

# Adult education across the generations



Over the last century, there has been a marked change in education, from a time when most people completed only compulsory schooling<sup>1</sup> to the present, when more than half of young people continue their education after leaving school. Whereas in the past skills were acquired on the job, many young people today feel that formal education will give them the skills to get established in the workforce.<sup>2</sup> As well, the proportion of students who are older is gradually increasing. This suggests that to gain an edge, or even to keep pace, in the labour market, older people see a need to upgrade their qualifications or skills. Fostering 'lifelong learning' has become increasingly important as Australia's population ages. Governments and workplaces alike have identified a need to boost labour force participation in order to increase economic growth, and this requires educated workers.<sup>3</sup>

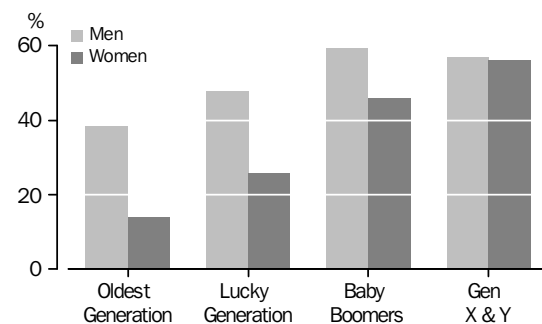
The census sheds light on the characteristics of people who participate in formal education beyond secondary school, people's educational attainment and their qualifications. This article examines each generation's experience of adult education in terms of age, sex, participation and qualifications. It also explores some recent trends in formal education: the increasing participation of women and combining study and work.

While the census can show trends in formal learning, education is broader than this and includes non-formal and informal learning as well (see box on next page). The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2006–07 Multi-Purpose Household Survey estimated that 3.6 million or 44% of Australian workers had participated in formal or non-formal learning in the 12 months prior to being interviewed.<sup>4</sup>

## Educational attainment across the generations

The 2006 Census shows that each successive generation of Australians is more educated than the previous one in terms of non-school qualifications (see Glossary). This reflects both the increasing demand for a more skilled labour force and people's desire to be better

## Australians with a qualification, by generation(a)(b)



(a) Qualification refers to formal qualifications of Certificate I level or above, for people aged 20 years and over. See Glossary.

(b) A description of each generation can be found in the article, 'From generation to generation', p. 9–14.

educated.<sup>5</sup> In 2006, 23% of the Oldest Generation (people aged 80 and over) and 37% of the Lucky Generation (aged 60–79) had obtained a non-school qualification during their lifetime. In comparison, the majority of Baby Boomers (aged 40–59) and Generation X and Y (aged 20–39) had completed a non-school qualification (53% and 57% respectively). Lower educational attainment among the Oldest and Lucky Generations compared with the recent generations reflects the relatively low requirement for formal qualifications in jobs in primary manufacturing, which dominated the economy of the early and middle period of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## Younger people gain higher level of skills

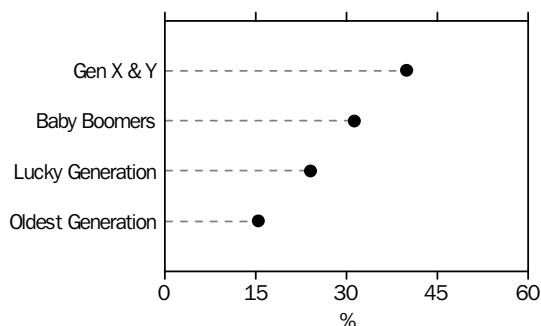
The proportion of young Australians in Generation X and Y who had completed a non-school qualification (57%) was slightly higher than the Baby Boomer Generation (53%), even though some younger members of Generation X and Y had not yet attained a first qualification in 2006. Further, people in Generation X and Y were more highly qualified: 24% had a bachelor degree or higher qualification compared with 20% of Baby Boomers, 10% of the Lucky Generation and 6% of the Oldest Generation.

In recent times there has been an increasing requirement for high level skills and qualifications in the workforce due to the changing nature of work, including technological change within industries and their changing structure.<sup>6</sup>

Changes in the level of qualifications required for employment is particularly noticeable in the occupations of teaching, nursing and farming. In 2003, those aspiring to be teachers were required to undertake at least a 4 year degree in education to enter the public education system in most states and territories.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, there has been a marked increase in the proportion of school teachers<sup>8</sup> from Generation X and Y who hold a Bachelor degree or above (92%), compared with 77% of school teachers from the Baby Boomer Generation. Similarly, 70% of nurses<sup>8</sup> in Generation X and Y had obtained a Bachelor degree or higher qualification, compared with 54% of nurses from the Baby Boomer Generation.

There has been a steady increase in educational attainment of farmers<sup>8</sup> in recent generations. At the time of the 2006 Census, 15% of farmers in the Oldest Generation had obtained a formal qualification, compared with 40% of farmers in Generation X and Y. Farmers increasingly need business, management and technical skills as well as agricultural skills, as family farm businesses have become on average larger and more complex. Young farmers in Generation X and Y were more likely to have a qualification in Agriculture, environmental and related studies than farmers in the older generations.

**Farmers with a qualification(a)(b)**



(a) Qualification refers to Certificate I and above.  
 (b) Includes all persons aged 20 years and older.

**Types of adult learning**

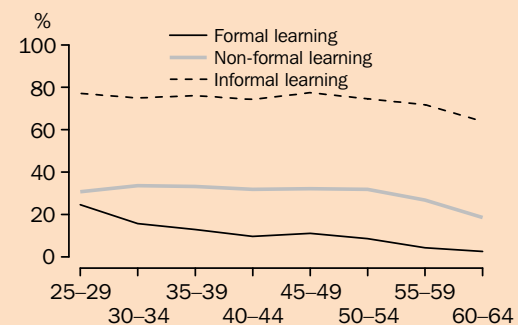
The Adult Learning topic in the Multi-Purpose Household Survey (MPHS) 2006–07 sheds light on the broader learning experiences of Australians. The survey collected details on participation in formal, non-formal and informal learning. Both formal and non-formal learning are structured, but only formal learning leads to a qualification. Informal learning refers to unstructured learning related to work, family, community or leisure.

The MPHS showed that 1 in 8 Australians (12%) aged 25 to 64 years participated in formal learning in the 12 months prior to interview. Participation in non-formal learning was higher (30%), while participation in informal learning was the highest, with almost three quarters of the population participating.

The survey showed that while participation in formal learning was most common among people under 30 and decreased in the older age groups, participation in other forms of learning was high across all ages. The most common types of non-formal learning were work-related courses (78% of those who participated), followed by Arts, crafts or recreational learning (12%). The most common types of informal learning were reading manuals, reference books, journals or other written materials (75%), and using computers or the internet (71%).

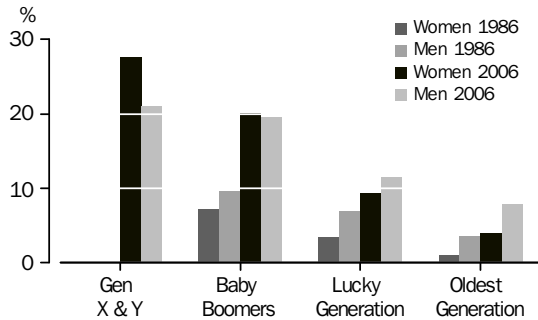
People with higher educational qualifications had higher participation rates in formal, non-formal and informal learning. Those employed full-time were more likely to have participated in some form of learning than those not in the labour force (84% compared with 62%).

**Participation in learning 2006–07**



Source: *Adult Learning, Australia, 2006–07*

**Women and men with a Bachelor degree or above, 1986 and 2006(a)**



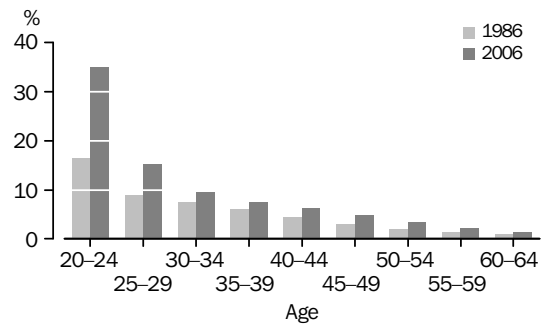
(a) Includes all persons aged 20 years and older.

**Women closing the learning divide in educational attainment**

A striking trend in education is the closing gap in educational attainment between men and women. A higher proportion of women in each successive generation has obtained a non-school qualification. Of people in the Oldest Generation in 2006, men were almost three times more likely than women to have obtained a non-school qualification during their lifetime (39% of men compared with 14% of women). In comparison, men and women in Generation X and Y were equally likely to have a qualification (57% of men and 56% of women). The trend towards equal opportunities for men and women has led to a rising proportion of women studying and gaining qualifications. This has gone hand in hand with an increased participation of women in the workforce.

Along with this trend, the gender gap in university qualifications has been closing. In 2006, more women than men in Generation X and Y held a Bachelor degree or above (28% and 21%). Women of earlier generations have also contributed to a narrowing gender gap. The proportion of Baby Boomer women with a Bachelor degree or above increased from 7% in 1986 (when they were aged 20 to 39) to 20% in 2006. In 1986, fewer Baby Boomer women than men had a Bachelor degree or above, but by 2006, this had reversed. In the Lucky Generation, there was a larger gap in the proportion of men and women with a Bachelor degree or above in 1986, when they were aged 40–59 years. By 2006 this gap had narrowed. This meant that women in the Baby Boomer and Lucky Generations had completed degrees as mature age students in the 20 years before the 2006 Census at a higher rate than men.

**Proportion of people studying in 1986 and 2006**



Occupations such as teaching and nursing attracted a high proportion of women across the generations (34% of all female graduates have their highest qualification in these fields). The shift to a requirement for teachers and nurses to hold a university level qualification has helped to close the gap between women and men with a Bachelor degree or above.

**Recent trends among students**

The census showed that in 2006, people of all ages were undertaking study beyond the formal school years. Undertaking study was more common for people aged under 30: 35% of 20–24 year olds and 15% of 25–29 year olds were studying. For those 30 years and over, participation was lower, ranging from 9.6% of 30–34 year olds to 1.4% of 60–64 year olds.

Across all ages, participation in formal education increased between 1986 and 2006. However the most noticeable change was the increase in the proportion of 20–29 year olds participating in either full or part-time formal education. This can be attributed to the trend for students to spend longer periods of time in education because they are combining study and work, or are studying for a double degree or post-graduate qualification.

More women than men in Generation X and Y held a Bachelor degree or above (28% compared with 21% in 2006).

### Working students: maintaining the balance

Between 1986 and 2006, the proportion of students aged 20–64 years combining work and study increased slightly from 64% to 66%. However, there were notable changes in the way students balanced study and work over this period. In particular, the wider availability of part-time work provided greater flexibility for students to fit work in with their study.

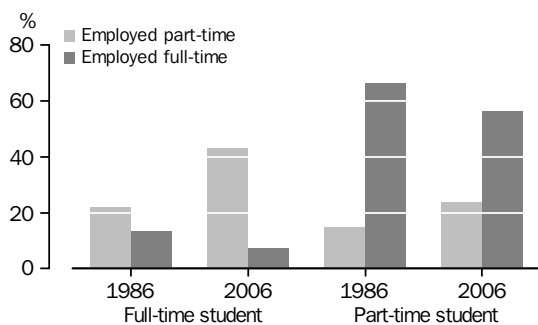
The greatest change was the substantial increase in the proportion of full-time students who were employed—from 36% in 1986, to 50% in 2006. All of this increase was in part-time employment. The proportion of full-time students working part-time doubled while the proportion working full-time declined.

Increasing living costs, the introduction of HECS (Higher Education Contribution Scheme) in 1989 and higher levels of student debt may also have contributed to a higher proportion of full-time students taking up employment.<sup>9</sup>

Part-time students were less likely to take up full-time work in 2006 than in 1986, and more likely to take up part-time work. In this period, the proportion of part-time students who were employed full-time decreased from 66% to 56%. Matching this decrease was an increase in the proportion of part-time students who were employed part-time, up from 15% to 24%.

It is increasingly common for employers to offer flexible working arrangements which allow employees to achieve a balance between work and other life commitments, including study. Allowing workers to study is important considering the demand for employees to be highly educated specialists in their field. For information on students' income, see the 'Economic resources overview', p 175–187.

### Work and study balance of students(a), 1986 and 2006



(a) Students aged 20 to 64 years

### Occupations of employed students(a)(b)



(a) Employed students aged 20 to 64 years.

(b) Information on occupation for 1986 is not available on a comparable basis with 2006.

### Student workers: sales and service

Of Australians aged from 20 to 64 years who were both working and studying, approximately 25% were employed as Professionals, 17% as Community and personal service workers (including hospitality workers), and 14% as Clerical and administrative workers. Almost half of working students who were studying full-time were Sales workers or Community and personal service workers. Many full-time students are young: two thirds of all working-age students (20–64 years) were aged 20–24. Work in retail or hospitality may be attractive to students because of the availability of part-time and casual work and the flexibility of hours. In contrast, employed part-time students most commonly worked as Professionals (31%), reflecting their older age profile compared with full-time students.

### Increase in qualified Indigenous Australians

Between 1986 and 2006, the proportion of Indigenous Australians aged 20 years and over who were qualified at Certificate level or above more than doubled, from 12% to 28% (see Glossary). Over the same period, the proportion of non-Indigenous Australians aged 20 years and over who held a Certificate level qualification or above rose from 36% to 50%.

A relatively small proportion of Indigenous Australians have university qualifications. In 2006, 5% of Indigenous Australians aged 20 and over held a Bachelor degree or above compared with 20% of non-Indigenous Australians in this age group.

## Endnotes

1 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2001, *Year Book Australia 2001*, cat. no. 1301.0, ABS, Canberra.

2 ABS 2000, 'Beyond compulsory schooling' in *Australian Social Trends 2000*, cat. no. 4102.0, ABS, Canberra.

3 ABS 2008, 'Adult learning' in *Australian Social Trends 2008*, cat. no. 4102.0, ABS, Canberra.

4 ABS 2007, *Adult Learning, Australia, 2006–07*, cat. no. 4229.0, ABS, Canberra.

5 The Treasury 2007, *Intergenerational Report 2007*, Commonwealth of Australia, <[http://www.treasury.gov.au/documents/1239/PDF/IGR\\_2007\\_final\\_report.pdf](http://www.treasury.gov.au/documents/1239/PDF/IGR_2007_final_report.pdf)>.

6 De Laine, C., Laplagne, P., Stone, S. 2000 *The Increasing Demand for Skilled Workers in Australia: The Role of Technical Change*, Productivity Commission Staff Research Paper, AusInfo, Canberra, September.

7 Department of Education, Science and Training 2003, *Australia's teachers, Australia's future: advancing innovation, science, technology and mathematics*, <[http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/school\\_education/publications\\_resources/profiles/australias\\_future\\_advancing\\_innovation.htm](http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/school_education/publications_resources/profiles/australias_future_advancing_innovation.htm)>.

8 School teachers are 'School Teachers', nurses are 'Midwifery and Nursing Professionals' and farmers are 'Farmers and Farm Managers' according to the Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations, 2006.

9 Australian Centre for Educational Research (ACER) 2003, *Student workers in high school and beyond: The effects of part-time employment on participation in education, training and work*, Research Report No. 30, ACER, Melbourne.