

EDUCATION

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Introduction

Under the federal system of government in Australia, the six States, the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory are responsible for providing schooling. The Federal Government is responsible for education services in Australia's external territories. Although the States and Territories have the major responsibility for school-level education, the Federal Government makes general and specific purpose grants to the States and Territories for education.

Policy advice to the Federal Government is provided by the Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education and Training and the National Board of Employment, Education and Training. The Board is supported by four councils: the Schools Council; the Higher Education Council; the Employment and Skills Formation Council and the Australian Research Council.

Schools

School attendance is compulsory between the ages of 6 and 15 in all States and Territories, except Tasmania where leaving age is 16. Nationally 75 per cent of students now stay on to Year 12.

Most children are educated in government schools, where tuition is free except for some voluntary contributions. There are some 2.2 million students were enrolled at government schools, while almost 900 000 are taught in non-government schools.

Most Australian children begin school before the compulsory starting age of

six and many attend pre-school centres. Each State and Territory has a pre-school sector which is separate from primary and secondary schooling. The structure of primary and secondary schooling in Australia varies between the States and Territories. Primary school comprises six or seven grades. In some States and both Territories it is preceded by a kindergarten or preparatory grade.

Secondary schooling comprises Years 7 to 12 or Years 8 to 12. The most common type of secondary school is the co-educational, comprehensive, high school. Students normally progress to senior colleges from high schools catering for students from Years 7 to 10.

Students from isolated and remote areas use a variety of systems, ranging from boarding schools, to study at home by correspondence, or by the School of the Air which uses the Royal Flying Doctor Service's two-way radio network to link teachers and students.

Curriculum development and assessment

English; Mathematics; Science; Technology; Studies of Society and the Environment; the Arts; Health, and Languages other than English are the system's eight recognized key areas of learning. Curriculum statements define each subject, outline its essential elements and describe a sequence for developing knowledge and skills. Subject profiles then describe the progression of learning typically achieved by students and provide a framework for reporting on a student's progress and achievements.

Assessment and certification at the end of schooling (Year 12) is by continu-

ous assessment within schools or by a combination of internal school assessment and public examination. These procedures, which vary between the States, also form the basis for qualification for entry to universities or other tertiary institutions.

National equity program for schools

The Federal Government provides a range of special assistance and programs under the National Equity Program for Schools (NEPS). The program aims to ensure students are given the opportunity to reach their chosen educational goals irrespective of their particular social, geographic, financial, ethnic or linguistic circumstances.

In the case of students with disabilities, NEPS provides extensive support to schools and other organisations to meet the goals of integrating students into mainstream schooling and improved educational attainment. The needs of Australia's multicultural society are addressed by a program that assists ethnic community groups and organisations to operate classes in the languages and cultures of their communities for the benefit of both non-English speaking background students and other students.

The Federal Government also assists schools to improve and extend second language learning, in particular in languages relevant to Australia's economic development and the multicultural community. Special English as a second language program assists school children of non-English speaking migrants. While most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school students attend the same schools as other Australian children, new strategies have been de-

signed to assist this group to maintain its distinct cultural heritage.

This has led to culturally appropriate pre-school programs; the employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers; and the development of special curricula, including bilingual programs where English is not the first language of the indigenous students. The implementation of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (AEP) since January 1990 has provided a framework for addressing the policy's 21 national goals for achieving educational equity by the year 2001.

Higher education system

The higher education system in Australia comprises more than 35 publicly funded universities, four colleges and two private universities. About 356,000 full-time students, some 173,000 part-time students and around 74,000 external students are usually enrolled across all disciplines in publicly funded higher education institutions.

The basic undergraduate course at most institutions is a bachelor degree of three to four years duration. Around 76 per cent of students are enrolled in bachelor programs. Most institutions also offer postgraduate degree study with about 20 per cent of students taking this option. Some institutions also offer courses at diploma or associate diploma levels.

Twelve per cent of Australian students undertake their higher education studies as external students using either distance education or through open learning approaches. The Open Learning Agency of Australia (OLA) provides further flexibility in the provision of tertiary education. Around 9 000 students

are enrolled in OLA undergraduate study units.

In 1995, Open Net was introduced to provide electronic access and support to OLA and other tertiary students.

Higher education institutions also conduct high quality research in a wide range of fields. Research is funded largely by the Federal Government on a competitive basis. Other funding sources include industry, private sources and State Governments.

Vocational and education training

Australia's vocational education and training system is coordinated through the Australian National Training Authority. The largest provider of off-the-job training is the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) system. TAFE provides innovative, high quality vocational training which meets the needs of employers and provides graduates with recognized qualifications and immediately usable skills. It is supplemented by private and industry training providers which also offer a wide range of vocational training options.

Teacher education

Pre-school and primary teachers generally complete three or four years of training in higher education institutions. Secondary teachers usually either complete a degree course at a higher education institution followed by one year of professional training in education or undertake a four year education program. Institutions also offer higher degrees in education. The Federal Government under its National Professional Development Program funds

projects to renew teachers' discipline, knowledge and improve the quality of school education.

International students

Australia participates in international education, research and training interchange with other countries and through multilateral organisations such as the OECD, UNESCO and APEC. These programs include the Australian Sponsored Training Program, the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan, the Overseas Postgraduate Research Awards Program, Australian Development Cooperation Scholarships and the International Development Program of Australian Universities and Colleges.

Many students from other countries, especially from Asia, come to Australia to enrol in a wide variety of courses in schools, colleges, and a range of higher education institutions.

Source: DFAT