

The Gender Agenda

Gender Differences in Australian Higher Education

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

Participation in Higher Education

Of 1,029,846 students in higher education in Australia in 2007, 566,394, 55.0%, were women. Discounting 273,099 international students, of 756,747 Australian students in higher education in 2007, 435,990, 57.6%, were women¹.

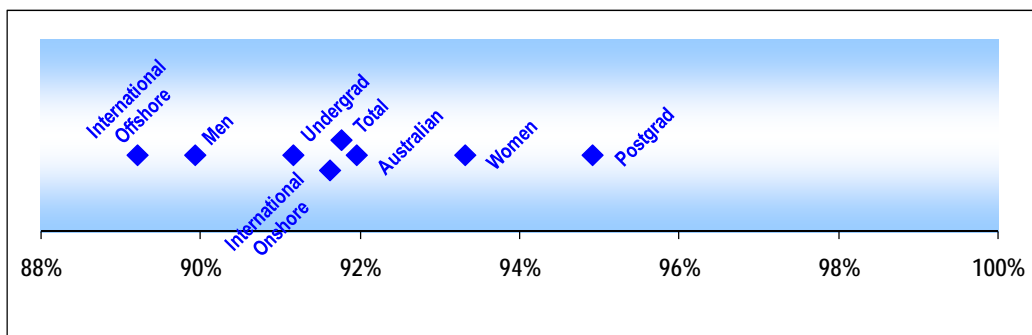
This 57.6:42.4 split means that there were 35.9% more Australian women than men in Australian higher education in 2007.

Academic Performance

A 2008 study of academic performance, carried out in cooperation with the Group of 8 (Go8), a coalition of leading Australian universities, intensive in research and comprehensive in general and professional education, covered Australian and international full time students in undergraduate and postgraduate coursework programs who were enrolled in 2007².

In this elite group of eight Australian universities, 195,694 students in 2007 passed 91.8% of what they attempted.

Chart 1
Student Progress Rates by Groups



As in Chart 1 **Student Progress Rates by Groups**

- Women did better than men
- Postgraduate coursework students did better than undergraduates

¹ DEEWR 2008

² Olsen 2008a

- International students on campus in Australia did as well as Australian students and did better than international students offshore.

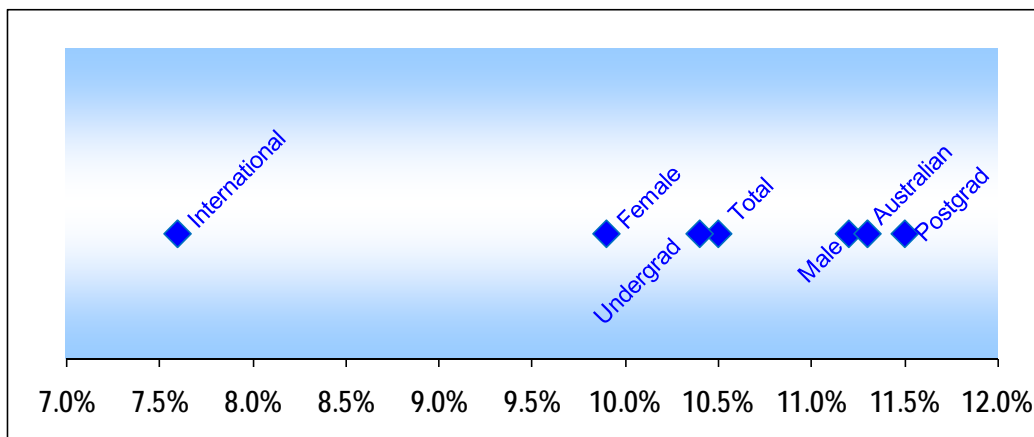
The 105,987 women passed 93.3% of what they attempted and did better than the 89,707 men, who passed 89.9%.

Retention and Attrition

A 2008 study, in conjunction with the Australian Universities International Directors' Forum (AUIDF), looked at retention and attrition of Australian and international students enrolled full-time in undergraduate or postgraduate coursework programs on campus in Australia in 2006³.

Of 485,983 students in 32 Australian universities in 2006, 434,831 students, 89.5%, stayed the course, either completing in 2006 or continuing to 2007. Conversely 51,152 students, 10.5%, students dropped out.

Chart 2
Attrition Rates by Groups



As in Chart 2 **Attrition Rates by Groups**

- Women stayed the course better than men
- Undergraduates stayed the course better than postgraduate coursework students
- International students stayed the course better than Australian students.

Women, where 9.9% of the 268,337 female students dropped out, stayed the course better than men, where 11.2% of 217,646 male students dropped out.

Outgoing International Student Mobility

Again with AUIDF, Olsen⁴ carried out research on outgoing international mobility of Australian university students in 2007.

³ Olsen 2008b

The study found that 5.8% of undergraduates in 37 participating Australian universities undertake an international study experience by the time they complete their degrees. The Australian figure of 5.8% in 2007 compares with the US figure of 9.4% for 2006/07⁵.

Women dominated all types of international study experiences. The 37 universities in Australia reported that 57.5% of students with international study experiences in 2007 were women. This is similar to the gender gap in US, where 65.1% of all study abroad students in 2006/07 were women.

Completion

Australia's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education, Employment and Workplace Relations outlined on 4 March 2009⁶ the Australian Government's immediate response to the **Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education: Final Report**⁷

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 percent.

The aspiration to enable 40 percent of young adult Australians to gain a bachelor's qualification is attainable, competitive with other nations and looks to our future needs.

The target, that 40% of all 25-34 year olds will have a qualification at bachelor level, will be achieved if, year after year, the number of undergraduate completions is at least 40% of an average 25-34 year old cohort or, in other words, if the number of undergraduate completions each year is at least 40% of 10% of the number of 25-34 year olds.

Numbers of undergraduate completions are available from the DEEWR higher education statistics collection, from 2008⁸ and earlier years. Population by age and gender by year is available from the Australian Bureau of Statistics⁹. The earliest year in which domestic and international undergraduate completions were split was 1999. There were 90,251 Australian undergraduate completions, equivalent to 31.4% of 10% of the 2,875,623 people in Australia aged 25-34. The most recent data are for 2007. There were 103,373 Australian undergraduate completions, equivalent to 35.3% of 10% of the 2,931,183 people in Australia aged 25-34.

But the gender agenda is in play here also.

In 1999, the 31.4% figure was the aggregate of 37.0% of young women and 25.8% of young men. In 2007 the 35.3% figure was the aggregate of 42.6% of young women and 28.0% of young men. Detail is in Table 1 and Chart 3 **Undergraduate Completions and 25-34 Year Olds**.

⁴ Olsen A 2008c

⁵ Institute of International Education 2008

⁶ Gillard The Hon J 2009a

⁷ Bradley D 2008

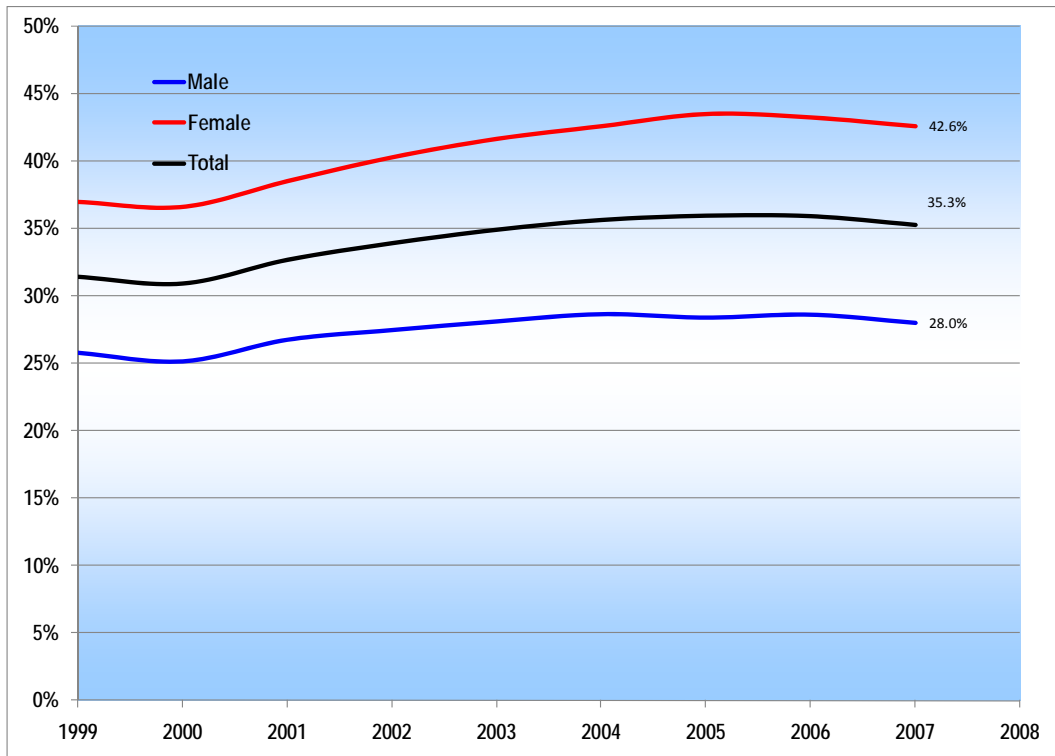
⁸ DEEWR 2008

⁹ ABS 2009

Table 1
Undergraduate Completions and 25-34 Year Olds

Year	Completions			Population (millions)			Rate		
	M	F	All	M	F	All	M	F	All
1999	36,884	53,367	90,251	1.432	1.444	2.876	25.8%	37.0%	31.4%
2000	35,938	52,879	88,817	1.431	1.445	2.876	25.1%	36.6%	30.9%
2001	38,176	55,668	93,844	1.428	1.446	2.874	26.7%	38.5%	32.7%
2002	39,360	58,236	97,596	1.433	1.446	2.879	27.5%	40.3%	33.9%
2003	40,422	60,312	100,734	1.438	1.448	2.886	28.1%	41.6%	34.9%
2004	41,239	61,517	102,756	1.439	1.445	2.884	28.7%	42.6%	35.6%
2005	40,972	62,832	103,804	1.443	1.445	2.888	28.4%	43.5%	35.9%
2006	41,466	62,460	103,926	1.449	1.445	2.894	28.6%	43.2%	35.9%
2007	41,169	62,204	103,373	1.470	1.461	2.931	28.0%	42.6%	35.3%

Chart 3
Undergraduate Completions and 25-34 Year Olds



With the rate for women above 40% for each of the last six years, the target, that 40% of all 25-34 year olds will have a qualification at bachelor level, essentially, has been achieved for women.

This analysis points out clearly the extent to which the target is a problem in respect of young men, with the completion rate for young men sitting on 28%, and with no growth in the last five years. The purpose is simply to show the data, rather than speculate on the reasons why relatively more young women than young men graduate.

Comparison with UK

The gender agenda gets further support from comparison with the UK Higher Education Initial Participation Rate (HEIPR).

The UK government has set a target to increase participation in Higher Education towards 50% of those domiciled in England and aged 18 to 30 by 2010. HEIPR measures initial (first time) participation in higher education for a period of at least six months¹⁰. The provisional figure for 2007/08 was 43%: 49% for women and 38% for men.

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

Conclusion

Girls do better than boys to the extent that, in any research on outcomes of higher education, it may be that a cohort dominated by women will do better than a cohort dominated by men. For this reason, gender needs to be on the agenda in any consideration of academic outcomes.

This is an important finding in its own right.

Equally important is its relevance to the Australian target that, by 2025, 40% of all 25-34 year olds will have a qualification at bachelor level. This target, essentially, has been achieved for young women. Now the focus needs to shift to the completion rate for young men, sitting on 28% with no growth in the last five years.

About the Author

Alan Olsen is Director of Strategy Policy and Research in Education Limited www.spre.com.hk in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of China, carrying out research, strategy and policy advice on international education, transnational education and international student programs. He has published extensively, with 38 items on Australia's Database of Research on International Education at http://www.idp.com/research/database_of_research.aspx. In 2009, he was joint author of **The Gaokao: Research on China's National College Entrance Examination** for Australian Education International (AEI). In 2008, he wrote **3+3+4: The Reform of Hong Kong's Education System (and what it means to Australia)** for AEI, **Staying the Course: Retention and Attrition in Australian Universities** and **Outgoing International Mobility of Australian University Students 2007**. In 2007 his publications included **Global Student Mobility: An Australian Perspective Five Years On**.

Alan Olsen
4 September 2009

¹⁰ Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills 2009

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