of the next educational improvement agenda is clear.



### ***Priority 4: Sharing pools of data***

Another vital aspect of collaborative strategy is creating 'pools' of data which can inform both shared decision-making and differentiated, contextualised learning.

It is striking how controversies over the data on senior secondary transitions and outcomes in Tasmania is still a central aspect of the debate, and how fragmentation of different information sources (for example, about who is participating in VE courses, what are the relationships between completion and attainment at Year 12, and so on) has contributed to fragmentation and lack of progress in the system itself.

This reflects an underlying principle; because any decision can only be made on the basis of the information available, shared decisions can only be taken on the basis of shared information. Data from teacher assessments; student feedback; family enrolments; and professional learning can only support system-wide educational improvement if it is turned into shared 'pools' of data that can be accessed, interpreted and learned from by widespread groups of users.

Digital technology applications now make it possible to analyse and synthesise and share data at a large scale. Teachers within schools, as well as a wide range of partners working together around schools, need data to support collaborative action that builds robust and widely shared data tools and repositories (NESTA, 2015).

In Tasmania it would be useful to build a shared community resource on educational participation and growth, which can be widely accessed by the whole community. It would act as resource for examining how different members of the community might access and benefit from education, with schools operating at the heart of this wider data system, rather than as a separate and isolated units.

In addition, a consideration is how to encourage ever-greater focus on evidence using data to develop more effective practice, rather than falling into the trap of sharing practices which do not actually lead to greater student learning. This reinforces the importance of focusing data and data-sharing on student learning goals, as generated through community engagement and through the development of an improvement strategy consistent with a long term Tasmanian vision. By linking data collection and data-sharing specifically to positive, student-focused learning goals, an emphasis on evidence for positive impact is being continuously reinforced.

### ***Opportunity 5 Create shared feedback loops, linked to statewide dialogue, for long term educational growth***

The possibilities of sharing data and using it to strengthen shared learning create a great opportunity to build long term, system-wide feedback loops in Tasmanian education to support repeated cycles of educational improvement.

The biennial Education Transforms symposium might provide an overarching 'umbrella' for this cycle, and the updating and review of data on educational participation and improvement.

The University of Tasmania can refine and enrich its own role in providing and sharing data in these ways, because of its unique roles in the system, as a creator of research and provider of analytical capability, a provider of teacher education, a multi-location base for community engagement, and a partner with government and industry. Ensuring a continuous effort to collect data and feedback from stakeholders in relevant areas of activity, and then building shared capabilities for interpreting feedback and acting on it, is an important opportunity.

### ***Priority 5: Structure governance around shared responsibilities for learning***

Finally, education systems cannot function without governance structures; the routines and relationships through which formal power, responsibility and accountability are coordinated.

Vertical governance structures in which control, resourcing and reporting are defined by function (for example finance, curriculum, subject specialisms) can act as a barrier to the kind of shared learning effort discussed in this paper. Many systems are moving towards horizontal accountabilities, place-based coordination and multi-disciplinary teams and networks.

This means moving further away from exclusive control of vertical, functional structures towards new combinations of horizontal networks and place-based structures holding schools accountable to each other and their communities. For example other Australian jurisdictions, including South Australia and Victoria, have developed new local and regional structures to promote collaborative improvement and provide coordinating platforms for family and children's services.

### ***Opportunity 6 Place-based community learning partnerships***

Tasmania could investigate how to build and strengthen local-regional learning partnerships, building on models like the BIG partnership to put government and education institutions alongside employers, industry associations, community groups and unions. These partnerships could experiment with different levels of scale, but they would both focus on specific local clusters of activity, and have a wider scope than single local government areas, seeking to encourage bridging and collaboration across Tasmanian regions.

The purpose would be to strengthen commitment to learning and skills development across the whole community, while improving the connections and partnerships that will lead to the supply of skilled learners and workers for specific opportunities in those communities.

## ***Opportunity 7 The University of Tasmania as learning intermediary***

Finally, this analysis of governance may point towards an opportunity for the University of Tasmania to evolve its role as an ‘anchor and broker’ even further in the next phase of Tasmania’s educational strategy.

We have seen how the University’s commitment to long term partnership, and its embrace of community learning, community partnership and community infrastructure, have contributed to the formation of new possibilities in the state’s broader education agenda.

The progress of these many initiatives, and the structural reform of Tasmania’s senior secondary and early childhood years, create a new opportunity for the University of Tasmania to act as an intermediary in ongoing, systemic learning across the state.

In order to sustain such an ambitious agenda, Tasmania needs a coherent, permeable structure that can focus on a clear number of focal objectives, while also supporting detailed implementation effort and rigorous evaluative research to generate feedback, data and guidance. Government obviously has an essential role to play in this strategy. However, government agencies cannot, and should not, play a comprehensive role in every aspect of this effort given the complexity and diversity of the effort involved.

The University of Tasmania can further enhance its contribution as a ‘learning intermediary’, working alongside government and the school system as an autonomous but engaged partner by sharing responsibility for key aspects of the school system, including the development of the education workforce. The University can also support a statewide cycle of improvement and innovation by helping to focus the strategy on key guiding objectives, encouraging the gathering of data and feedback from all possible sources, and supporting the formation of new capability for learning and improvement. The most obvious themes for further developing this effort are:

- Preparing the educational workforce and supporting professional learning.
- Building research partnerships.
- Enabling community dialogue and place-based coordination.
- Developing new educational methods and organisations.

## 6.4 Conclusion: growing a shared learning culture with a statewide improvement cycle

A deep shift in Tasmania's learning culture is potentially under way. There is no doubt that major changes in the focus and orientation of both the school system and of tertiary education in the state have created new possibilities.

Realising the potential that the Tasmanian community so clearly holds for the future relies on using these institutional and policy changes to deepen and broaden educational effort, so that it comes to play a more widely cherished role in individual and community life.

Collaboration is central to this effort; not in a generic, expert driven sense, and not in a way that Tasmania needs to imitate from any other place; but in the sense that working together, and learning together, need to become more deeply absorbed into the everyday habits and norms of every place and every organisation.

Collaboration can also be applied specifically and strategically to help articulate and accelerate some of the critical designs and interventions that can help Tasmanian education to create positive momentum and systemic improvement over the next decades. Doing this will require a courageous effort to stick to relatively few big and carefully chosen objectives, while simultaneously investing great effort in open, broad-ranging community engagement.

Fortunately the talent, wisdom and energy for this task abound in Tasmania – and are widely distributed across the state and its communities. Harnessing it by working and learning together should produce ever-growing rewards. Perhaps the most important way to do that is to treat the participants in the education system – the students, teachers, parents, researchers and community members – as the creators of knowledge about how to really make it work.

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