

The Gender Agenda

Gender Differences in Australian Higher Education

Gender is a key factor in outcomes of higher education in Australia.

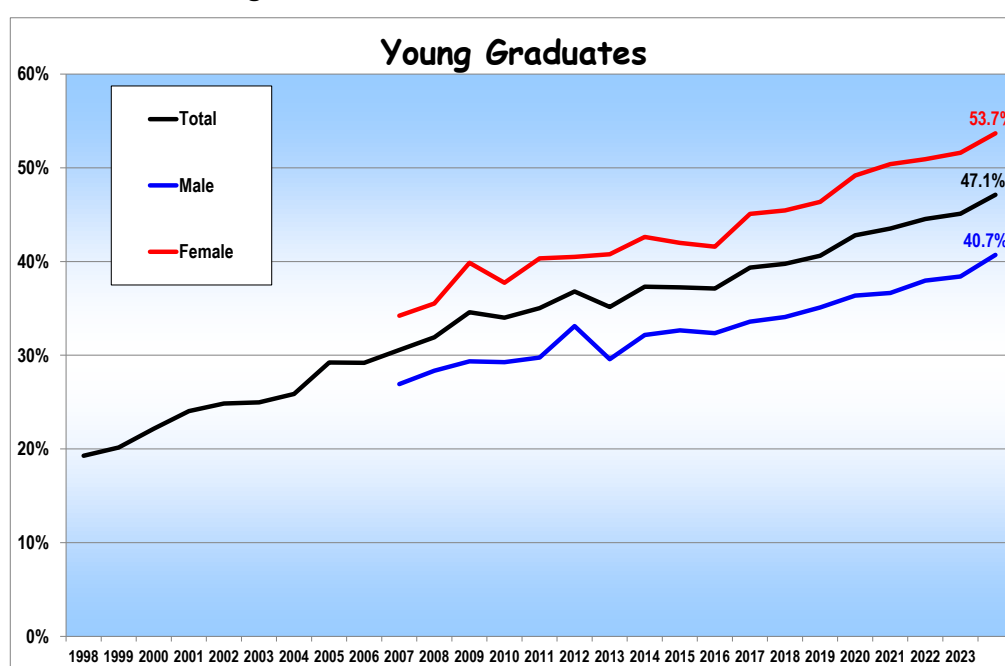
Attainment

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) collects data annually on education attainment, most recently in **Education and Work, Australia, May 2024**, released on 8 November 2024

<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/education-and-work-australia/may-2024>

In 2024, 47.1% of 25 to 34 year olds have at least a bachelor degree because 53.7% of young women are graduates and 40.7% of young men are graduates.

Degree Qualifications and 25-34 Year Olds



The history of Australia setting, then scrapping, an attainment target, that, by 2025, 40% of all 25-34 year olds will have a qualification at bachelor level or above, is in **Attachment 1: Australian Government Policy**.

Attachment 2 Degree Qualifications and 25-34 Year Olds provides the detail. The proportion of 25-34 year old people reporting at least an undergraduate degree (undergraduate degree or postgraduate diploma or postgraduate degree) has increased from 19.3% in 1998 to 31.9% in 2008 (the 32% figure used by the then Education Minister in March 2009), to 37.3% in 2014, 39.8% in 2018, 40.6% in 2019, 42.8% in 2020, 43.5% in 2021, 44.5% in 2022, 45.1% in 2023 and 47.1% in 2024.

There are gender differences and, since 2007, ABS has collected data by gender. Attachment 2 also shows detail by gender.

Bachelor Degree Completions

There were 130,015 domestic Bachelor degree completions in 2023, on the basis of data from the Australian Department of Education and Training <https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/student-data/selected-higher-education-statistics-2023-student-data>, released in September 2024.

The gender agenda is in play here also.

Of 130,015 domestic Bachelor degree completions in 2023, 79,300 or 61.0% were women and 50,342 or 38.7% were men. This gender split means that 58% more women than men are completing Bachelor degrees.

Analysing by field of education, 78% of completing Australian undergraduates in Education and 78% of completing Australian undergraduates in Health in 2023 were women.

83% of completing Australian undergraduates in IT and 81% of completing Australian undergraduates in Engineering were men.

Australian Bachelor Degree Completions 2023

	Completions	Female %
Health (includes Medicine, Nursing)	30,779	78%
Society and Culture (includes Arts, Law)	28,190	69%
Business	18,999	47%
Science	15,292	56%
Creative Arts	8,534	64%
Education	8,153	78%
Engineering	7,261	19%
IT	4,833	17%
Architecture and Building	4,157	41%
Agriculture and Environment	1,554	58%
Total	130,015	61%

Compared with the overall figure that 61% of completing Australian undergraduates in 2023 were women, the table above lists, by field, the proportion of completing Australian undergraduates who are women.

Research Higher Degree Completions

At the other end of the higher education experience, there were 6,460 research higher degree completions (PhD or Masters by Research) by Australian students in 2023, again from <https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/student-data/selected-higher-education-statistics-2023-student-data>, released in September 2024.

The gender agenda is in play here also. Of 6,460 domestic research higher degree completions in 2023, 3,621 or 56% were women and 2,820 or 44% were men. This gender split means that 28% more women than men are completing research higher degrees.

Analysing by field of education, 73% of Australian research higher degree completions in Education, 65% in Health, 63% in Agriculture and Environment, 61% in Society and Culture and 60% in Creative Arts were women.

67% of Australian research higher degree completions in Engineering and 62% in IT were men.

Australian Research Higher Degree Completions 2023

	Completions	Female %
Science	1,607	50%
Society and Culture (includes Arts, Law)	1,460	61%
Health (includes Medicine, Nursing)	1,291	65%
Engineering	652	33%
Creative Arts	366	60%
Education	332	73%
Business	293	57%
Agriculture and Environment	214	63%
IT	166	38%
Architecture and Building	79	52%
Total	6,460	56%

Compared with the overall figure that 56% of Australian research higher degree completions in 2023 were women, the table above lists, by field, the proportion of research higher degree completions who are women.

NSW Higher School Certificate 2024

Choice of field of education can occur at a young age.

There were 80,166 candidates for the Higher School Certificate in NSW in 2024. 51.5% were female.

Detail on subject choices by gender for the NSW HSC in 2023 are at **Attachment 3: NSW Higher School Certificate 2024**.

Highlighted in the attachment is that 23% of HSC Physics candidates in 2024 are women. Only 5% of female HSC candidates in 2024 studied Physics.

Similarly, 34% of HSC Economics candidates in 2024 are women. Only 5% of female HSC candidates in 2024 studied Economics.

Are young female students turning away from the key subjects Physics and Economics at 15 or 16 years of age?

Conclusion

Gender is a key factor in outcomes of higher education in Australia. This is an important finding in its own right.

Now, 61% of Australian Bachelor degree graduates each year are women, 56% of new PhD and Masters by Research graduates are women.

47.1% of 25 to 34 year olds in Australia have at least a bachelor degree in 2024, because 53.7% of young women are graduates and 40.7 % of young men are graduates.

In any research on attainment targets for young men and women, field of education is important.

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6 December 2024

Australian Government Policy

Australia's then Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, Julia Gillard, outlined on 4 March 2009 the Australian Government's response to the Bradley **Review of Australian Higher Education: Final Report**.

I announce today that our ambition is 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. Today that figure stands at 32%.

Following change of government in Australia in September 2013, then Minister for Education Christopher Pyne in November 2013 appointed David Kemp and Andrew Norton to review the demand driven system.

In their **Report of the Review of the Demand Driven Funding System**

<https://www.education.gov.au/report-review-demand-driven-funding-system>, Kemp and Norton recommended dropping the 40% target: "The Department of Education estimates that the target of 40% of 25–34 year olds achieving at least bachelor-level education will be reached before 2025." Kemp and Norton noted: "Indeed, for women, the 40% attainment target had already been achieved by 2011. However, for men, attainment levels are around 30%."

Kemp and Norton recommended: "There should be no higher education attainment targets".

In 2024, 47.1% of 25-34 year olds have at least a bachelor degree.

Degree Qualifications and 25-34 Year Olds

The proportion of 25-34 year old people reporting at least an undergraduate degree (undergraduate degree or postgraduate diploma or postgraduate degree) has increased from 19.3% in 1998 to 31.9% in 2008 (the 32% figure used by the then Education Minister in March 2009), to 37.3% in 2014, 39.8% in 2018, 40.6% in 2019, 42.8% in 2020, 43.5% in 2021, 44.5% in 2022, 45.1% in 2023 and 47.1% in 2024.

Degree Qualifications and 25-34 Year Olds

2024	47.1%	2010	34.0%
2023	45.1%	2009	34.6%
2022	44.5%	2008	31.9%
2021	43.5%	2007	30.6%
2020	42.8%	2006	29.2%
2019	40.6%	2005	29.2%
2018	39.8%	2004	25.9%
2017	39.4%	2003	25.0%
2016	37.1%	2002	24.8%
2015	37.2%	2001	24.0%
2014	37.3%	2000	22.2%
2013	35.2%	1999	20.1%
2012	36.8%	1998	19.3%
2011	35.0%		

There are gender differences and, since 2007, ABS has collected data by gender. In 2024, 47.1% of 25 to 34 year olds have at least a bachelor degree because 53.7% of young women are graduates and 40.7% of young men are graduates.

Degree Qualifications and 25-34 Year Olds

	Male	Female	Total
2024	40.7%	53.7%	47.1%
2023	38.4%	51.6%	45.1%
2022	38.0%	50.9%	44.5%
2021	36.6%	50.4%	43.5%
2020	36.4%	49.2%	42.8%
2019	35.1%	46.4%	40.6%
2018	34.1%	45.5%	39.8%
2017	33.6%	45.1%	39.4%
2016	32.4%	41.6%	37.1%
2015	32.7%	42.0%	37.2%
2014	32.2%	42.6%	37.3%
2013	29.6%	40.8%	35.2%
2012	33.1%	40.5%	36.8%
2011	29.8%	40.3%	35.0%
2010	29.3%	37.7%	34.0%
2009	29.3%	39.9%	34.6%
2008	28.3%	35.5%	31.9%
2007	26.9%	34.2%	30.6%

NSW Higher School Certificate 2024

Choice of field of education can occur at a young age.

There were 80,166 candidates for the Higher School Certificate in NSW in 2023. 41,304 (51.5%) were female, 38,757 (48.3%) were male, from the NSW Education Standards Authority at <https://www.nsw.gov.au/education-and-training/nesa/hsc/facts-and-figures/2024-hsc-facts-and-figures/course-enrolments#toc-hsc-general-enrolments>.

The 21 most popular subjects are listed in the table. (The top 21 allows the inclusion of Physics and Economics).

NSW Higher School Certificate 2024: Top 20 Popular Subjects
% Female Candidates

Subject	Candidates	% Female
English Standard	33,374	49%
Mathematics Standard 2	31,711	51%
English Advanced	25,476	60%
Business Studies	19,930	44%
Biology	19,269	63%
Personal Development, Health and Physical Education	17,539	55%
Mathematics Advanced	16,750	46%
Modern History	10,746	50%
Legal Studies	10,376	64%
English Studies	10,069	42%
Community and Family Studies	10,041	89%
Chemistry	9,834	48%
Mathematics Extension 1	8,986	40%
Visual Arts	8,899	74%
Studies of Religion 1	8,567	55%
Physics	8,291	23%
Ancient History	7,945	56%
Studies of Religion 2	6,221	64%
Mathematics Standard 1	6,126	42%
Industrial Technology	6,008	19%
Economics	5,646	34%
Total	80,166	51.5%

Taking HSC Physics as a key concern from the table, 8,291 of 80,166 HSC candidates in 2024 (10.3%) studied Physics. These 8,291 Physics candidates included 6,380 (77%) males and 1,907 (23%) females. The 1,907 female candidates studying Physics were 5% of all 41,304 female candidates.

Similarly, 5,646 of 80,166 HSC candidates in 2024 (7.0%) studied Economics. These 5,646 Economics candidates included 3,746 (66%) males and 1,900 (34%) females. The 1,900 female candidates studying Economics were 5% of all 41,304 female candidates.

Are young female students turning away from the key subjects Physics and Economics at 15 or 16 years of age?