

# 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 1,134,866 students in higher education in Australia in 2009, 629,249, 55.4%, were women. Discounting 320,970 international students, of 813,896 Australian students in higher education in 2009, 472,229, 58.0%, were women<sup>1</sup>.

This 58:42 split means that there were 38% more Australian women than men in Australian higher education in 2007.

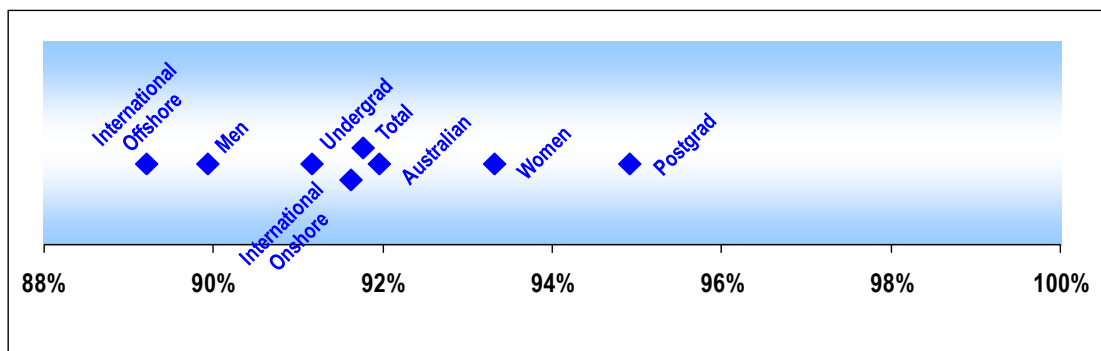
### Academic Performance

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 2007<sup>2</sup>.

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

As in Chart 1 **Student Progress Rates by Groups**, the 105,987 women passed 93.3% of what they attempted and did better than the 89,707 men, who passed 89.9%.

Chart 1  
Student Progress Rates by Groups



<sup>1</sup> DEEWR 2010

<sup>2</sup> Olsen 2008a

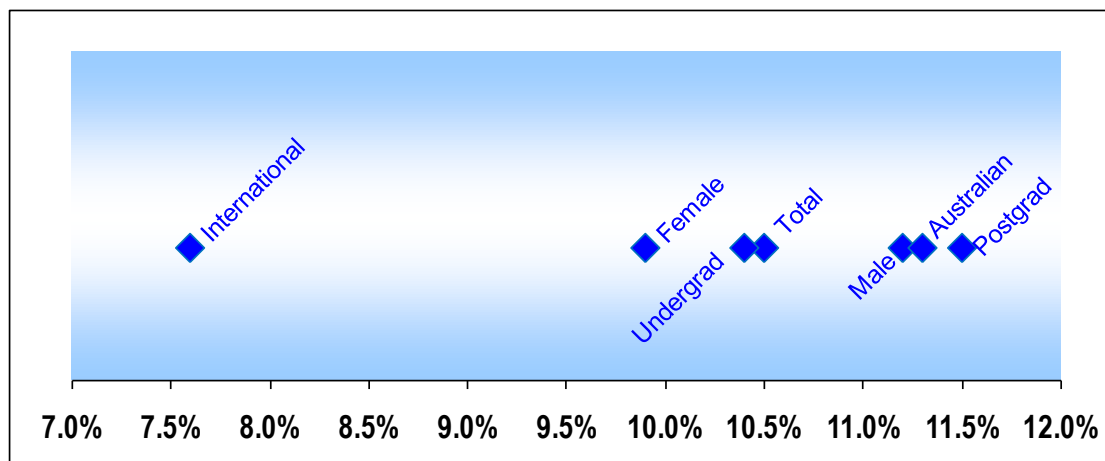
## Retention and Attrition

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 2006<sup>3</sup>.

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.

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

**Chart 2**  
**Attrition Rates by Groups**



## Outgoing International Student Mobility

Again with AUIDF, Olsen<sup>4</sup> carried out research on outgoing international mobility of Australian university students in 2009.

The study found that 8.8% of Australian undergraduates in 37 participating Australian universities undertake an international study experience by the time they complete their degrees. The Australian figure of 8.8% in 2009 compares with the US figure of 10.1% for 2007/08<sup>5</sup>.

Women dominated all types of international study experiences. The 37 universities in Australia reported that 59.1% of students with international study experiences in 2009 were women. This is similar to the gender gap in US, where 65% of all study abroad students in 2007/08 were women.

<sup>3</sup> Olsen 2008b

<sup>4</sup> Olsen A 2010

<sup>5</sup> Institute of International Education 2010

## Completion

Australia's then Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education, Employment and Workplace Relations outlined on 4 March 2009<sup>6</sup> the Australian Government's immediate response to the **Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education: Final Report**<sup>7</sup>

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 2010<sup>8</sup> and earlier years. Population by age and gender by year is available from the Australian Bureau of Statistics<sup>9</sup>. 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 2009. There were 107,699 Australian undergraduate completions, equivalent to 34.6% of 10% of the 3,112,359 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 2009 the 34.6% figure was the aggregate of 41.7% of young women and 27.6% of young men. Detail is in Table 1 and Chart 3 **Undergraduate Completions and 25-34 Year Olds**.

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 eight years.

The purpose is simply to show the data, rather than speculate on the reasons why relatively more young women than young men graduate.

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<sup>6</sup> Gillard The Hon J 2009a

<sup>7</sup> Bradley D 2008

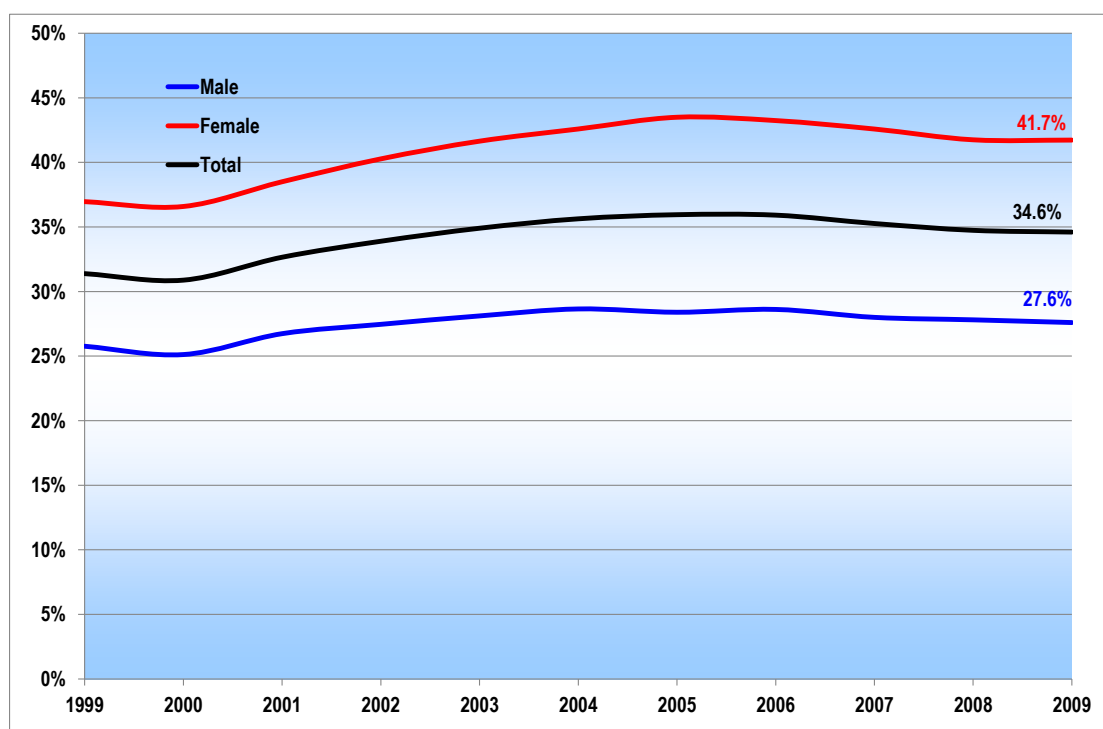
<sup>8</sup> DEEWR 2010

<sup>9</sup> ABS 2010a

**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%
2008	42,046	62,413	104,459	1.512	1.495	3.007	27.8%	41.7%	34.7%
2009	43,302	64,397	107,699	1.569	1.543	3.112	27.6%	41.7%	34.6%

**Chart 3**  
**Undergraduate Completions and 25-34 Year Olds**



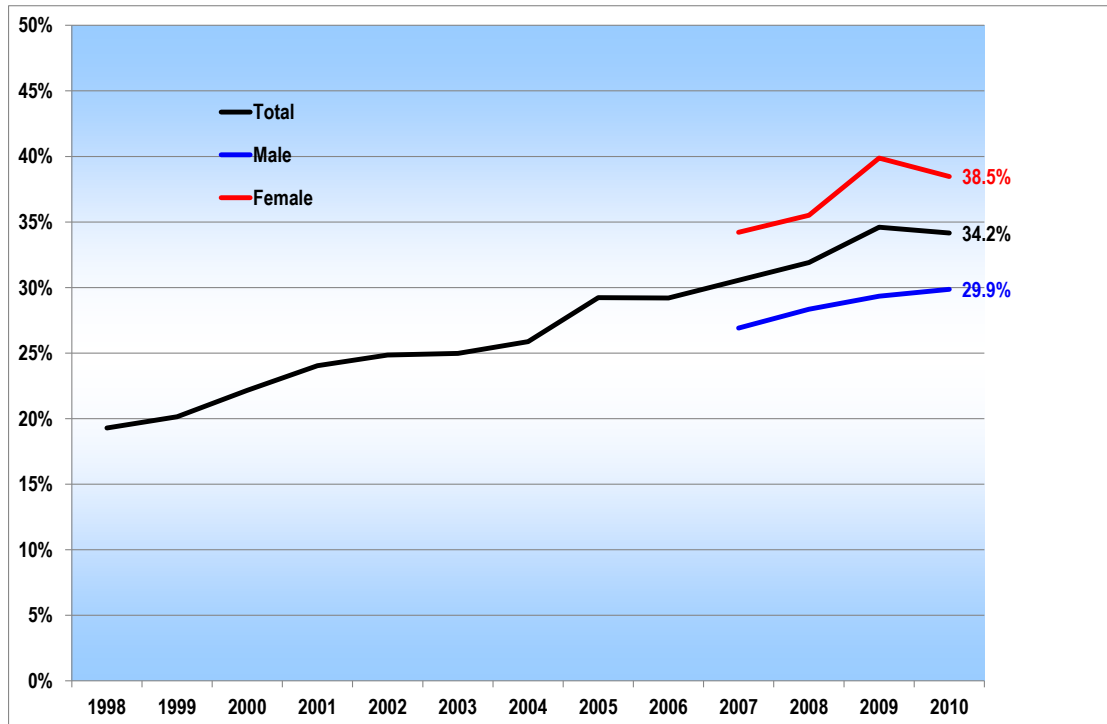
The Australian Bureau of Statistics addresses the Gillard target more directly in its Education and Work series in 2010 and earlier years<sup>10</sup>, with data collected once a year as a supplement to the Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) monthly Labour Force Survey.

The proportion of 25-34 year olds reporting at least an undergraduate degree (undergraduate degree or postgraduate diploma or postgraduate degree) has increased from 19.3% in 1998 to 29.2% in 2005 and 2006, to 34.6% in 2009 and 34.2% in 2010, against the Gillard target 40%.

<sup>10</sup> ABS 2010b

Again the gender agenda is in play. Since 2007 ABS has collected data by gender, and the 2010 figure 34.2% was the aggregate of 38.5% of young women and 29.9% of young men, as is Chart 4 **Degree Qualifications and 25-34 Year Olds**.

**Chart 4**  
**Degree Qualifications and 25-34 Year Olds**



## Comparison with UK

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

A former UK government 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 months. The provisional figure for 2008/09 was 45%: 51% for women and 40% for men<sup>11</sup>.

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.

<sup>11</sup> Department for Business Innovation and Skills 2010

## 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 eight years.

Alan Olsen  
10 January 2011

## About the Author

Alan Olsen is Director of Strategy Policy and Research in Education Pty Ltd [www.spre.com.au](http://www.spre.com.au) in Sydney, Australia. Alan is a consultant in international education, carrying out research, strategy and policy advice for client institutions and organisations on international education, transnational education and international student programs. He has worked in international education in Australia, Singapore and Hong Kong and has published extensively, with 44 items on Australia's Database of Research on International Education <http://cunningham.acer.edu.au/dbtw-wpd/textbase/ndrie/idp.html>.

He has Bachelor of Arts with First Class Honours in Philosophy from The University of Sydney and Graduate Diploma in Finance from University of Technology, Sydney.

In October 2009 Alan was recognised by his colleagues with an International Education Excellence Award from the International Education Association of Australia for his distinguished contribution to the field of international education.

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