

## **More women, more students, more diversity**

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*Universities maintain some traditions, but who goes on to higher education and the institutions they attend have been transformed over the last few decades, writes **Andrew Norton***

In some ways, universities remain very traditional institutions. Graduation ceremonies feature gowns and mortar boards with medieval origins. Lengthy summer breaks started with students needing to go home to help with the harvest. But research for a recent Grattan Institute report, *Mapping Australian higher education*, highlighted how large-scale change and tradition co-exist in higher education.

The most obvious change is the sheer scale of higher education now compared to the past. By 2010, 17 universities had enrolments exceeding 30,000 students—the total number of students in all 9 universities combined in 1950. Enrolments more than doubled in just the last 20 years, from less than 500,000 to more than 1.2 million. One in 18 Australian residents is a higher education student.

Enrolment growth has translated into significantly greater higher education attainment. As recently as the mid-1970s, only about 3% of Australian working-age adults had a degree. The proportion is now 24% overall, but 35% in the most educated age group, people aged between 25 and 34 years old.

Who goes to university has changed a lot. Universities were once overwhelmingly male, but the trend has been against men for decades, and they are now only a little over 40% of all students. The ethnic composition of universities has changed markedly, with more than 300,000 international students, along with the children of education-oriented migrants to Australia.

Over the last decade, students have become much more likely to enrol in health courses, and much less likely to enrol in IT courses. Management and commerce courses have increased their enrolment share, but because of international students. Among domestic undergraduates, there has been a trend away from business-related courses.

Most students give job-related factors as a reason for study. But the enrolment share of general courses such as arts and science is much the same now as in the early 1960s. Arts and science degrees have changed, however, with many new disciplines following scientific developments and intellectual trends. Double or combined degrees, which make up around 13% of completions, let students combine general and vocational interests.

A much larger proportion of students are postgraduates, nearly doubling from 15% to 28% in the last 30 years. Partly because many postgraduates have work and family commitments that make it hard to get to classes, studying off-campus has become twice as common in this time. Technology has transformed distance education, with online study allowing more innovative study materials, more interaction with staff and other students, and faster submission and assessment of assignments.

Up until the late 1980s, most higher education students were enrolled in colleges of advanced education and other non-university higher education providers. A series of mergers with universities and transformations into universities saw almost every public non-university higher education provider disappear as an independent entity. Only a handful of highly specialised public non-university higher education institutions survive today. However, private sector non-university higher education providers are growing, up from 86 in 1999 to around 120 now.

The university model of public higher education means that most students are enrolled in teaching and research institutions. There is on-going debate about whether synergies between teaching and research predominate, or whether the time conflicts between them disadvantage students. One Australian research paper reported that students were less satisfied with teaching in the more research-intensive universities. However, since the mid-1990s universities have increased both research productivity and student satisfaction with teaching.

An increased emphasis on student satisfaction flows in part from user pays and a competition for students. As recently as the mid-1980s, there were no full-fee paying students in Australian universities. But from the late 1980s, full-fee markets were created for international and postgraduate students. By 2010, 40% of students were in full-fee paying places created by higher education providers, if we include private institutions in the count. There is fierce competition for these students, who can go elsewhere if their courses do not meet their expectations.

From 1989, most domestic undergraduates paid part of their degree costs through HECS and then student contributions. But until now, domestic undergraduates had little market power. The government held the supply of student places below demand and allocated them to universities. With the demand-driven system for domestic undergraduates that began in early 2012—public universities can now enrol as many students as they like—we are closer to a market in higher education than at any time in Australia's history.

Andrew Norton is the higher education program director at the Grattan Institute. *Mapping Australian higher education* is available from [www.grattan.edu.au](http://www.grattan.edu.au)