

Senior school years: school completion uneven across Australia

Australia still has a high number of young people not completing Year 12 or equivalent by age 19. At this point, achievement is affected by whether a student attends an urban, regional or remote school, as well as whether or not they come from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

School completion is very uneven across Australia, as low as 43 per cent in very remote areas, compared to 78 per cent in major cities.

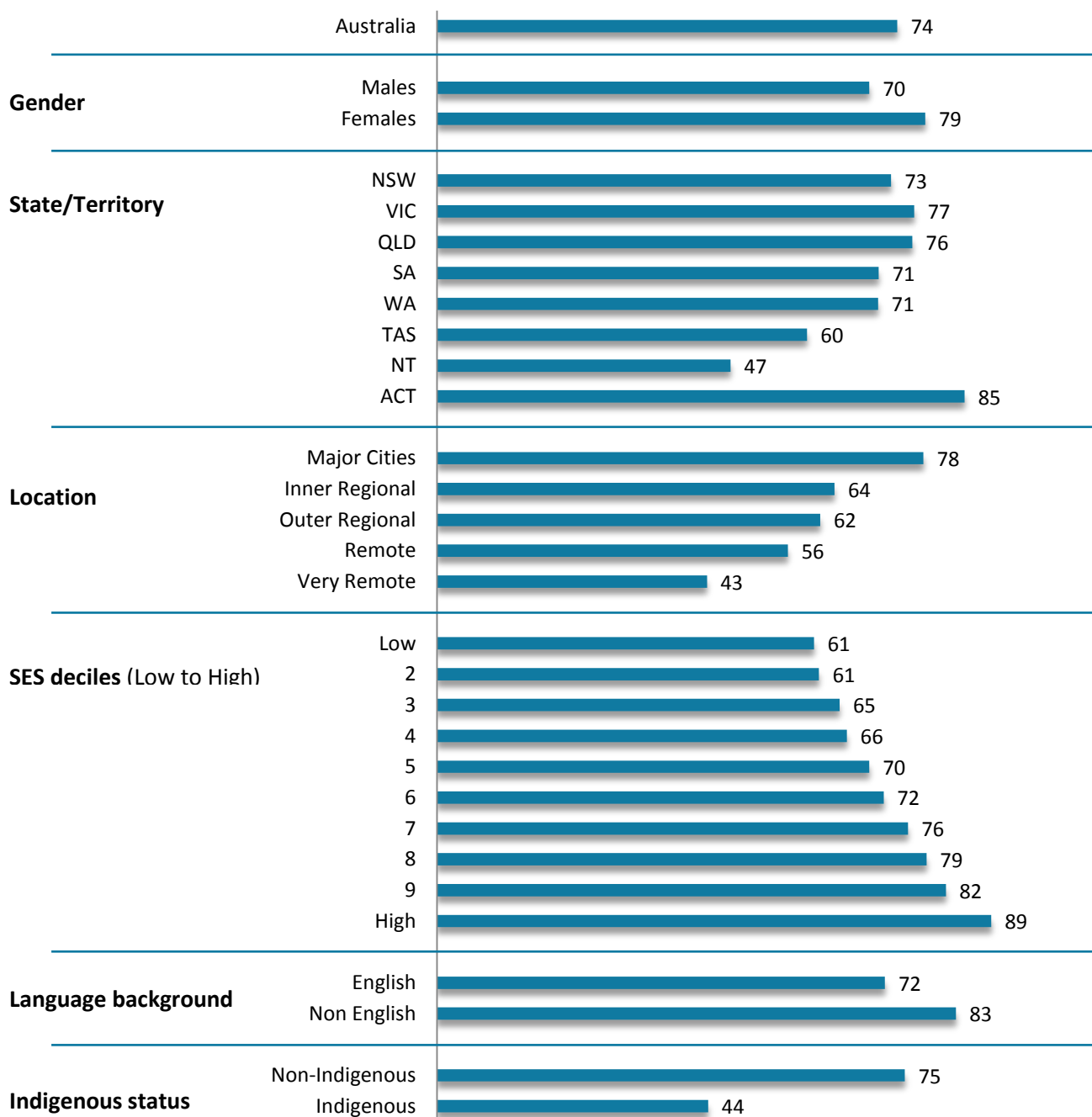
Educational opportunity in Australia 2015 is one of the most comprehensive data studies of Australia's education system. It examines young people's progress on four key educational milestones, from the early years right through to young adulthood. In this fact sheet we look at the **senior school years milestone** when young people are aged 19.

Key findings

- **Slightly less than three-quarters (74 per cent)** of young Australians have attained Year 12 or equivalent by age 19; meaning an estimated **81,000 young people have not been adequately supported by the education system** at this stage.
- **Females are more likely to complete school than males.** Thirty per cent of males miss out on this milestone compared to 21 per cent of females.
- **Indigenous students are significantly more likely to miss this milestone.** Only 44 per cent attain Year 12 or equivalent versus 75 per cent of non-Indigenous students.
- **Location is a key factor:** only 43 and 56 per cent of very remote and remote students meet the milestone, compared to 78 per cent of students in major cities.
- **Language background also plays a role in school completion;** those students speaking a language other than English at home are more likely to achieve this milestone (83 per cent versus 72 per cent for students who spoke only English at home).
- **Socio-economic status remains a key determinant,** with only 61 per cent of the most disadvantaged students completing school, compared to 89 per cent of the most advantaged.
- **Being on track at this milestone is strongly linked to earlier achievement in school.** Only 1 in 2 of the lowest maths achievers at age 15 had completed Year 12 by age 19. For the highest achievers, 94 per cent completed Year 12.

- **Levels of student engagement in school—cognitive, emotional and behavioural—as well as student dispositions towards school and learning** (sense of belonging, sense of purpose, self-efficacy, determination or grit) vary by student background and are correlated with achievement.
- Social and cultural factors are strongly linked to the likelihood of meeting the milestone. Schools that serve largely middle class populations do better on a range of scholastic and student outcomes. **Those who serve lower socioeconomic students don't do so well.**

Percentage of young people meeting the milestone by 19



Source: *Educational opportunity in Australia 2015*, CIRES for the Mitchell Institute

What does this tell us?

Not completing school is a major issue for Australia because those who do not gain a Year 12 or equivalent certificate have lower incomes and higher rates of unemployment. Within Australia, Year 12 attainment is regarded as a key factor in the development of skills and knowledge. Those with Year 12 have a greater likelihood of continuing with further study, particularly in higher education, as well as entering into the workforce. As a recent ABS publication noted, “Year 12 attainment contributes to the development of a skilled workforce, and in turn, to ongoing economic development and improved living conditions”¹. Evidence from overseas chronicles other consequences to individuals and society of not completing school, including increased tendencies toward poor health, single parenthood, and poverty².

Understanding the dimensions of the problem and the forces that impact completion rates is critically important to developing effective strategies. Across this research, we see that student achievement and completion are influenced by many factors including socio-economic background, family situation, engagement with education, and learned dispositions such as resilience and self-confidence. While some of these elements are also influenced by factors outside the sphere of influence of schools, they are also directly influenced by school. This supports the argument that the education system we currently have in Australia must be oriented towards the capabilities and attributes all young people will need for a successful future.

To improve the completion rate, school systems should focus efforts in the beginning of the middle years and earlier. The key indicators that researchers have identified as indicative of who is most likely to not complete are: poor grades in core subjects, low attendance, and disengagement in the classroom, including behavioral problems. What is needed for all students is more personalised teaching and learning approaches. Some very useful strategies include: smaller teacher and student learning communities and, for larger settings, “school within a school” for greater personalisation, partnerships between secondary schools and primary schools, transition programs, and support for students with disabilities outside of school.

About this milestone - what was measured?

The senior school years milestone looked at how many young people had attained Year 12 or an equivalent qualification (at the level of Certificate III or higher) by the age of 19, using ABS Census data.

Factsheets in this series

Fact sheet 1 – Socio-economic disadvantage and educational opportunity persistently linked

Fact sheet 2 – Early years: Gaps in educational opportunity evident at entry to school

Fact sheet 3 – Middle years: Achievement gaps widen at Year 7

Fact sheet 4 – Senior school years: School completion uneven across Australia

Fact sheet 5 – Post-school years: Many 24 year olds marginalised, but second chances help

More information

Educational opportunities in Australia 2015 was prepared by the Centre for International Research on Education Systems at Victoria University for the Mitchell Institute. For more information visit our website at www.mitchellinstitute.org.au

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¹ ABS, *Australian Social Trends March 2011*, NO. 4102.0 ABS: Canberra, 2011, p. 19.

² Belfield, C.R. and Levin, H.M. (2008). *The Price We Pay: Economic and Social Consequences of Inadequate Education*. Washington: Brookings Institution Press.