

## FEATURE ARTICLE – Educational Participation in Western Australia

### INTRODUCTION

In the last few decades, formal education and training in Western Australia has undergone considerable change. One aspect of change is that nowadays learning often continues beyond the commencement of initial employment. Many people will continue with or return to formalised learning beyond the compulsory years, and increasingly, while working. Formal education and training is no longer just for the young but can be a life-long process.

This article traces patterns of participation by Western Australians in formal education and training across the life stages — from childhood, through youth and adulthood, to the retirement years. An understanding of the extent to which Western Australians of various ages participate in formal education and training, and the characteristics of formalised learning undertaken at different life stages, is important in ensuring that educational resources are sufficient and appropriately distributed and that the education and training provided is appropriate to the needs of different participants.

Traditionally the terms 'education' and 'training' have each had a distinct focus. Education has been associated with gaining knowledge for broad vocational, cultural and civic ends; whereas training has been focused on developing skills oriented to specific vocations. In recent times, the distinction between education and training has diminished. In this article, educational participation refers to attendance at formal courses provided by educational institutions and covers both education and training (for example schooling, higher education and vocational education and training). Work-related training refers to participation in training courses (activities undertaken primarily to obtain, maintain or improve employment-related skills or competencies).

### WESTERN AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLING

Participation in formal education, in the form of schooling, has been compulsory for children in Western Australia since 1871. At present, except in special circumstances, it is compulsory for Western Australian children to undertake primary and secondary schooling from the year they turn six to the year they turn fifteen. Afterwards, they have the option to undertake further post-compulsory secondary schooling. Educational participation at this level is designed to provide individuals with a foundation for full participation in social, cultural and economic life.

### Participation in Western Australian Schools

Western Australia's school population is growing. In August 2000, there were 317,761 full-time students attending schools, representing an 11.5% increase in the number of Western Australian school students compared with a decade earlier. This expansion in student numbers in Western Australian schools is largely attributable to two factors. Firstly, the number of people aged 5–19 years in Western Australia (the group encompassing the majority of school students) grew by 7.4% between 1990 and 2000. Secondly, higher proportions of students continued on to post-compulsory schooling in 2000 than in 1990 (see the Post-compulsory Education and Training section for more detail).

## FEATURE ARTICLE – Educational Participation in Western Australia *continued*

Participation in Western Australian Schools  
*continued*

Of the students attending Western Australian schools in 2000, 192,047 (60.4%) were enrolled at the primary level and 125,714 (39.6%) at the secondary level. More than twice as much growth occurred at the secondary school level (16.9%) than at the primary school level (8.3%) between 1990 and 2000.

### WA SCHOOL STUDENTS(a)(b), By Level of Education and Indigenous Status

	AUGUST 1990	AUGUST 2000
<i>Level of Education</i>	<i>no.</i>	<i>no.</i>
PRIMARY		
Indigenous	8 329	12 209
All students	177 364	192 047
SECONDARY		
Indigenous	3 482	5 018
All students	107 522	125 714
<b>TOTAL</b>		
<b>Indigenous</b>	<b>11 811</b>	<b>17 227</b>
<b>All students</b>	<b>284 886</b>	<b>317 761</b>

(a) Full-time students only.

(b) Does not include Pre-year 1 students attending government schools.

Source: *Schools, Australia* (Cat no. 4221.0).

*Indigenous school students*

Indigenous school students are those who identify as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person when enrolling. Indigenous people represented 5.3% of the population aged 5–19 years at 30 June 2000 (based on ABS experimental projections of the Indigenous population). Indigenous students could be expected to make up a similar proportion of the school population. In August 2000, they represented 5.4% of the overall school population in Western Australia; 6.4% at the primary school level and 4.0% at the secondary level. This picture of Indigenous school attendance may be affected by multiple enrolments of Indigenous students, in particular those living in remote areas of Western Australia, who move frequently between schools (Bourke et al, 2000).

The overall number of students attending Western Australian schools increased by 11.5% between 1990 and 2000. In comparison, the number of Indigenous students increased by 45.9% during the same period. This increase may be attributable to a number of factors, including the willingness to identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people; changes in the way Indigenous status information is captured on school enrolment forms; underlying growth in the population and an increase in participation in education.

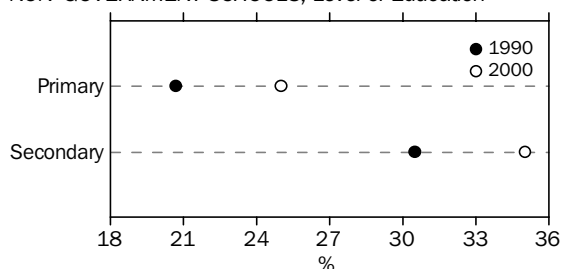
Sector of Schooling

Western Australian students are more likely to attend government schools than non-government schools (225,767 students compared with 91,994 in August 2000 respectively). The government school sector catered for three quarters (75.0%) of all primary school students in August 2000. At the secondary school level, the proportion of students attending government schools was slightly lower (at 65.0% of all students), but was still almost twice the size of the proportion of students participating in the non-government school sector.

## FEATURE ARTICLE – Educational Participation in Western Australia *continued*

The trend during the past decade was towards greater participation in the non-government school sector. The proportion of Western Australians undertaking their schooling in the non-government sector grew from 24.4% to 29.0% (an increase of 22,419 people) between 1990 and 2000.

PROPORTION OF WA STUDENTS ATTENDING NON-GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS, Level of Education



Source: *Schools, Australia* (Cat no. 4221.0)

In August 2000, Indigenous students were less likely than the overall student population to be attending a non-government school (17.5% compared with 29.0% of all students). Moreover, the proportion of all students in the non-government school sector increased by 18.5% between 1990 and 2000, while the proportion of Indigenous students in this sector decreased by 12.7%.

### POST-COMPULSORY EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Post-compulsory education and training refers to any study or training undertaken at a recognised educational institution beyond the years of compulsory schooling, including at secondary school and tertiary institutions such as universities, TAFEs and business colleges. This section focuses on the post-compulsory educational participation of three groups — young people aged 15–24 years, people aged 25–64 years and older persons aged 65 years and over.

Levels of participation in post-compulsory education in Western Australia vary dramatically across different stages of the life cycle. In May 2000, the education participation rate for young people aged 15–24 years was 54.7%. In comparison, the education participation rate for the population aged 25–64 years was 8.1%. The education participation rate equals the number of students expressed as a percentage of the total civilian population in the same group. In August 1996, 10.1% of older persons aged 65 years and over in Western Australia were attending educational institutions.

#### Young People (Aged 15–24 Years)

##### *Participation in post-compulsory education and training*

Post-compulsory education and training is usually undertaken by young people to meet requirements for entry into the workforce. Research suggests that people who do not undertake post-school education and training are more likely to be unemployed than those who do; more likely to have a lower paid job; and less likely to participate in further education and training later in life (ANTA, 1998).

## FEATURE ARTICLE – Educational Participation in Western Australia *continued*

*Participation in post-compulsory education and training continued*

In May 2000, young Western Australians were almost four times more likely to be attending an educational institution than people aged 25–34 years, this latter group having the second highest education participation rate of 13.6%. Among young people, the education participation rate of 15–19 year olds was more than twice that of 20–24 year olds in May 2000 (75.5% and 34.0% respectively).

### EDUCATION PARTICIPATION, Persons Aged 15 – 24 Years

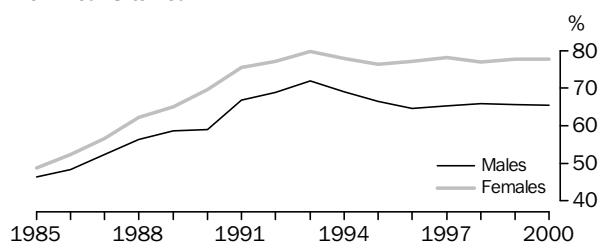
Age Group	MAY 1990.....		MAY 2000.....	
	no.	rate (%)	no.	rate (%)
WESTERN AUSTRALIA				
15 – 19	79 451	60.4	104 232	75.5
20 – 24	30 880	23.8	47 372	34.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>110 331</b>	<b>42.2</b>	<b>151 604</b>	<b>54.7</b>
AUSTRALIA				
15 – 19	928 512	66.7	1 039 176	77.6
20 – 24	311 842	23.4	462 358	34.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>1 240 354</b>	<b>45.5</b>	<b>1 501 534</b>	<b>56.0</b>

Source: ABS data available on request, *Transition from Education to Work*.

Between 1990 and 2000, the education participation rate for Western Australians aged 15–24 years rose by almost one third (29.6%), representing an increase of 41,273 students. In comparison, the participation rate for young people at the national level grew by 23.0% during the same period.

The rate of educational participation among 15–19 year olds in Western Australia increased by one quarter between 1990 and 2000. This increase reflects a greater tendency to stay at school beyond the compulsory age of attendance and also to progress to tertiary study. Changes in apparent retention rates of secondary students (the proportion of full-time students who continued to Year 12 from their respective cohort groups at the commencement of their schooling) provide evidence of increased participation in post-compulsory schooling in Western Australia. Apparent retention rates grew during the 1980s to reach a peak of 75.6% in 1993, then declined slightly and levelled out in the second half of the decade. Overall, apparent retention rates were higher in 2000 (71.3%) compared with a decade earlier (64.2%). Among young people in Western Australia, females are more likely than males to complete post-compulsory schooling. In August 2000, the apparent retention rate for females was 77.6%, compared with the male rate of 65.5%.

#### APPARENT RETENTION RATES OF SECONDARY STUDENTS(a), From Year 8 to Year 12



(a) Full-time students only.

Source: ABS data available on request, *Schools*.

The increase in retention rates for secondary students is attributable to a number of factors, including changing labour markets, increased financial assistance for low income families, changes to unemployment benefits for 16 and 17 year olds, and shifts in the focus of curriculum programs and access policies to reflect the needs of education for girls and disadvantaged groups.

The education participation rate of 20–24 year olds in Western Australia increased by 43.2% between 1990 and 2000. This growth further illustrates the trend towards progression from post-compulsory schooling to tertiary study, but is also a result of an upward shift in the level of qualification sought by tertiary students. Higher levels of educational attainment are seen to be desirable in the face of increasing competition to gain entry into the workforce.

### *Characteristics of post-compulsory education and training*

A high proportion (93.8%) of 15–24 year olds studying in Western Australia in May 2000 were working towards the attainment of a formal qualification.

The 142, 279 young people attending recognised study included:

- 42.4% who were participating in secondary school education;
- 32.3% who were undertaking higher education in the form of a bachelor degree; and
- 14.9% who were participating in vocational education, either at the skilled or basic level.

Males accounted for the majority (81.3%) of young participants in skilled vocational qualification courses (courses of two to four years duration and typically incorporating some on-the-job training). Many of these courses would lead to a trade certificate qualification. Young females were more likely to be studying for a basic vocational qualification, usually a short course of up to one year of full-time study (that, for example, would lead to pre-apprenticeship and traineeship certificates).

Just under one half (47.5%) of all young people aged 15–24 years undertaking recognised study in May 2000 combined educational participation with paid employment. Of these, the majority (69.2%) opted to study full-time and work on a part-time basis. A further 24.3% combined part-time study with full-time employment. The remaining 6.5% were either part-time students working part-time or full-time students working full-time.

### *Population Aged 25–64 Years*

#### *Participation in post-compulsory education and training*

In recent years, there has been a growing acknowledgment that people need to upgrade and update their skills throughout their working lives. Fewer people are confident of having a job for life with one employer and adult workers often bear the brunt of enforced changes in working life (NCVER, 1999). Educational participation provides mature workers the opportunity to re-skill, in order to retain a position in the increasingly competitive labour market. It also assists them to re-enter the workforce following absences for child-rearing and other activities.

## FEATURE ARTICLE – Educational Participation in Western Australia *continued*

*Participation in post-compulsory education and training continued*

In May 2000, there were over 80,000 mature students aged 25–64 years attending educational institutions in Western Australia. This equated to just over half the number of young people aged 15–24 years undertaking education and training at the same time. People aged 25–64 years made up a substantial proportion (34.6%) of all Western Australian students in May 2000, despite participating in education and training at a lower rate than young people.

Almost half (47.9%) of all mature students in May 2000 were aged 25–34 years. The education participation rate for 25–34 year olds increased by 33.7% between 1990 and 2000, compared with a 29.6% growth in the rate of participation among 15–24 year olds during the same period.

### EDUCATION PARTICIPATION, Persons Aged 25 – 64 Years

Age Group	MAY 1990.....		MAY 2000.....	
	no.	rate (%)	no.	rate (%)
25 – 34	28 236	10.2	38 325	13.6
35 – 44	21 100	8.3	22 572	7.8
45 – 54	9 178	5.5	14 136	5.5
55 – 64	*3 695	*3.0	5 052	3.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>62 209</b>	<b>7.6</b>	<b>80 085</b>	<b>8.1</b>

Source: ABS data available on request, *Transition from Education to Work*.

*Characteristics of post-compulsory education and training*

Mature students in Western Australia are less likely to study for a recognised qualification than younger students, and more likely to undertake a short certificate course of less than one semester, or selected units of an award course (without the intention of gaining a formal qualification). In May 2000, 75.4% of students aged 25–64 years were studying for a recognised qualification, compared with 93.8% of students aged 15–24 years.

The 60,354 Western Australians aged 25–64 years attending recognised study included:

- over a third (34%) who were participating in a bachelor degree course;
- almost a quarter (24.8%) who were studying for a vocational qualification; and
- 18.9% who were undertaking an undergraduate diploma course.

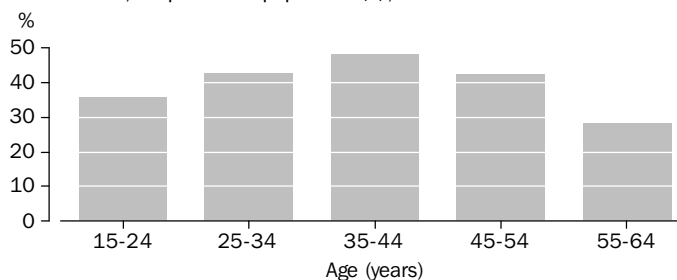
A higher proportion of mature students than those aged 15–24 years combine work and study. In May 2000, 71.7% of students aged 25–64 years studying for a recognised qualification were also in paid employment, compared with 47.5% of students aged 15–24 years. Most people aged 25–64 years who combine work and study fall into two main groups: full-time workers who undertake part-time study, and part-time workers undertaking part-time study. In May 2000, 60.2% and 22.5% of working students respectively fell into these categories.

## FEATURE ARTICLE – Educational Participation in Western Australia *continued*

### Work-related training

Education participation rates among Western Australians aged 25–64 years are relatively low compared to those of young people, but they are more likely to undertake a work-related training course. The ABS's 1997 Survey of Education and Training found that 42.9% of 25–64 year olds had taken one or more training courses in the 12 months prior to the reference period. In comparison, the participation rate for young people was 35.9%. Within the 25–64 year old population, those aged 35–44 years had the highest training course participation rate (48.4%). The participation rate for people aged 55–64 years was 28.5%.

PERSONS WHO TOOK ONE OR MORE TRAINING COURSES IN PREVIOUS 12 MONTHS, Proportion of population(a), 1997



(a) Excludes students aged 15–20 years who were still at school.

Source: ABS data available on request, Survey of Education and Training.

For each training course taken while employed, people were asked whether or not the course had been taken in order to improve chances of promotion and whether or not it had been taken for retraining. Each course may have been taken for one, both or neither of these reasons. Retraining was most commonly reported by Western Australians across all age groups as the reason for undertaking training while employed. Of all training courses taken by workers aged 25–64 years, 41.6% were for retraining, as were 55.0% for those aged 15–24 years. In comparison, promotion was reported as a reason for only 7.1% of training courses taken by employed 25–64 year olds, and 14.2% of courses taken by employed young people.

### Older Persons (Aged 65 Years and Over)

Results from the 1996 Census of Population and Housing show that 10.1% of people aged 65 years and over in Western Australia were attending an educational institution at that time. Of these older students, almost one half (46.1%) were aged 65–74 years. A further 38.7% were aged 75–84 years and 15.2% were aged 85 years and over. Educational participation among females aged 65 years and over (11.0%) was marginally higher than for males in the same age group (8.9%).

### EDUCATION PARTICIPATION, Persons Aged 65 Years and Over

Age Group	AUGUST 1991.....		AUGUST 1996.....	
	no.	rate (%)	no.	rate (%)
65 – 74	6 618	7.1	8 334	7.8
75 – 84	5 588	11.2	7 001	12.4
85 and over	1 665	13.0	2 745	15.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>13 871</b>	<b>8.9</b>	<b>18 080</b>	<b>10.1</b>

Source: ABS data available on request, Census of Population and Housing.

## FEATURE ARTICLE – Educational Participation in Western Australia *continued*

Older Persons (Aged 65 Years and Over) *continued*

The education participation rate of older persons increased by 12.9% between 1991 and 1996. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this trend towards increasing educational participation among older Western Australians has continued in the second half of the 1990s and will become more marked during the next few decades. As people live longer and healthier lives, an increasing number of those aged 65 years and over are prolonging their working lives past the conventional age of retirement. Educational participation enables older persons to re-skill and undertake the career changes often necessary to remain in the workforce longer. For many older persons, education also provides opportunities to acquire new knowledge and skills simply out of interest rather than to address specific vocational objectives.

SUMMARY

Western Australians of all ages participate in formal education and training. The extent of educational participation varies across the life stages, as do some of the main imperatives for undertaking study and training. The characteristics of educational participation (in terms of sector of provision, type and level of course, and combination of work and study) also differ according to age, as well as other factors such as Indigenous status and sex. During the past decade, there has been a trend towards increasing participation in post-compulsory education and training in Western Australia.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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