

# **Investigating the factors that lead to disengagement of students in the Upper Ross**

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All names have been changed to protect the identity of the young people and adult informants.

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# Background and Methodology 1

In 2003 the Queensland State government announced major reforms to the schooling system. These reforms are enshrined in the *Youth Participation in Education and Training Act 2003* and include the requirement from 2006 for young people to remain in school until 16 years of age or the completion of Year 10. Beyond this phase there will be a 'compulsory participation' phase when a young person will be required to further their education until they turn 17 unless they are involved in paid work for a minimum of 25 hours per week.

In Townsville, as in many regional communities, there are major challenges to ensure that young people remain in school or the compulsory learning phase in line with the government reforms. This small-scale research focussed on one geographical area of Townsville, the Upper Ross, and explored the issues around retention of students to years 10, 11 and 12 in order to support schools to develop mechanisms that address the issues around school engagement and retention.

The specific aims of the study are:

- a. to identify young people who are at risk of not completing the senior phase of schooling;
- b. to identify and develop local collaborative mechanisms to support school retention;
- c. to identify the cultural, social and economic factors that lead to school disengagement among students across a number of primary schools and one secondary school in the Upper Ross area of Townsville;
- d. to assist teachers, parents, principals and support workers in trialing strategies that may reduce school disengagement.

## 1.1 Research Methodology

This research project was conducted in three stages. Stage 1 involved a literature review of existing Australian and international studies of disengagement and the factors associated with early school leaving. The review provided a basis for a reflection on the similarities and differences with the Upper Ross region, a geographically bounded area within the Thuringowa City Council. This geographically bounded area was selected because demographic statistics indicated that the area has lower than state average incomes, and low apparent retention rates to Year 12, a high proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (13 % in primary schools and 32% in a secondary school) as well as high student mobility rates. The research project was developed in consultation with the Townsville trial of the *Education and Training Reforms* and developed in consultation with the *Townsville District Youth Achievement Plan Committee*. The project commenced following ethics clearance from James Cook University's ethics committee.

Stage two of the research involved the collection and review of statistical information pertaining to the Upper Ross area to develop a profile of the region. The quantitative data included statistics from the Australian Bureau of Statistics and other community data collections, and in addition, education department statistics.

Stage three of the study utilised a qualitative approach, using focus group and individual interviews with adults and young people living and working in the Upper Ross. Invitations to participate were distributed in schools and youth agencies in the Upper Ross. Focus groups were facilitated with the cooperation of schools in the area, and youth workers working with young people already at-risk of leaving school or young people who had already left school. Following the focus group discussions, the researchers extended invitations to individuals to participate in one-to-one interviews to explore issues raised in the focus groups. Five focus group sessions were held with young people using a semi-structured approach to the interview. Sixteen individual interviews with young people who were in school and young people who had already left school were conducted. All interviews, both focus group and individual were transcribed and core themes were extrapolated. Profiles of individual young people were constructed from the interviews, and key risk factors of early school leaving were identified.

In addition to the interviews with young people, invitations were distributed to teachers, youth workers and school support personnel in four school sites in the Upper Ross. Sixteen interviews with adult personnel working in the Upper Ross area were completed. These interviews were conducted in a one-one format using a semi-structured interview format, except in one instance where three teachers requested an interview as a small group. The personnel interviewed included school administrators, primary teachers, secondary head of departments, police liaison officers, secondary teachers, guidance officers and youth workers. Again, these interviews were transcribed and core themes analysed. Several adult personnel were interviewed on a second occasion to explore issues raised in the preliminary interview.

School administrators were provided with a summary of core themes and suggested recommendations. The ensuing discussions will form the basis for the continuation of the research in 2005.

## **1.2 Structure of report**

This report is presented in stages that reflect the research process. Chapter 2 provides a review of existing literature around school engagement and school retention. Chapter 3 presents an analysis of the socio-demographic data from the Upper Ross. Finally, summaries of interviews with school personnel, youth workers, and young people are presented in Chapters 4 and 5.

The final section of the report provides some recommendations that will be pursued with schools in the Upper Ross area in 2005.

# Literature Review 2

The research literature on educational disengagement states that early leaving is a social problem if education or training ceases and is unlikely to be resumed (Teese, Polesel, O'Brien, Jones, Davies, Walstab & Maughan, 2000). The social distribution of school disengagement suggests that there are three distinct factors namely: structural inequality in education, regional economic breakdown, and cultural discrimination in education.

Structural inequality in education refers to the marked socio-economic differences in achievement. These may contribute to the economic promotion of high-socio-economic status groups compared to the economic marginalisation of lower socio-economic groups through educational failure. For example working class boys are more likely to leave school earlier by finding manual forms of labour or by engaging in resistant behaviour at school (Lamb, 1998). Regional economic breakdown refers to the loss of employment as a result of a lack of investment and infrastructure in regional communities. School disengagement occurs as families respond by migrating to provincial cities, selling up property in favour of paid employment or finding training or employment opportunities through providers such as TAFE (Marks & Fleming, 1999). Cultural discrimination in education refers to the practices and values that alienate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Marks & Fleming, 1999; Gardiner, 1996). These practices are embedded in how the curriculum is organised, the dependence on English as a first language, the degree of parental involvement and the perceived relevance of subjects for success in the workplace. Discrimination occurs when adequate steps are not taken to counterbalance the negative effects of these assumptions, through culturally sensitive pedagogical and organisational practices.

## 2.1 Contributing factors to school disengagement

In Australia, and elsewhere, studies of educational disengagement have identified causes, outcomes and significance of early educational disengagement. The following section reviews this literature and is focused mainly upon those who are at risk of not completing the senior phase of education and the identification of social, cultural and economic factors that result in disengagement from school.

### 2.1.1 Socio-economic factors linked to school disengagement

Ainley, Batten and Miller (1984) found that a main cause of early school disengagement by students is their socio-economic background (Lee and Ip 2003; Marks and McMillan 2001; Rosier 1978). According to Rosier (1978), students' socio-economic background is conversely related to early school disengagement. Blakers (1990) found that early school disengagers were predominantly from less well-educated families and mostly from lower socio-economic

groups. Lamb (1998) also found that during the 1980s, early school disengagement was characterised by parental education levels and parental occupation levels. Lamb and Rumberger (1998) report that the comparison between a father's occupation and early school disengagement formed part of the social disposition of early school disengagement. However, the differences are greater in the United States than in Australia. Lee and Ip (2003) also found that early disengagement from school occurred in families of low socio-economic status with low levels of income and where there was a lack of learning resources. In an analysis of early school disengagement, Robinson (1999) found that levels of parental educational were a contributing factor to the students' year twelve completion rates, while the father's occupation was not a significant factor. Students whose parents had low levels of secondary education were only half as likely to stay on and complete their secondary education as those students whose parents had tertiary and other higher educational levels. Comparably, fathers' occupational status was not a significant factor with regard to early school disengagement of students, but low parental levels of education were found to be significant factors in early educational disengagement of their children.

### **2.1.2 Cultural, gender, and locational factors linked to school disengagement**

NESB students have also become less likely to disengage from school early (Rosier 1978; Marks and McMillan 2001). Lamb (1998) found that in 1980 there was no marked difference in school completion or early disengagement between first generation non-English speaking background (NESB) students and Australian born students. According to Lamb and Rumberger (1998), only ten percent of NESB students had disengaged from school early during the 1990s, while figures were higher for Australian born students at twenty-two per cent. Further, Marks and Fleming (1999) found that for the cohorts of 1984 and 1989, the rates for NESB students' completion were 20 per cent higher than for their Australian born counterparts. Aboriginality is also a significant factor in early educational disengagement (Australian Centre for Educational Research, 2000).

Despite recent improvements in Australia, Indigenous student participation in school is below that of the overall population. For instance, apparent retention rates for fulltime Indigenous school students from Year 7/8 to both Year 10 and Year 12 have continued to rise over the last five years: the rate to Year 10 increased from 75.8% in 1996 to 86.0 % in 2001, and the rate to Year 12 increased from 29.2 % to 36.3%. (ABS, 2001). This contrasts with the rate of 75% for non-Indigenous students (MCEETYA, 2001). Moreover, the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students is significant, and begins to grow as students move from Year 9 to Year 10 (89.7 per cent compared to 98.6 per cent). The most noticeable difference occurs with the transition from compulsory schooling into Year 11 (67.6 per cent compared to 89.4 per cent) (ABS National Schools Statistics Collection, 2001).

From an Australian perspective, young females stay at school longer than young males (ACER, 2000; Donnelly, 2002). In 1994, 18 per cent of females had not completed their secondary education. The figure was much higher for males at 27 per cent (Lamb and Rumberger, 1998).

Marks (1998) found that males exhibited a stronger propensity for early educational disengagement, while Robinson (1999) found that male students were more than half as likely to complete secondary school as female students.

There are indications to suggest that gender differences in early school disengagement are more male oriented and are on the rise in the male cohort (Marks and Fleming, 1999). According to Marks and McMillan (2001), comparisons between cohorts from the early 1980s and 1990s found that the gender difference in early school disengagement has been escalating since 1989, with little significant differences between the genders. In 1994 however, strong gender differences became apparent, and males disengaged from school more frequently than females. Donnelly (2002) reports that there is a crisis in boys' education and that feminisation of the curriculum since the 1980s and 1990s which has contributed to the low numeracy and literacy skills and negative self image connected to early male disengagement (Marks and McMillan, 2001).

Students from rural, and remote areas are more likely to disengage from school than city based, urban students (Ainley, Batten and Miller, 1984; Blakers 1990; Marks and McMillan, 2001). Robinson's (1999) analysis indicates that significant numbers of rural, regional and remote students were more likely to disengage from school prior to completing Year 12.

### **2.1.3 School factors linked to school disengagement**

The type of school attended is also an important factor in early school disengagement (Blakers, 1990; Marks and Fleming, 1999). In 1993 a Commonwealth survey found that students who disengage from school early are more likely to have attended state schools (DEET 1993a; see also Marks and McMillan 2001). In 1997 an ABS study showed that students who disengage early are more likely to come from state schools and were less likely to disengage at an early time if they attend independent and non-Catholic schools. Lamb and Rumberger (1998) also found that early school disengagement is higher among state school students and then students from Catholic schools. Levels of early school disengagement are very low at independent schools (Marks and Fleming, 1999). In addition Ainley and Sheret (1992: 113-114) noted that schools with high levels of early disengagement had low levels of school achievement. On the other hand, schools with low levels of early disengagement had high levels of school achievement (ACER, 2000). This data however needs to be considered in relation to the socio-economic and cultural background of the school population.

The school curriculum and educational performance is frequently referred to as a main cause of school disengagement (Marks and Fleming 1999). Marks (1998) found that the strongest reason for students disengaging from school before completing Year 10 was poor school achievement levels. Robinson (1999) used his analysis to conclude a correlation between high levels of school achievement and high completion levels of schooling. Students in the highest level of achievement were seven to eight times more likely to complete school than the students at the lowest level. Throughout the 1980s, achievement levels at school were

strongly correlated with school completion levels (Williams, Long, Carpenter and Hayden 1993). Further, Lamb and Rumberger (1998) report, in a comparison of school disengagement from both the United States and Australia, that there is a powerful negative association between school disengagement and school achievement levels in both countries. Batten and Russell (1995) also argue that many students who disengage from school have low levels of literacy and numeracy compared to the rest of their age group cohort.

#### **2.1.4 Economic factors linked to school disengagement**

Another influence on early school disengagement may be economic factors (Marks and Fleming, 1999). Fiscal independence coupled with a reluctance to remain at school generally, are important considerations for those contemplating early disengagement (ACER, 2000). However, limitations to favourable employment would see students less inclined to disengage from school (Blakers, 1990). Conversely, a healthy labour market for young people would encourage early school disengagement. According to Marks and Fleming (1999) it is hard to conclude how the state of the economy effects early school disengagement in Australia. However, they state that early school disengagement decreased through each phase of the economic cycle throughout the 1980s.

The foregoing discussion has focused on the sociological influences of students who disengage from school earlier than others. Ainley and Sheret (1992, pp. 119-124) noted that psychological factors also contribute to early disengagement. Motivation, high aspirations and positive attitudes toward school are contributing factors for those who do not partake in early disengagement behaviour. Those students who attend schools that have low retention rates of students also displayed characteristics of low aspirations and unfavourable attitudes toward school in general (Marks and Fleming, 1999).

## **2.2 Outcomes of early school disengagement**

Many studies have shown that early school disengagement is connected to a large range of negative outcomes (ACER, 2000; Marks and Fleming, 1999).

Dwyer (1995) found that early school disengagement led to former students drifting in and out of employment, which in turn led to a strong reliance on the welfare system and other family members. Marks and Fleming (1998a; Marks and Fleming, 1998b) argued that disengagement from school before year twelve exacerbates the chances of early career unemployment and impacts negatively on earning capacity. Holden (1992) studied a group of 132 early school disengagers and found that more than sixty per cent were unemployed and others had jobs with low levels of remuneration. Up to seventy per cent of the same group had no reliable income source. Similar outcomes were reported for early school disengagers in the United States (McCaul, Donaldson, Coladarci & Davis 1992). In an Australian study (DEET, 1993b) it became apparent that early school disengagement led to higher levels of unemployment (23 per cent) than those who had completed secondary school (13 per cent). In addition, early school disengagement students were more likely to be employed and then

become unemployed, while they also tended to be employed for shorter time spans than those who had completed school (Blakers, 1990; MacDonald, 1999; Marks and Fleming, 1999).

There are also some positive outcomes for early school disengagers. In recent research, positive labour force outcomes have been reported (Marks and Fleming, 1999). Lamb and Rumberger (1998) found that by the time the early school disengagers had reached the age of 19, almost 64 per cent of them were working full time. Ten per cent of the same group were working part time and a further eleven per cent were not working at all. More male than female early school disengagers had obtained full time employment (72 per cent as opposed to 56 per cent), although the number of unemployed remained constant. More female early school disengagers (12 per cent as opposed to 1 per cent for males) were described as not in the work force (Marks and Fleming, 1999).

## 2.3 Summary

The ACER survey (2000) found that a vast number of students were disengaging from school well before the completion of year twelve. There was also some evidence of reluctance to stay on at school but in some cases there were no alternative options available (ACER, 2000 p 5). Job opportunities and competition for available and appropriate employment were also perceived as significant factors of early school disengagement (Hill, Hemmings and Green, 1998). Financial considerations were also problematic for some students. Therefore, a base of skills needs to be developed, either through trade and vocational programs before early educational disengagement occurs - or, to encourage students to stay longer at school, at least to completion level.

Achievement levels at school are another significant factor in early school disengagement (Marks and Fleming, 1999 p 26). Contributing to this dilemma are the effects of social mobility and economic restraints. Gender also adds another dimension to the decision on early disengagement. It may well be that males decide to disengage from school earlier than females as there are more employment opportunities for them, at an earlier age, than female students (Marks and McMillan, 2001).

Indigenous students have high levels of early disengagement, thus retention rates regarding this group of students needs see greater effort made towards higher retention levels (ACER, 2000). Early school disengagement of regional, rural and remote students is more likely to effect males living in these areas. There is no clear evidence to suggest why this occurs (Donnelly, 2002; Lamb, 1998).

# 3 Profile of the Upper Ross region.

The analysis of the Upper Ross region is based on statistical data extracted from the 2001 Australian Census and augmented by more recent statistics where available. In addition, education department records pertaining to local schools situated in the area were included.

The Upper Ross profile is constructed through three different frameworks comparing the community's characteristics with Queensland state averages in:

- a) socio-demographic descriptors
- b) education descriptors
- c) crime statistics

The geographic area comprising the Upper Ross is located in North Queensland, within the city of Thuringowa. Specifically, it is an area of approximately 28 square kilometres, bounded by the Ross River to the east, the Bohle River to the west, Hervey Range Road to the north and Kelso Drive to the south.

## 3.1 Socio-demographic descriptors

The Upper Ross region of the city of Thuringowa comprised of 5,755 dwellings in the suburbs of Kelso, Condon and Rasmussen (ABS, 2001). In comparison to Queensland as a whole (Table 1), the Upper Ross has a slightly higher percentage of females, a considerably higher percentage of people under 15 years of age (45.97 %) and an Indigenous population which is almost three times the Queensland average.

**Table 1 Basic demographic data-Upper Ross as compared to Queensland**

Demographic	Upper Ross	Upper Ross population (%)	Queensland	Queensland population (%)
Total Persons	16 118		3 585 639	
Males	7 876	48.86	1 775 554	49.52
Females	8 242	51.14	1 810 085	50.48
Over 15 years	8 709	54.03	2 823 097	78.73
Over 65 years	3 082	19.12	443 105	12.40
Total Indigenous	1 545	9.59	112 772	3.15
Indigenous Over 18	616	3.82	60 353	1.68
Indigenous Under 18	929	5.76	52 419	1.46

Source: ABS (2001)

With regard to ethnicity and cultural diversity, the Upper Ross is considerably different from the Queensland average (Table 2). The Upper Ross is more homogeneous, with a higher percentage of its residents being born in Australia and speaking English as a first language. The larger percentage of Indigenous residents in the area is reflected in the languages spoken at home.

**Table 2 Birthplace, Ancestry, Languages Spoken at Home and Marital Status: Queensland average compared with Upper Ross\***

<b>Birthplace</b>	<b>Queensland average(%)</b>	<b>Upper Ross (Kelso)(%)</b>	<b>Upper Ross a) (Incorporating Condon/Rasmussen)(%)</b>
Australian Born	77.7	85.9	86.4
Born Overseas:	17.2	9.4	9.0
(UK)	5.1	3.6	3.6
New Zealand	3.6	1.9	1.8
	(Germany) 0.6	(Philippines) 0.4	(Philippines) 0.3
<b>Ancestry</b>			
Australian	39.7	49.0	50.8
English	37.7	36.3	34.9
Irish	12.1	10.5	10.4
<b>Language spoken at home</b>			
English	88.5	93.5	93.9
Other	1.0 (Chinese)	0.3 (Italian)	0.6 (Australian Indigenous Languages)
	0.7 (Italian)	0.3 (Australian Indigenous Languages)	0.3 (Italian)
	0.4 (German)	0.3 (German)	0.1 (Tagalog Filipino)

Source: ABS (2001)

Note: a) The statistics cited for Rasmussen and Condon include statistics derived from Thuringowa (C) -Pt A Balance (Statistical Local Area).

The family structure and its functioning are significant factors impinging upon early school leaving patterns (DETYA, 2001) and youth involvement in crime (White, 2003). In comparing the family structure patterns of Upper Ross residents with those of Queenslanders as a whole, there are few significant differences (Table 3).

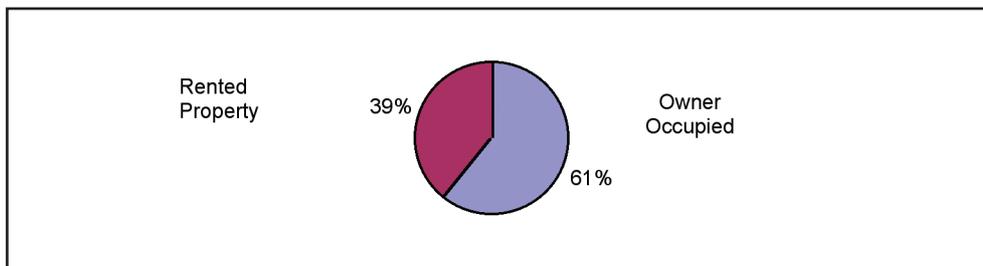
**Table 3 Marital status of persons in the Upper Ross as compared with Queensland**

Marital Status	Queensland average (%)	Upper Ross (Kelso) (%)	Upper Ross a) (Incorporating Condon/Rasmussen) (%)
Married	51.3	54.0	53.3
Separated	3.8	4.3	3.9
Divorced	8.0	6.8	7.7
Widowed	5.8	2.6	3.1
Never Married	31.2	32.4	32.0

Source: ABS (2001)

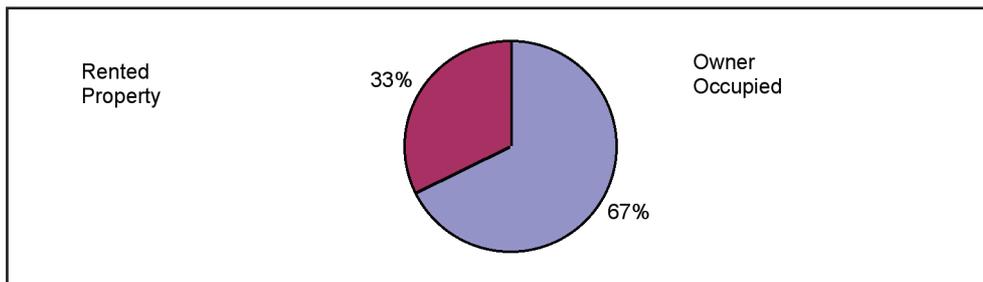
The level of home ownership in the area is lower than average for the state of Queensland (Figure 1, Figure 2).

**Figure 1 Ownership of Dwellings in Upper Ross**



Source: ABS (2001)

**Figure 2 Ownership of dwellings in Queensland**



Source: ABS (2001)

Related to home ownership are the income statistics for the area (Table 4).

**Table 4 Income: Queensland average Income/Rent/Household Size compared with Upper Ross**

	Queensland average	Upper Ross (Kelso)	Upper Ross <sup>a)</sup> (Incorporating Condon/Rasmussen) (%)
Median Weekly Income	\$300-399	\$300-399	\$300-399
Median Family Income	\$800-999	\$800-999	\$800-999
Median Weekly Rent	\$150-199	\$100-149	\$100-149
Mean Household Size	2.6 persons	3.2 persons	3 persons

Source: ABS (2001)

Note: a) The statistics cited for Rasmussen and Condon include statistics derived from Thuringowa (C) -Pt A Balance (Statistical Local Area).

**Table 5 Average weekly income: Upper Ross compared to Queensland average.**

Queensland state average	Kelso	Condon	Rasmussen
<b>\$470</b>	<b>\$450</b>	<b>\$430</b>	<b>\$420</b>

Source: ABS (2001)

The average income figures (Table 5) indicate that whilst weekly income in the Upper Ross is \$20, \$40 and \$50 respectively less than the Queensland state average, the variance as indicated by the median values (Table 4) is quite different for the two sectors. This may mean that there is a greater range of incomes in the Queensland state compared to the Upper Ross area with regard to higher incomes, resulting in a higher average. Alternatively, there may be more low income earners in the Upper Ross compared to the State as a whole. A more precise comparison of incomes across the two areas is beyond the scope of this report. It is noteworthy however that the median rental range is significantly lower in the Upper Ross indicating that there is a narrower and lower range of rental prices in the area compared to the state as a whole. Moreover, the dwellings available are more densely occupied in the Upper Ross, 3.2 and 3 persons respectively compared to 2.6 for the state average.

Educational attainment is another indicator of status and Table 6 compares Upper Ross residents and their educational qualifications to persons in Queensland as a whole. Proportionately, there are nearly twice as many graduates and post-graduates in Queensland as a whole compared to the Upper Ross area.

**Table 6 Level of education, post-secondary qualification: Queensland average compared with Upper Ross**

<b>Qualification</b>	<b>Queensland average (%)</b>	<b>Upper Ross (Kelso) (%)</b>	<b>Upper Ross a) (Incorporating Condon/Rasmussen) (%)</b>
Post-graduate Degree, Graduate Diploma or Graduate Certificate	2.5	1.4	1.1
Bachelor Degree	8.3	5.6	4.9
Advanced Diploma, Diploma or Certificate	21.5	22.1	23.5
No Tertiary Qualification	67.7	71.0	70.5

Source: ABS (2001)

Note: a) The statistics cited for Rasmussen and Condon include statistics derived from Thuringowa (C) -Pt A Balance (Statistical Local Area).

The relative affluence and social mobility of residents of the Upper Ross compared to Queensland as a whole may also be estimated through the types of occupations that they are predominantly employed in (Table 7). As a rule, graduates who comprise professional and managerial positions, tend to receive a higher salary than non-graduates. In the Upper Ross there are proportionately more persons employed as trades-people, clerical and sales assistants and unskilled labourers than is reported for the state of Queensland. Conversely, there is a lower percentage of managers, administrators and professionals in the Upper Ross than is average for the state of Queensland. Unemployment rates are higher in the Upper Ross although these are not significantly higher than the state average (Table 7).

**Table 7 Occupations: Queensland average compared with Upper Ross**

<b>Occupational Categories</b>	<b>Queensland average (%)</b>	<b>Upper Ross (Kelso) (%)</b>	<b>Upper Ross a) (Incorporating Condon/Rasmussen) (%)</b>
Managers and Administrators	8.5	4.7	4.6
Professional	16	11.4	9.8
Associate Professionals	12.0	10.6	11.5
Trades Persons and Related Workers	12.8	16.5	17.7
Intermediate Clerical, Sales and Service Workers	16.9	18.8	18.6
Labourers and Related Workers	9.7	10.1	10.0
<b>Industry of Employment</b>			
Manufacturing	10.7	10.1	10.7
Construction	7.1	9.1	9.6
Retail	15.3	17.2	17.1
Property and Business Services	9.8	7.9	7.5
Education	7.6	8.8	7.1
Health and Community services	9.6	9.3	9.9
<b>Employment Status</b>			
Employed (as % of labour force)	91.8	90.1	91.0
Of which: <i>Full-time</i>	63.9	62.4	64.2
Of which: <i>Part-time</i>	33.0	34.9	32.2
Unemployed	8.2	9.9	9.0

Source: ABS (2001)

Note: a) The statistics cited for Rasmussen and Condon include statistics derived from Thuringowa (C) -Pt A Balance (Statistical Local Area).

A factor that may contribute to the unemployment rates in the Upper Ross may be the issue of transport (Table 8). The fact that there are no available trains and few buses to connect the Upper Ross with other parts of the city may have a significant impact upon the unemployment in the area, particularly for those undertaking employment for the first time, such as the 15-19 year olds.

**Table 8 Method of Travel to Work: Queensland compared with Upper Ross**

Occupational Categories	Queensland average (%)	Upper Ross (Kelso) (%)	Upper Ross a) (Condon/Rasmussen) (%)
Train	1.8	0.0	0.0
Bus	2.4	0.8	0.5
Train and Bus	0.2	0.0	0.0
Car	64.9	72.8	75.7
Bicycle/walk	5.1	2.2	2.4

Source: ABS (2001)

Note: a) The statistics cited for Rasmussen and Condon include statistics derived from Thuringowa (C) -Pt A Balance (Statistical Local Area).

Access to technology was examined as an additional measure of relative affluence. Patterns of home computer use and utilization of the Internet appear to be similar for both Upper Ross residents and for Queenslanders in general (Table 9). Clearly, these statistics do not clarify whether the technology is up-to-date or how it is utilised. Used computers are plentiful and relatively inexpensive. Furthermore, they are a source of entertainment, through games and chat-lines, which may be serving a need in an area where entertainment may be difficult to access due to the expense and availability of public transport (Table 8).

**Table 9 Computer ownership and Internet usage: Queensland compared with Upper Ross**

	Queensland average (%)	Upper Ross (Kelso) (%)	Upper Ross a) (Incorporating Condon/Rasmussen) (%)
Use of a home computer	41.3	43.4	39.9
<b>Use of home computer by age:</b>			
0-19 years	13.9	17.3	15.0
20-44 years	17.3	17.8	17.8
45-65 years	8.8	7.7	6.6
65 plus	1.3	0.6	0.5
Internet use at work	4.6	3.3	3.9
Internet use at home	18.8	19.1	17.4
Internet use elsewhere	3.9	3.7	3.7

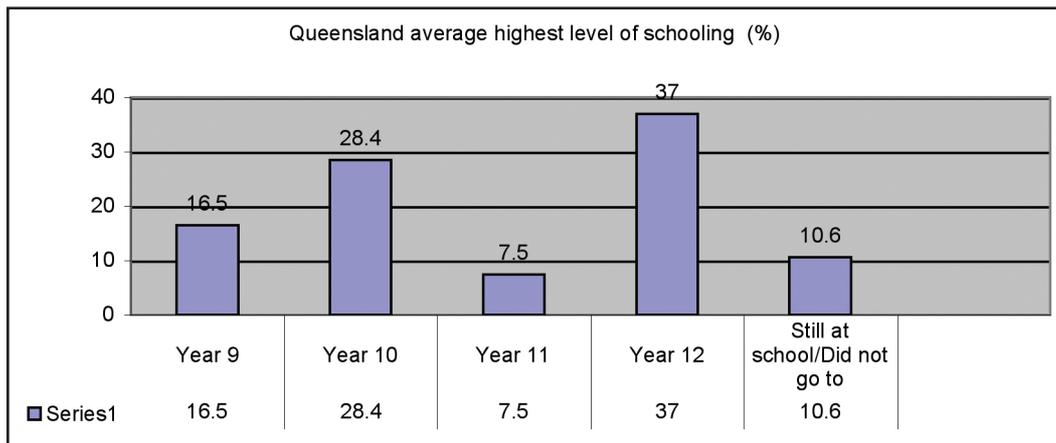
Source: ABS (2001)

Note: a) The statistics cited for Rasmussen and Condon include statistics derived from Thuringowa (C) -Pt A Balance (Statistical Local Area).

### 3.2 Education descriptors

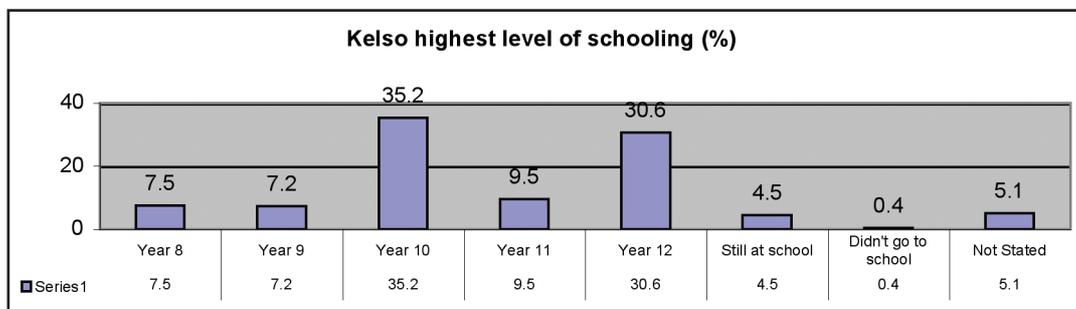
Socio-economic differences between Upper Ross residents and Queensland persons are also related to educational attainment levels. Figures 3, 4, and 5 compare the Queensland average to the various suburbs of the Upper Ross. There is a significantly higher percentage of Upper Ross persons who did not complete Year 12, with Kelso residents having a slightly higher rate of non-completion than Rasmussen and Condon residents.

**Figure 3 Highest level of schooling for persons aged 15 or over: Queensland average.**



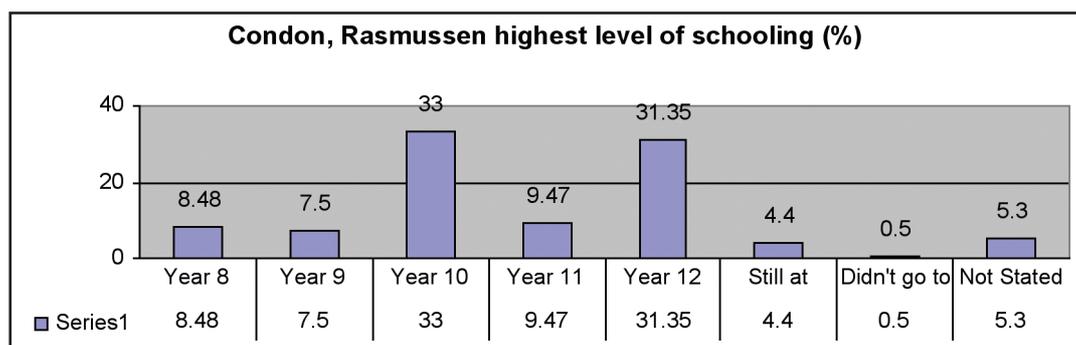
Source: Corporate Data, Education Queensland, 2003

**Figure 4 Kelso highest level of schooling**



Source: Corporate Data, Education Queensland, 2003

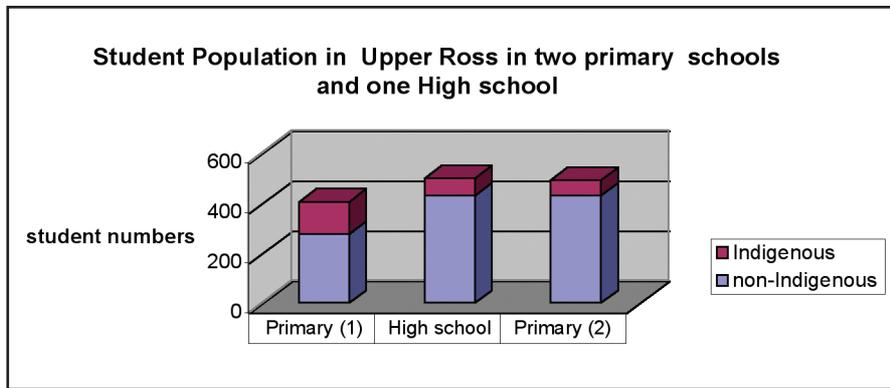
**Figure 5 Condon/Rasmussen highest level of schooling**



Source: Corporate Data, Education Queensland, 2003

School trends in the area including school enrolment continuity, mobility, and apparent progression rates were scrutinized. The data was drawn from three schools, two primary schools and one high school whose 2003 enrolment numbers are shown in Figure 6.

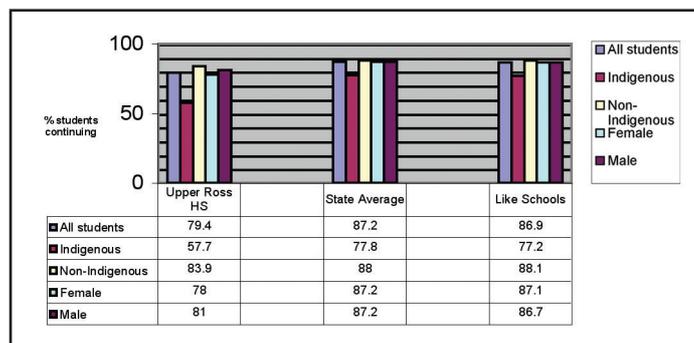
**Figure 6 Student Population in Upper Ross in two primary schools and one high school**



Source: Corporate Data, Education Queensland

School enrolment continuity gives an indication of the rate of student movement within a single year, within a single school. Figure 7 shows that the percentage of students continuing in this school of the Upper Ross is significantly lower for all types of students when compared to Queensland in general and to “like” schools. Indigenous students and female students are especially likely to discontinue their enrolment in this school.

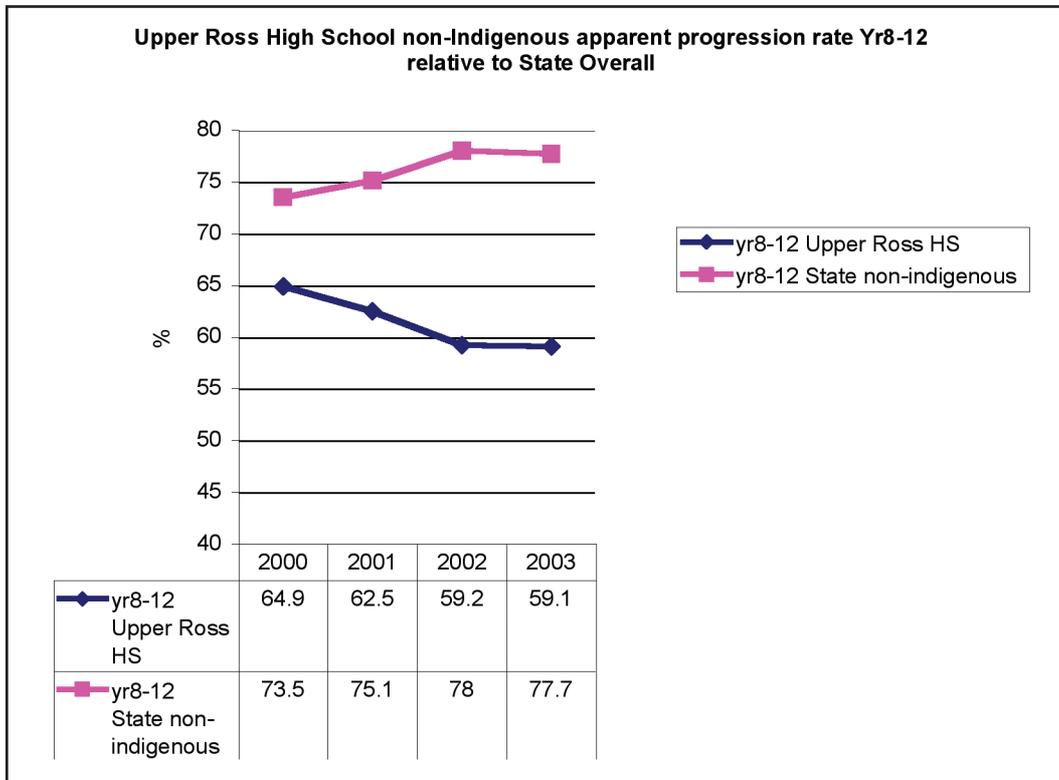
**Figure 7 Upper Ross: school enrolment continuity Feb 2003-July 2003**



Source: Corporate Data, Education Queensland

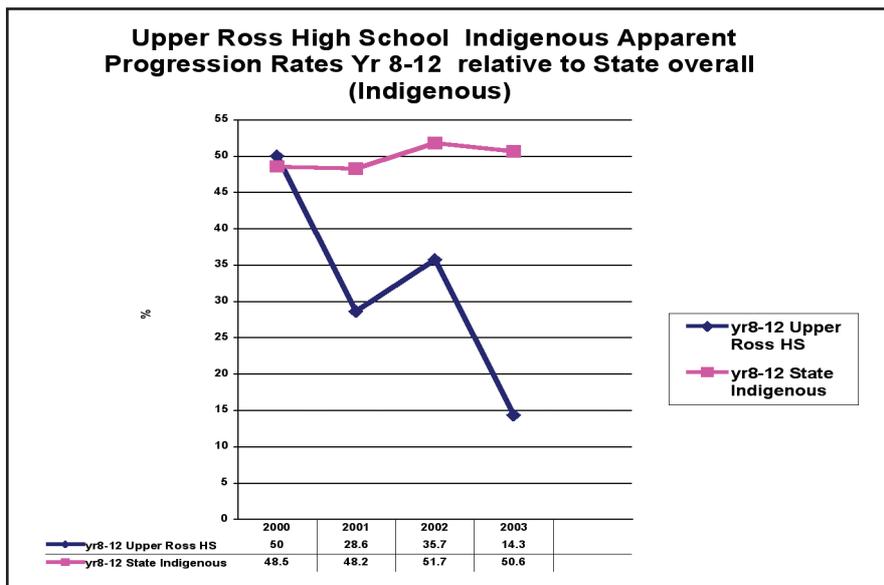
Similar trends are seen when apparent progression trends are examined over a period of time. The apparent progression rate refers to the percentage of students in a Year 8 cohort continuing in the school to complete Year 12. Figures 8 and 9 below show the rates of completion of four different Year 8 cohorts, for non-Indigenous and Indigenous students respectively. In both cases, the rates of Year 12 completion are below the Queensland average for the years 2000-2003 with the rates of completion for Indigenous students being significantly below the state average and showing a decreasing trend (Figure 9).

**Figure 8 Upper Ross High School non-Indigenous apparent progression rate Yr8-12 relative to State Overall**



Source: Corporate Data, Education Queensland, 2003

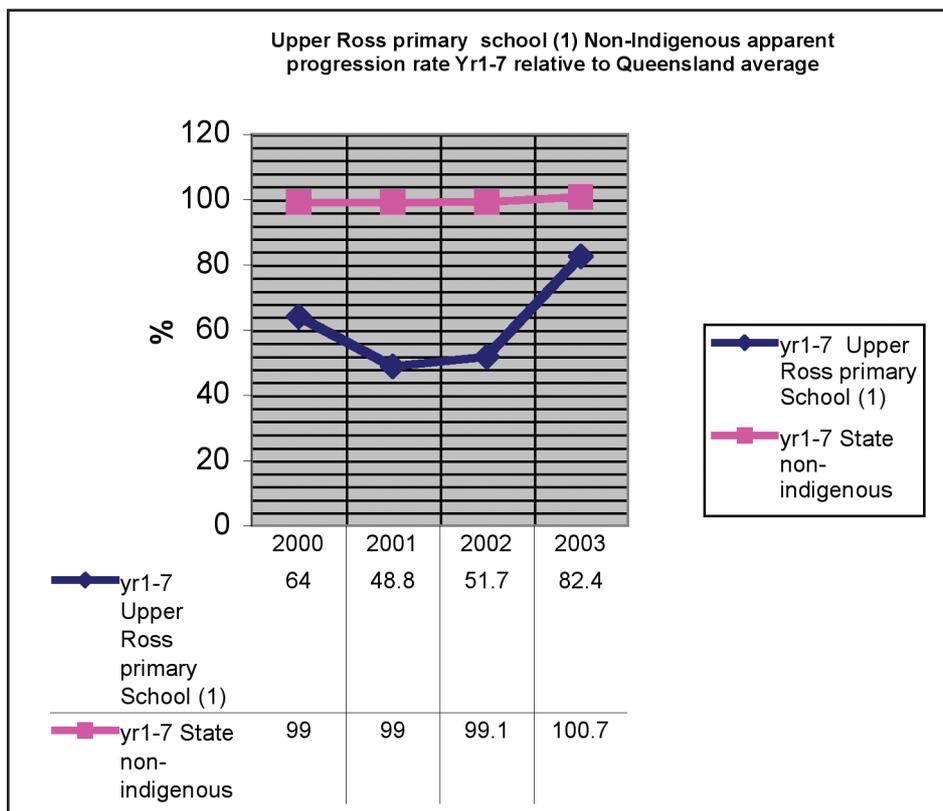
**Figure 9 Upper Ross High School Indigenous Apparent Progression Rates (yr 8-12) relative to State overall Indigenous student progression rate**



Source: Corporate Data, Education Queensland, 2003

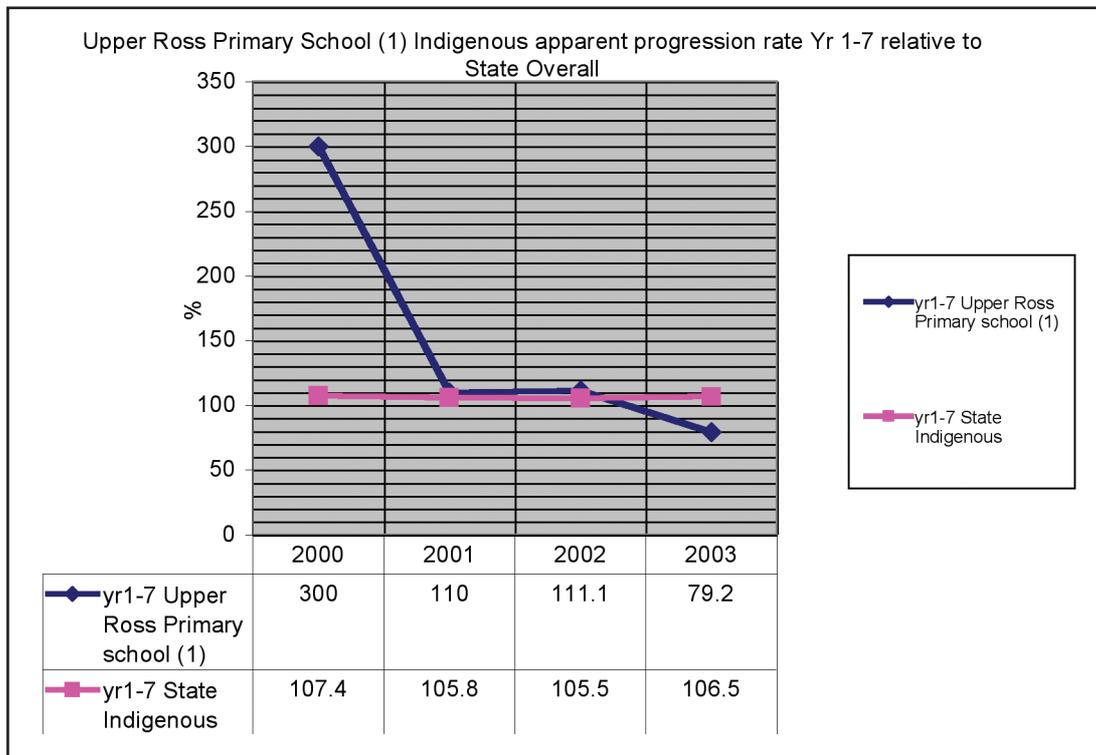
The apparent progression rates for the two primary schools in the Upper Ross show similar trends (Figures 10,11,12, and 13). In all cases the rates of progression fall below Queensland averages, showing relative instability over time.

**Figure 10 Upper Ross primary school- apparent progression rate (non- Indigenous students) relative to Queensland average**



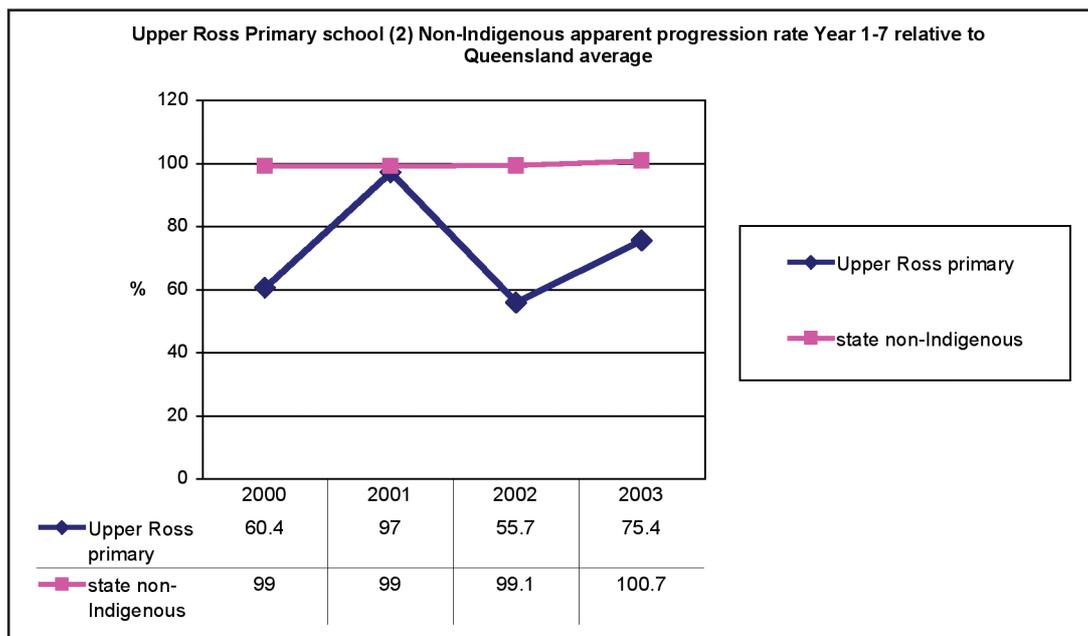
Source: Corporate Data, Education Queensland, 2003

**Figure 11 Upper Ross primary school (1) apparent progression rates (Indigenous students) Year 1-7 compared to state overall.**



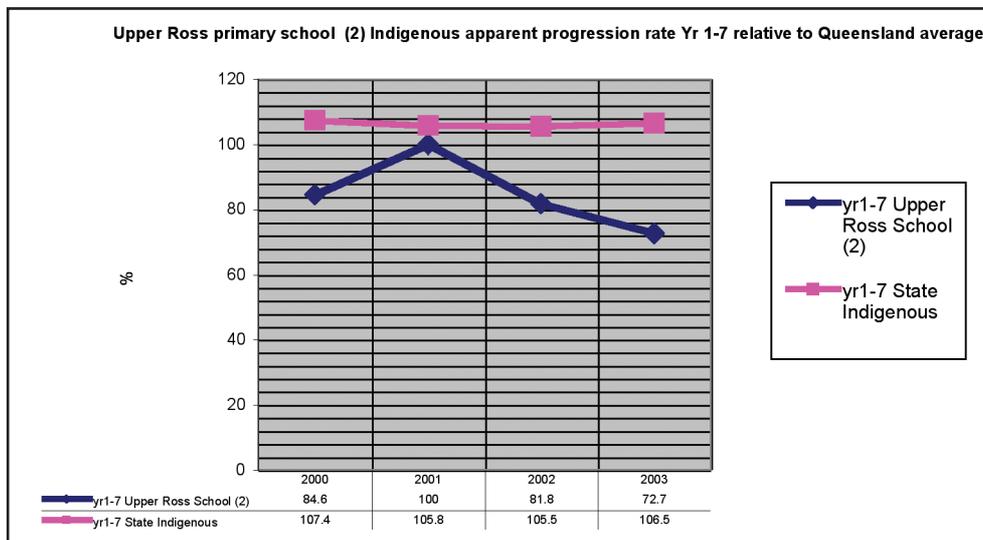
Source: Corporate Data, Education Queensland, 2003

**Figure 12 Upper Ross primary school (2) non-Indigenous apparent progression rates relative to Queensland average.**



Source: Corporate Data, Education Queensland, 2003

**Figure 13 Upper Ross primary school (2) Indigenous apparent progression rates relative to Queensland average.**



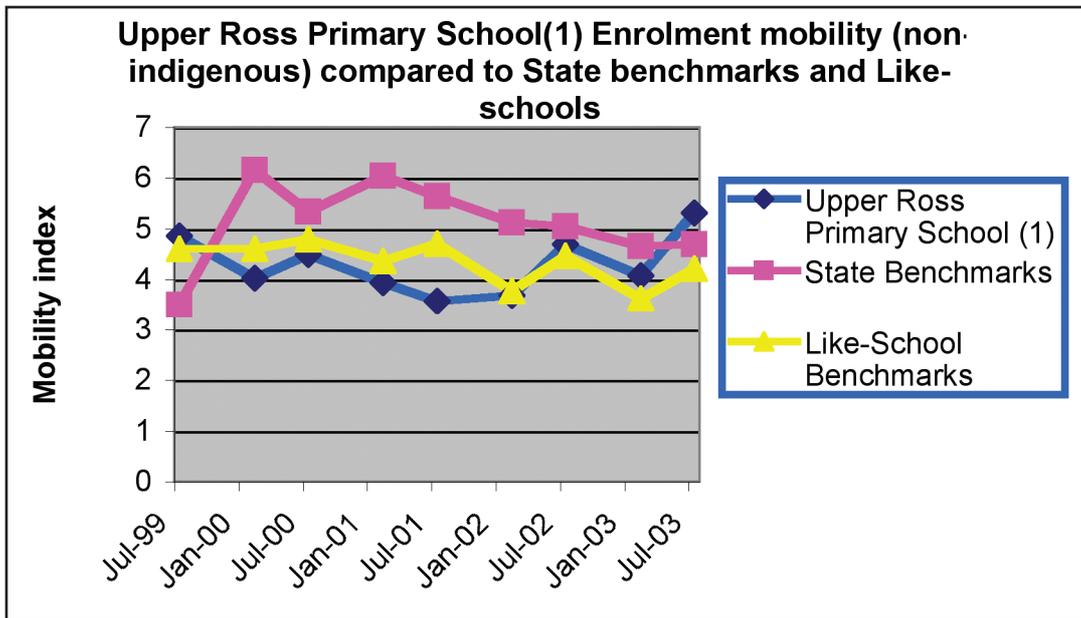
Source: Corporate Data, Education Queensland, 2003

The relative instability in the apparent progression trends may be the outcome of parental searches for work, resulting in family mobility within Queensland. This would be reflected in the mobility patterns shown in the school enrolment statistics. The mobility index used measures the frequency with which a student changes school, with 0 indicating low mobility and 60 indicating very high mobility. This figure is calculated through the student ID that is recorded within the Queensland Education Department and tracks student enrolment movements within this state.

If the mobility index for both of the primary schools (Figures 14, 15, 16, and 17) is equal or below that of like schools and state benchmarks, it may be assumed that the low apparent progression rate could be due to either early leaving from school to another state, or to a private school. The data included here do not cover the requisite period for both sets of data to be comparable, since for the apparent progression rates 2000-2003 the mobility data for the years 1993 onwards would be needed to draw inferences regarding family mobility.

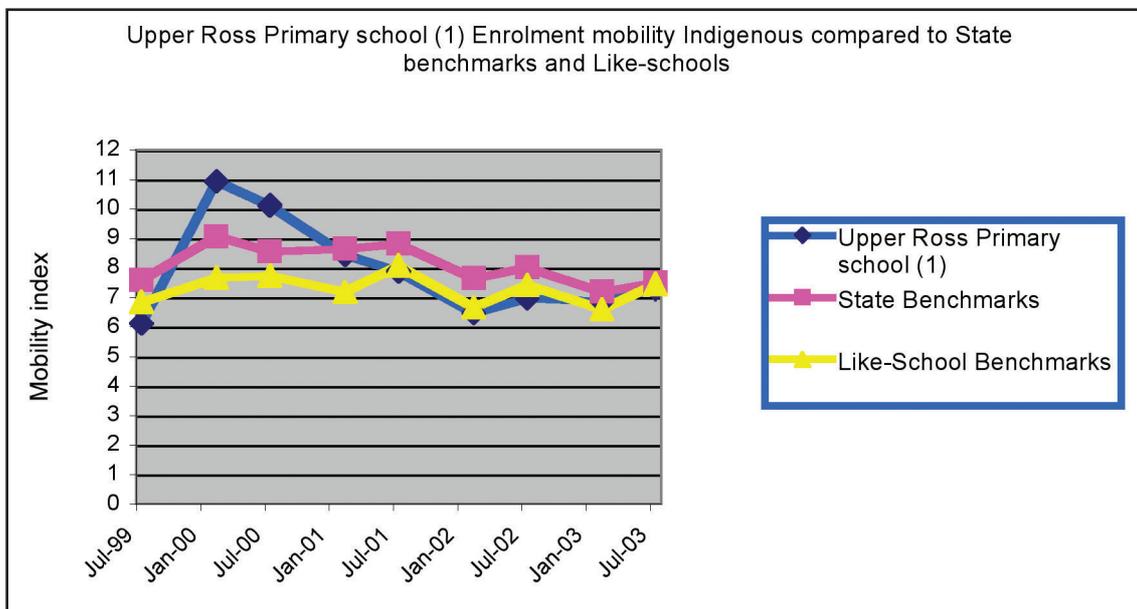
The enrolment mobility of a high school in the Upper Ross however, shows a different picture (Figures 18 and 19). There is considerably higher mobility for Indigenous students in this school than other “like” schools or the state benchmark for Indigenous students. Non-Indigenous students maintain the same patterns of mobility as those in other “like” schools however both are below the state benchmarks.

**Figure 14 Upper Ross Primary (1) Enrolment mobility (non- Indigenous) compared to State benchmarks and like-schools.**



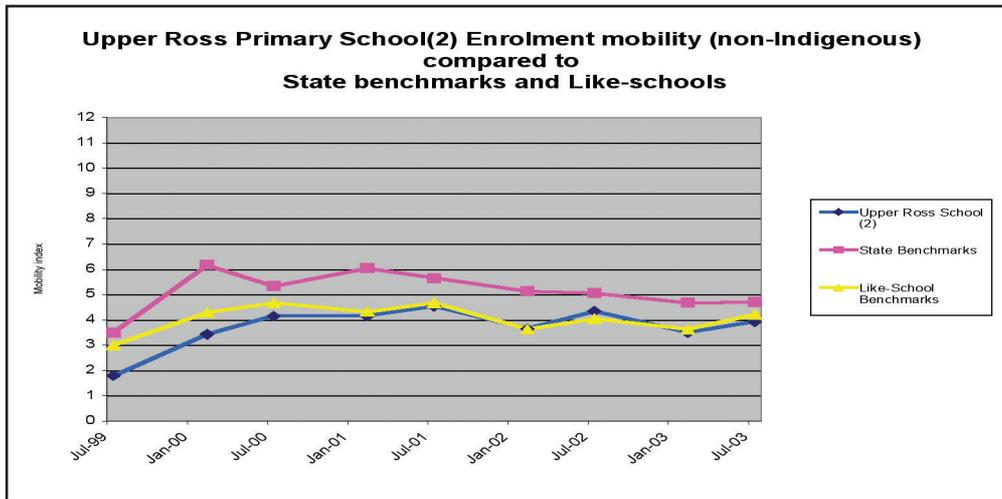
Source: Corporate Data, Education Queensland, 2003

**Figure 15 Upper Ross Primary school (1) enrolment mobility (Indigenous) compared to state benchmarks and like schools.**



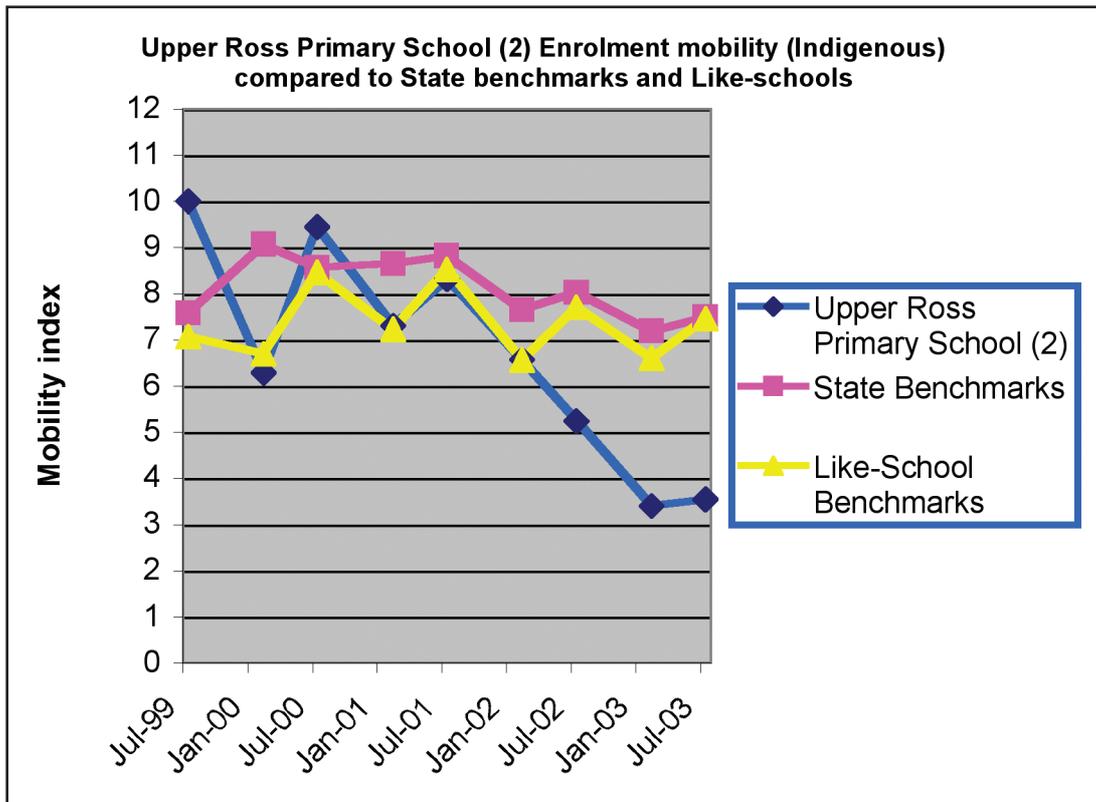
Source: Corporate Data, Education Queensland, 2003

**Figure 16 Upper Ross Primary School (2) Enrolment mobility (non-Indigenous) compared to State benchmarks and like-schools**



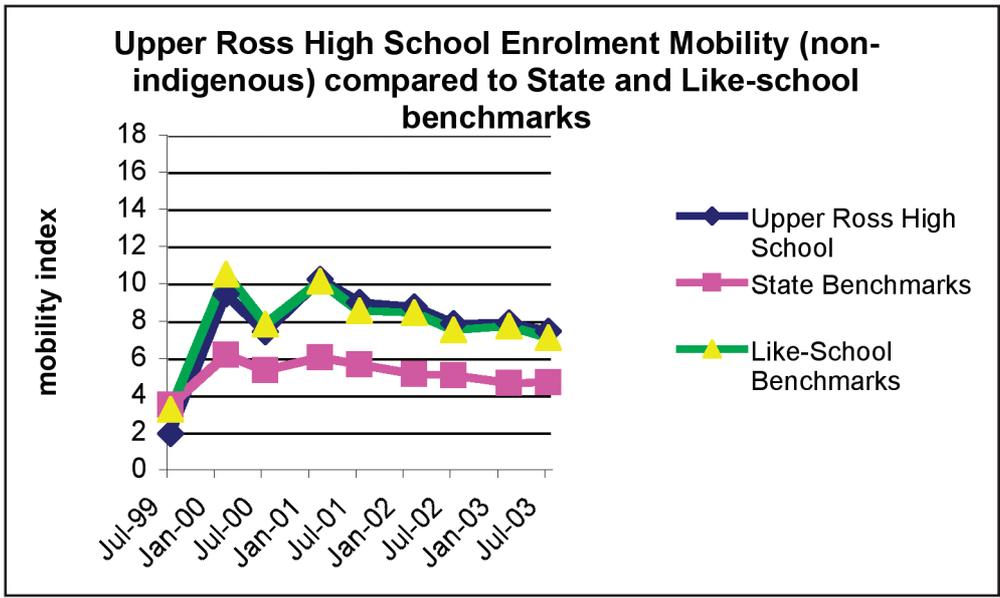
Source: Corporate Data, Education Queensland, 2003

**Figure 17 Upper Ross Primary School (2) Enrolment mobility (Indigenous) compared to State benchmarks and Like-schools**



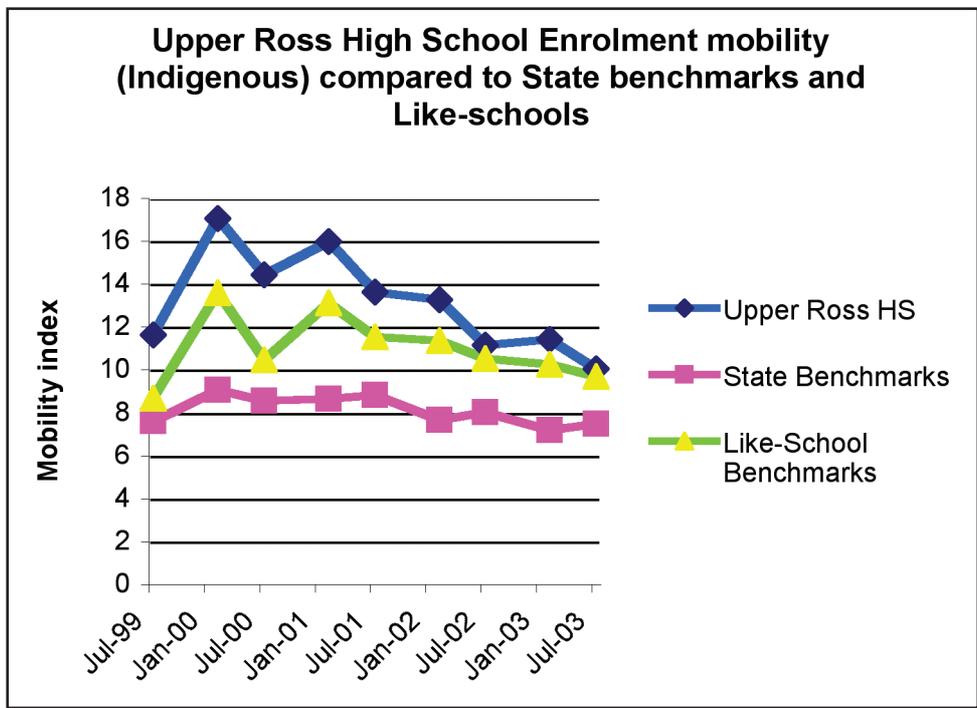
Source: Corporate Data, Education Queensland, 2003

**Figure 18 Upper Ross High School Enrolment Mobility- (non-Indigenous) compared to state and like school benchmarks.**



Source: Corporate Data, Education Queensland, 2003

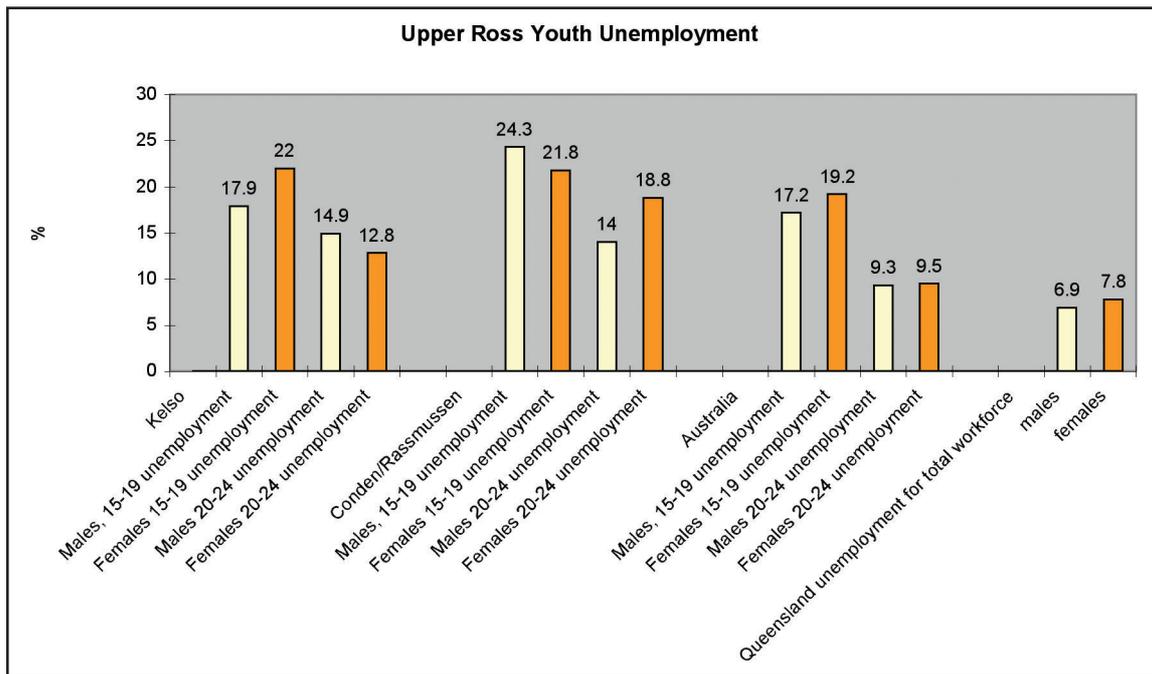
**Figure 19 Upper Ross High School enrolment mobility (Indigenous) compared to state benchmarks and like-schools.**



Source: Corporate Data, Education Queensland, 2003

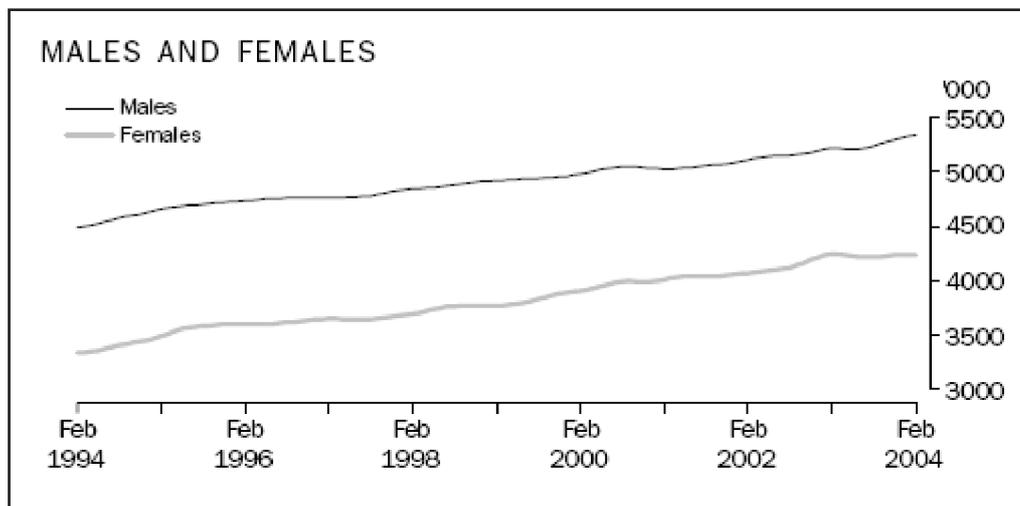
A corollary of the high mobility and early leaving of the students in the Upper Ross area is the rate of youth unemployment in the area. Figure 20 shows that Condon/Rasmussen males in the age range of 15-19 and Kelso females of the same age range have the highest unemployment rates when compared to Australian averages for youth unemployment. In the 20-24 age-groups, Upper Ross young people also show significantly higher rates of unemployment than the corresponding age group across Australia. This is occurring in a climate of decreasing unemployment (Figure 21).

**Figure 20 Upper Ross Youth Unemployment**



Source: ABS (2004)

**Figure 21 Full time employment in Australia.**



Source: ABS (2004)

### 3.3 Crime statistics

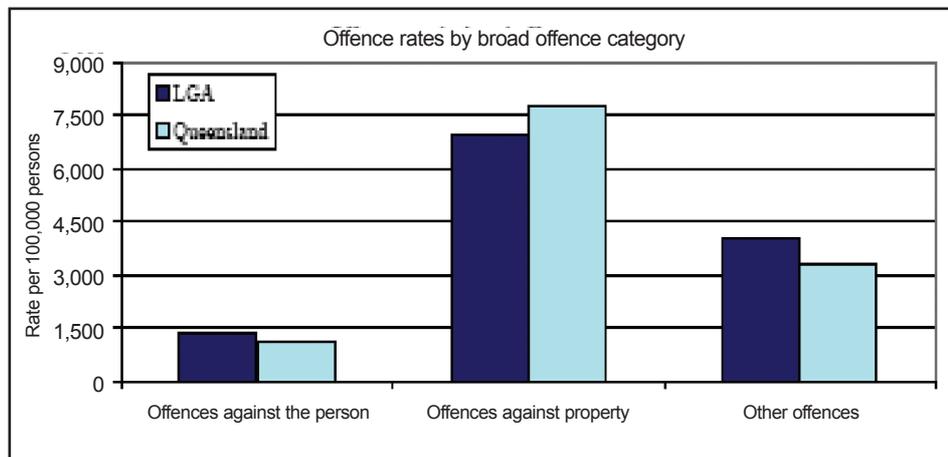
In addition to socio-economic factors, White (2003) lists several factors that enhance anti-social behaviour. Among them are low school commitment and poor academic achievement as well as high residential mobility and poverty. The low student retention rates observed in the Upper Ross, the high student enrolment mobility and the lower than average income levels in the area put the residents of this area at risk for anti-social behaviour.

This has been borne out by statistics on crime levels for the city of Thuringowa (Figure 22).

The overall crime profile of Thuringowa compared to Queensland suggests that offences against the person and "other offences"\* are higher than the Queensland average. Within the category 'crime against the person' (Figure 24), the sub-listing 'other', which is nearly twice as high for Thuringowa, includes 'breach of domestic violence protection orders'. When offences against property are examined in greater detail, (Figure 23) it is clear that stealing from dwellings, property damage and unlawful entry with intent is also higher in Thuringowa than the State as a whole. This seems to indicate that the crime rate in general is higher in Thuringowa than in the State as a whole (Figures 22, 23, and 24). Whilst this cannot be said definitively for the Upper Ross area, since detailed statistics for Upper Ross crime are unavailable, it may be assumed that the Upper Ross reflects the same general trends as the rest of the city of Thuringowa.

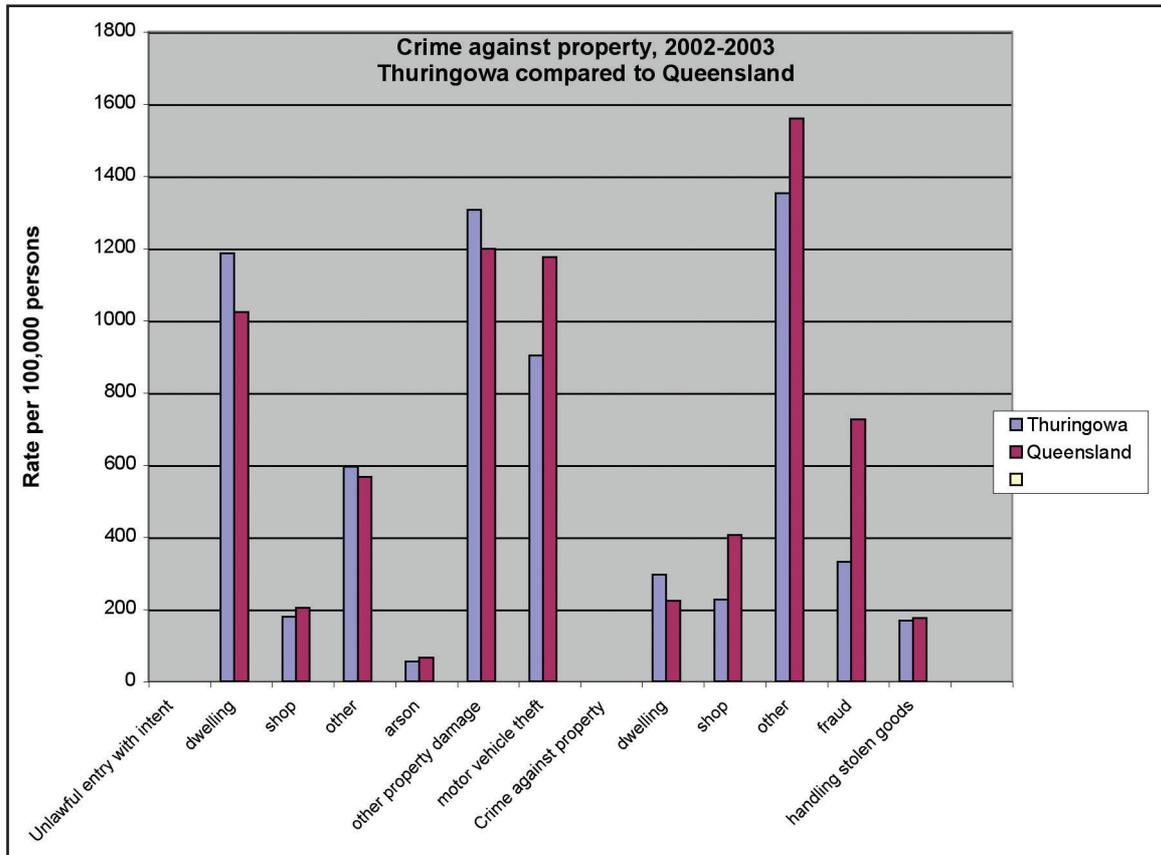
\* Other offences include prostitution offences, drug offences, liquor offences, good order offences and stock related offences.

**Figure 22 Local Area Crime Summary, 2002- 2003**



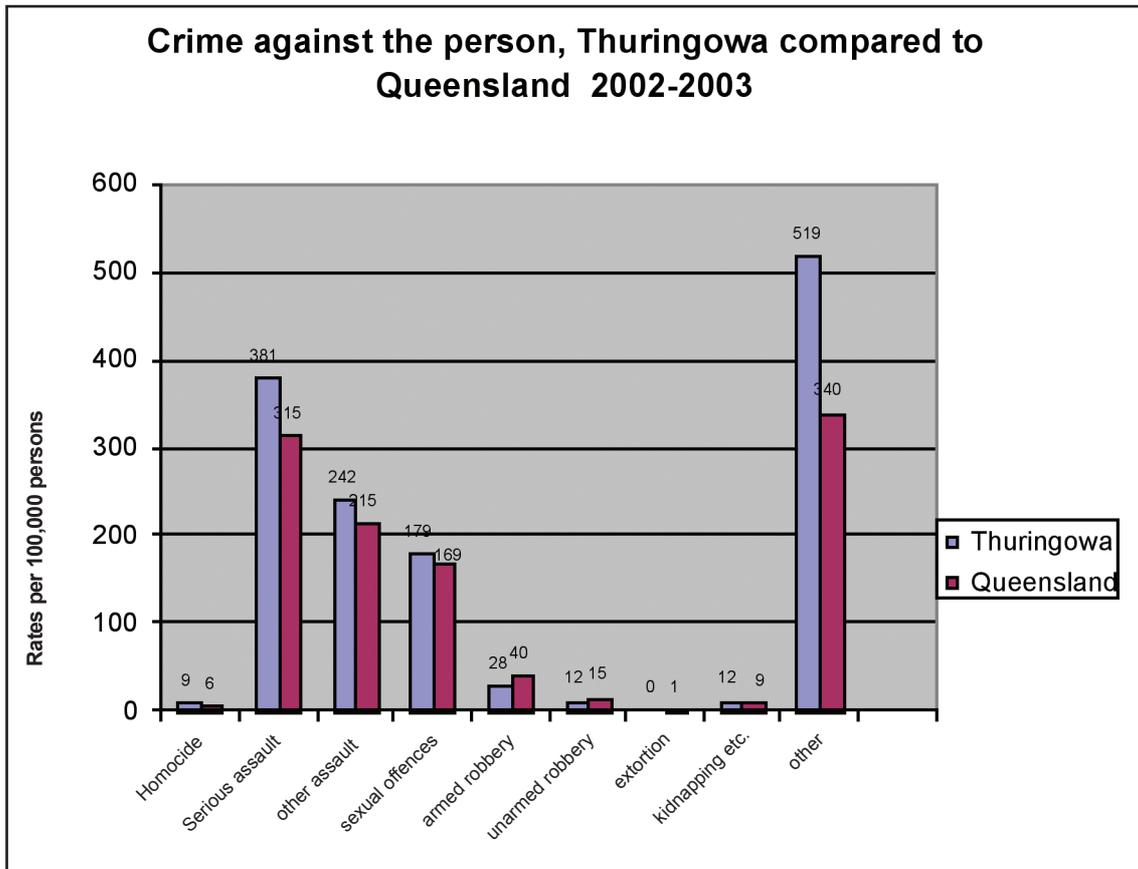
Source: Queensland Police. All analyses have been undertaken by OESR

Figure 23 Crime against property, 2002-2003. Thuringowa compared to Queensland



Source: Queensland Police. All analyses have been undertaken by OESR

Figure 24 Crime against the person, Thuringowa compared to Queensland 2002-2003



Source: Queensland Police. All analyses have been undertaken by OESR

### 3.4 Summary

The Upper Ross area within the city of Thuringowa is an area where residents have lower levels of income than the state average. The level of school completion and higher educational attainment is lower and there is a high enrolment discontinuity and mobility among school students. The local population is considerably younger and less diverse than the state average and comprises of a higher percentage of Indigenous persons. The significant youth unemployment in the area is coupled with a crime rate that is higher than that found in other parts of the state.

# 4 Disengagement in the Upper Ross

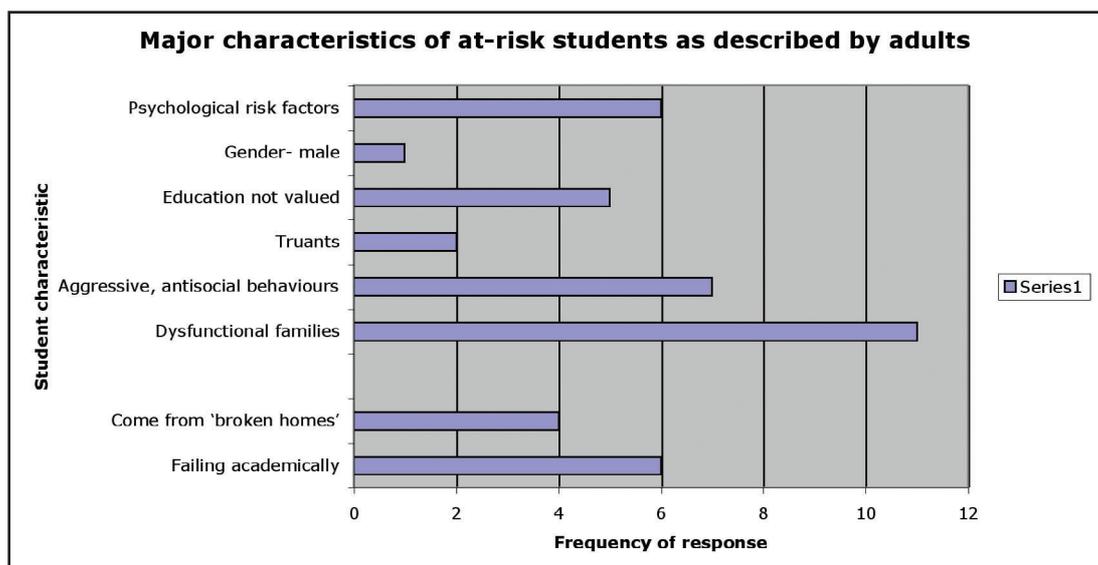
This section firstly reviews the interview data with a range of adults in the Upper Ross. These informants, teachers, school administrators, youth workers, and school support staff identify the factors they perceive to be of significance in educational disengagement and also discuss their views on suitable strategies to re-engage students.

## 4.1 Factors relating to educational disengagement-adult views

Adult personnel working with young people in the Upper Ross described the major characteristics of students who were 'at-risk' of early school leaving. Factors relating to the home, including education not valued, broken homes and dysfunctional families including responses such as poor parenting, and having multiple parents were most commonly discussed as the features of 'at-risk' students.

Behavioural attributes of students, such as low-self esteem, truancy, and aggressive behaviours were also identified as clear risk factors. Male students were also identified more frequently as likely to be 'at-risk'. School based factors were also noted as significant, including school performance. These major characteristics are summarised in Figure 25.

**Figure 25 Major characteristics of at-risk students as described by adults**



Out-of-school factors dominated respondents' views about other defining characteristics as summarised in Figure 26. Family poverty, inadequate parental supervision, parent illness and child abuse were identified as clear indicators of 'at-risk' students. Transport problems along

with drug and alcohol misuse either by the young person or their family were less frequently noted but still identified as factors. Two teachers noted student mobility between schools as a factor.

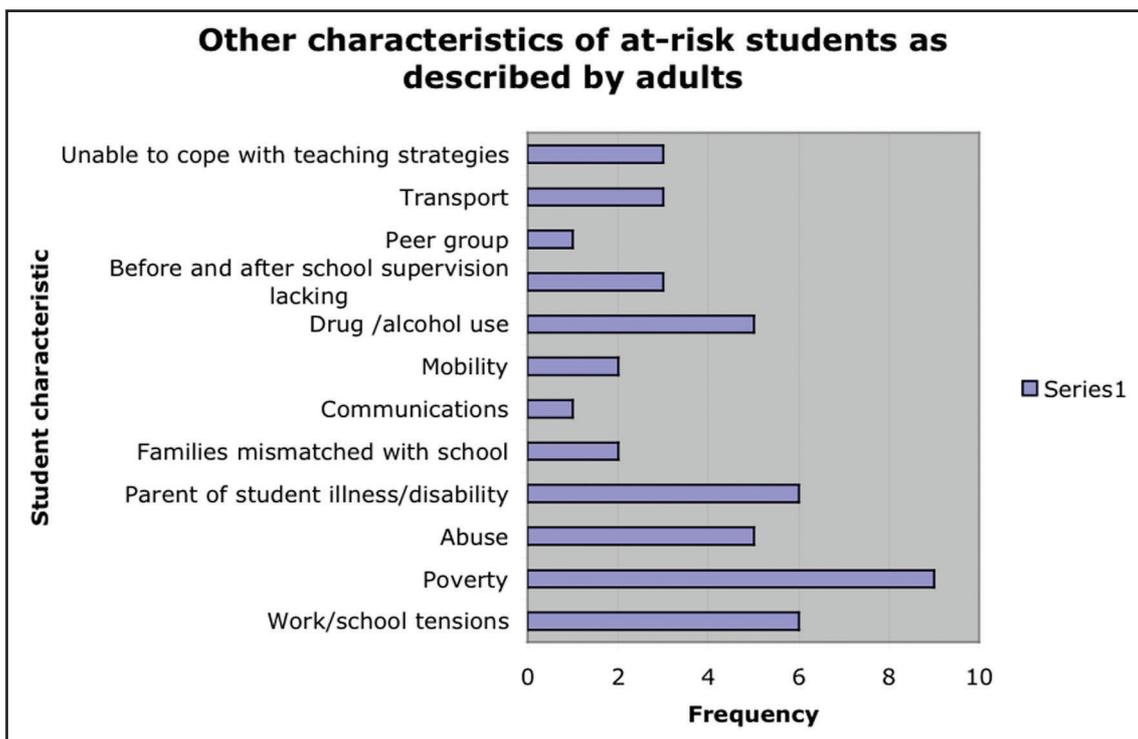
Several teachers noted the increasing problem of young people balancing school and work. Many young people were described as having part-time employment of 25 hours or more. As one teacher commented,

*“some kids having a lot of difficulty balancing school work and work”*

In-school factors such as a decreased ability to respond to a variety of teaching methods, poor peer group selection, and school home communication problems were also discussed by the adult respondents. The clash of school and home culture typified the communication issues discussed by teachers.

*“I think there can be a clash of cultures between the reality of these people, these kids lives, and the sort of life we expect them to come with when they come to school, which is, fairly loosely, middle class”*

**Figure 26 Other characteristics of at-risk students as described by adults**



The adult interviewees were asked to identify critical incidents that might also contribute to student disengagement. Responses included racism experienced in the school or wider community, bullying in the school or suicide attempts of young people or their peers. Family crises were also described as linked to school disengagement and early leaving. A youth worker describes a family crisis

*"She [student] was living independently because she was having ongoing conflict with her mother. That was probably happening for most of Year 11. At the end of Year 11, she's finally, after going through all the hurdles of being homeless and sleeping on the rotating couches of different families and friends and accessing a lot of services and support, trialing going back to mum and it's not working"*

Police workers and school counsellors also described involvement in crime, particularly vandalism as commonly linked to disengagement.

## 4.2 Adult actions to address disengagement.

Respondents were asked to identify how they responded **individually** to students identified as 'at-risk'. All respondents could describe a range of individual actions they have used with "at-risk" students. Building relationships was given critical importance by a number of respondents.

*"I find trying to build rapport with them is the best way to go".*

*"Yeah that relationship-building within the school for the young people so that they feel that sense of belonging"*

Teachers from a Catholic school described the use of teachers' first names as an important relationship building tool.

*"The referral to teachers on a first name basis [...] fosters a warmer and closer teacher-student relationship"*

Associated with relationship building, the teacher's choice of behaviour management strategy was seen to have a strong relationship to student disengagement. One teacher discussed the suitability of management theorist Bill Rogers, noting that his strategies were most appropriate for young people in general and young people at-risk.

*" I am a devotee of Rogers and I do employ those sorts of management skills".*

Respondents were asked to identify **school-based actions** that they viewed as possibly addressing disengagement. Youth workers identified success through the use of modified programs, including quite dramatically different attendance patterns and curriculum.

*"Providing more flexible options would be one way"*

*"they've had her on a modified program for quite a period of time where she goes to school one lesson "*

Linked to modified programs, the ability to manage students individually, through a case management approach was seen as successful. Such modifications could include significant changes to curriculum, including alternative programs and appropriate adjustments to the timetable.

*"an alternative curriculum available to them. More off-school training opportunities for them....a flexible timetable"*

Curriculum projects that appeal to different genders and student interest were also seen as valuable.

*"cooking, composing pop songs, use of computers"*

*"she was given jobs to do and that seemed to engage her"*

*"the Annual Theatre Restaurant"*

In addition, programs aimed at parents were also regarded as successful.

*"The PPP parenting program... and an alternative program running at two levels in the school and we basically did that when we had our transition program between preschool and year 1, which has now become the Prep year"*

Respondents described developing systematic approaches to communicating with the families of 'at-risk' students as an important strategy. Problems were seen to arise when school administration and teaching staff had different understandings with relation to young peoples needs.

*"sometimes there's a bit of a lack of information from Admin to teachers with regard to specific problems, or what's being done".*

Systematic responses to community poverty were described as vital. Strategies used by schools included breakfast clubs and a free uniform pool. The ability to provide subsidies or waive fees was desirable but not always possible.

Ultimately, the most important intervention described by the research participants related to additional human resources and the ongoing professional development of school personnel as essential. Schools described the support provided by youth workers, police liaison officers and chaplains and Indigenous liaison officers. One respondent identified the recent introduction of a home-school liaison officer as highly valuable. Other respondents identified locations where a range of personnel was in place, offering services that were not available in the Upper Ross. These included full-time transition officers and full-time career guidance counselors.

*"I've worked in other places where there have been full time transition officers in a school. Marrying the school to work. So that, here's a kid who isn't going to academically achieve, so what training courses can we put them into . . . and follows them through".*

Several respondents raised concerns about the lack of professional development for staff working with young 'at-risk' people. These included concerns that some staff were not interested in working with 'at-risk' young people. As one respondent noted,

*"at times I've been in staff rooms that are actually quite toxic in terms of believing in kids. I think things like professional development are the key to turning that around."*

## **4.3 Young peoples' views-factors relating to student disengagement**

Interviews with young people using both focus group and individual interviews revealed many factors related to disengagement. The young people described their family background, household circumstances, schooling, and any work or employment related experiences either from role models of parents or their own work experience. From these discussions, profiles of young people were developed and are included below. The selection of profiles link to the statistical data that highlight the characteristics of students with low apparent retention rates to Year 12, including Indigenous young people and students with criminal history.

### **4.3.1 Young people who have left school or attend in a limited capacity.**

The first three profiles are summaries of young people who have left school or are attending school in a limited capacity. All three young people live or lived in single parent families with limited household resources. All three have been suspended from school on a variety of occasions. School mobility is a feature for these young people with Kim (profile 1) attending eight schools. None of these young people have a work role model or have experiences in work places. All describe negative experiences of school but stress the importance of their relationships with some teachers. Interestingly, these three young people are able to describe their career aspirations, but in interview were unable to articulate the direction to their aspired path and were unaware of where they might seek assistance. Bryce (profile 3) is able to map out an education plan with the support of a youth worker. Critical incidents including abuse, drug use and violence at school appear to play a major role in these young peoples' early school leaving.



## Profile 1: Kim 16 years old - no longer at school

### School History

Kim has attended 7 primary schools in 7 years from Mt Isa to Townsville and then one high school in Townsville, which she left at the end of Year 10. She tried some study at TAFE through a work initiation program but this did not work out for here.

Kim describes being suspended 4 times - for fighting, truancy and not handing in a DOB [daily overview of behaviour] sheet. She has also been sent to the Special Education unit when her behaviour was too disruptive. She left school at the end of year 10

### Family Structure

Kim lives with her mother generally but also has lived since leaving school for some periods with her father in Rockhampton. She has also spent time with other relatives.

### Household Resources

Kim states that her mother couldn't really help her with her homework because the work was too hard and her mother had left school at Year 10. Kim has limited access to computers or technical resources. Printing out assignments at school was deemed too expensive.

### School Experiences

Kim describes two teachers who were very good "dippy" These teachers were always full of excitement. Most of her teachers however did not appear interested in helping her or in her view answered inappropriately.

*[No] because I was sitting right at the back and no one took notice, he was just standing behind me and then I was just really confusing the answers and I said "can you help me?" and he told me the answer. . And it just sort of scared me a bit because I never liked male teachers that much from that day. Scared me a bit.*

### Work Experience

Kim has done work experience in a car and truck repair facility. She was only able to attend as the boss came and picked her up each day. She has done no paid work, but has applied for a job at KFC and never heard back. She has worked at the Townsville show.

### Interests

Kim likes rugby union, darts, and BMX bikes; She likes hanging around the skate park.

### Critical Incidents

Kim describes becoming involved with peers who had big problems and then getting into drugs.

*Oh, I didn't actually - I used to like sit there confused on this problem and they'd be all like helping everyone else and I'd ask for help and they'd like ignore me and work with other people . . . and then hanging round all my friends, they sort of had all the big problems. . And then I started getting into the drugs and all that sort of stuff, so that really seriously messed up my life real badly.*

### Aspirations

Kim describes wanting to work around cars and get an apprenticeship of some sort.



## Profile 2: Lyn 14 years old - attending school in limited capacity

### School History

Moved from Southern Queensland to Townsville in Year 6. Lyn commenced high school at one school and has now moved to a different school. Currently allowed to attend school only one hour per day.

Recalls sport at primary school as a highlight. Lyn was suspended 4 times at her first secondary location.

### Family Structure

Lyn lives with her mother only.

### Household Resources

Resources for buses, homework etc are described as minimal.

### School Experiences

Lyn expresses concern about teachers' interactions in classroom, including what she feels is inappropriate touching. In addition Lyn expresses concern about her lack of access to computing facilities and the negative impact this has on her work.

*And I couldn't do it cos there was one more question there and I couldn't answer it cos there was nothing on the net about it. And when I asked the question of one of my other maths [persons of today], he said "there's no such thing". There was, I forget the word, it's a really long word, and I got a fail for it, cos I didn't have it, and that was the only thing I didn't have on it.*

Lyn is currently not provided with any schoolwork to do even though she is attending in a limited capacity. Lyn has been suspended for continual violence and problems interacting on a social level with her peers. In addition she cites the wearing of her nose ring, answering the teacher back. Most days she describes as receiving an internal suspension.

### Work Experience

Lyn is too young to have had structured work experience but has helped her mother out with her work-cleaning.

### Interests

Watching TV, bowling are described as interests.

### Critical Incidents

*Yeah, well everywhere I went I got teased. . and it was so annoying because I mean everywhere I went they'd go "hey how're you going fatty" and that and it really annoyed me. I mean, there's other people out there way fatter than me.*

Lyn describes an incident on a bus that has left her unwilling to travel by bus (the bus crashed into a car).

### Aspirations

Lyn describes always wanting to be a forensic scientist, as she enjoys TV programs that include such roles. She talks about needing to get into the police force first.



## Profile 3: Bryce 17 years old - no longer attending school

### School History

Bryce attended at least 4 primary schools in the Townsville district that he can recall and also one just outside of Townsville. He explains that the moves were related to housing problems experienced by his mother. He commenced high school and attended the same school for 4 years before expulsion.

### Family Structure

Bryce lives with his mother. He also has a close relationship with his Nanna.

### Household Resources

Bryce receives a study allowance and from this pays board to his mother. He has very little disposable income.

### School Experiences

Bryce expresses disappointment at the resources and learning environment of the schools he attended. He comments that in his view teachers did not have adequate resources. He describes his dissatisfaction with the teaching style

*it was like real boring. All we had to do was sit in a classroom and listen to the teacher write on the board.*

Bryce was disciplined on numerous occasions at school - for swearing, and later expelled for a criminal matter. He also describes truanting. Bryce does state that studying hospitality was the highlight of high school. Bryce describes using the guidance officer consistently but often had to wait over 1 week for an appointment. He also describes the school nurse as 'real helpful'.

### Work Experience

Bryce does not recall anyone at school discussing school-based apprenticeships. In Year 10 Bryce had work experience in a bowling alley as a sales person. He explains that he did not get a good report. Bryce has held a part-time job as a trolley collector for 2-3 weeks but he describes that as boring and states he got "the sack".

### Interests

Bryce describes going to the Strand and shopping as interests in addition to participating in youth workers' activities.

### Critical Incidents

Criminal charges for stealing and break and enter resulted in a referral to the Youth Support workers who Bryce describes as invaluable in providing support (personal and career). Bryce appears to have suffered serious abuse immediately prior to the criminal offences.

### Aspirations

Bryce describes an interest in hospitality but now he has refocused on horticulture as a result of meeting a teacher.

*Just the meeting the teacher. I got real interested in. they started saying what we would be doing, I'm like, "this sounds fun. I'm gonna do it"*

Bryce suggests that in 2 years time he will be working in the meatworks. He imagines this will lead to a later career in Woolworths/Coles.

### 4.3.2 Young people in Year 11

The next five profiles portray a range of young people currently in Year 11. Each has struggled or is currently struggling to remain in school, but at the same time express a resignation to continue. With the exception of Kate (profile 4) each has attended a number of schools with parental movement both inter and intrastate. Parents seeking employment or suitable and affordable housing are the common explanations for mobility for these young people.

While Kate has not moved schools, she has struggled to remain in school because of problems associated with housing, particularly finding appropriate housing. Similarly, Rachel, (profile 8) has struggled in secondary school to find suitable accommodation after a major breakdown in relationships with her mother. For Kate, Rayna (profile 5) and Cameron (profile 6), family life has involved significant caring responsibilities - for a parent with a disability, a brother with a disability and younger siblings. The impact of this responsibility on school engagement varies but is significant for each. Kate has had to leave home as she is unable to continue to care for her mother, Rayna speaks of spending a lot of time assisting her mother with her brother and Cameron describes his obligations to his younger siblings.

While caring responsibilities are significant for three of these students, four can describe a significant adult in their life who is encouraging them to complete Year 12. For Rayna, Cameron and David (profile 7) the significant adult is their mother. For Kate, who is unable to continue to live at home, the significant adult is now a teacher, who is also providing accommodation for her on the proviso that she completes Year 12 and attends school regularly. In addition to describing a need to complete Year 12, these young people also describe some career aspirations that are now seemingly unattainable, including professional aspirations (lawyer and psychologist) and vocational careers (butcher and child-care worker). Further to these statements of potential careers however, concrete descriptions of steps to attain their goals are limited and none have used the services of the guidance officers in the school to seek further information about careers.

Absenteeism is a serious issue for four of these young people. Motivation to attend school is low, with absenteeism as high as 68 days in one semester, rendering virtually impossible satisfactory school achievement. For four of these young people, homework is rarely completed. Lack of engagement with the school through high levels of absenteeism correspond with a limited sense of belonging to the school environment and these young people comment on their lack of enjoyment of lunch time and recess breaks.



## Profile 4: Kate 16 years old - currently in Year 11

### School History

Kate has been in Townsville for all her schooling and attended 1 primary school and 1 secondary school.

### Family structure

Kate has a mother with a disability who is no longer able to care for her. Housing has been a major crisis for Kate, as she moves from one refuge to another.

### Household resources related to school

Kate is no longer living at home. Household resources were very limited when she did live at home. She now lives with a teacher, who has agreed to have her as long as she attends school and works consistently.

### Current school experience

Kate has recently returned to Year 11 after leaving school briefly. She is involved with netball and this is a major interest both in and out of school. She also enjoys Legal Studies. She does not use the after school study program because she prefers to study alone.

She finds it difficult to get support following absences.

*"yeah, I know I need to catch up, but I need to know what we've done, so that I can . ." ... because there was other student . . I didn't have anyone to ask to catch up and I actually needed to get things from her, like, resources like sheets and stuff that she'd given out.*

### Work experience

Kate did work experience in a pre-school and currently has a part-time job, which she has held for 11 months.

### Interests

Kate has a major interest in netball.

### Critical incidents

Absence and school reactions

*I actually had a teacher tell me that, because I was away, that was my fault that I didn't know what I was doing and it wasn't her responsibility to stay after class or after school.*

Lack of understanding by staff

*basically when I decided that I maybe wanted to leave school is because I didn't feel that teachers understood where I was at, because at the time I was living independently and I just didn't feel that they knew, like they understood what I needed . . . because of the fact that I couldn't, that I wasn't the same as all the other students . . . sometimes I needed extra help because I would miss days for appointments or things like that and with the school, they said that I could write my own letters and that if I'm away, but really they want proof, and sometimes you cant give them proof .*

### Aspirations

Kate can articulate a number of post-school plans. At the moment she is thinking of doing a psychology degree. She is thinking of taking a year off from school when she finishes before making a decision about her next step

*I did once have a plan. I did once think that I would like to become a teacher.*



## Profile 5: Rayna 16 years old - currently Year 11

### School History

Rayna commenced school in Victoria then moved between Townsville until Year 9. She has attended three secondary schools in Townsville. She commenced at the Upper Ross High School in Year 10, but this year missed the first term of school - attending another school.

### Family Structure

Rayna is from a single parent family, lives with mother, sister (aged 10), brother (19) who is disabled

She spends a lot of time assisting her brother. Her mother does not work but would like to. The family is of low socio-economic status.

### Household Resources

Rayna's family has limited resources and disposable income. There is no home computer. Rayna has a set place to do homework at the kitchen table. Her mother gives support with homework, but Rayna does not regularly do her homework.

### Current School Experiences

In term 2 she misses 2-3 days per week and she explains that she will not go to school if she does not like particular subjects. She does have one teacher that she likes. She doesn't like any teachers because they just walk away and do not give her help. The only teacher she likes is the Early Childhood Practice Teacher who gives her help and talks to her outside of class

*" Like if we're doing... our work, she'll .. we'll put up our hand and stuff, and she'll come over and help us. She's not like the other teachers- they'll just say something to you and walk away".*

Her mother has contacted the school about Rayna receiving assistance but Rayna says the request has been ignored. Currently enrolled in lower strand non-board subjects such as Consumer Maths. She has a small circle of peers.

### Work Experience

Rayna has limited work experience but did work for the Cowboys Football Club in the bar and food stalls during one season. She had one school related work experience in a bakery in Townsville

### Interests

Rayna is not in any form of organised sport and does not play sport at school or at school level. She enjoys walking, going to the beach, jogging, having friends over for sleepovers. She likes to sit in the bedroom listening to music

### Critical Incidents

While Rayna likes some of her peers she says she has been the victim of bullying from other peers at her current school.

Last month she was punched by another girl and called "white trash". She does not know what prompted the incident but she is now wary about going to the toilets alone.

She has been suspended on two occasions for swearing while at Victorian schools and she has been on internal suspension for racist taunts.

### Aspirations

Rayna would like to work as a childcare worker but does not know how to go about applying for the relevant course.

Her goal is to complete year 12 and become a childcare worker. Rayna knows who the school counsellor is but has never spoken to her. She has never received any information about the childcare course or entry requirements.



## Profile 6: Cameron 16 years old currently Year 11

### School History

Cameron began his education in Mt Isa for years one and two. His family transferred to Townsville where he attended a primary school from years three to seven. He enrolled in one secondary school for year 8 then moved to another Upper Ross secondary for year 9 and 10. He has attended his current school since year 10. He explains his moves in secondary schools as related to friends-when his friends were expelled from one secondary school - Cameron moved as well.

### Family Structure

Cameron lives in rented accommodation with his mother, grandmother and grandfather. Cameron is the eldest child and has three sisters and one brother who also live in the family home. Cameron's brother and sister attend primary school. Cameron often looks after his siblings because his mother works full-time.

### Household Resources

Cameron's family possesses a computer, which is linked to the Internet and email. He admits that he does not use the computer for educational purposes. Cameron looks forward to playing his X Box games when he is not at school.

### Current School Experiences

Cameron stated that he had failed all of his first semester year eleven subjects. He admitted to rarely completing his homework and his current ambition is to  
*"get out of here as soon as possible"*

Later he explains that he is still committed to completing year 12 however. He has no subject that he considers to be his favourite but he likes his manual arts teacher because you; "can joke around with him."

In other classes such as English he has an agreement with the teacher where he is allowed to read a book at the back of the room if he does not misbehave. Another teacher who teaches Physical Education told Cameron; "that we really didn't have to work if we didn't want to" ). Cameron is not in any school sporting teams and spends his lunch hours hanging out with friends and smoking on the main oval. Cameron has been absent for 43.5 days in Semester 1.

### Work Experience

Gained work experience as a butcher in year 10 and enjoyed the experience. "They said I was the best that's' ever been there." However Cameron has not spoken to the school guidance officer about career pathways. He was supposed to have gained further work experience this year as a boiler maker in Garbutt but he did not have transport from the Upper Ross and could not afford transport due to lack of money within his family.

### Interests

Cameron likes being with his friends and playing his X-box at home. He has no other extracurricular interests, is not in any organized sport or hobby but enjoys informal games of rugby and basketball.

### Critical Incidents

There are no critical incidents in Cameron's school career. However a positive intervention is his selection by the school in the Agricultural course at an Agricultural College for later in the year.

### Aspirations

Based on his work experience in year 11 Cameron would like to find an apprenticeship as a butcher.



## Profile 7: David 16 years old, currently Year 11

### School History

David has had a highly mobile school experience. David attended at least three Townsville schools before Year 7. He left Townsville in year seven to live with his father in Hobart for a year. He returned to Townsville and attended secondary school in year 8. In year nine he travelled to a mining town for a year and lived with his father who had obtained employment in the mining industry. He returned to Townsville to the one area and lived with his grandmother until the end of year 10. His mother obtained accommodation in Kelso and he enrolled in an Upper Ross Secondary School for year 11.

### Family Structure

David lives in rented accommodation with his mother, younger brother and two sisters. In addition an eighteen year old cousin lives with the family as well. David shares a room with one of his brothers. His mother does not work outside of the family home.

### Household Resources

David's family owns a computer, which is connected to the Internet. He mainly uses the computer to download games and music. He enjoys using the computer to engage in chat room conversations.

### Current School Experiences

David passed one subject last semester. He is enrolled in English, Accounting, Legal Studies, Art and Geography. He is committed to putting more effort into his studies this semester. He likes one female teacher because she is "nice, but not slack but makes you work". By contrast he dislikes another female teacher because she "blames me for everything". When David attends her class he has been kicked out for swearing at his teacher. David can never recall having been issued with homework and does not do homework. David has applied through the Indigenous counsellor for a tutor to help him with his school work.

Out of school during recess David says he is bored by the school environment and says there is little to do. He smokes on the oval and sits around and talks to his friends. He perceives that his current school could provide more lunchtime activities for students. Would like more flexibility in the school day in terms of when students have to attend. David was absent for 68 days school in semester 1.

### Work Experience

David has received some career advice from the guidance officer with regards to the OP he needs to gain entry to law. Has little work experience but has applied for a school-based apprenticeship in retail. David did apply once for part-time work at Hungry Jacks but was not accepted.

### Interests

David watches television when he comes home from school or uses the family computer.

### Critical Incidents

David has been suspended twice at his current school. On one occasion he was suspended from school for swearing at one of his teachers.

### Aspirations

David aspires to becoming a lawyer. His interest in law stems from his enjoyment in the subject Legal Studies at School. However David is not sure about how he will enrol in the law degree or what OP he will need to gain entry into the programme. He has an interest in attending university but has never visited the Townsville campus or attended the annual university experience days.



## Profile 8: Rachel 16 years old, currently Year 11

### School History

Rachel attended a number of schools during her primary school years. She attended one school for preschool and year one, a second for year 2 to the end of year six and moved to another primary school midway through year seven. She has attended the same secondary school since year eight. The major reason cited for the high number of primary schools attended in the primary years is because her family rented accommodation on a short-term basis.

### Family Structure

Rachel lived with her single mother until the end of year 10. Since then she has lived in a number of homes with other families or friends. She now lives with her school friend Jane and her boyfriend's father. Rachel has periodic contact with her father.

### Household Resources

Rachel's current residence has few resources such as a computer or designated study area. She does have her own room where she spends most of her leisure time listening to music.

### Current School Experiences

Rachel stated that she was currently passing all of her subjects in year 11. These subjects included Legal Studies, Art, Home Economics, English, Maths A and Drama. School records indicate that she is passing only one subject- English. However she stated, "I don't do homework". Rachel could not think of one teacher she liked but recalled one of her Manual Arts teachers in year nine who was

supportive of the females;" Like he didn't let any of the guys stand over us girls". Rachel was critical of the overall school environment and cited that there was little to do outside of class hours. She spends most of her recess periods smoking with her friends down on the school oval. Her attempt at playing netball was truncated due to a fight with a bigger girl;

*"... it got a bit rough . I was like the oldest girl on the team but the smallest and they always, if you're little they'll pick on you"..*

Rachel has missed 16.5 days in semester 1.

### Work Experience

Rachel has never applied for a part-time job and has never sought advice from the school about finding employment. She has had little contact with the school guidance officer except for the time when she had assistance in choosing her senior subjects. However Rachel was looking forward to attending the year 11 work experience working in the laundry at Jupiter's Casino.

### Interests

Rachel enjoys ballet and modern dance. She drinks alcohol in moderation and enjoys visiting her friends. She observed however that there was little to do in her suburb and she had no transport to go into town. Many of her friends take drugs such as cannabis and ecstasy. Rachel has never been away on a family holiday but would like to travel one day.

### Critical Incidents

There are few critical incidents in Rachel's education. However it would appear that her decision to leave home in year 10 and live with a number of friends might affect her overall academic performance.

### Aspirations

In year 10 Rachel aspired to becoming a lawyer but she has now changed her mind. She was not sure how to become a lawyer however and did not know of any people who worked in law. Her current aspiration is to obtain a traineeship.

Apart from obtaining a traineeship Rachel has few aspirations beyond completing year 12. She has resigned herself to staying at school due to her perception that there are few jobs that she is interested in.

*"If you can't get a job, stay at school".]*

### 4.3.3 Young people in junior secondary school

While the Year 11 students discuss the possibility of remaining in school until the end of Year 12, the next three profiles (9-11) reveal young people who are less positive about their chances of remaining at school. Damion (profile 9) Ricki (profile 10) and Steve (profile 11) are still in junior secondary school (years 9 and 10) but are all experiencing difficulty within the school environment.

The conversations with these young people often centred on their relationships with teachers. These young people describe relationships with their teachers and their views about school generally, in very negative terms. Damion refers to his preference for primary school and the security of having one teacher, while Ricki discusses both her own and her mothers' problematic relationships with teachers and the school administration. Damion identifies teachers who he considers reasonable but is quick to identify a range of teachers who he has no relationship with at all. For Damion, his lack of school-mandated resources, perhaps related to his low family resource base, causes considerable friction, as his teachers seek explanations for his lack of preparedness in class. Steve expresses little interest in any school activity except physical education, and laments the school's lack of interest in rugby league.

For Steve, such antipathy for his current school may stem from his expulsion from his preferred school for fighting and for Damion, racism in the community and within the school is a constant theme in the interview. Like Damion, Steve has a long history of school mobility associated with his father's varying employment prospects. Damion's high school mobility is related to his family's housing situation and both students have experienced mobility due to school exclusion.

Unlike Damion and Steve, Ricki appears to access a range of recreational activities, with relative access to financial resources for material goods such as mobile phone and clothing and access to transport to attend recreational sites and shopping centres. Ricki's family appears more financially secure than any other young person interviewed, but she describes her parents as not interested in her continuing at school. Their profiles appear below.



## Profile 9: Damion 15 years old currently year 10

### School History

Damion attended 7 different primary schools, all in Queensland. Damion explains this movement from one school to another as linked to housing problems. Most times, Damion's family had to move as there were troubles with the neighbours or a shortage of housing. Damion liked primary school more than secondary school. He explains that the consistency of teacher and classroom, was more supportive and there was less homework.

Damion commenced high school while living with his Grandma in a caravan park. He moved between two schools before commencing in Year 9 at his current school.

### Family structure

Damion has five siblings, and lives currently with 7 other family members including his mother, who is his main carer.

### Household resources related to school

At home, Damion is expected to participate in domestic chores - washing up etc. He talks of the importance of these chores. There is no computer and no one who can assist him with his homework. Bus transport costs are too large to enable him to participate in many activities- \$20 a week pass is too expensive for his family's resources.

### Current school experience

Damion is currently in Year 10. He has been suspended 3 times in the last 12 months. He explains that he is consistently thrown out of class for not having materials, being late or talking.

*Don't have my pen. Don't have my book with me - left it at home. And I get told to get out. So I get out and walk off and then come back in. So "you come late", and I go "no I didn't - you kicked me out". Then I get sent away.*

He is currently below satisfactory achievement level in all subjects.

He can name individual teachers who he feels comfortable to ask for assistance. He talks of school being valuable for him, even though he is not passing he still feels he is benefiting from his time at school.

*Well, not really [like school] cos I failed every assignment . . . but, yeah it's helping me.*

*Yeah I want to go back. [to primary school]*

He has sought help from the school police officer- successfully and the community education counsellor.

Apart from the suspension periods, Damion attends school regularly, and absences are generally explained to the satisfaction of the school. He has missed 30 days in Semester 1, but most are explained absences (including suspension).

### Work experience

Damion has never had a part-time job or done any work experience. He says he can't get a job, he has tried but has had no luck. He knows he needs a resume to get a job, but he was away from school when they learned to do resumes.

### Interests

Damion has a strong interest in boxing and tries to go three times a week. Otherwise, sport is not of interest to him. He generally goes home after school goes to sleep or plays playstation.

### Critical incidents

Immediately when asked what concerns him about school, Damion offers the word "racism". He describes being suspended for punching a fellow student (who he is now friends with) for taunting him with a racist remark. Damion explains his second suspension as linked to punching a student.

He says he was defending his sister who was the subject of a racist insinuation. Damion describes problems with skinheads in the regions.

*Everyone just fighting by his colour and that.*

*Well they called me a black cunt and all that paint sniffer . . . and then I punched em.*

### Aspirations

Damion is currently thinking about quitting school. His mother says he can only quit if he goes on to another learning setting like TAFE. He had once thought of becoming a police officer but now rejects that option, explaining that he doesn't want to get shot. He outlines an interest in Indigenous media.



## Profile 10: Ricki 15 years old -currently Year 10

### School History

Ricki did her primary schooling in Victoria, and then had a period of moving around Queensland with family, but she has attended the same high school since Year 8.

### Family structure

Ricki lives at home with her mother, father, three brothers and sister

### Household resources related to school

Ricki has a computer but it is not currently working. Mum tries to help with homework.

### Current school experience

Ricki has been absent for 32 days in semester 1. She is currently involved in a TAFE program 1 day per week but she has missed many of these days as a result of other interests or other things happening in her life (eg her birthday).

She is adamant that the school grounds need improving and more activities (recreational) be available for students. She thinks she will probably stay at school until the end of the year, but is currently not passing any subjects.

### Work experience

Ricki has recently applied for a job at KFC. Her father is a builder and her mother is helping her find work

### Interests

Ricki would like to go out more often and be able to walk to recreational facilities. She describes going to the PCYC and "mucking around". She enjoys her mobile phone, and drinks regularly (rum). Mum buys the alcohol for her, as long as she drinks sensibly.

*. No like, on the weeknights mum doesn't let me have them very much, so I just have like one or two. And then on the weekend . . . if my friends are up to it, or we just come to my place or go somewhere else and just like have a couple of drinks and yeah.*

### Critical incidents

Ricki describes her mother getting very angry with the school and coming to see the school administration and yelling. She also describes getting into a fight defending her younger sister who is Year 8.

### Aspirations

Ricki is hoping to become a hairdresser, and is relying on her current TAFE program and her mother to help her make the next step.

*Mum wants me to stay at school, but she wants me to leave. I know it sounds bad for her saying that she wants me to leave but . . . it's like, I don't get anywhere at school.*



## Profile 11: Steve 14 years old currently Year 9

### School History

Steve attended 6 different primary schools, all in Townsville. Steve explains this movement from one school to another as linked to his father's employment. His father's most recent job change was 3 weeks ago.

Steve commenced secondary school at one location and then as a result of fighting at the end of Year 8, was suspended, he switched schools and has been at his current location since the beginning of Year 9.

### Family structure

Steve lives with his mother and father and sister. The sister attends the same school but is within the special education unit. Steve has an older brother who is a concreter.

### Household resources related to school

He reports having Internet access at home. He explains that his mother always asks him whether he has homework, but he doesn't do it. The computer is in the living area of the house.

### Current school experience

Steve is currently in Year 9. He is most interested in physical education, in particular, rugby league. He enjoys Maths and SOSE because he can have a joke with the teachers in those subjects. He has been suspended twice this year for fighting and has been absent a total of 22 days in semester 1. His first semester report indicates that he is passing 2 subjects. He has seen the guidance officer a couple of times but only because he was sent.

When asked about the hardest thing about school he answers:

*The homework and just having to come to school.*

*Not being able to play rugby league at lunch-time*

### Work experience

Steve has never had a part-time job or done any work experience. He has recently applied for a job at Eagle Boys. His mate's sister helped him prepare for the resume.

### Interests

Steve has a strong interest in rugby league. After school, if there is no rugby league training, then he plays computer game, visits the NRL website and watches TV. He also reads the newspaper for the NRL news. On weekends Steve will stay in the Upper Ross and spend time with friends, or go to the Cowboy or MacDonald's.

*go to Macca's . . . try and put on a bit of weight.*

### Critical incidents

When changing schools, Steve had to leave the rugby league excellence program. He describes leaving this program as a very bad point in his life.

### Aspirations

Steve is not enjoying school but says he will finish Year 12, as his mother is encouraging him to stay at school. He would like to be a professional rugby league player. He cannot name any other job he would like to do. He talks about connecting up with a couple of professional rugby league players to get some advice about becoming a professional football player.

*I wouldn't mind being a footy player.*

He says he might be interested in a school-based apprenticeship if he was offered one in carpentry, but only if a couple of friends could accompany him.

Finally, while the young people in junior secondary school discuss their school experiences in negative terms, and appear to be highly at risk of early school leaving, primary school personnel identified many younger students who could be at risk from early school leaving. These included students who were consistently absent and students who were at minimum achievement levels for their year levels. Students who arrive at school without having eaten are also considered at risk and one school described a program to provide snack food during learning sessions.

The challenges primary schools confront with these students are significant and profile 12, Max, gives an example of a young person in the Upper Ross who is currently in Year 3, who has already attended three schools, appears to have a hyperactivity disorder and in addition lives in a family environment where sleep deprivation is common.



### **Profile 12: Max 7 years old Currently Year 3**

#### **School History**

Max has attended three primary schools, all in the Upper Ross. He is receiving learning support. He was identified as hyperactive in the classroom. He is very competitive in the classroom but rarely finishes work. Max has recently been moved to another school- there was no indication that he was moving.

#### **Family structure**

Max lives with his mother and 4 siblings.

#### **Current school experience**

He attends school regularly. According to the learning support teacher, Max has a history of staying up late and watching horror movies that he is able to rent, apparently regularly. He reported consistently bad dreams or nightmares. He is under achieving in all key-learning areas, and often needs to sleep in class.

These 12 profiles typify the range of young people in the Upper Ross who are at risk from early school leaving. Table 10 summarises some key characteristics of these young people.

**Table 10 Summary of characteristics of young people**

Profile	Kim N/A	Lyn Yr 9	Bryce N/A	Kate Yr 11	Rayna Yr 11	Cameron Yr 11	David Yr 11	Rachel Yr 11	Damion Yr 10	Ricki Yr 10	Steve yr 9
- Indigenous											
Mobility - 3 schools	3 3 3	3	3 3		3 3	3	3 3 3	3	3 3 3	3	3 3 3
- School problems											
- Family factors											
- Number of subjects currently passing	N/A	N/A	N/A	4		1	1	1	1		1
Family type - Two parents - Extended - Single parent - Living outside family											
Household resources - No transport - No computer - No support with homework	  	  	  	 	 		 	  	  	 	
Absenteeism - 10 days in one semester	N/A	N/A	N/A		4	4	6	1	4	4	4
Exposure to work - No part-time job - No school work experience - No family member working	  	  	  		  		  	  	  	  	  

# 5 Conclusions and Recommendations

The data obtained from this study suggests a number of factors that contribute to young people disengaging from education in the Upper Ross area. Before this we briefly identify the major factors in the research literature that was reviewed earlier in this report in order to locate similarities and disparities to the data obtained in the current study.

Research indicates that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and who have parents with limited educational qualifications are more likely to disengage from school compared to students who have parents from wealthier backgrounds and possess post-school educational qualifications (Lee & Ip, 2003, Marks & McMillan, 2001). It is suggested that parents' occupation alone is not a major factor as to whether young people will stay engaged in school. However the majority of studies support the premise that parental levels of education is a significant factor for educational disengagement (Lamb & Rumberger, 1998).

Other social factors such as race, gender and geographic location are cited as contributing to disengagement from education. Students from non-English speaking backgrounds and Indigenous students are more likely to self-eliminate from education due to factors such as the strong focus on English for written, aural and speaking tasks, differences in learning styles and diverse experiences between school and home cultures (Marks & Fleming, 1999; Lamb, 1998).

Recent research indicates that male students are more likely to disengage from education than females while students from rural and remote regions are more at risk of leaving school than their counterparts in larger cities (Marks & McMillan, 2001; Robinson, 1999).

School related factors are cited as contributing to school disengagement. For example, student perceptions about the relevance of the curriculum for preparing them for future employment and the degree of engagement with the school curriculum is frequently referred to as a major cause of school disengagement (Marks & Fleming, 1999). The strongest reason for self-elimination from the system was based on students' perceptions of their academic performance (Ainley & Sheret, 1992). Teacher expectations for academic success was linked to students' self-esteem which were strongly correlated to poor educational outcomes. The discussion now turns to an analysis of the factors for educational disengagement among young people who attend schools in the Upper Ross area of Townsville.

## 5.1 External Factors For School Disengagement

The outcomes of this research link to a number of common factors for disengagement found in the existing literature. Some of these factors are external to the school such as economic resources of the family, the degree of family support and involvement with schools, the high levels of absenteeism among the research cohort and the type of exposure and experience of employment of young people.

However this research has found additional factors that were not identified in the literature that had a significant impact on whether young people remain engaged in education.

The most common factor contributing to school disengagement relates to the very high levels of mobility among the research cohort. The profiles contain numerous accounts of young people attending a high number of primary and secondary schools over the duration of their educational careers. It was not uncommon to find that young people enrolled in excess of five schools. This has the effect of fragmenting educational experience in terms of developing ongoing relationships with teachers and peers and impacting on their attachment and sense of belonging to one school.

There were a number of “push-pull” factors that contributed to the high rates of student mobility. Changes to the availability of parents employment opportunities in a particular area was a significant factor that fragmented the continuity of school experiences of some youth who were forced to enrol at a new school at critical periods such as mid-way through their secondary education. An additional factor related to the changing demographics of suburbs that dictated the availability of affordable housing for some families. The demographic data of the Upper Ross area suggests that this is one of the fastest growing suburbs in Townsville due to the increase in affordable housing. This is supported in the accounts of a high number of youth who stated that their families had been forced out of the areas where they had previously resided due to the rising costs of rented accommodation and often resulted in their relocation to a new school.

A number of young people were from single parent families and the breakdown of their family was a mitigating factor for relocating to another school. A further push factor noted in the profiles related to school exclusion or suspension, requiring young people to enrol in another setting, if permitted.

A significant pull factor related to the families perception that a change in school would assist young people in making a fresh start to their education after encountering negative experiences in their previous school. For example some young people cited strained relationships with teachers, possessing a negative self-image about their place in the school and wanting to breakaway from the influences of peers as being instrumental in the decision to attend other schools even if it meant additional time in travelling to their new school.

The institution of the family as a support mechanism was a second major factor in determining the degree of educational disengagement among the young people in this research. An analysis of the interview data about the structure and constitution of the families shows that a minority of young people were living with two parents while a high proportion lived with a single parent predominantly headed by females. There were significant numbers of the senior school students who were not living with a parent and had either chosen to leave home and board with other families or had become estranged from their families and were now living with friends. A small number of young people were highly mobile in terms of their living arrangements headed by one 16-year-old female who had lived in four locations over the preceding twelve-month period.

However there was no evidence from this study that supports the notion that family structure is directly attributable to detachment from education. It could be argued that other family related factors combine to determine a young person's attachment to schooling. The degree of family support towards education appears to be a powerful determinant for a young person's success at school. To this end young people were asked about the resources that supported their education at home. It was surprising to note that the majority of young people did not have access to information technology such as computers despite the demographic data on the Upper Ross that suggests an equitable distribution of computer home ownership compared to the rest of Queensland. Additionally, few young people possessed a designated space for study including a table and chair in order to do homework or study related tasks.

A common characteristic among the research cohort related to the support and involvement of parents in assisting the young people with their education. The majority of young people perceived that they received moral support from their parents or significant others, through encouragement in seeking employment or continuing with their education after completing secondary school. However few young people received parental assistance with their homework while a high number of young people reported that completing homework was not a priority in their life.

While young people may have received moral support from their parents this was not translated into actual parental involvement at the school level. It appears that there was little or no synergy between the private compared to the academic lives of the young people. This was evidenced in several profiles where the only time parents contacted the school was to react to situations such as school suspensions, bullying by other young people or arguments between individual students and teachers.

In addition few of the cohort were able to attend extra-curricular activities such as organized sport or school field trips due to limited financial resources in the home and transport restrictions. School bus timetables dictated attendance at school. All of the young people spent their leisure time either watching television, playing video games or "hanging out" with friends who lived in the neighbourhood.

The older young people spoke about attending parties with their peers. These gatherings consisted of listening to music, drinking alcohol and in some cases consuming drugs such as cannabis and speed. What is apparent in all cases is that few of the young people ventured outside of the boundaries of their immediate suburbs in order to socialize with young people from other parts of the city or to visit areas where young people congregated such as the Strand or the larger shopping complexes. Few of the youth could recall leaving the area during vacations or on public holidays. The relatively insular life experiences of these young people were discussed by the young people in relatively negative terms as they often lamented inexpensive and regular public transport system as well as accessible leisure facilities in the area. Although some young people commented on the Police Youth Citizens club in the Upper Ross, at the time of the research, it was used in a limited capacity.

## **5.2 Internal Factors For School Disengagement**

A number of factors relating to the young people's direct involvement in education can be related to school disengagement. A major issue relates to the degree of student's attachment to the school and how this impacted on their self-esteem and motivation to succeed in the system. Some of these young people were somewhat positive or optimistic about their aspirations for gaining employment or enrolling in post-school further education courses. A number of young people aspired to gaining entry into university in courses such as law while others considered vocational courses such as hairdressing and butcher.

What was surprising in almost all cases is that few of the young people were able to describe the process of how they would obtain these career goals. The majority of youth stated that they wanted to pursue specific courses or careers based on their limited school experiences in individual subjects such as Legal Studies. However few could explain the pathways to obtaining these goals in terms of factors such as OP scores for university entry into specific courses or the process of enrolling in TAFE courses.

The lack of knowledge relating to career pathways is attributed to a number of school and home-related factors. Some of the young people in the research were able to name the school Guidance Counsellor but mostly their visits with the Guidance Counsellors, if they had attended, were in relation to welfare or disciplinary issues. The young people in this research appeared to have few avenues to gain insights into their chosen career paths. The school Work Experience Programme in Year Eleven was one opportunity that provided young people with direct contact with the culture of employment for one or two weeks. However young people's access to the programme was marred due to the inability of parents to pay the fee to allow their children to participate in the programme. Another barrier to participating in the programme related to the young people's inability to find transport to work venues, which were often located closer to the city.

The young people's career aspirations and insights into employment were further impeded due to their non-participation or very limited participation in part-time work while at school. Despite the trend for young people to participate in casual employment while in school, part-time work experience of the research sample indicated extremely limited experiences of part-time work. This is in direct contrast to existing literature on student's participation in part-time work, which cites that many young people are working between 20-25 hours per week while they are completing their senior school education. One possible reason for their lack of work experience could be attributed to the fact that few of the young people had significant people in their lives to serve as role models for success in the world of work. By contrast the majority of the parents of the young people in this study had been unemployed for a number of years or worked as casuals in low- paid unskilled jobs or had transient employment

The process of gradual disengagement from education was marked by a number of other school-related factors. An analysis of school records clearly indicates that almost all of the young people had very high levels of absenteeism ranging from 16-68 days across only one semester (One semester equals 85days). This was compounded by a high number of young people being suspended from school for issues such as swearing at teachers or fighting with other young people. During the interviews we asked young people about their fragmented attendance records and found that young people did not come to school for reasons such as; not liking a particular teacher or subject, lack of transport to school, incomplete homework or assignments and a problem in the family such as sickness.

High absenteeism weakened the young peoples' bonds of attachment to the school. Few young people were involved in the culture of the school in terms of being members of school sporting teams or participating in cultural events such as music or drama. Most young people spent their recess periods with peers out on the school ovals talking or smoking cigarettes. Young people stated that their schools lacked "environment" and there was little to do during recess.

Critically however, all young people in the study enjoyed specific subjects if they liked the teacher. The emphasis on developing good relations with teachers was fundamental in gaining an interest in a particular subject. Good teachers were described according to personal characteristics such as spending time with young people, having a sense of humour, and appearing to be genuinely interested in their academic progress. By contrast teachers that were less popular displayed characteristics such as shouting at young people for not completing their work, embarrassing individuals in front of the rest of the class, and making negative comments about young people's attitudes to school.

In summary, this study suggests that disengagement is multi-factorial and cannot be reduced to one or two variables. Teachers and school support personnel are aware of many of the factors, but are more likely to support explanations about out-of school factors, such as family dysfunction, low socio-economic status of families, parental support and attitude towards the

value of education. While these factors are clearly important indicators, other internal school related factors are clear from the discussions with the young people.

Internal school factors such as attachment to the school, perceived relevance of subjects for future employment and in particular, the kinds of relationships built with teachers are critical in terms of whether young people remain engaged and focused on positive educational outcomes. Several teachers and school support workers referred to the critical need to work on relationship building with young people and the success they have with particular relationship building strategies.

It can be argued that this research has located a number of important and under-researched factors that contribute to the research in this area. These include the need for future research and the development of strategies to reduce the negative effects of high levels of student mobility as well as young people limited knowledge of pathways leading to further education or employment. The final chapter of this report provides a number of key recommendations to address these issues.

### **5.3 Recommendations and future directions**

Several recurring themes could be the basis for future action. These include actions by policy makers, schools, individual teachers and school support personnel. The first three recommendations relate to action on out of school factors.

#### **Recommendation 1- Develop a systematic response and action plan for young people with high mobility backgrounds.**

Within the Townsville community, mobility is regarded as relatively normal. The type of mobility and its origin, described in this research however requires a different response from schools and school support personnel. Suggested actions include:

- ◆ That schools develop a systematic action plan for young people with high mobility backgrounds, including the assigning of key mentor teachers, mentor peers and a possible case management approach on enrolment.

#### **Recommendation 2 - Develop innovative programs to support the engagement of young people in the world of work from the earliest possible age.**

Almost all of the young people in this study had no experience of the world of work through either a parent or significant other as role model, part-time work or work experience. This severely disadvantages young people in the labour market and in the Upper Ross, where transport issues were consistently highlighted creates further disadvantage.

Suggested actions include

- ◆ That schools establish practical benchmarks for all year levels in relation to knowledge about job opportunities/careers/world of work.
- ◆ That Federal and State governments cooperate to provide 100% subsidy for school students involved in work experience or provide budgetary support for schools to offer work experience at no charge to students, including work placement services, transport, clothing requirements.

### **Recommendation 3- Develop better access to technology, especially the Internet for young people in the Upper Ross**

Most young people in this study did not have access to the Internet and had limited access to computer for educational purposes. Young people who were afforded the opportunity to remain after school for study and use of technology found this difficult in relation to limited bus services.

- ◆ That the school consider measures to provide access to students in senior schooling though a loan system or something similar.

The next two recommendations relate to action on in-school factors.

### **Recommendation 4 -Improve access to career planning advice in schools.**

The lack of work experience or work role models experienced by the young people in school necessitates additional support for young people in the area of career planning. Several actions are suggested here:

- ◆ That schools increase the understanding within the school community of Guidance Officers as the support person for career planning.
- ◆ That policy makers recognise, that particularly in disadvantaged school communities, career education needs to be adequately resourced by well trained personnel, and that the current ratio of guidance officers to school students is inadequate and additional personnel such as transition officers may be required.

### **Recommendation 5 - Improve sense of belonging for young people in schools.**

Young people in this study consistently commented negatively in relation to their connectedness to schools. Schools already recognise this and in particular, the middle school movement addresses some of the concerns raised in this study. A priority focus should be, however to continue to promote the building of relationships between individual young people and the school community.

School action on these factors could include

- ◆ That absenteeism in schools be countered with a range of both reactive and proactive measures such as parent/family outreach and support programs and immediate intervention programs that include mentoring and the use of a range of support workers
- ◆ That relationships between teachers and students continue to be prioritised in professional development programs for teachers, and that teachers be publicly acclaimed for developing positive relationships with students.
- ◆ That the nature of homework be reconsidered particularly in the context of limited access to technology, limited family resources and other obligations such as work and caring responsibilities.
- ◆ That continued resources and emphasis be placed on the suitability of the learning environment and student sense of ownership of the learning environment.

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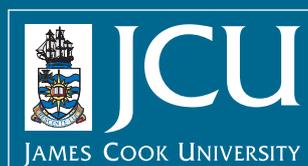
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