

This is a submission in response to the **Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper**.

The submission is from Alan Olsen, Director of Strategy Policy and Research in Education Limited www.spre.com.au.

SPRE undertakes research, strategy, and policy studies in the field of education, specifically in international education..

Alan Olsen is Director of **SPRE**, carrying out research, strategy and policy advice for client institutions and organisations on international education. He has worked in international education in Australia, Singapore and Hong Kong and has published extensively. In 2009 Alan was recognised by his colleagues with an International Education Excellence Award from the International Education Association of Australia for his distinguished contribution to the field of international education.

This submission covers three areas.

First is **Australia's High Quality Higher Education System**. The discussion paper refers to Australia's high quality higher education system, this submission makes clear how high that quality is.

Second is the area of **Academic Performance of International Students in Australia's Universities**. In any analysis of the quality of Australian universities, it is critically important to understand and acknowledge that international students do not drag down academic performance.

Third is the **Gender Agenda**. The discussion paper points out that the percentage of the Australian population aged 25 to 34 who are educated to bachelor level or above is now 44.6%, and that the target set by the Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education for 40% higher education attainment has been met. It is important to understand that 44.5% of 25 to 34 year olds in Australia have at least a Bachelor degree in 2022, because 50.9% of young women are graduates and 38.0% of young men are graduates.

1. Australia's High Quality Higher Education System

The Discussion paper refers early on, in Section 1.1 on page 5, to **Australia's high quality higher education system**.

It is important to look at how high this quality is.

In the **Times Higher Education World University Rankings** for 2023

Australia has 31 universities in the world's top 500, and 10 outside the top 500

UK has 58 universities in the world's top 500, and 112 outside the top 500

US has 103 universities in the world's top 500, and 2,534 (four-year) universities outside the top 500.

In terms of total student numbers

In Australia, 86% of students in Australian universities are at universities in the world's top 500

In UK, 47% of students in UK universities are at universities in the world's top 500

In US, 22% of students in US (four year) universities are at universities in the world's top 500.

Tightening up a little

In Australia, 36% of students in Australian universities are at universities in the world's top 200, compared with 28% in UK in the world's top 200 and 15% in US in the world's top 200

In Australia, 28% of students in Australian universities are at universities in the world's top 100, compared with 12% in UK in the world's top 100 and 8% in US in the world's top 100

A possible headline finding is

28% of students in Australian universities are at universities in the world's top **100**, while 22% of students in US universities are at universities in the world's top **500**.

Detail of this analysis is in the paper **Global Rankings of Australian Universities 2022** on the What's New page at www.spre.com.au.

The Times Higher Education World University Rankings describes itself as the only global university league table to judge research-intensive universities across all of their core missions: teaching (the learning environment); research (volume, income and reputation); citations (research influence); industry income (knowledge transfer) and international outlook (staff, students and research).

The **Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2023**, released in 2022, are at <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings>.

2. University Performance of International Students

Bachelor Degrees

In any analysis of the quality of Australian universities, it is critically important to understand and acknowledge that international students do not drag down academic performance.

In 2021, 26.2% of students in Australian universities were international students. A nation where 33.1% of people in Australia on census night in 2021 were born overseas, and where 24.8% speak a language other than English at home, welcomes international students.

Detail on numbers of international students in Australian universities in 2021 is downloaded from <https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/student-data/selected-higher-education-statistics-2021-student-data>. Detail on success rates is from Section 15 Attrition, success and retention.

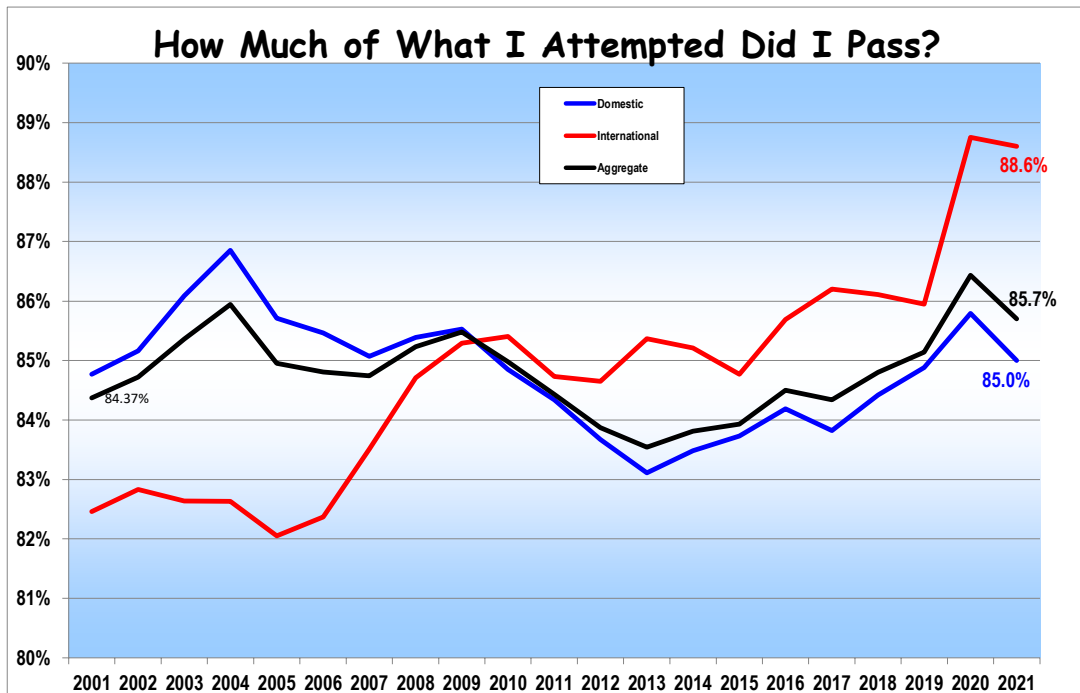
In 2021, 315,152 students commenced bachelor degrees in Australian universities. 79% were domestic students, 21% were international students. In 2021, commencing international bachelor students passed 88.6% of what they attempted in that year, and did better than commencing domestic bachelor students, who passed 85.0%.

But it was not always so. Generations of academics had the experience that commencing international bachelor students dragged standards down. In 2001, commencing international bachelor students were 2.3 percentage points worse, in 2004 negative 4.2 and in 2005 negative 3.7.

It was not until 2008 that commencing international students did about the same as commencing domestic bachelor students (less than one percentage point difference). It was not until 2013 that commencing international students did better than commencing domestic bachelor students.

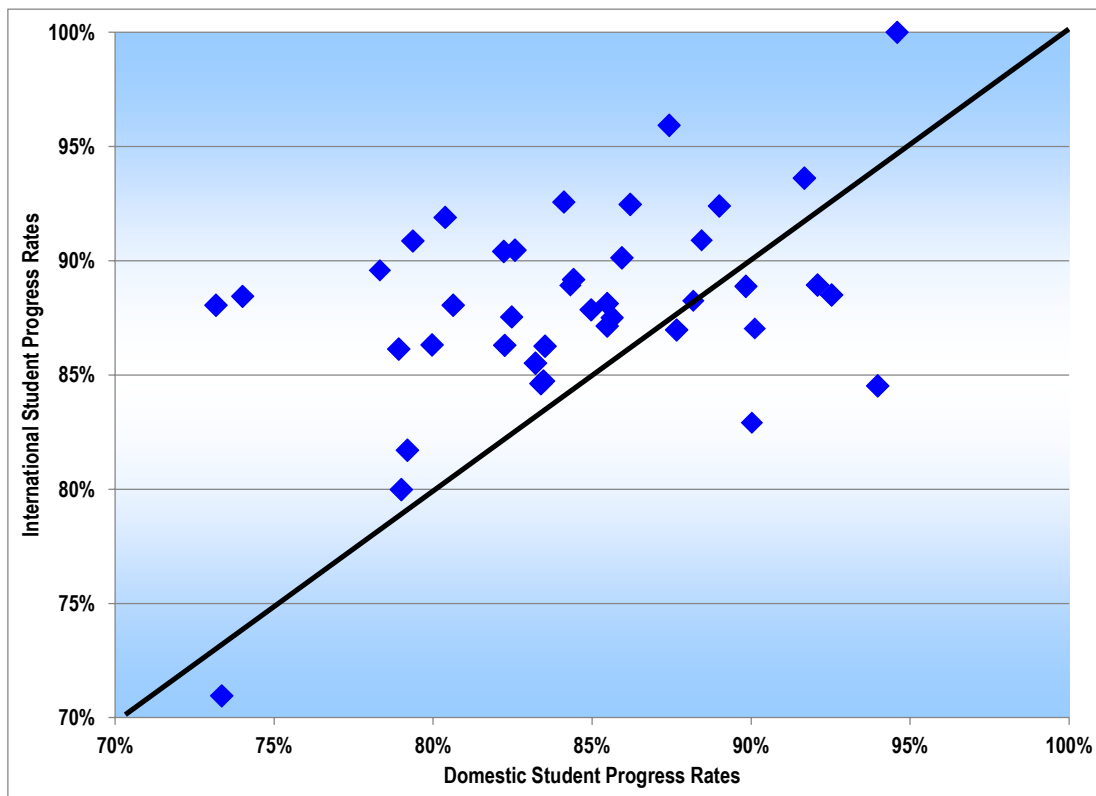
The results since 2013 can be interpreted as showing that increasing numbers of Australian universities set and maintain entry standards, including English language entry standards, for international undergraduates that lead to successful outcomes, prepare international students better in English language proficiency, monitor academic performance and provide effective English language and study skills support. Of course regulation has played a role in the improvement of standards.

Student Progress Rates: Commencing Bachelor Students: Time Series



In 31 universities in 2021, commencing international undergraduates did better than domestic students. In 6 universities domestic students did better. In 4 universities, there was no difference (less than one percentage point) as in the chart.

Student Progress Rates: Commencing Bachelor Students: 41 Universities



Why only commencing bachelor students, why only first years? Because that's what's published.

But former University of Wollongong Vice-Chancellor Paul Wellings, then chair of the expert panel to provide advice on implementing performance-based funding to improve university student outcomes in Australia, provided a useful quote in the Australian Financial Review on 12 August 2019:

“Student success was not based on completion. A better measure was whether a person survived first year and went through to second year. You can put a wrapper around first-year students. See if all first years become second years. Once they're second years they tend to last.”

At the level of commencing bachelor students, international students outperform.

Postgraduate Research Degrees

A long way from commencing bachelor students are students completing postgraduate research degrees (covering both Ph D and Masters by Research).

From analysis of the Award Course Completions Pivot Table at <https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/resources/award-course-completions-pivot-table-2021> , there were 9,886 postgraduate research (PhD plus Masters by Research) completions at the 41 universities in 2021.

38% of postgraduate research completions were by international students, including 60% of IT research completions and 58% of Engineering completions, with details in the table.

Postgraduate Research Completions 2021

Field	Completions	International %
Science	2,380	41%
Society/Culture	1,823	23%
Engineering	1,659	58%
Health	1,589	25%
Management/Commerce	624	50%
Education	451	29%
IT	464	60%
Agriculture/Environment	392	51%
Creative Arts	385	15%
Architecture	149	45%
Total	9,886	38%

This single figure, 38%, is an indicator of the contribution that international students make to the research capacity of Australia's universities.

Detail of this analysis, on the success rates of Bachelor degree students, and on postgraduate research completions, is in the paper **International Students in Australian Universities 2021** on the What's New page at www.spre.com.au.

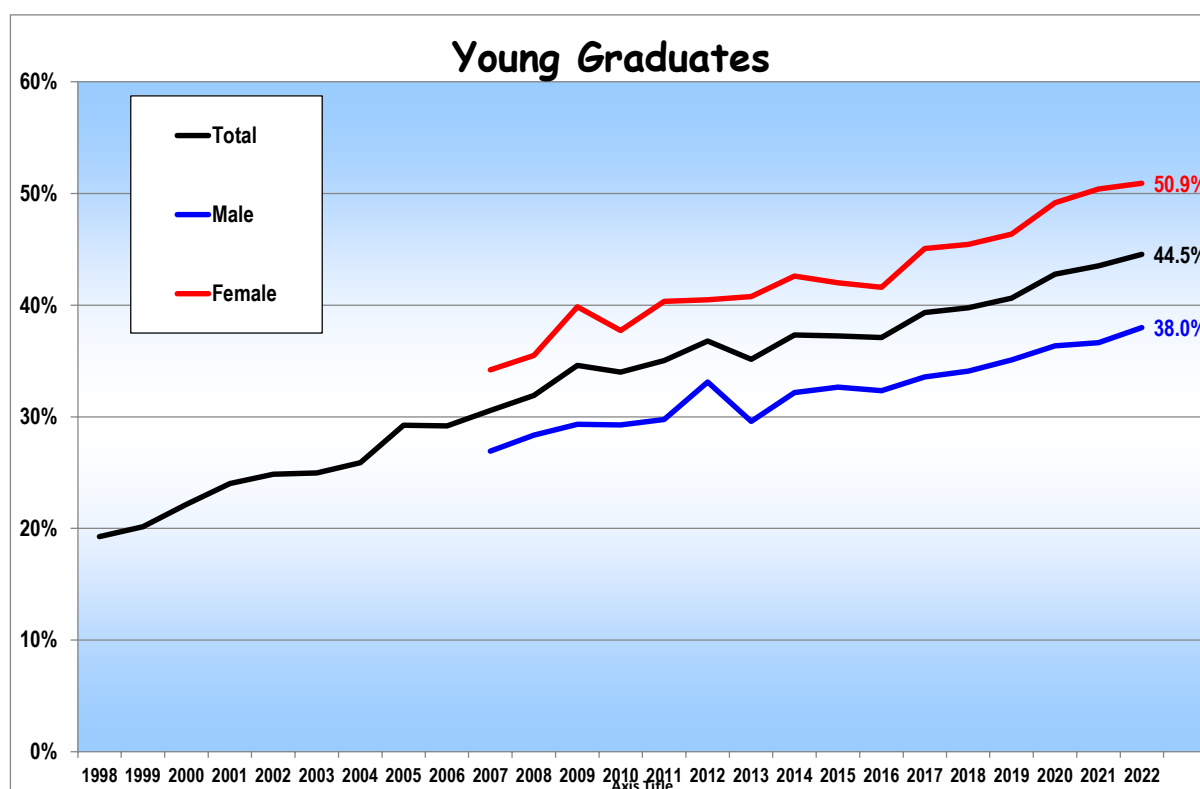
3. Gender Agenda

The discussion paper points out on page 7 that the percentage of the Australian population aged 25 to 34 who are educated to bachelor level or above is now 44.6%, and that the target set by the Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education for 40% higher education attainment has been met.

It is important to understand the extent to which gender is a key factor in outcomes of higher education in Australia.

44.5% of 25 to 34 year olds in Australia have at least a Bachelor degree in 2022, because 50.9% of young women are graduates and 38.0% of young men are graduates.

Degree Qualifications and 25-34 Year Olds



Of 135,683 domestic Bachelor degree completions in 2021, 83,031 or 60.5% were women and 53,483 or 39.4% were men. This gender split means that 55% more women than men are completing Bachelor degrees.

Australian Undergraduate Completions 2021

	Completions	Female %
Society and Culture (includes Arts, Law)	33,547	68%
Health (includes Medicine, Nursing)	31,131	77%
Business	24,453	47%
Science	18,101	54%
Education	10,369	76%
Creative Arts	9,987	65%
Engineering	7,608	18%
IT	4,652	17%
Architecture and Building	4,025	42%
Agriculture and Environment	1,607	57%
Total	135,683	60%

At the other end of the higher education experience, there were 6,083 research higher degree completions (PhD or Masters by Research) by Australian students in 2021.

The gender agenda is in play here also. Of 6,083 domestic research higher degree completions in 2021, 3,236 or 53% were women and 2,835 or 47% were men. This gender split means that 14% more women than men are completing research higher degrees.

Australian Research Higher Degree Completions 2021

	Completions	Female %
Society and Culture (includes Arts, Law)	1,399	59%
Science	1,383	49%
Health (includes Medicine, Nursing)	1,192	65%
Engineering	689	28%
Creative Arts	329	50%
Education	319	64%
Business	311	53%
Agriculture and Environment	192	56%
IT	185	51%
Architecture and Building	82	48%
Total	6,083	53%

Detail of this analysis, on the extent to which gender is a key factor in outcomes of higher education in Australia, is in the paper **The Gender Agenda 2022**, on the What's New page at www.spre.com.au.

Summary

In summary, this submission seeks to make three points.

Australia's High Quality Higher Education System

The discussion paper refers to Australia's high quality higher education system, and this submission makes clear how high that quality is.

Academic Performance of International Students in Australia's Universities

In any analysis of the quality of Australian universities, it is critically important to understand and acknowledge that international students do not drag down academic performance.

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