CHARTING AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION RESEARCH PRIORITIES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

A consultation paper inviting input into a Decadal Plan for Australian Education Research 2025–36

INTRODUCTION

Education as a sector has much to contribute to a fair and just democracy for all Australians. The critical role of early childhood, schooling, community and tertiary education in promoting more equitable futures is recognised in key national statements. The 2019 Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration, for example, establishes a national vision and goals for education from early childhood through to secondary schooling and sets out two overarching goals:

- The Australian education system promotes excellence and equity
- All young Australians become confident and creative individuals, successful lifelong learners, and active and informed members of the community.

Education shapes the lives of all Australians, our communities, opportunities and future. Australia has a research community with deep roots and valuable expertise to inform education policy and practice. Education is second only to health in terms of overall government expenditure and workforce, with significant national cultural, social, economic and wellbeing benefits. Despite this expenditure, Australian education research is under-resourced relative to other fields, and it can struggle for visibility and impact.

By 2036, our 5-year-olds will be 16, nearing the end of their schooling journey and preparing to enter the world of work and further education. To give all Australians, children, adults and generations to come the best possible foundation for success, a *Decadal Plan for Australian Education Research 2025–36* is being developed. Building on a well-established body of research, the Decadal Plan will raise the field's profile and work collaboratively to establish shared priorities for the education sector – spanning early childhood education and care (ECEC), primary and secondary schools, higher education and vocational education and training. This plan will identify the priorities and opportunities for educational research to shape educational policy, funding and practice over the next 10-years.

This paper supports stakeholder consultation for the development of a *Decadal Plan for Australian Education Research 2026–35*. This is part of a multi-year process, including a cross-sector roundtable in August 2024 with representatives from national education organisations and research fields. Convened by the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia (the Academy) and the Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE), outcomes from the roundtable informed the initial identification of key priority areas and recommended the development of a Decadal Plan.

WHY A DECADAL PLAN?
What is a Decadal Plan? It is a 10-year roadmap designed to shape priorities and achieve a clear set of objectives and understandings across research and practice communities on their needs, priorities and collaborative steps necessary to achieve their shared vision.

The *Decadal Plan for Australian Education Research 2025–36* will be the first of its kind for Australian education research and is being developed in collaboration with the Academy, AARE, Australian Council of Deans of Education (ACDE), Australian Council for Education Research (ACER), Early Childhood Australia, Australian Teacher Education Association (ATEA), Australian Education Union (AEU), Australian Research Council (ARC) Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child, Deakin University Centre for Research for Educational Impact (REDI), and Griffith Institute for Education Research.

The Decadal Plan aims to deliver:
- Proactive responses to sector challenges, such as inequity in the education system, and a better understanding of workforce needs and capabilities to ensure strong education outcomes

- A shared vision for the direction for Australian education research
- Coordinated sectoral arrangements for a more connected and impactful national educational research capability
- A pathway for growing investment in Australian education research.

HAVE YOIUR SAY

We invite you to contribute to the Decadal Plan by sharing your insights on the role of educational research in delivering better outcomes for all learners and supporting Australia's education workforce. We are also interested in your views on the resources needed to conduct education research and enable input into policy and practice.

This Consultation Paper outlines priority research areas and poses targeted questions to help define the sector's future research needs. It also presents the current state of Australian education research, including investment, researcher capability and opportunities for enhanced policy engagement and impact. The Consultation Paper includes sector snapshots from a policy perspective, intended to capture broad patterns across sectors and research areas and to help guide responses.

We are seeking your perspectives and experience on how this ecosystem is currently functioning for you and those in your area of expertise, and where there are opportunities for improvement. A detailed understanding of the practical and immediate and longer-term needs of the education research sector is fundamental to a successful Decadal Plan. The consultation period will be open from 1 December 2025 until 1 March. We are inviting written responses to the consultation questions via email to policy@socialsciences.org.au.

CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

The following overarching consultation questions, along with targeted questions related to specific priority areas, are intended to guide your response. Please feel free to respond to as many of the questions that are relevant to you.

Overarching questions

1. What are the key areas or issues for future research in each field or sector?
2. What steps should we take to drive short-term gains and long-term advancement in these areas?
3. What mechanisms are most effective for addressing the aims of the Decadal Plan?

PRIORITY AREAS FOR ACTION

JUSTICE, QUALITY AND EQUITY FOR ALL

Research and student-level data show that access to high-quality education and the opportunities it brings are unevenly distributed across Australia, Geography, socio-economic status, race and ethnicity, gender and disability impact everyone's experiences of education and outcomes. Complex, cross-jurisdictional and cross-sectoral policy, governance and regulatory frameworks, and funding mechanisms also shape vast differences in educational practices and outcomes for all.

A more integrated, cross-sectoral and cross-disciplinary research approach can help unpack the complexity of these challenges and their intersections to guide high-quality, impactful evaluations and evidence-based interventions. Charting a roadmap for more integrated research and evaluation first demands sector-wide consultation to identify priorities, establish what data is already available, who holds it and how it can be shared, and determine those responsible for different research and evaluation activities.

Improved systems for sharing and leveraging existing data and research findings will strengthen collaboration and drive a more connected research agenda. A greater understanding of specific support structures can encourage greater justice, quality, and equity for all learners across sectors.

4. What current policy and practices enable or constrain equity and justice for all?
5. What research focus areas should be prioritised to improve quality and equity for all learners? Briefly describe the specific research investments, capabilities and relationships that would make this possible.

6. What systematic changes are required to embed First Nations perspectives and practices into curriculum and learning frameworks? Please share examples of effective research-based, community-led and culturally responsive approaches that could be scaled.
7. How would a more integrated approach to research across sectors, disciplines and institutions benefit the experiences and outcomes for all learners?

A PREPARED AND WELL-SUPPORTED EDUCATION WORKFORCE

Australia's education workforce prepares and enables children, young people and adults to shape their futures with confidence and capability. A professional, skilled workforce is critical for addressing Australia's future skills demands and enabling all learners to thrive. Across all sectors, Australia's education workforce reports feeling overworked, underappreciated, and inadequately supported to teach, study or research effectively, leading many to experience a sense of de-professionalisation. This challenge is compounded by limited access to induction and mentoring, ongoing professional development, inconsistent national teacher registration processes, and fragmented career pathways.

The consequences are clear: declining enrolments in courses for ECEC and other education programs, high attrition rates within the teacher workforce, and national teacher workforce shortages. As a result, teachers are increasingly teaching out-of-field (and in ECEC, teaching out-of-sector), particularly in regional and remote areas, further exacerbating inequities in educational provision. Similarly, academics face more fragmented career paths, increased competition for limited research funds, and lack opportunities to inform decision making. This is alongside recent industrial relations and visa reforms affecting the higher education sector and contributing to overwork. For the vocational education and training (VET) sector, improving career pathways and capacity to upgrade qualifications is critical to building and maintaining the workforce.

Existing incentives and measures are inadequate to address Australia's current and predicted education workforce shortages. There is an immense opportunity for priority-aligned research that identifies and evaluates approaches to recruitment, retention and professional development to support and advance the current and future education workforce and raise the status of teaching.

8. How can teachers and early childhood educators be attracted to and retained in the profession, particularly in areas in greatest need?
9. How can those from diverse backgrounds be encouraged and supported to join and stay in the profession? Please share examples and strategies to help identify successful case studies that can be learned from and scaled.
10. What are the priority areas for evaluation in educational practice? Briefly describe the specific investments, capabilities and relationships needed for effective evaluation.

CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION AND SHARED UNDERSTANDING AND KNOWLEDGE

The Australian education sector and workforce have a wealth of knowledge and expertise that can be harnessed to inform impactful research, practice, and policy. Yet siloing and barriers to research-practice collaboration contribute to duplicated effort and prevent opportunities for shared learning. A nationally joined-up approach to research which is genuinely collaborative can help the education ecosystem connect to identify its priorities and chart a path towards opportunities for shared knowledge and understanding.

11. What are the most effective ways in which cross-sector research can help address contemporary challenges in the education sector?
12. How would a more joined-up approach to research across different sectors, disciplines and institutions benefit the education workforce across their career?

A WORLD-CLASS CONNECTED RESEARCH CAPABILITY

Australia's education research community has a long history of driving innovation, policy improvements and outcomes that have benefited generations of Australians.

However, recent trends in research and development (R&D) investment and higher degree by research (HDR) enrolments indicate that concerted effort is needed to sustain Australia's education research capability and enhance the contributions research makes to policy and practice. An effective research-policy nexus requires a strong and connected pipeline of scholarly excellence, built on rigorous research training.

Critical to this aspiration will be increased investment in educational and related social science and humanities research that focuses on capacity building, evaluation, national priority-aligned projects, and large centres of excellence that bring together cross-sectoral and cross-disciplinary expertise. These investments must be coupled with frameworks to enable better access and connections across research datasets, and nationally harmonised processes for institutional and individual participation in research.

13. What are the capabilities and relationships required to enable educational research to impact change over the next decade?
14. What is working in current approaches to research training? What isn't working?
15. How might a national approach increase the impact of education research and build research relationships, both across sectors and within Australian and international research communities?

THE CURRENT STATE OF AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION RESEARCH

INVESTMENT

Education in Australia is a well-established field of research with valuable expertise and enormous potential to inform education policy and practice. Yet relatively little is spent by governments on R&D (encompassing basic and applied research and experimental development) in education relative to other fields and the research-policy relationship is contested.

Education is a large focus of government spending – 14.5% of all Australian Government expenditure for the year 2023-24 was directed to education (encompassing all education systems, subsidy programs, and non-Government and Government schools national support). Health, in comparison, makes up 20.1% of total government spending. The ratio of R&D expenditure in education research compared with health is 1:142. This relatively low level of spending persists despite evidence of high returns on investment in education research.

Most government investment in education research is obtained through the competitive grants administered by the ARC. Across all schemes, 159 projects totalling $99.8 million were funded between 2015-2025 within the primary Field of Research (FOR) code for Education (figure is announced funding amount). Funded projects are concentrated at the Group of Eight research intensive universities, representing 31% of all projects and 24% of all funding. Notably, projects specifically focussed on tertiary education make up a limited proportion of funded projects, with just five projects related to VET in the decade from 2015.

In addition to formal R&D funding, the Commonwealth and State and Territory Governments also provide significant funding to the Australian Educational Research Organisation (AERO), which was established to conduct research and knowledge translation in support of improved educational outcomes in Australia. Government and universities are encouraging more applied research and industry partnerships at the same time as governments increasingly seek to limit research to their policy agendas. Parts of education research are increasingly being funded by the philanthropic sector, often with narrow agendas and implications for school policy and practice, for example particularly in DigiTech.

Government Expenditure on R&D, Total and Education, 2012–2023 ($m)

	2012–13	2020–21	2022–23	% change 200–21 to 2022–23	% change 2012–13 to 2022–23
Total Expenditure	3,725,465	3,617,998	4,344,376	20.10%	16.60%
Education Expenditure	21,230	26,157	12,035	–54%	–43.30%

Source: ABS (2024), Research and Experimental Development, Government and Private Non-Profit Organisations, Australia, various datasets.

ARC Funded Projects by Sector Focus, 2015-2025 ($)

ARC Funded Projects by FOR, 2015-2025 ($)
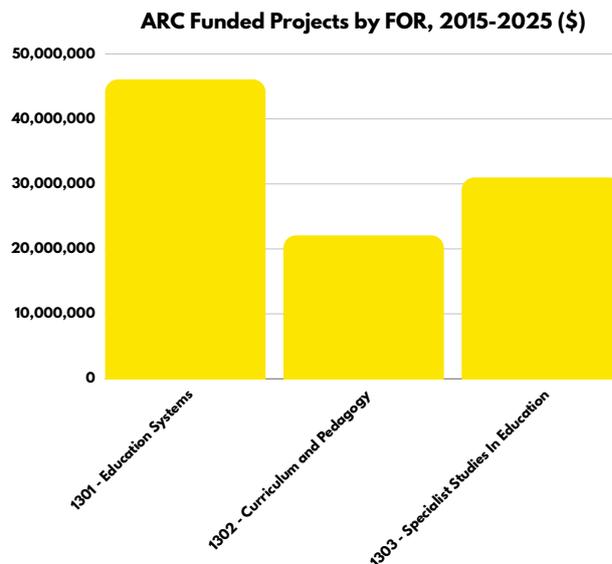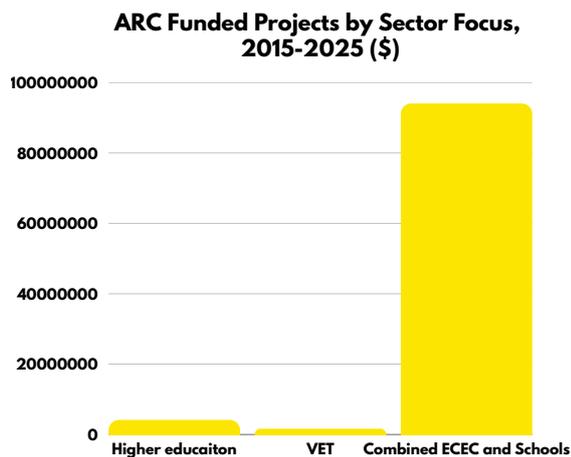
**Source:** ARC (2025), Australia, Grants Serach, various datasets.

RESEARCH CAPABILITY

Along with low levels of R&D investment, Australia faces a shortage of education researchers. There has been a 3.1% decline in the decade since 2015 in HDR enrolments in education programs. This is concerning in terms of the pipeline of graduates with high-level research training who will go on to carry out future education research in Australia and take up leadership roles at institutions, where research experience and postgraduate qualifications are increasingly a requirement.

Alongside declining numbers of education researchers, workplace conditions are increasingly making a research career unviable and pushing away those who are trained (See Higher Education).

Recognising the importance of a continuing pipeline of trained researchers, the Universities Accord recommended reform, such as renewed innovation of HDR models and improved Research Training Program (RTP) stipend conditions, to encourage future student enrolments. The Accord also emphasised the importance of collaboration between university and industry and equipping PhD students with teaching skills.

Total Domestic and Postgraduate (research) Enrolments in Education Programs, 2015–2024
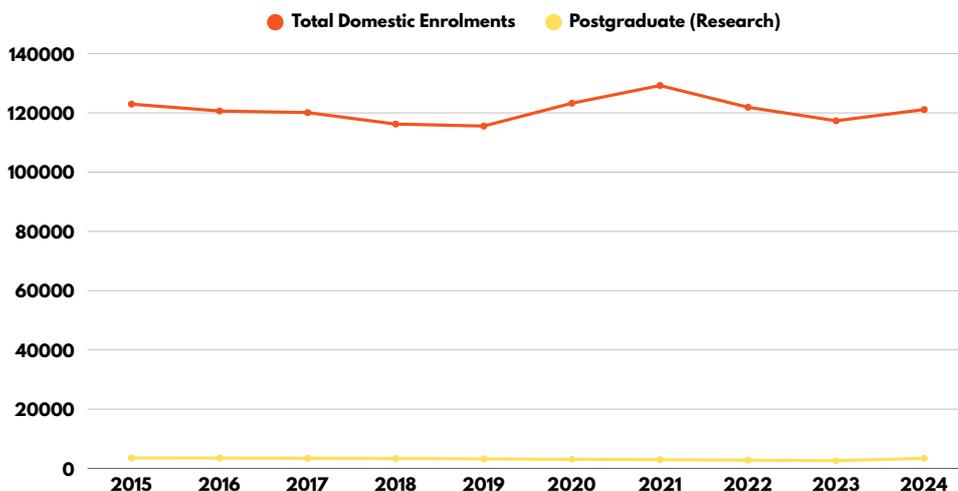
Source: Department of Education (2025), Select Higher Education Statistics – 2024 Student Data.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION RESEARCH

The Australian Government is overseeing several programs to deliver on Australia's education and training needs and support generations of Australians to benefit from the career opportunities and higher incomes that education makes possible. Multiple reviews of research have been undertaken of key research bodies, including the ARC, Australia's National Science and Research Priorities and the Strategic Examination of R&D, all of which will impact education researchers and the future research workforce.

There are challenges and opportunities alike to increase the profile, resourcing and impact of educational research in Australia.

EQUITY AND JUSTICE IN EDUCATION

In Australian education, equity is about providing fair and just support to address historical and systemic disadvantages, ensuring all students can succeed regardless of their background, while access refers to the right of all students to participate in and engage with learning opportunities. Promoting greater equity and justice in educational opportunities, experiences and outcomes has been a longstanding goal of Australia's education systems. The significance of this as a priority for Decadal Plan was identified at the Academy and AARE led *Priorities and Future Directions for Educational Research* roundtable in 2024.

There are multiple, often interrelated dimensions to inequality and many indicators of injustice. A vast range of data documents the disparities arising from the impact of specific equity categories, with a long history of associated policy and program reforms and an established bogy of research addressing these matters. There is also growing recognition of the intersectional nature of educational inequalities, including how different factors such as geography and social and identity categories intersect to create educational advantage and disadvantage. An ongoing challenge for education policy, practice and research is balancing a broad view of the intersectional and multiple dimensions of inequality and identifying priority areas.

DIRECTIONS FOR FIRST NATIONS EDUCATION

Promoting educational equity and improved achievement for First Nations students is a strategic priority within Australia's national education reform agenda. Some priorities are cross-sectoral, and some are sector specific, but they share common principles and goals, as summarised below, with specific data included in the relevant sector snapshots. Various policy documents acknowledge the barriers and systemic injustices facing First Nations learners, include inequitable access, insufficient culturally responsive pedagogy in mainstream practice, workforce shortages of Indigenous educators, and a lack of resources particularly in remote locations and areas with concentrations of First Nations populations.

A NATIONAL EDUCATION WORKFORCE CRISIS

Australia faces critical workforce shortages across the ECEC, schools and VET sectors, driven by common factors relating to geographic inequality, fluctuating enrolments, and inadequate incentives and support across careers, but manifesting with sector-specific severity.

ECEC:
- Universal access expansion, particularly in for-profit services, intensifying an existing overall workforce shortage
- Qualification drain: 44% of the ECEC workforce employed in schools rather than ECEC
- Initial Teacher Education (ITE) completions declining – 24% four-year completion for 2018 commencers versus 40% for 2016 in birth-5 programs

- Median Centre Based Day Care (CBDC) employee age of 34 suggests recruitment of younger, less experienced workforce
- Lower wages compared to school sectors despite comparable qualifications.

Schools:
- Only one-third of teachers intend to remain until retirement
- Only 18% of teachers in their first three years of teaching intend to teach for their entire career
- 31% of workforce aged 50+ signals impending retirement wave
- ITE completion decline compounds supply issues
- Workload the primary departure reason – 75% of full-time teachers work 45+ hours/week
- Regional and remote positions are hardest to fill
- Increased numbers entering the workforce while completing study through different programs
- Registration challenges facing migrant teachers with non-Australian qualifications.

VET:
- 18.1% decline in Teach, Train and Assessor roles over decade to 2020/21, despite being a period of growing demand for VET
- Fee-free Technical and Further Education (TAFE) has seen more than 725,000 enrolments since 2023 and will continue to increase demand for demand for trainers and assessors in priority-aligned qualifications
- Employee satisfaction declining from 82% to 75% in the decade to 2023 – a highly casualised, lower paid workforce with limited career development opportunities compared to other education sectors
- Wage and workplace condition disparity across registered training organisations (RTOs) – public RTOs employees are generally better paid and have greater job security than employees at private RTOs.
- Competing demand for trainers and assessors in vocational fields where the occupation is also on the skills shortage list.

Higher Education:
- Reduced government funding and policy changes targeting international students have had seen job losses and increased workloads
- High levels of casualisation across the workforce — the proportion of academics employed on casual contracts is approximately 2 out of 10
- A reduction in the proportion of academic roles employed on an ongoing basis for all levels
- Expansion of a teaching only pathway, which raises short and long-term issues for research capacity building.

The Australian Government recognises the need to fund initiatives and develop frameworks to support the recruitment and retention of the education workforce. These include National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy Shaping Our Future, the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan, and VET Workforce Blueprint. While these policy interventions differ across sectors, they share common principles and priority areas for action: strengthening ITE, supporting early-career educators, retaining and developing the existing workforce, elevating the status of the profession, and better understanding workforce needs through data collection and targeted research.

Reframing teacher education from a problem requiring regulation to a collaborative partner in co-designing workforce solutions could serve to better recognise ITE as a significant field of education research and practice in its own right, better reflecting how teacher educators work alongside schools and systems to address workforce and equity challenges. The Australian Government's Next Steps: Report of the Quality Teacher Education Review recognises the importance of building strong partnerships between schools and higher education providers, acknowledging that these partnerships – where knowledge and experience is shared – help to bridge the research-practice gap, and improve understanding, connection, and collaboration.

The Australian Government has also introduced a range of assistance packages intended to incentivise entry into the education profession. These include fee-free TAFE places for the ECEC and VET workforce, HELP Debt reduction for very remote teachers, the Paid Practicum Subsidy for practicum components for ECEC and teaching students, and the Commonwealth Prac Payment to support tertiary students completing teaching placements.

More collaborative approaches are essential to addressing equity within teacher education. Achieving equity first requires explicit examination of the demographics of those who enter ITE programs, and the program pathways chosen, and well as understanding precise completion rates for individual groups. Additionally, the specific barriers and enablers affecting First Nations peoples, regional and remote students, those from low socioeconomic status (SES) and first-in-family backgrounds, gender and sexually diverse people, people with disabilities, and other equity cohorts, also need to be comprehensively understood.

Australia's education workforce challenges and recent policy responses provide an immense opportunity for education research to deliver priority-aligned projects. Such projects can generate insights into the scale and complexity of workforce challenges and evaluate the effectiveness of different strategies to shape evidence-based policy and practice.

A MORE JOINED-UP TERTIARY EDUCATION SECTOR
A tertiary educated population has long term social, economic and health benefits and an inclusive, high-quality tertiary education system is critical to democratic societies and knowledge economies. The impact of technologies which are transforming social life and work requires a more innovative, responsive and responsible tertiary sector. The Universities Accord called for an increase in the tertiary attainment rate of the working age population from the current rate of 60% to at least 80% by 2050.

To meet this ambitious target, Australia will need to engage those currently under-represented in the tertiary education system, such as First Nations people and those from low SES-backgrounds. Currently, under-resourced public schools teach over 80% of students in these equity groups. Additionally, schools will need to increase student preparedness for post-secondary education. Developing clear pathways into tertiary education will involve greater harmonisation across the tertiary education sector, including improved credit recognition and more innovative, collaborative education and training programs that respond to the needs of learners and employers.

The Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC) was the headline recommendation of the Universities Accord. ATEC will oversee the stewardship of Australia's tertiary education sector to create a better, fairer and more harmonised tertiary education system that delivers for students and on national economic and social objectives.

These structural changes provide opportunities for the expertise housed in Australia's education research community to help inform consistent accreditation and professional standards, research-based approaches to practice, including for different cohorts, and develop appropriate approaches for evaluation.

Tertiary education reform is also a matter of sector funding. The dual funding model for TAFE institutions, with responsibility shared between Commonwealth and State and Territory Governments, has contributed to persistent underfunding. Government funding to universities has declined over the last three decades, encouraging institutions to rely on international student fees for research income. There has been a significant policy shift since 2023, with restrictions on international student places, limiting university revenue and contributing to widespread ad major job losses, course cuts and consolidations.

DATA GAPS AND INCONSISTENCIES

A key aspect of good policy and planning is robust longitudinal datasets across all education sectors to which researchers can gain access. Despite substantial data collection across Australia's education sector, significant gaps limit the capacity of researchers, policymakers and educators to understand student outcomes, workforce needs and to develop and implement evidence-based policy and practice. This is compounded by inconsistent definitions, varied reporting standards across sectors and institutions, and limited data linkage capabilities across education, health, and social services datasets and lack of data on cultural diversity, restricting holistic understanding of factors shaping educational equity and student outcomes.

Time lags in data availability (often 12-18 months between collection and publication) are also a challenge, limiting the ability of governments and researchers alike to provide timely and accurate advice on the urgent planning and action needed now to meet Australia's future skills and training needs.

The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) provides standardised literacy and numeracy measures, however, it only captures a narrow slice of student learning and has faced methodological disruptions including the transition to online testing and changes in administration timing. Notable gaps exist in longitudinal tracking of individual student progress across year levels and transitions between education sectors, making it difficult to assess the cumulative impact of educational interventions or understand different pathways for diverse learner cohorts including students with disability, First Nations students, and those from low SES backgrounds. Student wellbeing and engagement data remains fragmented across jurisdictions, with each state and territory employing different survey instruments, frequencies, and coverage creating barriers to national comparisons and limiting understanding of non-academic outcomes that strongly predict long-term success.

While VET RTOs collect and submit activity data to the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), the varied nature of provider types and resourcing contributes to inconsistent data collection practices and quality standards. This makes it difficult to ensure consistent teaching and assessment approaches, to understand outcomes for VET graduates and how they intersect with other personal characteristics, and to measure the impact of research and other investments. There has been recent investment in modernising and streamlining the collection, sharing and use of VET activity data. The VET National Data Asset (VNDA) brings together integrated dataset to provide a more comprehensive picture of the VET sector. These improvements provide an opportunity to enhance the quality and impact of VET sector research and inform government, RTOs and industry policy and practice.

Education workforce data does not include data on ethnic or cultural background which could inform research and policies about developing a more culturally diverse education workforce at all levels. In the VET sector, for instance, there is no regular compulsory or comprehensive collection of workforce data by RTOs. This leaves regulators, funders and providers uncertain about the size, composition and credentials of the VET workforce, with implications for the recruitment and ongoing professional development needed for future workforce planning.

SECTOR SNAPSHOTS

The following sector snapshots provide an overview of current key issues and policy agendas across Australia's education system. They are not intended as specialist or comprehensive accounts of each sector, but rather to capture broad patters and shared issues and priorities across the system to help guide consultation.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

Australia's ECEC system is an essential part of Australian society and the Australian economy. The system facilitates benefits for children and families by providing education and care, while also benefiting overall productivity by enabling parents and carers to increase participation in work and study. The comprehensive ECEC system comprises of dedicated pre-school programs, CBDC, Family Day Care (FDC), Outside of School Hours Care (OSHC), Vacation Care Services (VAC), and In Home Care (IHC) services. Approximately 1.5 million children participate in ECEC programs each week.

GOVERNANCE, CURRICULUM AND PROFESSIONAL FRAMEWORKS
Multiple and varied layers of governance and regulatory frameworks shape the ECEC sector. The Australian Government provides support to the sector through the development of policies, curriculum and financial support. Despite national frameworks, implementation varies across jurisdictions and each state and territory utilises their own administrative authorities, screening process for adults who work with children, and first-aid and safety requirements for employees. This fragmentation creates compliance complexity for providers operating across borders and inconsistency in educator experiences and professional requirements.
The Australian, State and Territory Governments have recognised the need for reform in the national Preschool Reform Agreement, including greater funding for equity and inclusion, improved participation, and improved learner outcomes outlined. The Preschools Outcomes Measure is a product of this reform and is expected to be widely utilised in 2026.

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The National Quality Framework
The ECEC sector operates under the National Quality Framework (NQF), managed by the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA).The NQF comprises the National Quality Standard (NQS) and the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) Belonging, Being and Becoming provides.

The NQS sets the national benchmark for ECEC services. It has seven quality areas assessed by state and territory regulatory authorities:
- Educational program and practice
- Children's health and safety
- Physical environment
- Staffing arrangements
- Relationships with children
- Collaborative partnerships with families and communities
- Governance and leadership.

Services are rated against the NQS as: Working Towards NQS, Meeting NQS, Exceeding NQS, or Excellent. In 2025, 18,018 ECEC services were approved to operate under the NQF. 93% of these approved services had been assessed with a quality rating. Preschools had more services (52%) exceeding the NQS than other service types.

The EYLF provides the pedagogical framework for children from 0-5 years. The EYLF is underpinned by five learning outcomes, that children:

- Have a strong sense of identity
- Are connected with and contribute to their world
- Have a strong sense of wellbeing
- Are confident and involved learners
- Are effective communicators.

Other national frameworks, standards and resources
Various other resources guide the ECEC and support data collection and monitoring and evaluation for better outcomes for children and families.

The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) has been implemented every three years since 2009 to:

- Gain an understanding of children's development as they enter school
- Inform ECEC policy development and practice
- Monitor trends in child development.

ECEC teachers are guided by the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers, which aligns with the NQS and EYLF. The Teacher Standards support early childhood teacher (ECT) from initial accreditation through to professional development and leadership. Throughout Australia, an approved early childhood teaching qualification is required for employment. However, registration and accreditation requirements for ECTs vary across states, territories, and early childhood settings.

THE CURRENT AND FUTURE WORKFORCE
The ECEC sector employs a workforce of approximately 270,000 across all service types. In 2024, 91% of workers were female, and 3.5% were Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. The ECEC services primarily attended by children between the ages of 0-5 years old, prior to the first year of their compulsory schooling, include CBDC, FDC, and dedicated preschools. These services employ approximately 205,000 employees and 82% of these workers are employed in CBDC settings. The median age of preschool workers is 45 to 46 years, however, the median age of employees in CBDC is 34 years old. At 37.5%, dedicated preschool settings have the highest number of employees holding a bachelor's degree or higher in a teaching field. In CBDC settings, 71% of employees have completed a diploma or certificate.
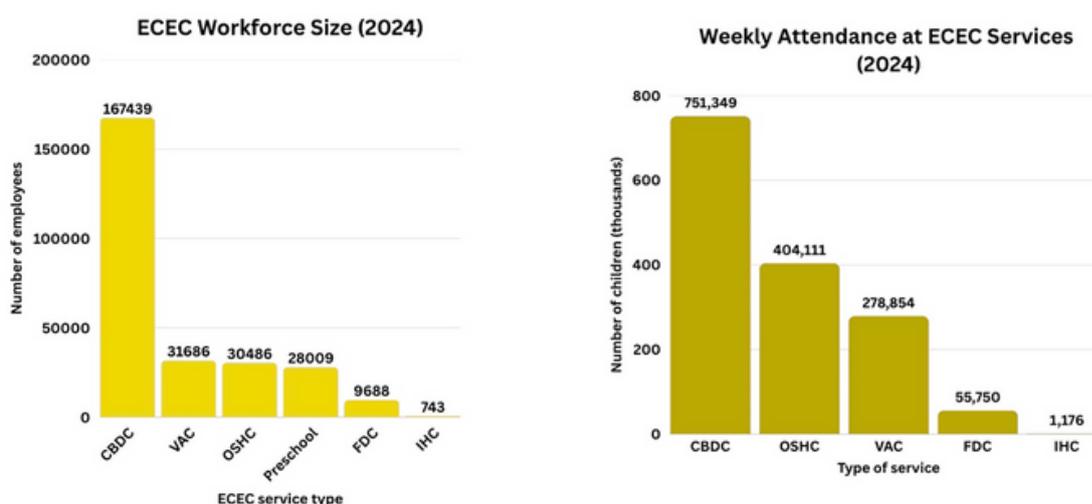
Source: Department of Education (2024), Early Childhood Education and Care National Workforce Census 2024 National Report.
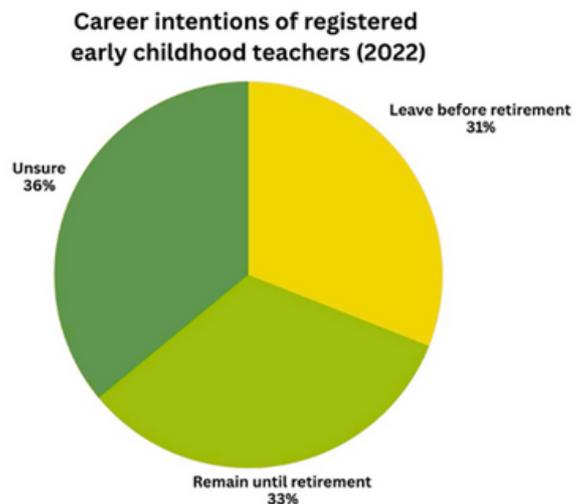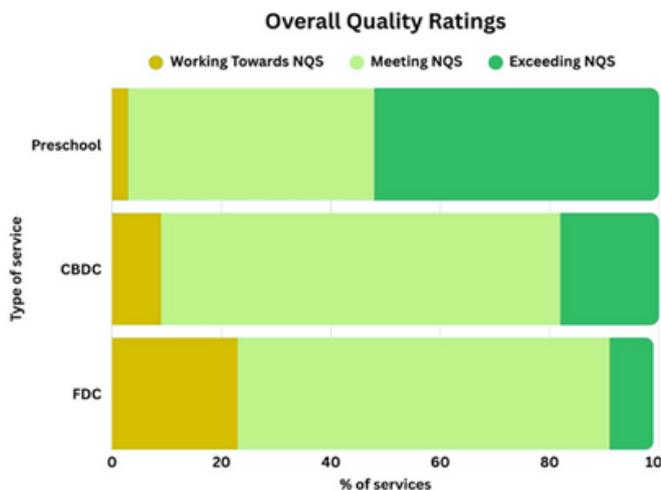
## Common early childhood ITE qualifications
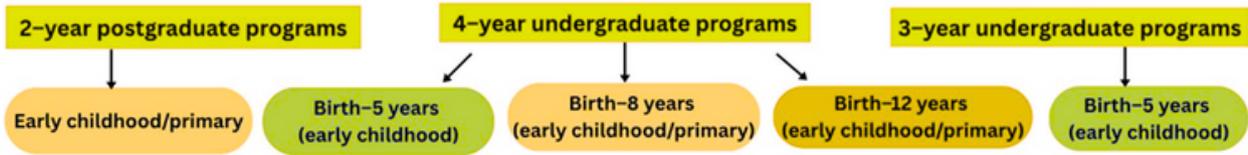
Source: Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (2024), In Focus: Early Childhood Teachers (August 2024 ed.).

The ECEC system has experienced significant expansion since 2013, predominantly seen through an increase in for-profit services. This growth has highlighted sectorial and workforce challenges. The sector is currently experiencing workforce shortages, which are more pronounced in low-SES areas, regional and remote areas, and in First Nations communities. These shortages are the result of rapid growth and staff turnover, lower wages in relative to other education sectors, unpaid work obligations, recruitment practices, and differing regulations across jurisdictions and services.

The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership's (AITSL) Australian Teacher Workforce Data finds that since 2018, the number of students completing early childhood ITE has decreased by an average of 4.9% each year. While the range of early childhood teacher ITE program offerings provides choice for students, those who train across ages often choose to work in primary school settings rather than ECEC. In 2022, 44% of the ECT workforce were employed in a school setting rather than solely ECEC. This preference of workplace setting further illuminates the challenges in retaining staff in the ECEC sector. The reduction in early childhood ITE completions and ECT workforce concentration in school settings is significant in the face of workforce challenges and growing demand. Recent rapid expansion across the sector, including an increase in the number of preschool hours that children are entitled to, shapes a need for additional early childhood teachers.

Sources (left to right): Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (2025), NQF Snapshot Q2 2025: A quarterly report from the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority; Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (2024), In Focus: Early Childhood Teachers (August 2024 ed.).
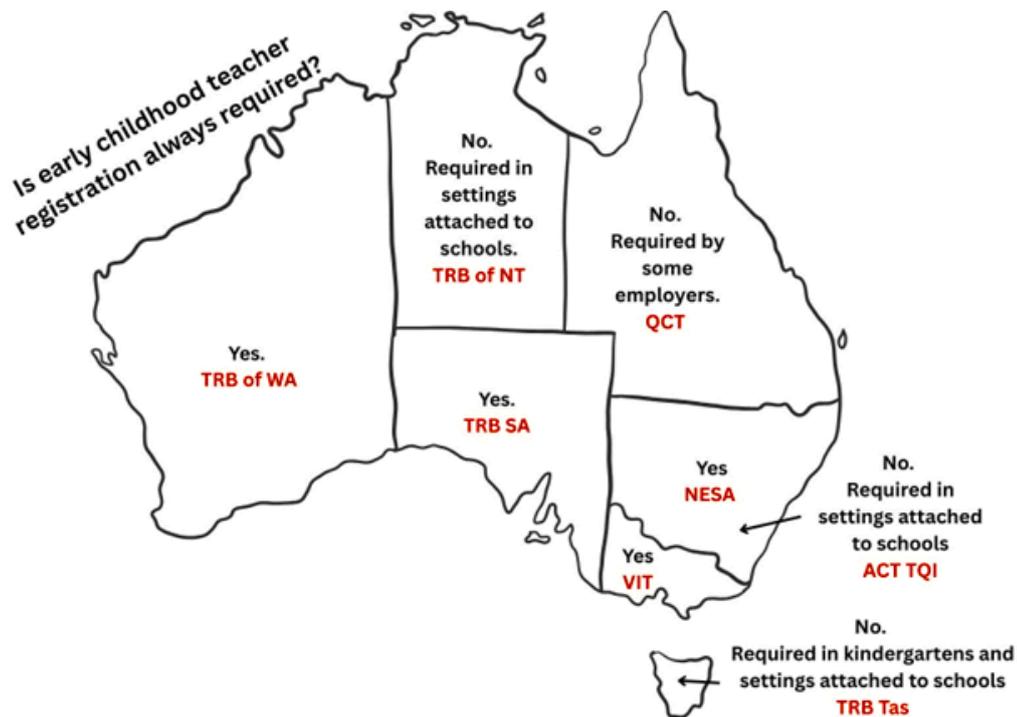
Source: ACECQA. (n.d.), <u>Early childhood teacher registration and accreditation.</u>

EQUITY AND ACCESS

Differences between ECEC centres and services, along with the varied geographic and socioeconomic factors that shape a child's background, limit the extent to which <u>outcomes from participating in ECEC</u> can be measured. Nevertheless, evidence indicates that quality ECEC is beneficial for children, particularly for children from less advantaged backgrounds and for 3-5 year-olds. Intervention-based research, predominantly from international settings, suggests that <u>longer-term benefits</u> include:
- Increased levels of schooling completion
- Improved employment and income outcomes
- Improved health and social outcomes
- Decreased likelihood of repeating grade levels
- Reduced contact with justice system services.

The most recent <u>AEDC National Report</u> finds that between 2021-2024 (across all domains) the percentage of children classified as developmentally "vulnerable" increased and the percentage of children developmentally "on track" decreased. This is concerning as the skills acquired by children in their early years have been found to directly <u>impact later achievement in literacy and numeracy</u>. Improved outcomes across AEDC domains would enable a greater number of children to commence school with the strong developmental foundations needed for educational success.

To improve outcomes for all leaners, the <u>Productivity Commission</u> recommended significant reforms to ECEC, including:
- An increased qualified workforce
- Increased ECEC attendance – particularly by disadvantaged children
- A reduction in the number of services operating at "Working towards" the NQS.

The Australian Government's <u>Inclusion Support Program</u> supports ECEC services with funding to improve inclusivity for children with additional needs. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), in 2022, 6% of 0-4-year-olds and 12% of 5-9-year-olds had a <u>disability</u>. While disability requires personalised learning and support, research finds that the needs of all children and young people should be considered in <u>curriculum development and delivery</u> to support and embed inclusivity.

The percentage of children classified as "on track" decreased across AEDC domains between 2021 - 2024
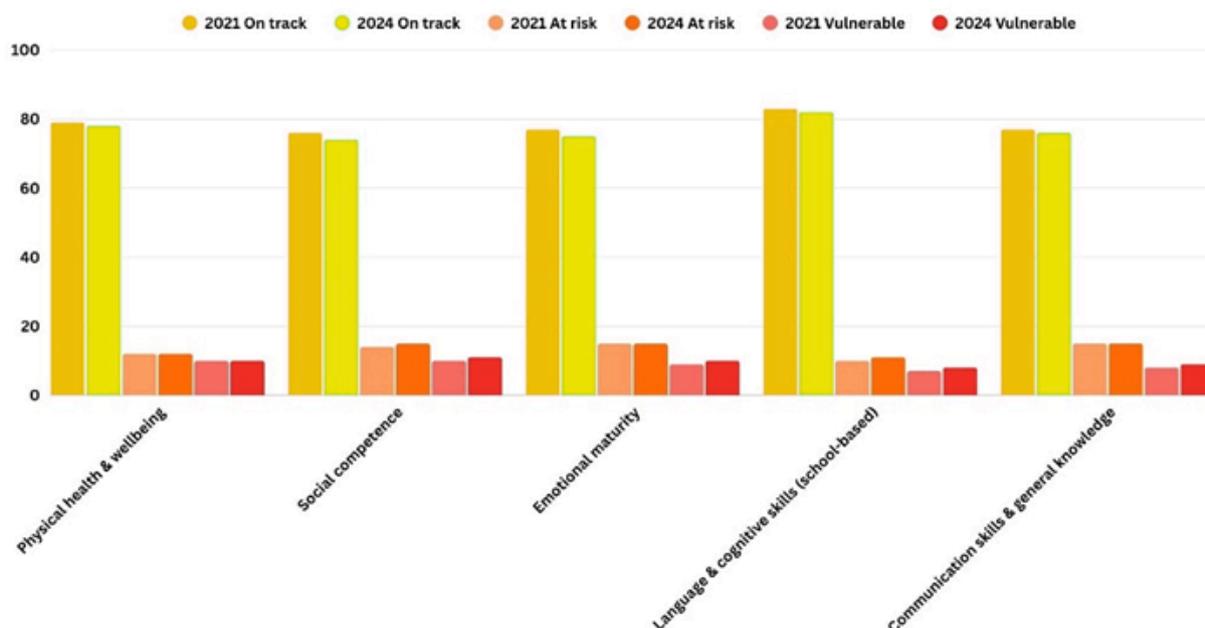
● 2021 On track ● 2024 On track ● 2021 At risk ● 2024 At risk ● 2021 Vulnerable ● 2024 Vulnerable

PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLING

School education across Australia follows a consistent staged structure with only minor variations between states and territories. Education is compulsory from ages 6-16, spanning primary (Kindergarten-Year 6), secondary (Years 7-10), and senior secondary (Years 11-12). Schools may operate as primary-only, secondary-only, or combined primary-secondary institutions, while secondary schools can be organised as single campuses or divided into separate junior and senior campuses.

GOVERNANCE, CURRICULUM AND PROFESSIONAL FRAMEWORKS

The primary and secondary schooling system comprises three sectors, government, Catholic and Independent. Australia's education system operates under a dual funding model: schools are funded through a combination of Commonwealth, State and Territory Government funding, alongside revenue from additional parental contributions and fees and private contributions in the Catholic and Independent sectors. Each sector has different responsibilities, with public schools required to take any child in their zone, whereas non-Government schools able to exclude.

In 2022-23, Government expenditure (Commonwealth, State and Territory) was $85.9 billion, a 4.4% increase on the year prior – with $64.8 billion for Government schools (enrolling 64% of students) and $21.2 billion to non-Government schools (enrolling 35% of students). Government recurrent expenditure per full-time equivalent (FTE) student measures efficiency in delivering primary and secondary education services. Actual recurrent expenditure (excluding user cost of capital) per FTE student for Government schools was $18,071 for primary schools and $21,363 for secondary schools.
State and Territory Governments maintain primary responsibility for school delivery, regulation, and funding, while national frameworks in curriculum and assessment through ACARA and teaching through AITSL ensure consistency in teacher standards and student assessment. This dual model creates inherent tension between jurisdictional autonomy and national coordination, reflected in varied policy implementation despite nationally consistent benchmarks.
Aligned with the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Australia's primary and secondary schools uphold children's rights to education, protection, and participation. The Declaration guides curriculum frameworks, assessment approaches (including NAPLAN), and policy

reforms across all education sectors. Its principles underpin the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement and the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. The Australian Curriculum and Student Wellbeing Framework guide these principles into practice, emphasising wellbeing, inclusion, and holistic development to ensure equitable access to quality learning. Key focus areas include fostering belonging, promoting mental health and safety, supporting diverse learning needs, and developing student agency and voice.

The implementation of these frameworks is supported by several national education bodies working in coordination. ACARA develops the national curriculum framework, establishing learning standards for Foundation to Year 10 across eight learning areas including English, mathematics, and science. AITSL promotes quality teaching and school leadership, while AERO supports education research and translation to inform best practices. Education Services Australia operates as a ministerial service provider that supports these bodies through collaborative infrastructure, technical services, and delivery of priority national reforms, enabling them to work together in translating curriculum standards into classroom implementation. As of October 2025, these bodies are expected to be merged into a new Australian Teaching and Learning Commission, intended to streamline Australia's national education architecture.

THE CURRENT AND FUTURE WORKFORCE
Australia currently faces a national teacher workforce shortage, with recent declining enrolments (see Higher Education), declining completion rates, and persistent retention challenges, especially in in disadvantaged and hard-to-staff schools where many are teaching out-of-field. Longitudinal surveys of principals over the past 10 years indicated that they are under stress and often experience, as do teachers, threats of violence from both parents and students which impacts on their health and wellbeing. Workload and wellbeing concerns are the primary reason teachers and principals consider leaving the profession, consistent with data showing three-quarters of full-time teachers work at least 45 hours per week. Of particular concern is the 8% increase between 2021-2023 in teachers intending to leave within five years, though international research suggests that stated intentions to leave (30-40%) typically translate to actual turnover rates of 10-15% over five years.
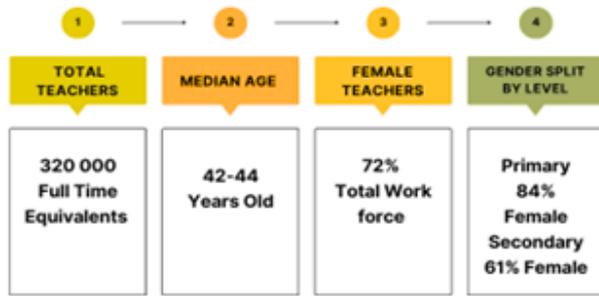

Primary v Secondary

Total Students by sector (2024)
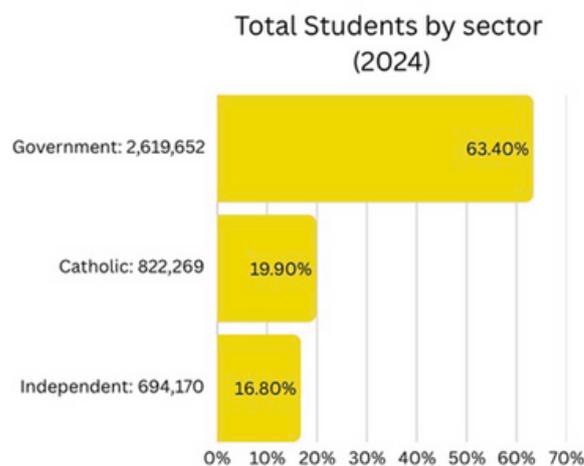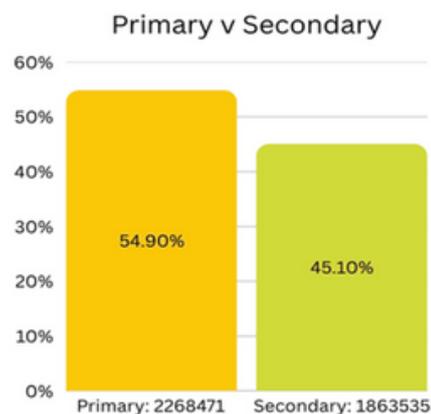
The ten-year growth trend shows a 30.7% increase in students attending independent schools.
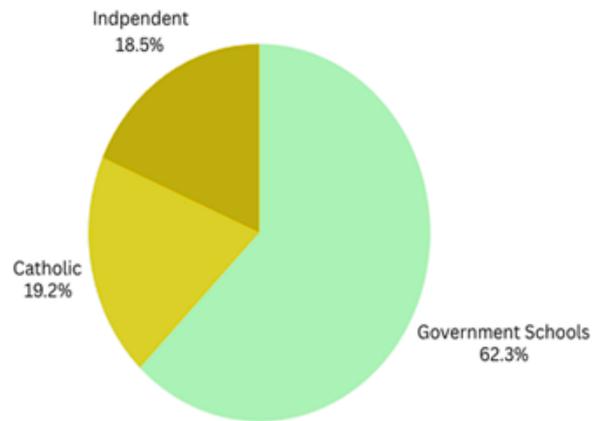
Source: ACARA (2024), National Reporting on Schools in Australia: Student Numbers.

Approved qualifications are required for all primary and secondary teachers, with ITE serving as the primary pathway. As of 2019, 367 programs across 48 public and private providers supported approximately 92,000 students, offering undergraduate and postgraduate pathways in early childhood, primary, or secondary specialisations. Students exiting secondary school or mature aged students may enter a 4-year ITE university degree where entry is typically determined by an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) or specific university entry requirements. Other alternative pathways to teaching include the completion of a 2-year Masters degree following an undergraduate degree, an accelerated degree, or employment-based pathways such as the Nexus Program and Teach for Australia.
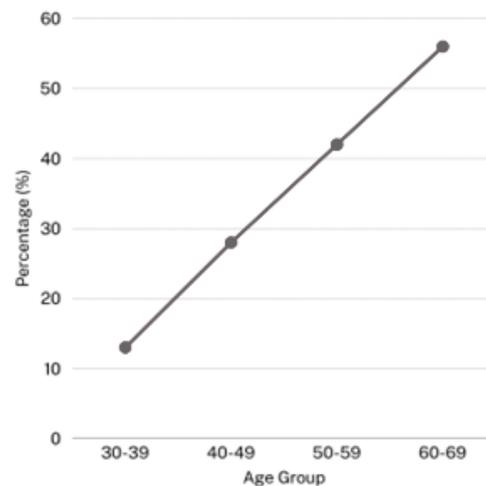
Australian Teacher Workforce Demographics

1 →	2 →	3 →	4
TOTAL TEACHERS	**MEDIAN AGE**	**FEMALE TEACHERS**	**GENDER SPLIT BY LEVEL**
320 000 Full Time Equivalents	42-44 Years Old	72% Total Work force	Primary 84% Female Secondary 61% Female

Total Teaching Workforce (FTE) by Sector (2024)

Indpendent 18.5%
Catholic 19.2%
Government Schools 62.3%

26% Stay Until Retirement — Only 1 in 4 Teachers (2023)

14% Leaving Within 5 Years — 8% increase since 2001

13% Young Teachers (30-39) — Plan to stay until retirement

Intention To Stay Until Retirement by Age

Percentage (%) vs Age Group:
- 30-39: 13
- 40-49: 28
- 50-59: 42
- 60-69: 56

Source (from top left to bottom right): Services Australia (2024), School Years; AITSL (2024), Australian Teacher Workforce Data; Australian Bureau of Statistics (2024), Retirement and Retirement Intentions, Australia.

ITE regulation operates through state and territory Teacher Regulatory Authorities (TRAs) using nationally consistent standards established by AITSL. Key regulatory mechanisms include:

- Australian Professional Standards for Teachers defining quality teaching across four career stages (Graduate, Proficient, Highly Accomplished, Lead)
- Literacy and Numeracy Test for Initial Teacher Education which sets out mandatory literacy and numeracy assessments required before graduation and registration
- Practical experience requiring a minimum 80 days (undergraduate) or 60 days (postgraduate) in school settings.

Graduate teachers must advance to Proficient level within five years of ITE completion, with progression requiring evidence submission verified by supervisors and validated by TRAs. This ensures continued professional development aligned with improving student outcomes.

The AITSL Professional Standards for Teachers include Standard 1.4 (Strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students) and Standard 2.4 (Understand and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to promote reconciliation) and provide to provide practical guidance for educators. These standards are supported by various AITSL resources addressing First Nations perspectives, community engagement, and cultural safety responsiveness for diverse learners.

EQUITY AND ACCESS

National annual reporting mechanisms, including the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD), and NAPLAN assessments, continue to highlight persistent disparities in educational outcomes and reveal how different student cohorts experience education in markedly different ways. These differences stem from intersecting factors, including disability, SES status, cultural and linguistic diversity, geographic location, and Indigenous status.

The 2024 NCCD found that 25.7% of Australian school students received an educational adjustment due to a disability, an increase of almost 8% since 2015. This significant number of students, increasing prevalence of disability, and overall changing face of disability and inclusion in schools, requires increased understanding of best practice to ensure an inclusive education is provided to all students. Designing for inclusive education demands ongoing attention to this evolving landscape, including the implementation of effective differentiation strategies, adjustment of learning and teaching approaches, and provision of appropriate learning spaces that accommodate the accommodate the diverse and changing needs of Australia's student population.

Australian school education has become more unequal over the last thirty years with funding based less on need due to sectoral differences in funding and responsibilities despite all schools receiving taxpayer funding. Non-Government schools receive both government funding and can charge fees. Extensive research evidence shows that both the family background of students and the social composition of schools have a major influence on student achievement exacerbating socio-geographical inequality. The three-sector school system, funding inequality and regulatory differences sees Australian schools among the most segregated among OECD countries, with long term implications for the society and economy.

Public schools bear the greatest burden of disadvantage yet have fewer resources than Catholic or Independent schools to address this disadvantage. Analysis of school profile data from the My School website, which utilises Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) data on families, shows that students from low socio-educational advantage (SEA) families comprise a much larger proportion of public school enrolments than in private schools. In 2023, 31.1% of students in public schools were in the lowest SEA quartile, compared with 15.9% in Catholic schools and 10.9% in Independent schools. 29% of public schools have over 50% of their students from the lowest SEA quartile compared to only 5% of Catholic schools and 9% of Independent schools. Public schools enrol the vast majority of students from the lowest SEA quartile. 80.5% of low SEA students attend public schools compared to 11.8% in Catholic schools and only 7.7% in Independent schools in every state/territory. By contrast, the proportion of students in the top two SEA quartiles in public schools is 42.8% compared with 70.1% for Independent schools and 56.7% for Catholic schools. Parents with lower SEA are less able to contribute time or funds to their local school.

These factors all have significant impact on teacher workload and student learning outcomes particularly in communities and schools where there is a concentration of multiple forms of disadvantage.

ANNUAL REPORTING, STANDARDISED ASSESSMENTS AND PERSISTENT PERFORMANCE GAPS

Annual reporting and large-scale, standardised assessments highlight how different and at times interconnected equity and access issues impact educational experiences.

Australia's schooling systems aims to equip young people with skills for lifelong learning, active citizenship, and employment transitions. Outcomes are measured through National Key Performance Measures reported annually by ACARA, and supplemented by data from the ABS, providing an evidence base to monitor progress and inform policy. Measures include student engagement, attendance, retention, and attainment.
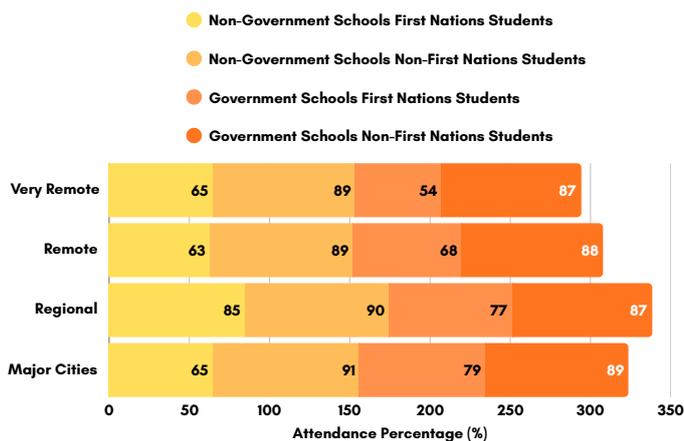
Student engagement serves as a key indicator of educational effectiveness in achieving universal participation. The construct comprises three interconnected dimensions: behavioural engagement (attendance, attainment, and retention), emotional engagement (attitudes toward learning and school), and cognitive engagement (intellectual challenge, effort, and motivation).

Attendance serves as a key indicator of student participation, with established non-attendance patterns correlating with poorer academic outcomes. Nationally in 2024, attendance patterns revealed concerning declines across both primary and secondary levels and have an impact on student learning outcomes. The attendance crisis spans all sectors, suggesting that school refusal and disengagement are major issues. Research and sector consultation finds that the patterns are largely shaped by post-COVID-19 avoidance behaviours, rising mental health concerns, family financial pressures, and vulnerabilities affecting particular groups.
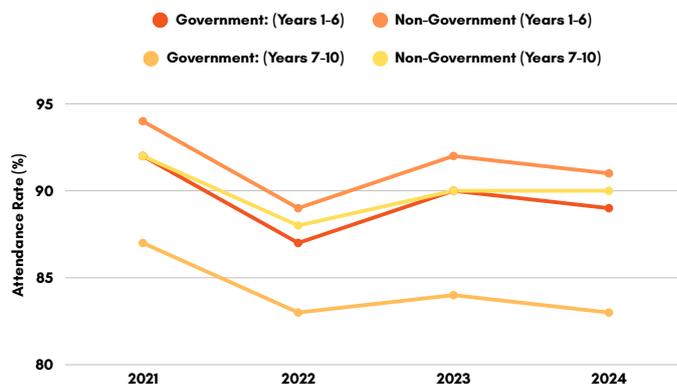
School exclusions, including short-term suspensions, long-term suspensions, and enrolment cancellations, disproportionately affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students across Australian jurisdictions. In Queensland, for instance, Indigenous students comprise only 11% of the student population yet represented 26% of exclusion incidents. Similarly, New South Wales data reveals this student cohort accounted for 25% of all suspensions despite representing just 9% of Government school enrolments. However, there are currently challenges to fully understand the scope and consistency of school exclusions as not all states and territories make suspension and exclusion data publicly available or readily accessible.

Annual reporting finds that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students record lower attendance rates than their non-Indigenous peers across all year levels and jurisdictions, with the
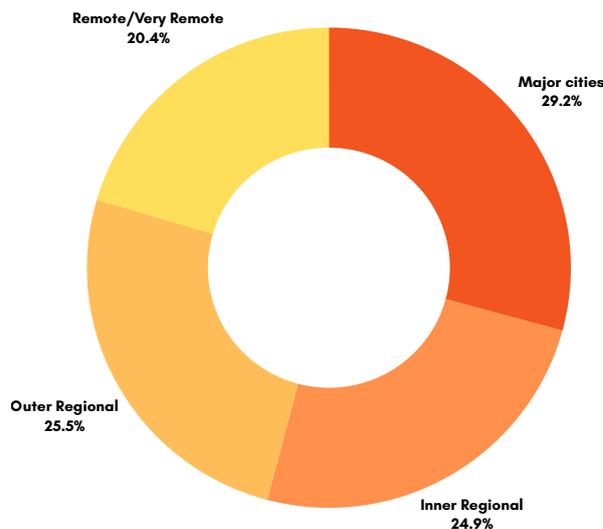
Attendance by Geographic Region
(2022)

- Non-Government Schools First Nations Students
- Non-Government Schools Non-First Nations Students
- Government Schools First Nations Students
- Government Schools Non-First Nations Students

Region	Non-Gov FN	Non-Gov Non-FN	Gov FN	Gov Non-FN
Very Remote	65	89	54	87
Remote	63	89	68	88
Regional	85	90	77	87
Major Cities	65	91	79	89

Attendance Percentage (%)

Attendance Trends: All School Types
(2021–2024)

- Government: (Years 1–6)
- Non-Government (Years 1–6)
- Government: (Years 7–10)
- Non-Government (Years 7–10)

Attendance Rate (%)

Year 12 Attainment
(2022)

- Remote/Very Remote 20.4%
- Major cities 29.2%
- Inner Regional 24.9%
- Outer Regional 25.5%

Source (from top to bottom): ACARA (2024), Student Attendance; ACARA (2024), Year 12 Certification Rates.

20

with the disparity intensifying in higher year levels. Some <u>research</u> suggests that attendance frequency may have little correlation with academic success or failure among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students living in remote regions. There is, therefore, a need to better understand how other factors such as funding and the quality of teaching and resources influence individual capacity for educational achievement.

Year 12 certification rates measure the proportion of students completing senior secondary education, reflecting Australian Government goals for universal graduation and preparation for lifelong learning, employment transitions and active citizenship. In 2022, the number of students who completed Year 12 was 76.3%, a <u>2% decrease</u> on the previous year. While attainment rates are relatively strong, they mask significant equity gaps. The 24% of students not completing Year 12 are disproportionately from disadvantaged backgrounds, First Nations communities, regional areas and public schools. Moreover, the patterns of ATAR results indicates the impact of social and economic inequality on particular cohorts. In an economy where nine out of ten new jobs will require <u>post-secondary qualifications</u>, this attainment and achievement gap perpetuates intergenerational disadvantage.

Australian states and territories utilise their own versions of annual school surveys to determine and analyse aspects of <u>student wellbeing and engagement</u>. These surveys are typically voluntary and may be designed to capture the opinions of staff, students and/or carers. While these data are useful, it is difficult to compare these data beyond the context in which they are collected, and data does not consistently capture the full scope of experiences across Government, Independent and Catholic schooling systems. Standardised assessments of students' academic performance are an established feature of Australia's schooling system. These assessments focus on students' attainment of the foundational skills considered necessary to academic success, and results are also interpreted as evidence of the efficacy of educational practices and to inform policy decisions.

<u>The NAPLAN</u> assesses reading, writing, and numeracy across Years 3, 5, 7, and 9, serving dual purposes as both diagnostic tool and policy instrument for targeted funding allocation.
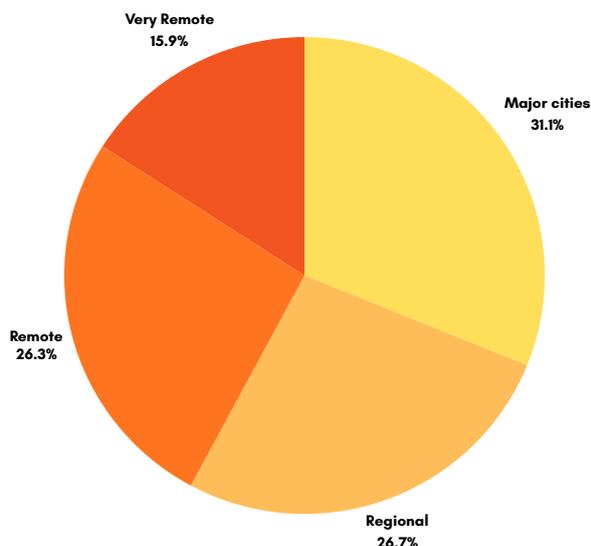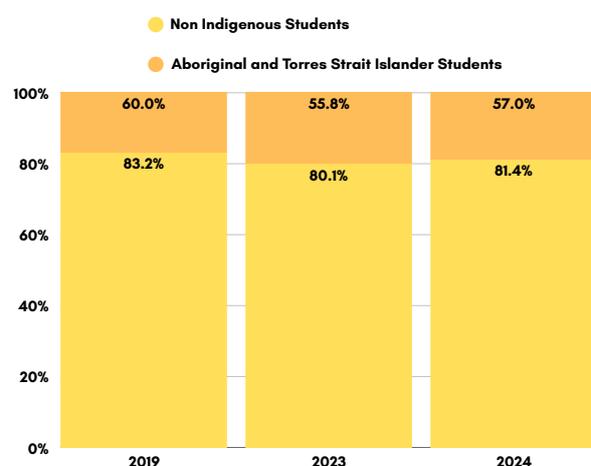
Source (from left to right): ACARA (2024), <u>Student Attendance</u>; ACARA (2024), <u>Year 12 Certification Rates</u>.

Key findings from the 2025 NAPLAN:
- **Approximately 30% of students across all year levels failed to meet national standards in core domains**
- **Geographic disparities persist, with 20% of very remote students achieved benchmarks compared to 70% in metropolitan areas**
- **Proficiency rates varied 15.8% across domains, from Year 3 Writing (76.8%) to Year 9 Writing (61.0%)**
- **Outcomes remained static between 2023 and 2025, indicating stalled national progress despite individual school improvements.**

Time lags and data access issues, including inequalities of access to data between school leaders and teachers, complicates the utility of NAPLAN data for teaching and learning. The public availability of NAPLAN results through the MySchool website has enabled the ranking of schools and created pressure on principals and teachers to ensure strong test performance, leading to increased focus on teaching to the test so that results reflect well on all stakeholders rather than serving the assessment's original diagnostic purpose. NAPLAN testing has also been linked to increased stress, anxiety and underperformance among students. As the NAPLAN Review final report observed, these challenges are further complicated by methodological considerations related to longitudinal analysis, with variations in school starting ages across jurisdictions, the 2023 transition to online testing (excluding Year 3 writing), and the shift from May to March administration.

Complementing NAPLAN and other annual reporting, the triennial National Assessment Program sample assessments (Years 6 and 10 for civics, science, and ICT literacy) provide additional context for evaluating outcomes across Australia's diverse educational landscape.

Australia also participates in three international large scale assessments – the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA; administered triennially to 15-year old students, and changing to quadrennial after 2025), Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS; quadrennial), and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS; quinquennial) – to benchmark performance against global standards. These assessments involve a nationally representative, random selection of schools and students.

The latest results find that 80% of students met or exceeded the proficient standard for reading, while 68% and 77% of students met or exceeded the proficient standard for science and mathematics respectively. Although Australia's mean scores remain higher that the OECD average, since first participating in PISA international assessments, the average Australian student results across mathematics, science and reading literacy have declined. PISA assessment results show that the percentage of low performing Australian students has increased and the percentage of higher performers has decreased. Persistent achievement gaps remain among First Nations students and those from low SES backgrounds and hard-to-staff schools in regional and remote areas, as well as longer-term downward trends in certain year groups.

TERTIARY EDUCATION

Tertiary education is formal post-secondary education and training, including higher education and VET. Australia has what is considered universal tertiary education, with census data showing 51.5% of the population aged 19-20 enrolled in either university or VET. The 50% threshold assumes that if the majority of a cohort participates, engagement becomes a social expectation, and thus universal. Yet as the data on the outcomes and experiences of some students reveals, consistent, high-quality tertiary education is not experienced universally.

The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), overseen by the Australian Government Department of Education, outlines formal qualifications and provides a framework for the Australian education and training system. The VET system comprises of AQF qualifications starting from Certificate I at Level 1, through to Level 8. Higher education covers qualification types spanning from an AQF Level 5 Diploma through to a Level 10 Doctoral Degree.

VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Australia's VET system provides access to a broad range of nationally recognised programs, including, foundation skills courses, multi-year apprenticeships, diplomas, vocational degrees and postgraduate certificates and diplomas. VET plays a key role in providing students with job-ready skills and an accessible entry point to further education and training for young people, including those participating in a school-based apprenticeships and traineeships, and groups who historically has experienced educational inequity.

VET is delivered by some 4,000 RTOs in Australia and offshore, including TAFE, schools and universities, professional and industry associations, and private and not-for-profit community-based providers. In 2022, 4.5 million students enrolled in VET, representing 830 million total training hours. Of these hours, 64% were delivered at private training providers, 24.1% at TAFE, 3.8 % at community education providers, 3.2% at schools, 2.9% at universities (dual providers) and 1.5% at enterprise providers. Under the current Federation Agreement, TAFE is the only fee-free provider, particularly in rural and regional areas.

The VET sector is itself also a major provider of education training, with 8.6% of all enrolments in education programs.

GOVERNANCE AND REGULATORY FRAMEWORKS
VET programs include those provided at AQF levels 1 through 8, as well as non-nationally recognised training which may be non-accredited or developed locally to meet specified identified skills and training needs. Only RTOs can deliver nationally recognised courses and AQF-accredited VET qualifications and receive government funding for the provision of VET courses. RTOs each have differing offerings, resourcing constraints and reporting practises.

Fragmented governance is a significant issue facing the VET sector, with responsibility shared across levels of government, industry engagement arrangements, and regulators. This has led to inconsistencies in policy, funding, and quality assurance. The Australian Government provides financial support to State and Territory Governments to deliver national training systems within their jurisdictions and provides specific incentives, interventions and assistance for national priority areas. The Australian and State and Territory Governments work together via the Skills and Workforce Ministerial Council. The Council provides a forum for cross-jurisdictional stewardship of VET through skills prioritisation, strategic policy and performance evaluation. In 2025, there are two active cross-jurisdictional agreements: the Fee-free TAFE Skills Agreement, which delivers fee-free places for priority sectors and priority equity groups, and the National Skills Agreement, which commenced in January 2024 for a period of five years and will deliver on nationally shared visions and principles for VET. These agreements and other agenda-setting decisions by the Council feed into the various skills and training departments, authorities and regulatory bodies.

Government funding for VET is provided through multiple channels, including Australian Government funding to states and territories through Federation Funding Agreements, general funding for government-supported providers such as TAFE institutes, and student and employee assistance. Total government funding for VET in 2024 was $9.8 billion.

A distinctive feature of VET sector programs is that they are competency-based, a model that effectively ensures industry input into the determination of course content. Commonwealth-funded Jobs and Skills Councils oversee the process of writing and curating units of competency that draw on industry consultations. These units are assembled into industry sector-specific training packages that define the core and elective structure of national VET qualifications, and RTOs use training packages to guide their curriculum and assessment design. However, rapidly changing industries are finding that training packages are not keeping up with skills needs. In response, a VET Qualifications Reform Design Group was convened to explore options for VET qualifications and units that include less detailed specification and a greater emphasis on knowledge as befits the modern knowledge economy. With the changes introduced by the Group, future research could investigate and support a transformation of VET qualifications so that they equip students for a wider range of post-course employment pathways, better address contemporary employer needs, and develop higher-level knowledge and skills to facilitate student transitions from VET to higher education.

THE CURRENT AND FUTURE WORKFORCE
Over the coming decade, it is anticipated that nine out of ten new jobs will require post-secondary qualifications and almost half will come through VET pathways. This will require the sector to grow substantially, increasing the demand for qualified trainers and assessors. The current VET workforce is approximately 111,000, with just under half employed in Teach, Train, and Assess roles.

Data shows that over the decade to 2020/2021, the number of VET teachers decreased by 18.1%, despite this being a period of growing demand. Trainers and assessors largely work part-time in their trade and have limited career progression and mobility opportunities. This has been partly remedied with the introduction of Graduate Certificates in initial and continuing teaching training, which offers additional pathways to improved pay and promotion.

VET Students by Type of Training, 2019–2024

Source: NCVER (2025), Total VET Students and Courses 2024.
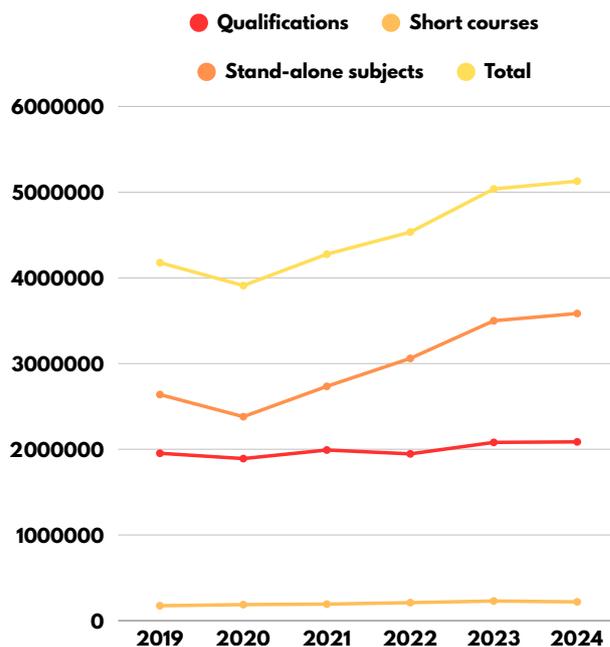
5.1 million students enrolled in VET, 1.8% increase from the previous year

The highest participation rate is among students aged 15 to 19 (45%)

3.5% of VET students were Indigenous

27% from regional or remote areas

3.8% reported having a disability

The VET Workforce Blueprint has been developed to help address issues of attraction, retention and support for the VET workforce.

The Blueprint has three key goals:
- Grow the workforce
- Retail and develop a sustainable, highly skilled and quality VET workforce
- ·Better understand that workforce through the development of data collection systems and targeted research.

EQUITY AND ACCESS

Completing a VET course has the potential to change lives, from equipping learners with the knowledge and skills for initial entry into the workforce to increased employment progression opportunities and providing pathways to university (8% of graduates go on to enrol in university study). For many, a VET qualification has positive financial impact, with a median salary increase of $11,800 in the year following completion. These material impacts are particularly transformative for historically disadvantage groups who have faced systemic barriers to tertiary education and training and the resulting improved life outcomes.

Despite generally high levels of satisfaction with VET programs and support, student outcomes and satisfaction surveys reveal dissatisfaction with training. Training failing to meet student expectations was the third most common reason for withdrawal in 2024 (13%). This reflects a consistent trend; looking back to 2021, training not as expected was among the top four reasons in annual survey findings.

Employers report generally high levels of engagement and satisfaction with the VET system at 75%. However, this represents a downward trend in the decade since 2013. Substandard quality of training, a failure to teach relevant skills, a lack of focus on practical skills, and poor access in regional and remote areas are consistent reasons for dissatisfaction. It should be noted that in 2023, only 15,744 employers nationwide were deemed in-scope for participation in the survey, and just 40% of these employers responded.

A significant proportion of VET is undertaken by non-government providers on a fee-for-service basis, with the cost for the activity taken on by the student or their employer. RTOs tend to be concentrated in metropolitan rather than regional or rural areas. They generally set their own fees and there is considerable variation in fees, subsidies and the total price for VET qualifications. The first national VET average price benchmarking was only conducted in 2021. It identified varying prices for the same qualification in different jurisdictions, for qualification within the same field of education and AFQ level, and even variation within the same TAFE system. While all jurisdictions base their pricing and subsidies on cost of delivery, different training-related factors – such as class sizes, contact hours, and salaries – and different local economic and demographic factors –including thin markets in remote areas, student characteristics – shape underlying cost structures.

Equity and access remain pressing issues for the VET sector, and price variations create barriers to participation, particularly in regional and remote areas where costs are higher, and where the levels of unemployment and proportion of First Nations people and people who are low SES are also generally higher. Better and more equitable access for all learners to VET opportunities and delivering on Australia's skills needs demands nationally consistent prices for VET. As governments looks to develop an appropriate national pricing model, a future challenge will be the availability and accuracy of data on fees and subsidies and access to expert insights to better understanding the underlying drivers of cost differences.

> **There is already a VET trainer and assessor shortage and some projections indicate that demand will grow by 21% over the next decade**

> **Varied prices for the same VET qualification in different jurisdictions average more than $3,000, and in many cases more than $10,000**

HIGHER EDUCATION

Australia's higher education system plays a vital role in individual growth and development, the economy, and the overall success of the nation as a democracy. Australian universities offer a range of study modes and models, including on campus, hybrid, online, full-time and part-time loads. The Universities Accord found that different modes of learning and study options are particularly important when considering equity of participation in higher education and the enrolment needs of non-traditional students. These options provide improved university access for students who are older, students with disability, from low SES backgrounds, from regional or remote areas, and First Nations students.
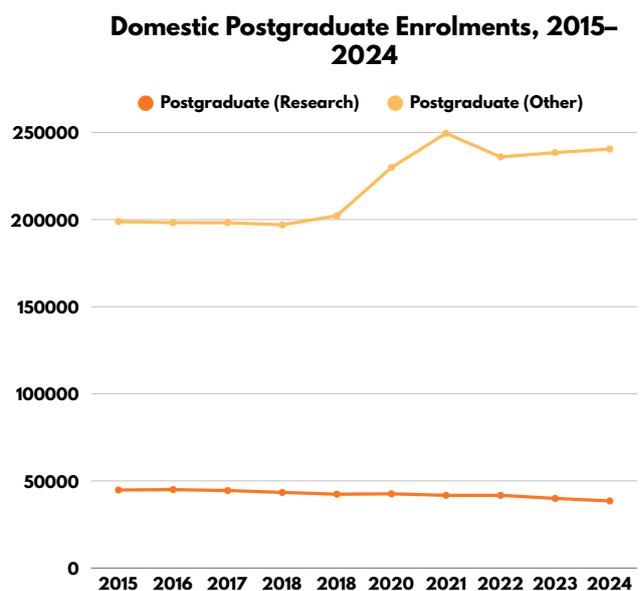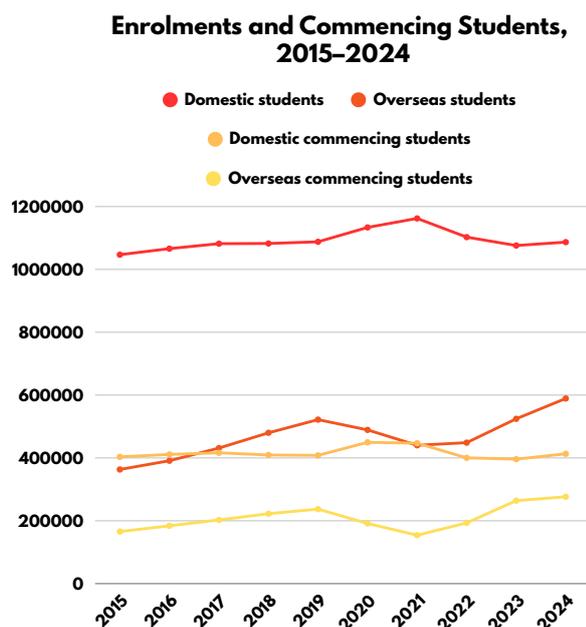
The Universities Accord sets out that by 2025:

- **Increase in tertiary attainment rates (Cert. III or higher) from 60% to 80%**
- **Increase in university education rates from 45% to 55%**
- **Increase in Commonwealth supported students from 860,000 to 1.8 million**

To ensure future success and the prosperity of the nation, the Universities Accord found that Australia's higher education system needs significant reform to meet Australia's future skills needs and deliver for students. To achieve this, the Universities Accord identified ambitious targets that higher education providers should strive towards doubling participation and student equity driven funding.

Australia's 44 universities enrolled 1.7 million students in 2024, 1.1 million of those being domestic students. 39 of the 44 are public universities, and their public funding has declined dramatically, dropping from over 80% in 1990s to average of 26% in 2025.

While enrolments are growing, this is primarily due to an increase in international students. Universities have become increasingly reliant on international student fees to fund domestic places and research, making universities highly vulnerable to geopolitical shifts and changes in visa polices, which impact on student flows and international research collaborations. Recent variability in enrolment trends has been caused by a range of factors including changes in personal circumstances due to the COVID-19 pandemic, cost-of-living expenses, variations in the labour market and availability of employment, changed visa and enrolment

Enrolments and Commencing Students, 2015–2024

- Domestic students
- Overseas students
- Domestic commencing students
- Overseas commencing students

Domestic Postgraduate Enrolments, 2015–2024

- Postgraduate (Research)
- Postgraduate (Other)

Source: Department of Education (2025), Select Higher Education Statistics – 2024 Student Data.

rules for international students, and increasing numbers of students enrolled in online and flexible courses.

When looking at longer term trends, we see that total domestic enrolments have increased by 3.8% in the decade since 2015; this sits below population growth. Commencing domestic undergraduate students have also declined to below 2015 numbers. Conversely, international enrolments have steadily increased by 60% on 2015 numbers.

Australia faces a serious shortage of researchers. The research-intensive Group of Eight Universities experienced an 11.8% decrease in domestic HDR student enrolments in the decade from 2015; the remainder of the system is not filling this gap, with an overall decline of 9.1%. The only notable growth in the postgraduate space has been in postgraduate degrees by coursework (8.5%), a trend that can largely be attributed to the growth in universities offering professional degree courses at a postgraduate level.

Australia has the second highest concentration of foreign students among OECD countries, at 27%, well above the OECD average of 7.4%

Number of Domestic Commencing Students for Education and ITE, 10 year and 2023–2024

	2015	2023	2024	% change 2023 to 2024	% change 2015 to 2024
Ed	46,687	42,208	46,436	10.00%	0.50%
ITE	29,812	23,426	25,683	9.60%	-13.90%

Participation in Higher Education by Equity Group, 2016–2024
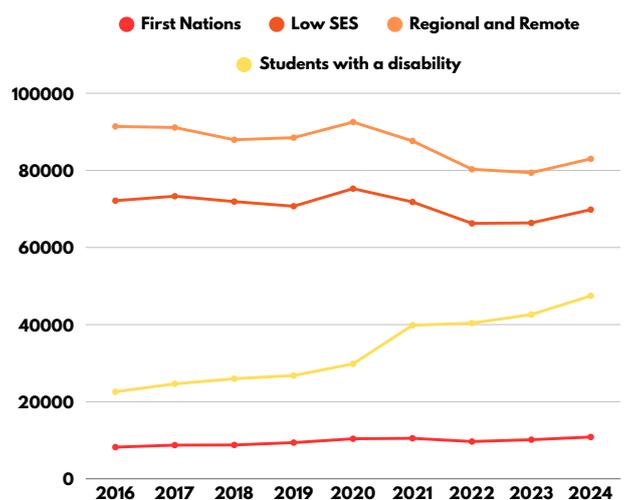
Source: Department of Education (2025), Select Higher Education Statistics – 2024 Student Data.

GOVERNANCE AND REGULATORY FRAMEWORKS

Australia's higher education sector is governed and funded through a complex system that involves Commonwealth, State and Territory Government oversight and funding, and individual institutions, and regulatory agencies. This system seeks to balance national regulation and institutional independence, while supporting research and education offerings that are world-leading and meet the needs of Australian society now and into the future.

At the national level, the Australian Government develops higher education policy and administers funding and student financial support schemes through the Higher Education Support Act 2003. Through the Department of Education, data is collected on student enrolment and outcomes and institutional performance. State and Territory Governments play a limited direct role in governance, but they legislate the formation of universities and may allocate funding for discrete initiatives, especially those related to regional development and innovation and capital works.

The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) is Australia's independent national quality assurance and regulatory agency for higher education. The Higher Education Standards Framework outlines the standards that higher education providers must achieve to ensure quality education is delivered and to remain registered.

Individual universities have their own governing bodies, University Councils, responsible for strategic decisions, finances, and overall institutional performance, while internal Academic Boards or Senates oversee academic standards, curriculum, and research quality and training.

The Universities Accord identified poor governance as a major challenge, with contributing factors including casualisation and underpayment of staff, high salaries of Vice Chancellors, and a lack of action on sexual harassment policies. A Senate Inquiry on university governance is underway and an Expert Council on University Governance, with a final report and principles, was established in response to the Accord findings. Subsequent Commonwealth Government legislation in 2025 has focused on improving accountability, transparency and representation. Interventions include mandates for annual reporting on compliance to TEQSA and University Council membership requirements, including First Nations membership, at least one student member, staff and union input and university leadership expertise from outside the institution.

The Accord also underscored the importance of student safety and connectedness. Consequently, a National Student Ombudsman has been appointed, responsible for receiving and investigating complaints from students about the actions of their higher education providers Additionally, the Action Plan Addressing Gender-Based Violence in Higher Education has been implemented, outlining a commitment to long-term social and cultural change, safety and support for students and staff, and prioritisation of the voices and needs of victim-survivors.

The establishment of ATEC was the headline recommendation of the Universities Accord, and it will oversee the stewardship of Australia's tertiary education sector. The ATEC interim Commissioners are engaging with the sector and stakeholders to embed expert perspectives in advice to the Australian Government. The Universities Accord called for the introduction of a student equity driven approach to funding and improved access for all students in equity groups, including regional university study hubs and free university places for First Nations students. Equity and participation are identified priority areas for the ATEC interim Commissioners.

THE CURRENT AND FUTURE WORKFORCE

The last three decades has seen immense changes to the higher education workforce. There are more women in both the academic and professional workforce, and the traditional workload model of a 40% teaching, 40% research and 20% service has altered over time. The number in the professoriate has increased to 25% by 2023, but there has been a hollowing out at mid-career due to downsizing of restructuring in the 1990s, with women largely located in junior teaching only positions and only 23% of the professoriate.

There has been an increase until 2024 in the research only workforce and teaching only workforce, who are largely employed as contract and sessional staff. Recent industrial relations legislation has sought to reduce the problem of casualisation in academia, yet this has led to a rapid increase in teaching intensive positions in education schools and faculties. This creates further challenges for building the current and future higher education workforce, as senior academics retire and there are fewer fulltime positions available, more teaching only roles, and, in turn, increased teaching loads which make it difficult to do research.

Enrolment data also reveal trends in the future education workforce. For students enrolled in Education programs, total domestic enrolments have fallen 5.8% in the decade since 2015, while HDR enrolments have declined by 3.1%. After significant

declines for total enrolments in 2018 and again in 2022 and 2023, the year 2024 has seen substantial growth in domestic undergraduate commencement as an area of national priority.

EQUITY AND ACCESS

From integrated government data assets to data collected by individual institutions, a great deal of evidence is available to support research and reform to drive improvements across Australia's higher education sector and to enhance student experience and outcomes.

Participation in higher education among equity groups has fluctuated in recent years. There was a spike during the pandemic years when students made use of more accessible study options. There has been a longer-term decline in enrolments among students from low-SES backgrounds and regional and remote areas, a drop of 3.2% and 9.2% respectively between 2016-2024.This decline reflects increased cost of living pressures, changed fee structures – for instance, the Job-ready Graduates Package disproportionately impacts First Nations and low-SES students – and travel and accommodation availability. Participation among First Nations students has increased, but this still represents just 2.6% of the First Nations population, suggesting that the National Agreement on Closing the Gap measures are having limited impact on higher education targets.

Overall attrition (students who discontinue after the first year of study and do not return the following year) remains relatively stable at 12.2% of Australian university students. On average, students have been taking longer to complete their study due to an increase in the number of students choosing to study on a part-time basis. The student success rate measures the proportion of units of study passed (EFTSL) from all units of study attempted for all students studying at all award course levels. National domestic success remains relatively high at 88.6% in 2024, but this has fluctuated in recent years, with a noticeable drop in 2020, likely due to the COVID-19 pandemic and students and educators alike adjusting to online teaching modes. While there have been recent gradual improvements, the success rate for all equity groups sits below the national average.

The Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) surveys make available consistent performance data across the student life cycle. The QILT Employer Satisfaction Survey measures how well graduates meet employer needs across five key areas: foundation skills, adaptive skills, collaborative skills, technical skills and employability skills. Overall employer satisfaction is high at 85.5% across all areas. Full-time employment outcomes are also strong at 91.1% three years after graduation for undergraduates and 93.3% for postgraduates (research and coursework). Employments outcomes are particularly high for students enrolled in teacher education study areas, at 95.7% for undergraduates and 95.9% for postgraduates. This is broadly in line with occupational shortage trends across all education occupations. While these data are useful for providing high-level insights into student experience and outcomes, there is evidence that aggregated reporting of outcomes hides significant inequalities and patterns of disadvantage among equity groups post-completion.

> **Students enrolled in teacher education study areas reported high levels of overall satisfaction (78.3%), although a closer examination of specialised study areas reveals a disparity between students enrolled in ECEC (83.2%) and those enrolled in primary and secondary (74.9%).**

> **Employer satisfaction with education graduates is high at 88.6%.**
> **Education graduates perform particularly well in foundational, adaptive and technical skills.**

The QILT Student Experience Survey measures aspects of student experience associated with learning outcomes: overall educational experience; learning resources; student support and services; teacher quality and engagement; peer engagement; and skills development. These data provide the more detailed, nuanced insights needed to better understand student attrition and success and how they interact with different demographic attributes. Following a significant drop in 2020 – from 78.5% in 2019 to 68.7% – overall student satisfaction among undergraduates with their educational experience has stabilised (76.5%).

Despite generally strong results for university graduate employment and employee satisfaction, student experience and access to high-quality higher education is not universal. A range of factors, including the need to work while studying, increasing fees, delivery modes and a lack of institutional support, shape students' learning experiences, attendance and ultimate decision to continue with study. First Nations students, for instance, report very low levels of peer engagement, 50.6% compared to 57.5% for non-Indigenous students. Students with disability report lower levels of satisfaction with support and services (67%), skills development (77.6%) and learning resources (71.2%) compared to students without disability (71.7%, 81.4% and 83.3% respectively).

Taken together, these data suggest that while students from equity groups benefit from completing higher education, systemic barriers exist to participating in and enjoying educational experiences. Future work is needed to identify and trial solutions that improve access, enhance learning resources and student support services to give all students the best possible chance of successful completion. These data highlight areas where research and individual institutions can focus and collaborate on efforts to improve equity and educational experiences to deliver improved outcomes for all learners.

The Australian Government aims to support greater equity in access to education by providing initiatives and funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. For example, First Nations students are guaranteed a university Commonwealth supported place, and the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program and the National Agreement on Closing the Gap and Needs-Based Funding (commencing 2026) aim to support greater equity.

Contributing factors identified by students considering early withdrawal from higher education:

Stress (42.3%)
Mental health (40.9%)
Financial pressures (40.5%)
Course failed to meet expectations (28.2%)
Lack of academic support (23%)

CONCLUSION

Having provided sector snapshots and an overview of current directions and challenges in education research, we return to the overarching consultation questions:

1.What are the key areas or issues for future research in each field or sector?
2.What steps should we take to drive short-term gains and long-term advancement in these areas?
3.What mechanisms are most effective for addressing the aims of the Decadal Plan?

We are now inviting you to share your experiences on how Australia's education research ecosystem currently functions for you and where there are opportunities for improvement.

The consultation period will be open from 1 December 2025 until 1 March 2026. Please share written responses to the consultation questions via email to policy@socialsciences.org.au.