



# Peter Underwood Centre

## **Summary of insights at three round-table discussions on educational attainment in Tasmania**

Incorporating the involvement  
of Honorable Henry De Sio Jr



We wish to acknowledge all those individuals – stakeholders and staff of the Centre – who so generously gave their time and shared their insights, and we thank Honorable Henry De Sio Jr, Visiting Scholar, for engaging in this process with us.

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## Executive summary

This report summarises participant input from three round-table workshops hosted by the Peter Underwood Centre for Educational Attainment (the Underwood Centre), and supported by the Honorable Henry de Sio Jr. The workshops took place in Ulverstone, Launceston, and Hobart in February and March 2016.

The report offers brief discussions about:

- the Underwood Centre’s mission, vision, and values;
- background information on the challenges facing educational attainment in Tasmania;
- a description of the round-table workshops and summary of salient findings from them; and
- the ways in which these findings inform the Underwood Centre’s work.

We appreciate the time so generously offered by participants at these events. Their contributions were central in formulating the Underwood Centre’s future directions.

## The Peter Underwood Centre for Educational Attainment

The Peter Underwood Centre for Educational Attainment is a partnership between the University of Tasmania and the Tasmanian State Government.

### Mission

We lead and contribute to work that results in sustained increases in educational attainment and benefits the whole community. A centre of excellence, our mission is to conduct innovative research, support workforce change, and provide novel aspiration programs for young people.

### Vision

Our vision is that all Tasmanians have an enduring commitment to be part of an ongoing culture of learning that provides them with positive choices over the life-course. Those choices should:

- enable sustained achievements in learning and successes in educational attainment
- provide strong foundations for individuals, families, and communities
- support educators and all those who support education, training, and learning
- help future-proof the Tasmanian economy.

Our chief method of approach is to provide expert independent and non-partisan research and to inform policy in ways that benefit Tasmanians; our chief focus is on the early and school years.

### Values

The Underwood Centre’s work is informed by several values:

- the belief that educational attainment is a key path to success;
- a continual focus on what makes a difference in a young person’s life, starting with those who most need support;
- ethical and evidence based provision of advice and decision making ;
- investing where we can to make the most significant difference;
- striving for excellence and always learning; and
- coming to understand what works and sharing what we know with others.

The University of Tasmania’s Statement of Values underpins, inspires, and informs our work.<sup>1</sup>

### Background

Education has well-established positive impacts on many social indicators, including health, sound financial decision-making, occupational success, and overall well-being.<sup>2, 3, 4</sup>

In the past decade, global educational attainment has reached a level never before experienced.<sup>5</sup> Information and communications technology (ICT), innovation, global cooperation, and the knowledge revolution are offering unparalleled opportunities to provide more people with a prosperous life. Yet, significant challenges remain in areas of equity, access to opportunities, and quality learning outcomes. The gap in outcomes between rich and poor—within and between countries—is high and sometimes growing.<sup>6</sup>

The impacts of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis led educators, policymakers, and related experts in many countries—including Australia—to rethink what a sound education means. Young people’s educational experiences and choices are taking place in rapidly changing social and economic

landscapes where both the intrinsic and extrinsic values of formal education are being questioned.

Increasing numbers of graduates find that their education has inadequately prepared them for new forms of work and revenue streams.<sup>7</sup> Full-time positions have decreased, with available jobs increasingly part-time, casual, or contract-based.<sup>8</sup> Increasing automation of occupations and the rising 'portfolio' approach to employment are profoundly affecting the world of work. Employers are increasingly seeking employees who have 'enterprise skills', such as digital literacy, problem solving, communication and presentation skills, critical thinking, team work, and creativity.<sup>9</sup>

Although universities and Vocational Educational Training (VET) providers are expected to support acquisition of these skills through their programs, it is 'recognised that these highly individual traits are deep-rooted [and many] formed at an early age'.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the foundations for a flourishing life and love of learning begin with comprehensive pre-tertiary education, from early learning to the completion of Year 12.

Families and communities are critical. They play a pivotal role in how education is viewed and the choices that young people make about their education and aspirations for the future.<sup>11</sup> Parents and families have varying abilities to 'understand, value, and navigate the educational system and economic labour markets'.<sup>12</sup> Communities may have distinctive identities and values, including views on what constitutes an adequate and appropriate education.<sup>13, 14</sup>

A report by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) referencing the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) shows an apparent decline since 2000 in the educational performance of Australia's 15-year-olds in reading, maths, and scientific literacy.<sup>15</sup>

Basic literacy, numeracy, and other core subjects are the foundation for knowledge and skill sets across many contexts, making these findings cause for concern.

There are also concerns about declining participation in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Maths (STEM) subjects, despite indications that there is a need for these skills in a transforming Australian economy.<sup>16</sup>

The Australian Curriculum, endorsed in September 2015 by all state and federal Education Ministers, and the Gonski Review of Funding for Schooling, are aimed at improving educational attainment levels and better preparing each student for changing social and economic landscapes.<sup>17, 18</sup>

Tasmanians are known for their strong island identity and sense of community, creativity, and resilience.<sup>19, 20</sup> Tasmania itself is a remarkable and complex island group, geographically, socially, historically, politically, and economically. This unique combination of factors means that many Tasmanians already possess distinctive skill sets with wide applications for success through the life course, not least in employment.

Tasmania's education outcomes are, on average, worse than Australia's nationally.<sup>21</sup> The relationship between such unique attributes and more formal indicators such as educational attainment requires further consideration. All Tasmanians should have the opportunity to fulfil their potential, and to have their capacities and skills recognised, refined and supported.<sup>22</sup>

Addressing challenges of educational attainment is a clear priority of the Tasmanian Government. Tasmania has experienced persistent underperformance in the transition to Year 10 and subsequent retention rates to Year 12. The Department of Education has accelerated the rollout of Year 11 and 12 in high schools in both rural and urban communities.

The new *Education Act* is another example of how the Tasmanian Government's approach to education is evolving to respond to trends within and beyond Tasmania.

Creating an environment in which all young Tasmanians can flourish through education means profound cultural transformation with respect to education, and it will necessitate:

- connecting with disengaged young people, their families, and their communities;
- accounting for Tasmania's geographical diversity;
- understanding the circumstances and impact of socioeconomic disadvantage; and
- connecting people to positive outcomes in a changing economy, particularly in pathways to employment.

Such challenges are the fundamental tests for the Underwood Centre over the mid- to long-term, shared in common with a broad range of colleagues and interested parties from around the State.

## The round-table workshops

The Underwood Centre's 2016 round-table workshops broadly examined the state of education in Tasmania today and prospects for the future. Over 130 people with diverse backgrounds and interests attended the workshops.

The timing of these round-table discussions was crucial. They were designed to take place during the Centre's establishment year, when it was important to engage and consult with large numbers of stakeholders from all corners of Tasmania. They were timed to coincide with the visit of Henry de Sio Jr, an author, public speaker, campaign strategist, and organisational coach, who provided a range of fascinating insights based on his observations of the events.

The workshops used a World Café approach where participants worked on rotation in

several small groups to share their views on specific questions, recording them in various written formats.

Between small group discussions were opportunities for participants to post additional thoughts on education in Tasmania according to the following categories:

- Treasure: What is valued about Tasmania's education system?
- Desire: Which innovations should be embraced?
- Jettison: What aspects are identified as the chief problems?
- Avoid: Which implementations observed elsewhere would not be welcome in Tasmania?

### Findings

The discussions elicited views on what was important for the Underwood Centre to consider over time.

All written elements of the round-table discussions were transcribed and reviewed by Underwood Centre staff over the course of multiple readings, and were augmented by the staff members' own notes.

Emergent themes were noted, and they have since informed a range of Underwood Centre priorities and activities (outlined in the following section).

The major themes to emerge outside the group work, from the individual comments were as follows:



#### Treasure

Passion for change  
Early years education  
Technology  
Community-based learning  
Dedicated teachers

#### Desire

Teacher specialisms  
Innovative and creative  
teaching  
Collaboration  
Culture of high expectations  
Long-term policy directions

#### Jettison

Standardised testing  
Partisan political agendas  
Under-qualified teaching  
Culture of low expectation  
Inequity in education  
system

#### Avoid

Rigid structures  
Standardised education  
systems  
Short-term fixes  
User-pays education  
School closures

## Group discussions

Six key insights were identified as influential for raising educational attainment in Tasmania:

- political impartiality;
- collaboration and a culture of lifelong learning;
- the classroom environment;
- parental engagement in and perceptions of education and learning environments and systems;
- structure of education provision; and
- pathways from education to employment.

Many additional ideas, questions, and reflections were raised during the workshops, and these have influenced the shaping of the Centre's work. Notwithstanding, this report is limited to the most prevalent comments—those which surfaced multiple times and at each workshop around the State. Thus, the remainder of this section summarises the major findings related to each theme.

### Political impartiality

Many participants observed that education should be removed from partisan political tendencies to enable long-term commitment to educational transformation. Some suggested that education should not be on political party platforms. Others countered that it was inevitable that education was politicized because it requires laws, regulation, public policy, and resources.

When invited to reframe their thoughts, participants nuanced their views by suggesting that innovations in education designed to promote attainment should be given more proving time before being dismantled or dismissed as a result of political change.

For the vast majority, the independence and non-partisan status and impartiality at the core of the Underwood Centre was strongly endorsed and highly valued.

### Collaboration

Participants supported what they perceived as increasing collaboration in education in Tasmania—for example, between schools, health and social services, and the police force. However, more work needs to be done to ensure the barriers and silos within the education system and beyond are dismantled.

Transparent, widespread, and wide-ranging data-sharing was suggested as being instrumental to understanding the Tasmanian context.

It was noted that increasing community engagement has the potential to reduce pressure on schools in areas such as transport for school children, health literacy, trauma care, and support for young people with special needs or exceptional capacities.

Participants discussed fundamental questions about lifelong learning and its place in the community. Efforts to improve adult literacy were noted, and support for play-based early learning was emphasized. There was a desire to nurture a culture of learning in Tasmania and to support learning over the life course. Conversations sometimes centred on whether education is valuable for its own sake, should serve employment outcomes, or both.

There was a perception that Tasmania is a place with great potential for positive change, partly based on collective will and partly on population size, which, while challenging in some respects, can promote cooperation and teamwork.

### The classroom

Participants acknowledged in education leaders a willingness to engage in education innovation. The Big Picture School Launceston based on personalised education programs designed by Big Picture Australia, the provision of other alternative pathways, and the embrace of new technologies all exemplify this willingness to experiment.

The dedication and hard work of teachers and education leaders were acknowledged frequently at each session. Several participants noted that schools are increasingly actively engaged with the 'basics', such as determining whether students have adequate food or shelter.

Many felt that teaching as a profession is not valued enough in Tasmanian communities, where teacher education does not attract the highest-performing students, and many teachers resign within five years of commencing in the profession. Frequently cited were Scandinavian, and especially Finnish, educational models, based on perceptions of those countries taking the teaching profession more seriously by comparison to Australia.

Face-to-face relationships between teachers and students were valued. Accordingly, ambivalence was expressed about distance education, which was seen to be helpful for reaching remote-area students, but which has potential risks to the formation of quality relationships.

Concern was raised about staffing for subject specialisations, and the prevalence of standardised testing such as the National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) and attendant perceptions that teachers are 'teaching to the test'. These concerns mirror anxieties about standardised testing in New Zealand, Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom.



### Parental engagement

The significance of parental engagement in raising aspirations and improving educational attainment was widely recognised.

There was hope that young people's disengagement in secondary school could be addressed by supporting interactions between parents and schools. The portfolio and exhibition methods used by Big Picture Schools were noted in this respect, as were different approaches to parent-child-teacher discussions on progress and aspiration.

Participants expressed concerns about the long-term impact that even the best teaching professionals could have in the lives of students experiencing disadvantage, who may still live in difficult home environments outside of school.

### Structure of education provision

Although Tasmania's secondary college system is still highly valued, there was support for recent changes introducing Years 11 and 12 into select high schools, recognising the reform's potential to influence transition, retention, and completion rates.

Participants suggested that an integrated network could be developed among the Department of Education, TasTAFE, and the University of Tasmania, potentially including new pathways and pre-degree programs. Such work is, in fact, in train.

There was hope that the VET sector would begin to benefit from the restructuring of TasTAFE, mindful of the need to account for the effect of independent Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) and a changed VET funding model. It was suggested that VET mistakenly suffers from the perception that it is a pathway inferior to university education.

### Pathways to employment

It was agreed students (and parents) should be provided with clearer information about the range of pathways available and, in this respect, My Education is slated to raise awareness of these options over time.

Increased participation by members of the business community in supporting positive transitions from education to employment was seen as both an opportunity for collaboration and of benefit for young people taking their first steps into the world of work.

# Round-table contributions to framing the work of the Underwood Centre

The content of the round-table discussions demonstrated how deeply important educational attainment issues are to Tasmanians of all ages, backgrounds, and sectors.

The workshops were key to the ways in which the Underwood Centre's priorities and strategies were then shaped.

The intersecting and overlapping nature of the themes that emerged from each workshop highlighted both the need and the desirability of having cross-cutting foci at the centre of the Underwood Centre's work.

Careful synthesis of the knowledge gained from the workshops, and from conversations with a range of other stakeholders during the Underwood Centre's start-up phase suggests that its activities may be summarised in terms of five key themes:

-  **Learning, education, and training**
-  **Social, cultural, and political dimensions of educational attainment**
-  **Educational attainment, economic forces, and employment**
-  **Communities, families, and individuals—including health and well-being**
-  **The influence of place and spatial dynamics on educational attainment patterns**

The purpose of each theme is to provide a way of thinking about specific issues to do with education, noting that other themes might also influence those issues. Their full scope will be delineated during the Underwood Centre's second, consolidation year over 2016/17.

## Final thoughts

The Underwood Centre's 2016 round-table discussions both strengthened the mission and vision of the Centre and informed its emergent strategy.

The discussions gave Underwood Centre staff the opportunity to learn about the experiences and perspectives of a range of stakeholders.

These engagements were a sound reminder of how important positive educational outcomes are to each Tasmanian, regardless of age or background.

We extend our thanks to all those who participated.

Please send further input to  
**[UnderwoodCentre.Enquiries@utas.edu.au](mailto:UnderwoodCentre.Enquiries@utas.edu.au)**



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