

Staying on at school: Improving student retention in Australia

Summary report by

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Executive Summary

This report was commissioned by the Queensland Department of Education and the Arts on behalf of the National Fund for Educational Research to identify the main drivers of current trends in retention rates across States and Territories, and to develop a set of models to predict differences in patterns of retention.

The study involved four main components: a large national and international literature review of factors affecting retention, a series of interviews with key school and system staff on what shapes retention, the development and application of a set of models of student retention to measure the impact of factors shaping student retention and differences across States and Territories, and an analysis of policy implications and policy options based on the results of the study.

The statistical modelling undertaken for the study to adjust for measurement and other differences shows that the gaps between the States and Territories are not as great as appears when account is taken of population differences, remoteness, interstate migration, and modalities of school use (e.g. part-time versus full-time). Removing the impact of these factors greatly compresses interstate differences.

Statistical modelling of factors affecting retention at an individual level brings out the impact of successful learning on retention, including both the direct effects on individual plans and the indirect effects of peer impact and family aspirations. The research literature highlights the fact that early leavers are drawn disproportionately from the ranks of low achievers. Failure to establish meaning in the curriculum or to

build satisfactory teaching relationships reduces the possibility of successful learning which is the most important intrinsic motive for staying on at school. Economic pressures to find work and earn a living may hasten early leaving, but where a positive experience of learning has not been established, resisting these pressures is likely to be even more difficult.

The results of the modelling suggest that a national strategy for increasing retention should aim at reducing differences between student groups and communities within States and Territories. In the long term, this will also reduce the gaps between the States and Territories, particularly those that are based on socio-economic and cultural differences in populations. Other factors, such as remoteness, will continue to exercise an influence and will require different strategies related to provision and access to education and training.

The focus in policies aimed at promoting higher levels of retention needs to be on the quality of programs, quality of experiences and quality of learning in schools. Policies needed to translate the broad objective of quality retention or its alternatives into action at the school or system level include early intervention strategies, monitoring of student progress, promoting quality school-community relations, creating positive learning cultures in schools, building strong alternative pathways, transition outcomes monitoring and improved careers education and guidance.

1. Background

This report was commissioned by the Queensland Department of Education and the Arts on behalf of the National Fund for Educational Research to identify the main drivers of current trends in retention rates across States and Territories, and to develop a set of models to predict differences in patterns of retention.

An important goal in Australian education is to ensure that all young people have the opportunity to complete Year 12 or its vocational equivalent. Yet rates of retention vary across States and Territories and have varied substantially over time. While the national apparent retention rate increased markedly during the 1980s before easing in the 1990s, state differences diverged over this period. Some of this divergence may be due to population and economic differences, others to policy differences linked to characteristics of school systems, senior school certificate reforms, curriculum and program changes (such as the development of Vocational Education and Training in schools), and school-based policies. All States and Territories are committed to increasing rates of school retention and identifying the most appropriate interventions or mechanisms for doing so. In this context, it is vital to gain an understanding of the different sets of factors that drive retention rates. Only then will it be possible to get some sense about what can be targeted from a policy perspective.

2. Method

The study had four main components:

1. An extensive review of national and international literature on school completion and early leaving, in order to identify key factors affecting retention and participation.
2. A series of interviews with a sample of retention 'experts' including school staff and policymakers to identify, from their experience, the key factors that shape survival in school and study.
3. The development and application of a set of models of student retention to measure the impact of factors shaping student retention and differences across States and Territories.
4. An examination of policy implications and policy options based on the results of the study. The analysis was informed by a set of workshops held with senior education policy officers in four States.

3. Constructing models of student retention

The literature review and consultations with school and system authorities identified sets of factors that shape student retention. The work suggested that patterns of student retention are based on a complex interplay between a range of factors including social and demographic (e.g. gender, achievement, student aspirations and motivations, family SES, ethnicity, indigenous status, health and disability, homelessness), regional and economic (e.g. urban, rural or remote, youth labour market, unemployment, part-time employment, industry structure, community links), school policies and context (e.g. sector, school quality, teacher quality, pedagogical effectiveness, school resourcing, school organisation) and the policy environment (e.g. system, state, and commonwealth policies, curriculum and qualification framework, income support). Regional and school context is important. Basic patterns of retention linked to individual and demographic factors are modified by regional and economic factors as well as by school policies and context, and by broader policy setting at a system and State or Territory level.

The factors contributing to retention, identified in the literature review and interviews with stakeholders, were used to develop two conceptual models of early leaving in Australia — the first based on individual decision making and the second on state differences in retention.

Figure 1 presents a conceptual model of school completion and early leaving based on empirical literature. It shows four separate dimensions related to the process of completion or early leaving:

1. outcomes, which is the product of the process and involves either completion of the final year or early school leaving;
2. dispositions, which reflect the attitudes, behaviors and achievements of students through particular concepts — school engagement, academic engagement, education and work aspirations, and academic achievement;
3. student characteristics, which relate to the background attributes of individuals; and
4. context, which represents the institutional, contextual and policy settings which actively and continuously operate to shape and modify student characteristics and the academic and work dispositions leading to completion or early leaving.

The model represents the completion and early leaving process as dynamic rather than static. From a policy perspective it should be viewed as one which reflects the opportunity to identify and target both general and local processes. The model may not be particularly suitable for identifying in a single analysis the magnitude of importance of the different factors (particularly given the long list of variables grouped under each dimension). Rather it should be viewed as a tool which gives policymakers an opportunity to examine and consider the different influences on completion and early leaving given different context and policy frameworks.

Figure 2 presents a conceptual model of State and Territory differences in completion and early leaving based on the empirical literature. The proportion of students who move into post-compulsory education and complete Year 12 varies between States and Territories. Differences between jurisdictions in participation and completion can be attributed to both policy and non-policy influences. The model shows both sets of influences and their interactions.

Existing research indicates that potential policy influences on retention include the following:

1. schooling policies such as age of entry, numbers of part-time students, compulsory leaving age, grade repetition
2. curriculum and accreditation including certification, assessment practices, teaching and learning programs

3. school organisation such as senior secondary colleges, middle school programs, selective-entry schools, location and size
4. resources including student/staff ratios, class sizes, educational maintenance allowances, school resourcing
5. education and training provision including TAFE policies, interactions between schools and TAFE, VET entry policies, and
6. national policies such as income support, school resourcing, apprenticeship and employment programs.

Non-policy influences relate to population differences as well as economic factors. They include:

1. population differences related to SES composition, proportion of population from indigenous backgrounds, ethnic composition, migration, dispersion of the population, poverty and welfare, residential segregation
2. economic differences including those related to industry mix, occupational structure, employment and unemployment levels, workforce participation, regional labour markets, teenage employment, and
3. school enrolment shares reflected in the size of government and non-government sector enrolments.

Figure 1: A conceptual model of factors shaping the retention decisions of individuals

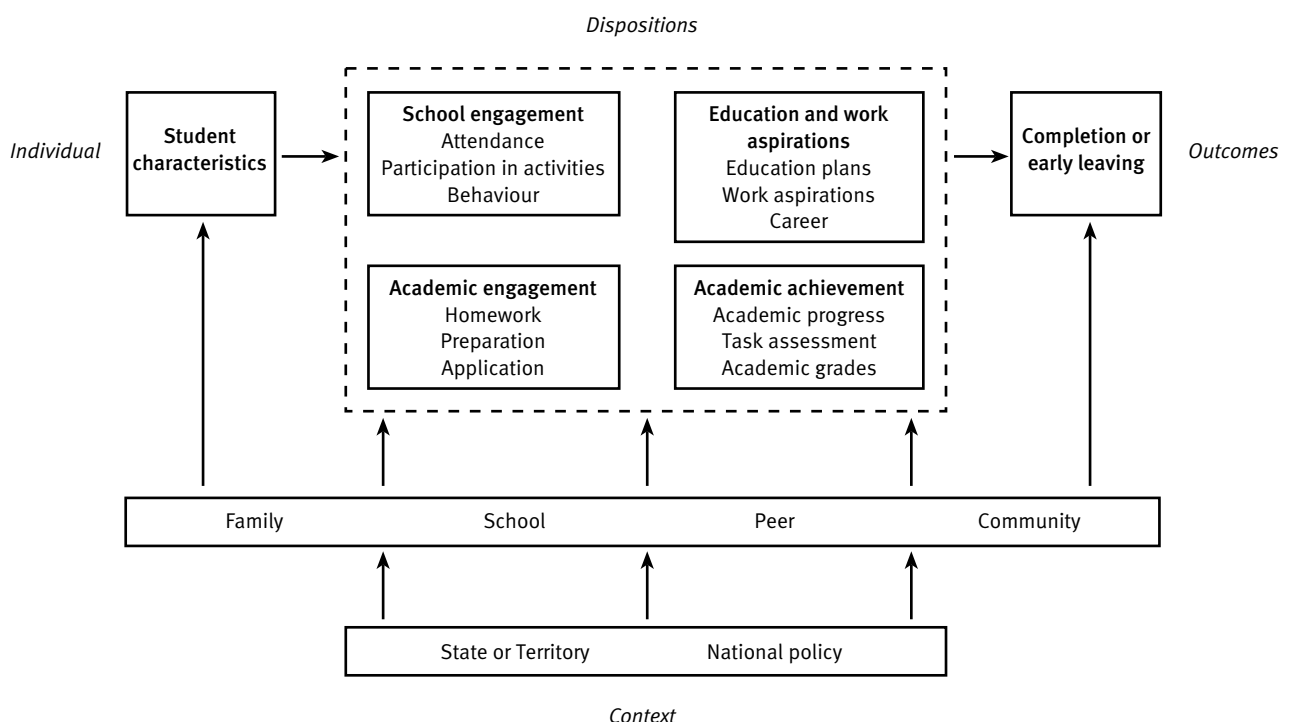
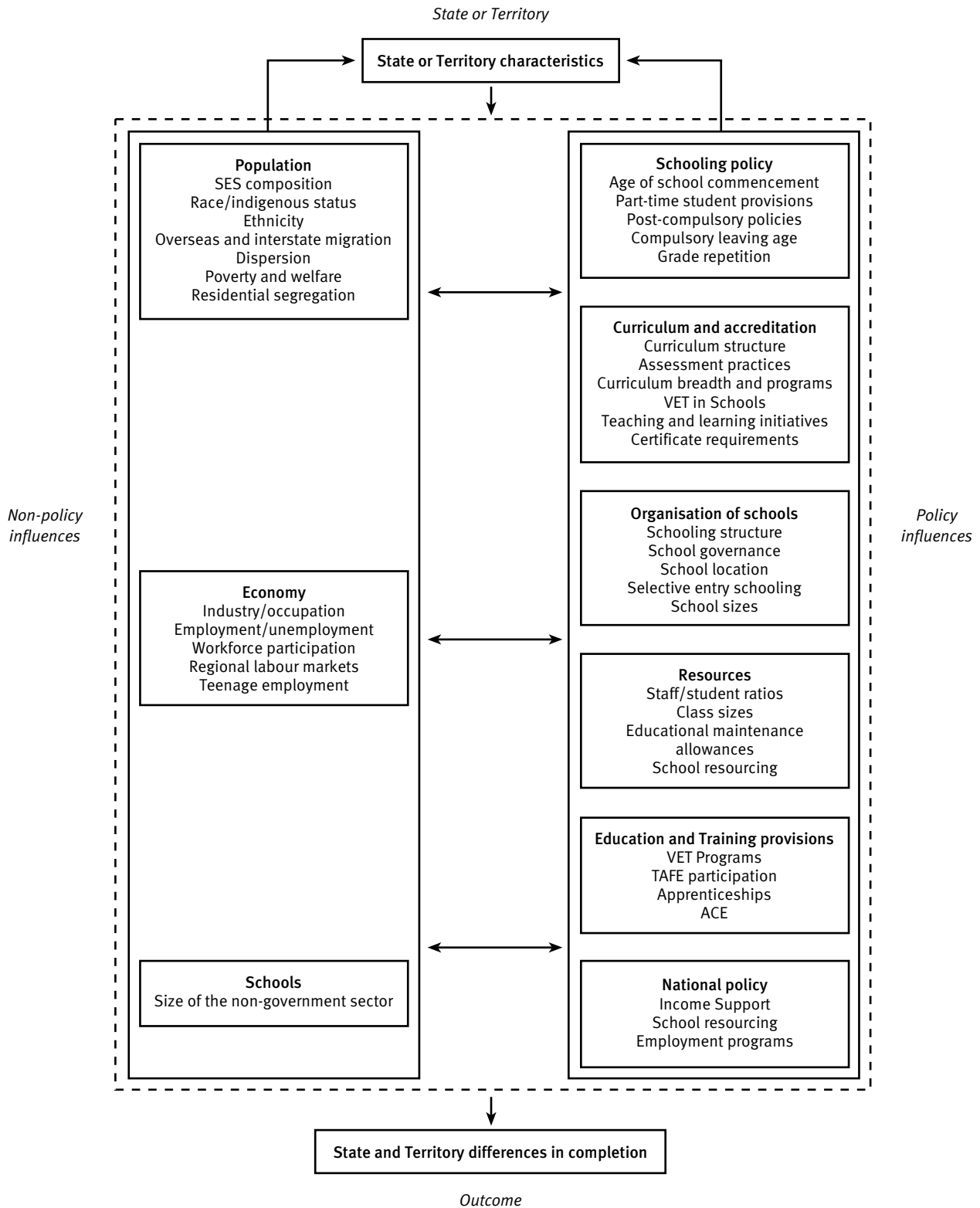


Figure 2: A conceptual model of State and Territory differences in retention



The conceptual models of retention were applied using available data to identify the key factors which shape retention, and to predict differences in rates of retention. The statistical analyses included modelling of the 2002 ABS apparent retention rates to examine State and Territory differences as well as modelling of

Year 12 retention decisions in a large sample of young Australians. Data for the two sets of models were derived from a wide range of sources including the ABS Schools Australia series, the ABS 2001 census, and the 1995 Year 9 cohort (13,600 Year 9 students) of the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth.

4. Results from the modelling of retention

State and Territory differences

Published figures on retention contain two main sources of differences across States and Territories. The first is linked to factors that affect the measurement of apparent retention including migration and changes in population, numbers of part-time students, numbers of mature-age students, cross-border students, and grade repetition. Apparent retention data is limited in its ability to reflect the variations across States and Territories attributed to population differences. The second source of variation is linked to the impact of both policy influences (e.g. schooling policies, curriculum and accreditation, school organisation, age of commencement, resources) and non-policy influences (e.g. school enrolment shares reflected in the size of government and non-government sector enrolments, social composition and dispersion of populations, densities of population from indigenous and non-English speaking backgrounds). A meaningful use of apparent retention rates requires appropriate adjustments for these measurement and population differences.

Table 1 presents the apparent retention rates for 2002 with the size of adjustments related to each factor. In 2002, apparent retention rates varied by up to 30 percentage points (88.1 per cent in the Australian Capital Territory and 53.0 per cent in the Northern Territory). After all adjustments are made, less than 10 points separates the States and Territories. Adjustments have a different impact depending on State and Territory. For example, mature-age students add 7.5 percentage points to the apparent retention rate for Tasmania. Population growth added 3.0 percentage points to the retention rate for New South Wales and 4.8 points to Victoria. The higher socio-economic status composition of the population of the Australian Capital Territory has a large impact on

its retention rate, as does the levels of remoteness and the size of the indigenous population in the Northern Territory.

The modelling shows that the gaps between the States and Territories are not as great as appears when no account is taken of population differences, remoteness, interstate migration, and modalities of school use (part-time versus full-time). Removing the impact of these population factors greatly compresses interstate differences. In making comparisons which attempt to treat States and Territories as if they have the same population and diversity reveal that the main differences which remain are linked to the non-policy factors.

The importance of Table 1 is not in the final adjusted rates for several reasons. The first is that there is still a range of other factors that would need to be included for accurate comparison of state and territory differences. These include such factors as grade repetition, economic contexts, and the impact of age-grade structures, to name just a few. A second reason is that the population adjustments are artificial. The large adjustment downwards in retention for the ACT to compensate for the territories' more homogeneously middle-class population is a statistical artefact. The actual rate of retention for the ACT — over 80 per cent — reflects in part the reality of its population base.

The important point of Table 1 is that it identifies several important influences that need to be considered both for the measurement and comparison of student retention and for the targetting of policies to improve rates and reduce differences. Critical factors influencing the low retention rates recorded in the Northern Territory, for example, are remoteness of much of the population, the large proportion of the population that is indigenous, and SES composition. Strategies to target and improve retention in the Northern Territory need to focus on these factors.

Table 1: Apparent retention rates for 2002 and adjustments

	ACT	QLD	VIC	WA	TAS	NSW	SA	NT
2002 apparent retention	88.1	81.3	80.9	73.7	72.6	69.9	66.7	53.0
MEASUREMENT ADJUSTMENTS								
Population change	-6.7	-4.3	-4.8	-3.4	2.6	-3.0	-1.4	1.4
	81.4	77.0	76.1	70.3	75.2	66.9	65.3	54.4
Part-time students	1.0	1.1	0.7	1.0	2.2	0.7	3.5	3.2
	82.4	78.1	76.8	71.3	77.4	67.6	68.8	57.6
Mature-age students	-0.5	-0.8	-0.4	-1.1	-7.5	-0.3	-0.8	-1.0
	81.9	77.3	76.4	70.2	69.9	67.3	68.0	56.6
Cross-border students	-0.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0
	81.1	77.3	76.4	70.2	69.9	67.4	68.0	56.6
POPULATION ADJUSTMENTS								
SES	-8.8	1.5	0.2	-0.5	3.4	-0.6	0.3	5.6
	72.3	78.8	76.6	69.7	73.3	66.8	68.3	62.2
Remoteness	-0.9	1.2	1.2	3.1	3.8	1.7	1.7	4.7
	71.4	80.0	77.8	72.8	77.1	68.5	70.0	66.9
Indigenous population	0.0	-0.2	-0.9	-0.3	-1.4	-0.4	-0.7	4.2
	71.4	79.8	76.9	72.5	75.7	68.1	69.3	71.1
Sector	-0.2	-0.1	-0.2	-0.2	0.0	0.2	0.2	0.1
	71.2	79.7	76.7	72.3	75.7	68.3	69.5	71.2
POLICY ADJUSTMENTS								
Secondary colleges	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0	-1.0	0.0	0.1	0.0
	71.2	79.8	76.7	72.3	74.7	68.3	69.6	71.2
VET as an alternative	0.7	-1.0	-0.6	-0.1	1.2	2.7	-0.3	-1.8
	71.9	78.8	76.1	72.2	75.9	71.0	69.3	69.4
Final adjusted rate	71.9	78.8	76.1	72.2	75.9	71.0	69.3	69.4

Individual-level differences

Rates derived after adjusting for State and Territory differences tell us what the levels of retention would be, were the States and Territories more uniformly similar in their population characteristics, in the geographical dispersal of their communities, and in the exchange of their populations which occurs across interstate boundaries. But States and Territories are not uniformly similar in these respects, and in fact are drawn apart by the play of macro-economic and social forces. From a national perspective, retention is very uneven, despite the long-term upward trend. Statistical modelling of interstate differences only tends to highlight factors over which school systems have relatively little influence.

A second model (see Table 2) focusing not on State and Territory differences, but rather individual student factors, reveals a range of other variables which impact on the likelihood of Year 12 completion, including parental aspirations and school policies, which are well within the influence of systems.

The results show that the process of early leaving is shaped by the different contexts within which individuals are situated. For example, family context has a major impact on retention (family background factors explain about 11 percent of variation in retention rates)¹. Children from low SES backgrounds

have a much lower rate of school completion than children from high SES families. Although there are variations within low SES groups (e.g. by language background), for children from low SES families as a group the chances of completion vary according to the schools they attend, the States or Territories they are in, the region where they live, and local labour market opportunities. In other words, the impact of SES on completion can be modified by a variety of contextual factors.

As well as family context, the results suggest that parental aspirations and the aspirations of peers are influential along with the quality of teaching and features of school climate. Differences linked to schools and school policies explain about four percent of the total variation in retention². Of these factors, higher retention rates associated with attending independent schools appears to be linked to intake rather than any additional effect. Much of the effect of family, school and peer factors is made through the impact of these influences on academic achievement, students' own aspirations and their levels of engagement in school.

Policies to address differences and obtain improvements in student retention will need to consider these interrelated factors which shape completion and early leaving.



Footnotes:

¹ Family background factors on their own account for 10.7% or approximately 11% of the total variance which is made up of 7.6% of the variance accounted for by student factors and 38.1 per cent of the variance accounted for by school-level factors $[(.076*89.7) + (.381*10.3)=10.7]$.

² The 4% is the difference approximately between the total variance explained by student, family and school factors (17.6%) and the total variance explained by student and family factors (13.7%).

Table 2: Effects of different factors on student retention expressed as odds ratios #5

		MODELS					
		Null	Individual	Context			Engagement
			Student	Family	School	Peer	Orientation
STUDENT							
Gender	Female		1.30**	1.34**	1.33**	1.33**	1.19**
Disability or not	Disability		0.90**	0.90**	0.90**	0.90**	0.95
Indigenous status	Indigenous student		0.87**	0.89**	0.89**	0.90**	0.92*
FAMILY							
SES	Family SES			1.54**	1.43**	1.45**	1.19**
Language background	LBO TE			1.17**	1.19**	1.18**	1.16**
Family size	Number of siblings			0.86**	0.87**	0.87**	0.89**
Parent aspirations	Tertiary education			1.39**	1.39**	1.38**	1.10**
SCHOOL							
Sector	Catholic				1.12**	1.05	1.08
	Independent				0.98	0.95	0.93
Quality of teachers	Content knowledge				1.10*	1.10*	1.10*
	Expertise				1.09*	1.07	1.07
	Preparation				1.02	1.00	1.01
	Communication				1.05	1.05	1.07
	Interest				1.13*	1.12*	1.12*
	Discipline				1.04	1.03	1.03
School climate	Behaviour				1.02	1.03	1.04
	Application				1.07	1.07	1.05
	Academic				1.00	1.00	1.01
	Motivation				1.08	1.09	1.07
Intake	Mean SES				1.27**	1.06	1.14
	Mean achievement				1.28**	1.01	1.16
PEER							
Reading habits	Amount of reading					1.01	1.02
School aspirations	Peer school plans					1.48**	1.32**
Post-school plans	Peer post-school plans					1.05	1.04
Attitudes to school	Learning					1.04	1.07
	Teachers					1.03	1.02
	Development of skills					1.01	1.01
	Motivation					1.04	1.03
Self-esteem	Peers' self-esteem					1.05	1.03
TV watching	Hours of TV watching					0.78**	0.72

		MODELS					
		Null	Individual	Context			Engagement
			Student	Family	School	Peer	Orientation
SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT							
Engagement	Enjoys school						1.01
	Likes teachers						1.07**
	Values skills						1.05
	Motivated to learn						1.10**
	Academic self concept						1.31**
Academic motivation	Participates in school activities.						1.05
	Hours of homework						1.18**
	Does extra homework						1.18**
	Works hard at school						1.07
	Hours watching TV						1.01
	Does extra work at school						1.00
Aspirations	School completion plans						1.65**
	Post-school plans						1.18**
Academic achievement	Year 9 achievement						1.45**
Variance analysis							
Variance estimate	Between students	0.183 89.7%	0.179	0.165	0.161	0.157	0.135
	Between schools	0.021 10.3%	0.019	0.011	0.007	0.003	0.002
Variance explained (%)	Student level		2.2	9.8	12.0	14.2	26.2
	School level		9.5	47.6	66.7	85.7	90.5
	Total		2.9	13.7	17.6	21.6	32.8

Source: Figures derived by Stephen Lamb from LSAY Y95 cohort.

Note: The control group comprises low achieving government school non-indigenous males without a physical disability from a low SES family background.

All factors are standardised to facilitate comparison of size of effect.

*= $p < 0.10$ **= $p < 0.05$ ***= $p < 0.01$

§ Reading the table: All of the results of the multivariate models are presented as adjusted odds ratios. The odds ratio represents the proportion of students with a particular attribute (e.g. females) who complete Year 12 relative to the proportion of students from a comparison group (e.g. males) who complete Year 12. An odds ratio can take values from zero to positive infinity. The interpretation of the odds ratios is relatively straightforward. An odds ratio value of 1.00 represents equal odds for completing Year 12 (or not completing) relative to the comparison group. Values from 0.00 to 1.00 are representative of a 'lowered' effect; that is, the odds of completing are lower for students with the measured attribute relative to the control or comparison group. Values greater than 1.00 represent greater odds for completing Year 12 for those students with the measured attribute relative to the comparison group.

5. Policy implications

Statistical modelling brings out the impact of successful learning on retention, including both the direct effects on individual plans and the indirect effects of peer impact and family aspirations. The research literature highlights the fact that early leavers are drawn disproportionately from the ranks of low achievers. Failure to establish meaning in the curriculum or to build satisfactory teaching relationships reduces the possibility of successful learning which is the most important intrinsic motive for staying on at school. Economic pressures to find work and earn a living may hasten early leaving, but where a positive experience of learning has not been established, resistance to these pressures is often ineffectual.

To improve the benefits that young people gain from school — benefits which cannot be read simply from a retention statistic — requires systems to monitor achievement patterns for different groups and communities within the later years of secondary school and to benchmark the performance of schools with a view to setting expectations. Quality of instructional experience should also be measured, partly through student feedback and partly through professional development programs. What happens to young people when they leave school — and what happens to different groups (high and low achievers, high and low SES, indigenous students, etc.) — provides essential insights into short- and long-term benefits as well as helping evaluate school programs.

The focus of policy efforts should be on creating the conditions for effective learning and personal growth that underpin quality retention.

Current levels of retention are associated with a wide gap in achievement and in quality of instructional experience. Reducing this gap should have priority. This will involve a combination of measures relating to school performance, on the one hand, and to program monitoring and evaluation, on the other. Consequential interventions flow from each side, e.g. teacher professional development.

A national strategy for increasing retention should aim at reducing differences between student groups and communities within States and Territories. In the long term, this will also reduce the gaps between the States and Territories, particularly those that are based on socio-economic and cultural differences in populations. Other factors, such as remoteness, will continue to exercise an influence and will require different strategies related to provision and access.

Vocational alternatives to retention have an important role to play, particularly for young people who need full-time work or have carer roles. These alternatives include apprenticeships and traineeships, on the one hand, and other VET programs which are not employment-based, on the other. The role of these programs should not be to relieve the pressure of student diversity on schools, but to provide a quality pathway to employment or further education. VET programs should have valuable and demonstrable benefits and should involve the same commitment to effective learning and personal growth as ought to underlie retention in school.

To raise attainment either in school or through alternative programs in the VET sector implies greater focus on the economic incentives to successful learning and award completion. These are strong for high achievers, but weak for low achievers. They include access to full-time work, a reliable training pathway, structured workplace learning opportunities, flexibly delivered programs that accommodate working hours, manageable tuition costs and charges, and physical accessibility. Without valuable and perceptible economic benefits, there is less incentive for young people to complete school or to undertake alternative programs if they leave school early.



Retention should be assessed in terms of the transition outcomes associated with it as well as the range of learning experiences on which it is based. Retention to Year 12 is not an assured pathway in itself either to good jobs or to further education and training. This has important implications for the design and emphasis of the programs on which it is based or which operate as alternatives.

In some States and Territories, retention has come to operate as the beginning of a new phase of education or training for as many as three-quarters of the completing cohort. To regard retention as the end of a phase has become outmoded.

The policies needed to translate the broad objective of quality retention or its alternatives into action at the school or system level include the following:

1. Early intervention. Strategies to improve student achievement need to be implemented early in schooling and to be properly targeted. Some current programs, such as basic literacy programs in early primary school, are not targeted to schools with high concentrations of disadvantaged groups.
2. Ongoing monitoring. Schools and systems require data on student achievement over the whole cycle of schooling so that gaps in achievement can be identified and acted upon early. Ideally student learning should be measured for individuals so that improvement can be assessed over time and performance of schools interpreted in terms of value-added. Unique student identifiers are an important element of a monitoring program, in order to measure growth in learning accurately.
3. Community-school relations. Programs to involve parents in school and programs which enhance communication between schools and parents are of special relevance in disadvantaged settings. Market research indicates that low-income parents are especially critical of the frequency and quality of feedback on their children's progress. Clear reporting to parents in ways which reflect the concerns of parents themselves would improve community relations and gain greater parental support for teachers in their efforts.
4. School factors: creating a positive learning culture. Research findings point to the key role played by aspirations and the need to create a climate of achievement through effective leadership and a high level of teacher commitment and expectations on student learning. Mentoring programs are an important vehicle for including students in this culture. For schools where there is high staff turnover or difficulties in recruiting quality staff, a stronger focus on pedagogical strategies to enhance student learning in the classroom is needed, for example negotiated learning processes and more individualised instruction. Case management is the foundation to many successful programs.
5. Student support services. Provision of health and welfare services at the point of delivery of school programs is vital in communities in which there are high levels of poverty, family breakdown, and unemployment. These are the areas in which retention is lowest and achievement most at risk. Examples include homework centres, access to ICT, mentoring, and provision of student housing.
6. Quality programs. For school programs to engage learners, they need to be challenging, stimulating, involve opportunities for sharing learning tasks, be satisfying as learning experiences, and have clear and demonstrable benefits beyond school. VET in Schools represents the most significant reform to the senior secondary curriculum and contains many of these features. VET programs are of wider relevance at this level for they contribute to a greater perception of relevance and stronger motivation from students.
7. Careers education and guidance. 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.
8. Transition outcomes monitoring. Schools need an accurate guide to what happens to school leavers from each exit year-level, and this information needs to be disaggregated by key student background characteristics (such as achievement level) to provide a focus for program development within schools and more effective pathways management.
9. Quality alternative pathways. Many early school leavers do continue in education or training. The challenge is to ensure that the programs they undertake are suitable and of high quality, that they foster commitment to learning and personal development, and that they have valued employment or further education and training outcomes. Alternative education and training options should provide pathways to continued lifelong learning. Apprenticeships and traineeships are examples of important alternative pathways traditionally taken by early school leavers.

10. Program evaluation. Curriculum authorities need to undertake periodic evaluation of accredited programs in different school settings, including both teacher and learner views. The uneven way in which senior certificate programs operate for different student groups requires a different approach, which is context-sensitive and potentially linked to professional development and school improvement programs.
11. Returning to study programs. Returning to study is made possible through several models, including schools which enrol adults, TAFE institutes and adult and community education providers. Students returning to study include those previously suspended and excluded, and school-age mothers. More extensive provision of adult recovery programs would allow school programs to be completed over different periods of time, paced to suit individual circumstances, and accessible to students with a troubled experience of school.
12. Measuring attainment and outcomes. Current measurement approaches to retention are unsatisfactory. They are error-prone and ignore alternative forms of educational participation. A national student number presents major advantages in improving retention statistics and could be progressed by the Performance Measurement and Reporting Taskforce, if directed by the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs. The ABS and its education advisory group should improve their measure of retention by taking into account other forms of education and training and addressing current problems in the measurement of retention.

