

**The Gender Agenda:**  
Gender Differences in Australian Higher Education

Alan Olsen  
Strategy Policy and Research in Education P/L

[www.spre.com.au](http://www.spre.com.au)

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## Gender Differences in Australian Higher Education

*Girls do better than boys* to the extent that gender needs to be on the agenda in any research on outcomes of higher education.

60% of domestic undergraduate completions in Australian universities in 2012 were women. A 60/40 gender split means that 50% more women than men complete bachelor degrees.

59% of students from Australian universities undertaking international study experiences in 2012 were women. A 59/41 gender split means that 44% more women than men studied abroad from Australia in 2012. Not quite *Surf City (July 1963, you may need to look it up)*, but gender matters.

From United States in 2010/11, 64% of study abroad students were women, a figure that has been steady at 64% or 65% for ten years. A 64/36 gender split means that 78% more women than men study abroad from US.

In research on issues such as indigenous attainment, women outperform. From data from the Department of Innovation<sup>1</sup>, 70% of Australia's indigenous undergraduate completions in 2012 were women.

### Gender Matters

A cohort of women may outperform a cohort of men, in any consideration of academic outcomes. Gender has to be on the research agenda. This is an important finding in its own right.

Gender is a factor in attainment. Former Education Minister Gillard announced in March 2009 the target that, by 2025, 40% of all 25-34 year olds will have a qualification at bachelor level or above. "Not just to have enrolled in higher education, but to have completed an undergraduate degree."

The Australian Bureau of Statistics addresses the Gillard attainment target directly in its Education and Work series. In 2012, 36.8% of people aged 25-34 had at least a bachelor degree, against the target 40% by 2025.

Gender matters. In 2012, 36.8% of 25 to 34 year olds had at least a bachelor degree because 40.5% of young women are graduates and 33.1% of young men are graduates. The Gillard 40% attainment target has been achieved for young women, but is a problem for young men.

Debate about achievement against the 40% target has been mired in issues about migration and international students, as though there is something controversial about migrants adding to Australia's intellectual capital. From 2013, ABS has promised information on visa status and citizenship in its Survey of Education and Work, scheduled for release in November.

## **New Bachelor Degrees**

To set to one side these distractions about migration and international students, we can look at numbers of domestic undergraduate completions, including by gender.

Ten years ago, in 2003, there were 105,000 domestic bachelor degree completions in Australia. These completions were equivalent to 36% of the average cohort among the 2.892 million 25-34 year olds in Australia.

By 2012, numbers of undergraduate completions had increased 13%, to 118,500. The population aged 25-34 also had grown 13%, to 3.281 million. The number of undergraduate completions in 2012 again was equivalent to 36% of a 25-34 year old age cohort. In every year from 2003 to 2012, the figure has been 36% or 37%.

Gender matters. In every year from 2003 to 2012, the number of male undergraduate completions was equivalent to 28% or 29% of a 25-34 year old age cohort of men. Every year, the figure for women was 43% or 44% or 45%.

Every year, 60% of domestic undergraduate completions were women, 50% more women than men.

## **UK**

A former UK government set a target to increase participation in higher education towards 50% of those domiciled in England and aged 17 to 30 by 2010. The Higher Education Initial Participation Rate measures initial (first time) participation in higher education for a period of at least six months, a target for participation that is softer than Australia's attainment target.

The provisional figure for 2011/12, reported by the Department of Business Innovation and Skills, was 49%: 55% for women and 45% for men.

Gender matters. As with Australia, where the tougher target involves completion rather than participation, the target has been achieved for women, but male participation falls a long way short of the target.

## **Indigenous Bachelor Completions**

In 2012, there were 955 undergraduate completions by indigenous Australians. Latest ABS figures on the Australian indigenous population are for 2011, but this is a population not impacted by numbers of migrants or international students. There were 91,400 indigenous Australians aged 25-34. Numbers of indigenous undergraduate completions were equivalent to 10% of a 25-34 year old age cohort.

Gender matters. The number (289) of male indigenous undergraduate completions was equivalent to 6% of a 25-34 year old age cohort of indigenous men. The figure for indigenous women (666 completions) was 15%.

## Gender Specific Strategies

With stark gender differences over attainment, do we continue with a strategy across the broad Australian population that is indifferent to gender, then lament that the strategy works for women (44%) but appears not to work for men (29%).

Do we continue with indigenous participation and attainment strategies that work much better for indigenous women (15%) than for indigenous men (6%)?

Do we create a separate strategy to boost the number of male undergraduates studying abroad from Australian universities?

To the extent that an attainment or participation strategy involves marketing, the world of new media enables as many different marketing strategies as there are colours of the rainbow.

Then, why stop at gender?

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Higher Education Indigenous Students data from Department of Industry, Innovation, Climate Change, Science, Research and Tertiary Education, copyright Commonwealth of Australia, reproduced by permission