

STA07168

Pathway Planning: Examining the process and outcomes

Martin Stalker and Thao Le
University of Tasmania

Abstract

The “Tasmania: A State of Learning” structures were borne from widespread discussion with the Tasmanian community between 2000 and 2003 to identify the optimum model for lifelong learning within the state. At Secondary High School level, with compelling research supporting the benefits of education and training beyond Grade 10, a major component of this initiative is guided by legislation introduced in 2005. This legislation is a response to the communities overwhelming support which now requires students exiting from Grade 10 to participate in training and learning. To support this initiative each school now has the additional resource of a pathway planning officer who conducts a minimum of 3 interviews of 45 minute duration with each student through years 8, 9 and 10. Pathway planning officers within this process are expected to develop a relationship that will allow for each pupil to look at their strengths and attributes, to speak of their aspirations, interests, career path opportunities; all of which are supported within an integrated curriculum embracing a career/vocation focus. This paper examines issues in implementing this educational initiative, specifically in the Tasmanian discourse.

Overview

Tasmania has introduced a network of strategies to increase the opportunities for all groups within the community to extend their education standards. The key component for High School age students within this blueprint was the introduction of legislation (Youth Participation in Education and Training [Guaranteeing Futures] Act 2005). This lifted the expectations of all year groups after and including the exiting 2007 Grade 10 year group. Students are now required to continue training or education in some form post Grade 10 in accordance with the legislation guidelines. Employment opportunities are clearly enhanced with post compulsory education as OECD research affirms “further education – whether it is just completion of upper secondary education or non-tertiary education beyond that level – offers significantly increased chances of accessing skilled occupations within a short time after leaving school”. Sentiments which are highlighted when the “national employment rate for 25 - 29 year olds with an upper secondary education or post secondary non-tertiary education is 22.9% higher than those who are without an upper secondary education” (‘From education to work : a difficult transaction for adults with low levels of education’ 2005). The challenge faced is to engage students within the curriculum spectrum; one of the keys to raising Year 12 completion rates must be wider curriculum choice to allow a wider range of adolescent’s developing personal and vocational interests to be satisfied (Sweet 2002). Pathway planning is one of several strategies that have been implemented to encourage students to establish a focus, and then make informed and realistic decisions about their vocational futures. The pathway planning process is an integral part of the Tasmanian students’ annual program within Grades 8, 9 and 10. The program is supported with a set of Grade dedicated resources; developed by Tasmanian teachers targeted at supporting and enriching the guiding conversations that the pathway planning officer will have with students throughout the year. Tasmania has embarked on a program that will potentially create greater employment opportunities for young citizens. Ryan explained that “individuals who complete VET qualifications and work full time tend to enjoy higher wages, work in higher status occupations and have higher rates of permanent employment than members of their comparison groups” (Ryan 2002, p 41). The value of this program is significant to Tasmania’s remaining a competitive player within a knowledge demanding economy.

This discussion examines how effectively this strategy harnesses the full potential of the student cohort with the education system now embracing pathway planning in each High School across Tasmania. This scrutiny investigates the key stakeholders at each stage and level of the process. The paper examines how effective is the current structure in creating an awareness of the opportunities for young people in relation to all educational routes post Grade 10.

Historical Background

The Pathway planning process had its origins when the Tasmanian Government presented to the community “*Learning Together*” in December 2000. This presented the vision of the government for a world-class education, information and training system. An approach that offered a renewed and integrated systemic strategy was needed to provide the catalyst for improving some of the crucial areas within training and education where Tasmanian levels were well below national averages. Highlighting the need for a proactive approach is that Tasmania has by far the lowest proportion of its population with a bachelor degree or higher with the national average of 17.8% compared with the Tasmanian level at 11.4% (ABS, 2003). Paralleling this data the Tasmanian participation in education by 20-24 year olds is 37.2% which is also well below the national average of 28% (ABS, 2003).

The central theme underpinning this document was for education to be the hub for the community wheel to develop to its full potential. An understanding of the dynamics of change were embraced: “we acknowledge the rapidly changing world we live in and recognise that what may be appropriate in the next two years may not be a viable proposition in five or ten years’ time”; (‘Learning together : a vision for education training and information into the 21st century’ 2000) was a clear message that for Tasmania to continue to move forward there was a need to embrace the challenge that the knowledge demands in modern economies are increasing. As highlighted by Evans when creating policy support for the initiative, research both nationally and internationally consistently supports the benefits of post compulsory education within the community at many levels (Evans 2006). Post compulsory education and training not only provides individual enhancement in job satisfaction, increased earning potential and employment diversity but also creates a raft of benefits for the community. The strategy evolving from “*Learning Together*” was constructed in consultation with all sectors of the community. The process was guided by a steering committee allowing those with an interest in post compulsory education to look at potential intended outcomes, provide alternative or add further outcomes, debate the delivery style of the model, comment on the intent and general scope of the strategy.

After this widespread community consultation the vision, purposes and values that will guide post-year 10 education and training were articulated in 2003 via a document titled “*Tasmania: A State of Learning*”. With community support assured during the consultative process for the vision within “*Tasmania: A State of Learning*”; the strategic framework to support the vision was now developed. The document identified four facets that would create conduits to allow all citizens to participate in the journey for embracing the opportunities the initiative would present. The four key elements identified that were to be developed to support the initiative were (Tasmania. Dept of 2003) -

- Guaranteeing Futures
- Ensuring Essential Literacy’s
- Enhancing Adult Learning
- Building Learning Communities

The Guaranteeing Futures element has many initiatives within its structure which have been developed to provide a multi faceted resource to assist with student transition post Grade 10. Developing local links and creating authentic learning opportunities is one facet used that mirrors thoughts by Halse, who also contends there is much value and benefit from this strategy where community connections are a crucial tool in supporting school curriculum (Halse 2004). These mechanisms are intended to assist and support the student’s journey into the next phase within areas of training, the workplace and the education labyrinths. Within the portfolio of Guaranteeing Futures is the pathway planning component which is currently embedded within the Government High School system.

The intention of the Guaranteeing Futures policy is to encourage students and create an awareness and understanding of the rewards associated with participation in education and training beyond post compulsory schooling. Research consistently indicates that young people who participate in education and training beyond Year 10 broaden their horizons and more easily take part and benefit from life's opportunities; this is clearly summarised by OECD research "further education – whether it is just completion of upper secondary education or non-tertiary education beyond that level – offers significantly increased chances of accessing skilled occupations within a short time after leaving school" ('From education to work : a difficult transaction for adults with low levels of education' 2005, P 53). Those who do not are more likely to narrow their opportunities and experience difficulties in adulthood. The effects of limited involvement in post compulsory education in Tasmania are emphasised when only 37.9% of the states 24 year olds had obtained a skilled vocational qualification or higher, compared with a national average of 49.2% (MCEETYA, 2002).

The Guaranteeing Futures strand has many components within its framework which have been developed to provide resources to assist with the transition from Grade 10 into the next phase of a student's journey. Pathway planning is a major support structure within the Guaranteeing Futures umbrella. The pathway planning model is envisaged to be an instrument providing an integrated opportunity for students to "plan, prepare and make informed choices about their post-school destination" (Department of Education, Tasmania, 2003). Legislation was introduced (Youth Participation in Education and Training (Guaranteeing Futures) Act 2005) to support the student cohort movement to their full potential with an increase to the "compulsory" period of education. The criteria from 2008 now requires young Tasmanians who have turned 16, or completed Year 10, to participate in training or education for –

- a further two years, or
- until they have gained a Certificate III vocational qualification, or
- until they have turned 17.

To assist this "raising of the bar" a varied and diverse a set of innovative strategies provide scaffolding that seeks to support all members of the student cohort.

The Pathway planning Process

The key to the pathway planning process is the relationship that is developed and cultivated between the student and the pathway planning officer. The constraints of time placed upon subject teachers within a High School make it extremely difficult to create free time for extended one to one dialogue with students. The limited time to interact with students for teachers is highlighted by teacher reactions such as "There are never enough minutes in a day to ever feel as though you are totally on top of it all, with everything completed and all needs met" (Rossmanith 2006, P 14). The value of the one-to-one conversations that a pathway planning officer can engage a student in are vital to creating the understandings that assist students to move towards informed vocational choices. Pathway planning officers work within a High School and become part of the school fabric with a dedicated workload exclusively based on pathway planning. The pathway planning officer has a time structure that allows for three sessions with students of approximately forty five minutes duration during the school year. The sessions begin in Grade 8 and continue through Grade 9 and finally to Grade 10, with a plan developed each year which dovetails with the student's personal development. Each year the student develops their own individual plan that draws on their unique strengths, attributes, aspirations and builds an understanding of the expectations within the world of work. The completed pathway plan is then presented to parents along with the traditional school report at the end of the year.

Aligned with the pathway planning officer developing the students' individual plan is an outstanding curriculum resource to assist teaching staff. Titled "*My Plan for My Future*" the binder is a complete series of learning sequences which supports the integration of the pathway planning process into the schools curriculum. The resource is designed for each year group as an ideal tool for teachers to create a platform to enrich the conversations that occur between the student and the pathway planning officer. The binders for each grade level were developed in consultation with over 90 teachers and pathway planning officers in

working groups to identify resources that would be ideal to stimulate interest and discussion. The resource has been well received in classrooms as an effective resource that identifies well with the learning dynamics associated within Tasmanian High Schools. Feedback has been very positive as indicated by a Grade Coordinator from a metropolitan High Schools comments:

“With pathway planning being in place for only 3 years; the VELDO’s were able to provide an extremely informative overview of the process and then take teachers through relevant, real life exercises that they can use in class. For an off the shelf unit of work the “My plan for my future” series is up there with the best I’ve ever seen.”

The style in which the support resource material within “My Plan for My Future” is introduced and delivered within a school varies within each High School. Some schools have a dedicated period within their timetable devoted to the pathway planning process; some have adopted a more fluid approach whilst other schools have embraced the process as the underpinning of all studies. Many schools are seeing the benefits of the initiatives as pointed out by a Principal of a District High School:

“I have seen a noticeable lift in student’s interest and awareness of their potential career paths that they will follow when leaving High School. The Pathway planning process has been a great influence which has provided for many students a “real purpose and focus” for their studies, motivation within the school has lifted and the results are starting to show.”

The “rollout” of the process will continue next year with the first group of students who have experienced pathway planning for the full 3 years moving into the Post year 10 stage of their development. The 2007 group of exiting Grade 10 students will be the first to leave High School and be operating within the guidelines of the new legislation. There is a model currently being developed for this group within Colleges along with alternative education and training institutions however the framework is yet to be unveiled. Again this process will involve much consultation with all stakeholders to ensure the current positive momentum is continued.

Another initiative of the Guaranteeing Futures structure is to employ Youth Learning Officers (YLO) to create a safety network for students who have been identified as potentially likely to become disengaged from or have disengaged from education. The Youth Learning Officer works in conjunction with the Pathway planning officer to develop an understanding of the individual student’s needs and barriers from the relationship that has been nurtured during the Pathway planning process within Grades 8 and 9. Each YLO has a caseload of 50 students who may face multiple barriers to their educational opportunities; the identified student group are supported through the final 2 Terms of Grade 10, this support continues in Term 1 at College level and critically contact is maintained with students over the Christmas break covering the crucial transition period. The benefits of this holistic approach are identified clearly in recommendations regarding improving student retention in Australia “Student satisfaction with careers education and guidance tends to decline with achievement levels and as student distance from university grows. The emphasis should shift from information to strategy-building and case-management, including transition mentoring” (Lamb et al. 2004). The outcomes of the Tasmanian YLO program in 2005 have been very positive with 70% of students in the caseload moving into colleges, study or training and employment (Evans 2006) following the high level of quality YLO support.

Vocational Education and Learning Development Officers (VELDO) are another element of support for the Guaranteeing Futures initiatives; VEL Development Officers have a role in providing advice for optimum integration of Guaranteeing Futures programs such as pathway planning within each schools curriculum. Professional learning for teaching staff at Grade and subject level provides teachers with the necessary tools to integrate new material within their structures successfully. Information evenings are arranged with the organisations such as University of Tasmania, High Schools and community groups to ensure not only the education community but the wider population have an understanding of the Guaranteeing Futures framework, the implications and benefits of the initiatives for students and all stakeholders. The pathway planning initiative has been very well received by parents of students within the system

"As parent of a child just entering adolescence, it is reassuring there is a solid plan in place in schools to provide direction and advice for careers planning that will carry through as they move up through the grades. The information evening was well-presented, informative, and essential to ensure parents are "kept in the loop" with how to access this vital information and gain insight on their child's aspirations and dreams for their future."

Authentic learning opportunities are initiated across a diverse range of vocational areas for students from medicine to bricklaying, returning excellent parental feedback and consistently enthusiastic support from High Schools. Community support for this cooperative authentic educational model is high and as Billett suggests; "almost universally, a school-based component which seeks to embellish, elaborate or augment the students' experiences in the workplace is a key element in securing effective school-to-work transitions" (Billett 2006, P 12). VEL development officers are currently creating innovative learning options for students through creating close ties with High School, industry, community and other training providers.

Discussion with stakeholders about the process has indicated much interest about the pathway planning model. A parent at an information evening commented that had the requirement of working towards a certificate been in place when he was leaving Grade 10 his work situation would probably be far different. With his current family responsibilities and not having recognition for his current skill set these factors combined to create a lot of stress due to the lack of evidence gained to mirror his years in the workforce. A former student now in the workforce was very impressed with the opportunity to take part in extended authentic learning experiences and felt that consistent vocational focus, advice and structure was in his words "exactly what I needed" during the final phase of compulsory education.

Not all points of view are similar with quite opposing views even coming from two teachers at the same school. One teacher was impressed with the supporting resource that dovetails with the pathway planning process; this teacher was "teaching out of area" and saw the supporting learning sequences as a "lifesaver". The colleague of the teacher who felt she had been "saved" by the resource had a different view, she was strongly of the opinion that there were not enough hours in the day now let alone introduce another block of information in her lessons. One student upon learning of the extra year necessary at school loudly exclaimed "oh no, ripped off" as he felt another year of school was made harder to accept by the fact his brother was in the year group prior to the new legislation effecting his cohort.

A tertiary lecturer's initial view of the structure that has been put in place with the pathway planning initiative was that this was an exciting addition. After an extended explanation of the integrated nature of the support framework to augment the structure, the lecturer was viewing this as an example of best practice within the fabric of a High School. Another former student had an air of disappointment regarding missing the opportunities that the pathway planning initiative could have opened up for her; the young lady impressed upon her younger brother to ensure he made the most of the process as a potential blueprint for his future options. One parent had the view that education had gone too far; expecting all students to continue past Grade 10 was simply "out of touch" with society. A sentiment that was expressed continually by a small group of parents at an information session was they were not aware of the great opportunity to see their siblings' plans develop during each year and how easily accessible the plans were. Internet access to all students' plans via individual password protection allows parents to see the development of their siblings' plans with the students' consent. Common thought from these parents was that this was a wonderful chance to create conversations around their children's proposed futures at a time when conversation was in their terms "drying up", much to the parents' despair.

Conclusion

The pathway planning process has certainly created much spirited discussion amongst stakeholders. The initial feedback has been overwhelmingly positive with some reservations being raised. The integrated nature of the program requires extended time to present a clear overview of all of the facets supporting the initiative. Whilst the broad and diverse nature of the various elements that create the momentum are a definite strength, until the “complete package” is clearly understood there will be some reservations within the community. It would be fair to view that the process has received support at this early stage however the benefits to the student cohort will not be seen for some time yet. The strategy appears to be well thought out and could present the impetus to provide solutions to some of the post compulsory education issues the policy targets.

References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics, (2003) Australian Social Trends. (ABS Catalogue 4202.0), Canberra
- Billett, S 2006, 'Informing post-school pathways : investigating school students' authentic work experiences', *Professional Educator*, vol. 5, no. 4, pp. 14-19.
- Evans, N 2006, 'Tasmania is guaranteeing futures for young people', *Vocal : The Australian Journal of Vocational Education and Training in Schools*, vol. 6, pp. 30-35.
- 'From education to work : a difficult transaction for adults with low levels of education', 2005, in D Organisation for Economic Cooperation and & N Canadian Policy Research (eds), (*SourceOECD Education and skills*), Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [and] Canadian Policy Research Networks, 2005.
- Halse, C 2004, 'Striving for balance : Australian perspectives on the future of schooling', *International Journal of Educational Research*, vol. 41, no. 7, pp. 523-533.
- Lamb, S, Walstab, A, Teese, R, Vickers, M & Rumberger, R 2004, *Staying on at school : improving student retention in Australia*, Brisbane: Queensland. Dept of Education and the Arts, 2004.
- Queensland. Dept of Education and the Arts, Brisbane, 2004,
'Learning together : a vision for education training and information into the 21st century', 2000, in C Learning Together & E Tasmania. Dept of (eds), Hobart: Dept of Education, 2000.
- Rossmann, A 2006, 'Stand by me', *Australian Educator*, no. 50, pp. 14-17.
- Ryan, C 2002, 'Longer-term outcomes for individuals completing vocational education and training qualifications', in A Australian National Training & R National Centre for Vocational Education (eds), (*TD/TNC ; 69.02*), Leabrook S Aust: National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2002.
- National Centre for Vocational Education Research, Leabrook S Aust.
- Sweet, R 2002, 'Youth pathways in an international spotlight', *Vocal : The Australian Journal of Vocational Education and Training in Schools*, vol. 4, pp. 5-7.
- Tasmania. Dept of, E 2003, 'Tasmania : a state of learning : a strategy for post-year 10 education and training', in T Tasmania. Office of Post-Compulsory Education and (ed.), Hobart: Tasmania. Dept of Education, 2003.