FACTORS IMPACTING ON STUDENT RETENTION BEYOND YEAR TEN IN RURAL, REGIONAL, AND DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITIES IN TASMANIA – A WICKED PROBLEM

A report from the Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Project between the University of Tasmania (Faculty of Education) and the Tasmanian Department of Education

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Introduction and background

There has been considerable discussion about retention\(^1\) of students in education beyond Year 10 in Tasmania\(^2\) reflective of the fact that the State has the lowest retention rates for young people continuing in some type of formal education or training beyond Year 10 in Australia. Although some efforts have been made to address this situation in the past, these have been essentially structural in nature, and have not made significant differences to educational engagement and attainment. As such, retention continues as a major challenge for Tasmania, with a poor track record in the area impacting negatively on the young people themselves (e.g., employment, further education opportunities) as well as the State more broadly (e.g., economically, socially and culturally).

The research reported here for the government school sector suggests that the challenges to effecting positive changes in retention in the future are highly complex. Structural solutions alone are not sufficient. Responses will also need to address curriculum issues as well as deeply held cultural views and practices evident across various sectors of society, including families, communities and educators themselves. Indeed, the complexities of the challenges for change to the current situation are best conceived as a “wicked problem”, one “highly resistant to solution … (and where) there are no quick fixes and simple solutions” (Australian Public Service Commission (APSC), 2007, p. iii). Importantly, it is clear there is no “one size fits all” approach to the required changes, because despite its small size, Tasmania is remarkably diverse in many ways.

This paper reports on one aspect of the research of a three-year Australian Research Council Linkage project, undertaken in collaboration with the Tasmanian Department of Education (DoE) examining best educational practice in government schools to enhance student retention in education beyond Year 10, especially for students in rural, regional, and disadvantaged areas. While paying attention to other aspects of this particular study (see for example, Beswick, Hay, Cranston, Watson, & Allen, 2012; Cranston, Allen, Watson, Hay, & Beswick, 2012; Watson, et al., 2013), the article draws specifically on a series of in-depth case studies conducted in government schools (and their communities) across the State in 2013. Three inter-related themes (sociocultural; structural; curriculum, teaching and learning) are identified that seem collectively and interdependently, to play key roles in determining whether many young people continue with their education beyond Year 10. More importantly perhaps, is the challenge for many young people in Tasmania to complete the equivalent of two years full-time study beyond Year 10, something that is an expectation in many other educational jurisdictions.

The three themes are conceptualised and discussed as a wicked problem: a highly complex educational, social and cultural problem, involving issues that require “thinking that is capable of grasping the big picture, including the full range of causal factors underlying them” (APSC, 2007, p. iii). The evidence suggests that if Tasmania is going to make positive steps towards enhanced and meaningful engagement of young people in education beyond Year 10, “collaborative and innovative approaches” will be required (p. iii). In considering the three

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\(^1\) For the purposes of this article, retention is broadly defined as students staying in education beyond Year 10 – to be meaningful, retention also embraces the notions of engagement and attainment in education. A stronger definition would require completion of two years of study (Year 11 and 12) post Year 10 (or equivalent).

\(^2\) Tasmania is one of six States and two Territories comprising the Commonwealth of Australia. It is the smallest State and has a population of approximately half a million people, the majority of whom are located in the major town centres of Hobart (south), Launceston (north), Burnie and Devonport (north-west).
themes, it is understood that context (e.g., social, geographical, economic) impacts on the significance of the themes for differing groups of young people, i.e., context matters when considering retention.

**Broader context for the study**

In the rapidly changing and challenging world in which we now live, it is accepted that continuing in meaningful education beyond Year 10 is not only highly desirable, but essential for “social cohesion and social prosperity, for economic competiveness, for employability, health and well-being of citizens” (Ramsay & Rowan, 2013, p. 2). Indeed, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2013) has noted that:

Graduating from upper secondary education has become increasingly important in all countries, as the skills needed in the labour market are becoming more knowledge-based and as workers are progressively required to adapt to the uncertainties of a rapidly changing economy. (p. 42)

This international prioritising of the importance of education is mirrored nationally in Australia through government agreed statements such as the *Melbourne Declaration* (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA), 2008) and the *National Partnership Agreement on Youth Attainment and Transitions* (Council of Australian Governments (COAG), 2009), with the former highlighting the need to improve rates of completion of Year 12 or its equivalent and the latter similarly noting the need for “increased participation of young people in education and training” to be reflected in “enrolments of full-time equivalent students in Years 11 and 12” (p. 5). An important point to note here is that these arguments are not just about continuing in education beyond Year 10, rather they are about completing the equivalent of two years full-time study.

Locally, similar sentiments are expressed in Tasmania’s *Economic Development Plan* which stated that “(i)ncreasing educational outcomes and year-12 retention rates are key to ensuring a skilled workforce and Tasmania’s long-term future” (Tasmanian Government, 2011, p. 3). The recently elected Liberal state government mirrors this priority with a policy of “improving retention rates so an extra 2000 young Tasmanians complete their year 11 and 12 studies” (Tasmanian Liberals, 2013, n.p.).

In short, there is agreement that completing twelve years of study (or equivalent) should be the expectation, not the exception. Currently, despite a variety of initiatives, this is not the case for many young people in Tasmania.

**Tasmanian research context**

Tasmania has the most rurally dispersed population of all the Australian States, creating some challenges for equality of provision of, and access to, education (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2010). Tasmania is also the most socio-economically disadvantaged of all the States as measured by a number of socio-economic indices – including disposable household income, adult and youth unemployment rates. Over one-third of the population receives government public financial assistance (ABS, 2007). Although 86% of the jobs in Australia require a post-Year 12 qualification, in 2007 only 47% of Tasmania’s workforce had that level of qualification.
In 2008, Tasmania’s post-Year 10 retention rates were low, with around 55% of students staying on until Year 12 compared with the Australian average of 62% (ABS, 2008). The Productivity Commission’s (2014) later figures show apparent retention rates for Tasmania for full-time secondary students from Years 10 to Year 12 as 67%, increasing to 93.8% when part-time students are included (for government schools). Data from the Tasmanian Qualifications Authority indicate that just over 40% of Tasmanians who were of an age to be in Year 10 in 2010 (in government and non-government schools), had completed their Tasmanian Certificate of Education (TCE) by 2013 (Tasmanian Qualifications Authority, 2013). In other words, less than half of young Tasmanians are “graduating” from twelve years of schooling, or what in other Australian states would be simply referred to as high or secondary school (Ramsay & Rowan, 2014).

In comparison to other States, young Tasmanians have a higher than average probability of belonging to a group called the “NEET” (not in education, employment, or training), a group as noted by Lamb and McKenzie in 2001, who are disengaged from learning, in part because of low aspirations and poor transitional pathways. Over a decade later, this situation continues. The cost to young people of early disengagement from education is profound and potentially life-long. It can affect their relationships with family, friends and community as well as their own self perceptions, confidence, and mental health (Steverink, Westerhof, Bode, & Dittmann-Kohli, 2001). The subsequent costs to the community as a whole through lost productivity, ongoing skills shortages, and demands on the health, justice and welfare systems are potentially significant. Various Tasmanian governments have been well aware of such impacts and have attempted a range of policy responses. These have been essentially structural in nature and include the setting up of an Academy and Polytechnic system (Tasmania Tomorrow Project, 2008a, 2008b) by the former Labor government and the current Liberal government’s plan to extend high schools (currently finishing at Year 10) in rural and regional communities to Year 12, thereby “giving students a choice whether to continue their studies in their local high school or go to a college” (Tasmanian Liberals, 2013, n.p.). These responses need to be seen in a context where in Tasmania, education in government schools beyond Year 10 is typically delivered via separate colleges for Years 11 and 12 to cater for the geographically dispersed nature of the population.

Geographically, the North-West region of the State is particularly disadvantaged in terms of a number of socio-economic and health indicators (Public Health Information Development Unit, 2005). Its lower educational participation and retention rates reflect this disadvantage (Abbott-Chapman, Braithwaite & Godfrey, 2004). The South-East region includes five of the seven most disadvantaged local government areas in Tasmania. These areas have higher levels of dependence on government assistance, long-term and general unemployment, mortality, low family income, criminal conviction, and suicide (Tasmanian Council of Social Services, 2007).

Notably, although Tasmania is an island and the smallest Australian state, there are historical divides that may affect the beliefs, attitudes, and opinions of members of the community in the north and south of the state (Hollingsworth, 2005). For example, West (2013) has noted:

If one sector or geographic region gains something, it is seen to come at the expense of someone (or somewhere) else. Hence, all opportunities are greeted with an outbreak of conflict over who should get what, usually between the northern and southern halves of the island. (p. 59)
Overview of literature

Students who are disengaged from education are more likely to give up hope of achieving meaningful and competitive employment in a post-school work environment (MacDonald, 2008). If they become parents, it is likely they pass on these low aspirations to their own children, such that the cycle of disadvantage is perpetuated (Purcell, Elias, & Wilton, 2004). This wastage of opportunity is multi-dimensional, having long-term negative economic and well-being implications for individuals, their families and communities. Importantly, recent research has suggested that “aspirations have a similar impact on educational outcomes, regardless of socioeconomic status and Indigenous status … (and) … that interventions to lift aspirations of young people should have a similar impact for all young people, including those most at risk of poor educational outcomes” (Homel & Ryan, 2014, p. 3).

Although there is some evidence to show that post-compulsory participation in Australia has increased across all the target equity groups (Marks, 2008), these groups remain under-represented in higher education, and their share has not changed over the last decade (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008; Centre for the Study of Higher Education, 2008). Early school leaving plays a significant part in this pattern (Lamb, Walstab, Teese, Vickers, & Rumberger, 2004). As a result, addressing retention issues beyond Year 10 must occur well before the students are in the later stage of their education. As such, the research argues that action needs to be an integrated aspect of a student’s ongoing educational program (Winn & Hay, 2009).

Failure of students to connect with their secondary school curriculum (McWilliam, 2008) or to build satisfactory teacher/student relationships (Hyde & Durik, 2005) has been demonstrated to impact negatively on students staying on at school. The likelihood of disconnecting from schooling is further increased if the individual is from a low socio-economic status (SES) community and under economic pressures to find work to survive financially (Swanson, 2009). Hence, low SES is considered a risk factor in terms of students’ initial and on-going schooling and academic and social development (Hay & Fielding-Barnsley, 2009). Associated with this risk is the concern, as noted earlier, that parents in lower SES communities have lower educational expectations and aspirations for their children, which indirectly influence students’ academic achievement, academic self-concept and career aspirations (Neuenschwander, Vida, Garrett, & Eccles, 2007). Students from low SES communities may also fail to connect with further and higher education institutions because of cost, transport, timetabling, and resource limitation. Additionally, they may have few role models or others with direct experience of higher education in their immediate family and peer group (Lamb et al., 2004).

As noted above, the importance of community in discussion about retention cannot be overlooked, with research indicating there are community impacts, particularly in rural regions, on students’ aspirations in terms of their education. Kilpatrick and Abbott-Chapman (2002), for example, explored social capital as “a community rather than individual characteristic that is central to the discussions of social cohesion, citizenship and social development” (p. 46). Moreover, community has a social capital influence on students’ priorities, aspirations and academic achievement (e.g., Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins, 2012; Israel, Beaulieu, & Hartless, 2001; Kilpatrick, Field, & Falk, 2003; Semo, 2011). School educators and parents also recognise the importance of being a part of a collaborative partnership, including family and community, to improve student academic achievement and
overall engagement in learning, and increased school attendance (e.g., Sanders, 2003; Sheldon, 2003; Sheldon, 2007; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005). Semo (2011) sets the scene for interest in the community by suggesting that “(s)ome evidence suggests that the influence of community networks can even help to offset some of the effects of socio-economic disadvantage” (p. 1).

Some of these factors may be exacerbated in the Tasmanian context because in rural and regional areas, separate post-Year 10 institutions may require some young people to travel large distances to Year 11 and 12 (or senior secondary) colleges and, for others, to move from their homes and board in larger regional towns. These factors have been demonstrated to impact negatively on the aspirations and plans of rural and regional students and their parents (Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman, 2002). The difficulties experienced by post-Year 10 students in separating from their local communities means there are challenges for senior secondary colleges to develop stronger links with the Year 7-10 secondary schools and feeder primary schools, and to develop transition programs to meet more effectively the social and psychological needs of rural, regional, and disadvantaged (low SES) adolescents.

Importantly, the attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of secondary school teachers have been shown to help shape the post-school pathways chosen by school leavers (Abbott-Chapman & Kilpatrick, 2001). Some research suggests that some teachers have low expectations of their students’ capacities to learn (Beswick, 2005, 2007) and these attitudes and beliefs can emerge among groups of teachers working together (Beswick, Watson, & De Geest, 2010). Although it has been established that beliefs are highly contextual (Beswick, 2003), the research suggests that in Tasmania, primary, secondary, and post-Year 10 teachers should collaborate more with each other regarding student retention.

As leaders of their educational communities, school principals face particular challenges as many are likely to be working within communities that have decades of low expectations regarding education beyond Year 10. In such areas, an improvement in student retention requires the input of school leaders with transformational skills to work effectively with their own teaching staff and with the wider community (Schein, 1999; Sergiovanni, 2000) enacting positive change for their students by changing expectations and aspirations across all members of the community - parents, teachers, students and others.

This overview of the literature serves to highlight the complex interplay and interdependence of an array of issues, indeed forces, that potentially mitigate against some students in rural, regional and disadvantaged communities continuing their education beyond Year 10. These issues or forces can be (tentatively) clustered around three interdependent themes: sociocultural (including issues such as individual family and community factors), structural (including issues such as the separation of high schools and colleges) and curriculum, teaching and learning (including school and pedagogical factors). The themes serve as a set of organisers for the issues and it important to emphasise the complexities and interdependence of them. That is, some of the issues are evident in different ways in more than one of the themes, such is the nature of wicked problems.

Notably, many of the issues identified in the literature have been relatively well known for some time. However, less well understood have been the complexities of the interplay among these and the challenges of attending to their solutions. That is, although policy makers and practitioners might look to the research for answers to the many challenges at play, it is the complexities of those challenges and the “wicked” nature of them that provide significant
barriers to change and improvement. The next section examines some of the aspects of wicked problems as they relate to this research.

Wicked problems

In recent years, those problems—usually of a complex social nature—that are not straightforward and lending themselves to rational linear solutions have been referred to as “wicked” (APSC, 2007; Brown, Harris & Russell, 2010). Originally written about some four decades ago (see Rittel & Webber, 1973), such is the acknowledgment of their significance at a government policy level, that the Australian Government prepared a compelling paper recently titled “Tackling wicked problems: A public policy perspective” (APSC, 2007). They define wicked problems as “complex policy problems … that go beyond the capacity of any one organisation to understand and respond … there is often disagreement about the causes of the problems and the best way to tackle them” (p. 1). Key “components” of wicked problems are that they arise in response to a wide range of loosely connected and interrelated factors and the interplay across these factors.

Key arguments around wicked problems are that, in contrast to “tame problems” (i.e., straightforward ones), they are not easily resolved by consideration of the facts, as often there are disagreements about just what are the facts, a situation emanating from underlying paradigm disputes among key stakeholders. As such, managing wicked problems is challenging, and it is rarely a matter of “fixing” a problem, rather one of ameliorating it. The notion of “fixing” has been characteristic of policy responses to challenging educational “problems” in the past. These are approaches that are “grounded in the idea of a stable and certain world” (Jordan, Kleinsaar, & Roe, 2014). As previous research has shown, and as this current research confirms, the issue of retention needs to be considered in a context of complexity and “contradiction” (Eisenberg, 2006, p. 271). What also needs to be understood is that problems that are in part embedded in social and cultural contexts such as retention, “are never solved, they are simply resolved over and over again” (Bore & Wright, 2009, p. 245). These notions have significant policy implications for decision-makers.

Although inherently complex, some agreed-on ways forward with wicked problems include (APSC, 2007):

- the need for collaborative strategies among key stakeholders – engaging the full range of stakeholders in the search for solutions is essential;
- the requirement of holistic rather than linear thinking is required, where interrelationships are acknowledged and addressed; and,
- a realisation that risks have to be carefully managed, and adaptive and flexible responses are required.

Importantly for this study, wicked problems “are unique because they are context-dependent” (Jordan et al., 2014, p. 2). This emphasises that there is no ‘one’ answer to addressing the challenges of retention in government schools in Tasmania. Rather, there are multiple responses required depending on the contexts under consideration – including the school and wider social and community contexts within which retention is being examined. As Rittel and Webber (1973, p. 169) argued, “diverse values are held by different groups of individuals – that which satisfies one may be abhorrent to another, that what comprises problem-solving for one is problem-generation for another”. Importantly, Munneke, Andriessen, Kanselaar and Kirschner (2007) note that wicked problems have many stakeholders in their particular contexts with their own views on problems and possible solutions. As a result, wicked
problems are characterised by having multiple values at stake, with stakeholders not agreeing about their relative importance or meaning (Jordan et al., 2014) such that “wicked problems have no right or wrong solutions that can be tested and revised” (Munneke et al., 2007, p. 1075).

Although it is not the intention here to engage in extended discussion about the usefulness or otherwise of the concept of “wicked problems” to examine and try to understand student retention, it is clear that such a concept aligns well with issues identified in the relevant literature and related research. What this brief overview emphasises, however, is that for “problems” such as that posed by retention of students in Tasmania, it is necessary to “move beyond simple and formulaic responses (i.e., answers) for complex (i.e., wicked) problems to a broader, collaborative and more integrated approach” (Jordan et al., 2014, p. 13). These matters will be revisited in the final discussion of the findings of this piece of research.

The case studies

The case studies (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995) on which this paper is based form one element of a wider set of data for the overall study (Beswick, et al., 2012; Cranston, et al., 2012; Watson, et al., 2013). The case studies were designed to:

- provide in-depth qualitative data from a range of school and community stakeholders from targeted schools to examine issues, as identified in the literature, that impact on student retention beyond Year 10;
- identify and explore ‘best practice in action’ (defined as enhancement of retention of students in education beyond Year 10);
- contribute to better understanding the complex issues underpinning retention beyond Year 10; and hence,
- lead to recommendations for enhancing retention beyond Year 10.

Schools participating in the study were identified by officers of the Department of Education – these were schools where the Department believed initiatives (focused on curriculum, outreach, transition or otherwise aspects) were having a positive impact on retention.

Two research fellows, highly experienced researchers, conducted the bulk of the data collection under the supervision of the chief investigators of the project. Regular discussions were held among the research team during and after the data collection activities. One research fellow worked in the South and one in the North/North-West Department of Education regions of the State.

Data for the case studies were collected from a range of stakeholders in 16 schools and colleges. Initially, participants for the case studies were identified by virtue of the particular position or role they held in the school. Others were then identified for involvement by a snowball sampling approach (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006). These participants included:

- principals, teachers and other relevant staff such as Pathway Planning Officers, boarding house managers, students and parents as well as others in the educational community of the schools involved;
- Department of Education General Managers of the regions; and,
- key stakeholders in local government, commerce and industry and other agencies in the selected regions who were connected with their local schools and/or colleges.
In the main, the schools were considered as clusters; that is, local feeder primary, high schools and colleges were involved. The data focussed especially on those matters identified in the earlier literature review that appeared to impact on retention of students in education beyond Year 10, as well as those actions and initiatives in place in some schools that seem to ameliorate the effects of factors working against retention. Framed by the three overarching themes noted earlier, both the case studies overall and the interview and observation schedules developed for data collection, were guided by the following four areas:

- education generally, such as the value and advantages of education;
- retention in particular, and reasons as to why it is generally low in regional, rural and disadvantaged Tasmania;
- targeted interventions addressing retention challenges; and,
- factors impacting on successes and/or providing barriers to retention.

Data for the case studies were collected via (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Merriam, 1998; Silverman, 2003):

- semi-formal in-depth interviews conducted individually or in small focus groups;
- document review – Department of Education, school-generated and other material relevant to retention; and,
- direct observations of programs, classroom practices and other relevant events.

Most interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Some interactions were summarised following discussions. These and other data were initially divided and coded according to their location within a framework drawn from Integral Theory (Wilber, 1997). This framework contends that there are four primary dimensions or perspectives through which the world can be experienced: subjective (experience or ‘I-space’), inter-subjective (culture or ‘we-space’), objective (data, observation and measurement or ‘it-space’) and inter-objective (systems or ‘its-space’). These dimensions can be mapped as four quadrants, providing a useful and comprehensive map that ensures that all aspects of an issue are included. This approach was complemented by the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 2012; Klenke, 2008) whereby categories, properties and tentative hypotheses are developed and where “the data gradually evolve into a core of emerging theory” (Merriam, 1998, p. 191). This allowed a “working” theoretical framework to focus subsequent data collection. All data were de-identified prior to analysis, with participants given a unique identification code. Teachers, principals, students and parents were identified according to their participant group and the school type (Primary, Secondary, District High, or College), followed by a sequential number, re-starting at 01 for each participant group (e.g., Primary School Teacher_01; District High Principal_01). Other participants were identified by their position only, followed by a number (e.g., Pathway Planner_01).

Importantly, the two research fellows maintained regular contact with each other, and with other members of the research team and met regularly both during and after data collection activities to debrief on progress and engage in discussion about emerging findings. Such discussions aided in the data analysis and informed the direction of subsequent data collection (Klenke, 2008; Miles & Huberman, 1994).
Findings and discussion

Presentation of the findings from the in-depth case studies is organised around the three overarching interdependent themes noted earlier. Considering them in this way provides an avenue for critically examining and discussing each theme separately, while appreciating that it is the variable interactions among them in different contexts that manifest in the complexities of the challenges of enhancing retention in Tasmania. Indeed, some of the issues discussed within particular themes also have relevance in other themes.

The inter-relatedness of the three themes can be illustrated in Figure 1. Importantly, the figure emphasises the significance of each of the three themes as integral to the quest for students continuing their education beyond Year 10 and, further, that the ultimate goal is not just to continue in education, but to effectively engage in and attain meaningful educational achievement equivalent to two years study post Year 10.

![Figure 1: The inter-relatedness of the three integral themes](image)

The three themes can be broadly described as follows:

(a) *sociocultural* – includes issues such as those relating to views about education held by some parents, community members and teachers including aspiration for continuing education and views about what forms of employment are valued;

(b) *structural* – includes issues such as physical and geographical separation of high schools and colleges and operational barriers such as college time-tabling; and,

(c) *curriculum, teaching and learning* – includes overall coherence and understanding of curriculum from a K-12 perspective, pedagogy, teachers and the curriculum.

In the presentation of findings and discussion below, each of the themes is considered in some detail. Of note is that the schools chosen for the study were considered to be exemplars of good practice. It is not surprising then, that many participants in the case studies were familiar with
many of the issues that pertain to retention, with some involved with a range of processes and structures designed to improve retention.

1. Sociocultural theme

Some of the key factors to emerge under the sociocultural theme included historical cultural factors, poverty and unemployment, personal traits, attitudes to education, and real and perceived opportunities available to young people when they leave school.

It is clear that historically some Tasmanians have regarded Year 10 (and even before) as the end of schooling. There are also strong cultural trends supporting this situation.

   The culture of the place makes a big difference … a lot to do with the parents and the culture about, do we finish at the end of Year 10? In the past, the culture would say yes, we finish grade 10, we go into work. (District High Teacher_01)

Structurally, the government school system re-enforces this, with most high schools still ending at Year 10. The majority of students wishing to continue to Years 11 and 12 need to move to a regional urban-based college, with the exception of some district high schools which offer limited programs at Years 11 and 12. Other options for young Tasmanians have been to leave without completing post-Year 10 education, to gain an apprenticeship or to enter the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector. In the past this was not considered a disadvantage, given a relatively high level of employment opportunities in sectors such as manufacturing and farming, which ensured most school leavers, if they wished to, were able to find employment.

Even when some Year 11 and 12 courses are available locally, the reputation across the community of some of these schools also seems to impact on students’ views of schooling and their own expectations and aspirations:

   You always think this is a second choice because you can’t go to the town one … or town is too hard. So all the failures come here while everyone else normally goes off to town. That’s the way that some kids look at it. (However) it’s the same courses and it’s the same opportunities (available locally) … You just need better promotion. (District High Student_01)

In some communities, young people may be needed to work locally to boost the family income, to work on the family farm or business, or to care for younger siblings. Being able to find work in the local community means that some isolated communities in particular, especially in the West and North West of the State, remained closed, with no reason for young people to leave. For some families, education beyond Year 10 meant that their child might become estranged from them and their values. Indeed, some children have been ridiculed for showing they have an education. Further, some parents in some communities who may have had a poor experience of school themselves project a skewed view of schooling, such that engaging beyond the local was neither a necessity nor desirable.

   A significant number of our parents wouldn’t have even finished grade 10. I’d say that’s the history of this part of the world … Back in the ‘80s there were boys who commonly left in grade 9. 15 was the age that you could go and get work, and so they’re the dads of the kids that we’ve got now … The mums who went off … got pregnant, finished in Year 9 or maybe struggled and did a bit in grade 10, but not much … They’re our parents (High School Principal_01).

3 Current Government policy is to add some Year 11 and 12 offerings to high schools (Tasmanian Liberals, 2013).
As a result for many in Tasmania, attending university or college has not been part of their historical cultural experience, either by way of aspiration or in fact. Indeed, one teacher observed:

Some of the schools I’ve been to, their aspirations are fairly limited by what they see immediately around them. (District High Teacher_02)

Some previously “closed” communities are beginning to become more open and tolerant as people from outside move in. This is not always seen as a good thing because adapting to life in the “modern day” is perceived as bringing some negatives, such as mental health issues and drug use:

… the community is a lot more open and welcoming. It’s … being dragged into modern day. (But there are) mental health issues from families, drugs and alcohol. Lots of single families, financial (pressures). (District High Teacher_02)

Many Tasmanians regard themselves differently from people in other parts of Australia. The most rurally dispersed population combined with a small island state mindset has, for some at least, produced an inward rather than outward looking community. Given these multiple factors, lack of education beyond Year 10 other than trade training, was not considered a problem until recently, when rapid globalisation has seen an increase in unemployment through loss of traditional industries.

Notwithstanding these challenges, the support and encouragement of parents, teachers and the wider community are seen as critical to success at school. One high school principal broadly “categorised” students into three groups. The first, high achievers (about 20% of the cohort) are students from professional families who expect their children to attend college and go on to university. These students also provide role models for other students. The second middle group (60%) consists of students who vary in their ability, tend to be unsure of their pathways or the value of education beyond Year 10 or are just keeping their options open. The third group (20%) are high needs students, who believe education is not important and who may be from high needs families with low educational levels, high unemployment and/or persistent intergenerational negative attitudes regarding education.

Importantly, many see poverty as a factor in forming families’ attitudes to education, with this translating into prioritising opportunities to earn money over continuing in education.

Families may depend on income from the student … It can be difficult if family depends on income. (Pathway Planner_01)

There’s that mindset … if it’s a rural setting, that … students can finish Year 10 and then work for the family business or on the farm. (College Teacher_01)

These factors are exacerbated in some areas of the State (e.g., the North West) where there are numbers of families experiencing intergenerational unemployment. There is a perceived welfare dependency that impacts negatively on any incentive to continue with education.

It’s … the poverty culture. Second, third generation unemployed … plus the limited, it seems, … ever-decreasing opportunities for employment. (College Assistant Principal_01)

Participants in the study believed that in order to succeed in education, particular personal qualities were required. These included resilience, goal-orientation, foresight and motivation. These traits
we believed to be different for country students compared with their cohorts in the city. Some observed that these were not evident in many students and their families.

Education not a priority in most homes. (There’s) no goal setting or encouragement to strive. (This) limits opportunities. (District High Parent_01)

Across the board, many parents, teachers, students and other members of the community saw value in continuing in education mainly for the instrumental purpose of increasing economic capital; for example it would assist in finding employment. Few saw it as serving wider purposes such as contributing to cultural capital.
Employers are demanding it. (Pathway Planner_01)

Gone are the days where … after Grade 10, I went … and got a job, or I got an apprenticeship - 11 is becoming just a continuation of 10 … Year 12 has become the Year 10 that was probably when I left high school in 1992. (College Assistant Principal_01)

Although some parents acknowledged that in today’s world employment was harder to come by and further education was required, they saw it as a necessary evil in that it brings the fear that their children may leave the community.

The heartbreak for me is that they may end up going very far afield ... You maybe need to go to Perth to be a vet … and that’s full on … as a parent … … if only every course they would ever need to do could be done in Tasmania. That would be so cool. (High School Parent_01)

Some of the adult participants in the study referred to a perception within the community that education was not particularly important or even desirable for employment. Apart from the historical reasons noted above, these perspectives included a belief that there were still sufficient jobs available. Importantly, there was also an expression of some parents’ own poor experience of school and the sense that an educated child might ‘show up’ the parents.

A lot of parents who live in isolated and rural areas… don’t value education at all, … they see education post-Year 10 as something which if their child …aspires to that, then they see that as a betrayal … they are aspiring to be something other than what other family members have been … able to do. (College Teacher_02)

Further, the very notion of academic excellence and becoming educated sometimes conferred an othering of the student, (‘poofy’; ‘smarty pants’), meaning that they no longer fit in their local community. The relatively mono-cultural background of some Tasmanians in some rural areas means that many students have little exposure to a diversity of cultural values, which some respondents believed exacerbates such othering.

If you have an education they won’t speak to you down the pub. You’re not a real man. (College Ex-student_01)

Notably, and consistent with the situation elsewhere in Australia, Tasmanian Aboriginal students are more likely to leave school earlier than their non-Aboriginal counterparts, and levels of absenteeism are higher than for non-Indigenous students for a range of reasons.
[Of the] Indigenous students I work with at school, 99% of the time [they] have lower rates of literacy and numeracy … 70% of students not attending are indigenous. (Social Worker_01)

A number of respondents expressed the view that going to college for Year 11 and 12 was believed by some as only a pathway to university. This offers a barrier to retention when coupled with the view among some that education at university level is not highly regarded or seen as being important for success. Reasons for this included the lack of role models of those who have “gone on”, and a view that university education does not confer economic advantage and only results in jobs such as in local government, which are looked down upon by some. High schools saw it as important to use previous students who had achieved success beyond Year 10 as important role models for those still in school:

… we’ve got kids of the Dean’s roll (of honour) at university … but they (the students) don’t hear these stories so much … All our success stories happen away from here, and we don’t get them back, and that’s what we need. (District High Teacher_03)

For many, blue collar jobs are preferred as they are seen as enabling students to stay in the community as well as being well paid.

Education isn’t … deemed necessary for success … So education isn’t valued whereas someone says “well you must have that to be successful”. I just don’t think the link is there. I think education is there, but then it stops there. It’s not seen as future success as a pathway. (Primary School Teacher_01)

There is a misnomer (sic) … that the colleges are only preparing kids for … a university pathway … from the general community, and perhaps the high school teachers too. But there are so many more programmes and … opportunities … I think there’s a lack of information that people have about the colleges, and think they’re only for a university pathway. (College Teacher_02)

We’ve got a lot of people work in mines here. People can earn as much in mines, if not more in the mining industry … a lot of people … worked in the mines rather than going and spending eight years at university. (Primary School Teacher_02)

Teachers, however, generally demonstrated an understanding of the impact of major economic changes on Tasmania, particularly the dwindling employment opportunities for unskilled young people. Mining closures in the North West of the State are a case in point.

Within the sociocultural aspects of the school itself, three other factors appear to be particularly relevant to retention beyond Year 10, viz., student absenteeism, Year 10 student leavers’ events and relationships.

Absenteeism was identified by some as a major factor contributing to poor retention rates in both school and college, with school data showing a “connection” between retention, absenteeism, educational level of parents and student attainment. Good school attendance was seen to link to motivation and good learning behaviour patterns developed in the early years. For some at risk students, absenteeism seems to depend on the relationship with teacher(s).
The view was also put that if parents did not value education, they may be more lax regarding their children’s attendance. Indeed, some dis-engagement from education is happening around Year 3, with parental support and expectations having an impact.

We see absenteeism patterns happening in kindergarten … we see a pattern of children missing a day or two a week and then over the year that becomes setting the pattern. … we see the same pattern replicated where it becomes compulsory (to attend) schooling five days. (DoE General Manager_01)

There is no expectation from the parents that their kids will go to Grade 12, there’s no expectation that they will even come to school on a day-to-day basis … I used to be in absenteeism here and on any given day, we would have over 35% did not actually attend school. (Student Networker_01).

The place leaked like a sieve when I first came here, is the expression I’d use... The attendance here was highly … mobile … we’d have students who would arrive at nine o’clock and be gone at morning-tea time … Others you would ring home, ‘hi Mrs. X (your son’s) not here’, ‘oh no he’s come home’ … and parents … didn’t seem to have a problem with it … The staff also had a comfort with that culture ... there was a high degree of acceptance around part-time schooling, if you want to call it that, for quite a number of students. (District High Principal_01)

The Year 10 student leavers’ events (essentially social functions) in Tasmanian government schools are seen by many as important community cultural events that mark the end of high school, and for some the end of school completely. Such events are seen as giving permission for students to leave school, both psychologically and physically. It is described as a rite of passage for which some students prepare for years before the actual event. In some schools it is rehearsed in Year 6.

Leaving at Year 10 is a psychological marker in the community. Graduation is end of Year 10 not Year 12. (It’s a) massive thing, they have been preparing since Kinder! A psychological marker, mindset … We have this incredible culture in the whole of Tasmania around leavers’ celebrations. (District High Teacher_04)

In such cases, the school is potentially re-enforcing that leaving at Year 10 is an acceptable pathway to take. Many believe such events hold an importance blown out of proportion, and should be recast as a transition to another phase of education rather than its end. One principal interviewed was seriously considering removing it from the school calendar although conceding that this would be very difficult to do.

It’s just so big and it’s a lot of money, a lot of fuss, the kids talk about it from Kinder, who they’re going to do their leavers with … So it’s this massive great big celebration when you finish grade 10. … It’s nearly like giving people permission to leave school … It’s a real culture and you just get swept along with it because that’s just the way it’s been. (District High Teacher_05)

For those students who do go onto Year 11, there is evidence that the college environment impacts on students differently in terms of social development and relationships. The transition was difficult for some, while for others it was a more positive experience.
… for some people the jump from going down here all your life to going up to a big college is just too much for them. Like, there’s all that socialising and parties and everything … They get distracted from school. (District High Student_02)

Participants noted that those students who were ready to leave home and were supported by their parents tended to be from more affluent and aspirational families. These students saw college as offering more educational and sporting opportunities than high school as well as opportunities for a “new start”: to become more independent, to enjoy city life, to experience a less threatening environment than high school, to enjoy being a small fish in a big pond and to make new like-minded friends and meet others who were passionate about their studies.

The other thing I like about the college system … is that if you’re a student who is a bit different in a school, they can … find like (minded) kids in a college where everybody is starting, everything is new … Lots of kids are ready for the change. (District High Teacher_05)

I think the great thing about coming to college is that the kind of people here are the people pursuing something they’re passionate about, just like you. (College Student_01)

Other students do not fare as well. Some see the college model itself as the cause of this. There is a belief among some high school teachers that colleges make incorrect assumptions about how well students are able to navigate their new environment. The change in culture between school and college - from a nurturing culture of close relationships to one of still-young students being expected to behave more independently as adults - may be enough to lead to some students dropping out. This situation may be exacerbated if the family support and value for education is not evident, and if they lack the maturity or resilience needed to continue with their studies. For some students, leaving their community caused a sense of isolation. It also disrupted their social life and previous work opportunities.

(There’s) a lot of coming back. They start up there (at College) and then they’ll end up back (in their old high school), boomerang … Because it’s just being away from the home, their family, their friends … They’re homesick. When you live in a small community like this … Because you’re 16 … and you’re only young. (District High Teacher_05)

Many students also find that when they move to college they have a great deal of free time on their hands which requires maturity and a level of confidence to manage. As well, there are marked differences in academic level and teaching approaches between school and college, even for highly motivated students. As noted above, some students reported coming back from college in their free time to the familiarity of their high school to seek support from their previous teachers. The very strength of the nurturing that high schools provide for students may be a double edged sword for those students continuing to college. At an age that for some is characterised as turbulent and confused, this may be a major factor for some students. Some held the perception that colleges did not have the resources or expertise to provide for the struggling students’ needs.

The biggest thing was just managing my own time … and just having to figure out how to do it myself … Maybe getting [new college students] to know their teachers a bit earlier as well, and letting them know just how much access to help they can have if
they need it. I think a lot of the dropout reason is just people getting under too much pressure … so just leaving. (College Student_01)

That transition point for 16 years olds to leave home is a real barrier, it’s a real challenge. Even students who are the most able and families who are aspirational for their kids, they still find it really hard to leave … at 16 to go and live in town essentially independently. (District High Principal_02)

As noted earlier, the schools were identified to participate in this study because they had made some gains in addressing retention of students. Through the case studies, there was a general awareness of the historical and cultural basis for those community attitudes to education that did not encourage some students to continue education beyond Year 10. They also demonstrated an understanding of the need to engage and work with parents and the wider community towards the goal of enhanced retention. Actions in this regard include working with the parents and community to stress the importance of education beyond Year 10, showing retention and unemployment statistics to raise awareness of the advantages and disadvantages for their children of completing education beyond Year 10, and developing strong relationships with students and parents and partnerships with the wider community in a diversity of contexts. Other practices and interventions include providing positive role models, tackling school absenteeism from an early age, and conducting comprehensive transition programs from Year 10 to Year 11.

(There is a need for) engaging students to believe that Year 11 and 12 is worthwhile and also convincing parents that Year 11 and 12 is worthwhile … we try very hard with … our marketing to schools, and to parents, that we say that statistics prove that if you can continue to Year 12 that you’re going to have a greater chance of success in the future. (College Teacher_01)

Schools and colleges also offer parent information sessions and transition programs. However, some teachers questioned the effectiveness of these strategies, querying whether the message to encourage students to remain in education was understood and hence acted on. Some also noted that some parents did not attend such meetings, often the parents of students at risk of leaving school. For some in the colleges there was a contradiction between advocating an adult, independent learning environment in the college, and the continued need to engage with parents as might be the case for high school students.

Once the students get here we have the regular parent teacher nights, newsletters, a college association and so on. But we do find once the students arrive that there’s a bit of pressure from them not to have their parents involved: “We’re adults now.” (College Principal_01)

Building good relationships across schools/colleges, parents and the wider community was highlighted as critical for retention as well as for engagement and attainment. Building relationships takes into account the child’s background and includes an understanding of the challenging circumstances some young people and their families are dealing with, such as poverty. These relationships and partnerships also extend, in some instances, to local businesses and industry. One principal observed that:

I can’t be an instructional leader for some kids … I can’t lead them to learning unless they feel safe and have been clothed, fed and all the basics. So I think that’s a major challenge. (Primary School Principal_01)
For some students, a strong relationship with a particular teacher may also be critical, as it may be the only thing keeping that student at school. However, moving from high school to college can often mean a break in this strong relationship, and ironically appears to be one of the key reasons why some students drop out in Year 11. Importantly, some interviewees viewed relationship building as being achieved at the expense of academic challenge in high schools, i.e., that a supportive culture might not necessarily be consistent with “stretching” students academically.

I think some teachers get confused with caring and being kind with still caring and being kind but having expectations and... you can care all you like but in the end they need you to be their teacher, because that’s the thing that is going to make the biggest difference for them in the end. (District High Teacher_06)

Providing role modeling for students and parents through seeing others in the community going to work was noted by some to send powerful messages that education and work was “the norm” not the exception. Bringing back past successful students to address the current students was also seen to reinforce the idea of the potential advantages of continuing in education.

If people are getting up, going to work and showing that that’s what you need to do to survive... So it’s... the role modeling... [it] is really important that we try and educate some of those parents... But in a community like this, we do try to provide opportunities for parents... I thought was so important because we need to celebrate, we need to have those kids come back and show other kids... (District High Assistant Principal_01)

Most schools have focused strongly on ameliorating absenteeism, recognising it as a major factor in engagement, attainment and therefore retention. In the past, part of the issue seems to have been a relaxed attitude to attendance on the part of some parents and some teachers. Schools now have more rigorous processes in place such as changing staff culture, keeping attendance records all day and following up with students and their families. The following observation highlights this:

Changing the staff culture was critical around more responsibility about attendance and being diligent and vigilant... [previously] I’d have senior staff saying, ‘oh yeah it’s okay, look, we know where (Student X) is... we’ve talked to his mum... [Now I am] calling staff to start accounting for attendance... we started to get accountability around attendance. (District High Principal_01)

Summary for sociocultural theme

In summary, key issues identified under the sociocultural theme include:

• beliefs among some parent, community members and teachers that education, certainly education beyond Year 10, is neither desirable nor necessary – this cultural view is historical, generational and evident in particular segments of the community; notably, however, there is evidence of some changes to this cultural view as traditional work opportunities disappear;
• changing employment opportunities due to economic and industrial decline in some areas of the State mean education is viewed more positively than in previous times;
• poverty and unemployment impact on families’ priorities and hence educational aspiration and engagement;
• there are socio-economic and generational challenges for many in the Tasmanian community – in essence, priorities other than continuing education are driving some families;
• education for some is a low priority such that absenteeism from school is acceptable if attending is seen as too difficult;
• some parents and community members hold less than positive views of opportunities afforded to young people from engaging in education beyond Year 10;
• the presence of highly valued (among some) cultural activities, such as Year 10 leavers’ events, in very powerful ways symbolise and celebrate the end of schooling for some young people; and,
• in essence, for many students (and their families and communities), retention has not been normalized, i.e., it is still talked about as an issue to be dealt with by them, by government, by the department – staying on at school beyond Year 10 has not been the norm for many students, rather it has been seen as an exception.

Although the issues noted above are essentially framed as barriers for some students in continuing their schooling beyond Year 10, there is evidence that schools in the case studies are aware of them and are making efforts to ameliorate their impact on retention. Key challenges for these responses will be just how effective they are in enhancing retention, and importantly, how sustainable they will be over time, particularly as many are concerned with matters beyond the immediate influence of the school. As a result, they will require collaborative and sustained efforts across schools, families and communities drawing on support from government and no-government agencies.

2. Structural theme

For this theme, key issues to emerge included: changes to the school leaving age, employment and training opportunities, structural separation of high schools and colleges, transport and accommodation for students attending college, and programs in place that directly or indirectly ameliorate low retention.

The school leaving age in Tasmania was increased to 17 as recently as 2007. The implications of this structural change are still working their way through the community. For some interviewees, it was seen as a positive move that has helped students and their families realise the importance of education beyond Year 10. Others seem constrained in their aspirations for their children’s education by their own limited experiences.

However, the fact that many high schools end at Year 10 results in some students enrolling in college but not attending, or leaving as soon as they reach 17, particularly if they have found employment. Although retention rates up to Year 10 appear healthy, some students are leaving school in Year 11.

I think obviously the move to have the leaving age increased to 17 has been a big help because the kids now see that they’ve got to go beyond (high school) … and therefore that door is much more automatically open than it was in the past. That’s been a positive move. (High School Teacher_01)

However, continuing to Year 11 is only the start of the retention “journey” – completion of a full program across Years 11 and 12 is the real challenge.
Rapid and deep structural changes in the global economy have had a major impact in many regions of Tasmania in recent years. The relatively high levels of unskilled workers in the State has meant that many have found themselves unemployed and without opportunities as traditional job markets dried up (West, 2103). Interviewees indicated that the practices of the past whereby (mainly male) children were expected to follow their fathers and grandfathers into apprenticeships that led to well-paid work, for example in metal processing industries, mining, timber, manufacturing and agriculture, are no longer available to the same extent. Similarly for girls, where entrenched gender roles meant they tended to be encouraged into female orientated employment such as retail and hairdressing. The situation for many young people is such that when employers are demanding higher levels of education, there are not enough opportunities or places for non-academic students post Year 10 in the workplace or at Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutions, while TAFE itself is preferencing students who have completed Year 12.

There are not enough opportunities especially for non-academic students … They can’t get into apprenticeships … Going to TAFE, students have to compete with those with Year 12. (Pathway Planner_01)

Financial pressures, such as accommodation costs, are a major impost for some families who support students who need to leave home to study at college. Education is seen as expensive and the rewards in the minds of some are not necessarily seen as worth the effort. For some families this results in pressure on the student to leave education to find employment.

The economic strain for families down here. We’re in a … really high needs area. Middle class families can manage it financially but people in the lower socio-economic group can’t … Lots of families under financial hardship would be looking at saying, ‘well, you should be employed, we can’t afford to keep you any longer’, in terms of real income. (District High Principal_02)

A rural issue, living away from home is hard and expensive … (Students leave school early because there is a) lack of home support for travel, money. (District High Parent_02)

College timetabling practices were noted earlier as contributing to different experiences for students compared with their high school ones, e.g. less structure, more free time. Timetabling matters also impact where students have to travel some distance from home to college. Issues around this can led to absenteeism and tiredness.

… you’re left hanging around in town for hours and hours for one class for what? An hour or two and then you’ve got to wait hours again for the bus back home (District High Student_01).

You might only have one class that day too. You still left at quarter past six, but you haven’t got a class till 11 o’clock … especially if I go up on Tuesday I don’t have a class till 10:30 and I finish at midday (District High Student_01).

Some interviewees indicated that some college students who are used to a full timetable at high school are not mature enough to set their own study goals, and hence experience difficulties around having more free time when they enter college. Some students succumb to the temptation for non-attendance. Colleges are exploring a range of ways to deal with issue
such as having students engage in volunteer work in their free time or timetabling study into three full days to enable students to work on the other days.

We’ve been trying to tailor their programmes to basically keep them … engaged, but it’s more about keeping them busy, because they’ve come from the high school model where they are busy from nine until three, and some of them don’t cope very well with the fact that I’ve got an hour and a half off in the middle of the day, what do I do?

(College Assistant Principal_01)

Rurality leading to isolation, having to travel long distances (sometimes perceived rather than actual) and transport difficulties are important factors for some students in deciding to stay in school in Years 11 and 12.

The travel is a killer. Then in winter you are leaving and getting home in the dark in the cold. I mean, I struggle to get up at 6:00 am in the winter … I was facing a two hour bus trip, I’d be like, ah it’s just too easy to stay in bed. (District High Student_01)

Some interviewees suggested there was a relationship between retention and distance from home to college. For example, some students have to negotiate several buses and rely on parents to ensure they can access the bus. Infrequent transport, bad weather and sporadic timetables combine in rural areas to impact negatively on retention for some students with low aspiration and motivation. Some interviewees suggested that these factors, along with reaching the school leaving age of 17, impacted on retention around Easter each year.

They do need support. It’s not that easy … the kid’s got to have the confidence to be able to do it … They’ve got to get up early, they’ve got to catch the bus. It’s extremely stressful if they miss the bus … so… they don’t go … it’s meant that they can’t get there. [The college bus] leaves at 7:30 … They do have a nine o’clock bus but … there might be a day where you might just have that two [classes] in the morning and then nothing for the rest of the day. (District High Parent_03)

Although they are designed to open up opportunities, some interviewees questioned the benefit of students’ engagement in external programs (such as work experience) while at high school. These programs are seen as a pathway into potential employment, and if no employment is obtained, students find it difficult to re-engage in education. Students who have continued straight from high school seem to have better outcomes in college.

Students engaging in outside programs can find it difficult to get back into school education … if they have been out on programs that take them out of the school, they almost become de-institutionalised and so we have greater problem with the students … programs where they’ve been accessing the community and accessing … early employment opportunities, they have a view that, ‘I can get a job’ and don’t have to bother with doing well at school. (College Principal_02)

Some high schools identified the positives for students if they could offer Year 11 and 12 subjects so students who were not ready to leave high school for a variety of reasons, could remain in their local community. Flexible and e-learning solutions, as well as the availability of qualified teachers, would be required to make this happen. As well, teacher exchange between high schools and colleges and collaboration with TAFE were offered as other options of overcoming travel and timetabling issues.
I’d like to see the Year 11 and 12 area more resourced and more supported because it is a huge transition, and you shouldn’t have to make the choice to move away from home just to continue education … offering a better curriculum through to Year 12 would be really good. (District High Teacher_02)

As noted earlier, the schools were identified to participate in this study because they had made some gains in addressing retention of students. An overview of some of the many responses by schools and colleges in attempting to address retention challenges with regard to the structural theme are now discussed.

With increasing awareness of the importance of engagement in education in the early years for retention, there is a variety of programs that aim directly or indirectly to engage students in learning from a young age. Some programs continue to Year 10 and beyond with Year 10-11 and 11-12 transition programs.

Child and Family Centres and the Early Childhood Intervention Service are seen as important in supporting young families and liaise with schools to identify families in need. However, this support only lasts until a child enters kindergarten.

Child and Family Centre has a huge impact on children’s success at school … here there is a psychologist birth to four, so in theory we can do assessments around families and children before they come to school … The families are very well supported … but then once they start kinder, a lot of that support’s gone because they can’t access a lot of these things. (District High Assistant Principal_02)

The Launching into Learning (LiL) (Tasmanian Government, 2014a) program aims at providing early intervention prior to Kindergarten by engaging hard to reach parents. Families are referred and supported by Child and Family Services, and receive home visits and toys for the children. It is perceived as successful in engaging parents in the critical early years, bringing parents into school who may have been reluctant to participate if they have had a poor experience of school themselves.

Launching into Learning is fantastic. Tasmania is a really strong Launching into Learning area. Our data has (sic) improved significantly. Our literacy and numeracy has also improved. Engaging the parents with schools … Absolutely [that’s really important]. (Primary School Principal_04)

Historically, retention of students beyond Year 10 has not been an issue of concern for many primary schools. However, all primary school teachers interviewed in this study believed that retention was an issue that should be engaged with long before a student enters high school. As a result, there are a number of early intervention programs now operating with the aim of increasing retention, by raising the awareness of primary students so that they start to think ahead, and develop positive attitudes to education and skills for success.

(This) issue at primary school hasn’t been on my radar because you get bogged down and you think that’s not an issue about me … But of course
now, with the Dream Big\(^4\) opportunity it’s starting to draw our thinking into, well yeah okay, what’s our role in that? (Primary School Principal\(_{02}\))

There is a variety of other support programs offered in some primary schools, focusing on things such as behavior management and student mentoring.

Many primary schools now operate comprehensive transition programs with the local high schools. Teachers visit each other’s schools. In some cases, strong links are maintained with the primary school once students have left.

It’s much more extensive than what’s happened … traditionally in the past. The Grade 6s go up … into the high school setting … and they have different subjects arranged for those days and then they have their full orientation day … The Grade 7 teachers come down and talk to the Grade 6s. (Primary School Principal\(_{03}\))

The Beacon Program (Dusseldorp Forum, 2014) is designed to develop a range of skills to assist young people (Year 10) to prepare better for the workplace, such as strategies for students regarding confidence building, preparing for interviews and interacting with community small business owners.

Other programs include those designed to engage disengaged students, particularly boys, and the young mothers’ program (Tasmanian Department of Education, 2103) aimed at keeping students with babies in education.

The young mothers’ program is a good example of an intervention strategy … now that we’ve got it up and running and it’s in partnership with the Child and Family Centre, it’s starting to build its own momentum. (College Principal\(_{02}\))

Pathway Planners (PPs)\(^5\), Transition Teachers and Youth Learning Officers are part of the Guaranteeing Futures program (Tasmanian Government, 2014b). They work in both high schools and colleges. Many see them playing a critically important and successful role in assisting and motivating students to choose educational pathways up to Year 12.

We use … a pathway planner … she does pathway planning with our 9s and 10s, 11s and 12s but we use her too to make sure we get our work placements up and running. She’s got great connections in the community. (District High Principal\(_{02}\))

Generally, high schools now seem aware of their role in the retention of students. Interviewees reported better communication now between some schools and colleges to help facilitate and support a smooth transition for students from Year 10 to Year 11. Some high school teachers stay in touch with students at college in various ways. Parents and students are encouraged to visit colleges, and parents unfamiliar with the system are encouraged to accompany their son/daughter to learn more about college life being experienced by their children.

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\(^4\) Dream Big is a Grade 5 program funded by Centrelink and informed by the work of Ruby Payne. It is a community partnership program with a work futures orientation. It aims to motivate students to aspire to a ‘brighter future’ through improved knowledge and attitudes and towards education, industry and employment opportunities beyond Years 10 and 12.

\(^5\) The State government is closing the Pathway Planner strategy to be replaced by an alternative approach.
Some teachers, however, saw that transition programs still had a way to go to be effective, arguing students were being transferred, not transitioned and believe more could be done to bridge the learning gap and cultural knowledge gaps between high school and college. The Year 10 to 11 transition point remains an issue for many students.

I think because of their age … they are expected to behave as adults, they’re expected to take on responsibility for their learning, which I know high schools do try and develop with the children, but it’s not until they actually leave and they go ‘oh, this is what it’s all about’. (District High Assistant Principal_02)

We need to be spending more time with our associated high schools about what they are actually doing so … we can feed onto it and get our teachers connected. It will also… be valuable for their teachers to connect with ours to find out … what happens next. (College Principal_01)

Support in the transition was seen as critical to success for students.

The main transition problems we have are accommodation and travel, and breaking ties with here (the high school). … The ones that have success with at Year 11 and 12 … have support from their families, financial support, emotional support. The ones that don’t have success – this is the majority – they’re doing it all on their own basically. (District High Teacher_02)

Another teacher noted:
Some … are just not ready to go … it’s a lot of factors … it’s not only maturity or being able to do the work there … it’s a whole lot of things which come into play and it makes them really uncomfortable. They are seriously out of their safety zone and they are seriously out of their comfort zone. (District High Teacher _01)

For some, the move away from their high schools to a college was important, at it allowed them to interact with a cohort of like-minded students (i.e., academically oriented) with goals. One Year 10 student noted:

… freedom, … independence and go to uni and get on with our lives … being with people who want to be there … instead of people who just mess around and don’t try … to distract you. (District High Student_03)

Most colleges operate transition programs of varying types with their feeder high schools. These programs include talks, orientation days, visits and taster days. For some high schools, there are close connections with particular colleges that may actually limit other potential options presented to students.

What annoys me … is that some people don’t get the options to go and see other colleges and other campuses … we’re not connected to the other colleges so we don’t hear about them … we need to experience all the possibilities. (District High Student_03)

Generally, the transition programs are well received.
I reckon the taster days and stuff are good because it gives them an idea of what’s going to happen … if it is a college they’re thinking about going to it does help you to learn how to get around … Because you have to catch buses and things. (District High Student_03)

Accommodation for students to attend college can be expensive, so is not an option for some families. Some students stay with older siblings or wider family members.

Some colleges set up programs to connect students to learning in a number of ways, including focusing of learning in greater depth with specialist teachers and working to develop students’ ability to self-manage.

The mental health of some students was seen as an issue in some schools and colleges. A number of support structures are available.

We’re finding mental health a big issue and we’ve done some work around how to deal with that in the classroom…Self-harm, depression, anxiety … Every student has to attend a support group which is about pathways, resumes, any admin. The support group teacher monitors the students’ attendance (and) any issues with them. (College Principal_01)

Students with high needs present challenges for both high schools and colleges, with some colleges liaising with the feeder high schools about potentially at-risk students.

We do track every student and if a student doesn’t finish, they’re contacted three times a year to see … what are you doing now? With any Year 11 that’s left, we ring them at the end of the year, …what are you up to now? Would you consider coming back for a Year 12? Just ask the question. (College Principal_01)

The plan at the moment, would be to talk with the feeder high schools and identify anyone that they believed was going to be a high risk of not being retained. (College Assistant Principal_01)

Some schools are experimenting with new technologies that provide improved flexible online learning to assist isolated students to keep connected with their Year 11 and 12 studies from home or even through their high school or through a cluster of high schools. However, there are resource needs involved; for example, there seems to be the need for a facilitator or advisor to be present for e-learning to be effective.

Not for all students - but for many students the opportunities through the online, the flexible learning opportunities, means that they don’t have to (leave home). We’ve got some students there who are fully flexible online and they’re studying pre-tertiaries and doing well. For other students, particularly in Year 11, that can be really tricky. But … having a support teacher (advisor) has worked … for a lot of students that’s really helped and that’s something that we’re building on. But having that option and having that choice, so if you want to do pre-tertiary subjects or you want to do that, you don’t have to go to town. (District High Teacher_05)

Boarding is one way rural students are able to attend city colleges. Boarding is currently subsidised and therefore affordable for most families. Some colleges have boarding houses.
In one case, the boarding house is opposite the college and is modern and well furbished. Its major disadvantage is that its doors close during the day because of the lack of supervision on the premises, so that students who are ill need to go home, and students with free time cannot access their rooms. Another boarding house is on the college campus and provides a good, safe learning environment for rural students with full-time managers in attendance. Limited resourcing and support for boarders, however, can be problematic.

We have a coordinator who lives on campus at the Villas, but they’re only there from 3:40 to 8:00 the next morning, or something... - if they fell sick, then they’d go to First Aid [on campus during the day]...If they were too sick … the parents would pick them up. (College Assistant Principal_01)

The Cradle Coast campus of the University of Tasmania in Burnie seems to have made a real difference to attitudes to education and continuing educational opportunities for students in the North West of the state. Students can still live at home while studying. Students from primary, high schools and colleges have programs whereby they visit the campus.

Having the Cradle Coast Campus has made a huge difference – students can still live at home, more people can consider studying … we’re going to see a change in that as our north-west campus gets bigger and offering more degrees and distance education opens up more and more all the time. (Primary School Teacher_02)

Summary for structural theme

In summary, key issues identified under the structural theme include:

- the Department of Education at a systemic level, and individual schools and colleges have implemented a range of programs aimed at enhancing student (and family) commitment to and engagement with education, from the early years on; current programs are rated positively across the board as making a difference for many students;
- however, often the lack of continuation of funding and fragmentation for such support services/programs for students impact on their on-going availability;
- the physical separation of schools across primary school-high school-college locations can present as a barrier to continuing in education for some students and their families;
- perceived and real geographical isolation of students from schools and colleges are barriers for some students – accommodation and transport issues then become significant for some of them;
- the relatively recent raising of the school leaving age to 17 means the traditions and educational expectations of many parents were formed by their experiences of leaving school at 15 or earlier;
- some students (families) are disengaging from education well before transition points such as high school to college – for some this occurs in early primary school;
- transition processes from high school to college are mixed in terms of longer term effectiveness of retention/engagement of students in schooling; and,
- college-centred issues act as barriers for some students in some locations – these include the college time-table which results in high levels of free-time for some students; a lack of structure in learning (compared with high school) that impacts negatively on some students (e.g. low engagement with studies and for some non-attendance).
As for the sociocultural theme, most of the issues noted above are essentially framed as barriers for some students in continuing their schooling beyond Year 10. However, it is clear that the schools in the case studies are aware of them and are making efforts to ameliorate their impact on retention. Key challenges for many of the special programs in particular will be how sustainable they are over time, particularly as many rely on funding for their continuation. Another key challenge lies in the transition point from Year 10 to Year 11. It is important that this be made as easy as possible for students because it is the critical starting point for those aiming to complete their Year 12 studies.

3. Curriculum, teaching and learning theme

There is general agreement across schools and colleges that appropriate and relevant curriculum and associated pedagogy are critical for enhancing engagement, attainment and, therefore, retention of students in education. However, a number of factors are evident that work against achieving these ends for some students. These include that the curriculum provision in some high schools that offer Years 11 and 12, particularly in rural and remote areas, is limited by a high turnover of teachers and school leaders and/or lack of teachers capable of teaching in particular curriculum areas, such as mathematics and science.

In all of these isolated schools, there’s a very high turnover of teachers. (College Assistant Principal_02)

As a result, teachers may be required to teach out of their subject area, with some schools relying on middle or primary school trained teachers to teach in these areas. In addition, there is evidence that there are still silos in schools, with some teachers reluctant to work in more open, collaborative ways.

Some students by the end of Year 10 have significant learning gaps that mean they lack a sufficient foundation to succeed in Year 11. That is, they are academically ill-prepared for schooling beyond Year 10. In addition, approaches to teaching and learning can be quite different in the colleges, with many students having to face (formal) examinations for the first time. These potential barriers are exacerbated for some students by the already challenging situations that many students experience in adjusting to college life.

They have to bridge the gap from Year 10 study to a whole different way of learning in Year 11/12 … That’s huge when you’re leaving home and you’re suddenly going into this level of study that is very different. The way that you learn is very different … But you’re not necessarily given … the structures to be able to cope within that system. … I think that’s changing, when I talk to the education officers in charge of the post Year 10 areas then I think that’s a really great start, because they’re looking for some uniformity. (District High Teacher_05)

Students report to me that there’s still a gulf between teachers’ expectations of them in Year 10 and the much higher expectations that we have of them here. Now I don’t apologise for that, even for the non-academic group because we do need to maintain high expectations for them because they’ll get a greater sense of achievement … and for something that they work hard at. (College Principal_02)

Interviewees generally welcomed the new Australian Curriculum (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2013) as driving positive changes in the classroom, while others felt it was too rigid. Positives included “invigorating” and “modernizing” the
curriculum and driving more contemporary pedagogy in classrooms. A number expressed disappointment with the loss of the Tasmanian Essential Learnings (ELs) (Department of Education Tasmania, 2002, 2003) which was seen as offering the sort of flexibility needed to engage students. Some respondents believed that many students’ relative isolation and lack of exposure to other cultures and points of view resulted in the lack of a broader outlook, making some aspects of the Australian Curriculum seem irrelevant to them and difficult to engage with.

The introduction to the National Curriculum … has such a big emphasis across fluency and reasoning has been really important in driving that need to change what is going on in classrooms. (High School Teacher_02)

It’s kind of hard to get your head around a lot of [curriculum and planning] especially because it’s another change and the [new teachers] probably been through uni when it wasn’t the Australian Curriculum as well. I went through uni with the ELs and was taught to plan lessons and units with the ELs. When I got out … it was the Tasmanian Curriculum and now it’s the Australian Curriculum. (District High Teacher_07)

In conversations that we have with our kids, and especially around the new curriculum, there’s a lack of awareness and understanding of what is outside of their family and even the small little town. They’re not exposed to different cultures, they’re not exposed to different perspectives, political, religious or otherwise, so there’s a lack of awareness about what’s out in the big wide world. (Primary School Teacher_03)

As noted earlier, the schools were identified to participate in this study because they had made some gains in addressing retention of students. The discussion below overviews some of the many responses by schools and colleges in attempting to address retention challenges with regard to curriculum, teaching and learning.

Schools and colleges generally recognised that curriculum and pedagogy, as well as teacher quality, were critical to student engagement and hence retention. Many indicated they were prioritizing, as they could, curriculum quality and the professional learning of teachers. Some schools were attempting to break down barriers and silos within their schools, encouraging teachers at all levels throughout the school to collaborate by looking at the whole curriculum in order to develop an understanding of curriculum as seamless and vertical.

We’re looking at making sure that we have an appropriate, interesting and relevant curriculum here that engages all of our kids and providing student choice and developing independent learners is really important for us … Also from a teaching point of view it’s making sure our engagement is right and making sure that we’re giving experiences to kids at the right level …. (Primary School Principal_04)

I think we need to be having constant curriculum review… where change occurs as a matter of course but not a matter of revolution … constantly reviewing how does our curriculum match up to our learners? What are we doing extra-curricular wise for this group of learners? … And it’s easy for the school to fall behind its learners. You’ve only got to look at our responses to things like social networking. (College Teacher_03)

Some schools work with outside consultants (e.g., from universities) to improve their practice. Providing good feedback to students is also considered critically important, given that
attainment is viewed as more important than just retention for students’ opportunities to be enhanced.

Some schools have introduced Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) for all their students in the middle school that link to the Australian Curriculum. The ILPs include students setting their own goals, excursions and project-based learning.

There was broad agreement that literacy and numeracy were critical to the success of students beyond Year 10, but that they need to be made relevant to students’ lives.

There’s some fundamental things here [relating to] literacy and numeracy that these kids have … you have a student struggling in Year 10 in an English class … and you’ve got the student next door to them (sic) working at a high pre-tertiary level … reading Macbeth which means nothing. But they have to sit there and either be the class clown … or disengage straight away. If you give them the primary school worksheet … how do you feel with your friend there seeing you’re doing the primary school worksheet while they’re reading and analyzing … If we’re going to do literacy and numeracy then let’s make it meaningful … I’ve got boys here, their literacy is quite low. So what I’m doing is let’s have a look at what TAFE would ask for, type of literacy. (Pathway Planner_02)

Most schools were endeavouring to use National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2014) and other data to varying degrees to inform their teaching and teacher professional learning.

We always try and look at [the data] and see especially about which kids can and which kids can’t and won’t … You’ve got your NAPLAN results for starters, because you want to measure yourself against that to start with … so you might as well do that. (High School Teacher_02)

Teacher quality and the professional learning of teachers were identified as critical ingredients to providing high quality and appropriate curricula and pedagogy for students, in schools and colleges. This was ‘across the board’ and impacted directly on students’ schooling experiences and their likelihood of staying on with their schooling. One principal emphasised the importance of teacher quality by arguing that “if students are going to be highly connected to education ….they got to have really good teachers” (Primary School Principal_01). Another teacher noted that:

the most important part … is (teachers) developing a relationship with them (students) … and encourage be them to actually see that there are opportunities for them that they might not have recognised beforehand. (District High Teacher_07)

The type of professional learning for teachers, as it pertains to retention in particular, seems mainly directed to strategic collaboration such as use of data, planning, inquiry time, working in teams to develop good practices and skills, peer observations, mentors, open classrooms, critical friends and coaching. One school leader spoke of his teacher coaching sessions with younger teachers who were inexperienced in the “school of hard knocks” with a view to empowering them and giving them tools to take away and solve problems themselves. Another observed that “we’ve got good teachers, but they need skills” (District High Principal_02).
In some schools, teachers with different specialisations were encouraged to assist each other across the whole school.

We’ve been doing some professional learning on … our bright students … more so the boys because … they drop out when things get a bit harder in Year 11 and 12. So they’ve got a disposition now where they’ve cruised through school, got good marks without having to work as hard as the little battlers. I really like the program that our Principal’s putting in place to move those bright children on … extended learning … to push those. (Primary School Teacher_04)

We’ve got a program about watching each other teach. That is one of our partnership programs; how we can then improve our teaching … And basic pedagogy just by individual instruction and individual advice; working in pairs … That will expand across the group as well, and as we implement … that, that will improve our pedagogy. (High School Teacher_02)

In some schools, teachers with different specialisations were encouraged to assist each other across the whole school and to mitigate the teacher shortage in some subject areas.

There is a shortage of specialist maths/science teachers so the school uses middle school trained teachers (5-8). There is a move to upskill teachers to teach Years 7 and 8 … We don’t tend to have people that are trained in maths/science. … So the idea there is actually to skill up the teachers in Grades 7-8, with the … skills required to get the students much more grounded in those fields. (High School Teacher_01)

Many saw the notion of exchange of teachers between high schools and college to bridge the learning gap, break down barriers and broaden the experience of teachers from both sectors as an interesting but not currently practiced idea.

We don’t have teachers here that have been in the college system so they haven’t got that connection … I think sometimes breaking down that barrier from high school teachers to college teachers is really important so that we can support our students and start to put some of those things in place. [There are] no [exchange programs with staff between college and the school]. (District High Assistant Principal_01)

There hasn’t been enough movement between the high schools and college staff. Certainly when it does happen the teachers report to me - teachers who’ve taught in high school who come here to the college report to me that the demands of teaching Year 11 and 12 are huge. (College Principal_02)

Summary for curriculum, teaching and learning theme

In summary, key issues evident in the curriculum, teaching and learning theme include:

- schools and colleges have introduced a range of programs to address the learning needs of their students and respond to contemporary curriculum initiatives, such as the Australian Curriculum;
- schools and colleges seem to introduce their curriculum programs in isolation from each other, leading to a lack of overall coherence in the curriculum across the primary school,
high school and college years; in particular, there is limited professional exchange across high schools and colleges whereby experiences and expertise may be shared;

- some students face quite different educational experiences in colleges compared with those in high school years; as a result there may be an intellectual leap and differences in teacher support between high school and college which may leave some students ill-prepared for college;
- stronger academic focus in colleges and the need for students to work more independently present challenges for some students whose high school experiences have been characterised by high personal support (social welfare) and lower academic expectations (compared with college);
- teacher quality and the professional learning of teachers are critical ingredients to providing high quality and appropriate curricula and pedagogy for students in schools and colleges;
- literacy and numeracy standards (content, teaching-learning) appear as particular issues for some students – there is a concomitant issue here regarding the lack of trained mathematics and science teachers; and,
- high teacher and principal turnover are issues in some schools.

Students’ educational experiences in schools and colleges are critical to their engagement and continuation with their studies. Differences in these, especially across high school and college, provide barriers for some students as they encounter the different learning environments and academic demands of their studies. Greater professional interaction between high school and college teachers to share experiences and expertise may contribute to better understandings about the curriculum in the two sectors resulting in greater coherence and enhanced educational experiences for students and leading to enhanced retention. In this regard, the quality of the curriculum, the teachers themselves, and their capacity to engage students in meaningful sustained learning are central to the challenges of retention.

**Conclusions**

It is clear that factors and issues relevant to the three inter-related themes (sociocultural, structural and curriculum, teaching and learning) seem collectively and interdependently, to play key roles in determining whether some young people in Tasmania continue with their education beyond Year 10, and indeed successfully complete the equivalent of two years of school in Years 11 and 12. While some evidence is available of apparently successful interventions, initiatives and ways of working that are making a difference for some students, there remains considerable work to be done to effect significant change in retention levels more broadly.

The questions for these successes are how sustainable are they and how transferable might they be to other contexts. Importantly, none of these successes deals simplistically with just one or two of the themes identified; rather, they are multi-faceted and take a long-term view of the necessary change process.

It could be argued that the structural issue of the separation of high schools from colleges, when coupled with a variety of other factors, looms large as a critical barrier for many students. For example, a student with low aspiration, who needs to travel some distance from home to college, and who is from a family and community where the valuing of education is low is less likely to complete a Year 12 qualification successfully than a similarly located student with high aspiration and an educationally supportive environment. That is, there is a
range of ameliorating factors that are likely to act either as facilitators or barriers to students continuing with their education beyond Year 10. Many of the barriers may be minimised if students can more seamlessly continue with their education after Year 10.

In considering these themes, it is understood that context (e.g., social, geographical, economic) in particular impacts to varying degrees on the significance of these themes for differing groups of young people, i.e., context matters when considering retention. The overwhelming sense is that the issues that need to be considered are complex and interdependent. That is, simply attending to one of the themes (say structural) in the pursuit of solutions is unlikely to lead to success.

The complexities and challenges of the issues, and the interactions across them are indisputably multidimensional and steeped in the histories, behaviours and cultures of communities (educational and otherwise). It is for these reasons that the challenges are well conceived of as a “wicked problem”, understanding that there are no quick fixes nor simple solutions to a range of what are highly complex interdependent factors at play. Taking this view is not to put the challenges in the “too hard” basket, rather to appreciate that responses must be built on creative and collective thinking and action.

In such problems, there are often disagreements about just what are the facts - a situation emanating from underlying paradigm disputes among key stakeholders about issues, such as the principal purposes of schooling/education. As such, addressing the wicked problem of retention will be challenging – and it will require mindsets among policy makers (and others such as school leaders) to shift from “fixing” the problem to one of ameliorating it as the challenges are not located in stable and rational contexts, rather they are located in complex and unpredictable ones. This will require leadership rather than mere management. What also needs to be understood is that problems that are in part embedded in social and cultural contexts such as low retention, “are never solved, they are simply resolved over and over again” (Bore & Wright, 2009, p. 245). These ideas bring significant policy challenges for politicians, decision-makers, school leaders, teachers and the community.

With these ideas in mind, some of the overarching messages to emerge from this research as possible ways forward include the following:

- The Department, and many schools (both primary and high) and colleges and community groups have attempted a range of responses regarding retention, some successful others less so – there is much to be learned on the ground as to what works in particular contexts and why. Although some evidence is available in this regard from this study and elsewhere, to effect change more research is needed to understand not only what they are doing by way of processes, but also to identify the underpinning issues they have successfully overcome.
- An ultimate goal must be to normalise the notion of completing two years of schooling beyond Year 10 in the minds of students, parents and the wider community – this expectation has been articulated by governments as well as many others, yet in Tasmania it is still seen by some in some parts of the State as something special to achieve such educational outcomes.
- The potential barriers identified in this research need to be carefully considered across the many different educational and community contexts in the State, and collaborative responses developed and resourced.
- The historical, geographical and cultural diversity of Tasmania means that one-dimensional responses across the State are unlikely to have the desired impact, i.e.,
locally developed responses, drawing on some of the findings from this and other relevant studies are much more likely to improve retention.

- Understanding, accepting and willingness to address the issues by all stakeholders is critical to moving forward.
- The three inter-dependent themes identified here highlight the highly complex nature of the responses required in some areas of the State to make real changes to prevailing retention levels, e.g., changing deeply embedded cultural values around education for some families and communities will not be an easy matter.
- Given that context is such a critical component in exploration of responses, the challenges for schools to make local decisions to accommodate local barriers are significant. As a result, school leadership and the professionalism of teachers are strongly in the spotlight for change.
- Retention in Tasmania is not just an educational issue – it is a whole-of-community issue that needs whole-of-community responses. Leaders and stakeholders across the board need to engage with the issues and collaboratively develop responses.
- New thinking and new energies are needed for more creative decision-making. At the local level, school leaders in particular have critical roles to play in this regard.
- Some agreed ways forward with wicked problems, relevant here, include: the need for collaborative strategies among the full range of key stakeholders in the search for solutions; holistic rather than linear thinking, where interrelationships are acknowledged and addressed; the need to manage risks carefully; and the generation of adaptive and flexible responses (APSC, 2007).

Finally, the research reported here, in some sense, identifies little that is very much different from earlier work undertaken by Abbot-Chapman and others. Indeed, the findings are likely to be similar to those evident in other areas of Australia where many of the contextual factors are similar to those in parts of Tasmania. Given this, the question is posed as to why, if we have long known about many of the issues and barriers regarding greater retention of students in education beyond Year 10, Tasmania remains with the lowest such attainment in the country? One answer must lie in the responses and the ways in which they have been conceptualised, developed, implemented and sustained. Careful reflection of the three themes identified here, and the argument that the “problem” needs to be approached with a different (i.e., wicked) mindset might lead to greater and longer-lasting success in the future.
REFERENCES


